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The Eccentricity of the Romantic Consumer: Campbell, Simmel, and Plessner

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Consumer culture has few defenders and there are even fewer who dare to argue that consumer culture may in a sense make us broader and deeper personalities. In this talk I will try to make the case for a sociologist who does claim just that, Colin Campbell – with his “Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism”. I will argue that his theory of the “romantic consumer” – particularly if underpinned by Simmel’s analysis of the psychological implications of the money economy – can account for a simultaneous increase in flexibility/complexity of contemporary selves and their persistent integrity as autonomous persons. To argue the latter point I will recur on Plessner’s work, especially his adaptation of role theory and his critique of the ideology of community (*Gemeinschaft*).

Plessner is a likely ally for the unpopular defence of the popular culture of consumption. There is more than only an elective affinity between consumer culture and Plessner’s defence of society (*Gesellschaft*) as consumer culture significantly contributes to what he calls the “increasing possibilities of play that civilization makes possible” (1999: 78)¹

Such *Gesellschaftlichkeit* throughout the twentieth century has had more intellectual critics than defenders... and hardly any admirers. Notably, one of the prime targets of those critiques always was consumer culture (even though it wasn’t often called that). It was seen as a major threat to occidental culture, dissolving and corrupting the very essence of European man. Prominently, Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* denounces everyday trivial sociability manifested in curiosity, idle talk, and ambiguity as the pinnacle of inauthenticity. For Plessner, in contrast, it is this very ambiguity that is the deep ontological trait (1999: 109; 1981:63) To take another example, Arnold Gehlen, bemoans the sensual overload (*Reizüberflutung*) of the mediatic consumer society as fundamental threat to the ordering power of tradition and routine. In contrast Plessner explicitly asks us to embrace such sensual overload as civilisational achievement, sees strength in the embrace of ‘the refinement of life, and the intensification of possibilities for stimulation’ (1999: 69).

In his 1924 *Limits of Community* Plessner indicates a specifically human form of desire for the imaginary that seems to me to be at the heart of a developed consumer culture – a desire for the unreal, dreamlike rather than the material and immediate. He asks:

‘Is there deprivation (excluding naked hunger) that urges not towards that unreal satisfaction, that demands satiation more with the magic of indeterminate promises than with what actually can be had?’ (1999: 114)

¹ „Gesellschaft bejahen um der Gesellschaft willen, die ihr eignes Ethos, ihre eigene, der Gemeinschaft überlegene Größe hat, und einsehen lernen, daß eine unendlich zu steigernde Anspannung des Intellekts für die immergrößere Souveränität gegenüber der Natur verlangt ist, die Maschinen bejahen, an deren Sozialfolgen die Gegenwart leidet, die ganze Pflichtenlast der Zivilisation, wie sie das Abendland erfunden hat und ausbildet, um der wachsenden Spielmöglichkeiten, die sie bringt, auf sich nehmen, das ist die wahrhafte Stärke, auf die es ankommt.“ (Plessner 1981: 31f.)

This seems to fit into 1920s big city life – but hardly strikes us as something “universally human”. Here Colin Campbell can help out as he focuses on this particular element in consumer culture – understanding it as an historical achievement, a novel intellectual/emotional skill developed in the Romantic Period – rather than something that’s just human. At first sight a contradiction, this ties in with Plessner’s assertion that for the most of human history the infinity of the psyche is something that is reconciled by giving it space behind, but also hiding it behind, ceremonial orders: Masks that do not give off anything of the personhood they facilitate. Campbell’s (1987) starting point is the conundrum of the insatiability of the modern consumer – an insatiability that cannot be fully explained by the generalisation or trickling down of aristocratic luxury consumption. Such luxury in “traditional hedonism” typically is not innovative but merely a quantitative excess over need satisfaction. Having moved beyond necessity the traditional hedonist tries to recreate the pleasure of need satisfaction by intensifying and refining the sensual stimuli involved. But in relying on sensations such hedonism still remains bound by the absolute limits to possible physical arousal. Its central function of asserting social rank (Veblen’s conspicuous consumption) also militates against the possibility of achieving genuine pleasure.

To allow insatiability, Campbell argues, the link to sensual stimuli must be severed and pleasure seeking must shift to emotions instead. Pleasure then no longer is a property of external objects but of internal “spiritual” processes, gained by conjuring up emotional states through a mastery of the imagination, by indulging in daydreams. While these daydreams are facilitated by the use of commodities, the pleasure is not in the immediate sensual effect of those goods on the consumer but in the consumer’s self-illusionary engagement with them. Campbell speaks of autonomous imaginative hedonism. The imaginative hedonist enjoys involvement in fictitious worlds, shares the adventures of invented characters, or dream him/herself into a semi-fictional identity by, for example, adopting a certain style of clothing, driving a particular car, or creating an online avatar.

The imaginative hedonist not only uses consumer goods as launch pad or aide for daydreams, but also is able to anticipate the pleasure to be had from objects not yet acquired. Thus not only the desired object is a source of enjoyment, but desire itself becomes an object of gratification. This leads into a dynamics of longing in which the acquisition of the desired object nearly always must disappoint as daydreams will be more perfect than any reality they anticipate. This frustration then triggers new longings which fuel demand for novel products and thereby accounts for fashion as “most central of all institutions of modern consumerism”.

“Modern hedonism presents all individuals with the possibility of being their own despot, exercising total control over the stimuli they experience, and hence the pleasure they receive. Unlike traditional hedonism, however, this not gained solely, or even primarily, through the manipulation of objects and events in the world, but through a degree of control over their meaning. In addition, the modern hedonist possesses the very special power to conjure up stimuli in the absence of any externally generated sensations. This control is achieved through the power of imagination, and provides infinitely greater possibilities for the maximization of pleasurable experiences than was available under traditional, realistic hedonism to even the most powerful of potentates.” (Campbell 1987: 76)

Self-illusion here does not lead to a loss of reality in a world of simulacra (as Baudrillard famously claimed) since it is performed in an emotionally involved yet intellectually detached

mode: the illusions are “felt to be true” – but “known to be false” (or as Coleridge calls it: performed under a “willing suspension of disbelief”). It is a skill that we consumers unthinkingly employ when we open a book, watch a movie or a football match, flick through a fashion magazine... entering other worlds, stories, struggles – while often remaining firmly attached to our sofas.

As the title of his book suggests, Campbell constructs the Romantic heritage of consumerism as a parallel to how Max Weber construed the Protestant legacy of capitalism. Written as a companion book to Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* it goes about in the same three step logic. As you will know Weber’s strategy was to first identify the “spirit of capitalism” (disciplined work towards the sole aim of profit and re-investment; “inner-worldly asceticism”), then secondly to trace the historical roots of this mentality (an ironic turn in Calvinist teaching of pre-destination) and thirdly to show how the economic system “selects” this type of character into leading positions and hence establishes new cultural heroes, leading to a self-perpetuation of the capitalist spirit beyond Calvinism itself)

Campbell’s strategy accordingly is to identify the “spirit of modern consumerism” (autonomous imaginative hedonism), then to trace its historic roots (the “other Protestant ethic”, leading to Romanticism) and finally find out why this mentality is “selected” even after its original source has dried up. Campbell mainly investigates the historical roots. These are interlinked with those of the protestant ethic of capitalism.

Campbell tracks down a transformation of optimistic, emotionalist, sentimentalist streams of Puritanism into the Romantic movement of the late 18th century. The latter retains a doctrine of signs in which feeling and taste, vision, imagination, expressiveness, creative energy, and unhappiness with the status quo replace economic success as vindication of the individual soul.

While Campbell, over the last 20 years or so, successfully defended his historiography, the third step (to which he dedicates only one or two pages), is problematic: How does the Romantic Ethic survive the fall of Romanticism? Like Weber for his Protestant Ethic

‘... there is no part in this thesis to suggest that the Romantic Ethic still persists or indeed continues to perform any such vital role.’ (Campbell 2003: 796)

But while Weber can enlist capitalist competition and in particular the labour market as selection mechanism: What selects the romantic consumer over the utilitarian? (after all: the latter as saver and investor will end up with greater economic resources...)

Campbell falls back on the Parsonian nuclear family for an explanation:

‘... middle class families successfully transmit both rational utilitarian and romantic values to their offspring, the father and the mother having a different responsibility in this respect. The “romantic” values are likely to be given expression first probably under the mother’s overall guidance, and the more “puritanical” ones imposed later (when the father becomes more important).’ (1987: 226)

This, at least at first sight, does not look very convincing – mainly because it presupposes a stability in the assignment of “instrumentality” and “expressivity” to “masculinity” and “femininity” that may or may not have been plausible in the 1950s – but certainly no longer is.

I will come back to this, as there actually is some use in a Parsonian reference to the family and the position of the middle class mother and wife.

For now, however, I complete the Weberian parallel by going back to the economy.

With Simmel one can argue that money – having become the central medium of social exchange – is in two ways structurally romantic: in a negative and in a positive way. Money mediates, distances people and things and removes the person from the felt immediacy of more direct traditional relations.

‘as an intermediate link between man and thing,’ Simmel says, money ‘enables man to have, as it were, an abstract existence, a freedom from direct concern with things and from a direct relationship to them, without which our inner nature would not have the same chances of development’ (1990: 469)

This alienation means that, I quote:

‘... our whole life becomes affected by its remoteness from nature, a situation that is reinforced by the money economy and the urban life that is dependent upon it.’ He suggests: ‘the distinctive aesthetic and romantic experience of nature is perhaps possible only through this process.’ (ibid)

So money opens a gap, a space that entices a longing for that which is now no longer directly at hand. But it does not only distance things – it also brings the distanced things within reach. Money encourages daydreaming: everything is possible, everything is available. While creating distant longings, it also is the means of acting on those longings, of realising some of them. As Simmel put it

‘The mere possibility of unlimited uses that money has, or represents, on account of its lack of any content of its own, is manifested in a positive way by the restlessness of money, by its urge to be used, so to speak.’ (1990: 212)

Crucially, while for the money owner possibilities represented by money disappear when spending it on a concrete option, money as such keeps representing those relinquished possibilities as not yet chosen, as still available at a later point in time. While, with every choice we make the horizon of possibilities (against we choose) shrinks, the consumer lives under an impression of a horizon of opportunity that can’t collapse – and that’s a further characteristic of their romantic mentality: what Carl Schmitt dismissed as romantic occasionism. He sees Romanticism marred by an unfulfillable yearning to be and create everything:

‘In commonplace reality, the romantics could not play the role of the ego who creates the world. They preferred the state of eternal becoming and possibilities that are never consummated to the confines of concrete reality. This is because only one of the numerous possibilities is ever realized. In the moment of realization, all of the other infinite possibilities are precluded. A world is destroyed for a narrow-minded reality.’ (Schmitt 1986: 66)

While consumers (following the romantic example) therefore deny or ignore death as limit to infinite choice their opponents tend towards necrophilia. Death as ultimate commitment (for Schmitt in his agonistic concept of politics as well as in both German and French existentialism

– for Sartre the proving pudding always is affirmation of fundamental choice in death...) – the committed, genuine self can only be proven in death. The survivor can always go on to become a traitor. In this respect consumerist ambiguity may be shallow – but at the same time life-affirming. Decisionism, radical choice, fundamental irreversible commitment (religio) stands against indecisionism... or rather against micro-decisionism, radical reversibility of casual choices.

Of course, choice always has irreversible consequences – but in a consumer culture they are systematically denied – hence the Romantic obsession with childhood, and the consumerist obsession with youth: the commitment to an open future – the celebration of openness to the world as infinite potential.

A potential that is not nothing (or “nothing yet”), but a valid aspect of being. As Simmel put it:

“The potentialities of a being are not just hovering intangible prophecies of a future actuality, but something positive, a characteristic presence which exists not only as a candidature to another, future form.” (“Die ‘Möglichkeiten’ eines Wesens sind doch keine ungreifbar über ihm schwebenden Prophezeiungen einer einmal eintretenden Aktualität, sondern schon jetzt etwas durchaus Positives, eine charakteristische Gegenwart, die keineswegs nur in der Anwartschaft auf eine andere, zukünftige Formung besteht.“ Simmel 1919)

Instead of seeing it as an existential threat and closing it off in traditionalisation and regulation, as under an *ancien régime*, the culture of modernity creates, according to Plessner, social arrangements that allow and foster individuality that dwells in potentiality. The vehicle for this development is the existence in roles.

Evidently there is an affinity between the structural romanticism of money and this central element of societal life (*Gesellschaft*) – as Plessner says:

“The distance the role creates, in the life of the family as well as in that of work, occupations, office is the detour to the other which characterises human beings, the mediation of their immediacy.”

Such distance, Plessner argues, is not just necessary to facilitate social contact beyond close community – it also enables or even demands the emergence of a personhood behind and beyond the mask of the role.

In simple cases, and under strict ceremonialisation, a role set may define person and the role functionary may mistake themselves for nothing more than a function in a social organism. Even then, it's difficult to construe oneself as nothing more than that – and once (to apply Merton's terminology) a multiplicity of role-sets are combined into a (always slightly contradictory) status-set autonomous selfhood becomes nearly unavoidable

Selfhood is not submerged under the superficiality of the role existence – superficial role existence precedes authenticity, makes it possible in the first place. As we play a role, accept an existence that is not intrinsically our own but one that conforms to the normative expectations that are part of the role set. It is as if we

‘change our existence’ – thus creating – I quote – a ‘distance to our social existence which can be consoling: Man, the individual never entirely is what he is. As office worker or doctor, politician or shop owner, husband or bachelor, member of his generation and his people, he is

always more than that, a possibility, which does not exhaust itself in such modes of being, cannot be subsumed under them.’ (Plessner 1976: 66)²

Against this background – should we not see the selfhood that is constructed through consumer choices as a similar mask, a development that goes beyond the more formal, clearly defined roles of occupation as the more clearly defined roles in public office, professions and occupations? While they on the one hand are communicated as expression of an underlying authentic self, the reversibility and the fact that the immediacy of the expressed is commercially mediated makes that underlying authenticity a role/mask in its own right.

Ceremonial roles are insufficient in an individualistic culture – they remain necessary! – there is a shift to prestige in a trivialised artistic, creative existence

‘The rigid masks of an arbitrary and interchangeable office, which imparts to the most different personalities the same aura, gives way here to a counter-picture appearing in the unique work brought to permanent form of the person who created it.’ (Plessner 1999: 141)

Such objectification (e.g. as a facebook entry) necessarily creates a distance – and hence establishes a subject that is not to be defined by the sum of their performances. The struggle for prestige as “struggle for a true face” hence still constitutes an “unrealisation” – the true face just as another role. This is not a repetition of the medieval situation where “man never was alone” – it is a performance of a private self that is detached from and thereby constitutes a subjectivity ‘behind’ the private self, thereby realising even further the potential that lies in the anthropologically given eccentric positionality.

This implies a higher degree of integration of self in style, not as alternately bemoaned and celebrated, dissolution into “multiple personalities”. In order to enact ourselves in a convincing way, we need to have distance. As Plessner in his reflection on Huizinga’s theory of play says about the actor:

‘The submersion into our selves – mark of personality – corresponds to an exteriority in relation to our corporeal figure which enables us to make our body the medium of expression (and by this a threat to its authenticity, the authenticity of feeling, which it conveys). The observation that an actor who gives himself over to his genuine feelings in order to make his part convincing loses evidence reflects how our ability to experience refracts on the communicability of our emotions.’ (Plessner 1983: 311)³

² „Daher billigt man unter dem Begriff der Rolle dem Menschen einen Abstand von seiner gesellschaftlichen Existenz zu, der etwas Tröstliches haben kann: der Mensch, der einzelne ist nie ganz das, was er ‚ist‘. Als Angestellter oder Arzt, Politiker oder Kaufmann, als Ehemann oder Junggeselle, als Angehöriger seiner Generation und seines Volkes ist er doch immer ‚mehr‘ als das, eine Möglichkeit, die sich in solchen Daseinsweisen nicht erschöpft und darin nicht aufgeht.“

³ „Der Versenktheit in uns selbst, Kenn-zeichen der Personalität, entspricht eine Exteriorität im Verhältnis zu unserer leibhaften Figur, die es uns ermöglicht, unseren Körper zum Mittel des Ausdrucks (und damit zur Quelle der Gefährdung seiner Echtheit, der Echtheit des Gefühls, das er vermittelt) zu machen. Die bekannte Erfahrung, daß der Schauspieler, welcher sich seinem echten Gefühl überläßt, um eine Rolle überzeugend zu machen, an Evidenz verliert, spiegelt die Gebrochenheit der eigenen Erlebnisfähigkeit an der Mitteilungsfähigkeit unserer Gefühle.“

Consumer culture offers the opportunity to play out the potential to be actors of ourselves. I would venture to claim that, because consumers are so good at that nowadays, that they managed to convince quite a lot of academic researchers of their unmediated genuineness.

Some civilisationist (or pro-*Gesellschaft*) theorists have expressed grave concerns about a culture of emotional expressivity leading to the erosion of distance and formality that – as Plessner argues – is essential in the emergence and perseverance of independent personhood most prominently maybe Richard Sennett – currently most vociferous being Frank Furedi who directly links this to a feminisation of culture.

This concern brings us back to the part the bourgeois wife/mother plays in romantic consumerism. Concerns about feminisation of culture seem to (secretly) rely on the picture Georg Simmel presented of the bourgeois wife in his *Female Culture*. While division of labour and specialisation is the realm of the man, woman resides in an undifferentiated world in which she leads a holistic existence in which intellect and emotion, reality and unrealised potentiality still form a unity.

In one respect Simmel does have a point in that the situation in which the bourgeois mother and wife lived is one that deprives her of (or – from Simmel's point of view spares her) the existence in differentiated role sets, role complexity that, in Rose Laub Coser's terms, is a "seedbed of autonomy".

If consumer culture were a generalisation of such reduced differentiation Furedi may be right that such holism, emotionalism, domesticism are a threat to the autonomous individuality that the existence in formal roles afforded.

I would suggest a different take. The holistic existence Simmel celebrates was already a broken one – and that brokenness is closely related to Romanticism. The legitimacy of the bourgeois marriage is romantic love, love between autonomous and equal subjects. But the result denies women precisely this precondition of romantic love: autonomous personhood. To quote the least likely theorist to confirm this, here's Parsons:

"Put very schematically, a mature woman can love, sexually, only a man who takes his full place in the masculine world, above all its occupational aspect, and who takes responsibility for a family; conversely, the mature man can only love a woman who is really an adult, a full wife to him and mother to his children, and an adequate 'person' in her extrafamilial roles." (1956: 22)

But, of course, there are no real extrafamilial roles for her. So she finds herself in a structurally hypocritical position where the feeling that 'this can't be all' is inevitable. The urge to consume is the urge to 'be more than that'.

I would argue that in this situation the apparent lack was compensated for by imaginary means, commercially mediated worlds beyond which partly made good for the denied role complexity – and partly became a vehicle to the outside, was utilised as a means of building personhood by mediating immediacy, by unrealising the presentation of the "true face".

This is why the novel was so central in the development of consumer culture as they allow the bourgeois subject, in Tenbruck's (1986: 271) words, to 'habitually unlock and extend inner spaces of experience' (my translation mzv). It was only a question of time that this fed into a desire to unlock outer spaces of experience as well. What they take outside is not a replication of the un-detached absorption into a one-dimensional domestic role – it is also not a de-centred

uprooted self; rather, I suggest, it is a skillfully ex-centred privacy that has become a major element of our consumer culture.

Postscript 12th November 2009 : Women's Romanticism...

I am currently reading Kari E. Lokke's *Tracing Women's Romanticism: Gender, History and Transcendence* (London: Routledge 2004). It is mainly an analysis of Germaine de Staël, Mary Shelley, Bettine von Arnim and George Sand who, according to Lokke

all envisage self-transcendence, both artistic and spiritual, as participation in historical process. (2004: 1)

I am not even half through the (slim) book, but I'm already quite enthusiastic about it – this really seems to confirm the point about “female culture” at the heart of romantic consumerism not being one of diffuse emotionality and a collapse of role-distanced autonomous personhood. To the contrary, Lokke shows how in those novels

disappointment with Romantic passionate love becomes a catalyst for the cultivation of heightened political, spiritual and historical awareness (2004: 7)

In the chapter on de Staël Lokke demonstrates how detachment – which women cannot achieve otherwise as they are excluded from public roles – is central for her in a way that calls for a full realisation of the potential that lies in our “eccentric positionality”. Detachment and emotional expression are no detrimental opposites, as

Staël is not advocating insensitivity to or a numbing repression of pain and feeling. Rather, she suggests focusing a clear and self-conscious eye on one's passions and desires, thus acknowledging their power and then, through an act of will, freeing oneself from them. “In a kind of pleasurable abstraction, we rise some distance above ourselves, watching ourselves think and live ... We are now placing ourselves in relation to our own consciousness, instead of fate” (p.168) (2004: 26)⁴

This is the core skill of the romantic consumer – and it is, I think, more than plausible that it is refined if not in reading and writing novels as parallel universe into which the reader can immerse herself (as till today, the majority of readers of novels are women) – but in a way that she can observe herself doing this from an eccentric vantage point.

Lokke also shows that de Staël's *Corinne* – in whom she realises the enthusiastic eccentricity she theorised in the *Influence of Passions* – maintains detachment beyond the formalistic role in a passionate way (along the lines that Plessner saw as the move from ceremonialism to art). Like Diderot, de Staël's *Corinne* rejects the total identification of actor and dramatic character, is all for a double-existence of person and role, but

⁴ Lokke quotes de Staël's 1776 *The Influence of the Passions on the Happiness of Individuals and Nations from An Extraordinary Woman: Selected Writings of Germaine de Staël*, New York: Columbia University Press 1987

it is the doubling of self that results from the exaltation that she believes art alone can inspire rather than the more calculated repetition of coded gesture that characterizes Diderot's pragmatic actors. (2004: 42)

This is important as it is evidence against Simmel's notion that "female culture" is one of non-differentiation. While this is to an extent true (due to the exclusion from occupational role existence), it is also true that in Romantic culture, women have found innovative forms of detachment that may, in the end, prove to be fuller realisations of our anthropological potential than the ceremonial role existence of the modern occupational system. For Simmel, the fact that dramatic acting was, in his time, the most prominent field for female artistic expression, is just further proof of his non-differentiation thesis:

There is no art in which performance and totality of the personality is forged into such close unity (Simmel 1919: 279)⁵

Whereas, in fact, as Plessner points out (I repeat from the quote above)

an actor who gives himself over to his genuine feelings in order to make his part convincing loses evidence.

Finally, I also very much like the way Lokke delineates Romanticism by going back to Schiller's notion of sentimental poetry in which, in her words

the appeal of the sentimental or the sublime is its ineffability which is that of the infinitely receding horizon (2004: 19)

... i.e. the occasionism Schmitt bemoans... (and that escaped Campbell's attention).

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⁵ "Es gibt keine Kunst, in der die Leistung und die Totalität der Persönlichkeit zu so enger Einheit verbunden sind."

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