

Can we speak of a "new spirit of consumption"?

For a history of mentalities applied to Consumer Research

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Abstract

Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) have recently argued that criticism is the main operator of the creation and transformation of the spirit of capitalism. Capitalism regularly "incorporates" some of the values on whose behalf it was previously criticized. During the ideological turn of the sixties, a "new spirit of capitalism" have integrated the critique of bureaucratic and Fordian standardization and embraced the values of autonomy, creativity and initiative. Can the Boltanski-Chiapello thesis be translated into the field of consumer research? This is the question to which this article will attempt to provide some answers.

Can we speak of a "new spirit of consumption" developing from the sixties, breaking with the ideology, representations and norms until then dominant? If Boltanski and Chiapello's thesis (1999) seems translatable in the field of consumption, it is because the long sixties, this period conceptualized by Marwick (1998), which extends from 1958 to 1974, is described by historians of mentalities and culture as a time of ruptures and upheavals. During this period, the rejection of conformism and the apology for spontaneity, detachment and authenticity were manifest.

Our article thus proposes to show, through the synthesis of a historical literature, the possible contributions of the history of mentalities to the understanding of consumer cultures, but also to grasp the interpretative quarrels in the existing literature about how this new spirit imposed itself. We describe the "constituents" of the new spirit of consumption by mobilizing the historical literature dealing with this time and we review the various hypotheses encountered in the literature that would allow us to explain how the new spirit of consumption has penetrated the market discourses.

As early as the 1950s, norms of consumption and marks of conformity, inherited from the Belle Epoque, are rejected by is a youth revolt that is particularly visible in the media. How to preserve one's autonomy and individual freedom, in the mass society that is coming? That's the question young people seem to be asking their elders. Existential anxiety is omnipresent in the fifties. The new "good life" seems standardized by the big industry, controlled by big corporations, who seem to organize everything about daily life: production and consumption. Modern society is that of the Organization: whether based on a socialist or capitalist bureaucracy, it always seems to destroy the very foundations of individuality, the possibility of autonomy. The crisis of meaning is general: the fear of conformism is a mood that permeates all the American culture of the fifties.

It is in this anxiety-inducing context that a new political doxa based on the rejection of repressive conformism will develop during the long sixties. This new sensibility, soon dominant, draws its inspiration from existentialism, Horkheimer and Adorno, freudo-marxists like Reich and Marcuse and situationists like Debord, Vaneigem and Lefebvre. These various influences will operate across western countries, and converge towards a central and unifying notion: alienation. To fight against capital is now to fight against alienation, through an individual work of conscience, towards human authenticity.

The multiple oppositional cultures that developed then all have, to varying degrees, opposed an existential anarchism to a society denounced as technocratic, cold and repressive. They all, in a way, tried to attack the bourgeoisie in what they imagined to be its anthropological fundamentals: rigor, austerity and respect for the conventions. However, the rebel culture of the sixties is intrinsically - and necessarily - a media and market culture. The rebel culture is entirely run by music producers, press and media owners, who are able to move this great audiovisual repertoire across the countries, all around the world. From a strictly economic point of view, the idea of a distortion (or commercial "rip-off") seems difficult to defend. However, the idea of a symbolic and rhetorical distortion seems more defensible.

According to Frank (1997), the sixties impose a standard binary narration, opposing hip to square, conformism and anticonformism, alienation and rebellion. According to this author, this new spirit of consumption has remained, since then, the ideological matrix of our commercial and advertising culture. According to Frank (1997), a rhetorical transformation of advertising occurs gradually, beginning in the first half of the sixties. This rhetorical transformation is fully achieved in 1965, long before the ideas of the counterculture were imposed in the media and known to all. The ideas and values related to the anti-conformist rebellion are indeed highlighted as early as 1959 with the announcement "Think small" conducted by Doyle Dane Bernbach's (DDB) on behalf of the brand Volkswagen. According to Frank (1997), the advertising industry did not reap the benefits of the counter-cultural revolution, it planted the seeds. But Frank's (1997) analysis has not been replicated. His interpretation does not reach consensus among cultural historians or advertising historians, who, without, however, deploying similar empirical evidence, evoke an opportunist inversion: advertisers would have appropriated counter-culture codes as they saw the increasing inefficiency of their old advertising recipes.

Has the rhetoric of the new spirit of consumption been retrospectively integrated by the advertising industry, or is it merely the product of it? For future research, practices and methods deployed by the historians of mentalities could give good insights on this subject.

Références

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