Consuming Life

To Ann Bone,
editor supreme

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polity

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Introduction

Or, the most closely guarded secret of the society of consumers

> There is no worse deprivation, no worse privation, perhaps, than that of the losers in the symbolic struggle for recognition, for access to a socially recognized social being, in a word, to humanity.
>
> Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*

Consider three cases, picked up at random, of the fast changing habits of our increasingly 'wired up', or more correctly increasingly *wireless*, society.

Case One On 2 March 2006, the *Guardian* announced that 'in the past 12 months, "social networking" has gone from being the next big thing to the thing itself.'[1] Visits to the website MySpace, a year earlier the unchallenged leader in the newly invented medium of 'social networking', grew sixfold, while its rival website Spaces.MSN scored eleven times more hits than the year before, and visits to Bebo.com multiplied sixty-one times.

Highly impressive growth indeed – even if the amazing success of Bebo, a newcomer to the internet at the time of reporting, might yet prove to be a flash in the pan: as an expert on internet fashions warns, 'at least 40 per cent of this year's top ten will be nowhere this time next year.' 'The launch of a new social networking site', he explains, is 'like opening of the latest uptown bar' (just because it is *the* latest, a brand new or freshly overhauled and relaunched

outfit, such an uptown bar would attract huge traffic 'before receding as certainly as the onset of the next day's hangover', passing its magnetic powers over to the 'next latest' in the never relenting relay race of the 'hottest', the latest 'talk of the town', the place where 'everybody who is somebody must be seen').

Once they get a foothold in a school or a physical or electronic neighbourhood, 'social networking' websites spread with the speed of an 'extremely virulent infection'. In no time, they've stopped being just one option among many and turned into the default address for swelling numbers of young men and women. Obviously, the inventors and promoters of electronic networking have struck a responsive chord – or touched a raw and tense nerve which has long waited for the right kind of stimulus. They may rightly boast of having satisfied a real, widespread and urgent need. And what might that need be? 'At the heart of social networking is an exchange of personal information.' Users are happy to 'reveal intimate details of their personal lives', 'to post accurate information' and 'to share photographs'. It is estimated that 61 per cent of UK teenagers aged thirteen to seventeen 'have a personal profile on a networking site' enabling 'socializing online'.[2]

In Britain, a country where the popular use of cutting-edge electronic facilities lags cyberyears behind the Far East, the users can still trust 'social networking' to manifest their freedom of choice, and even believe it to be a means of youthful rebellion and self-assertion (a supposition made all the more credible by the panic alarms which their unprecedented, web-induced and web-addressed zeal for self-exposure triggers among their security-obsessed teachers and parents day in, day out, and by the nervous reactions of the headmasters who ban the likes of Bebo from the school servers). But in South Korea, for instance, where most social life is already routinely electronically mediated (or rather where *social* life has already turned into an *electronic* life or *cyber*life, and where most 'social life' is conducted primarily in the company of a computer, iPod or mobile, and only secondarily with other fleshy beings), it is obvious to the young that they don't have even so much as a sniff of choice; where they live, living social life electronically is no longer a choice, but a 'take it or leave it' necessity. 'Social death' awaits those few who have as yet failed to link up into Cyworld, South Korea's cybermarket leader in the 'show-and-tell culture'.

It would be a grave mistake, however, to suppose that the urge towards a public display of the 'inner self' and the willingness to satisfy that urge are manifestations of a unique, purely generational, age-related urge/addiction of teenagers, keen as they naturally tend to be to get a foothold in the 'network' (a term rapidly replacing 'society' in both social-scientific discourse and popular speech) and to stay there, while not being quite sure how best to achieve that goal. The new penchant for public confession cannot be explained by 'age-specific' factors – not only by them at any rate. Eugène Enriquez recently summed up the message to be derived from the fast growing evidence gathered from all sectors of the liquid modern world of consumers:

> Provided one does not forget that what was previously invisible – everybody's share of the intimate, everybody's inner life – is now called on to be exposed on the public stage (principally on TV screens but also on the literary stage), one will comprehend that those who care for their invisibility are bound to be rejected, pushed aside, or suspected of a crime. Physical, social and psychical nudity is the order of the day.[3]

The teenagers equipped with portable electronic confessionals are simply apprentices training and trained in the art of living in a confessional society – a society notorious for effacing the boundary which once separated the private from the public, for making it a public virtue and obligation to publicly expose the private, and for wiping away from public communication anything that resists being reduced to private confidences, together with those who refuse to confide them. As Jim Gamble, the head of a watchdog agency, admitted to the *Guardian*, 'it represents everything you see in the school playground – the only difference is that in this playground, there are no teachers or police or moderators to keep an eye on what's going on.'

Case Two On the same day, though on quite a different and thematically unconnected page presided over by another editor, the *Guardian* informed its readers that 'computer systems are being used to snub you more effectively, depending on your value to the company you're calling.'[4] Computer systems mean that records can be kept of customers, marking them from '1', meaning

first-class clients who are answered immediately the moment they call and are promptly put through to a senior agent, down to '3' (the 'pond life', as they have been summarily branded in the company lingo), who are put at the back of the queue – and when they are finally put through, they are connected to an agent at the bottom of the heap.

Just as in Case One, so in Case Two technology can hardly be blamed for the new practice. The new and refined software comes to the rescue of managers who *already* had a dire need to classify the growing army of the telephone callers in order to expedite the divisive and exclusionist practices which were *already* in operation but were until now performed with the help of primitive tools – DIY, home-made, or cottage-industry products which were more time-consuming and evidently less effective. As a spokesman for one of the companies supplying and servicing such systems pointed out, 'technology only really takes the processes we have in place and makes them more efficient' – which means instant and automatic, sparing the company's employees the cumbersome duty of collating information, studying records, passing judgements and taking separate decisions for every call, together with responsibility for their consequences. What, in the absence of the right technical gear, they would have to evaluate by straining their own brains and using up a lot of precious company time is the prospective profitability of the caller for the company: the volume of cash or credit at the caller's disposal, and the caller's willingness to part with it. 'Companies need to screen out the least valuable customers,' explains another executive. In other words, companies need a sort of 'negative surveillance', the Orwellian Big Brother style or a Panopticon-style surveillance in reverse, a sieve-like contraption which primarily serves the task of flushing the undesirables *away* and keeping the regulars in: recast as the ultimate effect of a cleaning job well done. They need a way to feed into the data bank the kind of information capable first and foremost of cutting out 'flawed consumers' – those weeds of the consumerist garden, people short of cash, credit cards and/or shopping enthusiasm, and otherwise immune to the blandishments of marketing. Only resourceful and eager players would be then allowed, as a result of negative selection, to stay in the consumerist game.

Case Three A few days later yet another editor, on yet another page, informed readers that Charles Clarke, the British Home Secretary, had announced a new 'points-based' immigration system 'to attract the brightest and the best'[5] and, of course, to repel and keep away all the others, even if that part of Clarke's declaration was difficult to detect in the press release version: either left out altogether or relegated to the small print. Who is the new system aimed to attract? Those with the most money to invest and the most skills to earn it. 'It will allow us to ensure', said the Home Secretary, that 'only those people with the skills that the UK needs come to this country while preventing those without these skills applying'. And how will that system work? For example Kay, a young woman from New Zealand, with a master's degree but a rather lowly and miserly paid job, failed to reach the seventy-five points that would entitle her to apply for immigration. She would need first to obtain a job offer from a British company, which would then be recorded in her favour, as a proof that her kind of skills are ones 'the UK needs'.

Charles Clarke, to be sure, would not claim originality for transferring to the selection of human beings the market rule of selecting the best commodity on the shelf. As Nicolas Sarkozy, his French equivalent and a hot contender for the next term of French presidency, has pointed out, 'selective immigration is practised by almost all the world's democracies', and he went on to demand that 'France ought to be able to choose its immigrants according to its needs.'[6]

Three cases, reported in three separate sections of the dailies and presumed to belong to quite separate realms of life, each governed by its own set of rules while supervised and run by mutually independent agencies. Cases seemingly so dissimilar, concerning people of widely different provenence, age and interests, people confronted with sharply distinct challenges and struggling to resolve quite distinct problems . . . Is there any reason for putting them next to each other and considering them as specimens of the same category, you may ask? The answer is yes, there is a reason to connect them; and it is as powerful as reasons come.

The schoolgirls and schoolboys avidly and enthusiastically putting on display their qualities in the hope of capturing attention

and possibly also gaining the recognition and approval required to stay in the game of socializing; the prospective clients needing to amplify their spending records and credit limits to earn a better service; the would-be immigrants struggling to gather and supply brownie points as evidence of demand for their services in order to have their applications considered – all three categories of people, apparently so distinct, are enticed, nudged or forced to promote an attractive and desirable *commodity*, and so to try as hard as they can, and using the best means at their disposal, to enhance the market value of the goods they sell. And the commodity they are prompted to put on the market, promote and sell are *themselves*.

They are, simultaneously, *promoters of commodities* and the *commodities they promote*. They are, at the same time, the merchandise and their marketing agents, the goods and their travelling salespeople (and let me add that any academic who has ever applied for a teaching job or research funds will easily recognize her or his own predicament in their experience). Into whatever bracket they may be slotted by the composers of statistical tables, they all inhabit the same social space known under the name of the *market*. Under whatever rubric their preoccupations would be classified by governmental archivists or investigative journalists, the activity in which all of them are engaged (whether by choice, necessity, or most commonly both) is *marketing*. The test they need to pass in order to be admitted to the social prizes they covet demands them *to recast themselves as commodities*: that is, as products capable of catching the attention and attracting *demand* and *customers*.

Siegfried Kracauer was a thinker endowed with an uncanny capacity for gleaning the barely visible and still inchoate contours of future-prefiguring trends still lost in a formless mass of fleeting fads and foibles. Already in the late 1920s, when the imminent transformation of the society of producers into a society of consumers was in an embryonic or at best incipient stage and so was overlooked by less attentive and farsighted observers, he had noted:

> The rush to the numerous beauty salons springs partly from existential concerns, and the use of cosmetic products is not always a

> luxury. For fear of being taken out of use as obsolete, ladies and gentlemen dye their hair, while forty-year-olds take up sports to keep slim. 'How can I become beautiful?' runs the title of a booklet recently launched on to the market; the newspaper advertisements for it say that it shows ways 'to stay young and beautiful both now and for ever'.[7]

The emergent habits which Kracauer recorded in the early 1920s as a noteworthy Berlin curiosity went on to spread like a forest fire, until they turned into a daily routine (or at least into a dream) all around the globe. Eighty years later Germaine Greer was already observing that 'even in the furthest reaches of north-western China, women laid aside their pyjama suits for padded bras and flirty skirts, curled and coloured their straight hair and saved up to buy cosmetics. This was called liberalization.'[8]

Half a century after Kracauer noted and described the new passions of Berlin women, another notable German thinker, Jürgen Habermas, writing at the time when the society of producers was nearing the end of its days and so benefiting from the added advantage of hindsight, presented the 'commoditization of capital and labour' as the major function, indeed the *raison d'être*, of the capitalist state. He pointed out that if the reproduction of capitalist society is accomplished through the endlessly repeated transactional encounters between capital in the role of the buyer and labour in the role of commodity, then the capitalist state must see to it that the encounters take place regularly and succeed in their purpose: that is, culminate in buying and selling transactions.

For this culmination to be reached in all or at least a decent number of the encounters, capital must be capable however of paying the current price of the commodity, be willing to pay it, and encouraged to act on that will – reassured by state-endorsed policy insurance against the risks caused by the notorious vagaries of commodity markets. Labour, on the other hand, must be kept in a spick-and-span condition, likely to attract the eye of potential buyers, meet with their approval and entice them to buy what they see. Just as in encouraging capitalists to spend their money on labour, making labour attractive to capitalist buyers was unlikely to be achieved, let alone assured, without the active cooperation of the state. Job-seekers had to be properly nourished and healthy,

used to disciplined behaviour, and in possession of the skills required by the working routines of the jobs they seek.

Deficits of power and resources nowadays afflict most nation-states struggling to acquit themselves in the task of commoditization – deficits caused by the exposure of native capital to the ever more intense competition resulting from the globalization of capital, labour and commodity markets and from the planet-wide spread of modern forms of production and trade, as well as deficits caused by the fast-rising costs of the 'welfare state', that paramount and perhaps indispensable instrument of the commoditization of labour.

As it happened, on the way from a society of producers to a society of consumers the tasks involved in the commoditization and recommoditization of capital and labour went through simultaneous processes of steady, thorough and apparently irreversible, even if as yet incomplete, *deregulation* and *privatization*.

The speed and the accelerating pace of these processes have been and continue to be anything but uniform. In most (though not all) countries they seem to be much more radical in the case of labour than they have been thus far in the case of capital, whose new ventures continue to have their pumps primed – almost as a rule – from governmental coffers on a rising rather than diminishing scale. In addition, capital's ability and willingness to buy labour continue to be regularly boosted by the state, which tries hard to keep down the 'cost of labour' through dismantling the mechanisms of collective bargaining and job protection and by imposing legal brakes on the defensive actions of trade unions – and which all too often sustains the solvency of companies by taxing imports, offering tax relief on exports and subsidizing shareholders' dividends through governmental commissions paid for from public funds. To prop up, for instance, the failed promise of the White House to keep at-the-pump prices of petrol down without endangering stockholders' profits, the Bush administration confirmed as recently as February 2006 that the government will waive 7 billion dollars in royalties over the next five years (a sum estimated by some to quadruple) to encourage the American oil industry to drill for oil in the publicly owned waters of the Gulf of Mexico ('It is like subsidizing a fish to swim' was the reaction to the news of a member of the House of Representatives:

'It is indefensible to be keeping those companies on the government dole when oil and gas prices are so high').[9]

It is the task of the recommoditization of *labour* that has been thus far most affected by the twin processes of deregulation and privatization. This task is being by and large exempted from direct governmental responsibility through wholly or in part 'contracting out' to private businesses the essential institutional framework of service provision crucial for keeping labour sellable (as, for instance, in the case of schooling and housing, care in old age, and a growing number of medical services). So the overall task of sustaining the saleability of labour *en masse* is left to the private worries of individual men and women (for instance, by switching the costs of skill acquisition to private, and personal, funds), and they are now advised by politicians and cajoled by advertisers to use their own wits and resources to stay on the market, to increase their market value or not let it drop, and to earn the appreciation of prospective buyers.

Having spent several years observing at close quarters (almost as a participant) the changing patterns of employment in the most advanced sectors of the American economy, Arlie Russell Hochschild has discovered and documented trends which are strikingly similar to those found in Europe and described in great detail by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello as the 'new spirit of capitalism'. The strong preference among employers for free-floating, unattached, flexible, 'generalist' and ultimately disposable employees (of a 'Jack of all trades' type, rather than being specialized and subjected to a narrowly focused training) has been the most seminal among the findings. In Hochschild's own words:

> Since 1997, a new term – 'zero drag' – has begun quietly circulating in Silicon Valley, the heartland of the computer revolution in America. Originally it meant the frictionless movement of a physical object like a skate or bicycle. Then it was applied to employees who, regardless of financial incentives, easily gave up one job for another. More recently, it has come to mean 'unattached' or 'unobligated'. A dot.com employer might comment approvingly of an employee, 'He's zero drag', meaning that he's available to take on extra assignments, respond to emergency calls, or relocate any time. According to Po Bronson, a researcher of Silicon Valley culture, 'Zero drag is optimal. For a while, new applicants would jokingly be asked about their 'drag coefficient'.[10]

Living at some distance from the Valley, and/or being burdened with a wife or a child, lifts the 'drag coefficient' and lowers the applicant's chances of employment. Employers wish their future employees to swim rather than walk and to surf rather than swim. The ideal employee would be a person with no previous bonds, commitments or emotional attachments, and shunning new ones; a person ready to take on any task that comes by and prepared to instantly readjust and refocus their own inclinations, embracing new priorities and abandoning those previously acquired in short order; a person used to a setting where 'getting used to' as such – to a job, or a skill, or a way of doing things – is unwelcome and so imprudent; last but not least, a person who will leave the company when they are no longer needed, without complaint or litigation. A person, too, who considers long-term prospects, career tracks carved in stone and any kind of stability even more off-putting and frightening than their absence.

The art of the 'recommoditization' of labour in its novel, updated form is singularly unsuited to being learnt from the unwieldy, notoriously inert, tradition-bound, change-resistant and routine-loving governmental bureaucracy; and that bureaucracy is singularly unsuited to cultivating, teaching and inculcating it. The job is better left to the consumer markets, already known to thrive on and be adept in training their customers in strikingly similar arts – and it is. Shifting the task of recommoditizing labour to the market is the deepest meaning of the state's conversion to the cult of 'deregulation' and 'privatization'.

The labour market is only one of many commodity markets in which individual lives are inscribed; the market price of labour is only one of many market prices that need to be attended to, watched and calculated in individual life pursuits. In all markets, however, the same rules bind.

First, the ultimate destination of all commodities offered for sale is their consumption by buyers. Second, buyers will wish to obtain commodities for consumption if and only if consuming them promises gratification of their desires. Third, the price which the prospective consumer in search of gratification is prepared to pay for the commodities on offer will depend on the credibility of that promise and the intensity of those desires.

Meetings of prospective consumers with the prospective objects of their consumption tend to become the principal building blocks of the peculiar web of interhuman relations known for short as the 'society of consumers'. Or, rather, the existential setting that came to be known as the 'society of consumers' is distinguished by a remaking of interhuman relations on the pattern, and in the likeness, of the relations between consumers and the objects of their consumption. This remarkable feat has been achieved through the annexation and colonization by consumer markets of the space stretching between human individuals; that space in which the strings that tie humans together are plaited, and the fences that separate them are built.

In a gross distortion and perversion of the true substance of the consumerist revolution, the society of consumers is most often represented as focused around relations between the consumer firmly set in the status of the Cartesian *subject*, and the commodity cast in the role of the Cartesian *object* – even if in these representations the centre of gravity in the subject–object encounter is moved decisively from the area of contemplation to the sphere of activity. When it comes to activity, the *thinking* (perceiving, examining, comparing, calculating, relevance-ascribing, making-intelligible) Cartesian subject is faced – just as it was faced during contemplation – with a multitude of spatial objects (of perception, examination, comparison, calculation, ascription of relevance, comprehension), but it is now faced in addition with the task of *handling* them: moving, appropriating, using, discarding.

Admittedly, the degree of sovereignty commonly ascribed to the subject in narrating consumer activity is questioned time and again and cast in doubt. As Don Slater has rightly pointed out, the picture of consumers painted in the learned descriptions of the consuming life veers between the extremes of 'cultural dupes or dopes' and 'heroes of modernity'. At the first extreme, consumers are represented as anything but sovereign agents: they are shown instead to be hoodwinked by fraudulent promises, enticed, seduced, pushed and otherwise manoeuvred by blatant or surreptitious, but invariably extraneous pressures. At the other extreme, the alleged likenesses of the consumer encapsulate all the virtues for which modernity wishes to be praised – like rationality, robust autonomy, capacity for self-definition and rugged

self-assertion. Such portraits represent a carrier of the 'heroic will and intelligence that could transform nature and society and bend them both to mastery by the freely and privately chosen desires of the individual'.[11]

The point, though, is that in both versions – whether they are presented as dupes of promotional hype or as heroic practitioners of the self-propelling drive to mastery – consumers are cut away from and placed outside the universe of their prospective objects of consumption. In most descriptions, the world formed and sustained by the society of consumers stays neatly divided into things *to be chosen* and their *choosers*; commodities and their consumers: things to be consumed and the humans to consume them. In fact, however, the society of consumers is what it is precisely because of being nothing of the sort; what sets it apart from other types of society is exactly the *blurring*, and ultimately the *effacing* of the divisions listed above.

In the society of consumers no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity, and no one can keep his or her subjectness secure without perpetually resuscitating, resurrecting and replenishing the capacities expected and required of a sellable commodity. The 'subjectivity' of the 'subject', and most of what that subjectivity enables the subject to achieve, is focused on an unending effort to itself become, and remain, a sellable commodity. The most prominent feature of the society of consumers – however carefully concealed and most thoroughly covered up – is the *transformation of consumers into commodities*; or rather their dissolution into the sea of commodities in which, to quote what is perhaps the most quoted of Georg Simmel's immensely quotable propositions, the different meanings of things 'and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial', appear 'in an evenly flat and grey tone' – while all things 'float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money'.[12] The task of the consumers therefore, and the principal motive prompting them to engage in incessant consumer activity, is the task of lifting themselves out of that grey and flat invisibility and insubstantiality, making themselves stand out from the mass of indistinguishable objects 'floating with equal specific gravity', and so catching the eye of (blasé!) consumers . . .

The first album recorded by Corinne Bailey Rae, a 27-year-old singer born in Leeds and signed up in 2005 by an A&R man from

EMI, turned platinum in just four months.[13] An amazing event, one in a million or hundreds of millions – shooting to stardom after a brief appearance in an indie band and a job as cloakroom attendant at a Soul Club. A chance of probability no greater, perhaps still smaller than winning the lotto jackpot (but let us note that week in, week out millions go on buying lotto tickets). 'My mum teaches in a primary school,' Corinne told her interviewer, 'and when she asks the kids what they want to be when they grow up, they say, "famous". She asks them what for and they say, "Dunno, I just want to be famous." '

In those dreams, 'being famous' means no more (but no less either!) than being paraded on the front pages of thousands of magazines and millions of screens, being seen, noticed, talked about, and therefore, presumably, *desired* by many – just like those shoes or skirts or accessories that are currently displayed in glossy magazines and on TV screens and therefore seen, noticed, talked about, desired . . . 'There is more to life than the media,' observes Germaine Greer, 'but not much . . . In the information age invisibility is tantamount to death.' Constant, unstoppable recommoditization is for the commodity, and so for the consumer, what metabolism is for living organisms.

Beneath the dream of fame, another dream, a dream of no longer dissolving and staying dissolved in the grey, faceless and insipid mass of commodities, a dream of turning into a notable, noticed and coveted commodity, a talked-about commodity, a commodity standing out from the mass of commodities, a commodity impossible to overlook, to deride, to be dismissed. In a society of consumers, turning into a desirable and desired commodity is the stuff of which dreams, and fairy tales, are made.

Writing from inside the budding society of producers, Karl Marx censured the economists of his time for the fallacy of 'commodity fetishism': for their habit of overlooking or hiding human interaction, by design or by default, behind the movement of commodities; *as if* the commodities, on their own, entered relationships with each other with no human mediation. The discovery of the buying and selling of labouring capacity as the essence of 'industrial relations' hidden inside the phenomenon of the 'circulation of commodities', Marx insisted, was as shocking as it was revolutionary: a first step towards the restoration of

human substance in the increasingly dehumanized reality of capitalist exploitation.

Somewhat later, Karl Polanyi would tear another hole in the illusion spun by commodity fetishism: yes, he would say, labour capacity was sold and bought *as if* it was a commodity like any other, but no, he would insist, labour capacity *was not* and *could not be* a commodity 'like' any other. The impression that labour was a commodity pure and simple could only be a gross travesty of the real state of affairs, since 'labour capacity' can't be bought or sold separately from its carriers. Unlike in the case of other commodities, the buyers can't 'take home' their purchases. What they have bought does not become their exclusive and unconditional property, and they are not free to *utere et abutere* (use or abuse) it at will, as they are in the case of their other purchases. The apparently 'purely commercial' transaction (recall Thomas Carlyle's complaint in the early nineteenth century that multifaceted human relations were reduced to a bare 'cash nexus') inevitably binds the carriers and the buyers of labour power in a *mutual* bond and tight *inter*dependency. On the labour market, a *human* relationship is born out of every *commercial* transaction; each labour contract is another refutation of commodity fetishism, and in the aftermath of each transaction proofs quickly appear of its falsehood, and of the deception or self-deception following it.

If it was the lot of *commodity fetishism* to hide from view the human, all too human substance of the society of *producers*, it is the turn of *subjectivity fetishism* to hide the commoditized, all too commoditized reality of the society of *consumers*.

'Subjectivity' in the society of consumers, just as 'commodity' in the society of producers, is (to use Bruno Latour's felicitous concept) a *faitishe* – a thoroughly human product elevated to the rank of superhuman authority through forgetting or rendering irrelevant its human, all too human origins, together with the string of human actions that led to its appearance and was the *sine qua non* condition of that appearance. In the case of the commodity in the society of producers, it was the act of buying and selling the labour capacity of producers that, by endowing it with market value, made the product of labour into a commodity – in a way not visible in (being hidden by) the appearance of an autonomous interaction of commodities. In the case of subjectivity in the society of consumers, it is the turn of

the buying and selling of the tokens deployed in the construction of identity – that allegedly public expression of the 'self' which is in fact Jean Baudrillard's 'simulacrum', substituting 'representation' for what it is assumed to represent – to be effaced from the appearance of the final product.

Consumers' 'subjectivity' is made out of shopping choices – choices made by the subject and the subject's prospective purchasers; its description takes the form of the shopping list. What is assumed to be the *materialization* of the inner truth of the self is in fact an *idealization* of the material – objectified – traces of consumer choices.

Some time ago one of the ever more numerous internet dating agencies (parship.co.uk) conducted a survey which showed that in 2005 two-thirds of the single people using dating services (about 3.6 million) turned to the internet. The 'internet dating' business reached 12 million pounds in that year and that was expected to rise to 47 million by 2008.[14] In a matter of the six months preceding the survey, the proportion of singles believing they would meet the right partner on the internet grew from 35 per cent to 50 per cent – and the trend is still upwards. Commenting on such findings, the author of one of the 'spiked essays' published on the web observes:

> It reflects a fundamental shift in how people are encouraged to think about their personal relationships and organize their personal lives, with intimacy acted out in public and subject to the contractual norms one might associate with buying a car, a house, a holiday.[15]

Sharing the view expressed by another 'spiked' writer,[16] the author believes that prospective users are prompted to switch to internet services as a 'safer, more controlled option' since it allows them to avoid 'the risk and unpredictability of face-to-face encounters'. 'Fear of being alone sends people to their computers, while stranger danger encourages procrastination from real-life encounters.' But there is a price to be paid. Jonathan Keane notes the 'creeping sense of unease and abuse' that haunts people, however hard they try to avoid it, as they turn from one website to another, just as they used to turn over catalogue pages, in search of their ideal partner.[17]

Clearly, the people turning to internet agencies for help have been pampered by the user-friendly consumer market which promises to make every choice secure and every transaction one-off and without obligation, an act with 'no hidden costs', 'nothing more to pay, ever', 'no strings attached', 'no agent will call'. The side-effect (one could say, using the currently fashionable expression, the 'collateral casualty') of such a cosseted existence – minimizing risks, heavily reducing or abdicating responsibility and carrying an *a priori* neutralized subjectivity of the protagonists – has proved however to be a considerable amount of social deskilling.

The company of flesh-and-blood human beings makes the habitual clients of internet dating agencies, properly primed by commodity market practices, feel ill at ease. The sorts of commodities with which they have been trained to socialize are for touching, but have no hands to touch, are laid bare for examination, but do not return the look and do not demand the look to be returned and so abstain from exposing the viewer to scrutiny, while placidly exposing themselves to the client's examination; one can examine them all over without fearing their scrutiny of one's own eyes, those windows into the soul's most private secrets. Internet agencies derive most of their attraction from recasting the sought-after human partners as the kinds of commodities which well-trained consumers are used to confronting and know how to handle. The more seasoned and 'mature' their clients become, the more they are taken aback, confused and embarrassed when they come 'face to face' and discover that the looks must be reciprocated and that in 'transactions' they, the subjects, are also objects.

In the shops, goods come complete with answers to all the questions their prospective buyer might wish to ask before taking the decision to buy, but they themselves keep politely silent and don't ask questions, let alone embarrassing ones. Commodities confess all there is to be confessed, and more – without asking for reciprocity. They stick to the role of the Cartesian 'object' – fully docile, obedient stuff for the omnipotent subject to handle, give shape to, put to good use. By their sheer docility they elevate the buyer to the noble, flattering and ego-boosting rank of the sovereign subject, uncontested and uncompromised. Playing the role of objects impeccably and realistically enough to convince,

market commodities supply and perpetually replenish the epistemological and praxiological grounding for 'subjectivity fetishism'.

As buyers, we have been properly primed by market managers and commercial scriptwriters to play the subject's role – a make-believe lived through as a living truth; play-acting performed as 'real life', but with the passage of time elbowing out that real life, stripping it on its way of all chances of return. And as more and more of life's necessities, once upon a time obtained the hard way, without the luxury of the go-between service of shopping-networks, become commoditized (the privatization of water supplies, for instance, leading unswervingly to the bottled water on shop shelves), so the foundations of 'subjectivity fetishism' are broadened and firmed up. To complete the popular, revised version of Descartes's Cogito, 'I shop therefore I am . . .', 'a subject' could and should be added. And as the time spent on shopping grows longer (physically or in thought, in flesh or electronically), the occasions to add to it multiply.

Switching to the web to choose/purchase a partner follows the much wider trend towards internet shopping. More and more people prefer to buy on websites rather than in shops. Convenience (home delivery) and petrol economy is the immediate, though only a partial, explanation. The spiritual comfort gained from replacing a shop assistant with the monitor is equally, if not yet more, important.

An encounter with a live person calls for the kinds of social skills which may be missing or prove inadequate, and a dialogue always means exposing oneself to the unknown: as if giving a hostage to fate. It is so much more reassuring to know that it is my, only my palm that holds the mouse and my, only my finger that rests on the button. No longer will it happen that an inadvertent (and uncontrolled!) grimace on my face, or a flickering but revealing expression of desire will leak out and betray to the person on the other side of the dialogue more of my inner thoughts or intentions than I am prepared to divulge.

In *Soziologie der Sinne*, 'Sociology of the Senses', Georg Simmel pointed out that the look I give another person willy-nilly uncovers my own self. The look I give the other in the hope of obtaining a glimpse of her or his state of mind and/or heart is bound itself

to be expressive, and the innermost emotions which are shown in that way can't easily be bridled or camouflaged – unless I am a highly trained professional actor. It makes sense therefore to imitate the alleged habit of the ostrich of burying its head in the sand and avert or cast down my eyes: by not looking the other in the eye, I make my inner self (more to the point, my inner thoughts and emotions) invisible, inscrutable . . .

Now, in an era of desktops, laptops, palm-held devices and mobiles, most of us have more than enough sand around in which to bury our heads. No longer need we worry about the seller's superior skills of reading faces and their powers of persuasion, or our moments of weakness. My fears and hopes, desires and doubts will stay what they should be: mine and mine only. I will not rush to press the 'buy now' key and 'confirm' before I have collected, listed and pondered all 'pros' and 'cons' of each choice and weighed them against the 'pros' and 'cons' of all alternative choices. As long as I proceed in such a cautious manner, the hour of reckoning, of sentence-passing, that point of no return and regrets of 'too late to reconsider', 'no way back' and 'no starting again' is kept at arm's (or more to the point in the case of keyboard operators, at fingers') length; I am the one, the only one who stays in command and holds the steering wheel. I feel protected against the ploys and subterfuges of the unknown and impenetrable others – but also against myself, against a decision slipping out, against acting 'on the spur of the moment' in a way I might regret for – I have no way of knowing – perhaps an infinite time to come. This applies to buying a car or a lawnmower or an entertainment centre or a laptop or a holiday; why should not it apply to the purchase of partners?

And last but not least: in our world where one tempting novelty chases after another at breathtaking speed, in a world of incessant new beginnings, to travel hopefully feels much safer and much more enchanting than the prospect of arrival: the joy is all in the shopping that gratifies, while the acquisition itself, with the vision of being burdened with its possibly clumsy and awkward effects and side-effects, portends a high likelihood of frustration, sorrow and regret. And as internet shops stay open all hours, one can stretch at will the time of gratification uncontaminated by any worry of future frustrations. A shopping escapade no longer needs to be a long-planned outing – it may be broken up into a multitude

of joyful moments of excitement, lavishly sprinkled over all other life pursuits, adding bright colours to even the darkest or dullest of spots.

The snag, of course, is that seeking a *partner* does not fit well into the shopping-and-buying scheme; even less does seeking a *life companion*, a partner-for-life.

The help the internet can deliver in the perpetual pre-emptive war against the risks and anxieties filling to the brim the life of a chooser in the society of choosers is bound to remain limited and 'up to a point'. It may placate somewhat the anxieties of the searcher for the duration of the search, but it won't reach beyond the moment of fulfilment to which the journey of discovery is hoped and expected to lead, and from which it is believed to derive its attraction and motive. Just like the commodity fetishism which haunted the society of producers, the subjectivity fetishism that haunts the society of consumers is ultimately grounded in an illusion.

The productive power of producers could not be separated from the producers themselves, whose inalienable power it was; an invisible, yet heavy and inescapable cost of the transaction of the buying and selling of labour was therefore a complex, multifaceted and above all *reciprocal* bond tying together the buyers and the sellers for the duration of the production process which the purchased labour force was intended to serve. That bond meant it was a foregone conclusion that there would be a long, perhaps unending chain of interest clashes, simmering antagonisms or open enmities, daily skirmishes and long-term wars of recognition. It is much the same story with the purchase of a 'pleasure force': however fully and honestly they are listed on the website of the dating agency, the wondrous joy-giving *qualities* sought by the internet surfers in their would-be partners and which they allow to guide their choices cannot be separated from the *persons* whose qualities they are, just as the labour force could not be cut off from the producers whose force it was.

Unlike the fiction electronically patched together out of a number of pre-selected attributes, the real person is endowed with a tongue to speak as much as with an ear to listen, wishes the partner-elect to look in her or his eyes as much as being willing to expose his or her own eyes to the partner's scrutiny,

has emotions waiting to be aroused as much as the capacity of arousing them, and a biography fully of her or his own complete with a biographically shaped character, expectations and model of happiness: nothing remotely reminiscent of the passive, docile, submissive and pliable Cartesian 'object'. The curse of reciprocal aucthorship (that 'impure' blend of 'the actor' and 'the author', in all probability unable to be purified because of the irreducible authorial potency of all actors and the well-nigh impossibility of 'pure reiterations' of patterned moves) will call the bluff of the illusion of 'pure subjectivity'. No amount of precautions will change that fact, or 'cleanse' the relationship of that curse: it will hover above the series of keen and ingenious attempts to change it, however long they go on.

There are limits to how far the 'consumer sovereignty' promised by the society of consumers can be stretched – impassable limits – and from every human encounter these limits tend to emerge fortified despite (or because of) the pressures to redraw them.

Subjectivity fetishism, just like commodity fetishism before it, is founded on a lie, and it is so founded for much the same reason as its predecessor was – even if the two varieties of fetishism focus their cover-up operations on opposite sides of the subject–object dialectics ingrained in the human existential condition. Both varieties of fetishism stumble and fall at the same obstacle: the stubbornness of the human subject, valiantly resisting the repetitive attempts at its objectification.

In the society of consumers, the subject–object duality tends to be subsumed under the duality of consumer and commodity. In human relationships, the sovereignty of the subject is thereby recast and represented as the sovereignty of the consumer – while the resistance of the object, deriving from its incompletely suppressed, however rudimentary, sovereignty, is offered to perception as the inadequacy, unsoundness or defectiveness of a wrongly chosen commodity.

Market-driven consumerism has a recipe for tackling that sort of inconvenience: exchange of the faulty or merely imperfect and not fully satisfying commodity for a new and improved one. The recipe tends to be recast into a stratagem to which seasoned consumers resort automatically and almost unreflexively, from a learned and interiorized habit; after all, in consumer–commodity

markets the need to replace 'outdated', less than completely satisfactory and/or no longer wanted consumer objects is inscribed in the design of products and publicity campaigns calculated for the steady growth of sales. A short life expectation for a product's use in practice and proclaimed utility is included in the marketing strategy and calculation of profit: it tends to be predesigned, prescripted and instilled into consumers' practices through the apotheosis of new (today's) offers and the denigration of old (yesterday's) ones.

Principal among the consumerist ways of dealing with disaffection is disposal of the objects causing disaffection. The society of consumers devalues durability, equating the 'old' with being 'outdated', unfit for further use and destined for the rubbish tip. It is by the high rate of waste, and by shortening the time distance between the sprouting and the fading of desire, that subjectivity fetishism is kept alive and credible despite the endless series of disappointments it causes. The society of consumers is unthinkable without a thriving waste-disposal industry. Consumers are not expected to swear loyalty to the objects they obtain with the intention to consume.

The ever more common pattern of a 'pure relationship', revealed and described by Anthony Giddens in his *Transformations of Intimacy*, may be interpreted as a transplantation of that commodity–market rule to the realm of human bonds. The practice of the 'pure relationship', widely observed and sometimes eulogized in popular folklore and its mass media representation, can be visualized in the likeness of the assumed or postulated consumer sovereignty. The impact of the distinction of the partner–partner relationship from the act of purchase of ordinary consumer goods, a rather profound distinction originated by the *mutuality* of consent required for the relationship to be *initiated*, is minimized (if not made irrelevant altogether) by the codicil making the decision of *one* of the partners sufficient to *terminate* it. It is that clause which lays bare the *similarity* overriding the *difference*: in the model of a 'pure relationship', just as on the commodity markets, partners are entitled to treat each other as they treat the objects of consumption. Once permission (and the prescription) to reject and replace an object of consumption which no longer brings full satisfaction is extended to partnership relations, the partners are cast in the status of consumer objects.

Paradoxically, they find themselves so cast because of their struggle to gain and monopolize the prerogatives of the sovereign consumer . . .

Obviously, a 'pure relationship' focusing on utility and gratification is the very opposite of friendship, devotion, solidarity and love – all those 'I–Thou' relations deemed to play the role of cement in the edifice of human togetherness. Its 'purity' is measured in the last account by an absence of ethically loaded ingredients. The attraction of a 'pure relationship' is in the delegitimation of questions like (to quote Ivan Klima) 'Where is the border between the right to personal happiness and new love, on the one hand, and reckless selfishness that would break up the family and perhaps damage the children, on the other?'[18] In the last account, that attraction lies in declaring the tying and untying of human bonds to be morally 'adiaphoric' (indifferent, neutral) acts, thereby relieving the actors of responsibility for each other: that unconditional responsibility which love, for better or worse, promises and struggles to build and preserve. 'The creation of a good and lasting mutual relationship', in stark opposition to seeking enjoyment through objects of consumption, 'requires enormous effort' – a point that the 'pure relationship' emphatically denies, in the name of some other values among which the ethically fundamental responsibility for the other does not figure. What love, in stark opposition to a mere desire of satisfaction, needs however to be compared to, Klima suggests,

> is the creation of a work of art . . . That too requires imagination, total concentration, the combining of all aspects of human personality, self-sacrifice on the part of the artist, and absolute freedom. But most of all, as with artistic creation, love requires action, that is, non-routine activity and behaviour, as well as constant attention to one's partner's intrinsic nature, an effort to comprehend his or her individuality, and respect, And last but not least, it needs tolerance, the awareness that one must not impose one's outlook or ideals on one's companion or stand in the way of the other's happiness.

Love, we may say, abstains from promising an easy passage to happiness and meaning. A 'pure relationship' inspired by consumerist practices promises that passage to be easy and trouble-free, while rendering happiness and meaning hostages to fate – more like a lottery win than an act of creation and dedicated effort.

As I write these words, a remarkable study of the many faces of consumerism, edited by John Brewer and Frank Trentmann, has appeared.[19] In the introduction, the two editors draw the following conclusion from a comprehensive survey of the available approaches to the study of the phenomenon:

> We began this chapter by commenting on the remarkable richness and diversity of modern consumption and on the difficulty of accommodating such variety within a single interpretative framework . . . No single narrative of consumption, no single typology of the consumer and no monolithic version of consumer culture will suffice . . .

And they advise us, when we struggle with the daunting task of composing such a cohesive view of consumers and their life strategies, 'to recognize that markets are necessarily embedded within complex political and cultural matrixes that give acts of consumption their specific resonance and import. Only then will we be able to do justice to modern consumption in all its power and plenitude.'

How right they are. What follows is one more illustration to their thesis: another addition to uncountable cognitive perspectives from which the phenomenon of modern consumption has been scrutinized thus far. An attempt no less (though hopefully no more) partial than those it is meant to complement rather than correct, let alone replace.

In this book, I intend to propose three 'ideal types': of consumerism, the society of consumers, and consumerist culture. On the methodological grounding and cognitive significance of ideal types, see chapter 1; but it ought to be stressed here already that 'ideal types' are not snapshots or likenesses of social reality, but attempts to construct models of its essential elements and their configuration which aim to render intelligible the otherwise chaotic and scattered evidence of experience. Ideal types are not descriptions of social reality but the tools of its analysis and – hopefully – its comprehension. Their purpose is to force our picture of the society we inhabit to 'make sense'; to achieve that purpose, they deliberately postulate more homogeneity, consistency and logic in the empirical social world than daily experience makes visible and allows us to grasp. Their roots are sunk deeply in the soil of human everyday experience and practices. But in order to attain

a better view of such practices, their causes and motives, they need a distance that allows them to embrace the field as a whole – so that the sight of human practices becomes more comprehensive and clearer to the analysts, also opening up, it is hoped, the causes and the motives of their actions to the actors themselves.

I am fully aware of the 'messiness' (complexity, multisidedness, heterogeneity) of reality that our common experience makes available to us. But I am also aware that models 'adequate at the level of meaning', as Max Weber would say, are indispensable for any understanding, and indeed for the very awareness of the similarities and differences, connections and discontinuities that hide behind the confusing variety of experience. The ideal types I propose here are meant to be 'thought with' and serve as instruments to 'see with'.

With the same idea in mind, I propose a number of concepts which I hope may help in grasping the new or emergent phenomena and processes that elide with the older conceptual nets – such as 'pointillist time', the 'commoditization of consumers', or 'subjectivity fetishism'. Last though not least, I attempt to record the impact of consumerist patterns of interaction and evaluation on various apparently unconnected aspects of the social setting, such as politics and democracy, social divisions and stratification, communities and partnerships, identity building, the production and use of knowledge, or value preferences.

The invasion, conquest and colonization of the web of human relations by the worldviews and behavioural patterns inspired by and made to the measure of commodity markets, and the sources of resentment, dissent and occasional resistance to the occupying forces, as well as the question of impassable limits (if any) to the occupants' rule, are the main themes of this book. The social forms and culture of contemporary living are scrutinized once more and reinterpreted in the light of those themes.

Inevitably, the story intended to be told here will be inconclusive – indeed, open-ended – as all reports from the battlefield are bound to be.