



Beyond the “Goods Life”: Mass Consumerism, Conflict, and the Latchkey-Kid

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I learned at an early age that what you have in your toy chest is a reflection of what your worth in society amounts to. At five years old (probably four, but I am being conservative) I knew that having “real” Barbie dolls, along with their “authentic” accessories, was the ticket to being cool. Who is cool at five years old? Well, no one really, but when you are five, you just want to fit in. When you are a five year old **latchkey-kid**, and you live in low-income housing (otherwise known as Section Eight, or subsidized housing) because you are below the **poverty-line**, you will do or attempt to do whatever it takes to be liked and accepted by your peers. This ticket of material coolness is a ticket to **power** and to most, power equals acceptance.

The term latchkey-kid is usually used in reference to children who are frequently left alone. Although I was often alone, and without my mother around, I was never left alone at home when I was five. I use the term more so because when I was around five or six years old and until I was around eight, I attended a large day-care/educational facility that was known as Latchkey. This facility was created for children of

low-income and single-parent households, both of which I was a part of and were known to everyone. I went there on a bus in the morning before school and then I went back when school ended. My mom would pick me up after work.

One would be considered living in a state of poverty if one could not live an average or normal life without some kind of financial assistance. Financial assistance, usually from the government, could consist of housing, food (food stamps or food-basket programs), a fuel or utility program (state funded fuel assistance), or educational or child-care (in my case, Latchkey). Essentially, at five years of age, I learned that there are certain “rules” and goals associated with being a normal or average member of society. These rules and goals allow and encourage a large portion of the American population to conform, or attempt to conform, in an effort to just fit in. Living in an “acceptable” neighborhood, wearing the “right clothes,” having the “good” toys are only some of the rules that govern how one would fit in (particularly at five years of age). Fit in with whom or with what, you may ask. The idea is just that: to simply fit. Our society exists before we arrive and it will exist after we leave, but being able to fit within it is what we tend to struggle for.

At five, while I was dreaming of fitting in I was falling under the spell of mass consumerism, notorious for causing social division and conflict. Most of my days were spent asking Santa for the “real” Barbie Dream House—though he left the “Colorform” version under the tree. I was in grooming, so to speak, and already carrying out what Erving Goffman calls **impression management** (Wallace & Wolf, 230)—a concept derived from his **dramaturgical** theory of **symbolic interaction** which compares everyday life events to a theatrical setting. Goffman theorizes that we seek to control the reaction others have of us. He describes our lives in terms of concepts that evoke images of a stage, by relating our ev-

everyday lives to front and back regions (Wallace & Wolf, 230). Particularly, my toys and surroundings would fall into the category of **front region** (later in life these items would be my car, my computer, and my iPod). This front region is like the stage, where we are seen and judged. Our peers can decide if we are worthy by simply watching us perform. When Goffman refers to the **back region**, he is referring to the area in which we are ourselves, or where we are not in need of props and assistance. When I was five, and wishing for the Barbie Dream House to appear beneath our Christmas tree, I believed that it had the power of making me fit in and making others accept me, despite my family's circumstances. I believed that the "Colorform" version would have the exact opposite effect, by forcing everyone to see what I was trying to hide and allowing direct access to the back region, where the "truth" was.

In "My Image Struggles in Capitalist Society" (2003), Anna Schlosser describes a similar time in her life when she struggled to gain acceptance in a world made up of "beautiful" people. Schlosser describes how our society has "shaped [her] and influenced the way [she] perceive[s]" herself" (Schlosser, 34). In reference to impression management, Goffman "shows us how, in the drama of everyday life, individuals manage to look good when they present themselves to others at home, school, work, neighborhood, and in other microinteractive settings" (Wallace & Wolf, 231). We make choices based on immediate rewards and perceived approval without taking into consideration the fact that we are perpetuating negative consequences for our society. The part of this that we easily forget is that we perpetuate this cycle which in turn perpetuates a **social dilemma**.

Throughout our lives our social reality appears to be structured the way it is for eternity. "Why is this?" is the question posed by **phenomenological sociologists**, however. The purpose of this questioning is

to understand "the commonsense reality" occupied by "ordinary people" from the perspective of the participant, or "acting subject" (Farganis, 303). As Farganis describes well, "everyday life... is lived in this social reality, and people share a culture, a language, and a set of meaning structures that allow them to negotiate their everyday lives... [we] come to understand [our] social world as a natural order... it exists prior to [our] emergence... and will exist after [we] depart" (Farganis, 303).

In the film *Twelve Angry Men*, several of the characters are obviously out of their element when put in the jury room with each other. Twelve men are brought together to decide whether or not a young man is guilty of killing his father in cold blood. Each man is completely out of his natural environment, where there would be some sort of control to be had. In essence, their natural stage is tipped on its head and nothing is what it seems. The interesting thing is that even though everything about the characters' predicament is new and out of the ordinary, they all know how to behave and what they are there to do. They just know. Harold Garfinkel's Ethnomethodological studies of jurors, as described by Wallace and Wolf, tells it best when he writes: "jurors [know] what [to do] in doing the work of jurors." Phenomenologists want to know how this taken-for-granted knowledge is socially constructed, maintained, and internalized.

Symbolic interactionism studies how human interactions take place via creation and use of symbols whose meanings are influenced by the ever-changing scripts of social situations. Can other theories be interpreted in terms of the theatrical stage symbolism? Could **Functionalism**, for instance, be described as a stage-play made up of separately acting parts that when put together, are supposed to tell the full story of a supposedly functioning society as a whole? Or, can phenomenology be also defined in terms of the stage metaphor: how

we play out taken-for-granted scripts in everyday life, occupying roles and acting out our lives?

Consumerism is one of such everyday scripts we play in our lives. It is defined as the “effects of equating personal happiness with purchasing material possessions and consumption” (Consumerism, 1). Consumption is defined as the “selection, adoption, use, disposal and recycling of goods and services” (Consumption, 1). Consumerism, for the most part, has become an affliction of sorts, and it promotes a **materialistic lifestyle**. This materialistic lifestyle is part of our stage. It is made up of our clothes, food (yes, food can fall into this category, for we have food markets that are *cool* to go to), homes, cars, gadgets, vacations choices—the list can go on and on. Consumerism affects everyone, no matter how much someone may deny it; however, the extent of its effect depend on the individual. Like many of my friends and acquaintances, I was a victim early in life, and it seems as though I will always be in its grip.

In *The Big One*, Michael Moore’s documentary chronicle of his tour for publicizing his book, *Downsize This: Random Threats from an Unarmed American*, we see firsthand that our society is very materialistic. Our demand for items such as Nike sneakers and clothing is so large that we allow factories to employ children, some only twelve or fourteen years of age (after the film was released, Nike created a policy that would not allow their factories to employ children under the age of 18). Our demand for Nike products became so large that the Nike Corporation found cheaper avenues to keep up, regardless of the fact that these cheaper avenues were morally questionable. The immoral practices of Nike (and other corporations) are probably not limited to what was shown in the movie, and it is safe to say that Nike is still as *big* and powerful as it ever was.

I am now nearing my thirty-second

birthday, I work for a large corporation in Boston and I live just on the outskirts of the city limits (the limits of Boston proper that is, for I am still within the metro area...the cost of my rent reminds me of this everyday). I am relatively happy; however, I foster a grand illusion that I am living the “good life” that I want, even though I secretly wish everyday that I had made better choices. I have quite a bit of debt which is the result of wanting the best (I must point out that this notion of the *best* is relative, for my idea of it is in relation to my opinion and those of my friends and peers) and living paycheck to paycheck is the norm for me. I am not able to have a significant savings account because there is always something to buy that would make my illusion more convincing. I am trapped by this behavior, for in the short term, the rewards are great.

I am able to convince others that I am hip, cool and in control. James Farganis, when describing George Homans’ Exchange Theory writes, “approval or recognition, are attendant on certain behaviors. When these behaviors are rewarded, an individual is likely to repeat them in similar situations.” My behavior not only makes me hip, cool and in control, it also gives me power. L. M. Damian, in his essay “Conspicuous Conflict” (2002), writes,

the human race has...the ability to manipulate its environment for its own benefit...this ability gives...a feeling of power. The more easily [and] effectively...the manipulating, the greater the euphoria and prestige they gain. (Damian, 9)

Our society, with lots of help from ourselves, promotes an environment that connects those that *have* as being equal to those with power. Damian writes:

There has been an underlying dogma in many ideas about life,

society, and politics that glorifies power and prestige, urges everybody to acquire them, and promotes inequality. People seek political influence over others, more property than they need [and] popularity for the sake of being seen as an important figure ... the ideology that power and prestige bring superiority, a presumably desirable end, brings about constant conflict ... (Damian, 9)

My version of the “good life” would be to put myself in a position where I did not have to have roommates, possibly own my own home, and rid myself of all debt. Unfortunately, I am too wrapped up in allowing my friends and family to think that I am happy the way everything is. In reference to **exchange of social rewards**, Farganis writes that “most human pleasures have their roots in social life. Whether we think of love or power, professional recognition or sociable companionship, the comforts of family life or the challenge of competitive sports, the gratifications experienced by individuals are contingent on actions of others” (Farganis, 267). We find ourselves happy because of our choices; however it is ultimately the reaction we get from those around us that is the most gratifying. One may volunteer with a local community center or at a charity event, but it is the reaction from friends and family that makes the volunteerism worth while. This notion is not unlike Goffman’s concept of a dramaturgy where society is compared to acting on a stage. On this stage we are supposedly all in control of how we are reacted to.

In some ways, the basic notion of **Conflict Theory**, the idea that “ultimately it is coercion rather than consensus that maintains social order” (Farganis, 219), is at work in the complexities of consumerism—as observed above by Damian. Realistically, consumerism works and our current collective society seems to maintain a balance of

sorts; however coercion is fundamentally the foundation. I may have wanted a Barbie Dream House because it simply looked appealing in those Saturday morning commercials that ran while I was watching cartoons, yet it would not have hit that proverbial tipping point if the masterminds behind the marketing did not do their job. I am sure I wanted it more because Lisa, the girl who lived about a block and a half down the street (who was in the same **socioeconomic** class as I, though her mother didn’t work) had not one, but two Barbie Dream Houses and every accessory imaginable. In the end I never got my five-year-old hands on one, but I did find the Barbie RV under the tree in 1980. I can not even put into words the feeling of power that RV gave me. I believe I was the only kid on the block to have one, so all of the other “Barbies” wanted to go on Barbie vacations at my house (much to the chagrin of Lisa).

When I was five it was Barbies, when I was 12 it was Benetton sweaters, Esprit bags and cosmetics from the counter at Jordan Marsh (which became Macy’s when it was eaten up by the conglomerate known as the Federated Department Stores). I remember my mom saving extra money so she could afford to make me at least a little bit happy. Maybe she was feeling the guilt for sending me to Latchkey when I was younger. My grandmother always pulled through and every Christmas and birthday gift from her was something that I knew would make me “cool.” Rational Choice theories shed much light on this situation, for my mother decided to work a little overtime and save a little extra cash, and my grandmother would just charge everything and worry about it later. The goals were the same; however, the most efficient means for accomplishing them were different. The **principles of rationality** are at work in both situations, however different they may be. Individuals “repeat rewarding actions; respond to stimuli associated with such rewards and act on the basis of the val-

ues they attach ..." (Wallace & Wolf, 308). My mother and grandmother were behaving in ways they perceived to be rational, with the same goal in mind: my happiness.

The "trickle down effect," or in this case, "trickle up effect" (my needs and desires making those who care about me succumb to the effects), is a great example of the effects of consumerism. Society is laid out in such a way that everything creates a tipping point of sorts. When that happens, we all ask how high we are supposed to jump—we follow suit like robots. For many, fitting is a great illustration of Merton's notion of **anomie**—"Discontinuity between cultural goals and the legitimate means for reaching them." The concept of "fitting in" is a legitimate goal that we may possess (we, as in collectively), however reasonable means for reaching this goal is sometimes so unattainable.

Affluenza, a film put out by PBS, documents America's dedication and tireless search for a high **standard of living** that is generally far beyond our resources. This film is a great way to view from an outsider's standpoint our almost fruitless chase of the American dream (not by everyone, but a large percentage of Americans) and the material items that come along with it. We have in some ways become addicted to this quest because along the way we find more ways to fit in. These ways are for the most part unattainable without exhausting ourselves while working to pay off the high costs. We no longer consume things out of a need of necessity, but instead we consume out of a need for control over our perceived affluence (perceived by others, not ourselves). We shop for luxury items we cannot afford by buying them on credit and then we work overtime to pay off the bills (with interest). *Affluenza* also portrays well Merton's theory of **deviance**, for we (collectively) have these goals that are for the most part inaccessible. The result of our feverish efforts to have the newest and best of everything (car, house, skin, teeth ... the list

is endless) has become so obsessive that many individuals and families spend a lifetime trying to get out of debt (from charging on credit and accruing interest far beyond our means); or a lifetime paying the price for choices that were made in an attempt to reach the unattainable. Merton represented the different ways we can adapt to or deviate from our situation: **conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism** and **rebellion** (Wallace & Wolf, 56). We have many choices than simple conformity.

As I mentioned before, I am nearing my thirty second birthday and I can say, without hesitation or doubt, that after falling victim to the clutches of consumerism and the ways in which we mass produce and waste, I have not yet been able to crawl out from under the spell. **Capitalism** is alive and well in my brain and I am aware of it; but I am paralyzed by it. I have to use the best shampoo, for it must be good if it is expensive, right? I must buy organic so my body is being treated better. I am aging, so I must purchase the best skin cream for my face. There are so many things that I must do, regardless of the cost.

It is a struggle, R. F. A. writes in "The Capitalist's Cuckoo's Nest" (2002). R. F. A. is on the mark when he writes, "a conflict many people ... face is the struggle between conforming to society's standards or rebelling against them. There is a standard display of what a **modern** individual in America is" (R.F.A., 1). Add to that my mind numbing trials of being a single woman in a larger than life city. Well, again, I am paralyzed. The funny thing is: I have yet to find the Barbie Dream House under my tree.

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