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The Haves and Have-nots: re-considering ‘consumption’ in light of Simmel, Tarde & Latour

The riches thus amassed in the aerarium of civilization henceforth appear as though identified for all time. This conception of history minimizes the fact that such riches owe not only their existence but also their transmission to a constant effort of society – an effort, moreover, by which these riches are strangely altered. Our investigation proposes to show how, as a consequence of this reifying representation of civilization, the new forms of behavior and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria. These creations undergo this “illumination” not only in a theoretical manner, by an ideological transposition, but also in the immediacy of their perceptible presence. They are manifest as phantasmagorias.

Benjamin, 1999: 14

This paper seeks to suggest that the accepted definitions of ‘consumption,’ ‘consumer’ and consumerism’ inherited from economic theory, particularly political economy, and declared against ‘production’ as the *use* or *using up* (consummation) of goods are inadequate and require to be replaced with a discussion of *modern consumption* that is specifically linked to the social relations of capitalist modernity. This rejection of the sociological incarnation of *homo œconomicus*’s perpetuation of the Cartesian prioritisation of subjects over objects, or consumer over consumer goods (services and experiences), allows a new relationship between ‘subjective culture’ and ‘objective culture’ (Simmel, 1990) to be posited based upon the association of *being* and *having*. Such a ‘modern’ inter-relation of being and having lies at the heart of Latour’s formulation of Actant–Network–Theory (ANT), but has its basis in the *fin de siècle* social theory of Gabriel Tarde and Georg Simmel. By refuting a qualitative and metaphysical distinction between subjects and objects in favour of a theory of subjectivity rooted in the interaction, or exchange, between the two it is possible to discern the centrality of *modern consumption* to the sociological study of ‘modern’ life.

Recent analyses of ‘consumption’ have focused upon the ‘cyborg’ extension of physiological humanity to include, through extrusion, objects, machines and experiences (Harraway, 1987; Sheller, 2003) often through the theory of ‘affordances’ (Gibson, 1987; 1988) discussed by Dant (1999), Gaver (1996) and Costall (2004). However, the residual primacy and autonomy of the subject of

bourgeois philosophy and political economy overshadows such contributions: the free and rational exercise of choice – as cost/benefit analysis – remains at the core of ‘consumer’ desire. By regarding such a ‘desiring’ model as a historical hangover from the ‘classical bourgeois world view’ (Ferguson, 1990) it is possible to discard both the implicit emphasis upon the *materiality* of the commodity–object and its satisfaction of a *lack* or absence within the subject. This, in turn, allows the commodity–object (service or experience) to be considered as a ‘bundle of functions’ (Massumi, 2003) given formal unity and *accessible* by the subject through interaction as *experience*. The capitalist commodity–form can be understood as a technological *medium* for the facilitation of certain types of interaction and experience (regardless of whether these are considered deleterious or not): the ‘affordances’ of the object, service or experience *alter* subjectivity, and so reveal the link between *having* and *being*.

The ‘bourgeois world view’ that produced classical political economy and Cartesian dualism has given way to a *modern* ‘world view’ organised around a different ‘operating’ principle: where *production* governed the thinking of the former (as work), *play* predominates in the latter (Ferguson, 1990), as *sociability* (after Simmel). The sphere of circulation and exchange, described by political economy, in which the goods produced by the capitalist mode of production moved prior to their ‘final consumption’ (Marx, 1973; Fine & Leopold, 1993; Fine, 1995) has been replaced by a *terrain* upon which the *possession* of instances of the commodity–form are central. The analysis of *modern consumption*, therefore, must be centred upon the investigation of the forms of interaction and experience made available by the ‘technology’ of the commodity–form within capitalist modernity. The *subject* of *modern consumption*, in contradistinction to its historical predecessor ‘consumption,’ can no longer be thought of as a ‘collector’ of objects or experiences, the collection of which externalise personality or individuality through the revealed preferences of ‘choice.’ Instead, the subject is immersed within the technological sublime of an ‘economy of experiences’ in which the ‘sphere of circulation and exchange’ (Marx) has become a *terrain* constituted entirely by the types of interaction and experience available (and the physical, technological and economic infrastructure required to sustain these experiences). This terrain acquires a ‘spectral objectivity’ (Frisby, 1992: 142) through its operation as a ‘locus’ for experience, such that it resembles the dissolution of knowledge into ‘information’ and threatens the possibility of *collecting* (Abbas, 1988; Benjamin, 1999): the archetypal model of subjectivity inherited from the bourgeois tradition. The subject of *modern consumption* is better considered as a ‘nodal’ point for the convergence of experiences delivered through the ‘technological’ framework of the commodity–form of capitalist modernity. The concept of ‘self’ is thus relativised and rendered as ‘fleeting, fortuitous and contingent’ (Baudelaire) as any other aspect of modern culture.

So, *collection* as the work of the bourgeois figure of the collector can now be opposed to the play of *modern consumption*, based on the relationship of

possession. The playful possession of commodities reveals the different temporal logic of the bourgeois and modern eras. The narrative logic of subjectivity changes, the linear narrative progression of the collector and its implicit teleology are replaced by schizophrenic-like inhabitation of the present in contemporary modernity. Objects are no longer markers of 'progress' (accumulation) or signs of development (distinction as identity), but are moments or 'aesthetic events' (Bohrer, 1992) that differentiate the otherwise qualitatively equivalent temporal fragments of the present, through the relation between being and having (possession). Gabriel Tarde in his discussion of modern *sociality* captures much of how the 'terrain' of *modern consumption* operates when he decries 'originary' (Stewart, 1998) moments in favour of an alternative temporal logic:

[...] imitation seems primarily to occur due to imitation. Granted, an invention is imitated a first time, Tarde would say, but subsequent imitations are just as much imitations of the imitation as of the initial invention. When only the social process has begun [sic], imitation becomes a self-organizing force of its own – you imitate because others imitate.

Boch (2005: 85)

In Latour's (1997: 12) discussion and exposition of Tarde's work he also captures the historically novel logic of subjectivity operating:

To exist is to differ; difference, in one sense, is the substantial side of things, what they have most in common and what makes them most different. One has to start from this difference and to abstain from trying to explain it, especially by starting with identity, as so many persons wrongly do. Because identity is a minimum and, hence, a type of difference, and a very rare type at that, in the same way as rest is a type of movement and the circle a type of ellipse. To begin with some primordial identity implies at the origin a prodigiously unlikely singularity, or else the obscure mystery of one simple being then dividing for no special reason.

Tarde, *Monadologie et Sociologie* p. 73, cited Latour

So far, all of philosophy has been founded on the verb *To be*, [...]. One may say that, if only philosophy had been founded on the verb *To have*, many sterile discussions could have been avoided. From this principle 'I am,' it is impossible to deduce any other existence than mine, in spite of all the subtleties of the world. But affirm first this postulate: 'I have' as the basic fact, and then the *had* as well as the *having* are given at the same time as inseparable.

Ibid

The circulation and association of monads in modern metropolitan phenomena, such as the crowd (Tarde), pre-empt ANT's intention 'to [transform] the social from a surface, from a territory, from a province of reality, to a circulation' (Latour, 1997: 4). ANT was never intended as a theory of the social, but as 'a theory of space in

which the social has become a certain type of circulation' (ibid). This leads to a reconsideration of *what*, not who, inhabits this space of circulation:

Subjectivity, corporeality is no more a property of humans, of individuals, of intentional subjects, than being an outside reality is a property of nature.... Subjectivity seems also to be a circulating capacity, something that is partially gained or lost by hooking up to certain bodies of practice.

Latour, 1997: 5

The 'extreme sociality' manifested in crowds is an 'interspiritual' (Tarde) or inter-subjective phenomenon, a temporally fleeting and circulating *capacity*, rather than the 'possession' of any monad or network of monads. *Imitation* is a social phenomenon capable of being communicated by human and non-human actants alike, as such it recalls Dant's insistence upon the role of material culture as a *medium* – the perfect example of which is fashion. For ANT this implies the 'radical indeterminacy of the actor' (Callon, 19??), since the human actant is merely an element within a vast assemblage of people and things, power-relations, processes and dispositions that have no discrete existence (being), but are, rather, realised as temporally unstable aggregates. The social space in which *modern consumption* appears, then, is no more that of the 'consumer society' than it is the sphere of circulation and exchange proposed by political economy.

Towards a Theory of 'Terrain'

ANT's 'change in topology' requires thinking not in the dimensions of Newtonian mechanics but 'in terms of nodes that have *as many dimensions as they have connections*' (Latour, 1997b: 2). This helps 'lift the tyranny of geographers in defining space and offers us a notion which is neither social nor "real" space, but simply associations' (ibid: 3). The space of 'the social' is the totality of those 'nodes' or actants that constitute it, they are the 'stuff out of which socialness is made (Latour & Lemmonier, 1994)' (Latour, 2000: 8). Subjective experience is the outcome of a relationship between *transportation* (displacement) and *transformation* (as the production of difference, of metamorphosis). Latour uses the example of a train journey to illustrate this, the apparently effortless *movement* through time and space achieved through *transportation* involves a minimum of *transformation* because of the 'obedience' of the environment to the wish expressed through the purchase of a train ticket. However, if this *transportation* were to be interrupted and some or all of the hitherto unseen actants within the network (and the displacements and mediations they perform) be revealed, then the experience of *transformation* would devolve onto the subject onboard the train. The apparent autonomy of the subject, as passenger, relies upon the transformations *produced* by other actants, as work. A network that produces transportation without displacement now resembles the 'virtualist' systems (Carrier & Miller, 199?) in which the *mediation* of experience is seemingly without cause.

So, what Latour and theorists of ANT describes as the space of 'the social' is revealed as an effect of hidden or, at least, unapparent causes, it presents itself as a 'virtual' system of *effects* within which the subject is immersed. As such, it is best considered as a *terrain* in which the actions of actants, discrete in space and time, coincide, resulting in 'an event-producing topos' (Latour, 1997: 13), to the extent that a landscape including a mediaeval castle can become a contemporary tourist destination. The experience of 'the social' is, therefore, the experience of 'effects of isochrony and isotopy, produced by the carefully monitored and heavily institutionalised circulation of objects that remain relatively untransformed through transportation: high speed trains, rulers, standards, canons, weight, constant relations, bullets, ballistic missiles, falling stones, accounts, and various other rods, hands of clocks, gears and structural isomorphies' (ibid: 17). ANT's discussion of 'the social' as a topology of interactions within which a Tarde-like 'microsociology' (Borch, 2005) can reveal the processes that constitute experience can now be seen to provide a model for the analysis of *modern consumption* that circumvents the shortcomings of both the 'consumer society' thesis and the semiotic soup of postmodern society.