

Jean Baudrillard

The Consumer Society

Myths and Structures

Revised Edition

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Consuming Baudrillard: Introduction to the Revised Edition of *The Consumer Society*

Barry Smart

Introduction

This new edition of *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* appears in a challenging social, economic, and environmental context, one in which concerns about the 'disbenefits' of growth and the sustainability of prevailing modern ways of life are rising rapidly. As more and more people live, or aspire to live, in a 'consumer society' and the consequences of a materially acquisitive consumer orientated way of life for individuals, communities, other species, and the planet we inhabit have become more apparent, so consumer culture, in turn, has become an increasing focus of academic interest and critical inquiry. At the beginning of the century there were just under two billion people in what has been termed the 'global consumer class', that is people with the means to purchase a range of goods and services that were once largely confined to the wealthier populations of Western Europe, North America, and Japan, and an increasing number of people around the world are aspiring to have a comparable consumer lifestyle (Gardner et al 2004; Dobbs et al 2012). Our globally extensive materialistic way of life appears to be having an irreversibly detrimental impact on the planet's ecosystems and the prospect of continuing rapid growth in the consumption of goods and services has aroused concerns that the planet is in danger of being consumed to excess (Jackson 2009; Jordan 2009; Urry 2010; Smart 2010).

It was Jean Baudrillard, in a series of publications beginning in the late 1960s, who first sought to develop a sustained and innovative critical social analysis of the increasing significance and meaning of consumption in modern social life. Drawing on Marxist political economy, Freudian psychoanalysis, sociology, and semiology Baudrillard sought to challenge prevailing understandings of consumption. In particular he sought to counter what he considered to be a marginalisation of consumer activity in Marxist analyses and to overcome deficiencies in existing sociological accounts by generating a more radical analysis of the ways in which modern social life in the course of the twentieth century had become increasingly centred on consuming. Baudrillard recognised that contemporary society is bound up with the idea of consumption, that it is increasingly

organized around consuming, its social imaginary colonized by an unconscious social logic of consumption. It is to a consideration of consumption as an ordered system of codes and signs, to an analysis of the structures and myths of consumption, that Baudrillard's engaging narrative in *The Consumer Society* is directed.

Signs of consumption

The first of Baudrillard's consumption-related publications was *Le système des objets* (1968), the English translation *The System of Objects* was published in 1996.¹ Baudrillard's analysis of the system of objects in the developing 'global order of production and consumption' (1996: 9) was followed by two related papers 'La Morale des objets: Fonction du signe et logique de classe' (1969a) and 'La genèse idéologique des besoins' (1969b) both of which were subsequently published in *Pour une critique de l'économie politique de signe* (1972), the English translation *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* was published in 1981. These texts effectively prepare the ground for the analysis offered in *La Société de consommation* published in 1970, the English translation *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* first appearing in 1998.

For Baudrillard (1996: 200) America was the place where an 'ever-accelerating cycle' of consumption was considered to be most pronounced. While in the late 1960s his assessment was that Europe had not reached the same stage as the 'American model', the continent was well on its way and it has long since fully embraced the materially acquisitive modern consumer lifestyle, as subsequently has a growing middle class in both India and China. When Baudrillard was first outlining his ideas on the social logic of consumption credit cards in the USA were still in their relative infancy. The first *American Express* charge card appeared in 1958. BankAmericard was launched in the same year and in 1976 became *Visa*. In 1966 seventeen bankers formed a credit card federation which led to the Interbank Card Association and in 1969 they adopted the Master Charge name, which in 1979 duly became *Mastercard*. By 1970 just over half of the population of the USA had credit cards, but by the end of 2008 over 70% of US households had one or more cards, and during the period from 1968 to 2008 total credit card indebtedness in the USA increased from \$8.8 billion (in 2008 dollars averaged over the year) to \$942 billion (Wright and Rogers 2011: 111).

When *La Société de consommation* was published the ten largest corporations in the USA were respectively General Motors, Exxon Mobil, Ford Motor, General Electric, IBM, Chrysler, Mobil, Texaco, ITT Industries and Gulf Oil. Walmart, Nike, Ralph Lauren Corporation, Calvin Klein Inc., and Gap had not long been established and Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Google, and Facebook had yet to be founded. In the 1970s television viewing had become a significant feature of American culture

and television increasingly became the preferred medium for framing the consumer landscape, advertising products, and promoting brands. The commercial development towards the end of the twentieth century of the internet, the subsequent creation of social media and digital marketing, and the advent of online shopping has further significantly transformed the consumer landscape and multiplied the signs of consumption explored in Baudrillard's work.

In *The System of Objects* Baudrillard (1996: 1) describes the systemic character of the relentless 'procession of generations of products, appliances and gadgets' and the respects in which modern consumer commodities are increasingly differentiated in a complexly articulated sign system. It is in this text that Baudrillard first introduces his notion that it is not the function of objects that is at the heart of contemporary consumption but their 'signifying fabric' and that 'consumption means an activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs' (1996: 218). Baudrillard explores taste, design, colour, technology, symbolism, and the growing presence of automatism in what he describes as a developing 'global consumer society' (1996: 186, 215, 217). Other aspects addressed, that anticipate aspects of the analysis in *The Consumer Society*, include credit, product obsolescence, brands, and advertising, as well as the emphasis frequently placed on consumer freedom, described by Baudrillard as 'imaginary' and 'stage-managed', primarily through advertising, and where the corollary of derived forms of consumer gratification is identified as 'equally massive' repression (1996: 194). Baudrillard concludes his exploration of the system of consumer objects by commenting that insofar as consumption is not bound up with needs then it is inexhaustible. In short, there are no limits to consumption. Subsequently modern consumption has proven to be truly irrepressible and limitless, as Baudrillard anticipated, and we live with its increasing growth and global diffusion, seduced by its pleasures and promised benefits, but also disturbed by its costs, including its proliferating excesses, accumulating waste, and destructive environmental consequences.

In the two related papers published in the same period as *The System of Objects* the cultural significance of the sign value of the object is reaffirmed. Baudrillard differentiates his analysis from significant aspects of Marx's critique of political economy, in particular the critical conceptual distinction drawn by Marx between use value and need on the one hand and exchange value and commodity form on the other.² Drawing on anthropological studies Baudrillard (1981[1969a]: 30) remarks that 'the consumption of goods ... does not answer to an individual economy of needs but is a social function of prestige and hierarchical distribution'. So it is to a consideration of the symbolic order rather than use value, needs, and commodity exchange that Baudrillard directs attention in his analysis of the centrality of consumption within contemporary capitalism. Baudrillard argues it is the continuing significance of 'symbolic exchange value' in contemporary societies, rather than use value or needs, that should be the focus of a sociological analysis of consumption and that it is to 'the social theory of

the sign-object' that consideration needs to be directed (1981: 30, 54). Consumer objects are wrapped in signs and they derive their meaning from a 'hierarchical code of significations', through which they are differentiated from other consumer commodities (Baudrillard 1981: 64). To avoid sociology's conflation or misidentification of the ideology of consumption with 'consumption itself', Baudrillard argues it is necessary to expose the ideological genesis of consumer needs. To that end Baudrillard cautions against speaking 'of a consumer society as if consumption were a system of universal values appropriate to all men because of being founded upon the satisfaction of individual needs, when really it is an institution and a morality' and against explanations predicated on psychologism, culturalism, and psycho-social economics (1981: 62, 73–74).

Consuming Society

Baudrillard begins *The Consumer Society* by remarking on the profusion of objects that are now a taken for granted part of more and more people's everyday lives. Our consuming interest is continually cultivated, our appetites stimulated, by the relentless generation of newly designed consumer objects whose signs now litter the multiple screens on and through which we live our smart-phoned, i-padded, internetted and digitalised lives. As Baudrillard perceptively observes, our lives are increasingly lived 'by object time', at their pace, their rhythm, according to their death-dates and retirement-replacement schedules, designed by consumer corporations whose manufacture of generations of differentiated products constitutes a 'chain of signifiers' to which consumers and their choices are continually exposed.

In reflecting on the abundance of commodities confronting the consumer Baudrillard describes how the transformed architecture of consumption, exemplified not only by department stores but also the drugstore, shopping centre or mall, lays hold to 'the whole of life'. The drugstore or shopping centre, air-conditioned, homogenized, and enticingly organized, constitutes a consuming community and is described as 'the *sublimate* of all real life'. The difference between then, the late 1960s to early 1970s and the second decade of the twenty-first century, being firstly the scale or size and then the reach or global proliferation of such 'landscapes of consumption' as George Ritzer (2005) designates them, secondly the rapidly increasing prominence of digitalized virtual equivalents, for example the purchasing portal of the internet and online shopping, the Amazonization of i-consumer desire, and thirdly the proliferation of digital communications media images and seductive signs of consumption in and through which social life increasingly is lived, experienced, and s(t)imulated.

Late modern forms of consumption have a captivating character, technology, 'progress', and growth seem to magically deliver an endless abundance of goods. But while consumers may be unaware of and inattentive to the extensive process of production that delivers the abundance of

goods on display in malls and shop windows, in advertising, and increasingly online, Baudrillard emphasises that our society remains a 'society of production', it is a society in which economic growth is pivotal, and it is a society in which consumer expenditure, both on the part of individuals and the community, continues to rise and needs to do so. But growth is problematic, it is an accounting fiction. It includes, as Baudrillard notes, only aspects 'visible and measurable' in terms of the criteria of economic rationality and excludes a host of essential activities and practices upon which economic life is unavoidably and necessarily predicated. Measures of growth, for example Gross National Product, include the value of all activities whether they are positive or negative, indeed Baudrillard remarks that the system lives by the negative aspects and 'cannot rid itself of them'. Here, Baudrillard observes, is 'the truth of the economic-political system of growth'. Product death dates, obsolescence, and waste are all systemically functional, even the dysfunctions of production and consumption are conducive to growth, as is most convincingly illustrated in Naomi Klein's (2007) discussion of the protocols and practices of 'disaster capitalism'.

In considering 'the vicious circle of growth' Baudrillard identifies a number of matters that subsequently have increased in significance, notably the 'heavy disparity between private consumption and collective expenditure', which at the time was considered to be 'more characteristic of the United States' than Europe; the complex relationships between mechanisms of redistribution, inequality, and life chances; and the consequences associated with 'environmental nuisances' arising from increasing productivity and 'dysfunctional consumption'. Baudrillard questions whether and to what extent state expenditure, taxation and social security have reduced inequalities in respect of standards of living and improved life chances in areas such as education and health. The evidence leads Baudrillard to question 'social redistribution' and to comment that insofar as privilege is preserved, and it is worth adding that subsequently privilege has been enhanced as wealth and income inequality have increased, perhaps the 'real function' of social policy and associated redistributive mechanisms has been to manage growing social inequalities in consumer society, to ensure the majority remain politically quiescent, curiosity recalibrated as consuming interest by communications media, to be communally celebrated in spectacular 'cathedrals of consumption', and momentarily gratified by purchases of commodities and services (Ritzer 2005).³

Environment, waste, and growth

In *The Consumer Society* Baudrillard describes the environmental consequences of the 'advance of affluence', specifically continuing industrial development, technological innovation, and increasing consumerism, as mere 'nuisances'. Responses to the consequences identified, which include various forms of pollution, disruption, and 'environmental destruction',

generate compensatory forms of production and consumption which, in turn, serve to further raise gross national product. What this indicates to Baudrillard is that 'the system is exhausting itself in its own reproduction', in and through its growth, which to an increasing extent is being driven by the necessity to address its self-generated disruptive and destructive consequences, a theme that is echoed in Ulrich Beck's (1994) analysis of risk society and the reflexivity of modernization.⁴ But it is not only the capitalist economic system that is being exhausted through its reproduction; the increasing pace and volume of production and consumption are exhausting natural resources, accelerating human induced species losses, and dramatically transforming the planet. While in the 1960s and 1970s some analysts, for example Rachel Carson (1962), Donna Meadows et al. (1962), and Andre Gorz (1980[1975]) amongst others, were confronting environmental issues and were aware of the increasing gravity of such matters, their concerns were not widely shared, as Baudrillard's representation of waste as merely 'environmental nuisance' perhaps serves to demonstrate.

Waste is synonymous with social life. Every society wastes resources, produces more than is needed and consumes more than is necessary, leading Baudrillard to argue that waste is functional, it cannot be eliminated, and that it 'orientates the whole system'. The consumer society also routinely produces a surplus and engages in superfluous production, but it is a society in which 'too much' has become a virtual necessity, a corollary of the pursuit of economic growth and valorization of increasing consumer choice. It is a society of 'productive waste', of excessiveness and mass consumption, one in which, Baudrillard argues, a squandering of resources 'no longer has the crucial symbolic and collective signification it could assume in primitive feasting and potlatch'. Increasingly in the consumer society this squandering is realised through aesthetically designed and technologically engineered forms of obsolescence. The modern consumer society requires displacement and destruction of its commodities, has deliberately designed their passing and visualized their death as essential stimulus for economic production and consumption, integral to which are the cyclically fluctuating configurations of fashion and the advertising industry's cultivation of a system of persuasive consumer signs and images. Consider the fast-passing generations of i-phones, nine generations between 2007 and 2015, and the accumulating spent commodities creatively captured in Chris Jordan's (2009) powerful photographic images of the growing wastelands of American consumer culture.

Is consumption about needs, happiness, and the achievement of well-being? Is the consumer society an 'affluent society'? On both counts Baudrillard is unconvinced. Outlining his views on the social logic of consumption he takes issue with the ideological focus on 'well-being and needs' and the ways in which determinants of inequality are regarded as dysfunctional. Confronting J K Galbraith's (1963[1958]) analysis of 'affluent society' Baudrillard argues that inequality and poverty are not to be considered as 'dysfunctions of the system', they are not residual manifestations, temporary

distortions, matters that will be corrected by further economic growth. The disparity between expenditure on private consumption and public services, which has increased significantly since Baudrillard addressed matters, is systemic, it is a manifestation of 'a *systematic logic* at work'. What emerges from Baudrillard's narrative is bleak, critical, and prescient. Growth is described as the system lubricant, it has allowed 'egalitarian democratic principles' to endure in the mythic form of a promise, the American Dream, the prospect of the future realisation of affluence and well-being, whilst ensuring an existing 'order of privilege and domination' is maintained or is enhanced, as it has been for the one percent who have been the primary beneficiaries of growth since the neoliberal turn in economic policy (Stiglitz 2013, 2015). The inegalitarian social and economic order of late capitalism, with its hierarchical social structure of privilege, is dependent upon continual growth, that is its 'strategic element'. Within the industrial capitalist system wealth and poverty are closely articulated, the generation of dissatisfactions and 'nuisances' are as necessary as the creation of satisfactions and achievement of innovations considered progressive, in short 'poverty and nuisance cannot be eliminated' for they are systemic, integral to system survival and growth.

In a series of observations on the object as sign and mark of social distinction, observations that invite comparison with the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), Baudrillard discusses how with the development of mass consumption, and the widespread availability of essential and formerly relatively scarce goods, new forms of social segregation appear, new hierarchies emerge, and criteria of social differentiation assume more subtle forms, including 'type of work and responsibility, level of education and culture (the *way* of consuming everyday goods ...) [and] participation in decision making'.⁵ Baudrillard notes how, as a corollary of the increasing scarcity of particular commodities and their acquisition of status as signs of distinction and class privilege, a variety of new rights emerge, for example in respect of health, space, knowledge, and culture. What is signified by the emergence of such new social rights ('right to clean air') is not progress for Baudrillard, but the transformation of formerly 'natural' goods and values into commodities for economic profit and signifiers of social privilege, in short, manifestations of the relentless 'advance of the capitalist system'.

Bound up in their own consuming worlds individuals are preoccupied with their own aspirations and acquisitions and largely oblivious of the enduring systemic social ordering of difference, which their consuming conduct serves to reproduce. To understand the character of contemporary consumption it is vital to recognise it appears unlimited, that growth continually generates needs and aspirations, which seem to be inexhaustible and irreversible. The pursuit of social differentiation, status, and prestige in globalized, densely populated, urban industrial capitalist societies with a diversity of readily available communications media, leads to increasing status competition and in turn means there are no limits to needs, which 'grow exponentially'. Just as concentration of manufacturing plants and suppliers leads to increased industrial productivity, so the

growth of metropolitan concentration and digital communications media leads to a 'limitless promotion of needs'.

From the perspective of 'the growth society', which is what consumer society represents, production generates the needs appropriate to it, 'the needs of growth', and this leads Baudrillard to argue that elements identified as 'dysfunctions' are in practice logical, as 'the system produces only for its own needs'. Among the systemic needs listed by Baudrillard are cars and motorways, the higher education of middle managers, and in anticipation of knowledge becoming a scarce commodity in the knowledge society, 'the "democratization" of the university'. Subsequently, in the wake of the neoliberal turn in social and economic policy, there has been an increasing privatization of public services and in the USA, the UK, and a number of other countries universities have been corporatized, higher education has been commodified, and the student has been reconstituted as 'consumer' (Molesworth et al. 2011). The much greater growth of private expenditure and consumption in comparison to the public sector is 'no accident', it is a consequence of the social logic of consumption and economic growth. There is a systemically cultivated affinity between individual self-interest, consumer needs, and 'the productivist option', which is integral to the order of growth and which, as Baudrillard anticipates, extends with increasing privatization even to 'the most "rational" needs (education, culture, health, transport, leisure), cut off from their real collective significance'.

Theorising consumption

In a chapter that is in many respects the hub of the text, Baudrillard outlines a theory of consumption, in the course of which he clinically disposes of the remains of *homo oeconomicus* and identifies the limitations of the anthropological disciplines and their liturgical engagement with needs through such pivotal notions as utility (economics), motivation (psychology), and the individual (sociology and social psychology). After differentiating his understanding of the meaning and significance of consumption from economics, psychology, and sociology Baudrillard engages appreciatively yet critically with the analysis provided by social economist J K Galbraith in *The Affluent Society* and *The New Industrial State*. Dismissing the irrelevant abstraction of the formally free rationally calculating subject integral to economics, and criticized by Emile Durkheim (1978[1888]: 49) as 'the sad ... isolated egoist', Baudrillard focuses his critical analytical gaze on the pivotal notion of the '*conditioning of needs*', a prominent preoccupation in accounts of the consumer society.

Taking stock of Galbraith's diagnosis of contemporary capitalism, Baudrillard argues that the basic problem identified is that to ensure markets can be found for potentially unlimited productive capacity it is necessary to achieve control, not only over production but also consumer demand.

This view of the dilemma confronting an increasingly productive capitalism is longstanding and can be traced back at least to the early twentieth century, when Samuel Strauss (1924: 578–9) noted that with the increasing growth in production of goods and services consumption becomes ‘a new necessity’ and that the problem is no longer ‘how to produce the goods but how to produce the customers.’ In respect of this matter Baudrillard notes how Galbraith overturns the accepted economic orthodoxy that attributes sovereign power to the consumer in the marketplace, that deems consumer demand to govern supply, by presenting an analysis of the ways in which consumer needs, desires, wishes and behaviour are governed or managed by advertising, marketing, and branding. While Baudrillard agrees with some aspects of the critical assessment offered by Galbraith and other analysts, namely that ‘the freedom and sovereignty of the consumer are mystification pure and simple’, he nevertheless objects to the conditioning of consumer needs thesis, especially ‘its idealist anthropological postulates’, as well as associated utopian assumptions about alternatives.

The reality of consumer society is that consuming is a productive force and needs are systemic. Extending his engagement with the pull of consuming, and attempting to explain ‘*why* consumers “take” the bait’, Baudrillard observes that, whilst life may appear to revolve around consuming, the puritan ethos prevails, indeed ‘*haunts* consumption and needs’. There is a drive or compulsion, an obligation, to consume which serves to problematise the ideology of ‘consumption-as-enjoyment’ and helps to explain the inability of increasing material acquisition to deliver commensurate increases in happiness and well-being, as later research has demonstrated so effectively (Schwartz 2005; Layard 2003). An explanation of the routine, everyday, presence of signs of consuming and the global diffusion of a consumerist way of life are not, in Baudrillard’s view, a ‘function of enjoyment’, rather consumption is bound up with production, it ‘secures the ordering of signs and the integration of the group’. In short, consumption is institutionalized, systemic, and the citizen is duty bound to consume, a view subsequently endorsed by Zygmunt Bauman (1998: 24) who notes how in late-modern society members are engaged ‘*primarily* – in their capacity as consumers ... [and] need to play the role of the consumer’.

Elaborating on what he considers to be our obligation or duty to consume Baudrillard observes how as people’s lives become less bound up with work and production they are encouraged, frequently exhorted, to devote more consideration and time to ‘the *production* and continual innovation of ... needs and well-being’, subsequently exemplified in one form by the proliferation of media narratives and corporate advertising campaigns offering advice, guidance, and encouragement to individuals to purchase ‘makeovers’ for their hair, skin, physique, clothes, homes, gardens, cars ... narratives which serve to confirm that consumer society is very much ‘the society of learning to consume, of social training in consumption’. In addition consumer society, as is well known, is also a credit society. Credit serves to provide consumers with a mental training in economic calculation and insofar as it imposes

discipline and constraint it represents an extension of the rational and disciplinary ethos Max Weber (1976) identified as being integral to the formation of modern capitalism.

Baudrillard's recognition of the needs and satisfactions of consumers as significant productive forces, as equivalent in some respects to the importance for economic production of a reserve army of labour, remains of relevance. Indeed, given the subsequent impact of information technology and digitalization on production, exemplified for example by automation, robotics, 3-D printing, and the associated rapidly increasing precarity of employment and work, Baudrillard's observation that it is the consumer who has become 'irreplaceable' has only grown in significance with the passage of time. However, while Baudrillard's observations on the rising importance of the individual as consumer resonate powerfully with present circumstances, his parallel comments about the 'free market' and the state serve to illustrate how much economic life has changed since the late 1960s. In a series of observations on individual consumption, collective responsibility, social morality, and the state Baudrillard remarks that 'the "free market" has virtually disappeared, to be replaced by bureaucratic, state monopoly control'. The contrast presented by Baudrillard is overdrawn. Markets have never been 'free' in any absolute sense because 'laissez-faire' has continually required statecraft as Karl Polanyi (2001[1944]) confirmed. Moreover, it is evident from the introduction and deployment of neoliberal economic policies from the late 1970s, in response to a crisis of capital accumulation, rising unemployment and inflation, and low rates of economic growth, that state market regulation was nowhere near as pervasive and not anything like as firmly embedded as Baudrillard's remarks imply (Harvey 2005).

But if in some respects Baudrillard's observations on market and state appear to be overdrawn, his comments on tensions between the private sphere, private interest, and individualism on the one hand and the public sphere, communal or collective interests on the other, draw attention to the cultural contradictions intrinsic to contemporary capitalism subsequently explored by Daniel Bell (1976). Tension has been a longstanding feature of capitalist settlements, especially in respect of the relationship between self-interest and consumer individualism on one hand and altruism and collective provision on the other. The withering of altruism in the face of the rising emphasis placed on consumer individualism and self-interest has led, as Baudrillard observes, to a 'deep contradiction between political and civil society in the "consumer society"'; the response to which has been to generate 'mechanisms of "collective solidarity"', a range of welfare services and resources designed to provide insurance, security, and care, measures which, Baudrillard remarks, wage-workers 'receive in the guise of gifts or "free" services', effectively a proportion of what has been appropriated from them in the form of surplus value and taxation. When discussing taxation and other economic levies and transfers which make it possible for bureaucratic state authorities to provide forms of social security, unemployment benefit, and welfare provision, Baudrillard suggests

the establishment 'arrogate to themselves the psychological benefit of appearing generous ... [and] charitable'. A few years after the publication of *The Consumer Society* the post-war settlement began to unravel as the deployment of neoliberal economic policies led to even greater emphasis on individualism and self-interest and an erosion of both the value of collective responsibility and the institutions of the welfare state.

Consumption is not confined to objects alone, services too are consumed. In a series of observations on the system of social relations Baudrillard notes how a range of attributes and dispositions are now consumed in the course of service provision. Loss of spontaneity and reciprocity in modern social relations has led, Baudrillard argues, to an increasing emphasis on 'personalized communication', exemplified by displays of concern, sincerity, and warmth, the signs of which are consumed. A variety of tertiary sector person-to-person service occupations, including positions in reception, social work, public relations, consultancy, and sales, involve forms of what Hochschild (2003:7) terms 'emotional labor', manifested as presentations of care and concern, simulations of sincerity, and insinuations of intimacy (Rojek 2015: 44). The signs of human relating reinserted into a variety of impersonal functional contractual settings represent for Baudrillard 'the lubrication of social relations with the institutional smile'. Emotional labour produces the signs of sincerity, warmth, and concern that are consumed by service users, but this 'system of solicitude', which exhorts us, amongst other things to 'Have a nice day', masks what Baudrillard describes as the 'truth of social relations', notably the increasing impersonality, distance, and competitiveness to which personal relationships are subject with the rising concentration of population in industrial metropolitan environments and, in turn, as commodification or 'the abstraction of exchange value' penetrates ever deeper into everyday life, early signs of which were identified by Georg Simmel (1950[1903]; 1991[1896]).

As the service sector has grown so the system of solicitude has become an increasingly significant part of the system of production, serving to contribute to the reproduction of consumption as 'social labour' and the mobilization of people as consumers. What is present in this context is institutionally and industrially manufactured solicitude, cultivation in the tertiary services sector of employment of a range of human qualities and personal relational and communication skills to ensure clients, customers, and service users experience a warm personal connection, in the course of engaging in exchange transactions, which masks the increasingly 'functionalized', premeditated, and contrived character of human relations.

Consuming time, leisure, and work

In a series of reflections on leisure and time Baudrillard ponders the sense of time in a consumer society and remarks that it is chronometric, measured, object-like, and abstract in quality, it is bound up with the system of

production and, rather than 'free', is itself commodified, has exchange value, and is 'liberated' merely to be invested, spent, or consumed. In the 'non-stop life-world of twenty-first century capitalism' this has become even more evident, as Jonathan Crary's (2014: 8) consideration of the 24/7 intensification of late modern life and consumer activity demonstrates. Notwithstanding all the rhetoric about freedom in leisure, Baudrillard comments that 'free' time is increasingly a logical impossibility, as time consumed in leisure, and time consuming as leisure, is in practice governed, subject to the norms and constraints of working time (Rojek 1995). Time is objectivized, earned, possessed, and exploited. Like money it is spent and for Baudrillard it is an 'expression of the exchange value system'. As with work, accomplishment and performance are significant features of leisure and consumption. This is illustrated with references to the way people approach holidays, feel an obligation to do tours of historical sites and galleries, work at getting fit, have other body-maintenance and self-improvement regimes, and conform in Baudrillard's terms to the 'principles of duty, sacrifice, and asceticism', prominent features of the performative ethos of leisure.

Noting the unequal distribution of leisure and the respects in which it has been a mark of cultural distinction and privilege, Baudrillard identifies a possible future reversal, that work, and particular types of work, may well become more and more a mark of distinction and privilege. The example Baudrillard offers is of 'top executives and managing directors who feel they have to work 15 hours a day', who consume work and are consumed with and by work, and who appear to prefer work to 'free time'. It is worth adding that it is not just long working hours which has led to certain types of work acquiring a mark of distinction and privilege. The deployment of neoliberal policies in the financial and manufacturing sectors of the economy has led to very long working hours, but also to the privilege of very substantial financial rewards for certain categories of workers, executives, and managing directors, and capital gain as a material mark of distinction (Hewlett and Luce 2006; Arlidge 2009). Conversely, neoliberal policies have led to the lives of many other categories of workers being marked not by privilege but by precarity and the misfortune of having to work very long hours across a number of jobs for very poor rates of pay (Cuniah 2013). In some instances, as Bauman has observed, precarity is manifested as unemployment and an inability to embrace 'the consumerist model of life', leading those affected to suffer not only stigma but also forms of exclusion from consumer society, matters to which Baudrillard in his consideration of the industrial system and poverty devotes insufficient attention.

Concluding remarks

Decades after its publication *The Consumer Society* is more relevant than ever for exploring the reality of contemporary consumer culture and the

related reconfiguring of social and economic life. Increasingly it is through consumption, or rather signs of consumption, that a society represents itself, proclaims and promotes itself. In turn, it is through their signs of consuming that individuals present themselves, display identity, demonstrate inclusion and belonging, or where such signs are absent or lacking, manifest their exclusion, their 'flawed' character as Bauman (1998) argues. Our society is consumed with the idea of consumption which has acquired the status of myth; it cannot conceive of its future other than in terms of more economic growth in the form of the production of more material goods and services and, in turn, yet more and more consumption. Baudrillard makes reference to the double-sided character of the myth of consumption – it has 'its discourse and its anti-discourse' – a celebratory discourse on affluence and a critical discourse on consequences and contradictions. In identifying fundamental contradictions, imbalances, and anxieties endemic in the consumer society, made manifest in multiple forms of anomie and the radically alienating structure of production and consumption under the 'sign of capital', Baudrillard's discussion makes a significant contribution to the body of critical work on consumption. But it is evident that Baudrillard wanted to disassociate himself from "critical" counter-discourse on the ravages of consumer society and the tragic end to which it inevitably dooms society as a whole', particularly intellectual criticisms of the tastes, values, and satisfactions attributed to the majority of consumers which he regarded as 'part of the game' and a 'critical mirage', which merely served to complete the myth.

The theoretical foundations of *The Consumer Society* are complex and diverse and reveal the influence of the works of particular classical and contemporary analysts on social and cultural thought in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Baudrillard draws on the works of a diverse range of analysts, including Karl Marx, Thorstein Veblen, and Emile Durkheim, there are references to the contributions of J K Galbraith, Marshall McLuhan, and Herbert Marcuse, some parallels with the work of Werner Sombart, and there are Freudian residues present in a number of his observations, including on the alienating consequences of commodity logic and the ideological genesis of consumer needs. *The Consumer Society* can be read as a dialogue with Marxist analysis and critical theory, a dialogue informed by functionalist notions and structuralist analysis. In seeking to counter the relative neglect of consumption and differentiate his analysis from established Marxist approaches Baudrillard draws on aspects of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics and Roland Barthes's semiology to provide an innovative understanding of contemporary social life governed by consuming, by a generalized commodity logic and spectacular images and signs of consumption. As a whole the text exemplifies the hybrid character of much contemporary sociology, although Baudrillard continually expressed ambivalence towards the discipline with which he remains associated, commenting in one interview conducted in 1984 that 'I don't consider myself to be deeply sociological. I work more on symbolic effects than on sociological data' (1993a: 68). *The Consumer Society* is a theoretically

innovative work which introduces ideas and concepts that subsequently became far more prominent in Baudrillard's later analyses. For example, the concepts of sign and code, simulation, and symbolic exchange are employed subsequently to reorientate contemporary social thought in a more substantial manner, perhaps most significantly in the first instance in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993d[1976]).

If theoretically *The Consumer Society* is in some respects a book of its time the observations provided on consumption continue to resonate strongly with our experience of everyday social life and especially with the (hyper) reality of contemporary consumer culture. Baudrillard's narrative, which imaginatively explores key aspects of late modern 'post-industrial' social life, in particular the centrality of 'the consumed image of consumption ... our new tribal mythology', identifies a variety of emerging and developing tendencies that have only grown in reach and significance with the passage of time. It is in places a controversial book, not least in respect of Baudrillard's reservations about the value or relevance of "'critical" counter-discourse on the ravages of consumer society', but it is also one packed with stimulating ideas and it will undoubtedly engage generations of new readers and continue to enrich understanding of consumer culture, the respects in which forms of social and economic life revolve around consumer activity, and the complex constellation of consequences with which we all need to engage.

Notes

- 1 *Le système des objets* was Baudrillard's doctoral thesis and the continuing influence of his dissertation committee, Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, and Pierre Bourdieu, can be seen in the subsequent development of his work (Francis 2015 : 72).
- 2 Baudrillard acknowledged the influence Marx's analysis and political economy had on his work in an interview conducted in 1991: 'yes, there was a Marxist analysis in my work but very much mediated by many other things. I set about doing some theoretical work. From the start there was semiology and psychoanalysis and things of that sort, all of which went well together' (1993b: 20). In another interview conducted in the same year Baudrillard reiterated that in his analysis of consumption and 'the object as a sign' he worked with 'semiology, Marxism, psychoanalysis' (1993c: 172).
- 3 Inequality has increased significantly since Baudrillard's *La Société de consommation* was published in 1970. For example, in the USA in 1965 the CEO-to-worker pay-ratio was 20-to-1, but by 2015 it had increased to 354-to-1 (Fitz 2015). As Joseph Stiglitz (2013 : 9) states in his comprehensive analysis of inequality in the USA:

The simple story of America is this : the rich are getting richer, the richest of the rich are getting richer still, the poor are becoming poorer and more numerous, and the middle class is being hollowed out. The incomes of the middle class are stagnating or falling, and the difference between them and the truly rich is increasing.

- 4 By 'reflexive modernization' Beck (1994 : 6) is alluding to the ways in which risk society there is an increasing concern with the consequences of modernization or 'self-confrontation with the effects of risk society'. As Beck (2009 : 6) has commented subsequently, 'Incalculable risks and manufactured uncertainties resulting from the triumphs of modernity mark the *conditio humana* at the beginning of the twenty-first century'. A significant difference from Baudrillard being that a central preoccupation in Beck's work

is to develop a critical analysis of risks, manufactured uncertainties, and 'affluence-induced environmental destruction' (2009: 13).

- 5 A few provisional comparative thoughts on Baudrillard's and Bourdieu's positions on signs of distinction and discrimination in respect of art and culture can be found in Marie-Thérèse Killiam's (2006) account of Baudrillard's discussion in *L'effet Beaubourg* of the Beaubourg Center in Paris.

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