

Analysis of Contemporary Consumer Society Phenomena based on Marx's Theory of Alienation

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of China's economy, consumer culture has increasingly become a significant marker of social progress. However, the rise of consumer culture has also brought numerous problems, among which the issue of consumer alienation is particularly prominent. This phenomenon not only reflects the distortion of individual values but also exposes deep-seated contradictions in social development, further becoming an important factor affecting social harmony and individual well-being. This paper aims to analyze the problem of consumer alienation in contemporary society from the perspective of Marx's theory of alienation, encompassing various manifestations such as conspicuous consumption, luxury consumption, and virtual consumption. Based on Marxist theory, the paper proposes suggestions and recommendations for resolving the issue of consumer alienation, thereby promoting the comprehensive and healthy development of individuals and fostering healthy consumption in society.

KEYWORDS

Marx; Alienation Theory; Consumer Alienation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Marx's theory of alienation is a crucial component of his philosophical system, formed through profound observation of capitalist social reality, with a particular focus on alienated labor and alienated production. This theory systematically reveals the background, conceptual meaning, basic characteristics, roots, and solutions of alienation, constructing a logically coherent analytical framework that provides solid theoretical support for understanding the phenomenon of consumer alienation in contemporary society.

Currently, the prosperity of consumption is often seen as a sign of economic growth; however, it also harbors many issues. Marx pointed out that people often measure the satisfaction of needs through the possession of commodities, extending from basic living needs to the pursuit of a better life. Thus, consumption becomes an important pathway to realizing life's ideals. Yet, under the influence of capital and media, contemporary consumption concepts and behaviors have gradually deviated from their essence, giving rise to alienated phenomena such as symbolization and excessiveness, which cause significant social and individual distress. In this context, it is necessary to return to Marx's theory of alienation, deeply analyze the causes of consumer alienation, and explore resolution paths suited to the characteristics of our time.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1. The Formative Background of Marx's Theory of Alienation

Marx's theory of alienation was an inevitable outcome of the historical development of capitalist society, a reflection on and solution to the problems of the era. In the late 18th century, the First Industrial Revolution swept across Europe, greatly promoting the development of the capitalist mode of production, unprecedentedly boosting productivity levels, and causing profound changes in capitalist production relations. The tremendous transformations of this period formed the background for the emergence of Marx's theory of alienation.

First, the capitalist mode of production continuously developed. The mode of material production is a contradictory unity of productive forces and production relations, forming the foundation of human existence and development. Its transformation deeply affects all aspects of human social life. The Industrial Revolution had a profound impact on social change and progress. It propelled society from traditional handicraft workshops to the era of machine-based industry, from the "Age of Steam" to the "Age of Electricity." With the continuous advancement of the Industrial Revolution and the constant improvement of production technology, the mode of production kept changing. "The old feudal or guild forms of industrial organization could no longer meet the demand rising with new markets." ^[1] The application of various machines and industrialized production greatly enhanced production efficiency and output, leading to increasing social wealth. However, this also brought limitations. Machines could not completely replace human labor; tasks they could not perform still had to be done by workers. Monotonous and repetitive work deprived laborers of opportunities for free development, separated them from the means of production, widened the wealth gap, and thus intensified social contradictions. Industrial changes continuously raised the level of social productive forces, making machines the primary productive force and undoubtedly a solid force driving social development.

Second, capitalist production relations underwent profound changes. According to Marx's definition, production relations are "a definite and necessary relation independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces."

^[2] Since the Industrial Revolution, the capitalist mode of production gradually replaced feudal production relations, driving the development of human society. On the one hand, the purpose of capitalist production is the valorization of value through commodity exchange. Under this system, capitalists control the means of production, while workers, possessing nothing but their own labor power, must sell their labor to earn wages; labor power itself becomes a commodity. The superficially free exchange of commodities in fact conceals the exploitation inherent in private ownership. Under conditions of machine-based industry and socialized production, the socialization of labor coexists with the private ownership of the means of production. Producers are separated from the means of production, and the entire system is built upon the exploitation of workers, leading to the continuous formation of class contradictions. On the other hand, class contradictions in capitalist society became increasingly prominent. "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."

^[3] With the development of commodity-money relations, the proletariat, as providers of labor power, became entirely subject to the bourgeoisie, new forms of oppression emerged, and the contradictions between the two major classes intensified. Capitalists, in pursuit of maximizing surplus value, continuously aggravated social contradictions, thereby triggering social revolutions. Revolution is the locomotive of history, and social revolution became the driving force for social progress. With the proletariat entering the political stage, "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism" not only revealed the severity and complexity of the revolutionary situation but also reflected the urgent need to establish a scientific revolutionary theory, laying the class foundation for the birth of Marxist theory.

2.2. The Basic Content of Marx's Theory of Alienation

Alienation refers to the phenomenon where forces that originally belonged to the subject, in the process of development, turn into an alien power that dominates and restricts the subject itself. In his theory of alienated labor, Marx proposed four aspects, the core of which is to reveal the exploitative relationship between capitalists and workers and to point out that the essence of alienation is the loss of the human species-being.

1) Alienation from the product of labor. Under capitalist private ownership, the product of labor, as the objectified result of the worker's labor, becomes an alien power opposed to the worker. The more wealth the worker produces, the poorer he becomes. As Marx said: "The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. The devaluation of the human world grows in direct proportion to the increase in value of the world of things."^[4] The product of labor, which should belong to the laborer, in reality dominates the laborer.

2) Alienation from the act of laboring itself. Labor should be a free and conscious activity of human beings, a way to exert physical and mental powers. But in alienated labor, labor becomes an external, compulsory activity. "His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it... the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another."^[5] Workers shun labor like the plague. Labor degenerates from a human essence into a painful means of subsistence.

3) Alienation from species-being. The species-character of human beings lies in free and conscious activity, specifically labor. Alienated labor reduces human productive activity to a mere tool for maintaining physical existence. The result is: "It alienates from man his own body, as well as external nature and his spiritual aspect, his human aspect." Humans become separated from their species-being; labor no longer embodies human freedom and creativity.

4) Alienation of man from man. The direct consequence of the first three forms of alienation is the alienation of human relations. If the labor product and activity do not belong to the worker, they must belong to another being outside him. In capitalist society, "this man" is the capitalist. Labor activity and products are controlled by the capitalist. The relationship between humans manifests as the exploitative and oppressive relationship between worker and capitalist.

3. THE CONCEPT OF CONSUMER SOCIETY

3.1. Definition of Consumer Society

Consumer society refers to a social form in modern society where consumption behaviors and consumer culture occupy a central position. In such a society, economic activities and individual life revolve around consumption. Products and brands often become symbols of personal identity, and consumption choices reflect social status, taste, and values. Consumption is not merely an economic behavior but also an important means of social interaction, cultural identification, and self-expression.

3.2. Analysis of the Characteristics of Consumer Society

1) Materialism in Consumption. With the development of the market economy, people face a reality of great material abundance. How to correctly approach consumption has become a difficult problem. Most people are in a state of earning money and consuming, then earning more and consuming more. The desire for material possession is unprecedentedly high, and there is a trend of rising materialism. Modern consumption patterns release humanity's infinite pursuit into the chase of material desires, failing to achieve spiritual, psychological, and intellectual development. Once materialism dominates

people's values, consumption is misinterpreted as an end in itself, thus becoming detached from production – consumption for the sake of consumption. People inevitably become obsessed with material things, lose their individuality, and become slaves to objects.

2) The Sign Value of Consumption. The sign value in the characteristics of consumer society mainly refers to the symbolic meaning and social status carried by goods and services. In modern society, people do not just purchase the item itself; they pay more attention to the identity, taste, and lifestyle it can convey. Certain products, due to their scarcity, brand influence, or unique design, become symbols of status. Through the consumption of these goods, individuals express themselves, confirm group belonging, or seek social recognition. In today's consumption context, the market value of a commodity is often surpassed by its sign value. Consumers' purchasing behaviors reflect their sensitivity to and pursuit of social symbols, thereby forming a complex consumer culture. This emphasis on sign value also reflects, to some extent, contemporary society's craving for material things and the subtleties of interpersonal relationships, thus making consumption behavior an important pathway for individual identity and social interaction.

3) The Accelerated Obsolescence of Goods. One characteristic of consumer society is the accelerated obsolescence of goods. This phenomenon reflects the shortened life cycle and accelerated replacement of products in modern society. Against the backdrop of rapidly developing information technology and productive forces, enterprises continuously launch new products to meet consumers' growing needs and preferences, while old products are quickly phased out. This rapid turnover makes goods no longer durable consumer items but more like fleeting fashion trends. When making choices, consumers not only face a wealth of options but also bear the accompanying anxiety.

4. MANIFESTATIONS OF CONSUMER ALIENATION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

4.1. Conspicuous Consumption

Conspicuous consumption is deeply influenced by face culture. China's face culture has a long history and is even considered an important psychological characteristic of Chinese people, influencing their consumption behaviors and social interactions. Just as "face" is annotated as "honor, glory" in the Cihai dictionary, in the Chinese language context, "face" originally meant honor, and "losing face" is equivalent to "disgrace." Driven by face culture, consumption is not merely an act of satisfying material needs but also a symbol of social status and identity. Conspicuous consumption manifests in various forms, such as luxury cars, mansions, brand-name products, and luxury goods becoming means to display personal or family social status. In interpersonal interactions, consumption levels become a standard for evaluating each other's relationships, status, and respect, triggering an endless race of comparison.

4.2. Symbolic Consumption

Symbolic consumption is a widespread phenomenon in contemporary Chinese society. Its roots can be traced back to Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, where "conspicuous consumption is a symbol of the leisure class's identity and social status," evolving into a situation where the sign value of consumption surpasses its use value. Against the backdrop of rapid economic development, consumption has become not only about satisfying material needs but also an important means of displaying social status, wealth, and personal identity. This consumption model is adopted by all social strata, from the wealthy classes to ordinary people, and even emerging consumer groups like migrant workers, all participating to varying degrees in the wave of symbolic consumption. From luxury brands to tech products, from cultural activities to daily necessities, symbolic consumption choices reflect the deep-seated needs of individuals pursuing social recognition and respect.

4.3. Blind Consumption

Blind consumption refers to people making consumption choices without considering their genuine personal needs or carefully selecting goods, often following trends and imitating others, manifesting as an unconscious behavior of chasing fashion. Influenced by Georg Simmel's concepts of "imitation" and "differentiation," various social strata show a tendency to follow trends in consumption behavior. The upper classes create fashion, and the lower classes chase it, forming a dynamic cycle. Blind consumption becomes a means for individuals to symbolically attempt to elevate their social status. However, with the rapid iteration of fashion, such attempts become increasingly blind.

4.4. Luxury Consumption

Luxury consumption in contemporary Chinese society has transcended the traditional category of "extravagance and waste," transforming into a complex social phenomenon. It is not only reflected in the pursuit of expensive goods by a minority wealthy group but has also widely penetrated various social levels, triggering a widespread yearning for material luxury. Some Chinese people are enthusiastic about luxury consumption, even shifting their luxury consumption targets globally. Behind luxury consumption lies a competitive psychology, creating a sense of honor and vanity for consumers. However, the spread of this consumption model brings problems such as resource waste, distortion of social values, and the blind following of consumption mentalities.

5. REFLECTION AND IMPROVEMENT REGARDING CONSUMER SOCIETY

5.1. Dialectical Analysis of Alienation in Contemporary Social Consumption

With the continuous development of China's social economy, the problem of alienation in consumption also changes accordingly; the two are closely linked. The impact of consumer alienation varies across different historical stages. It has both beneficial and harmful aspects for the consuming subject and socio-economic development. Therefore, we need to view the issue of alienation in contemporary social consumption dialectically.

First, from the beneficial side, consumer alienation reflects the pursuit of individuality and differentiation by social groups. This helps promote the diversity and innovation of goods and services, thereby stimulating economic growth, creating more market segmentation and specialized demand, and thus generating more employment opportunities, etc. Simultaneously, individuals express their values and cultural identity through consumption, which is a form of self-actualization and social participation.

Second, from the harmful side, consumer alienation may lead to a series of problems. It may exacerbate social tendencies towards materialism and money worship, causing contemporary youth to excessively pursue material enjoyment while neglecting spiritual pursuits. It can lead to resource waste and environmental pollution, negatively impact the ecological environment, and exacerbate social inequalities.

Therefore, we need to understand and analyze the issue of alienation in contemporary social consumption from a dialectical perspective. We must neither analyze the issue of alienation in consumption one-sidedly with a traditional metaphysical viewpoint, i.e., completely negating or accepting it, nor analyze it in isolation and statically, detached from a dialectical viewpoint. Due to differences in economic levels across regions, the impact of the problems also varies. Only by comprehensively analyzing the issue of alienation in consumption can we recognize its dual nature. Only by viewing the issue of alienation in consumption from a perspective of motion and interconnection can we correctly understand its impact. In summary, only by using a dialectical

analytical perspective can we correctly view the issue of alienation in consumer society. Furthermore, only by guiding and educating people towards reasonable, moderate, and healthy consumption behaviors can we contribute to their genuine development and be more conducive to the sustainable development of society.

5.2. Correctly Understanding the Relationship between Needs and Consumption, Real Needs and False Needs

Needs are the internal driving force of human survival and development, while consumption is the means to satisfy needs. Human needs are diverse, including material, spiritual, and social needs, etc. They are satisfied through consumption, while simultaneously stimulating new needs. Needs can be divided into real needs and false needs: Real needs are the fundamental demands generated by humans to guarantee basic survival and development. Consumption should be a social activity originating from real needs. However, in today's highly developed commodity economy, consumption often becomes a false need induced by society, culture, and advertising. Humans are no longer the subject of consumption but instead become non-rational "shopping machines," trapped in an alienated state of consumption for its own sake. Therefore, we must be vigilant against consumer alienation and correctly understand the relationship between needs and consumption, and between real and false needs.

First, clarify the relationship between needs and consumption. Consumers should have a clear awareness of their own needs during the shopping process. The rise of the internet and e-commerce has drastically changed shopping methods, bringing convenience while also weakening the psychological burden of payment. It satisfies both material needs and some spiritual needs. However, many consumers easily fall into the predicament of overconsumption and luxury consumption. Therefore, consumers must rationally examine their own needs, avoid waste, and conserve resources.

Second, clarify the relationship between real needs and false needs. Consumers should engage in rational and selective consumption based on actual needs. Modern information technology promotes the widespread dissemination of advertising and product information. Consumers need to remain awake, be wary of being puzzled by symbolized and over-packaged commodities, and actively choose goods that meet their real needs. We should correctly identify and resist false consumption slogans such as "the more, the better," curb endless consumption desires, return to real needs, cultivate good consumption habits, and achieve rational and healthy consumption.

6. CONCLUSION

Although Marx's theory of alienation was proposed over a century ago, it still holds significant theoretical value and practical relevance for analyzing and solving contemporary social consumption problems. With the development of China's socialist market economy, alienated phenomena such as blind consumption, face consumption, and symbolic consumption have emerged in the consumption sphere, urgently requiring in-depth theoretical analysis of their formation mechanisms and negative impacts. Based on this theory, we should deepen our understanding of the essence of consumer alienation, adhere to an orientation towards the free and comprehensive development of human beings, and promote the establishment of a consumption civilization that is economically and ecologically sustainable through practical paths such as constructing consumption models suited to national conditions, guiding consumption orientations that satisfy real needs, practicing green and low-carbon consumption behaviors, and fostering a consumption environment harmonious between humans and nature. This will provide effective support for realizing the comprehensive development of individuals and social progress.

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