

Ideological dimension of consumption

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The paper deals with the ideological dimension of consumer society. The problem of ideology is approached by distinguishing between consumption and consumerism. Consumption is understood as common human practice aimed to satisfy individual needs. In this case, individuals tend to operate rational logics based on practical characteristics of the objects consumed, while in the case of consumerism, individuals are shown to be engaged in symbolic logics which operates the symbolic meanings of the objects consumed.

Key words: consumer society, consumption, consumerism, ideology

INTRODUCTION

The central issue of the paper is the problem of ideology in consumer society. First of all, it is important to give the reasons for such a problem. It was R. Bocoock who inspired investigations of this kind by introducing the concepts of consumerism and consumption. *Consumption* is understood as a process which takes place in a certain network of social, cultural and economic practices, and *consumerism* is understood as an ideology promoting the process of consumption. Bocoock's insights are important because he distinguishes between consumption and consumerism. Bocoock also argues that consumerism depends on the specific moral / social values that are accepted by the majority of society; he also covers the problem of a consumer consciousness: affected by *consumerism*, an individual consciousness becomes capable to recognize and conceive the symbolic values of the commodities consumed; thus, an individual behaves in a certain way because of the symbolic content of things.

The theoretical approach to the problem is also based on the claim of J. Baudrillard that consumption is an idealistic practice. The commodities consumed *a priori* do not have any transcendental meaning except their functional / empirical characteristics. Baudrillard argues that in the modern consumer society it happens that commodities have the sense as symbols that are realized through an individual social action and become ideologems with a certain social perspective. Such a matter of things allows us to make a distinction between consumers – individuals who still do not lack the capacity of critical judgment based on the functional treatment of things, and *consumers* – individuals who are influenced by consumerism and submit the logics of consumerism, called by J. Baudrillard *fetish logics*, which is at the root of consumer ideology in general. Baudrillard's distinction between consumers is very similar to Bocoock's distinction between consumption and consumerism.

Because of the idealistic nature of consumption, consumerism may be treated as a practice of the systemic manipulation of symbols. An object needs to obtain a symbolic meaning to become an object of consumption; for a consumer to recognize the symbolic meaning, his consciousness needs to be "trained" to accept the symbolic value of an object consumed. The paper explores how an individual is constituted as an *ideal consumer* – an ideological subject who accepts and reproduces ideologems of consumerism as if they were his own but not imposed from the outside.

To put the concepts of ideology and consumption within one theoretical framework, the concept of ideology elaborated by J. B. Thompson is used. As modern society is the one in which the extended circulation of symbolic forms plays the fundamental and ever-increasing role, Thompson argues that the production and exchange of symbolic forms is a pervasive feature of social life. Conceptually, Thompson examines the nature of symbolic forms and their relation to the social contexts within which they are produced, transmitted and received, focusing his analysis on the interrelations of meaning and power. Thompson argues that the concept of ideology can be used to refer to the ways in which the meaning serves to establish and sustain the relations of power, which are systematically asymmetrical. Thompson, in his study of ideology, investigates the ways in which the meaning is constructed and conveyed by symbolic forms of various kind; he investigates the social contexts within which symbolic forms are employed and deployed: symbolic forms are studied in a specific way of structured social relations.

STRUCTURED FIELD OF CONSUMPTION AND SYMBOLIC FORMS

This part of the paper is aimed to reveal the process of consumption as the process of social differentiation. In order to make a claim that consumption determines the character of social differentiation, first of all some important theoretical assumptions should be made. The principle of analysis rests upon the assumption that objects of consumption always have a symbolic meaning specifically orientated towards the social positions of individuals. Baudrillard argues that

“... you never consume the object in itself (in its use value); you are always manipulating objects as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of a higher status” (Baudrillard 1998: 61).

Consumption does not homogenize society; it is obvious that different people have different possibilities of consumption. Baudrillard regards consumption (of material and cultural products) as corrective to social disparities, social hierarchy and the ever-increasing level of discrimination where power and responsibilities are concerned; it is the role the ideology of consumption plays indeed. Commodities themselves do not have any transcendental meaning but their functional / empirical characteristics; it is their social perspective which has a symbolic meaning, and this meaning, as Baudrillard argues, is always a distinctive one. The status, according to Baudrillard, is the social essence which is simulated by the objects by their social code, social perspective or symbolic meaning. Status in its essence is a grace of predestination, which is only bestowed by birth to a few and which the majority having opposite destinies can never attain, so they prove salvation by consumption – creating an environment by the signs of a pursuant status – as the salvation by grace is unattainable. Thus, the social logics of consumption is the logics of the production and manipulation of social signifiers; Baudrillard (1998) states that such a perspective of the social process of consumption may be analyzed from two basic angles:

- as a process of signification and communication, based on a code into which consumption practices fit and from which they derive their meaning;
- as a process of classification and social differentiation in which signs / objects are ordered not merely as significant differences in a code but as status values in hierarchy.

Here, Baudrillard claims that through the processes of communication and social differentiation individuals create the sense of “who they are” – that is the question of social identity. Because of / with the help of symbolic meanings of the goods consumed, individuals cre-

ate and maintain the sense of identity. Thus, consumption is an active process involving the symbolic construction of the sense of both collective and individual identities. The process of constructing identity by consumption necessarily implies that individuals must be aware of manipulating symbols; this means that people must develop certain specific consumption capabilities. It is worth quoting Bocoock here:

“To be a consumer of capitalism’s products, therefore, entails learning a specific set of cultural symbols and values. There is nothing natural about modern consumption; it is something which is acquired; learned; something which some people are socialized into desiring. Modern consumerism, therefore, depends upon its specific set of values becoming acceptable and comprehensible among sufficient groups of people so that sales of consumer products can be made. These consumption-oriented values have to include those which either allow, or actively encourage, the purchase of the goods and experiences on offer. They involve, also, developing a capacity to understand, to respond to, the symbols which surround modern consumption” (Bocoock 2001: 53–54).

Baudrillard (1998), as well as Bocoock, identifies that the “consumer society is a society of learning to consume”, of social training in consumption which is the process of constituting the ideological subject – *the ideal consumer*.

The concept of the *ideal consumer* is elaborated within the theoretical insight introduced by G. Mažeikis (2002) in his study of propaganda subject construction. Mažeikis aims to show the way the external forms of thinking and their estrangement enforce thinking in substitutive forms and the phenomenon of substituting the forms of self-conscience; he claims that the construction of the autonomic ideological subject is an important purpose of propaganda. Searching for this aim is based on the switch-up of the forms of self-consciousness.

The substitution of the forms of self-consciousness, Mažeikis (2002) argues, is in fact the substitution of personal experience by collective experience, collective (group) thinking models and the values of behaviour imposed by them. What is important about these collective models is that they cannot resist the mechanisms of manipulation. Such a theoretical approach falls within Baudrillard’s analysis:

“Consumption is an active, collective behaviour: it is something enforced, a morality, an institution. It is a whole system of values, with all that expression implies in terms of group integration and social control functions” (Baudrillard 1998: 81).

Personal existentialist experience is substituted by fragments of collective, public memory with the prevailing symbolic character; thus, symbolic reasoning overcomes the critical one. Symbolic thinking is the thinking by the complex affective cognitions characterized by numerous meanings. Often, such symbols come as a result of collective creative activities: members of a certain social group operate symbols as the marks, guidelines, ideals of a group and of every individual – member of the group. It is the way individuals are socialized in terms of identity – they recognize themselves as members of a certain social group or social position because of operating the same symbols and sharing the same values and modes of behaviour imposed on them by the commonly reasoned meanings (the symbols shared).

Baudrillard would argue that the capitalist system of mass production and mass communication are the systemic instruments of production / constitution of an ideological subject – the ideal consumer. Production and consumption, Baudrillard argues,

“... are part of one and the same process of expanded reproduction of the productive forces and their control. This imperative, which is that of the system, passes into daily mentalities, ethics and ideology – and here is the great trick – in its inverted form: in the form of liberation of needs, individual self-fulfilment, enjoyment and affluence, etc.” (Baudrillard 1998: 82).

Here, Baudrillard criticizes the ideology of consumption in terms of false consciousness: an individual becomes an *ideal consumer* – an ideological subject who accepts and reproduces the symbols of consumerism as if they were his own but not imposed from the outside. As a result of symbolic reasoning, an ideal consumer produces simulacra: symbolic visions in consciousness are not referential, and that is why consciousness does not merely distort reality but does not grasp it at all. Baudrillard argues that only some people achieve the mastery of autonomous, rational logics of elements of the environment (functional use, aesthetics organization, cultural accomplishment). Such people “do not, strictly speaking, consume”, while the others (the majority) are condemned to the valorization of objects as such, and of all other things as objects – ideas, leisure, knowledge, culture; this is what Baudrillard calls the fetishist logics which is the ideology of consumption.

J. K. Galbraith (1969) in *The Affluent Society* argues that “needs are fruits of production”, Baudrillard (1998) makes some corrections and claims that “*the system of needs is the product of the system of production*”. By the system of needs it is meant that needs are not produced one by one in relation to the respective objects (this is what Galbraith has in mind), but are produced as system elements but not as a relationship of an individual. Thus, Baudrillard claims that a socialization of an individual as a consumer is the same process of “rationalization of productive forces” which took place in the 19th century in the sector of production and reached its culmination in the 20th century in the sector of consumption. In the 19th century, people were socialized as a labour force, and at present they are solidarized as a consumption power. Such a transformation is done by replacing the old system of values by new ones; a result of this transformation is commodification of any field of human / social action. Commodification process is of total character:

“It is a totalitarian code, for no one escapes it; escaping it in a private sense cannot prevent us from participating every day in its collective development. Not believing in it still means believing sufficiently in other people’s beliefs in it to adopt a skeptical stance. Even actions intended as resistance to it must be defined in terms of a society that conforms to it” (Baudrillard 1980: 194).

When speaking of transformation of value systems, the study of R. Inglehart (1990) might be of particular importance. In his continuous empirical research of societies which differ in their socioeconomic environment, Inglehart comes to a conclusion that the impact of technological modernization is reinforced by parallel cultural developments taking place in advanced industrial society:

“Economic development and the emergence of social welfare institutions give rise to a sense of economic security, which in turn leads to a gradual shift from Materialist to Postmaterialist values among both elites and general publics. What is distinctive – Postmaterialists are far likelier than Materialists to give high priority to self-expression (in various kinds of social fields of action)” (Inglehart 1990: 429).

When speaking of “self-expression”, the works of J. P. Bourdieu (2003) and A. Giddens (2000) should be considered; both of them use the concept of lifestyle, which is elaborated (both authors do it in a particular way) within the theoretical context of individual identity. In the society that we live in today it is possible for an individual to express himself through consumption practice; of course, it is not the only way to create the sense of identity, though a count on it should be made. For Giddens, “the I narrative” is constructed in the circumstances when the personal / peculiar appropriation is affected by the standardized consumption.”¹ (Giddens 2000: 257).

¹ Lithuanian edition 2000, translated from: Giddens, A. *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Era*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997.

For Baudrillard, consumption involves the consumption of signs and symbols and not of merely material objects. The objects consumed signify a certain meaning which is recognized by others who share the same system of signs / symbols. This is how consumption, as a process of signification and communication, based on a code into which consumption practices fit and from which they derive their meaning, works. The meaning Baudrillard speaks about is always of distinctive character: consumer objects produce distinctions, and first of all they produce stratification which collectively assigns consumers to a socially structured code.

CONSUMPTION AS POWER RELATIONS

In this part of the paper, the notion of consumption as a structured field of power relations will be revealed. As already shown, consumption is understood as a socially structured process; “socially structured” integrates the notion of power to some extent, but it is still not clear how does it happen that the meaning mobilized by symbolic forms serves, in a specific social context of consumption, to establish and sustain relations of power; it is a theoretical approach of J. B. Thompson (1990) to the problem of ideology in general, and it is the approach within which the central problem of the paper is going to be revealed. For such a purpose, first of all it must be clear what is meant by “*establish and sustain relations of domination*”:

- to establish, in the sense that meaning may actively create and institute relations of domination;
- to sustain, in the sense that meaning may serve to maintain and reproduce relations of domination through the ongoing process of producing and receiving symbolic forms (Thompson 1990: 58).

Thompson’s work is directed towards the study of the ways in which meaning is mobilized to maintain the relations of domination. Whether the symbolic phenomenon serves or not to establish and sustain the relations of domination is a question which can be answered only by examining the interplay of meaning and power in particular circumstances, the ways in which symbolic forms are employed, circulated and understood by individuals situated in structural social contexts. Thompson (1990) makes an important claim: symbolic forms or symbolic systems are not ideological in themselves; whether they are ideological, and the extent to which they are, depend on the ways in which they are used and understood in specific social contexts.

The concept of meaning is understood to be the meaning of symbolic forms which are embedded in social contexts and circulating in the social world. Symbolic forms, Thompson argues, are understood as a “broad range of actions and utterances, images and texts, which are produced by subjects and recognized by them and others as meaningful constructs” (Thompson 1990: 59) – in case of consumer society, the objects of consumption are concerned as symbolic forms. Following Thompson, it should be stressed that the symbolic forms / objects of consumption are always embedded in socially structured contexts and processes. To describe these contexts and processes as socially structured is to say that there are systematic differences in terms of the distribution of, and access to, resources of various kinds. The social location of individuals and the entitlements associated with their positions in a social field or institution endow them with various degrees of power understood at this level as a socially or institutionally endowed capacity which enables or empowers some individuals to make decisions, pursue ends or realize interests. Thompson speaks of domination when

“... established relations of power are systematically asymmetrical – when particular agents or groups of agents are endowed with a power in a durable way which excludes, and to some significant degree remains inaccessible to, other agents or groups of agents, irrespective of the basis upon which such exclusion is carried out” (Thompson 1990: 59).

Thompson argues that symbolic forms are always embedded in certain social contexts which are necessarily socially structured. The concept of structure is essential in Thompson's framework for the analysis of social contexts, which involves three basic characteristics: the field of interaction, social institutions, and social structure. It is within these elements that the concept of ideology is elaborated. The characteristics of social contexts are constitutive of the production and reception of symbolic forms. The process of reception is understood as an active / creative process of interpretation and evaluation in which the meaning of a symbolic form is constituted and reconstituted. It is important to stress that in receiving and interpreting symbolic forms, individuals draw upon the resources, rules and schemata that are available to them. Hence, the ways in which symbolic forms are understood and the ways in which they are valued may differ from one individual to another, depending on the position they occupy in a socially structured field or institution; concerning the field of consumption, the symbolic meaning of the objects consumed has a different impact on different individuals. That is why Baudrillard speaks of individuals “who, strictly speaking, do not consume”, because they do not share the “fetishist logics of consumption”. If we accept Thompson's position, Baudrillard in this case could be interpreted from a different angle: it is not the question of consumers who consume obeying the consumerism ideology and the consumers who consume but do not fall within the ideology; it is the question of the extent to which consumption (in the broadest sense) empowers certain individuals to establish and sustain relations of domination. These relations occur because of the symbolic meaning of the objects consumed when receiving and interpreting them (in the structured field of consumption).

When receiving and interpreting symbolic forms, Thompson (1990) argues that individuals are involved in the process of the symbolic reproduction of social contexts. The meaning of symbolic forms as received and understood by recipients may serve in various ways to maintain the structured social relations characteristics of the specific context of consumption within which the symbolic forms are produced and received. In “various ways” means that we should cover not only the notion of status, what Baudrillard actually does, but also that a certain scope of indicators should be elaborated in order to examine the specifics of the process of consumption as a social field where power relations of certain individuals or groups of individuals take place.

Thompson claims that symbolic forms become the objects of complex processes of valuation, evaluation and conflict – the process of valorization; two types of valorization are of particular importance:

- *symbolic valorization*: it is the process through which certain symbolic forms are ascribed a certain symbolic value, the value which objects have by virtue of the ways in which and the extent to which they are esteemed by the individuals who produce and receive them;
- *economic valorization*: symbolic forms are ascribed a certain economic value, the value through which they are constituted as commodities and can be exchanged in the market (Thompson 1990: 154–155).

It is essential about the process of valorization that it raises a conflict of symbolic / economic valuation, which is inevitable because the very process takes place in a structured social context, which means that certain symbolic forms have different values for individuals who

attain different social positions. Thus, the process of valorization is linked to the process of social mobility; individuals involved in the production and reception of symbolic forms are aware of this process as a means of improving / preserving their own social position. Thompson argues that the valorization process should be linked with certain strategies of symbolic / economic valuation, which are always elaborated with respect to an individual's position in the socially structured context. Here, Thompson incorporates the concepts of social *capital* and *field*, elaborated by the French sociologist P. Bourdieu in order to show how certain strategies are linked to different positions in the field of interaction:

- individuals who occupy dominant positions have privileged access to resources of capital of various kinds (symbolic, economic, and cultural); their typical strategies of valuation are distinction, derision and condescension;
- intermediate positions within a field are those which offer access to one kind of capital but not another or which offers access to different kinds of capital but in quantities which are more limited than those available to dominant individuals or groups. Individuals who are within intermediate positions usually pursue strategies of moderation, pretension and devaluation.
- subordinate positions within a field are those which offer access to the smallest quantities of capital of different kinds; individuals within subordinate positions usually pursue strategies of practicality, respectful resignation or rejection (Thompson 1990: 158–159).

It is important to stress that certain strategies of individuals are always elaborated with respect to other individuals acting in the same social field (consumption); the strategies mentioned always maintain a social direction. Strategies of dominant positions are orientated downwards, whereas strategies of individuals in subordinate positions are orientated (usually) upwards; and strategies of intermediate positions maintain both directions with respect to social hierarchy. Thus, by carrying out different strategies, individuals act in the social field of consumption; they manipulate, value, receive and produce meanings which result in the power with a certain social / cultural perspective.

CONCLUSIONS

The very process of consumption is understood as a social action which operates symbolic meanings of the objects of consumption, thus it has been analyzed from two basic angles: as a process of signification and communication and as a process of social differentiation. The analysis of consumption as a process of social differentiation leads to a conclusion that the field of consumption is structured; the analysis of consumption as a process of signification and communication leads to a conclusion that certain meanings are produced within the structured field of consumption – as the principle of analysis rested upon the assumption that objects of consumption always have a symbolic meaning with a specific orientation towards the social position of individuals.

The concept of ideology has been analyzed referring to the ways in which the meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of power. By accepting Thompson's theoretical approach to the structured field of consumption within which certain meanings are produced and delivered by individuals involved in consumption, it has been shown that the meanings produced result in power relations among individuals: it is a question of the extent to which consumption empowers certain individuals to establish and sustain relations of domination.

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Ideologinis vartojimo aspektas

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas ideologinis vartojimo aspektas. Ideologijos problema vartojime išvelgiama remiantis amerikiečių autoriaus R. Bocoocko teiginiu, kad vartojimas ir vartotojiškumas yra du skirtingi procesai. Vartojimas suvokiamas kaip kasdienis procesas, vykstantis tam tikrame socialinių, kultūrinių ir ekonominių praktikų tinkle, o vartotojiškumas suprantamas kaip vartojimą skatinanti ideologija. Kitas teorinis ramsis straipsnyje yra J. Baudrillard'o darbai, kuriuose nagrinėjamas ženklinis šiuolaikinės kultūros pobūdis remiasi daikto-ženkle koncepcija. Daiktai, anot Baudrillard'o, patys savaime neturi jokios simbolinės prasmės – tik funkcinės savybės. Vartotojų visuomenėje nutinka taip, kad funkcinės daiktų savybės marginalizuojamos ir sureikšminamas vartojamų daiktų simbolinis turinys. Taigi vartotojus galima skirstyti pagal jų santykį su vartojamais daiktais: vieniems nestinga kritinio požiūrio į realybę, jie atpažįsta ir vertina daiktus pagal daiktų funkcinės savybės, kiti persiima „fetišistine logika“, jų sąmonė operuoja simboliais, neturinčiais adekvataus referento realybėje. Pasak Baudrillard'o, vartojimas yra idealistinė veikla, visuomet pasižyminti socialine diferenciacija. Remiantis šiuo teiginiu, vartojimas traktuojamas kaip socialiai struktūruotas procesas.

Tam, kad daiktas taptų preke, jis turi įgyti simbolinį turinį; tam, kad šis simbolinis turinys būtų prasmingas socialinėje erdvėje, vartotojo sąmonė turi gebėti atpažinti vartojimo daiktuose užkoduotas prasmes. Straipsnyje, remiantis G. Mažeikio suformuluota propagandinio subjekto samprata, pateikiama ideologinio subjekto – idealaus vartotojo – samprata, analizuojami pagrindiniai šio subjekto formavimosi etapai.

Remiantis vartojimo ir idealaus vartotojo sampratomis, darbe vartojimas analizuojamas kaip galios santykių raiška. Straipsnyje remiamasi J. B. Thompsono suformuluota ideologijos koncepcija, pagal kurią ideologija įtvirtina ir palaiko galios santykius socialiai struktūruotuose kontekstuose. Ideologija, pasak Thompsono, apskritai remiasi prasmingais simboliniais turiniais. Galios santykiai tarp individų pasireiškia šiuos simbolius interpretuojant ir užimant pagrindines ar subordinuotas pozicijas simbolių generavimo ir interpretavimo atžvilgiu. Vartojimo kontekste galios santykiai suprantami kaip individų pasidavimas / nepasidavimas manipuliavimui vartojamų daiktų prasmėmis, vartojimas pasirodo beesas procesas, kurio metu galios santykių raiška tarp individų tampa neišvengiama, todėl vartojimas tampa įrankiu, įtvirtinančiu galios santykius. Šiuo atveju prasmingas yra klausimas: koku mastu vartojimas leidžia ir palaiko šiuos santykius.

Raktažodžiai: vartojimas, vartotojiškumas, vartotojų visuomenė