

Horkheimer and Adorno go to Japan

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Some time ago, before I moved to Japan for three years, I saw a picture that stuck in my mind and stayed with me through my travels, and has since grown, for me, to encapsulate modern Japanese culture and the direction of globalising technological change and identity consumption. The image was of a bulldozer, busy at work in Tokyo Bay with seagulls everywhere, crushing a seemingly endless mountain of electronic goods: TVs, VCRs, microwave ovens and stereos ripped apart and crushed in a violent creation of the new Tokyo waterfront. It was a powerful image of nature and land, torn apart and reassembled as consumer goods, mechanised-electronic products, consumed and disposed of, to be reconstituted as new industrial nature, building on the cities that spawned them. In a country with less than 20% flat land, sustaining over 120 million people and the world's second most productive economy, the need for more space seemed obvious, and the picture confirmed the image I had of Japan as a hyper-modern, technologically advanced country of sophisticated electronic goods and computer gadgets. Though somewhat twisted, it seemed paradoxically, to affirm the other image of Japan in the popular consciousness, of a sustainable, holistic society. Even manufactured electronic goods were recycled, turned back into nature and made to serve the ongoing progression of social invention and life.

The picture provided a snapshot of a hyper-consumptive Japanese society, hard to accurately convey or imagine in spite of our own wildly unsustainable consumptive habits; and in so doing, offered a heightened, amplified look at the emerging patterns of global consumption. It spoke of a culture celebrated with images of natural harmony and simplicity, of delicate flower arrangements and bonsai trees, bamboo groves and vermilion gates, given way to computerized toilets that automatically test blood-sugar levels and nutritional balance, communicating with the

fridge and recommending this week's supermarket list. Once renown for full-moon gazing and cherry-blossom viewing parties, Japan had transformed itself into the hyperconsumptive society defined by industry and government promises of conflict-free post-industrial/information-age affluence and media exhortations to buy the latest in identity-consumption.

The bulldozed waterfront of 'post-industrial' goods demonstrated the incessant circulation of material wealth in the form of consumer goods, especially high-tech electronic goods, but also Japanese culture and identity. The zero-defect and 'just-in-time' production techniques that had propelled Japan to the top ranks of the international industrial hierarchy and lodged Japanese company names like SONY, Mitsubishi and Toshiba into popular global consciousness, had grown to define Japan to the world and to themselves. Although I didn't realize it at the time, in retrospect I'm quite certain, that in the background of the photo, almost hidden along the waterfront and seagulls, I could just make out Horkheimer and Adorno, strolling hand-in-hand, with the most peculiar look on their faces.

How did a people internationally celebrated for their harmonious balance with nature; boasting an animistic religion that recognized gods in rivers, mountains and trees; worshipped their ancestors and land as sacred and alive; and sustained itself and a vibrant and sophisticated culture on the bounty of their seas, soy and rice-fields, grow to suffocate fertile wetlands and fishing-grounds under mountains of toxic electronic gadgetry and the best of last-year's consumptive needs? Where once they witnessed gods, today not one unregulated' river remains on the main island. Not one! Damned, diverted and cemented over, choked by sewage and industrial-agricultural runoff, the rivers run down fabricated shorelines and extended industrial parks of crushed over electronic appliances (McCormack, 46). Its brand-image of Zen spiritual harmony and simplicity eagerly bought and sold around the world, Japan now madly rushes in a headlong pursuit of conspicuous consumption and waste.

Veblen traced the development of consumption as a means of advertising communal worth and reputability. He suggested that the more one could consume/waste, the more worthy they were seen to be. But, one didn't simply consume and waste anything, for anyone could and had always done that. The task was to consume/waste in the most conspicu-

ous way possible. In a competitive society of limited resources, one must consume and waste as conspicuously as possible the most extravagant and desired goods; and in so doing, affirm one's worth and desirability (Veblen, 62). As Debord (1977) asserted, being had been reduced to having, which in turn had been reduced to showing. What better way to show than through the ceremonial destruction/waste of your economic prowess. The result is a ceremony of consumption, in which all familial, communal and religious ceremony has been folded into displays of pre-coded consumption/waste.

While Veblen and Debord were commenting on 'western' societies their insights certainly hold true for Japan, where every occasion necessitates the socially-scripted exchange of gifts, the ceremonial commodities of communal rite. Visiting someone's home, having someone visit you, meeting someone for the first time, starting a job, finishing a job, going on a work trip, going on a holiday, going to a wedding, or even getting married. All these ceremonies necessitate the purchasing and giving of gifts, whose worth is determined not by their utility but by the department store they are purchased from and their adherence to codified tradition. Going to Hiroshima? Must bring back these cinnamon flavored treats. Going to Kyoto? Well, it will have to be some traditional leaf tea. Off to northern Japan? Don't forget to bring back a kokeshii doll. Local and national culture and production is transformed into a social ceremony of consumption and waste, differentiated and defined by prepackaged goods. All of this provides a ceremony of initiation, signifying belonging to a particular social class and community through the purchasing and giving of gifts. Though Japan is very proud of its 'middle-mass' society in which everyone from garbage collectors to doctors can rest assured that they have achieved the promised affluence and happiness of massive industrial production, a present wrapped in Mitsukoshi department store paper still says something vastly different about the gift and the person giving it than one wrapped by Daei or Seibu.

But how else is one to signify their communal belonging, position and worth? As Veblen (1977: 72) pointed out, the act of consumption/waste to advertise oneself is particularly strong in urban settings. Japan is very, very urban. With over 50% of the Japanese population and most industrial and information-age production crowding the sprawling megalopolises of Tokyo and Osaka, Japan's GNP per km² is well over four times that of the much larger US. Even more so for level land (Bennett

and Levine, 456). Japan has concentrated its economic and political might on sprawling urban labyrinths that define and dominate the political, economic, cultural and geographic landscape of Japan. I'm sure everyone has seen the pictures of Japanese workers being crammed into subways by white gloved staff. As the megalopolises grow, and overtake the once fecund rice fields, workers are forced to travel further and further into the cities, spending up to three or four hours a day on subway trains, which authorities recently boasted to *run only* around 175% or 150% of full-capacity during peak hours. The concentrated political-economic might exhorts citizen-consumers to "Buy Japanese," for "Japan is # 1"; and the piles of gadgets grow along with the waterfront, and Tokyo and Osaka merge into a single productive/consumptive complex connected by shinkansen bullet trains, high-tech tunnels and arching bridges of concrete and fibre optics.

How is one to know and judge the character and worth of anyone, when thrown into such close proximity and the maddening crush of speed and stress? Advertisement. Conspicuous consumption takes the place of actually knowing our neighbours, becoming the preferred way to judge worth and respectability. Accordingly, how one looks, how one presents themselves, the brand of clothing, the culture and education exhibited in formal speech, all become ways of judging and classifying each other. How do you give your *meishi* (business cards)? How do you receive it? One hand or two? How long do you hold it? What do you say? Do you put it into an expensive 'Coach' holder or stick in your back pocket? These things say volumes about the cultural and economic capital of which Bordieu (1986) speaks.

Still, how is one to know the proper codes of consumption/waste/display? Veblen points to an 'upwards emulation' as providing the codes of inclusion (Veblen, 1977: 70). We compare and compete with our peers in unceasing attempts to consume like our socio-economic superiors - with the upper-class' conspicuous consumption as the ultimate model of worthiness. As Horkheimer and Adorno (1994) pointed out, it is the culture industry that provides this image of how our peers and superiors are consuming. Not as consumption per se, but as life, blurring the lines between advertised image and 'reality,' until the distinction becomes meaningless. As highlighted by Bordieu (1986: 55), consumption is a life-style expressing economic and cultural capital. It is Weber's 'stylization of life'; it is Debord's Spectacle, both cause and effect, a model of

what is and what should be, totally inseparable from the 'real' as it creates and is created by the 'real.' How we consume becomes the means of socioeconomic advertisement, classification of culture, education, family and worth. More than that, it becomes who we are. The Consumer as Artist: creating and exhibiting the self.

In Japan, as here, the sporty person wears North Face and drives a SUV; the business man wears the most expensive, dull suits, the upper-class housewife practices ikebana and tea ceremony, always smiling behind her hand; the office clerk goes out for karaoke and spends her bonus on new clothes and Hello Kitty paraphernalia. The good students are neat, tidy and polite, their mothers hovering over them as they struggle from elementary school to get into the right junior-high, that is affiliated with the right highschool which will ensure their passage into the appropriate university and thus a good job in a good company, with a wife and a home to match. The art of emulating each other in pursuit of the manufactured ideals of the entertainment industry results in a coming together of economic and cultural consumption to create and display the self within pre-scripted lines, running harder and faster on the treadmill of consumption, justifying more and more needs to be forever produced, consumed, wasted, and formed into landfills.

I guess it could be said, as it is said in Japan, that at least this provides a place for everyone. Everyone knows who and what they are and how they fit into the famed 'middle-mass' social whole. But of course, it also becomes a tool of exclusion, of policing and persecuting those that deviate. The need to emulate makes conspicuous consumption a relation of control. One must consume to the full expectations of their class — and for maximum show, lest they be left behind and cast out, the greatest fear of all. In Japan, it is common wisdom that the most sorrowful person is one without family, community and/or belonging. To be outside of the system is to be dead. This means consuming and advertising enough, but never too much. Everyone has their place, their line not to be crossed. Like Bordieu's (1986: 378-382) working classes that know to be 'realistic,' and not to 'put on airs', in Japan 'the nail that stands out gets hammered.' While reassured that all Japanese are enjoying the bounty of the 'middle-mass' (shhhh! -no one say class), they are regulated and differentiated by ceremonial waste and identity consumption. Powerful social stability is maintained, justifying large disparities in consumptive abilities and cultural belonging.

So what does all this amount to? Both Japan and the 'western' world have a culture industry that both creates and is a product of a consumptive/waste ideology that determines and enforces social expectations and valuations of conspicuous consumption, within which are created pre-packaged personalities to fulfil the consumptive needs of niche marketing, pushing technological and productive capacities ever further in the converting of nature into culture, appliances and waterfront. The need to assert individuality, as dictated by social peers and TV, have us demand more and more differentiated and advanced products in pursuit of the self, always expecting but never achieving, the satisfaction advertisements lead us to believe we will attain. As soon as we 'just do it' and satisfy one need, there is immediately another to coax us on, convincing us that this is 'the real thing.'

This is most glaringly demonstrated in the computer industry today, where politicians and business leaders alike inform us that if only we were more technologically advanced, bought more computers, did away with more liberal arts, spent more time on-line, produced more software, pursued economic rationalization and corporate restructuring more aggressively, all while social spending is cutback, all our problems would be solved as technology marched on, bringing promised affluence, identity and happiness in its wake. Technology — development consumption on a global scale — all dictated by a seemingly inherent evolutionary force. But, as Horkheimer and Adorno (1994: 121) told us, "[a] technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself."

The most startling aspect of this ideology of autonomous scientific advancement and consumptive utopias, is that the constant, insatiable need to consume absorbs any increase in the efficiency borne of mass production or technological gains. In spite of corporate and government promises since the 60s, with the greater, rationalized production of more 'advanced' and 'efficient' stuff, people don't work less, they just need and consume more and more, to no end. So we work longer and harder, to keep pace with the technological advances that were promised to set us free. Nowhere is this more true than in Japan, where everyone can see the torrents of drab, stony-faced workers streaming end mass across Tokyo intersections bathed in flashing neon and giant flat-screen TVs glaring down from office building walls, urging them to push faster and harder for the promises of the information economy. This is evidenced by the not uncommon practice of *karoshi*: working oneself to death.

While the image of Japanese corporate warriors sacrificing themselves to the company is something of a cliché borne of cheesy WWII movies with crazed pilots yelling “BANZAI” and dive-bombing American ships, the reality is no less bizarre. The normally implacable conservative government has been forced (by a series of successful litigation launched by surviving families threatening corporate backers) to initiate a government task-force to investigate *karoshi*. However in the cult of speed, production and selfless sacrifice, the head of the agency investigating these unsustainable job pressures worked himself to death. Banzai!

So in Japan, we witness this manic obsession with acquiring the newest version of the most technologically advanced, timesaving, personality-defining cell-phone, stereo, car televisions and GPSs, flooding the garbage with last year's trends. Last year's identity-defining products slavishly pursued to the detriment of health and community, are today thrown into the garbage. On garbage night you can walk around residential neighborhoods and find everything you need to furnish an apartment. In fact, this is exactly what a lot of foreigners do, especially in the big cities. But when I mentioned this to a young, hip and seemingly progressive Japanese friend who had travelled extensively abroad, he looked as though I had admitted to being an axe-murderer. “Da-me! You mustn't do that!” Last year's brand-name appliances, made in Japan or at least by Japanese companies, are thrown out not, because they don't work, but because their value in fostering social cohesion and differentiation is spent. They are good for nothing but landfill. To suggest otherwise is to threaten the base of production, identity and culture; to be a nail sticking out.

Let's say, the ecological state of affairs gets to you. Certainly it does get to many Japanese, who can boast a rich tradition of socio-environmental movements that would put many smug 'eco-friendly' Canadians to shame. You don't want to contribute to the growing landfill sites of discarded appliances that are recreating Tokyo Bay. Surely you can do something about it. In spite of all the above, you don't have to buy a new car every two years. Do you? Well, it would seem that the TV sets are stacked against you for two reasons: the passivity of consumptive society and the co-option of dissident choice.

The passive nature of a consumptive society was most clearly laid-out by Horkheimer and Adorno (1994) who saw a consumptive 'culture'

that required no thought, imagination or input — rather than engagement, just absorption, conditioning passivity and alienation — what Fukutake Tadashi (1981: 101) saw as making “a nation of a hundred million idiots.” For every need there is a ready-made formula of mass-produced commodities, requiring no thought, effort or involvement. It is as unsatisfying and alienating as it is deadening, leaving the consumer empty and craving for more consumption in the hope of fulfillment, enmeshing them in a neverending maze that dissipates any resistance which they might have been capable of. As stated by Horkheimer and Adorno (1994:141), “[w]hat is decisive today is the necessity inherent in the system not to leave the customer alone, not for a moment to allow him any suspicion that resistance is possible.”

This is most easily portrayed through professional sports (the opiate of middle-America). Sports provide an idealized model of the self as rich, beautiful, athletic and powerful. Fans consume this image in order to associate themselves with the athletes, but in so doing become even more aware of the divisions separating themselves from their idealized athlete/selves. They only have to see a hulking football player or a graceful ice dancer to realize the painful chasm between the real and ideal. They have become alienated from the product, and from themselves, only to be placated with greater consumption as manic fans. Everyone has probably seen the image of Japanese baseball fans, in team/company colors, jersey, hatband, banners and blow-horns, chanting and clapping in total unison, becoming louder and faster until the cheer and the individualities of the crowd break down into a single cultish collapse-union. Sport exemplifies the cult of consumption, in which culture, consumption/waste and the self is brought together into a package of orgiastic alienation and passivity.

That being said, there still seems to be a lot of rage out there; not only in Japan but in Canada as well. People are not happy, or at least some aren't, and there doesn't seem to be anything passive about them. What happens when you see those bulldozers, crushing last year's VCRs to make tomorrow's harbor fronts and you decide to remain impassive?

Consumptive society has an uncanny way of co-opting dissent to further the cycle of production, consumption and waste. It could even be said that the global, corporate giants of 'post-industrial' capitalism need dissent; they need activists to highlight new avenues of differentiation and growth, pushing through reforms for greater rationalization, control

and profit. This is further evidenced in the commodification of the history and symbols of dissent, producing a scripted personality for those who would 'rebel'. You want to be an enviro-rebel? Here, buy this Che T-shirt, or this Rage CD, and this 'green' laundry detergent. And along the way, our 'dissent' helps create the conditions needed for the greater rationalization and commodification of nature in the name of sustainability.

This dynamic can be witnessed with anti-consumption, environmentally minded protest-advocacy groups like Adbusters. Campaigning against 'corporate rule,' Adbusters helps disseminate information and stoke the flames of 'people power': individual choice combatting conspicuous consumption. And, they get their message across through the selling of their product: dissent, through catchy slogans and sound-bites that require little thought from the consumers. "The Big Question." "Economic Progress is Killing the Planet." "Every time there is a car accident, the GDP goes up." "Buy Nothing Day," "TV Turnoff Day," "Think Global, Act Local," They even have a contest for products that will help raise environmental awareness (Adbusters, www.adbusters.org).

One of their calls for action is to take back the media, Horkheimer and Adorno's dreaded culture industry. They proclaim, "The Media is You," calling on people, with cameras, tape and video recorders in hand to record and spread information through personal computers, fax machines, modems, webpages, e-zines, to raise money to produce uncommercials to buy air time on the major networks and usher in a "new culture of protest." This is all done with a new language, new codes and new costumes. Just open your brain and internalize this, and as long as you can buy the latest in gadgets and have plenty of time, you can be an enviro-dissenter too.

Along the way, 'sustainability' mouthpieces provide the pressure for more efficient, differentiated production of more of the same. Pushing for 'green alternatives,' environmentalists help spawn new technologies, new industries, new products, and greater profits. Old inefficient technologies must be phased out, with new products brought in with mass consumer support, cultivated by green-branding: environment friendly, dolphin-friendly, recyclable, energy-savers.

If it isn't bad enough having our protest pre-scripted and co-opted, environmentalism also emerges as a new type of disciplining, with new laws, regulations and societal norms brought together under the banner of sustainability. Governmentality, with its messy packaging of class-

conflict and mechanisms of power makes way for Earth-saving environmentalism. The environment must become subject to the most 'rational' exploitation possible. Ecological space must be scientifically investigated, rationally controlled, protected, managed and exploited to its fullest potential, through new technologies and mass-production/consumption (Luke, 1998). We as consumers must therefore support this to help 'save' the 'environment,' one landfill at a time.

The result, as we can see in Japan, is that we have to get rid of these old refrigerators for more efficient ones. Instead of one big inefficient water heater, let's have a small one for each tap. New windows will have to be put in to save electricity. Maybe a whole new house would be better, so we tear them down every 20 years. In Japan they do; families submitting to 'mortgage-hell' to purchase a tiny piece of land and 'rabbit-hutch' home to be soon torn down as worthless and embarrassing. In the office and in the home, everything is in a flux of destruction and consumptive (un)creation. Along with yesterday's furnishings and kitchen appliances, all our old word processors and out-of-date computers have to be replaced with the newest and fastest available, so we can make the most of ecofriendly information-industries, and take part in the 'anticonsumer revolution'. The garbage piles get bigger and more of Tokyo-harbour is remade with the 'recycled' goods of a 'post-industrial' age.

I return to that image of the bulldozer creating new space, land and nature, with last year's electronic identities, and ironically note that I think Horkheimer and Adorno would appreciate. Just before I left Japan, I was in Tokyo and went out to the new Tokyo Bay, which today is entirely reconstructed — it's a huge tourist attraction connected to Tokyo by computerized sky-trains that whisk young couples and new families out of the crush of urban life and into the relaxation and space of nature. The landfill site, filled with the discarded identities manufactured by the culture industry and our need to emulate and advertise our worth, has become parkland, with sculpted rolling hills, a beach and boardwalk and space to unwind and relax. And the centerpiece that brings people out, is this massive, architecturally awe-inspiring television studio, for which you can buy tickets to walk in and marvel at its cathedral-like dimensions and effect, looking into the studios where your favorite shows and commercials are made. So this industrial space, called forth by the discarded 'needs' of conspicuous consumption manufactured by the culture/advertising industry, has become the home and showpiece of the very

industry that spawned overproduction/consumption, which necessitating the site to begin with. The Zen circle is complete.

Inside the studio-cathedral, in the ground-floor atrium, is a model of the 'reclaimed' Tokyo Bay for all to see and wonder at how this Lockean wasteland has been made into something so beautiful and worthwhile. And the crowning jewel of this development, not yet complete when I was there, eagerly pointed to with models and a video presentation, was to be placed at the point of the harbor, for all to see and bask in the glory of, as it welcomed, unprejudiced, the boatloads of foreign currencies, The Statue of Liberty.

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