



Research Article

GLOBAL CONSUMERISM AND POWER IN ITS THIRD DIMENSION

Bhavya Kumar

Centre for Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Mehrauli Road, New Delhi 110067

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received 07th January, 2015 Received in revised form 010th February, 2016 Accepted 15th March, 2016 Published online 28st April, 2016</p>	<p>The paper 'Global Consumerism and Power in its Third Dimension' has been written with the objective of portraying the contemporary neo-liberal market economies as holding certain positions of power and authority over the consumers across the world. The mode of exercising the same is not coercion, rather, the appropriation of the impressionable minds of the consumers. While treading this path one wonders how effective are the assumptions of pure economics which hold the consumer to be a rational being adhering to the law of marginal utility, feasibility of the intersection of the supply-demand curves to give a perfect equilibrium thereby giving an impression of a win-win situation to both producers and consumers.</p>
<p>Keywords: Global Consumerism, Market, Power, Third Dimension of Power, Leisure Class, Thorstein Veblen, Gavena, Steven Lukes, Conspicuous Consumption, Pecuniary Emulation, New Middle Class, Globalisation,</p>	<p>The aim of the article is to establish the role of the power wielded by the market and corporate houses on the consumer community by and large at par with the neo-liberal and classical economic rules and assumptions to understand the dynamics of the contemporary market economies. I seek to concentrate on the 'third dimension' of power that is exercised by the market forces; for which I borrow from the work of Steven Lukes on the dimensions of power and his contribution to the same by theorizing about the third dimension of power. This enables me to substantiate my argument that market forces perpetuate their power by making the consumers believe in the inevitable possession of goods and services, which the consumers can otherwise make-do without! This is accompanied by a culture of conspicuous consumption and the emergence of a consumerist class. I depend on the work of Thorstein Veblen (The Leisure Class) to explain the origin and existence of a 'leisure class', which has only expanded today by the inclusion of the new middle class.</p>

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INTRODUCTION

This is the age of consumerism. We live in a world that thrives on the values and ethics of the neo-liberal market. Market economy, trade, finance play leading roles in establishing political ties between nations and regions. Irrespective of the ideology a nation is based on, or irrespective of its stage of development 'consumerism' seems to be garnering the allegiance of masses from all societies alike! It has quickly revealed itself as a pervasive force to reckon with; a form of 'power' that needs no coercion in order to command 'authority'. This paper would like to deal with this contemporary issue of consumerism (and other 'isms' of its like) not just as 'global market phenomenon' but rather as a socio-political-economic movement, which wields immense power and authority on the larger part of the globe.

Different sociologists have propounded different theories on Power. *Max Weber* defines power as the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry

out his own will despite resistance, regardless on the basis of which probability rests. *Parsons* defines power as a positive social capacity to be able to mobilise its resources to achieve its communal needs; and draws an analogy between power and money in doing so. Marxists regard power in a zero sum approach, that is, an individual A will be powerful at the cost of B. Within the Marxist tradition: (1) *N. Poulantzas* defined power as the capacity of one class to realise its interests in opposition to other classes. This makes inevitable the presence of a class struggle, characterisation of a Mode of Production around which the power struggle is involved etc. (2) *Gramsci* who developed the concept of hegemony in order to explain the quiescence of the powerless in terms of the ideology of the dominant class.

Power in its third dimension

The theory propounded by Steven Lukes in his book *Power: A radical View*, comes in handy here. He debate nature of power, how power and powerlessness affect the political actions and

*✉ **Corresponding author: Bhavya Kumar**

Centre for Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University,
New Mehrauli Road, New Delhi 110067

lives of non-elites. Lukes suggests that power may be understood in three dimensions. The first dimensional approach developed by pluralists Dahl and Polsby hold the powerless responsible for the non participation in political process. In John Gaventa's words 'within the one-dimensional approach because (1) people act upon recognised grievances, (2) in an open system (3) for themselves or through leaders, then non participation or inaction isn't a political problem. Dahl calls these non-activists as homo-civicus: for whom political action is less efficient than working at his own work. The second dimensional approach developed by Bachrach and Baratz. They believe that power is exercised not just upon participants within the decision-making process but also towards the exclusion of certain participants and issues. This approach involves a mobilisation of bias within the sphere of politics which ensures that certain people and issues remain excluded. 'Political organisations, like all organisations develop a mobilisation of bias... in favour of the exploitation of certain kinds of conflict and suppression of others... organised out' (Gaventa ,1980:257). Lukes makes his contribution to the debate of power and powerlessness by giving shape to the **third dimensional approach** (which commands our interest). He argues that 'A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests. The means by which A may do so go significantly beyond those suggested by the first two approaches: A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he doesn't want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants... through affecting B's conceptions of issues altogether' (Gaventa,1980:260). In propounding the third dimensional approach Lukes offers prospects of serious sociological and not merely personalised comments to various issues which were hitherto untouched. He aims at identifying and criticising values that not only lead to quiescence but also lead the dominated lot to celebrate their position. This acquiescence may occur in a thick and thin sense (Scott, 1990): the thick sense where people strongly believe in the values that oppress them and thin where they merely resign to them.

Theory of the Leisure Class

One of the many systems where the power nexus can be explained with the assistance of the third dimensional approach is the 'market and the power it exerts over consumers via mechanisms of consumerism'. Lukes' third dimensional approach will help us understand how the market(A) influences the very perceptions of consumers(B), moulds it to such an extent that individual consumers buy goods and services which they can otherwise make do without (domination of A over B). In doing so we will rely heavily on Veblen's 'The theory of leisure class', in which he labels the dominant classes of American capitalist society as the leisure class who pursue a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption, ostentatious waste and idleness.

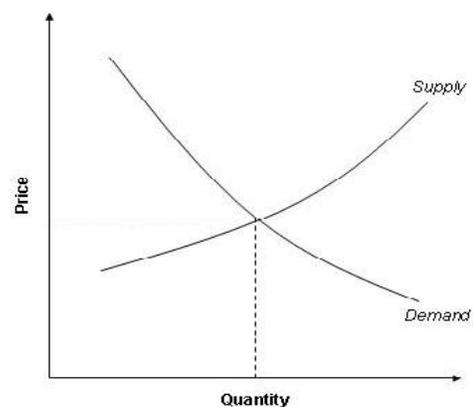
Before we delve into this matter, we must acquire a background of Veblen's concepts which he tries to explain through 'The theory of Leisure class'.

Written in 1899, at a time when the excesses of so-called late capitalism or post modernity could scarcely be imagined by even the most gifted of social critics, Veblen's belligerent and bombastic volume shattered the idyllic ambience of the era. His ideas and statements regarding conspicuous consumption became so prevalent and commanding that it's easy to find media houses making good use of the same, moving products through ideological frameworks of consumers for example: a beautiful woman suddenly being interested in a young man just for using a body spray. There is no better time than today, to recall the work of Veblen, for I doubt he has ever been as relevant as he is now!

The Theory of the Leisure Class is a study in economics even though it lacks the economic jargons, data analysis etc. Veblen examines the demand and consumption of the upper classes of society. He begins by looking at the primitive society to trace the origins of the leisure class. In the primitive society there are no class distinctions or forms of ownership but when the institution of ownership begins, women are seized by victors, and then class distinction begins. This barbarian society (class distinctions based on the ownership of women) has different characteristics than the primitive society does (no class distinctions), and this is where the basis of the leisure class can be found. In order to examine the consumption and leisure habits of the leisure class, Veblen looks at their lifestyles, examines their characteristics, their activities like their dressing sense, religious habits, rituals and activities of higher learning. He considers a major part of this as conspicuous and vicarious in nature, related to the display of status and not to functionality or usefulness. They avoid any kind of employment that is productive.

Contextual realities

The point I wish to keep forward is that global consumerism along with a neo-liberal economy, gives us a picture of balance between the producers and consumers, on the basis of its aggregate demand and supply diagrams striking a point of equilibrium at a given price and quantity.



It shows us a picture where the world becomes one equal platform from which people of various nationalities can conveniently procure goods and services they 'need' or 'wish' to buy from the one fair and perfectly competitive market. This is to a large extent a farce as it is heavily lopsided in favour of

the producers and distributors and huge capitalist multinationals and is based on assumptions of perfect rationality of the part of consumers (which scarcely holds true). It fails to account for the intricacies and complexities that markets bear contextually.

In reality, we are faced with marketplaces where communication technologies have led to consumers having similar tastes for products, that is, a global homogeneity is generated with respect to the tastes and choices of consumers. To put it in colloquial terms, we live in the age of 'globalisation' marked by increasing integration and interdependence of societies. George Ritzer in his book 'The Globalisation of Nothing' provides a description of globalisation in terms of consumption of goods and services. He believes that the process of globalisation consists of the process of 'glocalisation' and 'grobalisation'. Glocalisation is a combination of the words globalisation and localisation. It means that global players seek to increase their sales in local markets by adapting to dominant local trends. This trend usually comes in handy in the untapped developing economies of the world. I would like to substantiate the same by citing B. Pradeep Nair's article 'Cloud Technology changing TV ad landscape'. He believes 'hyperlocal' is the new buzzword and seeks to point at the competence of the 'geo-targeted' ads in publicising goods and services to people in contexts relevant to them. "Advertisement tailored to the location or browsing pattern of a person is common on websites. For example, we see an HDFC or Flipkart advertisement on New York Times website." (Nair: *The Hindu*; 30.05.2016; 16). By Grobalisation, Ritzer aims to point at the imperialistic and capitalistic ambitions of nations, corporations and organisations. Larger forces overwhelm the power of people to adapt and innovate in ways that preserve their (producers and distributors) autonomy. Consumer goods and the media are key forces that largely dictate the nature of the self and the groups a person joins.

This leaves the multinational corporations with great power (albeit not without competition) to create and maintain 'compelling' brands. To accomplish this result the multinationals engage in marketing strategies to increase brand loyalties etc. This is where Luke's third-dimensional approach can be put to place. The market can condition and socialise consumers in a fashion such that the market exercises power over them by influencing, shaping or determining their very wants.

Veblen, in his Theory of Leisure class, traces the origins of this class which he calls leisure class, also mentioned earlier in the paper. He does so by tracing the popular culture of consumption patterns at various points in the history of human civilization. The leisure class according to this conception can be defined as a class of people who indulged in consumption of goods and services that are prized and culturally in vogue at a given point. Veblen stresses on non industrial character of consumption and occupation of the leisure class well into history. He gives example of the Brahmins who have the luxury of industrial exemption. 'The leisure class on the whole comprises the noble and priestly class, together with much of their retinue. The occupations of the class are correspondingly

diversified; but they have a common economic characteristic of being non-industrial' (Veblen, 1991:2). Also, not everyone by virtue of popular culture gets to be a part of the leisure class. Occupation is an important source of exclusion. The everyday work of getting a livelihood is supposed to be a sign of the inferior classes which consists of slaves, other dependents and women. To draw contemporary references we may cite the two dimensional approach given by Bachrach and Baratz where the power relations require the exclusion of a certain people and issues to maintain a mobilisation of bias. The market, with its requirements of 'price' and price uniformity does exclude a large mass (in Veblen's words the inferior classes) while perpetuating a culture of consumerism among the leisure class. However, as we proceed in time we must digress a little from Veblen's composition of leisure class. The leisure class today has broadened its contours to include white caller workers, industrialists, bourgeois and petty bourgeois. However, manual labour is still looked down upon. When viewed in the light of that modern common sense which has guided economic discussion, it seems formal and insubstantial. But it persists with great tenacity as a common place perception even in modern life, as is shown for instance, by our habitual aversion to menial employments (Veblen, 1991:5). Therefore, to suit our purpose we may say that in the present ages the definition of the leisure class has changed, rather expanded. This is a sign of the growing might of consumerist tendencies.

One would argue that many products owned by consumer's maybe goods of personal useful nature, something which is essential or goods of primary need. Can one then point to the consumption of these goods in the same light? Does the consumption of such goods make the class in question any less 'leisure oriented' in nature? The answer is that the original reason for seizure or ownership for a good or service by the leisure class would be its use as a trophy and not necessity. That is, a good with high face value with almost no regard to its use value. The original reason for seizure and appropriation of women seems to be their usefulness as trophies (Veblen, 1991:12). Hence, goods consumed for the mere sake of consumption couldn't be seen in the same light, also it was only the consumption of goods for their usefulness as trophies that made the leisure class what they were. The usefulness of a good can be determined by its perception in a society. How much a society values a good or a service also decides its worth. This may include the study of social myths, languages, and symbols and how they are shape and manipulated in the power process, social legitimisations are built around the role of the goods in question and a resultant belief is instilled. These mechanisms are extremely similar to the mechanisms of propagation of the third dimensional approach. Here, the market gains legitimacy in garb of the commodities in question and so perpetuates its prowess over the consumers. While this does obviously lead to the ideological domination of the market over its consumers, this also leads to the emergence of a hegemonic domination of one class over the others. The superiority being measured in terms of consumption of goods and services and also a domination of ideologies that lead the consumerist, market oriented approach of the leisure class to be superior.

Perpetuation of Power and the New Middle Class

John Gaventa theorizes that power and powerlessness are both interrelated and accumulative in nature and that each dimension of power reinforces the form of a progression to further our argument of the above mentioned point of the growing clout of the market power over consumers: If A gains in power over B and continues to prevail with respect to allocation of resources etc, this lead to a consistent accumulation of resources which facilitates the construction of barriers against the interests of B (development of mobilisation of bias). Having accumulated enough, A invests in the development of dominant images, legitimization of beliefs of A's superiority via control over media, advertisement, monopolisation, cartelisation etc. This is the context in which we try to understand the control over power relations that is commanded by the market vis-à-vis the leisure class or consumers at large. The consumer culture not only defines how to satisfy ones needs and wants but has also been successful in redefining one's needs and wants. A suited example of the same would be the brand value associated with the popular Apple products and gadgets. Owning an Apple i-phone for instance is symbolic of higher status vis-à-vis owning a mobile phone of another company. This reflects the building of a class which is increasingly conscious in its approach. Consciousness, not with respect to rationality, but with respect to status and symbolism. This fetish of buying goods and services for the sake of status can be well understood through 'La Distinction' (1979) by Pierre Bourdieu. In this sociological report Bourdieu states that those with degrees of cultural capital, no-financial social assets like education which facilitate social mobility are likely to determine the 'taste' within a society. He believes that acceptance of dominant forms of taste is a form of symbolic violence, denying the dominated the means to define their own world. Hence, taste becomes an example of cultural hegemony which we can understand as being imposed by the all powerful market on its consumers on the one hand and by the so called leisure class on the inferior class on the other. Hence, this is another substantialisation of the fact that the market as a dominant entity exercises power over the consumers (especially the gullible leisure class) by shaping and determining their wants.

As mentioned above, we are witnessing the expansion of this leisure class. This is the impact of the spread of a 'consumer culture'. This expanded, extrapolated class has now come to be characterised by the increasing clout of the middle class. Hence, I would seek to expand the ambit of Veblen's leisure class by inclusion of the middle class. Talking in context of the Indian middle class, the newness of the middle class refers to a process of production of a distinctive social and political identity that represents and lays claim to the benefits of liberalisation (Fernandes, 2011: 69). The new middle class world over is now characterised by attitudes of consumerism, investment and corresponding lifestyles. A class that consumes and invests with an aspiration of upward mobility is the class which we call the middle class. The values related to consumption in modern times are an example of elements that have travelled from industrialised societies to developing countries around the globe via trans-culturation (Byrnes,

2007:2). This culture which we refer to as a shared set of consumption-related symbols such as product categories, brands and common consumption activities is called 'global consumer culture'.

'Pecuniary Emulation' has an important role to play in the expansion of the ambit of the leisure class. Through pecuniary emulation the so called low status would emulate the classes that command the dominant culture; this helps them gain greater social status. Contextually the burgeoning middle class is a classic example of the same. '... It is only when taken in a sense far removed from its naïve meaning that consumption of goods can be said to afford the incentive from which accumulation invariably proceeds. The motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation; and the motive of emulation continues active in the further development of the institution to which it has given rise to the development of those features...' (Veblen, 1991:14). However, pecuniary emulation etc cannot guarantee in principle the same honorific value that which has already been acquired by the leisure classes. The reason being that even though wealth is intrinsically honourable, wealth acquired through the passage of generations is considered much more honorific than that accumulated by the possessors own efforts. Prowess still remains the monopoly of the elite, the leisure class remains at the head of the reputability. Though possession of wealth does become a common basis of reputability, but, the desire for added comfort and security from want is present as a motive at every stage of accumulation in a modern industrial community; although the standard of sufficiency in these respects is in turn greatly affected by the habits of pecuniary emulation (Veblen, 1991: 17).

The new, extrapolated leisure class indulges in what we call conspicuous consumption. The theory of conspicuous consumption holds the unproductive consumption of goods as honourable, status oriented activities, which are primarily stoked by tools of the market; like advertisements which instil a strong urge of acquiring products which we can make do without. The market, having accumulated power and resources over decades mobilises a bias, which does exclude a certain class, but which also selects a target group. This target group with its required capital to spend and social prestige to earn and maintain is effortlessly sucked into the cycle of conspicuous consumption. As wealth accumulates in the hands of the man of leisure, he alone won't be sufficient to do justice to his opulence. 'The aid of friends and residents is therefore brought in by resorting to the giving of valuable presents and expensive feasts and entertainment' (Veblen, 1991:37). The man along with his companions is sucked into a life of materialism. Costly modes of entertainment are adopted to serve as means to the end. The companion not only witnesses the excess of good things which his host is unable to dispose single handed but also becomes witness to his etiquettes.

To Veblen, one of the greatest ills of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure is 'wastage'. He believes that indulgence in either or both of them will inevitably lead to wastage of time and wastage of wealth accumulated; either of which is definitely not in the right interests of the man of leisure or his companions. Stemming from conspicuous consumption

is invidious consumption which is meant to provoke the envy of others through one's ostentatious consumptions. In many instances conspicuous consumption is discussed as a behavioural addiction or an immense desire for the gratification of hedonistic expectations.

Unlike the basic assumption of neo-liberal economics, regarding the rational character of the consumer, Veblen points out the lack of satisfaction and happiness at their end. Since, the consumer is anything but rational here; the law of marginal utility scarcely applies. Therefore this form of consumption is aimless in its approach and goods are valued as being trophies, there are no limits to the expectations (hedonic expectations) of the leisure class. This gives rise to widespread discontent and a never ending thirst for better products. Let's say, a man of leisure would always want to upgrade from an i-phone 5 to i-phone 5s to i-phone 6, so on and so forth. In doing so the market (individual multinationals or cartels) will wield power in the form of brand power, star power, promotion power etc. one of the above mentioned would in the least deal with interests of the consumers. Rather they would leave the consumers in questionable and relatively disadvantageous position.

Conclusion

Consumption and production of goods have gained importance quickly over the years, more so in the 21st century. The reason being rise in industrialisation and a corresponding rise in the income levels and change in lifestyles of people.

Globalisation has bought the world together on one large platform, creating a global village, and global citizens. The dominant tradition that a global citizen ought to follow is that of consumerism. Ideally we as consumers have a utopian image of the market and its ethics, given that we can avail luxuries at wink of an eye. But due to lack of perfect information we fail to see that it's the market which is at a commanding position here.

It wields immense power in not only supplying the consumers demand but also controlling the wants of the consumer, its quantity and also the frequency of its demand. This power exerted on the consumers is not coercive, nor tangible; it perpetuates through the thought process and the constant conditioning of the thought process by the prevalent culture of consumerism.

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