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Consumption as pedagogy of simulation

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# Consumption as pedagogy of simulation

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## Abstract

This paper highlights the still actual aspects of post-structuralist consumption analysis and in particular that of Baudrillard and Bourdieu. I analyze the today world of consumption through this theoretical lens. The aim is not to deny that the consumer has an active role in the sense creation, that the meanings of consumption acts are variable or that, in addition to the enunciator, an enunciatee and a socio-cultural context come into play. But this paper rather argues that there are still valid reasons to recover a partially deterministic vision between the social position (and not the classes) and, this is the novelty of the paper, the mode of signification (and not the goods/services or their constellations, as in the historical Bourdieu's map). I identify various empirical facts of this connection between social structure and consumption. The present work argues that consumption has been and is a pedagogy of simulation (defined as the manipulation of a social meaning) and it is precisely in this sense that it spread to other fields, from the political positions on social issues to the presentation of the self in every day life. Finally, the aim of the paper is to analyze the social consequences of consumption as a language and the symbolic dimension this entails nowadays.

**Keywords**— *Sociology of consumption, post-structuralism, simulation, ideology, symbolic value.* **JEL Classification Codes:** A12, Z13

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# 1 Introduction

Is widely recognized in the sociology of consumption that the consumer plays an active role in the processes of sense creation and that lifestyles cut across the social hierarchy. Differences in consumption practices are related not only to the vertical but also to the horizontal differences in society. The meanings of goods and services are mobile and in the signification process both the socio-cultural context where communication takes place and the semantic encyclopedias of the individuals or groups involved come into play. There exists an ordinary consumption with no consumers' meaning (Gronow and Warde (2001)). This does not mean that in some cases the modalities of this consumption are not classificatory and classifiable. For instance Alan Ward pointed out (Warde (2015)) that households deploy electricity, oil and other environmentally problematic commodities without reflection. This is true and two observations deserve to be made in this regard: in Western societies this kind of consumption entered an ethical dimension. Secondly, the way of consuming certain commodities is in any case indicative of the type of culture and community one lives in, trivially: running water is taken for granted in some areas of the world and not in others, therefore the way a resource is used is roughly linked the type of society using it. In this work when I speak of consumption I always and only mean it as a communication system. Any consumption where the consumer gives absolutely no meaning, conscious or unconscious, to the act (not even that of pure functionality) will remain outside the analysis. Some studies highlight psychological aspects of compulsion in consumption act (Lejoyeux and Weinstein (2010)), others theorize a form of cognitive dissonance the subject defends himself from, through the coherence and symphony of the meanings of goods; these psychological hypotheses too will remain out of the analysis. The starting hypothesis is sociological-semiotic, that is to say: in order to become an object of consumption a good must become sign. This does not mean that it has a unique meaning, but that an operation of signification or representation from an human being is required to speak about consumption in our western societies.

Before starting to discuss the central issue of the article, some disclaimers taking into account the contribution of the most recent theories, in particular semiotic and socio-semiotic, are necessary. Consumption is a complex field, it is hard to develop a theory including every concrete possibility about it; for various reasons that I will quickly try to report. In consumption, both the individual psychology and the empirical practices of the subjects come into play (Codeluppi (1993)).

Texts (consumer goods/services) and social contexts do not pre-exist each other but are defined simultaneously and interacting with each other. Each good/service does not have one and only one meaning and the analogy with Saussurian linguistics is not entirely explanatory, in fact in all possible social relations processes of construction of meanings occur with at least a triadic logic, which includes the product, the individual and the social relational context (Semprini (1996)). Therefore, even an institutionally imposed meaning on a good or a constellation of goods, is continuously called into question in every

relationship (Solomon and Assael (1987)).

The meanings move not only top-bottom, that is, from the social constituted culture to the good, and then from the good to the consumer (as argued by G. McCracken (1986)), but also in the opposite direction; in other words culture is not a finished product, it is also created through the texts consumer goods) that are both creations and creators of the social. Thus the goods' signification is unstable for various reasons, including the fact that the consumer is both passive receiver and active constructor of these texts. In consumption conscious and unconscious elements intertwine, speakable meanings (the subject is able to express them linguistically), manipulated meanings and implicit meanings, which I propose here to call representations. That is, those meanings that the subject is not able to express linguistically, but uses and manipulates. Finally there is the structural aspect of consumption as language: although every good is a bearer of meaning in fact, there are no autonomous meanings: *"the meaning lies in the relations between all goods, just as music is in the relations delimited by sounds and not in a single note"* (Douglas and Isherwood (2021)).

Consumption is a social activity comparable to the links of kinship and goods' circulation in archaic societies; to the media, the formation of opinions on social issues and other ways of meaning circulation in our societies. In our secularized and rationalized western ideology, consumption has been functionalized, something that at the micro level manifests in the individual behavior of using the use value as an alibi for the sign one. And more generally in the tendency to hide or relegate in the untold all the aristocratic logic of the game and privilege behind consumer goods as signs. The democratic principles of equality and the puritan ethic of work require that only the functionality of goods be highlighted, even when these circulate (and sometimes have their main social function as signs). In a sense, the circulation of goods under this form of value is the ghost of the aristocratic societies of the past.

After this operation of concealment of the sign value and the continuous raising of the use one, consumption does not seem to have such a large social function, but as Douglas and Isherwood (2021) argue, confronting Levi-Strauss: *"the meanings transmitted along the goods channel are an integral part of the meanings that we find in the channels of kinship and mythology; All three fall under the general concern of controlling information."*<sup>2</sup> *Only if they are analyzed together can they reveal their meanings to cultural anthropology"*

Semprini (1996), basing on the work of Umberto Eco, argues that there are two types of pre-existing knowledge in consumers: a dictionary of isolated terms and a semantic encyclopedia of relationships between terms. Therefore, in a specific situation the semantic

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<sup>2</sup>Hoping that conspiracy theorists and anti-conspiracy theorists will beware from giving a specific *meaning* to these words of Isherwood. Here the author refers to the various ways the most disparate societies in time and space have built systems of collective signification, for example through myths, the circulation of "precious" goods and women, as Levi-Strauss showed. In this sense Isherwood writes *"control the information"* and not in the trivial sense this formula is used today.

baggage of the individual and the textual identity of the product create actually two discursive strategies. The first is that one of the consumer, which also follows from his ideas on the discursive strategy of the product itself in a certain context. The latter for the socio-semiotic theory is not a strategy purely elaborated by the object (as in Baudrillard's metaphysics), but is elaborated by advertisers, agents, salesmen, friends and other individuals who interact with the consumer. This strategy can also be structured according to the assumptions made by the consumer. So there is circularity and collaboration in the creation and modification of the social culture.

I add that the individual can manipulate the meaning for his own purposes, there may be dissonance between the semantic encyclopedias of the empirical issuer and the empirical recipient or linearity and accuracy of the communication. This asymmetry can also exist between the company that wants to advertise itself and some consumers. This asymmetry is potentially a source of simplification of the language used, therefore of the induced signification, since it must address to a wider audience as possible.

The Birmingham school and cultural studies first conceived the consumer good as a text, that is, as a process of construction of the sense where interact: the meaning of the speaker, a range of meanings that can be activated (and/or nuances of meanings) undaunted in the goods and the meaning of the listener. According to Hall (2007), as he writes in a famous article, there can be various decoding ways or levels: dominant-hegemonic, where the receiver decodes the message through the code used by the issuer. Traded: the receiver does not discuss the value system linked to the issuer's code, but declines it in his own way in various practical situations. Opposition: the receiver understands the signification induced by the issuer's code, but redefines its form within an alternative frame.

An important contribution this article starts from is the Vanni Codeluppi scheme (Codeluppi (2005), pg. 265). It takes into account the socio-cultural context, the consumer text, the issuer and the empirical recipient and two abstract roles that represent them "symbolically": the enunciator and the enunciatory. To which a possible world represented through the consumer text is added. I want to observe, in this regard, that the internal diagram of its scheme may be interpreted as the definition of simulation in Baudrillard; it is the simulation declined in consumption or in other words, consumption as a simulation field.

It must be recognized that consumption is a communication mechanism in addition to the others, therefore can be considered an enrichment of the modes of expression, even in the neo-capitalistic phase that characterized the end of the second half of the twentieth century. It's a medium that oils the wheels of social interaction, so the elements that I will highlight in this work do not want to be the basis for a negative value judgment on consumption as a whole, but highlight its links with the social structure and solicit a certain type of analysis also bringing out the ideological aspects and symbolic violence inherent in this code.

It is for sure a communication mechanism in addition to others already operating in the constituted culture; at the same time it is also an expressive code that can deprive the subject of the ability to create its own one, with its own symbolic aspects, as we will see later.

Among other things, the purchase choices can be coordinated and oriented towards political purposes: Cooperatives, consumer associations for product quality and fair trade, specific campaigns of boycott for some political purpose and also anti-globalization movements contesting the legitimacy of capitalistic order (for a detailed review see Trentmann (2012)). So, surely consumption is a mean of communication that provides the expressive possibilities of individuals and groups from some points of view, or better, on a certain ground.

I hope I have sufficiently argued, though not exhaustively, why it is difficult if not impossible to construct a general theory of consumption not losing explanatory power in various concrete situations.

Indeed, this paper does not claim to create a general theory of consumption, but to develop some arguments in favor of the recovery of a certain sociological approach of post-structuralist mold, linking consumption and social structure. The basic idea this work moves from is that each individual or group of the social space defined by the forms of capital identified by Bourdieu, has a different way of meaning various things (status, prestige, phallic, elegance, precise style, healthy, green, functionality and so on). Two individuals in different points of the social space delimited by cultural, economic, symbolic and social capital, can mean a precise thing (for example, prestige) also through the same object, but in different ways. So it is the way of signification that here I take as a relational variable with respect to the social class one belongs to and not the goods/services consumed.

In this introduction I try to clarify what is the difference between sign and symbol, because it is fundamental to understand what I mean about consumption in the rest of the paper. A classic example is the difference between the wedding ring (it is a symbol, even if its uses as a sign cannot be excluded) and any ring worn on the finger (a sign).

*Symbol* literally means "put together", two different parts that, as joined together, have a meaning. In ancient Greek *symbolon* was the card of *hospitalitatis* or recognition used by two families or two cities as a cork of the signed pact, was evidence of the agreement reached (indeed another meaning of the word is "agreement"). The ambiguity between sign and symbol arises from the fact that both seem to be something that stands in place of something else, something that "means" something else. But as Hegel says in the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences: *"the difference lies in the fact that between the sign and what it represents there is indifference and conventionality: the sign can also recall the thing it must indicate (for example in the figure of a road sign), but fundamentally it is something different from the content it expresses. The strength of the symbol instead depends on the fact that it has appearance and content that are in analogy with what it wants to symbolize and is ambivalent outside the relationship it represents."* Hegel (2010)

The logic behind the symbol is a logic of ambivalence, the symbol is transcendental, it creates a new meaning only if linked to a relationship; and it is charged with emotion, but the logic behind the symbol is always that one of reversibility (of values and of the social order) and ambivalence. While the one behind the sign is a logic of difference, it is



experiential. In primitive societies the symbol could not be defined by the logic of reason, there was just a linguistic impossibility that corresponds to the impossibility of reason to speak without replacing the very source of its language.

Corbin (2014) states that *"The symbol is not an artificially constructed sign, but is what spontaneously opens in the soul to announce something that cannot be expressed otherwise"*. Jung instead tries to explain this difference by saying: *"the sign has a fixed meaning, being an abbreviation (conventional) that stands for a known thing or is a reference to that same thing, instead, the symbol indicates a polysemic content, undefined and unconventional, it has many similar variants, and the more it has at its disposal, the more complete and appropriate is the image that outlines its subject"*(Jung (1980)). The symbol is alive for Jung only as long as it maintains this characteristic, it represents tension between opposites, between conscious and unconscious, between known and unknown, at the moment when the symbol gives birth to its meaning, dies and becomes a sign. Lévi-Strauss and Marcel Mauss also support the irreducibility of the symbol to the sign. Among some primitive peoples, in fact, the use of the word "mana" means force (magic, in the sense we need to understand it), but also action or quality, it can be both verb, noun and adjective, because it is pure form, it is symbol, and as such can assume any content.

Umberto Eco in Eco (2016) proposes *"to define as a sign all that, on the basis of a previously accepted social convention, can be understood as something that is in place of something else, while symbols refer to something more, a content that expands"*. Thus both the recipient and the accepted social convention condition the understanding of the sign, which varies from culture to culture. While symbols enlarge the vision instead of defining it. They have the ability to put together, to bring together distant elements in a new characterizing form, unique and source of new meanings, that is, they have a transcendental function. Stevens (2002) writes: *"According to Jung a symbol transmits something more and different from itself that eludes our present knowledge and it is precisely to this extent that it owes its charm and its power. As soon as its conscious and unconscious elements are united, it is as if a creative energy flows between them, releasing a sudden perception of meaning, a flash of intuition"*. The concept of *mother* is a good example to better explain the difference between sign and symbol: as a sign is the person who gave birth to us and raised us, but as a symbol recalls the experiences (sweetness, love or rejection) lived with his mother. Motherhood understood as the ability to generate and raise, the mother that all (?) have had. And also the great mother, understood as the creative and regenerative capacity of nature and man. In this sense the symbol of the mother reunites the emotions to those of other human beings, in fact in Jung the symbol has an archetypal value. I decline now in consumption this difference, in any case is important to clarify that the ambivalence is crucial as it distinguishes the symbol from the sign.

Symbolic exchange has always existed, but in primitive societies it was characterized by the disappearance of the object itself, only the relationship between the two or more individuals involved mattered. This symbolic exchange under capitalism has evolved into

an intransitive object-sign, that is, it no longer counts the relationship and no longer defines any relationship, is simply an object whose differential value compared to all other objects is encoded as an expression of who you are, of your own identity and thus of the differences between you (or your group) and the others, but it does not presuppose any concrete relationship between those who exchange the meaning. The fundamental difference between the sign value and the symbolic value is entirely in this intransitivity and in this pre-codified relationship that characterizes the object sign. The symbolic object (which may be the traditional domestic object, craft and ritual) is the mediator of the relationship, the relationship itself refers to what the object means, to a part of the concrete experience (a concrete relationship). The sign object instead is intransitive, it is limited to designating the place of an empty relationship (the messages sent through consumer goods). The object-sign is a way of presenting to the others and understanding the others in the absence of a concrete relationship with them. The symbolic object is abolished in the exchange, the sign object designates exchange, it codifies the social relation and therefore abolishes it. So consumption conceived as signs exchange is one of the ways of depriving the individual of his own symbolic means of expression, of providing individuals with something that only at a first stage may seem just a meaning, but actually it is also a code.

Symbolic exchange responds to a logic of ambivalence because the object has no value in itself, regardless of the relationship it represents, while in contemporary consumption in most cases objects are signs, that is, they respond to the logic of difference (compared to all other sign objects).

In this sense, the polyvalence of consumer objects and the activity of the consumer in constructing meaning is not different from the equivalence. That is, the postmodern vision of a range of activatable meanings and of many other variables in attributing meanings in consumption remains still opposite to the ambivalence of the symbolic object. In other words: both equivalence and polyvalence can be opposed to ambivalence, since there are forces (social, psychological and so on) that condition and conventionalize the interpretation. Baudrillard tries to use the ambivalence of the symbolic as a means to solve the equations of meaning that characterize the object sign in modern society. In trying to establish a parallel with Marx's criticism of exchange value as code of equivalence between commodities, Baudrillard basically extends this criticism to the signification field and integrates Marx with Saussure.

It must be said that from so called *cultural turn* (Birmingham school) onwards, but in particular with the socio-semiotic approach, it has been theorized (explicitly or implicitly) that there is a mix between symbolic logic and sign logic. In the sense that the object itself may have a differential value compared to other objects, but then this value is renegotiated in every concrete social situation where at least two subjects (therefore a relationship) and a socio-cultural context come into play. This is true, but one wonders how much of this relationship is defined by the object sign in itself, that is, by its differential value with the other objects and how much does it define the value of the object itself starting from the



uncertainty on the value? Uncertainty typical of symbolic ambivalence? In other words: is it more the codified sign object that designates the relations between men in our society, or the relations between men that define the value of an object in itself ambivalent? I, as it is clear from this paper, am more for the first hypothesis, I believe more in the power of the object on man than vice versa. Or rather, under capitalism I see consumption as an ideology precisely because of this operation it carries out on society. As a regulator of relationships between men.

If objects as signs act as regulators of relationships between men, a person who socializes does nothing but learn to manage the code of differences that he finds in society as a rule. The symbolic aspects disappear from the moment when (and in all the fields in which) the subject (or groups) do not have the strength to reconsider the "socialization" encoded in the sign objects.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGP-Tlyyyaw>. The video of course must be seen net of the spectacularization that a reality show needs to sell itself, and is just a trivial example of the mix job-consumption-communication. In this sense the present paper is fully in the "materialistic" tradition, that is, in the idea that the true materiality of the commodity (as for Marx) consists in its *form*, which is always that one of a social relationship, while all our idealism converges towards an objective materiality (a use value) of the goods and services, discourse of the "reality", which as a matter of fact is that one of the imaginary (it doesn't take much to prove that people use objects as signs). Umberto Eco, however, spoke of *symbolic way* to make it clear that every phenomenon (consumer's act) can actually be declined both as a sign and as a symbol.

Bourdieu follows a more rigorous method, suited to an academic environment compared to Baurdillard. He strives to identify the relations of domination involved in the judgement of tastes, relating the social position defined by various types of capital with consumption and the micro-languages related to them. The types of capital that enter his analysis, in addition to the economic one, are: cultural (the level of education of the person and of his family), symbolic (the symbolic power held over others), social (the set of social connections, chosen or obliged, the social network). The distribution in the social space takes place both as a function of the total amount of capital (first level) and as a function of its inner composition (second level), since the types of capital are interdependent and people are able to put in place conversion strategies between forms of capital.

Bourdieu has given rise to a whole series of empirical studies relating consumption practices and social structure. His *habitus* concept encloses a series of unconscious predisposition of judgment of taste, meanings and representations. He defines it as "*ability to produce classifiable practices and works, and ability to evaluate and distinguish these practices and products*", Bourdieu (1987), p. 207. In short, it constitutes the taste through which one builds a social imaginary and a lifestyle. "*More generally, the space of the positions retracts into a space of the positions taken through the space of the dispositions (or habitus); In other words, the system of differential deviations defining the different positions in the two main dimensions of the social area (economic and cultural capital) corresponds to a*

*system of differential deviations in the properties of agent (or agents), that is to say, in the practices and possessions. To each class of positions corresponds a class of habitus (or tastes) produced by the social conditioning associated with the corresponding condition and, through these habitus and their generative abilities, a systematic set of goods and properties shared by an affinity of style”* (Bourdieu (2000), 2000: p. 20). The habitus therefore concerns both the structured dimension, since it generates and organizes individual or group’s practices and representations, and the structuring dimension, delimiting the field of possibilities of social thought and therefore the field of action. According to Bourdieu *“The taste, propensity and aptitude for the appropriation (material and/or symbolic) of a certain class of classifying and classifying objects and practices, constitutes the generative formula that is at the origin of the lifestyle: unitary set of distinctive preferences, that in the particular logic of each of the symbolic subdivisions: furniture, clothing, language or physical hexis manifest the same expressive intention”* (Bourdieu (1987): p. 178). Therefore consumption concerns the propensity towards “aesthetic” (kantian/elitarian and non kantian/popular) attitudes, which function as social strategies or tactics for the definition of the status with a dual purpose: maintaining the position and maintaining the distance between and within groups. Indeed the aesthetic features of the objects depend not only on the connotations conferred by the manufacturer, but on the possibility of the user to adapt to the class rules (and this classism and aesthetic are old conceptions for sure, as many scholars wrote) that in a certain historical- cultural context discriminate what is artistic (for instance) from what is not, and so on and so forth for other meanings (what is alternative and what is not). Bourdieu writes *“Objects, even when they are industrial products, are not objective in the sense that this term generally has, that is, independent of the interests and tastes of those who observe them, and do not impose at all the evidence of a universal and unanimously accepted sense”* Bourdieu (1987). From this vision the idea of a stratified society comes out, but also hierarchized of course, characterized by the struggle for the appropriation of cultural and economic goods as distinctive signs. The elites, compared to the subordinate classes, have the power to found the illusion of a natural distinction, associating to their habitus an idea of superiority that corresponds nothing but to their way of being in society. The ruling class re-establishes the legitimacy of the domination of economic, social and cultural capital. It is therefore in this class that the change of the consumption system, its rules as language and the transgression of the latter, must be sought, when the signs of distinction are threatened by disclosure and vulgarization. “Separate holders” are opposed to “pretentious pretenders”: the middle classes, who seek to distinguish themselves from the popular classes. The true privilege of the elites in Bourdieu, however, is the following: only this class able to produce the models, the middle classes are uncertain about the rules and how to conform to them. And thus suffer the symbolic violence of the code. Here I find a profound analogy with Baudrillard’s thought which indicated exactly the same thing as far as the true discriminator is that the subalterns are never sure about how to comply with the rules of the game. In these two authors, therefore, the semblance of a growing democratization through consumption is

aimed at mystifying and hiding the socio-economic and cultural differences that constitute the social dimension.

Despite the various dimensions involved Bourdieu discusses also the importance of the relationship between forms of capital, what it calls “conversion strategies”. This formula means that those with greater economic capital have more access to the other two forms of capital, and of course, due to a kind of circularity, have greater possibility of converting the latter into economic capital. The subcodes that govern the way of being, owning and using objects (or services) contribute to build the representations of the world by a given social group both at the conscious level and at the unconscious one, so these social groups are coherent with the distinctive logic of the society of capital.

As Crespi says *“If analyzed in depth, the theory of Bourdieu appears, therefore, in the end as a more sophisticated version of the structuralist determinism of the Marxian type: the action, in fact, has, in this theory, a subordinate position, how much it is limited to actualizing objective cultural schemes having their ultimate root in the structure of class”*. (F.crespi, manuale di sociologia della cultura 2003: p.139).

For sure this determinism is no more actual, but we could admit that the tactical behavior and the relevant forms of capital are still there, in actual consumption.

The post-structuralism applied to consumption was not a prerogative of Bourdieu and Baudrillard. Also authors such as Appandurai, Sam Friedman, the strand of cultural studies (partially, Barthes, Gottdiener and others applied its concepts to consumption. I focus on these two first of all to perform a deepened analysis and not an overview, secondly they are the authors who I think have the most urgent implications to recover if we want to understand consumption today.

The next section is a brief literature review of the two authors, their criticisms and literature that took up the post-structuralist vision. In section three I deepen the reasons why the deterministic aspects (that surely does not concern all the consumption acts) between social structure and ways of signification in consumption may lead to important reflections and studies. In other words, it is a section devoted to the reasons why it is important to recover these two French authors and the consequences that this operation can bring in terms of explanatory power. Here are some: there are still forms of trickle down à la Simmel, i.e. goods/ services that as long as they are still distinctive remain in the hands of an elite, then once lost their distinctive charge filter to the lower layers. Bourdieu’s trickle round theory also presupposes a tactical and classist use of consumer practices: the privileged class adopts popular practices to distinguish itself from the middle class that aspires to their position. And also this logic is quite common in advanced societies. Thirdly, there are still today differences in micro languages, combinatorial practices and ways of signification that are attributable to social position in terms of forms of capital (and again, not classes, at most *strata*): a striking example are goods/services that are not understood by the majority, but whose social value is understood only by a small group. Or again, the different ways by which they mean status, elegance, or any other thing, individuals with different capitals (in the sense of Bourdieu, in one of the four forms). A fourth reason for

recovering these authors, is that there are sub-cultures (youth or non-youth) that create from the bottom a meaning, a set of meanings or lifestyles. But these social meanings, if they spread, are monopolized at the top and redistributed in the form of simulacra, that is, signs without referents. This operation neutralizes the social meaning and makes it hyperreal, overloaded with an empty (no referent) meaning.

Other reasons for recovering a post-structuralist approach are outlined in section 3. I conclude by focusing on the social consequences of consumption as a form of communication. I maintain that it exerts symbolic violence on individuals (in the sense of Bourdieu) and greatly simplifies the semantic languages and encyclopedias operating within social culture. The last section concludes with a handful of practical examples that led me to formulate the ideas of the paper and possible consequences of such a research approach in consumption.

## 2 Related literature

There is much evidence of how the consumption's communication system is a facilitator of social interactions, of elite formation, of solidarity acts or collective mobilization and rebellions (Martens and Casey (2016), Maffesoli (1996), G. D. McCracken (1990), Reimer and Leslie (2004), Thornton (1995)). This shows once again that it is difficult to give a moral judgment on the positivity or negativity of consumption as a communicative system, it is simply a further form of communication, in addition to the others that already operate within a given culture. One famous stream of North American sociologists and anthropologist is labeled Consumer Culture Theory, born mainly in the business and marketing departments. Arnould and Thompson (2005) in their manifesto of CCT conceive the consumer as an interpretive agent inside some symbolic boundaries.

In this stream of literature too there are references to a post-structuralist analysis. For example, Holt (Holt (1997a), Holt (1997b)) shows, among other things, that people with high cultural capital apply critical judgment to all the cultural forms they come in contact with and experience leisure as a moment of self-realization, deepening the topics they are interested in. While those who have a low cultural capital read the cultural elements according to an external code and live leisure as a value in itself.

The differentialists (Bourdieu and Baudrillard) had an idea of consumption as an institutional and classist language ( Baudrillard (2016b), Bourdieu (1987)) where micro-languages and goods/services appeared to reflect the social hierarchy and the transition from one to another represented a real or hoped-for process of social mobility. The basic idea is that people "speak" the code and sub-codes of consumption and objects, not following strict rules, but play with them, cheat (they use it tactically) and bring out their own "class dialect". As Roberta Paltrinieri writes, Bourdieu and Baudrillard consider that "*each lifestyle acquires its own meaning by differentiating and opposing itself to others, which is to indicate how the general code of differences governs social life*" Paltrinieri (1998). The

analogy with language lies here: as the code of language "surpasses" the individual consciences who speak it, so the code of consumption does. In the sense that from conscious and unconscious elements in handling the code, possible social classifications emerge. Already from these few lines we can see the importance that structuralist anthropology and Saussurian linguistics had for this stream of studies, even if both the authors were aware that the analogy with the language was not entirely correct. They knew that the rules of linguistics do not apply properly to consumption, however, as Baudrillard argues, linguistics has similarities with consumption since: "*Outside the field of its objective function, where it is irreplaceable, that is, outside the field of its denotation, the object becomes replaceable in an unlimited way, that is, in the field of its connotation, where it acquires the value of a sign. Thus the washing machine serves as a utensil and acts as an object of comfort, prestige etc. The latter field is precisely that of consumption*" Baudrillard (2016b). Taste, therefore, would play a function of social classification of individuals and would exist a class' "moral" (or unconscious predisposing cognitive and culturally constituted structures) that conditions choices. At this point it must be said that this idea of a class' moral has widened and is much more homogeneous than before between social strata, but the way of putting it into practice remains however indicative of the social position. One of Bourdieu's fundamental contributions in highlighting the unconscious aspects of consumption was certainly the concept of *habitus*, widely discussed in the literature (for instance by Lizardo (2004) and King (2000)). Here I limit myself to saying that the importance of this concept is, above all, to question the naturalness of categories widely used in social culture such as "character" and taste. According to Bourdieu, they are not innate categories, but acquired ones. The *habitus* is in fact in Tommaso D'Aquino what the *exis* was in the Aristotelian tradition, *exis* comes from *echein*, "to have", so Bourdieu tries to emphasize the fact that it is something acquired, historically built. The Marxist imprinting of Bourdieu's thought can also be seen from the fact that, being *the habitus* something historically constituted, it can be deconstituted and therefore there are possibilities of emancipation.

On the other hand, an aspect of Baudrillard's analysis that has not been sufficiently stressed is a good argument to resume talking about the links between consumption, production and social structure. The author highlights the fact that even the social meanings that arise from below, unless they remain a local and secondary phenomenon, are monopolized at the top by the (re)productive order and redistributed (with variations on the theme) from the top under the form of differential sign values, detached from the cultural referent where they were generated. In this sense, the author speaks of simulacra, that is of signs without referents, because that value is not lived in first person by the consumer, who often does not even know the historical origin and therefore the feeling behind, but it is taken as the differential sign of a code that does not belong to him, an external code. The consumer does not invent a code to express his feeling or meaning, but by analogy (therefore by fetishism) takes the ready-to-use abstraction scheme, so basically the consumer simulates the meaning within a predetermined *frame*. This dynamic is evident if you analyze the trap and the emancipatory potential that someone claimed to have Kaluža (2018).

Dialoguing for a moment with this paper I suggest that maybe the emancipatory potential could exist (but I am not sure, there exist also subcultures artificially born since the beginning in the form of a simulacrum) as long as the trap style was a sign with a referent, the concrete lives of those people living in the "dirty south" of US, but if it becomes a pure sign, that is a simulacrum (as happened from 2009 onwards with artists such as Young Jeezy, Gucci Main and companies such as Gucci and Balenciaga) loses all the emancipatory potential, indeed it becomes another tool of symbolic domination of the code on individuals, as an expressive means of a neutral transgression (indeed favorable to production). Bruner (2018) well describes this process for the rap music. I'll take up this example in the last section. In short, Baudrillard is telling us that there is a force (monopolization at the top of a social meaning and redistribution) that fights against the emancipatory potential of the active consumer of post-modern theory. And I count this among the good reasons for reconnecting the analysis of consumption with the production system, that is, with a real production of a code of differences and therefore of trivial, naïve, simplified categories of perception.

The criticisms levelled at these two authors are varied and mainly concern an excessive determinism between goods/services consumed and social stratification. The purpose of their research, however, was precisely to identify regularities, social laws behind consumption, although they were aware that not the entire process could be described according to precise laws. Therefore, a criticism of the generalisability of their theses is legitimate, but it must also take into account the authors' intentions at the beginning of their research and of course an historical context where Marxist analysis, the Freudian and Lacanian unconscious, structuralist anthropology and Saussure's linguistics were hotly debated. One of the major criticisms levelled at Bourdieu is precisely the fundamental determinism between social structure and consumption practices. Jenkins (1982) argues that Bourdieu's scheme is circular, as it starts from unconscious structures that produce culture, which in turn produces everyday practices, which reproduce the unconscious structures. Other authors have instead tried to demonstrate how cultural and social changes (i.e. breaks in the circularity of the schema) can be analysed within a Bourdieusian framework (from the mismatch between the instances of the social field and the individual *habitus*, from an explicit pedagogy, the reflexivity of identity formation and the openness of our contemporary society). With regard to this type of criticism it could be suggested that a circular and self-strengthening system is nothing more than a channel of social reproduction. This theme of reproduction was of interest to Bourdieu, who tried to identify some of its main axes, for instance the French educative system. (Bourdieu and Passeron (2018)). The concept of cultural omnivorousness coined by Peterson (1992) also challenged Bourdieu's theory and was interpreted in relation to it. This concept refers to the fact that in the US the link between high socio-economic status and high culture has diminished. In general from 1980 onwards economically privileged and well-educated social strata started to consume both popular and élitist cultural forms. But there is yet no agreed theoretical

interpretation of these empirical results. The fact that this happens can indeed be seen both as a form of democratisation and equality of access to culture, and as forms of distinction, since it is always the economically and culturally privileged classes (at least middle classes) that are 'omnivorous'. In reality, Ollivier (2008) has shown that there are many types of omnivores and not all of them belong to the upper classes.

Trigg (2001) describes how the theory of Bourdieu can be used to explain and remedy all the shortcomings (which, however, also suffer from a lack of socio-historical contextualisation and take root from a fundamental misinterpretation of *the theory of the leisure class*) that have been imputed to Veblen's theory. One example is the shift from trickle-down logic to the trickle-round logic theorised by Bourdieu, according to which the upper classes also adopt popular class tastes, but still with a tactical purpose. "*The upper classes sometimes adopt the tastes of those at the bottom of the social ladder in order to outflank members of the aspiring middle class, who find it difficult to compete due to insufficient stocks of cultural capital. In practice, the middle classes with sufficient economic capital aspire to higher positions through practices to which the lower classes do not have access. Here, then, such practices become distinctive for the wealthier classes, which hold off those immediately below, the aspirants to their position*" (Trigg (2001)). Trigg shows that Veblen's theory is often simplified and decontextualised, thus making it subject to irrelevant attacks.

What we can say, however, about Bourdieu and Baudrillard's approach, is that it is particularly suited to addressing questions of power and domination: the capacity of consumption to reflect and reproduce social structure. As Alan Ward writes "*Culture and consumption are not innocent; differences in cultural competence and practice map onto wider contours of structured inequality and social injustice*". Warde (2015)

Another criticism, which perhaps relates to a deeper issue, levelled at the two French authors is the verbosity of their arguments. See for instance the book Sokal and Bricmont (1997) where the authors wonder what would remain of Baudrillard's thought once stripped of its language. In this text, moreover, the authors make an attempt, intended more to complement and dialogue than to criticise, to purge certain intellectuals, including Baudrillard, of an erroneous and heteronomous scientism, and so far the criticism is more than shareable, even if the purpose of certain scientific quotations is often metaphorical and poetic. With regard to the criticism of language, however, the issue is more difficult to be deepened. Here, indeed, it is a matter of one's idea about language: whether it is merely a cataloguing medium for expressing one's ideas or whether it is both a bearer and a generator of ideas. I am inclined to the second hypothesis: while not denying the function it performs as a means of communication, I raise the importance of admitting that it has a symbolic and autonomous aspect (detached from the subjects who speak it and able to influence them). It is therefore hard to answer the critics of Sokal and Bricmont (1997) if the basic belief they start from is that language is merely and simply a mean of communication. This criticism is linked to their analysis of consumption, as it passes through non-trivial linguistic depth and articulation, such as the distinction between



sign and symbol, the concept of *habitus* and in general the kind of language of the main essays I refer to in this article: Bourdieu (1987), Baudrillard (2016b) and Baudrillard and Dalla Vigna (2010).

As argued by Peters (2014), sociology's determinism for Bourdieu has an ethical-political significance: it can provide agents with the tools to understand the social mechanisms they are involved in and thus detach themselves from these mechanisms, gaining a margin of freedom. Whereas saying that everyone is free on the contrary is a way of domination, of course. *"Like any science, sociology accepts the principle of determinism, understood as a form of the principle of sufficient reason. The science that must give reasons for what is ... postulates... that nothing exists without a reason for being'. The sociologist adds: 'social reason' - nothing is without a specifically social reason for being. ... The degree to which the social world is determined depends on the knowledge we have of it. On the other hand, the degree to which the world is actually determined is not a matter of opinion; as a sociologist, it is not for me to be 'for determinism' or 'for freedom', but to discover necessity, if it exists, in the places where it is found. As each advance in knowledge of the laws of the social world increases the degree of perceived necessity, it is natural that social science is increasingly accused of 'determinism' the more it advances. But, contrary to appearances, it is precisely by increasing the degree of perceived necessity and providing a better knowledge of the laws of the social world that social science provides more freedom. Every advance in knowledge of necessity is an advance in possible freedom.... An unknown law is a nature, a destiny... a known law appears as a possibility of freedom"*. Bourdieu (1993).

In Bourdieu's thought, the articulation between agency and structure is not linked to the dichotomy between free will and determinism in accounting for human conduct. The dialectical interplay between the subjective and objective dimensions of the social world does not refer, in his theory of practice, to the confrontation between the agent's freedom (at least if understood as the absence of determined behaviors) and the necessities imposed by an external social universe. It refers rather to the logical role of subjective practices in the explanation of social phenomena. This is why it is important to distinguish between objectivism and determinism, following Bourdieu's own vocabulary. Broadly defined, objectivism is embodied in all the approaches that consider the reference to collective structural conditions and tendencies as data not only necessary, but sufficient to the explanation of social processes. The agents' subjective intentions and representations could be, thus, summarily coming from the inventory of variables that compose the explanations of social-historical facts, while the individuals could be residually deemed as epiphenomena, conductors, or supports (Bourdieu often quotes the Weberian term *Trager*) of causal forces over which they would have neither control nor consciousness.

Basically Bourdieu rejects the "illusion of transparency" typical of the sociology of the common sense. He thought that the causes of social processes are not reducible to individual intentions and representations, since these individuals are immersed in this process both actively (constituting it) and passively (as information receivers). In his own words

determinism is something that *"no science can reject without disowning itself as science"* Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (2011). There is a form of disenchanting in this view of the social world since humans are modeled in personality by social historical conditions which are not object of choice, but end up objectivated in their subjectivities.

Analysing the socio-historical (and not the natural) conditions and forces underlying our social action can therefore, according to Bourdieu, lead to a recognition of these forces and thus to at least a partial form of liberation, a release from them and the consequent greater dynamism of society. After all, Bourdieu is talking to us about the transcendental aspect of culture. Culture without transcendence is only a form of elitist notionism, a reservoir that can be used as a supplementary *mana* when the social situation calls for it. In this sense, both the culture perceived only as institutionally legitimated series of informations, (as can happen at school) and that of fashion shows in the midst of monuments, spectacularised as empty beauty, lack transcendental function. Under these conditions, the consumption of culture (for instance art) becomes like the consumption of anything else, does not even induce an imaginative effort and does not change any worldview. Instead, he suggests that the task of sociology is to induce a form of cultural transcendence and an understanding of one's own actions within a framework of Marxist liberation.

He writes, somewhat loftily: *"frees us by freeing us from the illusion of freedom"*. In any case, consumption applied to culture, I would point out, means once again turning it into a sign with no referent, in all those practical situations where there is no transcendence. To consume culture means to enjoy it as a service without it changing your view on something or someone, your way of reasoning or even simply a new meaning: culture can be consumed under the condition of the absence of transcendence.

A criticism to the Baudrillard view of tastes instead comes from Gerardo Ragone. He raised two points: the first one is that the society analysed by Baudrillard was characterised by an economic boom, while later on, the employment crisis and austerity proletarianised various middle strata. Thus consumption would be less important in terms of a distinctive logic according to Ragone, or at least it would be less linked to a logic of social integration. As a matter of fact, one can reply to this criticism that what that economic boom changed also consisted in the integration of a certain traditional morality that no longer suited production, with a fun morality that, high or low income, became an individual motivation to produce and to consume. This new morality is still functional to the productive system, but involves a work aimed at asserting the exteriority, and no longer a work of sublimation of the interiority as in traditional morality.

Ragone's second criticism concerns the internal logic of Baudrillard's discourse. In Baudrillard, the middle or lower strata apply a ritual logic to objects/services that the upper strata use objectively and rationally: the television, the organization of the domestic environment, etc. Gerardo Ragone argues that this approach is wrong given that there is also a rituality of *"the sophisticated paradises of the ruling elite"* (the premiere of a successful film, the clubs, academic ceremonies, and so on). According to Ragone, the contradictory

logic between rationality and rituality is transversal with respect to all social classes. In other terms, there would be simulation for all social classes. This is certainly true and constitutes an absolutely acute observation. However in my opinion what Baudrillard and Bourdieu want to highlight is that in *the same context* one class is relegated to a magical economy and the other to a rational and objective one, this is where the discriminatory function of consumption lies. Besides this, it is also true that all classes have their own *potlatches* as Gerardo Ragone says. *"In short, it is certainly true that, for example, behind household chores there is a" rhetoric of salvation", an often obsessive desperation for one's own social destiny, as it also happens for the indiscriminate viewing of all television programs; but isn't it the same for bridge tournaments or for appointments in underground theaters, for holidays in Porto Cervo or for the South African safari? "* (Gerardo Ragone, 1977, <https://opcit.it/cms/?p=97>). This is true, but it is not by chance that they are different activities, this is what Baudrillard and Bourdieu tried to tell us.

Another critique of Baudrillard's analysis comes from Gilles Lipovetsky (Lipovetsky (2002)) who pointed out that the great originality of postmodern consumption is its desocialisation, i.e. the fact that it has value as individual pleasure and satisfaction, while social and communicative value would be secondary. In my opinion, Lipovetsky noticed an increasing personalisation of choices, which is indisputable. But this does not mean that such personalisation is detached from the social aspect of consumption, any more than the spectacularization of enjoyment and pleasure is. Is enough asking oneself why signs of enjoyment and happiness are exhibited on the social networks (Gianluca Vacchi's *enjoy* for instance, an italian (ex) influencer on Instagram). Moreover, consumption brings with it a moral, of enjoy, a *fun morality*, that has nothing to do with desire and is internalised in an ideological way (I am still referring to a statistical fraction of the population). This shows that individual enjoyment or choices personalization is not detached from the social aspects of consumption, quite the contrary. An institutionally important critique of Bourdieu comes instead from Shove and Warde (2002), who highlighted phenomena antithetical to a determinism with social structure in the Marxist sense: 1) Firstly, Warde points out that horizontal differentiations are more significant than vertical ones. 2) The democratisation processes of consumption have complicated the readings of goods/services in terms of social differentiations. 3) Class is no longer a valid category for distinguishing social groups. 4) Consumption behaviour is increasingly personalised and cannot be associated with a group, class or stratum.

Let us try to sketch a response to the first criticism. One can also give a class reading of horizontal differentiations, in this sense consumption can be seen as a particular tactic of the strategy *dividi et impera*, for example: an beautician who cares a lot about her own image is unlikely to cooperate for an higher salary with a factory worker who ends the working day with dirty hands, even if they both earn 1200 euros a month. She differs from him through lifestyle even though in a materilistic sense they belong to the same so-

cial class. Not to mention the probability that a human relationship is established between them, reduced almost to zero by their respective lifestyles: consumption is ideologically interiorized and acquires symbolic power also because it is seen as a mean of relation with the opposite sex or any sex we are interested in. So horizontal differentiations as deterrents to social cooperation still bind consumption to classes, even if in a negative sense. Another response to Warde's second argument: the fact that consumption becomes increasingly personalised does not mean that it loses its feature of socially positioning individuals, even if this positioning no longer takes place entirely on the basis of social class. Certainly Bourdieu's determinism is excessive and outdated. The idea that individuals are driven to act by a class morality does not take into account the progressive cultural homogenisation due to the consumption-media system, which tends to blur the differences that would instead emerge based on the cultural capital of the family of origin and the school attended. However, consumption choices are still able to define the strata, at least at a low level of segmentation (Friedland et al. (2007)). Michel de Certeau in his book 'The Invention of the Everyday' criticises Bourdieu saying that the concept of *habitus* underestimates the individuals creative capacity. Silverstone (2003) writes: "*Although Bourdieu uses the analysis of consumption to highlight the construction of patterns of everyday life in contemporary society, and does so with convincing results, he fails to emphasise the dynamic: the shifts and turns, the flickers and resistances that in their meaning or lack of meaning actually make consumption an active, sometimes creative process where status and social identities are asserted, claimed and constantly negotiated*".

However, there are also non-deterministic readings of Bourdieu and of his concept of *habitus*. See, for instance, Barrett and Martina (2012), where the authors show that *habitus*, even if it operates at an unconscious level, can be modified by events or environments that promote reflection and self-questioning, altering in this way the perception of own education and life trajectories.

There have been attempts, such as that of Trizzulla, Garcia-Bardidia, and Rémy (2016), to water down Bourdieu's structural determinism while maintaining it as a basic principle of analysis. The authors attach greater importance to the subject, emphasising the non-uniqueness of the individual *habitus* and the relative autonomy of social fields.

### 3 Why recover Bourdieu and Baudrillard

One of the most important papers highlighting the importance of recovering the post-structuralist approach is Holt (1997b). Holt, explaining the decline of empirical studies linking consumption and social structure, writes: "*Common academic wisdom attributes this decline to the diminishing influence of social conditions in structuring consumption patterns in advanced capitalist societies....The basic premise of this study is that there is an alternative explanation for the decline in research describing the social structure of con-*

*sumption. I draw on a group of contemporary social theorists who have suggested that social collectivities continue to structure consumption patterns (and vice versa), but in increasingly subtle ways” (Holt (1997b)).*

Holt’s work is important because it distinguishes with great accuracy the two prevalent approaches at the time (object signification and personality/values) from the post-structuralist one.

*”Both the object signification and personality/values approaches assume that lifestyles are shared consumption patterns. In the object signification approach, lifestyles are composed of sets of cultural objects assumed to have a distinctive social meaning marking those who consume the set (Levy 1959). For example, concepts such as consumption constellations (Solomon and Assael 1987) and Diderot unities (McCracken 1988) describe clusters of consumption objects that confer particular meanings on their consumers. The personality/values approach lacks an explicit conception of social meaning: consumption patterns are understood primarily in material rather than symbolic terms. Implicitly, however, this approach also assumes that social meanings are immanent to shared consumption patterns and, so, are readily interpretable by the researcher. In contrast, from a poststructuralist perspective, consumption patterns have no immanent social meaning qua pattern. Instead, lifestyles are created by relational differences between consumption patterns, their meanings are constructed by and exist in these differences.” (Holt (1997b)).*

In other words, the aspect of linguistics that is found in consumption consists in the differential nature of meaning and not its uniqueness, as many critics of the analogy between Saussure and the sociology of consumption argued.

The main characterizing points of the post-structuralist approach according to Holt are five: 1) Consumption patterns are structured by contextualized cultural frameworks. 2) Consumption patterns consist of regularities in consumption practices. 3) Lifestyles are constructed by symbolic boundaries between consumption patterns. 4) Lifestyles are collective phenomena. 5) Lifestyles are dynamic sociohistorical constructions. To better clarify the differences between motivations that may appear equal to each other see Holt (1997b). In particular according to Holt *”Consumption can be conceived as a field of social life that is organized by the expression of tastes. As such, consumption is distinctive from other fields that are organized around different pursuits such as scarce productive resources (business), power (politics), metaphysical certitude (religion), and formal knowledge (education). All of these fields serve as domains in which the social organization of society is played out and, hence, reproduced”.*

Many of these points are still valid today and constitute good arguments for recovering a certain approach in the study of consumption. I would add that the postmodern idea of the free consumer is a way to get rid of the burden of taking a political position on the liberals ideals of consumer sovereignty.

Finally, to conclude with Holt’s analysis of lifestyles: *”The key collectivities that together*

*constitute the social relations of a society (e.g., those formed around master social categories such as class, gender, race/ethnicity) are typically represented in consumption. Consumption is socially patterned because people who share similar social conditions acquire similar tastes that organize their consumer actions”.*

Of course, Holt also realises that social conditions are not mechanically reproduced by lifestyles for a number of not very interesting reasons, which are basically the same reasons why it is impossible to create a general deterministic theory of consumption. One of these reasons is that although other dimensions of social life such as the political, economic, technical, and religious spheres are distinct from consumption, they are not autonomous and, so, often interact with consumption patterns. For instance as Holt noticed: *”the emergence of the yuppie lifestyle among upper-middle-class professionals in the United States in the 1980s is often linked to economic and political shifts that significantly raised the real incomes of this group relative to others (Belk 1986).”.*

I would add that by adopting specific lifestyle (or simulating using consumption as one of the main means) it is easier to enter certain companies. Furthermore, there are companies that promote a specific lifestyle. Some in a less intense way, think for example of the requirement of shirts for men or non sneakers and non-open shoes for women. Others in a more stringent way, such as uniforms, hairstyle standards and so on. Ecology itself is unfortunately reduced to a simulacrum. Employees can adapt in two ways: suffer the symbolic violence and try to conform, to be in line with the lifestyle (the ”philosophy”) that the company promotes. In the other case, it is the company itself that involves its employees with concrete initiatives, such as the supply of clothes and accessories, training and refresher courses, or directly with internal constraints and regulations. Berlusconi was a pioneer of this attitude in Italy, think of the suitability for a job based on physical appearance. In fashion companies, there are the so called ”Grooming guidelines” that define the appropriate aesthetics for each company. In short, it is so evident that in developed societies the job-world has been reunited with the sign system of consumption that we feel like saying with Baudrillard that: *”An early stage of analysis was to conceive of the sphere of consumption as an extension of the sphere of productive forces. It is the reverse that must be done. One must conceive the entire sphere of production, of labour, of productive forces as spilling over into the sphere of ’consumption’ understood as that of a generalised axiomatics, of a codified exchange of signs, of a general design of life. Thus knowledge, aptitudes, but also sexuality and the body, imagination (Verres: ’Imagination alone remains tied to the pleasure principle, while the psychic apparatus is subordinated to the reality principle [Freud]. We must put an end to this waste. Let the imagination actualise itself as a productive force, let it invest itself’)*” Baudrillard (2016a).

Let us try to identify some absolutely concrete elements the reasoning behind this paper starts from. What are the empirical facts highlighting the link between social structure, consumption practices and modes of signification?



1) Trickle-down mechanisms still exist. Goods/services that are initially elitist and are abandoned when they lose their distinctiveness. It is not the purpose of the paper to identify the social strata involved in these mechanisms, but it is easy to think that the strata with the most capital, especially cultural capital, such as executives in public enterprises or university professors, will not get involved in certain temporary fashions. What is important for the purposes of the argument is that the *trickle down* still exists, even if it concerns more a passage of needs/goods/services from strata with high economic capital to strata with low economic capital, than a difference in cultural capital. The important thing is that the former have high symbolic capital in the eyes of the latter (recognised by the latter therefore, since symbolic capital is based on recognition), leaving aside the cultural capital of the groups involved in this trickle-down mechanism. Empirical evidence of trickle down in our societies is provided by Galak et al. (2016).

2) A second empirical fact I faced in society that pushed me towards the theses of this paper is the trickle round. It is a more subtle version of trickle down, in fact it also contemplates the possibility of the upper strata adopting popular practices to distinguish themselves from the middle class, those individuals or groups trying to climb the social ladder. In practice, the upper strata super-distinguish themselves. Riesman had already identified this form of *ostentatious under-consumption*. It is seen as a way of defending oneself against the social pressure of the upper-middle strata. If one reflects about it, vulgarity is often defined as just that: the attempt by middle or upper-middle strata to behave in the same way as the upper strata without having the physique du rôle, without having certain innate attitudes, but by vulgarly mimicking them. An empirical proof of the trickle round mechanism is Silvia Bellezza's paper (Bellezza and Berger (2020)).

3) The third empirical observation the central argument of the paper stems from is that there are different micro-languages between different social strata. It is still true that *"modern beautiful design objects are subtly created not to be understood by the majority, at least not immediately, their first role is to be signs of distinction, objects that will distinguish those who are able to recognise them, the others will not even see them"* Baudrillard (2016b). Or alternatively, as Bourdieu writes: *"Habitus is both a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices. And, in both of these dimensions, its operation expresses the social position within which it was elaborated. Consequently, habitus produces practices and representations which are available for classification, which are objectively differentiated; however, they are immediately perceived as such only by those agents who possess the code, the classificatory schemes necessary to understand their social meaning. Habitus thus implies a "sense of one's place" but also a "sense of the place of others"*. Bourdieu (1989). The social fact that there are different codes of understanding goods and services is not only related to innate individual matters of taste and character. Social regularities can be found in the decoding of goods and services, although these regularities are not necessarily related to social classes. In this sense, the difference in the languages and micro-languages of consumption is a point



in favour of recovering a certain determinism typical of post-structuralism, or at least the tendency towards the latter as the aim of consumer research.

4) To say that post-structuralist theory is only and solely deterministic is a way of simplifying and dismissing it. This idea is based on the Bourdieu's attempt to link the Marxian social structure with the judgments of taste. Taking a post-structuralist vision into account would require more analytical effort than the 'everything is valid' that characterises the consumer as sovereign and free creator of meanings. In particular, I want to argue for the importance of the researcher's interpretation in trying to understand the unconscious aspects of consumption as a social process. I am not arguing that the interpretations of the two French authors were correct in general, but that an analytical effort to understand or at least interpret in an original way manifest, obvious and taken for granted behaviour is important. If all consumers are free and sovereign to create all the meanings and interpretations they voluntarily want, then there is nothing more to be said about consumption, neither of its link with production, nor of its symbolic power, nor about the way it regulates relations between people (Schor (2007)). Marx already noticed this capacity of the commodity to regulate social relations: *"However, let us remember that commodities possess objectivity of value only insofar as they are expressions of an identical social unit, of human labour, and that therefore their objectivity of value is purely social, and then it will be obvious that the latter can present itself only in the social relation between commodity and commodity"*; or besides: *"While the relative form of value of a commodity...expresses its being value as something quite different from its body and its properties [use-value]... there is a social relation hidden in it...it is implicit in the infinite series of its expressions that the value of a commodity is indifferent to the particular form of use-value in which it is presented"*. When speaking of the link between the presupposed equality of men and social relations he writes: *"The arcane expression of value -that is, the equality and equal validity (equivalence) of all labour, because and as human labour in general- can only be deciphered when the concept of human equality already possesses the consistency and tenacity of a popular prejudice. But this is only possible in a society where the commodity form is the general form of the product of labour, and thus also the reciprocal relation between men as possessors of commodities (who produce and exchange commodities-) is the dominant social relation"* Marx (2018). While what we have all too often taken with us from Marx's theory is only the idea of the economy as the determining instance of history, but we have taken it with us by degrading his idea: by transforming the idea that capital is a historically constituted social relation into the idea that the economics is the basis of every geopolitical move and of history, we transformed his idea into an economic metaphysic. The famous passage in Volume 1 of Capital reads: *"The arcane of the commodity form thus consists simply in the fact that this form, like a mirror, restores to men the image of the social characters of their own labour, making them appear as objective characters of the products of that labour, as natural social properties of those things, and thus also restores the image of the social relation between producers and overall labour, making it*

*appear as a social relation between objects existing outside of them producers. By means of this quid pro quo, the products of labour become commodities, sensibly supersensible things, i.e. social things*". The same applies to the sign-form, if perceived as objective. Fashion from this point of view is the largest (but not the only) industry of objectivation of the sign-form and of its interpretative code.

5) The monopolisation at the top and redistribution of social meanings born "from the bottom" (sub-cultures) is a process that row against the idea of the postmodern emancipated consumer. Firstly, it is a process of monopolisation of meaning and thus of induced and revisited interpretation of the signifier, perception and classification's categories. Secondly, it neutralises and reifies the underlying social relationship, it abolishes it from the moment it codifies it.

6) Goods and places of consumption are increasingly designed according to the imaginary they want to seduce, they increasingly leverage the sign value and the emotional aspects linked to it (Vanni Codeluppi). Algorithms are a means of adapting the offer to the consumer's imagination. Furthermore, the media are powerful creators of images and therefore of imagery (in various aspects they substitute the imagination): there is a form of circularity in the functioning of media and consumption. The consumption-media integrated circuit is a reproductive channel of society, through which the society the algorithms study is reproduced, and goes hand in hand with cultural cloning (including opinions on social issues). But above all, the individual, isolated subject is reproduced: all our individualism, the subject of conscience and private property, the subject deprived of its inner otherness, i.e. an autistic subject, is the presupposition of our current society (in this key of interpretation, covid-19 and the consequent virtual relationship with the other is not an extraordinary event, but an ordinary one) and takes on the force of reality also thanks to the consumer-media circuit and the virtual nebula that everyone has around him.

## 4 Conclusions

If there is a freedom of the consumer, it consists in non-sense, in the absolute emptiness of meaning (not even that of functionality), in not knowing what one wants and thus in a radical relativisation of code and value. Not in the postmodern idea of freedom and the appropriation of combinatory and signifying practices (mixing different styles, for instance), because this takes place within a frame (in the sense of Kahneman and Tversky (2013b), Kahneman and Tversky (2013a)) of pre-established representations, or rather, of representations that are at least communicable and thus rest on a shared code. Anyway as far as a given meaning is simulated the idea of consumer freedom is empty.

This is also the case with political positions on social issues. First of all, let's say that often

in our society a moral judgment is also a way to stop thinking about the object of judgment. Ideology in the case of political opinions consists in placing at a very low level of deepening the moral choice (pro-Ukrainian or pro-Putin for instance) and this moral choice, which often determines political opinion, follows the same logic of identity designation through consumption. And it's simulated, of course, it is without referent.

What I mean is that from a social science point of view, it is always important to distinguish the meaning with a referent from the simulacrum (that is, a sign without a referent). Innovation or innovativeness, for example, can be really useful to better understand/solve a problem, or they can be brought into effigy as simulacra, as sign values encoded in society (positive in this case).

In conclusion, I argue that consumption exercises forms of symbolic violence (the interview is in italian)<sup>3</sup> as far as an arbitrary code is lived as legitimate. It contributes to the impoverishment of semantic encyclopaedias and processes of signification operating within social culture and to the neutrality (indeed, complementarity with production) of potentially subversive practices.

In particular, the consumer is free and active in the post-modern sense to express himself through the semiological system of consumption, but this semiological system, whatever the consumer's 'critical' choice in front of it, has already fulfilled its ideological function: it has already reduced every symbolic (and therefore ambivalent) possibility of expression of the subject, it has already deprived the subject of the symbolic means of expression, precisely because it is a code, as a social instance, it says: 'do you want to be transgressive? Here are the means. You want to be sexy? Here are the means'. It has already provided the subject with a positive, positivist way of expressing a certain value. The ideology consists in taking for granted, in believing in the value (at least as arbitrary as the linguistic sign) that is expressed through that code in various declinations.

There is a fine definition of ideology in *"For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign"*. Baudrillard and Dalla Vigna (2010). It would consist in the semiological reduction of ambivalence. That is, something that in itself is ambivalent is invested with an arbitrary sign value. Reduction of a symbol to a sign. Let us give some examples of this ideology: the sun. It no longer has anything of the symbolic function it had for the Aztecs or the Egyptians, that is, the ambivalence of a natural force both in primitive cults and in peasant work, death and life together. It becomes an entirely positive sign, euphorising and significantly opposed to non-sun, rain, etc. From this moment it functions as an ideology and as a cultural value in a system of oppositions, the hyperbole of which, could be a 'right to the sun'. It is in this sense that Bourdieu in a famous interview quoted above says that *"After all, the form par excellence of symbolic violence - it is terrible to say it - is precisely a certain use of human rights"*.

Another example: the masculine and the feminine. Nobody by nature is relegated to one

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<sup>3</sup><https://web.archive.org/web/20080513043250/http://www.emsf.rai.it/interviste/interviste.asp?d=388>

sex, sexual ambivalence is at the core of every subject, sex can be inscribed as an organic difference in the body, not as an absolute term linked to the presence of an organ. But this deep ambivalence must be reduced because it escapes the social and sexual order, which gives rise to a cultural model that separates the sexes (to then privileges one of them). Let me make a brief aside: if you think about it for a moment, this is also the case with the media and social issues fed to the 'masses'. Information has all the answers, but they are answers to questions that we never asked and certainly are not even interesting. In this way it urges us to take a position, which lately is often dichotomous, and then socially 'privilege' one over the other: the non-sovereignists privileged over the sovereignists, the non-populists over the populists, the pro science over the no vax, the people in favour of sending arms to Ukraine over the pacifist (the latter case with some differences from the others, since being pacifists cannot be denigrated more than that for obvious reasons).

A final example of ideology as semiological reduction: the nudity, that has been proposed by the mass media (TV from 70' onwards, in Italy) as a "discovery" of the body and of the sex, as a libertine expression. This nudity claims to be rational and progressive, that is, to rediscover the "truth" of the body and its "natural" reason. But the symbolic and sexual truth of the body certainly does not coincide with the nude in this naive sense, but (as Bataille's *Erotism: death and sensuality* or Botticelli's Venus express), with "laying bare", because this is the symbolic equivalent of a putting to death, and therefore the pattern of an always ambivalent desire: love and death together. Modern nudity does not imply this ambivalence, this deep symbolic value, because it concerns a body transformed by sex (as a cultural value) in an entirely positive value, in a model of realization, in a moral (or in a playful immorality, which is the same thing). This nudity never refers to a divided body, split by sex. The modern sexual body claims only its positive aspect, namely: 1) The need and not the desire. 2) The satisfaction and not the negativity, the lack, the death and the castration. 3) The right to the body and to the sex: the social subversion of the body and of the sex are schematized in a democratic claim, obviously quite formal, which concerns rights (to the body in this case).

At this point, once the ideological process has liquidated the ambivalence and the symbolic function of nudity, it can reorganize everything into a semiological system of distinct and opposite sign values. Nudity becomes a sign among others and significantly is opposed to the dress or to the see-through effect. So even if this nudity is presented as "liberating or libertine", as a matter of fact it is only a sign variant that can easily coexist with the dress (or non-nudity) in the fashion's game and can perform its function in the alternation between nudity-non nudity. A nudity reduced to a sign and involved in the game of differentiation through them, and not that one linked to *eros* and *thanatos*. What is important to note is the following fact: the condition through which it is able to function ideologically is the loss of the symbolic content and the overloading of the semiological one. This reduction of the symbolic field by the semiological one defines the ideological process. This is exactly the ideology that lies behind consumption as a code, behind objects as signs and to which consumption itself (as an institution that you are faced with in society) educates.

In this sense, the meanings of consumer goods, health, beauty, sexuality and so on, are models of simulation ready to be used and where the consumer's creativity and freedom can be expressed in the combinatorial practice of the elements. But this is precisely simulation, since the meaning is detached from the referent, it is produced (in the double sense of the word, manufactured and brought as proof) and available on the market.

I also argue that consumption simplifies semantic encyclopaedias. I will take some practical examples to understand how this code of signs simplifies the language operating within social culture. The "antico Vinaio" is a sandwich seller who made his fortune starting out in Florence, working especially with tourists. In advertising himself on social media, he evidently uses 'Tuscanity' to characterise his product. Now this Tuscanity is indeed a meaning, but it is also an expressive code, a myth. From Levi-Strauss onwards, we know that myths do not only form a content that circulates in societies, but also a code, a classifying principle. In the distribution of cultural capital in the population, some will recognise this connotation of Tuscanity as crude, artefactual; and for others, it will instead *be* the Tuscanity, the interpretation of the signifier gets used to being naive. This should already make it clear how the code of consumption and sign-objects strongly simplifies the languages operating within social culture and is tied to its structure. This is in line with the influence American culture has on our culture: Americans are a highly naive society in this respect, they believe in simulacra.

*"In storing details on their computers of all the known souls in the civilized (white) countries, the Mormons of Salt Lake City are behaving no differently from other Americans, who all share the same missionary spirit. It is never too late to revive your origins. It is their destiny: since they were not the first to be in on history, they will be the first to immortalize everything by reconstitution (by putting things in museums, they can match in an instant the fossilization process nature took millions of years to complete). But the conception Americans have of the museum is much wider than our own. To them, everything is worthy of protection, embalming, restoration. Everything can have a second birth, the eternal birth of the simulacrum. Not only are the Americans missionaries, they are also Anabaptists: having missed out on the original baptism, they dream of baptizing everything a second time and only accord value to this later sacrament which is, as we know, a repeat performance of the first, but its repetition as something more real. And this indeed is the perfect definition of the simulacrum. All Anabaptists are sectarian, and sometimes violent. Americans are no exception to this rule. To reconstruct things in their exact form, so as to present them on the Day of Judgement, they are prepared to destroy and exterminate - Thomas Münzer was an Anabaptist. Baudrillard (1989).*

The current fact that when we talk about the Russo-Ukrainian War we must make initial disclaimers about who is the attacked and who is the aggressor is still linked to this ingenuity of the signification process. Everywhere the usual symbolic mortification. But more generally, the whole sphere of "politically correct" resorts to this mechanism of identity designation through signs, of which consumption has been and still is, a pedagogy. Because politically correct relies on simulation as ideology, that is, it keeps the individual in check,

forcing him to choose between two (or more) codified social meanings. This pedagogy of simulation when it is related to the acceptance and relationship with the opposite sex (or the same one for homosexual people) becomes a real anxiety to learn. And, to conclude on the politically correct: what is more politically correct than an unconditional respect for life as a positive value?

Another practical example I mentioned above highlights instead the operation of neutralising social meanings once they have become simulacra. It is well known that the trap style, like the hip hop, was born as a subculture and became mainstream. Some authors see in this transition an increase in the political potential of hip-hop (Stapleton (1998)). I here argue the opposite, namely that a sub-culture becomes mainstream when this monopolisation and redistribution takes place and transforms it into a simulacrum, neutralising even its possible subversive charge.

The trap originated in the south of the USA as an expressive need of groups of people who were living on their skin the contrast of values between starting from scratch, from the street with all the inequalities in terms of opportunities that this entails, and the American dream ambition materialised through signs of wealth such as gold jewellery, diamonds or luxury cars (flaunted by their peers who were socially realized). As long as this cultural manifestation, whatever aesthetic judgement we have, was linked to a historical and anthropological reality, it could still be considered a sign with a referent. In 2009/2010, artists such as Gucci Main and Young Jeezy cleared customs for the sounds and rhythms of trap, which became mainstream, embedded in pop melodies, summer tunes. Important fashion companies such as Gucci and Balenciaga started to create product lines that (albeit with different declinations among them and different from the original one) recalled the trap lifestyle values. This is what I mean when I speak of monopolisation at the top of a social meaning (even one born from below, a sub-culture) and redistribution. Such redistribution is not innocent because it detaches the sign from its referent, makes it a simulacrum, thus not false, but overloaded with meaning. At this point, let us take a concrete example: a boy who wants to express transgressivity (but one could also say other meanings) is faced with a ready-made model of simulation of transgressivity. He does not write a poem or challenge the ideology behind his teacher's lecture, or at least, he does not necessarily do that either. He may stop at the model of simulation of transgressiveness offered by the production system and accept all the contradictions of the worker condition or the symbolic violence of the pedagogical relationship.

One could give another example: bagged salads contain amounts of disinfectant and plastic residues within the law (Allende et al. (2008), Gil et al. (2016)), yet they can be considered healthy food. Some critical consumers with a specific cultural capital will be able to judge and choose, while others will not: they will take those salads thinking they are healthy (some really will be, but that is not the point). For this second category of consumers is evident how the good/service functions as a simulation field of (referent-less) healthy meaning (the same goes for green unfortunately). In this last example, the good-

sign is not a simulacrum (even if it is overloaded with meaning), it is false, as in standard Marxist analysis.

Anyway, there is discrimination between rich and poor and between different cultural capitals also in food choices. But let's beware of creating an education of food for poor people: no one has the right to life, to health, to clean air, to water or to sexual pleasure; let's leave this forms of legality to the liberated slaves.

An example of social meanings' manipulation that goes beyond the narrow field of consumption, but reproduce its logic: a diner, talking about a common friend, defines him as one who reflects retrospectively on things, and gives a different judgment on past events, even after a few days. The aim was to make fun of this person, as if thinking about past events were a thing for loser in itself. Here we can see the manipulation of a social meaning. Firstly, in fact, "to reflect" does not mean "to brood", while according to that social meaning every person who thinks back to the past is a "rosicone", it is not said that there is resentment behind a reflection. Second, reflection on the past is the basis of transcendence, but modern man does not know what to do with transcendence, he lives very well in the immanence. So in this case my diner was trying to manipulate a social meaning to designate another person in a certain way according to a codified difference, but this codified difference is first of all untold, but also ideological in itself. It prevents reflection on past events (exactly as the distinctive opposition of consumption are ideological in themselves). I precisely argue in this paper that consumption, as a game of institutionally recognized signs, is one of the actual social codes that teaches to manipulate social meanings; and it is precisely in this sense that it extended to other fields of social life. Simulation and simulacra were present also in the past, I am saying that nowadays consumption is a pedagogy of simulation, which does not mean that in the past there were no other practices that taught this kind of social order.

In this broad sense, as communication system, consumption is a field of simulation that contributes both to the impoverishment of semantic encyclopedias operating within social culture and to the neutralisation of potentially subversive cultures (or sub-cultures). This occurs through the links between consumption, production, and social structure defined according to the various forms of capital identified by Bourdieu, and through the differences in languages (semantic encyclopedias and vocabularies of terms) theorised by Eco and Semprini.

Adopting a theoretical and historical perspective, one sees a continuum between consumption as a field of simulation and the continuous 'Vetrinizzazione' as Vanni Codeluppi puts it, or the portable confessionals that Bauman talks about (mobile phones) with regard to social networks. In the sense that consumption has accustomed us to the practice of simulation, until we realised that in social networks we simulate more and better, the factitious component of social meaning is, if possible, even greater. So if we look at consumption as a simulation field (to which we certainly cannot entirely reduce it) we see this line of continuity between it and the 'vetrinizzarsi', which by the way is also demanded to the



academic researchers. In general, the social injunction to produce oneself and have nothing to hide, no secrets, is in line with the simulation of identity through consumption's signs. Fundamentally it is the same thing, a prescribed freedom, it is this continuous intimation, this admirable metaphor of the void to be what one wants and to want what one is. But in the case of its virtual version, the simulative power of the *device* is immensely greater, even more intransitive (no physical contact, exchange of glances etc.) and individualistic (it is almost about an autistic subject, isolated in its virtual nebula) than that of standard consumption.

Basically, I mean that consumption as a communicative form, as an ideology of semiological reduction of the ambivalence and socially founded language, has only prepared the ground for the social culture of talking to everyone and oneself all the time. To that continuous violence done to the depth, to the individual being, to its secret.

Much of economics, with regard to consumption, did nothing more than 'naturalise' the cultural system underpinning our societies, averting change and discouraging it implicitly, which is always more effective than doing it explicitly (as conservatives do); in this regard, the 'unspoken' plays a key role compared to the 'explicit' in our social culture.

I will give two last examples, showing that the logic of consumption is much widespread and had an historical importance.

In economics department (but perhaps more broadly, in various social science departments) there is a whole ideology of objectivity, of science as opposed to rhetoric and philosophy. We note that also in this artificial opposition one of the two terms (science) is always favoured, while the way rhetoric and philosophy are spoken of is often derogatory, at least implicitly.

For example: yesterday (12/05/2022) after the presentation of the interesting book 'the privatisation of knowledge', professors were discussing the fact that not all professionals work for money. "*It is evident that doctors do not work for money*" said one of them. The first thing that came to my mind was that there are individuals who are doctors for prestige or the prestige-money mix. If we want to put it less simplistically, we can replace the word "prestige" with "social position" (at least in Bourdieu's forms of capital) and money with the tranquillity of a comfortable life. Instead, I took into account my (subjective of course) judgement of the interlocutor and said "*there are also cosmetic surgeons*". Because the latter have no objective excuse, they do not work to save lives (perhaps save minds?). Actually observing society, I could have said much more: 1) there are doctors who have chosen the profession for the social position it implies (although some disappointed, ex-post). 2) There are doctors (or nurses and many other categories aimed at 'helping their neighbour') who want to build up an image of themselves, they need the signs of altruism, the signs of being left-wing and so on. 3) There are doctors who are altruistic in the absence of signs of altruism; who only from a practical and concrete point of view help their neighbour. They want to help, they know how to do it and they do it, it ends there. They do not designate themselves (in the sense of the *design*). 4) Finally, there is a mix of these modes. And these are only the conscious aspects of the choice. But I preferred

to mention only cosmetic surgeons because they have no excuse (I am not talking about reconstructive surgery), 'objectively' in the meaning (which I assumed) of my interlocutor, they do not act to cure or save lives. Therein lies the ideology of objectivity in universities, in these unconscious dispositions towards an arbitrary idea of objectivity (that nowadays is an *habitus* for scientists, and follows a logic of consumption as a signs system as it designate the identity) and refusal of "humanistic" arguments. If we talk about consumption with this idea of objectivity in mind, thus avoiding interpretation about the reasons for choices, we will never come close to understanding the problems of inequality (Mary Douglas). This very ideology of objectivity causes it to be postulated as the basis of consumption choices; this severely limits the view of its social impact. Points 1 and 2 of the example above (and the very same *habitus* of considering "scientific" only some arguments) show how the logic of consumption, understood as the appropriation and manipulation of social meanings, (which is its social definition according to the paper's thesis), has invaded other fields, not too 'scientifically' studible unfortunately: I wish it were that simple. Consumption is a social process because follows a logic of appropriation and manipulation of social meanings and production of signs. In a word, it follow a logic of simulation. And it is precisely as an *habitus*, as pedagogy of simulation, that it has extended to other fields, from the political one (the positions on social issues that "defines" you: vax or no vax, scientific or ascientific, sovrانىst or not sovrانىst and I could tediously go on) to the representation of the self in everyday life.

Now, this simulation, of which consumption has been and is, anthropologically and historically, a pedagogy, is an ideological problem of our time.

I will try to convince the reader with an example: talking about wealth distribution and fiscal rules, a recent paper by Roventini came out, proposing some solutions to let our tax system pass from regressive to (at least) flat. I was discussing about this issue at a party, I told my interlocutor that one of the implementation problems of redistributive policies is the income determination. If you don't want to spend too much on tax audits, one of the few solutions that have been found by economists is to tax people according to the goods owned (for instance, the SUV, the house registered to the child, and so on). His answer was that he did not agree, because the state already excessively drowns entrepreneurs and those who spin money. His system of distinctive oppositions (his code the simulation stems from) was: on the one hand the moralist communistello, almost a priest, a bit "loser", who is a policeman and would like more taxes for everybody because he is a slacker and wants to be a parasite. And on the other hand the self made man, who makes a bunch and produces GDP, so he feels entitled to evade something, to ensure the lifestyle that he prefigured and earned (in all this there is a phallic element obviously). A moral that Berlusconi has ridden on, winking at the evaders, but that in Italy was perhaps already present before him. Now between these two possibilities, the subject I was speaking with, chose the second one (note that the first opinion prevent you from social and sexual relationship in certain social environments). But I did not mean either of these two, I meant that one of the best solutions

(up to now) to the problem of income determination is to look at the goods owned and to inheritance taxes. Moreover, taxing the top 5% of wealthiest population would also mean less taxes for the middle and upper-middle entrepreneurial classes. This example shows that simulation through pre-packaged social meanings (an institutional and classist code of differences, as Baudrillard and Bourdieu define consumption) is an ideological problem of our time. It draws strength both from the inconvenience caused by the deepening of the questions and from the typically bourgeois qualunquismo to transform the levity in a moral value (making it in this way immediately heavy) and to prevent itself from making deep and deepened speeches, truly opened to social change through dialogue.

However, the rationalisation of society as Weber understood it, today consists of relegating a whole series of codified social meanings to the unspoken and making 'speakable' and analyzable as accepted argument only objective things. But society are also organized around mythical codes, far away from objectivity, and our society does not escape this rule. This attitude towards an objectivistic vision of social facts<sup>4</sup> seems more an hope of certain scholars or a performative act. But the masses punctually dispel this vision by idolizing the game of signs: fashion is more than what the sociology of distinction is able to say, it is a collective passion.

The entire logic stated earlier (of the appropriation and manipulation of social meanings), which is what I claim to be the logic of consumption, is relegated to the unspoken, while manifest discourse (political, social, etc.) is tied to an 'objectivity' of the social itself. This fetishistic and ideological view of objectivity strongly precludes the possibility of social changes. This is one additional reason to resume a post-structural approach to consumption. A great strength of this social logic, which makes it difficult to eradicate through a cultural struggle, is the fact that simulation takes effect of reality and we are already a society that believes in simulacra (of which greenwashing, pinkwashing and so on, are nothing more than the most naive and recognizable versions).

This is why I raise the importance of taking up the post-structuralist vision of consumption (which also means changing school and academic curricula), not to create a general deterministic theory, but to rediscover the links of the sociology of consumption with a Marxist and semiotic vision in today's society, to recognise the ideology and the total relativity, hence the possibility of change, in any cultural system.

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<sup>4</sup>In Italian "fact" is the past perfect of "to do", this should induce some question on the artificiality of, at least, social facts. But one could argue that even an earthquake is a social event from the moment when what matters for a social science is the effect and reaction to it of the social body.

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