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Buying our way into humanness: consumerism and the dehumanisation of the poor

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Article Information

Abstract

Consumerism is an important feature of neoliberalism. The market has spread to all areas of life and relationships, emotions, meaning, but also whether one is considered fully human, are being determined by what one can buy. The question of whether something is a human being should be an easy one to answer. However, social psychology research shows that at times, we subjectively attribute human characteristics to non-human entities (anthropomorphism) or deny human characteristics to human beings (dehumanisation). Dehumanisation has mostly been studied in the context of intergroup violence, as is the case with genocides. In this article, I will explore the link between consumerism and dehumanisation. In a consumer society, goods, services, and lifestyles are not just bought for their usefulness but also for their ability to signal that one belongs to a higher social class (to the category of those that are seen as being more human), distancing oneself from those that are seen as lower and less human. As a result, the poor, who can only afford to consume a little, are systematically dehumanised. The poor are often invisible, despised or excluded when belonging has been identified as one of the most fundamental human psychological needs. Additionally, their well-being and happiness are threatened by a system in which those are determined by what one can buy.

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Introduction

Between 2000 and 2012, Abdoulaye Wade, then president of Senegal, undertook a series of public works in the capital, of which was the renovation of the Corniche Ouest, a highway going from Almadies, one of the fanciest neighbourhoods in the city, to downtown Dakar, the business centre. The Corniche Ouest has since become a pleasant highway with an ocean view, shiny SUVs, an upscale shopping mall, a high-end hotel, an outdoor fitness area, palm trees, luxury homes and buildings which house the World Bank, foreign embassies, and the like. What is not seen are run down buses, overflowing sewers, overcrowded markets and neighbourhoods, garbage dumps, people busy trying to make ends meet through odd jobs, which one may pass on an alternate route through the much poorer Medina neighbourhood.

Poverty has different meanings. According to the International Poverty Line, to be poor means to live on less than $1.90 a day, an estimate of the amount necessary to satisfy basic needs. Poverty can also be determined by examining living conditions. When comparing the two neighbourhoods I have described above, it is clear that they reflect different standards of living. One can easily establish that access to education, proper healthcare, food, or adequate housing differs between the people living on the Corniche Ouest and those living in the Medina. Those meanings of poverty refer to its objective, measurable, material aspects.

In this article, I examine poverty as a subjective experience in the context of neoliberalism and its corollary the consumer society, using a social psychology approach. The consumer society is a social context in which all aspects of life (relationships, emotions, meaning, social worth) are determined by what one can buy on the market. Social psychology is a discipline that investigates how the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of people are influenced by the real or imagined presence of others (Allport 1985). Social psychology provides a unique perspective: like other psychology sub-disciplines, it focuses on constructed or experienced "reality" rather than on "objective reality". Besides, it stresses that human beings are fundamentally social, and that this sociability has important consequences for both their inner worlds (thoughts and feelings) and their observable behaviours.

Thus, rather than asking: how many people in the Medina neighbourhood live on less than $1.90 a day or have adequate healthcare? This approach is about asking, for instance: how might someone who lives on less than $1.90 a day feel about themselves and their life? How are they seen by others? How are their social interactions influenced by their poverty? What does it mean, for the self and for others, to be someone who can afford the brands sold in the Corniche Ouest's shopping mall? Neighbourhood status, clothing brands and cars may seem superficial compared to adequate food and healthcare, which other meanings of poverty may focus on. However, to the extent that they can determine social worth in the consumer society, they have profound psychosocial consequences. Thus, someone may be living with considerably more than $1.90 a day yet feel very poor and experience psychological distress because they cannot afford the goods that the consumer society says they need in order to be valued.

Although social psychology might seem well suited for the study of subjective experiences of poverty, the latter has not received much attention in the literature for several reasons. First, social psychology (psychology as a whole, one might say) focuses on individual and interpersonal processes. Poverty is usually treated as an individual attribute (economic status of the research participant or perceived economic status of another person, etc.), but it is rarely analysed at the societal level.

Second, true experimental design has become the preferred research method in social psychology. As mainstream social psychology became increasingly obsessed with true experimental design, it has, since the 1950s, given up societal and historical phenomena to focus on immediate, controllable, interindividual microphenomena (Oishi, Kesebir and Snyder 2009). Contrasting mainstream social psychology with what the liberation psychologist Martìn-Barò had wanted it to be, Aron and Corne (1994:3,5) summarised the

state of the former as follows: "Psychology had become infatuated with methods and measurements [...] and blind to many of the structural determinants of individual and group life, including its own allegiances to the privileged and powerful. [...] Psychology has created a fictionalised and ideologized image of what it means to be human, based on its own ahistoricism and bias toward individualism. This false image presents the individual as bereft of history, community, political commitment, and social loyalties."

The third issue is psychology's own neoliberal bias. The extensive use of true experimental design, the gold standard in research, may suggest that social psychology provides an unbiased perspective on society. However, social psychologists live in societies dominated by neoliberal ideology. As a result, the body of knowledge they produce reflects and even supports the neoliberal agenda instead of studying it more critically. Adams, Estrada-Villalta, Sullivan and Markus argue: "By studying psychological processes independent of cultural–ecological or historical context and by championing individual growth and affective regulation as the key to optimal well-being, psychologists lend scientific authority to neoliberal ideology, grant it legitimacy, and amplify its influence—even if they might intend to do otherwise" (Adams, Estrada-Villalta, Sullivan and Markus 2019:190).

Thus, the social psychology literature would benefit from more work examining the impact of neoliberalism on psychological processes. Despite those limitations, social psychology can provide unique insights into how neoliberalism, consumerism and poverty may be experienced by human beings with minds, who analyse and construct their worlds, and who are fundamentally social.

Neoliberalism and consumer society

Cabannes (2013) offered a rich historical analysis of neoliberalism, linking its beginnings to the decline of Fordism. Fordism was the dominant economic system for thirty years after World War II (1945-1975). Workers accepted difficult working conditions (chain work in the automobile industry)

in order to increase production. In exchange, companies provided stable employment and good wages. The government was responsible for social security and oversight. Fordism was quite successful, and in many northern countries, real Gross Domestic Product grew substantially in that period. In France, for instance, this period was referred to as "les trentes glorieuses" (glorious thirty years), testifying to the country's prosperity in that period. However, from 1973 onward, Fordism suffered several blows, including an oil crisis in 1973, a recession in 1975, inflation, and market saturation. As Fordism was declining, Thatcher became Prime Minister of Britain, and Reagan was elected President of the United States. Both Thatcher and Reagan were favourable to open market capitalism, which opened the way for the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to shift towards policies that encouraged it. In the 1980s, neoliberalism, a contemporary form of open market capitalism, thrived in the US and Britain. It then spread to the rest of the world in the 1990s.

In Senegal, neoliberalism was introduced through structural adjustment programmes. The Senegalese government obtained high interest loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in return for applying neoliberal measures. The implementation process and disastrous consequences (for education, healthcare, employment, women, farmers, safe water access, purchasing power, inequality) of structural adjustment programmes in Senegal are documented by Abadie (2006). As she explains, the Senegalese economy was already in a fragile state when the country became independent from French colonial rule in 1960. The economy was dominated by the international peanut trade: up to 80% of jobs were in that sector. By 1968, France, which set up this peanut trade-based economy in the colonial period, was no longer willing to support it by buying from Senegal at preferential rates. On International markets however, prices kept dropping. By 1980, Senegal was producing less due to several drought episodes, selling at very low prices and spending too much on imports, which resulted in severe budget deficits. Structural adjustment programmes were implemented in 1980, 1984,

1994, 1998 and 2000. They consisted of several neoliberal measures seeking to decrease social spending, decrease government intervention and encourage open market capitalism.

Dostaler (2009:44) has defined neoliberalism as an ideology according to which market exchange, competition and business are the most effective means of organizing not only economic matters but also the government, human interactions, and society as a whole. Neoliberalism seeks to create a society in which: (1) the market operates freely, that is, without social and political constraints; (2) people must resort to the market in order to meet their needs, instead of relying on community or the State (Cabannes 2013).

Such a system requires economic, political, and social measures. At the economic level, it involves large-scale privatization of national companies, increased power for financial institutions (banks and insurance companies), opening up the market to the general public and foreign investors through the stock market. At the political level, governments facilitate the expansion of neoliberalism by eliminating policies that may constitute barriers, by lowering taxes for businesses, by reducing protectionism and by decreasing social spending. At the social level, neoliberalism benefits from social disintegration and increased individualism. When people do not see each other as members of the same community, they begin to see each other as rivals and want to consume in order to "win the competition". For Cabannes (2013:34), neoliberalism's expansion would not have been possible without the dismantling of social cohesion, social institutions, and traditional values. Specifically, neoliberalism targeted religious institutions and community organisations based on values and social norms that may actually decrease consumption (for example, simplicity, emphasis on positive emotions from experiences and relationships rather than material goods).

The consumer society is a product of neoliberalism. It has been described by Floris and Ledun (2013:5) as a society in which the market is the most powerful and legitimate institution; a society in which nothing – not emotions, relationships, human interactions, well-being, nature, meaning, dignity – can escape the market. In that context, the poor, who can only afford to consume a little, are systematically excluded to the point of being dehumanised.

Humanness into question

Objectively speaking, it is easy to tell whether something is a human being or, say, an object or an animal. According to research in social psychology, however, it is neither sufficient nor necessary to be human in order to be considered human. Two psychological processes shape what we consider a human being, regardless of objectively available information.

The first psychological process is anthropomorphism. When we anthropomorphise, we apply physical or mental attributes that typically belong to humans to non-human entities such as objects, plants, pets, spirits. For instance, to believe that a computer is moody or that a mouse is insolent is to anthropomorphise. A computer may malfunction, a mouse may go out to seek food at an inconvenient time for us, but insolence and moodiness require mental attributes that those entities do not normally possess. Humans anthropomorphise because anthropomorphism has useful psychological functions. First, anthropomorphism helps to provide a sense of social connection for the highly sociable species that we are, as it makes a person out of an animal or object (Epley, Waytz and Cacioppo 2007). Indeed, there is research evidence suggesting that people who report experiencing loneliness are more likely to use anthropomorphic traits to describe their pets than people who do not feel lonely (Epley, Schroeder and Waytz 2013). Second, anthropomorphism helps us give meaning to events and interpret others' behaviour; and finding meaning has been identified as one of the most important psychological needs for humans (Koole, Greenberg and Pyszczynski 2006).

Anthropomorphism usually involves attributing intentionality, which proves to be one of the most meaningful and therefore psychologically satisfying ways of explaining a behaviour or an event (Malle, Moses and Baldwin 2001). This

meaning-making function of anthropomorphism explains why, for instance, regardless of what science may say about natural disasters or pandemics, malevolent conspirators or wilful gods always find their way into people's explanations.

The second psychological process that determines perceived humanness is dehumanisation, a process by which we remove human attributes from a person or liken a person to non-human entities. As with anthropomorphism, dehumanisation has psychological functions. It primarily serves to prevent identification with someone seen as the "other". If considered less human, he or she becomes less deserving of the empathy and moral care expected for oneself, the best and most familiar exemplar of a human being in our mind (Haslam, 2006). Thus, dehumanisation allows one to feel distant from another, to feel superior, it facilitates harm and exploitation, and it reduces guilt, empathy, and moral concern. Slavery, colonisation, the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide all involved dehumanisation through propaganda without which such levels of harm and exploitation from human beings towards other human beings would not have been possible.

Dehumanisation and related psychological processes (prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, social identity, etc.) have extensively been studied in social psychology. However, most of the work has been on intergroup relations – how members of one social group may dehumanise members of another – and individual experiences, without much emphasis on the broader social context. In this paper, I examine how the consumer society may dehumanise the poor.

Consumer society and the new human

Floris and Ledun (2013:31) have described the consumer society as one in which the market has colonised public space, private family space and mental space. Indeed, even the self has been colonised by the market (Teo 2018:584).

The neoliberal context has produced a distinct mindset, shaping human subjective experiences and behaviours so that what we value, who we think we are, what we think, what we feel, how we interact with the world, what motivates us, in sum, our very selves, are determined by the market. Given that social psychology has often failed to consider the greater social context, core concepts in the discipline such as self, identity, self-esteem, self-enhancement, self-regulation, social comparison, impression management, and others may not define "human nature" in an absolute sense but rather humans under the influence of neoliberalism (McDonald, Gough, Wearing and Deville 2017).

How has neoliberalism changed the self? The concept of *Homo Economicus* (the economic man) is a widely accepted description of the neoliberal self. Homo Economicus is characterized by rationality – the ability to examine information about available choices and make rational decisions – and by selfishness; his main concern is to maximize his own well-being and satisfaction. Teo (2018) and Adams, Estrada-Villalta, Sullivan and Markus (2019) suggest additional but converging characteristics.

As with everything else in the consumer society, the neoliberal self is a commodity: "And the commodity they [people] 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 traveling salespeople [...]. 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" (Bauman 2007:6).

Attracting others' attention requires relentless self-promotion, continuous self-improvement, and freedom from constraints. This implies "an unending effort to itself become and remain a sellable commodity" (Bauman 2007:12) because neoliberalism tells us that this will, in the end, make us happy, and happiness is valuable. Under neoliberalism, there is a shift from thinking to feeling, with a strong imperative to pursue happiness at all costs and without guilt.

Hence the neoliberal self aspires to freedom from

strong social ties and social institutions, which may be seen as constraining. It is also highly flexible, subject to change and adaptable because of a strong belief that, with determination, one can improve one's life and change oneself. One consequence of this idea is that, for the neoliberal self, each person is responsible for their own fate. As a result, the greater social context is rarely questioned: the neoliberal self has little interest in others' well-being and in social issues. It may even blame the victims, those who are not seen as successful, for their difficulties.

The consumer society has redefined the meaningful to us. Everything that is good and worthy is to be found in the market. For Floris and Ledun (2013:6): "In the past 30 years, children have been learning like never before that the best way to achieve 'the good life' or to be happy is to earn as much money as possible, to work to ensure that money is earned, to purchase a maximum of goods and services [...] Children have also guessed that all those goods and services are necessary for them to earn social recognition [...] Work, goods and services are not just means to a good life, they are what to live for [author's translation]."

We have also come to express the extent to which we find something meaningful through the market. As Baudrillard (1968) discusses, we have, for example, come to expect the price tag of an engagement ring to reflect the extent to which a woman is loved. There is, however, ample evidence in the social psychology literature that spending on experiences and on others makes people happier than spending on material goods (see, for instance, Van Boven and Gilovich 2003; Dunn, Aknin and Norton 2008).

In the interpersonal realm, the neoliberal mindset is characterized by exchange or utilitarianism. Vaughan (1997) provided an in-depth analysis of the exchange mindset and its opposite, the gift mindset. With the exchange mindset, people are more likely to engage in social interactions in order to get something for themselves rather than for the benefit of the other. They give of themselves in order to receive more, or at least as much. The other in the social interaction is seen as an adversary with whom one is competing, an

adversary who is also motivated to get as much as possible from the interaction while giving as little as possible. Values that encourage competition – patriarchal values such as strength, power, greed, dominance – are promoted at the expense of values that focus on care and kindness.

Consumer society and the dehumanisation of the poor

The dehumanisation of the poor in a consumer society can take many forms. The poor may be dehumanised through the language used in everyday life to talk about them. The poor are said to be poor because they are lazy, lack rational competencies (planning, organisation, knowledge) to create better lives for themselves, lack self-control, and do not want to take responsibility for their lives; they would rather take advantage of social services (Galbraith, 2011). Haslam (2006) provided an analysis of attributes that typically belong to humans and distinguish humans from animals or objects. These attributes include self-control, rationality, culture, sophistication, prosocial virtues (not taking advantage of social services), agency (taking responsibility for one's life), creativity, passion, etc. Thus, denying the poor self-control, agency, and rationality denies their humanness.

More importantly, the poor are dehumanised in that they are systematically excluded from consumer society. Human sociability has been compared to that of bees, termites and ants, creatures so sociable that millions of individuals can coordinate their behaviours to function like a single superorganism (Kesebir 2012). The need to belong has been identified as one of the most important psychological needs for humans and experiencing exclusion is extremely painful. For Bangladeshi labor migrants in Singapore for instance, exclusion and even invisibility were some of the most central and difficult aspects of migration (see Rifat in this issue). Exclusion is so painful that it makes one feel as if they were dying (Case and Williams, 2004). In fact, it may even cause death: Durkheim (1951) has provided ample evidence that isolation and lack of social integration were the most reliable predictors of suicide. Zadro, Williams, and Richardson (2004)

conducted an experiment in which participants played a computer-based ball-tossing game with two other players for six minutes. The researchers manipulated whether the participant was included in or excluded from the game. Included participants received the ball as much as the other players. Excluded participants received the ball at the beginning of the game but not later. The researchers also manipulated whether the participants believed the other players to be humans or to be computer-generated. Excluded participants experienced a lower sense of belonging, a lower sense of control, lower self-esteem and were less likely to find life meaningful even when they were told that the other players were computer-generated.

Humans are fundamentally social creatures and being excluded is dehumanising. Consequently, numerous behaviours are aimed at promoting oneself to attract others and avoid exclusion. "People increase their chances of forming relationships and being accepted into groups when they are perceived as possessing characteristics that make them a desirable group member, friend, romantic partner, colleague, companion, teammate, or whatever. As a result, a great deal of human behaviour appears centered on efforts to promote and maintain one's relational value" (Leary 2010:871).

Consumption can help people avoid social exclusion because consumer goods can be used to signal that one is a highly desirable individual to associate with. As Baudrillard (1968, 1970) has theorized, consumer goods are not necessarily bought for what they are or the functions they serve but for what they symbolise. In other words, roads in Dakar have never been bad enough to justify the high number of SUVs in the city. More specifically, by buying certain goods, people seek to either communicate to others that they belong to the upper-class, the class of those who can afford those goods – which is highly desirable – or to distance themselves from the lower social classes to which they might belong. Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption (1889) makes a similar argument. As societies became too large and too anonymous for people to know each other's reputability and nobility, indicators of

wealth that can easily be seen and understood by all became more important: "Property now becomes the most easily recognized evidence of a reputable degree of success [...]. It therefore becomes the conventional basis of esteem. Its possession in some amount becomes necessary in order to any reputable standing in the community. It becomes indispensable to accumulate, to acquire property in order to retain one's good name. [...] In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men, it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence."

It is noteworthy that even the poor aspire to consume goods that symbolise wealth or belongingness to a higher social class to avoid being devalued and excluded. They thereby participate in the very system that oppresses and excludes them. At the country level, developing countries such as Senegal are in a constant race to be more like the West through material "improvements" that do not necessarily improve the lives of most ordinary citizens (Sarr, 2016). For instance, the Senegalese government is struggling to finish an ambitious project to build a high-speed top-notch tramway system, while the bus system – on which many Senegalese living at the outskirts of Dakar but working in the city rely –   is in difficulty. At the individual level, people in those countries and poor people in wealthier countries aspire to own goods that are popular – and expensive – in rich countries (iPhone's, SUVs, etc.) for what they symbolise.

In his study on stigma, Goffman (1963) had identified three types of attributes likely to result in stigmatization and social exclusion. A person could be excluded because of what would be considered moral failings; this might be the case for someone with substance abuse issues or someone who had been incarcerated. A person could be excluded because of a physical handicap. Finally, a person could be excluded because they belong to a devalued social category such as a minority ethnic group. Goffman had not anticipated that consumption would, as Baudrillard (1970:270-272) stated, become the new universal language with which anybody in

society can be evaluated and placed on the social ladder. That inability to consume the "right" goods would become the primary stigma, the one that may supersede other reasons for exclusion. Nonetheless, Goffman's analysis remains relevant. As with other stigmas, "an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us. […] We believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption, we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances."

Conclusion

Poverty is to be understood beyond the objective, measurable indicators such as the International Poverty Line. Only stressing the objective dimension of poverty downplays that poverty happens to human beings with minds who feel, analyse, construct, and react to their experiences and whose subjectivity has been coloured by the greater social context, particularly by the neoliberal ideology.

Neoliberalism has produced the consumer society, a society in which the market colonises all aspects of life. As a result, even people's sense of self is constructed in a way that reflects the market's control: people see themselves as a commodity that needs to be "sold" to potential employers, friends, romantic partners, etc. One way people may increase their "market value" is by consuming, by acquiring goods that symbolise that they belong to a special and desirable category of people.

In this context, the poor who cannot afford to consume special goods are systematically excluded when belonging is fundamental to their well-being. Given our social nature, this exclusion is dehumanising. Thus, a Senegalese person may make more than $1.90 a day yet feel poor and excluded because of what they are not able to consume. They may feel looked down upon, feel uncomfortable and out of place in the Corniche Ouest's shopping mall, feel dejected about having to take public transportation, and aspire to own

an SUV; they may struggle somewhat more to find a partner.

Hundreds of young Senegalese perished in the ocean last year, trying to regain Europe via small artisanal boats. Perhaps it is not solely because they want more money and better objective economic conditions. It might also be because Europe is a commodity of some sorts, and being in Europe moves one up the social ladder in ways that having decent wages at home does not. Social psychology, the study of how the social context influences people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, is well-suited to better understand such subjective experiences of poverty under neoliberalism, despite insufficient research in that area.

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