The Critical Theory of Western Marxist Consumption Alienation and its Enlightenment

Xuan Chang

Yunnan Normal University, Kunming 650500, Yunnan, China

Abstract: The phenomenon of consumption alienation is very common in society, it has caused a series of serious social problems, has caused a great impact on people’s life. Western Marxist scholars have formed the unique Marxist theory of consumption alienation criticism after absorbing the predecessors’ thoughts on consumption alienation theory. They have analyzed and criticized the phenomenon of consumption alienation from different aspects and dimensions. Mastering western Marxist critical theory will help correct understanding of consumer consumption alienation of human and social development, to enable people to correctly handle the relationship between production and consumption, help people establish the reasonable consumption, pay attention to the coordination of spirit and material consumption, forming the consciousness of environmental protection, green consumption, the consumption to promote the all-round development of human beings.

Keywords: Western Marxism, Dissimilation of consumption, Consumption, Value.

1. Introduction

With innovative science and technology, the development of social productivity are dramatically, increasingly rich material in the society, people increasingly spend way has changed, and the purpose of capital logic often leads to consumer alienation phenomenon appears, consumption is no longer in order to meet the needs of the development of personal life or, more is to become a kind of phase with the essence of man from the action. The phenomenon of consumption alienation has led to a series of social, ecological and cultural problems, which pose a great threat to human development and social progress.

2. The Meaning and Essence of Consumption Alienation

The essence of consumption is to meet people’s needs and provide them with a better life. However, in capitalist society, labor makes people’s life dull and devoid of freedom. People try to make up for “unfree labor” with “free consumption” in life. Ben Agel argues that consumption alienation is “the phenomenon in which people make the acquisition of goods as a goal in order to compensate for their monotonous, uncreative, and unproductive labor.”[1] The consumption purpose of consumers is not only to meet their real needs, but to meet the false needs guided by capitalists. The consumption behavior of consumers is no longer consumption for consumption’s sake. This kind of consumption deviates from its real needs, presents alienation and has certain harm, but it is a common phenomenon in daily life. In such a consumer society, people’s values have been distorted, and consumption alienation presents characteristics contrary to human nature. It is actually a means for the ruling class to control the society. Since the 20th century, the level of productivity has been greatly improved and the social and economic development has been rapid. “Accumulation and abundance are obviously the most impressive description characteristics”[2]. Money plays an important role in capitalist society, as long as there is money, anything, anything can be bought or done. The consumer appears to be free on the surface, but it is actually the embodiment of the intentions of capitalists, manufacturers and advertisers. Consumption is no longer just a means to meet people’s needs, but has become an alien power to enslave and control people in turn, resulting in the emergence of consumption alienation.

3. The Main Content of Western Marxist Critical Theory of Consumption Alienation

Western Marxist scholars such as Lukacs, Fromm, Marcuse, Baudrillard and so on absorbed the previous scholars’ thoughts on consumption alienation, and then made an in-depth study of the phenomenon of consumption alienation in capitalist society. Lukacs analyzes the capitalist society from the perspective of materialization; Fromm analyzes the causes of consumption alienation from the psychological perspective. Marcuse believes that alienation makes people lose their critical ability, and there is no way to make people truly happy; Baudrillard believes that consumption has the color of symbols. Western Marxist scholars have deeply analyzed the consumption dissimilation from different dimensions, and these studies constitute the main content of Western Marxist criticism of consumption dissimilation.

3.1 The Relationship of Things Obscures the Relationship of People

Lukacs “materialized” Simmel, Marx’s “commodity fetishism” and weber after the influence of the thought of “rationalization” in “history and class consciousness” materialization theory is put forward, he pointed out that materialized for understanding the relationship of the people. There is, in the role of materialized, the relationship between people and the relationship and things are the same. As a result, man’s own labor will be separated from his actions[3].

Under the capitalist system, commodities occupy the dominant position in the society, and commodities play a decisive role for producers. In this case, the relationship between people is obscured by the relationship between things, and the social relationship between people has the nature of “things”, and such social relations have become irrelevant to people. The materialization makes the goods produced and
created by people themselves check their makers in turn, and the relationship between people and the object of labor and between people and themselves is cut off. As the leader of their own behavior, with the development of production, the relationship between people and things has reversed, and people begin to worship the things they create. This makes people dominated by things, control, loss of freedom and initiative. Due to the development of science and technology and production, human personality is destroyed, and human beings no longer exist as real people, but are forced to become commodities to be traded.

3.2 “Unidirectional” Consumption without Critical Power

Marcuse, a critical philosopher of the Frankfurt School, always keeps a clear mind and sensitive insight. Marcuse’s criticism of consumption alienation was deeply influenced by Marx. He clearly realized that in the society of material abundance, the labor intensity of workers has not been adjusted, the living conditions have not been improved, on the contrary, they are also subjected to intensified exploitation and oppression from capitalists, which resulted in the abnormal state of the more work, the less they get. Marcuse’s criticism of the phenomenon of consumption alienation stems from his theory of “unidirectional degree”, which is used by Marcuse to describe the one-sided, unidirectional or unitary living state of people in modern capitalist society. Marcuse believed that a person in an ordinary society should have two “dimensions” and two “dimensions”; that is, one “dimension” is the affirmation of the social reality, while the other “dimension” is the negation and criticism of the existing phenomenon. With the massive development of industrial technology, the degree of oppression and exploitation of laborers deepened, and the alienation of labor in the society became prominent. More and more people became “one-dimensional people”, whose thoughts were controlled by capitalists and lost the ability of rational criticism. In the consumer society constructed by capitalists, they are restricted by commodities and materials, gradually separated from free and conscious behavior, and finally become the vassal and slave of consumption. In such a deformed society, people cannot manipulate consumption, but consumption manipulates people.

In the One Dimensional Man, Marcuse absorbed Freud’s views and divided human needs into real needs and false needs. He regarded consumption alienation as a behavior that violated his real needs and occurred to meet the false needs advocated by the bourgeoisie. “Most of today’s needs, such as rest, entertainment, living and consuming according to advertisements, love and hate, are governed by social trends, irrational needs.” Modern western capitalist countries, high production, high consumption policies, in order to achieve the goal of “forced consumption”, constantly use advertising to create the “false need”, ads in the society, “if a person has two speakers, the media will encourage him to buy four speakers, then will tempt him again, to buy six speakers.....”[4] This “false need” will lead to the expansion of people’s desire to buy, and finally let people fall into the quagmire of material consumption, so as to lose the pursuit of spirit, and finally consumption will be reduced to the manipulation tool of capitalists. “People seem to live for goods.” Marcuse notes. Cars, high-definition facsimile units, split-level family homes and kitchen appliances are the soul of life.[4]. The essence of consumption alienation is excessive possession and plunder. People blindly consume materials and rely on them excessively, which cannot make people realize what is real happiness. Only BY HAVING the ability OF DIALECTICAL thinking, clarifying the relationship between material and human beings, clarifying the significance of consumption to human beings, and eliminating the alienation of consumption, can people finally recover their free and conscious way of living.

3.3 Possessive Ostentation, Extravagant Consumption

The phenomenon of consumption alienation is everywhere, and Fromm describes it very thoroughly: “As long as I have money, even if I don’t know anything about art, I can buy a good work; Even if I don’t know music, I can buy the best albums. I can buy a library, even if it’s just for show; I could buy knowledge, though it was nothing more than an extra social capital. If I destroy all the paintings and books I’ve got, I’ve lost nothing but my money. With money, I have power. I can dispose of whatever I like.”[5] Consumption has a “show off” effect, which can show the social status and identity of consumers. Consumption alienation increases consumers’ irrational consumption of “non-goods”. These consumption behaviors are seriously separated from their actual needs and only exist to show off and show off.

In “To Possess or to Be”, Fromm mentioned that the way of modern people’s existence is “re-possession”. This is a way of life and production. It will consume as a form of possession that’s possession of objects, everything should be brought into the goal for human being, the main meaning of human life naturally became the endless pursuit of all kinds of goods, in the process, people seem to get the dominant can follow one’s inclinations, obtained the content and the rule of the conquest of feeling, but actually falls into the commodity fetishism. Instead, they become slaves to things and are controlled by them. “Buying and consuming has become a compulsively irrational purpose, because the act is an end in itself, rather than the use and enjoyment of what is purchased and consumed.”[6] What people pay attention to is not the real use value of the product at all, but the symbolic significance of the product. In order to better attract the attention of consumers, capitalists rack their brains to improve the comfort and aesthetic degree of things. They manipulate the market by advertising and publicity. They use fancy packaging to stimulate people’s sensory vision and make people crazy in pursuit of high consumption. Unbridled desire induces people to fall into the trap of extravagant consumption. In the endless consumption of resources and commodities, the ecological environment gradually deteriorates and limited resources are wasted in large quantities, which poses a great threat to the survival of human beings. In the consumer society, Fromm believes that starting from the human mind is an important way to solve the social consumption alienation phenomenon, individual mental health has an important role in the development of society. Only by changing the alienation of modern people in personality and psychology can we further change the prevailing survival mode of heavy possession in the society, and the life center can be reversed and finally form the survival mode of heavy existence.
3.4 Symbolic Consumption

Baudrillard, a French scholar, proposed the concept of “symbolized consumption” and applied the semiotic viewpoint to the study of consumption alienation. He believed that the structure and nature of things had changed drastically in the phenomenon of consumption alienation, and things were no longer simply for people to use. In the consumer society, objects gradually evolved into a “symbol”, which began to symbolize some special meanings, and the purpose of consumption gradually began to be linked with the “symbol” of objects. For example, consumers did not pay attention to the real use value of an object when they bought something. On the contrary, consumers hope to show that they have some significance by purchasing such special goods, and their status or identity can be demonstrated through this way. Before that, there were many fetishism phenomena in the society, and people’s worship of symbols was similar to the worship of objects, that is, “fetishism”. Marx said: “To find a metaphor, one must go into the fantasy of religion. There, the products of the human brain appear as living, independent beings that relate to each other and to others. In the world of commodities, the same is true of the products of human hands.” This is what I call fetishism. Once the product of labor is produced as a commodity, it takes on the character of fetishism.”[7] Religion began as a fantasy of the human brain, but as long as it exists alone from the human brain, it is endowed with life, and finally has become the thing that governs human thinking and action. Similarly, “commodity”, as the result of human labor, once separated from human beings, commodities, like religion, will eventually become something that enslaves and controls human beings. Commodity fetishism refers to the fact that commodities can meet people’s needs and realize people’s dignity, which gives people the illusion that a person will become worthless if he or she does not have enough commodities. Man’s worship of goods is like the worship of God, goods can no longer be under personal control.

In the consumer society, people’s obsession with symbols became more and more serious. Baudrillard believed that people’s worship of symbols gradually replaced the position of commodity fetishism in the society. In this kind of alienated consumption, the “things” that people worship lose their real value and are endowed with the color of “symbols”, and people gradually move from the obsession of “things” to the infinite pursuit of symbols. People pursue “things” and occupy or consume them only because they value the “symbol” value carried by “things”. Consumerism involves all people in “false demands”, making people indulge in the environment of economic prosperity, the desire for material and symbol and enjoyment, while ignoring the individual spiritual pursuit.

4. Enlightenment from the Western Marxist Critical Theory of Consumption Alienation

With the development of science and technology, the level of productivity and economy by leaps and bounds, gradually close relationship and communication around the world, especially in the Internet age, the culture and thought of collision between different countries also became very frequently, it can promote the mutual understanding between countries, but also leads to some unreasonable consumption idea also impact on people’s consumption behavior. These ideas are widespread among young people who have a high acceptance of new things. Therefore, further study of critical theory and absorb western Marxism consumption alienation in modern western developed countries for reference to overcome the consumption alienation phenomena in the process of experience is very beneficial to reduce the consumption alienation phenomenon to the society, the harm to consumers, which can help people to set up the correct consumption view, raise the consciousness of green consumption, the correct understanding of the relationships between matter and spirit, As far as possible, let consumption promote the all-round development of people.

4.1 Social Production and Consumption Developed in a Balanced Way

As an important link in social reproduction, production and consumption play an important role in the operation and development of social economy. Marx pointed out: “without first meeting the necessary needs, there can be no accumulation; And the great stream of human desire is the pursuit of enjoyment; So, at any given time, the amount of real wealth in society is, relatively speaking, insignificant. It’s a permanent cycle of production and consumption.”[7] Production, as the basis for improving economic development, and consumption, as the means to achieve economic development, are interrelated and influence each other. On the one hand, production determines consumption. In order to produce, people must consume certain materials or means of living. Therefore, material materials are the most basic element of human production in any case, so the starting point of social development is production. Production provides objects for consumption, and if production ceased to exist, there would be no consumption. How fast consumption grows depends on how fast production grows; The manner or structure in which production affects consumption; Production arouses consumers’ new needs and promotes consumers’ consumption power. “Production creates a need in the consumer by the product it was originally intended to produce”[7]. On the other hand, consumption has a dynamic effect on production. “A product, unlike a purely natural object, can only identify itself as a product when consumed.”[7] As the end-result and the ultimate goal of production, only consumption can make the product produced become a real product. “Without consumption, there would be no production, because without consumption, production would have no purpose.”[7] Once production leaves consumption, it will only lead to blind production and eventually economic crisis. Consumption can also provide power for production. Consumption can not only provide new production needs for production but also enhance the enthusiasm of workers, thus promoting the development of social production. In a word, production and consumption are inseparable, dialectical unity, no production, no consumption; Without consumption, production would cease to exist. Production and consumption have the same identity, can not overconsumption, consumption can not be insufficient, only production and consumption coordinated development of social economy can run smoothly.
demand side plays an vital role in economic development, they produce each other between benign movement will not only help to solve the information asymmetry between supply and demand on the market caused by a series of problems, also can use the change of consumption structure to promote the upgrading of industrial structure, industrial structure and consumption structure are complementary to each other. Only when the industrial structure and the consumption structure depend on each other and cooperate with each other, can the social economy present a state of benign operation. If the coordinated development of supply and demand cannot be realized, no matter the supply exceeds the demand or the demand exceeds the supply, it will have a bad impact on the development of society and economy, which is completely contrary to the demand of high-quality economic development. Therefore, we should coordinate social production and consumption and promote the balanced development of supply and demand, so as to promote the sound and rapid development of society and economy.

4.2 Material Consumption is Unified with Spiritual Consumption

The daigou craze has taken off in China in recent years as part of the country’s growing obsession with luxury goods. With each big luxury brand advertising, people in induced by consumer virtual symbols to reflect their own value and its grade, mislead consumers this way to realize self-worth, it only pays attention to material consumption, completely ignore the spiritual consumption, is the potential of people can’t get excavation, the all-round development of people can’t realize itself through consumption. Everything has two sides, so does the symbolic meaning of consumption. Symbolic consumption can show consumers’ individuality and highlight their uniqueness. But people are quietly divided into three, six and nine in symbolic consumption, which will cause people in the society to become more comparing and vain.

At present, Internet technology and smart phones are widely used, which brings a lot of convenience to People’s Daily life, but at the same time, some new consumption problems arise. When China’s online shopping festival, such as “Double 11”, comes, Taobao, Jingdong and other major online shopping malls, in order to show that the price reduction is great and the goods purchased at this time are very affordable, will carry out extensive publicity through endless advertisements. They advocate consumers to consume in advance. Under the banner of “consume first, enjoy first”, consumers are guided to make impulse consumption by installment. Especially the webcast rise in recent years, many Internet star or stars are scrambling to sell goods by means of live, in the interests of the driven by the host took pains in live camera strongly praised goods, various appearing in the sales link to “kill” and “countdown” greatly confuse the consumer’s perception of their actual demand. Consumption on network platform, consumers are prone to blindly, impulsive consumption, some consumers addicted to anchor with goods shopping experience and pleasure, “revenge” consumption in live with goods pay more attention to the growing popularity of the host and the symbolic meaning of goods, the lack of goods true judgment, easily falling into the abyss of consumption alienation.

People’s needs for a better life include both material and spiritual needs. With the continuous improvement of living standards, people should constantly seek spiritual satisfaction when they are satisfied with their material life, rather than blindly focusing on material consumption. In today’s world, people’s lives have been greatly guaranteed and their living standards have been greatly improved. Abundant material means of life allow people to get a certain degree of satisfaction and happiness after material consumption. Marx once pointed out that “in order to make history, people must be able to live. But in order to live, you first need food, food, clothing and other things. Therefore, the first historical activity is the production of the means to satisfy these needs, namely the production of material life itself.”[7] In the era of material poverty, people often overconsume their spirits; In today’s rich material life, and often excessive material consumption. Excessive material and spiritual consumption is unreasonable, and a balance should be found between the two to promote the free and all-round development of human beings. Excessive material consumption only brings an instant pleasant feeling, which has long gone with the passage of time. In addition to meeting people’s survival and physiological needs, material consumption is very limited in filling the spiritual world of human beings. Only spiritual consumption can truly improve people’s spiritual needs. Material consumption and spiritual consumption need to maintain full integration, in order to completely change people’s understanding of goods, money, reduce people’s worship of material, improve people’s spiritual world, restore harmonious social relations between people, only in this way can people feel real happy life.

4.3 Set up Green, Reasonable and Correct Consumption Concept

In order to reflect the “sense of ceremony” of the festival, some businesses will over-package the goods. In order to highlight the atmosphere, there will often be “waste on the tip of the tongue”. All these show that the phenomenon of extravagance and waste is spreading. Ignoring the ecological environment, blindly focusing on production, these bad behaviors have brought many problems and challenges to our country, such as the pollution of the natural environment, the over-exploitation of natural resources, the destruction of the ecology, frequent “irrational” consumption in the field of consumption, etc., these problems are vital for everyone. This is a waste of social public resources and has a certain impact on the ecological environment. When people focus on the economy and enjoy the convenience of economic development, they never think about whether these actions will cause bad consequences. If human beings challenge nature instead of fearing it, they will only fail in this challenge. The ecological environment is the basis for human survival and development. Once the ecological environment is persecuted, it will inevitably cause great harm to people’s life. The ecological environment is closely related to the sustainable development of human society, as well as people’s sense of happiness and gain. The ecological environment is very important to all people. To protect nature is to protect human beings, and to protect the ecological environment is to benefit human beings. Therefore, we should encourage people to establish the consumption concept of respecting nature, conforming to nature and protecting nature,
and vigorously advocate practical, frugal and moderate consumption.

We must make full use of the current media, network, etc., to promote the correct, green and reasonable consumption concept; Effectively control and monitor the spread of bad information, and severely criticize the phenomenon of “material worship” spread in public media such as television, computer and Internet; Guide people to establish a correct view of money and consumption; It is clear that when people’s basic needs are satisfied, they cannot achieve a happy life without improving their spiritual state and continuing to consume endless material goods. “Consumption” was human self-realization process, consumption has always been to human development and the service, only understand the meanings of consumption for its own development, establish the reasonable consumption, form the green consumption, scientific consumption behavior, to make the consumption in promoting the all-round development of people at the same time also can maintain the natural environment to the survival of humans.

References