

MARDI GRAS ESSAY 4: CARNIVAL OF CAPITALISM

The global marketplace is a liberal-utilitarian project that developed during the enlightenment. Its core principles are based on production, consumption, and rationality. Its goal is monolithic in that it attempts to expand and develop an all-encompassing social space that penetrates into every aspect of a person's public and private life. What I have described throughout various essays is very much related to the essential ingredients of a consumer, commodity culture. Like the 19th century fairs, which were thought to destroy the character of all who visited them, so the modern fair—global capitalism—becomes the site of consumption (Presdee 1994, p. 181). The marketplace provides a carnival of surplus commodities to consume. Like Lacan's theorized subject whose desires can never be fulfilled, a consumer culture that produces spectacular images of human bodies will also fail to satisfy the human desires on which it depends.

In the marketplace, all people are assumed to be formally free and equal, unconstrained in their choices (Slater 1997, p. 27). This enlightenment project has been referred to as "consumer sovereignty." Consumer sovereignty is the idea that consumers have sovereignty over their own needs, desires, wants, and identities. Sovereign consumers have both the right and ability to formulate their own plans and projects in a market society (Slater 1997, p. 34-5). However, consumer sovereignty is also a broad political project. "Its fundamental value and goal is personal liberty--defined as the individual's freedom from social interference--and its concern is to secure the social conditions necessary to allow individuals to define and pursue their own interests" (Slater 1997, p. 39). In other words, this liberal tradition ensures the private desires of individuals who pursue their self-interest and individual preference by creating a "system of production, distribution, and consumption that relies almost entirely on a system of regulation of workers mixed with the desire to consume--what we might call the self-destructive cocktail of capitalism" (Presdee 1994, p. 181). For this reason, "consumer sovereignty is inextricably bound up with images of the west as a cornucopia of goodies, the great bonanza" (Slater 1997, p. 35).

Viewed under enlightenment liberalism, Mardi Gras depicts the ideal marketplace of global capitalism. The consumers who accumulate as many beads as possible are pursuing their self-interest by exercising their individual choice to consume in a global marketplace. "They correctly perceive a common desire to possess, to have, to consume. What they become aware of is the Veblenian nature of conspicuous consumption 'writ large'" (Presdee 1994, p. 181). Indeed, conspicuous consumption is the central activity at Mardi Gras; the capturing and exchanging of beads is the exciting capitalist sport. Each reveler attempts to consume as many beads as

possible during this feverish festival, not only by walking around and seeing as much as they can, but also by possessing as much as they can (see Kinser 1990, p. 286). “Modern consumerism demands that they look, touch, and take, or appropriate. This is a culture that plays at life, where the marketplace becomes the site of pleasure, leisure, desire, and most important, a place of pushing back limits” (Presdee 1994, p. 182). The revelers do not care how they pursue what they want or what limits they transgress; they only know what they desire. In the end, the revelers who have accumulated the most beads accomplishes their “victory” by collecting an excess of beads in a global marketplace.

At this threshold in history, what remains is the desire and excitement to transgress regulated boundaries through consumption and public acts of passionate confessions in the streets (Presdee 1994, p. 181). Hence, there is only one calculable question that each reveler can ask, “How can I accumulate the most beads with the least effort?” Thus, the question is one of utility. The reveler calculates the best means to maximize their desires and to minimize their lack. The consequence is that the revelers at Mardi Gras are free, rational, and autonomous consumers in a global market that caters to their unregulated desires. As a result, “there is no principle in restricting who can consume what, there is also no principled constraint on what can be consumed: all social relations, activities, and objects can in principle be exchanged as commodities. . . Everything can become a commodity at least during some part of its life. This potential for any thing, activity, or experience to be commodified or to be replaced by commodities perpetually places the intimate world of the everyday into the impersonal world of the market and its values” (Slater 1997, p. 27). The revelers who accumulate Mardi Gras beads are “heroes” who conform to the imperatives of a consumer culture. Like consumers who walk through malls searching for objects that strike out at them, the revelers who accumulate beads in exchange for nudity or sex follow the same rules. Revelers are simply following the desire to accumulate an abundance of “symbolic merchandise” in a global marketplace of competition for wealth and excitement (see Shrum and Kilburn 1996).

The implication is that the revelers are following the imperative to enjoy themselves. Enjoyment is an imposition that gives rise to the occurrence of transgression--the excess--and is brought into the logic of visual capitalism by providing people the fantasy of participating in a festival where complete freedom takes place and 'anything goes.' Indeed, Mardi Gras is a space of abundant enjoyment, so much so that it is a productive occasion for synopticism rather than a resistant or liberatory space. The contemporary experience of transgression during Mardi Gras is a central activity where power and liberation should be rethought. Mardi Gras is constrained by its own transgression, to that dimension of excess that is seen in its most conspicuous form in neoliberal economies: with all its defiant freedom and jovial rapaciousness, Mardi Gras fails to

provide true liberation, freedom, and resistance. Instead, it displays the most obscene form of synoptical punishment: you must enjoy yourself, you must transgress, you must be happy!

Contemporary citizens are "Revelers" who are no longer confronted with the question of, "What shall be done?" but instead pressed by the question, "Are we having enough fun?" This enjoyment-hinging-on-anxiety principle suggests that citizens must have fun and enjoy themselves no matter what they do: reveling citizens are given a space of excess where anything goes so they can do whatever they like and say anything they want, as long as they enjoy themselves and have fun. If the revelers fail to adhere to this interpellation to "stay up" and enjoy, then they are shamelessly punished because they are "impotent"--they cannot "keep it up." The revelers must neither compromise their desire nor betray their enjoyment. Both global capitalism and Mardi Gras are spaces to transgress and indulge in deviant activities. The prohibitions that Mardi Gras are supposed to counter actually generate transgressions, and global capitalism profits by marketing them as synoptical commodities and entertainment. Consequently, Mardi Gras and global capitalism take on the characteristics of viagra--people must keep it up and have fun!

The revelers who participate in these activities are transgressive workers who must "keep it up." By doing so they reassert and reproduce global capitalism because they enact the transgression "in the right way." They are not punished for their transgressions because they properly reinstate the normative order of global capitalism by transgressing in a way to restore it. So while we should not strictly dismiss the standard explanation that people are trying to 'escape from boredom' and monotony in life, we should not retain this view as feasible completely either. The new Protestant Calling interpellates people to transgress, keep up this activity, and, like the Coke slogan states---to Enjoy! (Zizek 2000). The performative Calling--Enjoy!--maintains synoptical obedience by producing people who recognize themselves as subjects who desire to transgress norms in carnivalesque spaces with little risk of punishment. Neither transgression nor the carnivalesque provides liberation, resistance, or freedom as much as they produce excess spaces where transgressive work can take place. These same transgressions ultimately conform to the dictates of global capitalism. While people argue that Mardi Gras is a vibrant, subversive ritual for liberation, transgression, and resistance, my essays have illustrated how Mardi Gras and the exchanging of beads contributes to global inequality and global domination.

At this threshold in history, then, what remains is the desire to liberate oneself from panoptical regulation by transgressing into synoptical seduction. The consequence is that reveling citizens are subjects of enjoyment in a Mardi Gras marketplace called global capitalism. Global capitalism caters to their unregulated and insatiable desires to consume. Consequently, there are no restrictions on who can consume what; there are no constraints on what or whom

can be consumed (Slater 1997). As Karl Carlone explained, global capitalism can elevate shit as a sublime and golden commodity. Welcome to the carnival: Enjoy!