

Justin Lewis, **Beyond Consumer Capitalism: Media and the Limits to Imagination**, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013, 224 pp., \$69.95 (hardcover), \$24.95 (paperback).

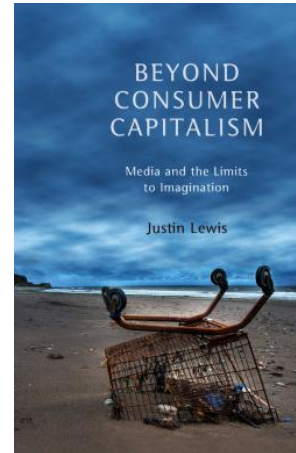
Reviewed by

Peter Lunt<sup>1</sup>

Dafni Mangaloussi

University of Leicester, UK

What is the role of the media and cultural industries in late capitalism? In ***Beyond Consumer Capitalism: Media and the Limits to Imagination***, author Justin Lewis joins those who argue that these forces are escalating the crisis of personal well-being, the hollowing out of public life, and the failure to develop imaginative policy responses to impending environmental disaster. He locates the origins of these effects of the media and cultural industries in what he terms “consumer capitalism,” seeing their present consequences in a culture in which



progress is bound up less with creating innovative, diverse and well-crafted forms than with the speed at which we dump and replace digital devices. The [media and telecommunications] industry thus not only embraces consumer capitalism, it epitomizes it. . . . [As] we are swept along in this constant cycle of replacement it is difficult to imagine other forms of progress, to see how innovation might serve a social or cultural purpose as well as a commercial imperative. (p. 12)

In structure, *Beyond Consumer Capitalism* opens with theoretical analysis of consumer capitalism as a cultural system, followed by three chapters that examine the above claims in turn—namely, how the media and cultural industries contribute to the crisis of well-being (by prioritizing consumer culture), the hollowing out of public life (through the marketization of news and factual broadcasting), and the lack of creativity in policy responses to environmental crisis (because of the nature of consumer capitalism itself). As summarized on the back cover blurb, Lewis despairs that “our cultural and informational industries limit rather than stimulate critical thinking, keeping us on the treadmill of consumption and narrowing our vision of what constitutes progress with grave inequalities”. The final chapter explores possible responses to the cumulative effects of these crises of imagination inherent in consumer capitalism.

The book is to be welcomed for its analysis of the intersection between media and consumer society from a critical cultural studies perspective. However, a reader might also have a variety of questions and concerns. Consider the expectations raised by the title itself. First, “consumer capitalism” is not a common term in the sociological, anthropological, or social psychological study of consumption (where the notion of “consumer culture” is more common). We discuss the choice of “capitalism” over “culture” below, since it raises familiar yet unresolved questions of the relationship between cultural

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studies and the political economy. Second, the word "beyond" raises expectations about what lies beyond consumer capitalism: a new form of capitalism or, just possibly, a new way of organizing production and consumption without capitalism? As our imagination inclined us to the latter, what Lewis meant by "beyond" proved disappointing.

Titling the last chapter "Imagining a Different World," Lewis sketches several ways in which regulation could be strengthened to constrain rampant consumer capitalism—and this is paradoxical insofar as most of the book has implied an insidiously powerful system of control. Thus despite his effort to point to new directions, the overall effect is dystopian. But, as we will argue, Lewis' claim about the limits of our contemporary imagination is shaped by a particular account of capitalism, one which tends to underplay the importance of political economy in relation to culture, contra some tendencies in cultural studies to recognize people's agency.

### **Context**

Lewis has a long established interest in critical cultural policy studies, and in the book he applies this perspective to identify the cultural contradictions of consumer capitalism. The most fundamental of these is the promise to satisfy the needs of individuals and to enable their flourishing alongside an endless cycle of unsatisfied wants as identity becomes synonymous with consumer choices. This idea is not new, but Lewis' point is that media and cultural industries have produced an intensification of consumer culture through the increasing saturation and sophistication of advertising and marketing techniques that draw consumers ever more effectively into overconsumption and divert them from political concerns. Lewis discusses the origins of consumer capitalism in the development of the advertising industry in the United States in the 1920s, culminating in the commodity capitalism of the corporate era of the mid-20th century. Since then, Lewis argues, the intensification of promotional culture, the hollowing out of the public sphere, and the inability to face up to environmental issues are all expressions of a diminished culture—a culture without imagination. The idea of a "cultural system" is central to Lewis' argument, suggesting that culture, instead of being opposed to systems, is now appropriated by capitalism and systemically generated by the cultural industries.

The promise of satisfaction and freedom compared to the realities of life in a consumer culture is a widely recognized contradiction of capitalism. Yet, although capitalism fails in its own terms, it continues to exist, as many critical analysts have sought to make clear (Slater, 1997). The Frankfurt School of critical theory developed a powerful critique of consumer culture for combining commodity capitalism with a corporatist political culture, reinforced by the neuroticism of institutions and individuals (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002/1987). Consumer society emerged from the broader shift in political economy from industrial to postindustrial (or "consumer") capitalism based on global corporations and expanding consumer markets. A critical analysis, therefore, could no longer focus just on a production process reliant on a reserve force of the unemployed, which kept labor costs down and provided the incentive to work despite poor conditions. The analysis of alienation must encompass the alienation of consumers (the illusion of "happy consumers," as Herbert Marcuse put it), including a critique of how the apparently neurotic nature of subjectivity in modernity is the result of attempts to adapt to the demands of capitalism.

At the center of the Frankfurt School critique of commodity capitalism in the mid-20th century was an account of the fragmentation and isolation of individuals as consumers who were ever less able to exercise autonomy, form collectives, and realize their human potential. Leaning heavily on the psychodynamic analysis of culture as mass psychology (Reich, 1980/1933), Marcuse (1964, 1973/1969) accorded the media—especially advertising—a crucial role in the construction of consumer false consciousness. This totalizing rationalization of consumer culture has, in turn, disorganizing effects on subjectivity. The difficulty of expressing dissent in such a system of domination—which works through the positive enrollment of consumer desire—has long been recognized and contrasted with an ideal understanding of the potential for nonalienated labor and freedom through engagement in a society built on the principles of social justice.

Lewis retains this basic argumentation from critical theory when he contends that the development of the media and cultural industries resulted in a mass culture of consumer identity that creates a sense of hopelessness and limits creative imagination. However, in asserting a conceptual shift from critical theory to critical cultural studies, Lewis offers two crucial arguments. First, he drops the trappings of psychodynamic theory in favor of a cultural analysis in which lack of imagination replaces neuroticism and fetishism. Second, he adapts critical theory's claim that consumer needs are shaped by the functional requirements of the system of consumption, suggesting that the contradictions of consumer capitalism are cultural rather than economic.

The general issues that Lewis considers—the transformation of capitalism, the increasing mediation of society, the links between marketization and the denuding of civil society and political culture, and the escalating environmental crisis—are of wide concern. But Lewis' book is a polemic, offering little engagement with wider debates about capitalism, culture, and consumer society.

### **Critique**

#### ***Political Economy versus Cultural Studies***

In 1994, Oscar Gandy organized a conference, later published as a special issue of *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* in 1995, that articulated the radical split between political economy and cultural studies approaches to media and communication. Although this split was against the grain of the New Left, as exemplified by Stuart Hall's integration of insights from both fields in his analysis of the circuit of culture, the conference saw Garnham (1995) make his opening statement in favor of the political economy of communication. He reaffirmed the primacy accorded by Marxist theory to political economy by asserting the determining influence of the economy on culture. Grossberg (1995) countered by making the case for an autonomous cultural studies, thereby allowing for a new direction for cultural studies that disdained debate with the political economy of communication because it tended too easily to economic determinism and failed to come to grips with the increasing importance of culture to society.

There is clearly value in challenging vague appeals to commensurability across approaches, and usefully this split allowed for recognition of different purposes, theories, and methods between political economy and cultural studies (see Babe, 2009; Peck, 2006). Nevertheless, as Miller (2011) argued, notwithstanding the unresolved legacy of conflict, many researchers have worked across these boundaries

in practice—including, to some degree, in *Beyond Consumer Capitalism*. As we have argued, Lewis implicitly engages with the arguments of critical theory in his analysis of the contradictions of consumer capitalism. Far from ignoring the claims of political economy, his strategy is to explain key political economy concepts—including the contradictions of capitalism itself—in cultural terms. Thus he argues that it is not so much the general economy as the cultural industries that have become the structuring focus of modern society.

### **Agency and the Consumer**

In *Beyond Consumer Capitalism*, Lewis appears to be arguing for the relative autonomy of culture while retaining an understanding of agency that reflects the impossibility of critique in consumer society. The underlying problem for Lewis, it seems, is the lack of subject positions available for counterhegemonic discourses in consumer capitalism because of the capacity of consumer culture to create the conditions for subjectivity based on consumer rather than citizen identity, thereby limiting both public life and policy discourses. McNay (2008) argues against accounts of agency that presume

that agency derives its shape from identity rather than action itself being constitutive of agency [thereby failing] . . . to differentiate adequately between different types of social and political agency or between available discursive resources, framing strategies and opportunity structures. (McNay, 2008, p. 164)

Such accounts of agency tend to focus on the opposition between freedom and constraint or routine and creativity, as opposed to understanding, as Bourdieu (1990) famously put it, “regulated liberty.” Bourdieu developed a reflexive sociology that transcends such distinctions by acknowledging the importance of experience without reducing social analysis to phenomenology and by understanding embodied agency as social practice that sediments social categories.

Moreover, so totalizing a critique of agency undermines attention to the potential for resistance—and unsurprisingly, therefore, Lewis gives little attention to anticapitalist or environmental movements. In contrast, McNay (2008) argues for a nuanced relation between authenticity and effectiveness in protest and resistance that has received considerable attention from scholars concerned with political subjectivity. For example, the Foucauldian analysis of governmentality, in which identity is an effect of power, is detached from the distinction between authentic and inauthentic action (e.g., Rose, 1999). Gramsci-inspired analyses of politics hold that discourse and hegemony constantly inform and are shaped by identity construction (e.g. Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Analysis within the broad framework of Bourdieu’s work develops a nuanced approach to the role of affect in politics (e.g., Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005).

In different ways, each of these approaches seeks to transcend dichotomies such as structure/agency and domination/freedom in order to recognize that alternative political imaginaries need to work strategically within practical limits while acknowledging the potential for acts of subversion to raise awareness of the arbitrariness and fragility of power (McNay, 2008). Lewis presents us with a vision that occludes these possibilities and doubts the potential for nuanced and incremental change to

undermine the dominance of consumer identity over citizen identity, to revitalize political engagement, or to force established power to respond to a global environmental crisis.

Lewis' deliberations on agency have another source, implicit in his mapping of cultural studies and psychology as forms of knowledge onto critical and administrative knowledge interests. Without wishing to contest the dangers of psychologism within promotional culture, the special position that Lewis affords to cultural studies needs to be questioned. One theme running through Lewis' book is the claim that psychological knowledge is fully appropriated by capitalism, whereas cultural knowledge is a potential source of critique. There are two objections to this position: One is that cultural studies too, surely, have been appropriated by capitalism and the cultural industries (think of the many employees working for promotional culture with degrees in media and cultural studies); the other is that it is surely too simple to see psychology as co-opted by power while cultural studies remain a source of emancipation.

### **Alternatives**

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in a critical analysis of capitalism. First we turn to Harvey's (2007, 2009, 2014) rereading of Marx's *Das Capital*, motivated by the recognition of processes of globalization, the extension of capitalism globally, and new forms of capitalism (particularly state capitalism in China). Then we examine Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) account of the new spirit of capitalism within the global networked society. Part of their argument is that, following intense discussions and debates about capitalism in the 1960s and 1970s, there was relative silence on the topic during the 1980s and 1990s. Perhaps it was in this lacuna that a radical autonomy for cultural analysis seemed plausible.

### ***The End of Capitalism***

Harvey's (2014, 2015) imperatives for analyzing the implications of this changing capitalist context stem from the global financial crisis in 2007, continuing political instability, and increasing and new forms of inequality. Thus he takes us back to political economy, reminding us that crises erupt through the historically contingent effects of the contradictions of capital. Indeed, capitalism has often surprised its critics by its capacity to adjust in the face of crisis. Allied to this process of adjustment, capitalism also tends to extend its reach to territories far beyond its origins in European liberal democracies (Harvey, 2007). What, then, is different about the present crisis? According to Harvey (2007, 2014), three "dangerous" contradictions have become salient, each characterized by various forms of externality that threaten to destabilize the capitalist equilibrium of adaptation to crisis and diversification of fields of application. First, Harvey doubts that compound economic growth is sustainable for a further century, partly because exploitation of the natural environment will no longer provide the material resources for growth. Moreover, he argues, the lack of resources cannot be overcome by adaptations from within capitalism itself, as the problem is external to (and bigger than) capitalism. Second, capitalism has no easy way, within its own terms, to produce environmentally sustainable growth, and thus it is doomed to create the conditions that will ultimately threaten the planet as well as capitalism itself (Klein, 2014). Third, Harvey discusses the notion of an emerging "universal alienation" resulting from a widespread loss of meaning, and in turn, undermining open discussions of future possibilities for physical and mental life.

There are parallels between Lewis' account of consumer identity and Harvey's conception of universal alienation, although a key difference is that Harvey includes new forms of sociality, revolt, or protest, including religious fundamentalism and fascist revival. Harvey does not see civil society as a denuded space for public participation, but instead argues that it is characterized by the radical expansion of struggle and conflict, not least over the nature and future of capitalism and humanity. For Harvey, the problem is also political rather than cultural, since the proliferation of conflict is increasingly used to rationalize state powers of suppression using the military state apparatus and technologies of surveillance. At the same time, the political Left is too weak to coordinate dispersed forms of protest across civil society or to build consensus in the face of difference (Turner, 2007). The danger, then, is what Harvey calls the "globalization of indifference" as universal alienation results in widespread skepticism and disbelief.

Consequently, for Harvey there is an urgent need to reformulate the analysis of capitalism in late modernity so that the Left can in turn reformulate forms of protest. In contrast to Lewis' account of the continuity of consumer capitalism across most of the 20th century, Harvey (2009) points to important differences between mid-20th-century monopoly capitalism and present-day capitalism. He argues that late modernity from the 1980s onward saw significant changes on a scale equivalent to the shift from 19th-century industrial capitalism to 20th-century monopoly capitalism. For example, contemporary capitalism extends financing models that once applied to firms to the individual, and thus credit and debt became central to how capitalism funds both production and consumption. This, in turn, creates new ways of extorting value as new capitalists (merchant capitalists, money capitalists, landlords, venture capitalists, etc.) emerge to exploit these possibilities.

### ***The New Spirit of Capitalism***

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) take as their starting point the widespread protests of the late 1960s against liberal politics and monopoly capitalism in Western liberal democracies. Thus they focus on agency, interpreting these protests as expressions of indignation at the effects of the regime in exacerbating inequality, and for its inability to address the politics of identity or to respond to questions of legitimacy. While the revolutionary aims of life political movements were not realized, according to Boltanski and Chiapello their critiques were appropriated by capitalism and realized in the new spirit of capitalism thriving within the network society.

In this new spirit (an updating of Weber's early 20th-century analysis, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*), adaptation to new flexible, adaptive, creative, and mobile modes of work is complemented by indignation at inauthenticity, oppression, misery, inequality, and egoism. Boltanski and Chiapello argue that critical sociology should position itself between the effort for radical change and cynicism, instead engaging in public debates that challenge established power without expecting that these would either generate value consensus or be dissipated by the totalizing effects of consumer culture. This is a position according to which "agency is given its full recognition and in which actors are knowledgeable and capable of bringing about change through protest, action and debate" (Turner, 2007, p. 411).

Where Lewis paints a picture of a world in which one cannot imagine any space for critique—perhaps because he has borrowed from critical theory a notion of the totalizing system and translated it into the cultural system of contemporary promotional culture—by contrast, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) understand critique as a human capacity inherent in what it is to be a social being even as that capacity for critique has long been appropriated by capitalism precisely for its generative nature. This, in effect, is one of the ways in which capitalism has sustained its adaptability. As Susen (2014) puts it, critique must be flexible so that “people possess genuine critical capacities—that is to say, that they are never so alienated as to be incapable of establishing critical distance” (p. 488). Furthermore, in relation to capitalism, itself a dynamic and changing system, critique is not foundational but pragmatic, itself prone to appropriation by capitalism, although adapting to the form of capitalism it confronts and yet in the process retaining its efficacy.

### Conclusion

As we have shown, *Beyond Consumer Capitalism* opens up important questions about the relation between media and cultural industries and changing forms of capitalism by exploring the implications for consumer culture, the quality of public life, and citizen/consumer agency. Nonetheless, a reading of alternative analyses of capitalism leads us to position Lewis’ account of the denuding of the public and political spheres in tension with alternative concepts of political agency and the new spirit of capitalism. While all broadly agreed that society—fueled in part by the media and cultural industries—has reached a dangerous point, one in which consumer society threatens its very continuity, disagreement remains as to whether the solution, if there is one, lies within or beyond the bounds of capitalism itself.

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