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'Contextualizing and Critiquing the Fantastic Prosumer: Power, Alienation and Hegemony'

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Contextualizing and Critiquing the Fantastic Prosumer: Power, Alienation and Hegemony

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Abstract: The ‘prosumer’ has emerged to become a central figure in contemporary culture. Through the melding of production with consumption, both mainstream and progressive analysts conceptualize prosumption to be a liberating, empowering and, for some, a prospectively revolutionary institution. In this paper, these fantastic associations are critically assessed using an approach that situates prosumption activities, including contemporary online applications often referred to as ‘co-creation,’ in three social-historical contexts: capitalism as a political economy dominated by mediated abstractions; capitalist society as a hierarchical order; and alienation as a pervasive norm. Among other conclusions, we find that prosumption (particularly its Web 2.0 iterations), constitutes an emerging hegemonic institution; one that effectively frames and contains truly radical imaginations while also tapping into existing predilections for commodity-focused forms of self-realization.

Keywords: prosumption, co-creation, hegemony, abstraction, alienation, political economy, information and communication technologies (ICTs)

Introduction

The prosumer has emerged to become a central figure in both mainstream and radical visions of the future. Marketers, for example, now see the melding of the producer with the consumer – the *prosumer* – to be an essential step forward in their efforts to overcome cynicism in a saturated media marketplace. Some even see prosumption as the precursor

of some fantastic social changes. According to Kozinets et al. (2008), “With the diffusion of networking technologies, collective consumer innovation is taking on new forms that are transforming the nature of consumption and work and, with it, society...” (p. 339).

Among progressives, arguably the most vaunted of prosumer developments involve Web 2.0 applications. Through blogs, wikis and social networking sites, millions now are crafting and transmitting texts, sounds and images instantly worldwide while new opportunities are emerging for people to affect change through increasingly creative and collectivist ways of acting and thinking (Jenkins, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2006; Deuze, 2007).ⁱ As Alvin Toffler prophesized in his book *The Third Wave* (Toffler, 1980), for many, the prosumer appears to be a leading figure in the construction of nothing less than a new civilization.

But having said this, prosumption itself is not new. People have always labored, without remuneration, in the process of creating and preparing things for consumption. However, as George Ritzer argues,

The contemporary world is not defined by the preeminence of prosumption, but rather with its emergence as a phenomenon that is now growing significant enough to rival production and consumption in importance. It is the coexistence of these three, and not the predominance of any one of them, that defines our age (Ritzer, 2007: 3).

While Ritzer may be exaggerating, his assertion reflects a substantive trend: the active, aware and technologically-engaged prosumer is, indeed, ascendant.

Although various political economy perspectives have been applied to critique prosumption (e.g. Ritzer, 2007; Humphreys and Grayson, 2008; Fuchs, 2009; van Dijck, 2009; Zwick et al., 2009), generally what has been missing from these is an effort to relate it to broader socio-economic conditions – conditions in which it has emerged and now is being applied. In this paper we examine prosumption in more historical and sociological terms by assessing it in three structural contexts: capitalism as a political economy dominated by mediated abstractions; capitalist society as a hierarchical order; and alienation as a pervasive norm. By relating prosumption to each, we are better positioned to assess the claims made by its many proponents (e.g. Kotler, 1986; Prahalad

and Ramaswamy, 2004; von Hippel, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Deuze, 2007; Bruns, 2008; Kozinets et al., 2008;). In other words, the fantastic claims being made concerning prosumption and the prosumer now need to be assessed using similarly ambitious contexts.

To do this, *first*, we outline prosumption's lineage and the reasoning used to substantiate optimistic claims related to it. *Second*, we contextualize prosumption in terms of the structural contexts listed above. And *third*, we arrive at conclusions about the prosumer's likely implications for power relations. On this last point, we argue that prosumption's institutionalization is an important elaboration of what in most relatively 'developed' political economies constitutes a hegemonic order – one in which rule takes place through the consent or acquiescence of the ruled. Rather than an institution crafted to facilitate the development of a more reflexive political culture – one led by an increasingly equal and non-alienated polity – we conclude that prosumption more probably will perpetuate the structural conditions used in this paper to contextualize it.

Toffler and the Birth of the Prosumer

For Alvin Toffler the prosumer was to be a liberator of humankind; the person whose technology-mediated ingenuities would reach new heights of creativity and self-sufficiency, overcoming alienation and forging a better world. In *The Third Wave* (Toffler, 1980), Toffler argued that people would participate more directly in customizing the goods and services they consumed. Through the pervasive use of computers networked to one another as well as corporations (along with sophisticated robotics), Toffler predicted that consumption increasingly would become integrated with production, distribution and exchange; so much so that power over the production process would shift into the hands of everyday people. Mass industrialization and consumption, he said, would be eclipsed by self-customization led by the hybrid producer-consumer.

The prosumer, said Toffler, is the outcome *and* agent of a new civilization. Unlike humanity's agrarian past (the First Wave) or the more recent industrial era (the Second Wave), a generally improved society – one in which individuals are empowered to fulfill

their personal needs and desires – will emerge in what Toffler calls history’s Third Wave. The Second Wave, he says, was built around factory production and the nation state. It structurally and ideologically emphasized standardization, specialization, synchronization, concentration, maximization and centralization. With the Third Wave Toffler anticipates their disintegration. Synchronization, for instance, will wane as workers will be asked to follow (and, indeed, some will prefer) more flexible schedules (i.e. flex-time). In addition, technologies will facilitate flex-time in leisure pursuits. Regimented mass media offerings will be eroded by the audience’s preference to watch, read or listen to what they want, when and where they want. Eventually, writes Toffler, the home will become an “electronic cottage” (Ibid: ch. 16); the locale where work and leisure take place and where the prosumer ultimately emerges due to the attractiveness of prosumption-related freedoms.

To repeat, for Toffler, the prosumer will become nothing less than a central agent of historical progress, reflecting and generating “the first truly humane civilization in recorded history” (Ibid: 11). Note, however, how freedom and this civilization are conceptualized. For Toffler, it is the freedom of the *individual* – the individual as both producer and consumer; the individual exercising his capacities in terms of what C. B. Macpherson called “proprietary individualism” (Macpherson, 1962: 3). In this context (originally articulated by Locke in terms of private property as a natural right and Bentham who viewed human beings as a bundle of appetites demanding satisfaction), according to Macpherson, the individual is “the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual [is] seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself” (Ibid).

In the Third Wave, says Toffler, individual property owners will produce their own goods and services for corporations through paid contractual arrangements and, also, through non-remunerated contracts involving some kind of reciprocity with other prosumers. In this emerging “practopia” (Toffler, 1980: 357), people will consider one another to be equally free as vendors of prosumer-generated commodities. Thus, while proprietary individualism provides the ontological justification for Third Wave socio-economic relations, it also deepens a political-economic order in which people are interconnected primarily through the exchange of commodities. Indeed, what Toffler idealizes

is a system in which disparities persist, at least in terms of differing capabilities to procure needed or desired commodities. Clearly, then, although the Third Wave is portrayed in revolutionary terms, according to its originating author, this emerging civilization does not transcend capitalism. Instead, it might well constitute the market system's apogee.

Historically Situating the Prosumer

Toffler's conceptualization of prosumption emerged amidst a more general zeitgeist concerning information and communication technologies (ICTs) and their socio-economic propensities. In 1962, Fritz Machlup published his groundbreaking study, *The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States*, in which he quantified the growth of information-based occupations and activities (Machlup, 1962). Three years later, Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol argued that information technologies provide the potential for "objective" knowledge to become the basis for public policy rather than "ideology" (Bell and Kristol, 1965). Bell's subsequent book, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (Bell, 1973), advanced these arguments in its prediction that quantitative developments concerning knowledge-based activities will have qualitative implications, including the arrival of a more "rational" world order. Thus, with *The Third Wave*, a new stage of history again was prognosticated, but this time emphasizing the purportedly revolutionary implications of technology itself, particularly in terms of the capacities it facilitates.

The historical context for the prosumer's recent ascent – in conjunction with 'information society' and more contemporary rhetoric concerning 'globalization' – stems from the collapse of Fordism in the 1970s and the subsequent rise of neoliberalism and the political-economic turn, among corporate (and state) policy elites, to ICTs as decisive economic resources (Comor, 2008; Zwick et al., 2009;). During this period, in the United States, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs-cum-corporate behemoths promoted the ideals of the free market, free trade and the free flow of information. In the wake of the de-industrialization of the northeast, the American southwest filled the economic policy vacuum (Davis, 1985) stressing the country's comparative advantage in 'information

economy' activities. The Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, followed by NAFTA, followed by the WTO – all codifying information activities as services with requisite property rights guarantees – followed. During this period, both Al Gore and Newt Gingrich (in the 1990s Toffler was a Gingrich consultant) opined and legislated on behalf of corporate interests as well as those on the American Left who idealized the social vision propagated in *Wired* magazine, namely its version of Jeffersonian democracy (Barbrook, 2007). As Thomas Friedman wrote in the late-1990s in the *Wall Street Journal*, “It’s a post-industrial world, and America today is good at everything that is post-industrial” (Quoted in Ibid: 266).

Related to these developments was the emergence of post-modernist sensibilities as well as a business literature elevating consumption and the consumer’s status vis-à-vis production and the working class. According to Zwick et al. (2009), such seemingly disparate interests coalesced through a shared commercial and academic concept called ‘co-creation.’ⁱⁱ Rather than a Fordist political economy stressing mass market products, in recent years “ambiences that foster contingency, experimentation, and playfulness among consumers” emerged to become the focus of a growing number of corporate strategies (Zwick et al., 2009: 166).

Despite rhetoric associating prosumption with revolutionary change (e.g. Tapscott and Williams, 2006; Kozinets et al., 2008), when assessed historically, as mentioned above, prosumption is not entirely new. From the first ready-made sauces (sold in London at the end of the eighteenth century) to today’s home computers, consumers have always participated in producing what they consume (i.e. emptying the sauce out of its jar and heating it up or setting up one’s new pc and learning how to use it). Similarly, in the field of media studies, van Dijck (2009) points out that theorists have long recognized various levels of audience participation in the development of entertainment and information commodities. Building on this, it seems to us that the one substantive difference between past and present forms of prosumption is the consumer’s now more *conscious* (i.e. consensual) participation.ⁱⁱⁱ

To give just one example, the online virtual world called *Second Life* has been the object of much fanciful speculation (Strangelove, 2005). By constructing one’s own cyberspace identity and socializing online, some regard it to be a model of progressive

and creative prosumption; transcending, it is assumed, proprietary corporate interests by engaging people in opportunities to construct their preferred social order. Yet how ‘free’ and ‘autonomous’ are *Second Life*’s participants? What kinds of knowledge are they prosuming? Indeed, what (beyond the vaguely ‘imminent’) is *Second Life* contributing to efforts or capacities that redress the real-world of disparity, exploitation and alienation? In response to such questions, at this stage of our analysis, suffice it to say that *Second Life* is, in fact, a private entity owned and run by the profit-making Internet firm *Linden Lab*. Not surprisingly, while in *Second Life*, some prosumption activities are pursued for the sake of generating exchange values. Individual players retain elements of what they create (in terms of intellectual property rights) while buying and selling virtual commodities (from avatar fashions to ‘real estate’) using the site’s own money called Linden dollars (a currency convertible into real U.S. funds). According to Herman et al. (2006), in *Second Life*, “The market economy itself is, in a very real sense, the broadest level of interface at work, informing all notions of property, propriety, creativity, and individuality...” (Ibid: 202).

Regardless of such decidedly non-revolutionary examples, many have a vested interest in eschewing these conditions, promoting instead prosumption as an empowering development. The leading group (if we can, for the sake of argument, lump them together) now promoting it are advertisers and marketers (McConnell and Huba, 2006; Nadeau, 2006; Kozinets et al., 2008). For several decades, they faced mounting challenges in an increasingly cluttered promotional environment, alongside the growth of a cynical, ad-avoiding public. One solution has been the use of prosumption to develop corporate-customer ‘relationships.’ With ICTs and more recent Web 2.0 developments, corporate marketers now are developing the means of collecting, collating and applying precise forms of information about consumer behaviors and preferences. By actively engaging people in fun, creative and often ego-enhancing endeavors, more precise and timely data about what customers want is being accumulated and, just as importantly, new techniques are being crafted to overcome their resistance (Comor, 2008: 86-88, 162-64; Zwick et al, 2009: 168-71).

We turn now to a critical assessment of the claims made by prosumption’s proponents. To do this, we focus on three tendencies or structural parameters. The first is

the fact that we live in a political economy dominated by mediated abstractions. The second are the hierarchical modes of organization that characterize our contemporary socio-economic order. And the third is the pervasive political-cultural condition called alienation.

Prosumption and Mediated Abstractions

As Marx (1973) emphasized, human relationships in capitalist societies are characterized by a multiplicity of mediations. Perhaps the most fundamental of these are two legal institutions: private property and contracts (particularly the wage labor contract). Through the state-backed imposition of the former, people are compelled to work in order to, under the auspices of the latter, earn the monies needed to acquire what they need or desire. Social relations mediated by private property thus compel the vast majority, possessing nothing other than their labor power, to sell it for a wage. Once these institutions are entrenched, capitalism is established and a new historical dynamic unfolds. Customary local laws and explicit day-to-day power relations – formerly mediated by inter-personal oral histories – are transformed (despite predictable resistance) into written laws and regulations imposed by an impersonal central authority.

Before capitalism, power was visibly part of everyday life as it was directly experienced through explicit hierarchies, obligations and customs. A core reason for this transparency was the very public nature of surplus extraction. Whether it was the tribute paid by the peasant, the tithe handed over by the serf, or the forced labor performed by the slave, workers were explicitly *unfree*. But with capitalist relations – in societies mediated by contractual relations ‘freely’ entered into among seemingly equal participants – such inequalities are occluded. Rather than the result of tradition, reciprocity or, more pointedly, the barrel of a gun, in capitalist political economies, surpluses are extracted through often mystical ‘market forces’ backed by a universally respected ‘rule of law’ – a rule codified and enforced by state authorities. In this increasingly complex political economy, money – i.e. the price system – becomes both the shared unit of quantification (measuring both ‘development’ and ‘success’) and an essential medium of exchange. Indeed, as the price system becomes a

logistical necessity, it also tends to become a conceptual norm. Capitalists and their executives focus on abstract balance sheets instead of flesh-and-blood people while virtually anything is made comparable with everything else.^{iv} As Dickens observed in *Hard Times*, the laborer is treated as merely an inanimate tool rather than a whole human being. With capitalism, *concrete human relations are neglected while mediations proliferate*.

Exchange relations involving a tangible awareness of where things come from, who made them and the human and environmental implications of their production are marginalized. Power relations, once directly experienced, become cloaked under the unimpeachable ideals of ‘individualism,’ ‘freedom’ and ‘equality.’ Physically and psychologically interdependent human beings become seemingly autonomous. In modern capitalist political economies, as Marx argued, “individuals are...ruled by *abstractions*” (Marx, 1973: 164, author’s emphasis).

Prosumption, as a liberating and empowering institution, constitutes yet another abstraction. This is not to say that such associations (individualism, freedom and equality) are mere apparitions. For both Marx and our purposes it is important to point out that abstractions instead precede knowledge; they are, in fact, the stuff of relationships and social activities. Rather than thoughts becoming things (Virno, 2004), Marx’s view is different. For him, an abstraction is fundamentally “a relation, or even a thing, which then becomes a thought” (Toscano, 2008: 282). Unlike the ‘realities’ of biology and nature, those ‘realities’ that are dependent on the construction and maintenance of society constitute, for Marx, *real* abstractions. Exchange, for example, is a very real activity involving material relationships yet it also constitutes a social concoction – a conceptualized reality based on historically crafted structures and relational norms.^v

Such lived, real abstractions enable us to better understand why, under contemporary socio-economic relations, stark disparities, exploitative relations and alienated ways of living remain largely obfuscated – disparities, exploitative relations and alienated lives that supposedly are becoming more transparent through the use of ICTs. For Marx, the production process itself abstracts labor. After all, when labor power is treated as a commodity – when it is organized and manipulated primarily in terms of its

commercial exchange value – the status of human beings as exploited producers is diminished. As with everything else, when the price system and commodity exchange dominate how a society is structured and the people in it relate to one another, flesh-and-blood realities are trivialized not (primarily) as a result of psychic manipulation but, instead, as an outcome of how human beings live and interact.

As we pursue below using a neo-Gramscian approach to hegemony (Williams, 1977: 108-14), the fact that many believe themselves to be both freer and empowered through their participation in prosumption is in part the outcome of its status as a real abstraction. After all, through her actions as a prosumer, the individual *really is* able to express herself directly. As such, the commodities she co-creates *really* do provide her with more meaning. Moreover, the goods and services she consciously prosumes *really* do tend to be more (materially and psychologically) useful than those that are mass produced. Nevertheless, as we explain below, the practice of prosumption also tends to entrench status quo relations and structures and, in so doing, as an institutional mediator of socio-economic relations, it generally frames and contains prospectively radical imaginations.

The Prosumer and Hierarchy

Capitalist relations have always been hierarchical. Beyond its fundamental class-based asymmetries, over time the growing scale of business activities has necessitated a vast elaboration of professional managers. Especially over the past two centuries, the owners and directors of firms have come to have little direct experience of production itself or, indeed, the work of their legions of employees. While only the executives at the very top of the corporate pyramid are responsible for *all* a company's activities, today even these individuals are compelled – through logistical necessity – to conceptualize and manage their employees using statistics, spread-sheets, efficiency data and the like. Indeed, over roughly the past thirty years, ICTs have enabled unprecedented developments along these lines – developments in which the spatial and temporal limits of production, distribution, exchange and consumption have been extended in ways previously unimagined.

Particularly since Taylorist scientific management methods were introduced more than a century ago, capitalists have become less reliant on their employees' knowledge and creativity. In response to this general disempowerment of workers^{vi} various forms of resistance have taken place but these, over the long-term, have been countered through a range of methods: from coercion (directly involving state mechanisms such as policing and the court system) to co-optation (including 'standard-of-living' improvements focusing on consumption) to the more recent widescale use of ICTs to eliminate 'redundant' employees (Harvey, 2005).

In addition to the use of technologies to shed skilled positions, ICTs have been applied to coordinate disparate production and distribution systems (or, perhaps more accurately, they have facilitated these spatial developments as they have enabled central authorities to manage them). Moreover, for the majority of workers, ICTs are being used to monitor activities and control communications. For example, transnational firms such as *McDonald's* and *WalMart* use technologies and software to standardize worker performance and interactions. For most of their workers ICTs are used to circumvent even basic tasks such as entering prices into cash registers (as scanners and image-based touch-screen buttons have been universalized). Independent thought is being further eroded through software programs that orchestrate customer-staff relations both online and during telephone conversations. As Rule and Besen conclude after reviewing empirical studies on such developments (Gordon, 1996; Gimlin et al., 2003; Head, 2003), "the net effect on the intellectual content" of most labor activities "is surely negative" (Rule and Besen, 2007: 25).^{vii}

ICTs, of course, also have been applied in ways that generate new occupations. According to recent studies by the European Union sponsored WORKS Project,^{viii} although "upskilling" is taking place for the minority, in practice many of these jobs compel workers to process and apply increasing amounts of information at faster speeds. This trend, says one report,

...means that neither the upskilling nor the importance of new skills necessarily result in a strengthening of the professional competences... These new skill requirements may, on the contrary, in some cases jeopardise the development and use of the core professional

skills, such as was observed specifically in the occupations in R&D and design where they encroach the required time for creativity, reflection and for ‘thinking’ ... We may conclude that, due to this processes of ‘skill intensification’, ‘more difficult’ seems not necessarily to be more interesting or more ‘fun’, but often is reported as ‘more speedy’ and ‘more stressed’ (Ramioul and De Vroom, 2009: 66).

Despite such findings, proponents of prosumption specifically (Deuze, 2007; Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2008) and ICTs generally (von Hippel, 2005; Gates, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2006) continue to forecast the ongoing development of non-alienating, fulfilling knowledge-rich occupations accompanied by a gradual disassembly of socio-economic hierarchies. For them, such activities are proliferating both in the private sector and the home. The citizen journalist, for example, now can circumvent central authorities, even if his reports are limited to a 140-character ‘tweet’ via *Twitter*. If more people are engaged in ‘immaterial labor’ and ‘knowledge-based’ occupations^{ix} surely (they assume) corporations and states will (intentionally or unintentionally) lose control of established levers of power.

A manufacturing example of this assumed flattening of hierarchies is the success of *LEGO*’s Digital Designer software program. It enables online participants to design and build with virtual *LEGO* bricks. Once submitted, the player/designer is offered a material version of her ‘co-creation’ for a price. Virtual models also can be shared and the advice of other *LEGO* enthusiasts solicited. On rare occasions *LEGO* executives adopt a design and manufacture it for sale in toy stores. In return, the prosumer receives ‘design recognition’ but not financial compensation (Zwick et al., 2009: 181).

In assessing such developments, at this stage we might well ask ‘what kind of knowledge is being prosumed?’ Notions that either the citizen journalist or the online *LEGO* designer are engaged in some kind of ‘mass intellectuality’ (Virno, 2004) are rather vague, while to say, as Toffler might, that such activities reflect and further the retreat of Second Wave hierarchies itself overstates matters. Nevertheless, some contemporary progressives suggest that these and similar examples are prospectively revolutionary. Zwick et al. (2009), for instance, write that prosumption’s exploitation of “the productive value of social cooperation, communication, and affect...represents a

closing of the economic and ontological gap between consumption and production...” (p. 182). Almost three decades before this, Toffler argued that prosumption’s transcendent potential lies in it overcoming “the historic breach between the producer and consumer” (Toffler, 1980: 11). Once this is accomplished, for both contemporary progressives and the prosumer’s mainstream supporters, the individual will be empowered to fully realize his potentials while “encouraging and capturing the creative know-how” of what some call the “creative common” (Zwick et al., 2009: 184).

In addition to pointing out this remarkable coming together of politically disparate analysts,^x we also should underline that both mainstream and progressive theorists have arrived at similar conclusions regarding the primary agent of this new social order: the prosumer or co-creator. For mainstream observers, the perfect market system – one that produces what people want, when and where they want it – is idealized hand-in-hand with the ‘sovereign’ consumer (Gates, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2006). For progressives, co-creation’s assumed pluralization of power and creativity enables the ‘autonomous’ worker to openly commune and realize Marx’s peripheral yet now idealized conceptualization of a “general intellect.”^{xi}

It is perhaps no coincidence that this perspective has emerged alongside the popularity of Hardt and Negri’s writings (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Hardt and Negri, 2004) and what is called ‘autonomist Marxism.’ According to Negri, “work processes have shifted from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine” (Negri quoted in Terranova, 2000: 33). This “machine” constitutes the fusion of production processes with capacities that are associated with social interaction and communication. As with Web 2.0 developments and prosumption/co-creation, a growing global workforce is said to be involved in labor that develops, refines and intensifies both know-how and cooperation (Virno, 2006).^{xii}

This perspective lacks empirical evidence. It also conveys unorthodox readings of both Marx and, more generally, the sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). As one WORKS Project study discovered, even in organizations where tacit forms of knowledge and creativity are deemed to be beneficial, the trend is “towards further rationalisation, standardisation and knowledge codification through the introduction of bureaucratic processes or knowledge codifying technologies” (Ramioul and De Vroom,

2009: 85-6). The reason, postulates another (Huws and Dahlmann, 2009), is that the innovation and commodification process, under capitalism, is never ending. Corporations pursue and governments promote creative, knowledge-based developments followed by their rationalization, management and full exploitation. As knowledge advances alongside the technologies needed to commercialize it, activities once viewed to be fulfilling and non-alienating are de-skilled, routinized or eliminated (Ibid: 33-4).

Beyond these considerations, we also should ask questions concerning the kinds of ‘creativity’ and ‘autonomy’ that are possible given contemporary political-economic dynamics. Is it a creativity and autonomy that liberates humanity to see beyond commodity-framed relations and reified individual identities or does it, instead, ultimately co-opt and pacify?

From a Marxist perspective, the autonomists are partially correct. Capital seeks profits (through the realization of surplus values) by using machines (including ICTs) to elaborate and coordinate the division of labor. This, historically, has implied spatial variations in the production process as well as the capitalist’s centralization of control. As this unfolds, the political economy’s hierarchical tendencies are elaborated and all kinds of specializations spring up; managers and administrators emerge and workers are purposefully de-skilled. While this process is cyclical in that the early stages of an industry may entail a period of relative autonomy and creativity for workers, these tendencies generally repeat themselves primarily due to the competitive and systemic dynamics driving market economies (Huws and Ramioul, 2009).

More debatable are the cultural and intellectual implications of these dynamics. Of course new skills arise but, for the most part, the abilities and proclivities leading to a global proletariat’s revolutionary consciousness and prospective empowerment probably are not among them. Rather than the ability to produce something in ways that incorporates a broad range of reflexive skills, interests and (in some cases) artistic ambitions, most contemporary workers are compelled to become evermore adaptive, flexible and efficient. For most, over the *longue durée*, ICTs extend existing divisions between those who conceptualize and those who execute (Braverman, 1974; Huws, 2003; Ramioul, 2007). This pattern is even present in the computer software industry. Indeed, Taylorist principles have been applied in the production of code as component tasks of its

development are divided among teams of programmers (in private companies such as *Microsoft*) while, in the public realm, fragments of open-source software are developed by disparately located individuals. One of the best known examples of the latter is *Linux*.

With *Linux* software, the transparency of its underlying code enables a vast pool of mostly unpaid workers laboring online to assess, improve and evolve it. Their suggested revisions are sent to an assembly node where strict control is exercised over what (if anything) is modified. For logistical and economic reasons, one individual and his colleagues monitor this complex division of labor – Linus Torvalds and the Linux Mark Institute. According to Chopra and Dexter, in the case of *Linux*

...the disciplining of labour power is an intricate affair – a delicate mix of cooperation and cooptation. Open source shows such a mixture in its co-optation of the utopian spirit of a free software model, as workers have already bought into the ideology of open source or free software production... While the education and flexibility of open source programmers make it harder for capitalists to control the labour force, control does exist (Chopra and Dexter, 2005: 10).

Yet the source code or ‘kernel’ of *Linux* is available to anyone with a copying device. There are no legal restrictions blocking individuals from selling it to others (although this is an unlikely event since it is freely available). Interests can, however, profit from *Linux* by building and selling services stemming from it (e.g. *redhat.com*). However, because Torvalds ‘owns’ the original code/kernel, such new service vendors generally are compelled to cooperate with him in ways that retain and enhance his dominant position. First, Torvalds is free to provide or deny his Institute’s technical support. Second, if others initiate profitable *Linux*-based services, he is free to develop similar ones (probably at lower costs). And, third, rival service providers, if they utilize an independent programmer’s (usually non-remunerated) code, are legally compelled to enter into a licensing agreement with *Linux* directly (Chopra and Dexter, 2005). Barring a radical reform of U.S. and international law, what is known as the *Linux* open source business model (Rivlin, 2003) likely will continue for the foreseeable future.^{xiii}

Another much discussed example of open source are wikis – online sites with content that almost anyone can add to or modify. The largest of these is the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*. With approximately ten million registered English-language users, about 150,000 individuals modify content each month (Kendall, 2009). Although the most commonly cited motivation for contributing to *Wikipedia* is an interest in sharing information, the site routinely is used to promote commercial and political interests (Haffner, 2007). And while wikis sometimes are portrayed as transcending the instrumental logic of accumulation (rekindling, for some, a pre-capitalist commons and gift economy), the historical dynamic of capitalism suggests a different future: as the most creative stage of their development ends, vested interests, seeking to market to or profit from others, likely will colonize an increasing number of wikis.^{xiv}

As we develop below, what seems for some to be a reversal of history constitutes, in fact, its extension. To more fully explain this we now ask if the ‘creativity’ and ‘autonomy’ that some currently associate with prosumption is possible as long as the workers/consumers involved remain exploited and their products commodified? And related to this, we pose another question: can prosumption, as an emerging institution, possibly facilitate the development of socio-economic conditions that are antithetical to a pervasive condition of contemporary existence: alienation?

Prosumption and Alienation

A fundamental condition of life in capitalist political economies is alienation.^{xvxi} As Marx put it (Marx, 1984), when alienated, a person’s own activities become “an alien power” standing over and against him (p. 53). The concept itself precedes Marx. In the Old Testament alienation is equated with idolatry. For the prophets, man is criticized for spending his energy and creativity on idols; idols that man himself has built but now worships as if they are independent of his own creation.^{xvii}

Through mediations and abstractions, many are alienated from their own powers as creators. Indeed, some tend to idolize their own social products – especially money and technology. “Man,” writes Erich Fromm, “has created a world of man made things... He has constructed a complicated social machine to administer the technical machine he

built. Yet this whole creation of his stands over and above him... He is owned by his own creation, and has lost ownership of himself” (Fromm, 1955, p. 115). Fromm emphasizes alienation as a state of being; a condition of living in capitalist society. Usually it is not consciously experienced. Instead, it is often expressed through depression, aggression and self-destructive behaviors (Erikson, 1986).^{xviii}

Recent evidence demonstrates that those most active online – what a *Forrester Research* report calls the Internet’s “actual creators” (defined as people who have posted a blog, updated a web page, or uploaded video within the past month) and we might refer to as Web 2.0 prosumers – constitute the minority (24 percent) (Bernoff, 2009). Among these individuals still fewer are engaged in anything remotely progressive or transformative, as the *Forrester* surveys show them to be involved in mostly entertainment and branding activities. And while contributors to *Wikipedia* are motivated by different things than those who upload their photographs onto *Flickr* or others who take part in virtual reality via *Second Life*, the vast majority are taking part for less than altruistic or intellectual reasons (Cheshire and Antin, 2008; van Dijck, 2009; van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009: 862). “To align all kinds of user motives for online participation as community driven,” conclude van Dijck and Nieborg, “is a rhetorical ploy popular among advertisers, who like to present telephone companies as being in the business of ‘connecting people’ or promote credit card companies as ‘facilitators of love and affection’ (van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009: 863).^{xix}

To reiterate a point made previously, technological applications give capital the ability to constantly revolutionize the production process in ways that separate mental from manual labor, facilitating scientific modes of management and control (Braverman, 1974; Huws, 2003; Ramioul, 2007). This, to repeat, is not to say that workers (and people more generally as these principles are applied to the broader culture) have not resisted and, in these struggles, have not directly shaped the course of history. Indeed, critics of Braverman have, among other points, argued that workers play a far more active role in this process, organizing (often successfully) in ways that have produced materially beneficial compromises (Burawoy, 1979; Edwards, 1980). Still other critiques of the scientific management thesis have described contemporary ‘information economy’ developments as *re*-skilling rather than de-skilling (Wilson, 1988) – an interpretation we

believe to be dubious in light of ongoing and usually successful efforts to rationalize labor activities, codify the knowledge that is produced and, eventually, subsume workplace creativity (Armstrong, 1988; Huws and Dahlmann, 2009; Ramioul and De Vroom, 2009).^{xx}

As Marx's final "moment" in the production process, consumption similarly has become an alienating activity as the commodities of our own (social) making are infused with qualities and capacities that have little or nothing to do with their utilitarian attributes. Not only are things and services now typically idolized, generally speaking, the higher the exchange value (something's value in relation to other things, i.e. what it can be sold for), the more fantastic is the use value (something's value in satisfying wants or needs).^{xxi} Veblen originally identified this in terms of status and "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen, 1953) while more recent writers assess this form of alienation as a central characteristic of contemporary culture (Bauman, 2007).

Because, at first blush, the prosumer appears to be aware and in control of her productive and consumptive activities, she appears to be a prospectively transcendent figure. This, however, is a mistake. According to Toffler, "A revolution in the media must mean a revolution in the psyche" (Toffler, 1980: 389) and the "de-massification" of media will impel people to look inwards for their identities and preferences. People subsequently will expect others to value them for their individuality and uniqueness rather than their ability to follow mass advertising. But in this "practopia" – seemingly anchored in a "do-it-for-yourself" work ethic (Ibid: 356) – Toffler fails to recognize that the fundamental conditions behind alienation remain unchanged. The seemingly free and autonomous prosumer has not forsaken exchange relations, for how could she if private property and contract relations remain entrenched institutions; entrenched in their mediation of both socio-economic relations and consciousness itself.

As Martin Morris argues, the very presence of exchange relations in capitalist society (involving the commodification of both things and human labor) in fact "*depends* on actors repressing consciousness of the socialness of their act" (Morris, 2001: 88, author's emphasis). Through the concept real abstraction, we thus can recognize such activities – including prosumption – as essential components of alienation. For Marx, the universal institutionalization of commodified exchange relations (i.e. "the commodity

form”) itself mediates a repressed existence; one in which the mind sees socially constructed relations as ‘voluntary’ and ‘empowering’ (which at a lived, concrete level, they are) yet, in some fundamental respects, they are not.

In the realm of consumption, arguably the prosumer’s focus on co-creating products constitutes as idolatrous a relationship to things as was experienced during the industrial Second Wave. Echoing the call of some liberal feminists for wages to be paid to “housewives,” Toffler argues that the prosumer and its valuation of housework will, in effect, improve the status of women. But, here again, surely what the prosumer reflects and develops – including social norms and attitudes – is itself little more than an alien force: the abstract power of private property and social relations mediated by contracts and the price system.

Let us elaborate this point by examining what, precisely, the prosumer is producing. One way to do this that clarifies prosumption’s implications for alienation is to assess the prosumer’s role in co-creating either use or exchange values. All commodities, of course, have both. Under capitalism, however, exchange value priorities tend to dominate. For prosumption activities to truly constitute a new direction in socio-economic relations – to, in effect, prioritize the creation and distribution of use values – prosumers need to work/create primarily for their social or intrinsic needs rather than for exchange. Whether or not what is produced/co-created benefits the individual or the group (i.e. society or the corporation), if the purpose and result of prosumer labor is the advancement of exchange values or profits, status quo relations will remain largely unchanged. To put it more simply, beyond the prosumer’s economic exploitation, if prosumption is primarily about making money, existing material relations are perpetuated. On the other hand, if prosumer activities are used in the creation of non-commodified products and services – things developed and shared primarily for their material, psychological or social usefulness – those who argue that prosumption is a liberating and potentially revolutionary development have an intriguing point.

One reason why this is so is that socio-economic relations guided primarily by exchange value priorities are quite different than those that prioritize use values. Exchange values, because they aim to satisfy existing wants and needs in the context of capitalist relations (most obviously to make a sale), tend to embody existing realities; in

effect reproducing the way things are. Use value priorities, however, will more likely open doors to different destinations. As selling what is created is not important, producing for the sake of creativity, community and social welfare becomes more probable (Humphreys and Grayson, 2008). With exchange relation priorities – especially in light of marketplace competition and the price system’s responsiveness to consumer preferences – new ideas and fashions of course proliferate *but* these are produced and disseminated within the framework of status quo political-economic relations.

If the above exchange-use value comparison is correct, we now need to ask specifically what does the prosumer get out of participating? Why would so many take part in co-creation activities that, ultimately, are exploitative and alienating? To answer this (without resorting to vague references to ideological dominance or ‘false consciousness’) we turn to the neo-Gramscian concept of hegemony in the section below. For now, suffice it to say that consumers have always taken part in the creation of use values even when these activities are primarily framed in terms of exchange (for example, to make a simple cup of tea, we labor to boil water and infuse it with tea leaves).^{xxii} As such, Web 2.0 and other prosumption activities are, in fact, elaborations of existing norms. But more than this, to quote Tapscott and Williams, “people get big thrills from hacking a product, making something unique, showing it to their friends, and having other people adopt their ideas” (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 129). But why?

According to Zygmunt Bauman, in our consumerist culture, when the alienated are ‘empowered’ with ICTs, unprecedented opportunities emerge for people to seek a sense of self-worth by marketing themselves to others (as if they are genuinely autonomous, valued members of their communities). In other words, the online prosumer may well be motivated to take part as a way of promoting and selling himself to others as yet another commodity. “In a society of consumers,” writes Bauman (2007), “no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity... [Herein the subject] is focused on an unending effort to itself become, and remain, a sellable commodity” (p. 12). For this alienated polity, the quest is to be included in a cultural tapestry of exchangeable commodities. In this context, becoming known to others – even if it only involves posting a blog, attracting *Facebook* ‘friends’ or being credited with a *LEGO* design – thus is

idealized. Indeed, celebrities as brands have become our culture's primary role models.^{xxiii}

Although the prosumer may well understand his activities as expressions of his individualism and interest in social connection, directly or indirectly, these are taking place in pursuit of exchange values (see Ritzer, 2007; Bernoff, 2009; Fuchs, 2009; van Dijck, 2009; van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009; Zwick et al., 2009). It is in this context that the paradox of prosumption becomes clear: on one hand, the prosumer acts in response to his state of alienation; on the other, the act of prosumption itself may deepen this state of being. Indeed, in many contemporary cases, alienation “takes yet another turn when one considers the case of a consumer purchasing his or her own labor back from a company” (Humphreys and Grayson, 2008: 14).

In the world of the prosumer, what is produced, where it is produced and who has access to the products being produced increasingly become the domain of private (individual or corporate) interests. Presumably, since capitalism and its mediating institutions remain in place, prosumer practices will not be divorced from considerations of efficiency and profitability. This is not to say that efforts to circumvent these conditions, whether pursued consciously or not, will dissipate. Instead, and in contrast to an idealistic and, indeed, voluntaristic understanding of resistance, how people respond to exploitation and alienation is contingent; it involves both the structural parameters of one's political economy and, related to these, the intellectual and conceptual capacities of those taking part. No wonder then that the Internet (as with television and radio before it) is becoming more a part of status quo relations than a medium used for fundamental change. The system and technologies that humanity has created – and, indeed, the central role of acquisition and commodity consumption in this social order – remain primary indices of normal social relations and a successful life. The alienated (and in several respects *dependent*) individual and her assumed freedoms are prioritized over the non-alienated as an inter-dependent agent vis-à-vis her community.^{xxiv}

The Hegemonic Implications of Prosumption

Prosumption's thirty-year ascent appears to be more about power's centralization than decentralization; more about the furtherance of hierarchy than its retreat; more about the perpetuation of alienation than a mechanism for self-realization and genuine freedom. Having argued this, from a hegemonic perspective, prosumer applications empower *both* powerful vested interests and commodity-focused individuals. Unlike some students of cultural studies who relate hegemony to ideology, discourse or symbolism (Lash, 2007), according to a neo-Gramscian approach, hegemony is a process in which class rule takes place through structured processes and mediations that explicitly (but never exclusively) facilitate control. From this perspective, hegemonic rule is rooted in the material conditions from which such consensual relations are elaborated; lived conditions that frame intellectual and organizational capacities.

For Gramsci, hegemonic rule cannot take place in the absence institutions that mediate class relations – institutions that enable genuine participation while, in so doing, containing such activities within certain (but changing) conceptual parameters (Gitlin, 1980). While private property, contract relations, constitutional rights and other institutional norms (all taken-for-granted conditions in most 'developed' liberal democracies) enable the dominated to at least potentially take part in aspects of their own governance, the structural and intellectual implications of their use also prevent this participation from going 'too far' – limiting the prospect of revolutionary change being imagined let alone implemented. For example, political activities that do not contravene property rights are generally permissible, as are expressions of dissent taking place through privately-owned organs such as a newspaper or website. If, however, the institution of private property itself is contravened (perhaps a free speech advocacy group uses force to take over a local television station), state coercion then becomes a legitimate means of containing dissent. Capitalism, after all, fundamentally requires private property rights and contract relations to be enforced. As with the participatory and creative potentials of prosumption, in hegemonic orders, working people are free to communicate, mobilize and effect substantive change but only in the context of existing political-

economic structures. It is precisely this ability to participate that gives most ‘developed’ capitalist regimes their legitimacy.

In contemporary liberal democracies prosumption developments are deepening this legitimacy, while in relatively undemocratic regimes we might usefully consider prosumption as a means of providing status quos with at least a semblance of needed consent. As Comor demonstrates (2008), capitalist consumption itself has become a hegemonic institution, mediating, through the everyday pursuit and acquisition of commodities, a delimited yet tangible sense of individualism, freedom and empowerment. In this context, prosumption entails an even more active polity in which people clearly are empowered to take part. With some exceptions, as outlined above, this participation is not primarily the outcome of coercion or even ideological manipulation. Instead, people do, indeed, get something substantial out of it – usually useful commodities or some amount of meaningful notoriety. Through one’s participation and identity as a prosumer, we might theorize that whatever antipathy the individual has towards status quo relations is more likely to be contained than exacerbated. Prosumption, after all, enables people to express themselves in ways that reify their individualism through the direct use of contractually-mediated, commodified relations.

Divide et impera, indeed.

To reiterate a point made early on, while consumers have always played a role in production (as James Joyce implied in his query, “My consumers, are they not my producers?”), with prosumption the very process of commodifying social relations has been framed in terms of self-empowerment. In this sense, the prosumer, as an active producer of commodification and her own alienation, constitutes something of an archetype for the hegemonic process writ large. As Christian Fuchs puts it, through prosumption, “individuals are activated to continuously participate in and integrate themselves into the structures of exploitation” (Fuchs, 2009: 82).

Conclusions

In the absence of radically modified political, cultural and economic structures, we conclude that the prosumer’s engagement mostly serves status quo interests. More

generally, prosumption is being used to further entrench a now atomized polity. The plugged-in, active prosumer thus seems more likely to become, at the very least, the subject of ongoing exploitation and, quite possibly, an agent of increasingly complex forms of possessive individualism.

In response to those progressives who conceptualize prosumption as co-creation and co-creation as a material expression of an imminent (and progressive) general intellect, we conclude that as long as private property, contracts and exchange values are dominant mediators of our political economy, disparities and exploitative relationships will remain largely unchallenged – unchallenged, at least, through the auspices of prosumption. This is not to say that all prosumers are equally alienated. No doubt an elite of relatively knowledgeable and creative people do, indeed, find aspects of co-creation personally fulfilling and socially compelling. However, even these individuals are not isolated from exploitative structures and alienating relations.^{xxv} Following the myth of Narcissus, technologies, through prosumption, tend to fuel the individual's mesmerization with his market-framed self. From Prometheus, we might add that such technological applications ultimately may be destructive, at least in terms of their promulgation of a largely ahistorical and atomistic culture (Babe, 2006).

The fantastic prosumer is indeed a fantasy (at least in the context of capitalist relations and mediations); one originally cast by Toffler, largely unchallenged by activists, and now widely promoted by self-serving marketers and other interests. It is a fantasy that taps into our cultural predilections for empowering technologies and, indeed, self-realization. Prosumption developments also are elaborating a hegemonic order in which the individual and collectivity internalize mostly commodified constructs. These developments now stand largely unchallenged in part because many of those who are most exploited are prosumption's primary participants; reproducing, in effect, their own possessive individualism and alienation.^{xxvi}

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Notes

ⁱ Online citizen journalists are said to be ‘prosuming’ new forms of information; at-home video ‘producers’ are downloading, re-editing and uploading innovative forms of entertainment; hackers and amateur computer engineers are ‘co-creating’ open-source forms of software.

ⁱⁱ ‘Co-creation’ appears to have been developed by business interests as a means of framing prosumption as a consumer-corporate ‘partnership’ while, for academics, the term likely reflects the postmodernist tendency to celebrate consumption and consumer choice. Herein prosumption and co-creation are used inter-changeably as they constitute the same institutional development.

ⁱⁱⁱ More generally, Marx conceptualized all forms of production and consumption to be irrevocably inter-related. The production *process*, said Marx (Marx, 1984b), is one in which the “moments” of production, distribution, exchange and consumption together

constitute a holistic, dialectical enterprise (pp. 124-40) – one in which the institutional media used (such as private property, contracts and money) are constitutive (Williams, 1977: 98-100).

^{iv} With commodification, all kinds of relationships, activities and things become exchangeable through the use of money. This is one of the most profound secularizations in history. A skill, someone's time, a bag of potatoes, a poem, a ton of steel, and even human sexuality become quantifiable, comparable and seemingly 'manageable.' Prices thus become the culture's core measuring rod of value and, in the process, historically established or intrinsic values are trivialized or erased. Through commodification and the price system, because virtually everything has a price and almost anyone can become a consumer, everyone theoretically is 'free' to have whatever he/she wants.

^v To quote Marx directly, "As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both *what* they produce and with *how* they produce" (Marx, 1984a: 42, author's emphases).

^{vi} The primary incentive was (and remains) efficiency and power vis-a-vis workers (Braverman, 1974) yet, as popular analyst Richard Florida argues, the long-term outcome for many corporations has been an over-reliance on upper management and expert consultants in lieu of utilizing the creativity of shopfloor employees (Florida, 2002).

^{vii} Similarly, increasingly exploitative tendencies are emerging through the use of ICTs to monitor and orchestrate customer preferences, as well as commodify consumer 'free time' (Huws, 2003; Ritzer, 2007).

^{viii} The WORKS (Work Organisation and Restructuring in the Knowledge-based Society) project is a pan-European research endeavor commissioned by the EU. Its mandate is to investigate major changes concerning work as a result of what it calls the knowledge-based society (KBS). See <http://www.worksproject.be/>

^{ix} Conceptualizations of a knowledge- or information-based economy both entail a range of under-assessed theoretical and empirical questions. Similarly, notions of the ascendancy of 'immaterial labor' or a 'weightless economy' are logically and empirically dubious (Huws, 2003), as are some iterations of the 'information society' (Rule and Besen, 2007: 15-17). Nevertheless, these conceptualizations now play central roles in both mainstream (esp. Tapscott and Williams, 2007) and progressive (e.g. Von Hippel, 2005; Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2008) analyses of the prosumer.

^x Among its pro-business and marketing proponents are Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), Tapscott and Williams (2007) and Kozinets (2008). Progressive academics who see prosumption as democratizing or politically empowering include Deuze (2007), Bruns (2008) and Jenkins (2008). Neo-Marxists who recognize some imminent potentials in the prosumption/co-creation activities addressed herein include Virno (2004) and Zwick et al. (2009).

^{xi} By "general intellect," Marx is referring to the ensemble of abstract knowledge required to develop and sustain relatively complex political economies. Under capitalism, he speculates that this knowledge (especially its scientific and technical forms) is concretely manifested in the form of fixed capital such as machines and factories (Marx, 1973). From this and Marx's concept "species-being" (reflecting the socially constructed underpinnings of 'human nature'), in recent decades some autonomist Marxists have argued that, particularly as a result of post-Fordist

developments, co-creation activities constitute the material elaboration of such imminent capacities – imminent capacities stemming from the skills and collective know-how required among workers engaged in some ‘non-material’ forms of labor.

^{xii} As Zwick et al. explain, “capitalist mediation of social relations, that is social cooperation and its production of innovative, experimental, and authentic forms of life now takes place mostly outside the traditional confines of the company and increasingly within the autonomous networks of communication and interaction of the public. From this vantage point, the general intellect refers to an indirect and heavily mediated form of social labor...based on the cooperation of a plural, multiform constantly mutating intelligence” (Zwick et al., 2009: 179).

^{xiii} For an extended discussion, including an outline of contradictions and strategic opportunities concerning open-source and the potentials of a digital ‘creative commons’, see Söderberg (2002). Also see Weber (2005).

^{xiv} The owner of *Wikipedia* – a profit-making company called *Wikia* – thus far has established (or has hosted the presumption of) specialized wikis on fifty thousand subjects. According to its CEO, Gil Penchina, the most popular of these concern movie franchises and video games, all of which generate revenue by linking special interest/niche market consumers to corporations (enabling the latter to engage prospective customers, utilize their free labor, and exchange information with them in order to pursue more personalized marketing strategies) (Parfeni, 2009).

^{xv} In an analysis published in this journal, Peter Archibald concludes worker alienation has neither declined in relatively ‘developed’ political economies nor has it been exported to the ‘developing’ world. According to Archibald, even the many who have been ‘freed’ from atomistic workplaces through the ascent of ‘white collar’ positions now tend to face less job security, increasingly pervasive forms of surveillance and a daily engagement in stressful information-overloaded activities. Archibald also cites data such as a Gallup poll conducted in 2002 in which 70 percent of American workers say they are either not engaged or actively disengaged from their work. While he reiterates the systemic underpinnings of alienation, he also emphasizes that individuals are alienated to varying degrees and that non-conscious indices, including job-related anxiety, demonstrate the ongoing relationship between capitalist relations and alienation (Archibald, 2009).

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^{xvii} The monotheistic religion that the prophets promoted has itself become a form of idolatry in that human beings now project their power to love and create onto God who they, in turn, have come to depend upon for their source of love and creativity (Fromm, 1955: 113).

^{xviii} In this context, what appears to be a rising incivility, especially among those text messaging, blogging or commenting on social networking sites, is perhaps, in part at least, an outgrowth of alienation. According to a poll conducted in 2007, 89 percent of Americans said they think incivility is a serious problem and 78 percent thought it has become worse over the past ten years (Marcus, 1997). Incivility also has been associated with the insecurities of an increasingly competitive neoliberal order (Harvey). Also see Spence (2002) and Sandywell (2006).

^{xix} The alienated individual, while inter-dependent on the whole, tends to be dislocated, fragmented and isolated. (Erikson, 1986). According to studies on the psychology of

Internet users, participants in social networking sites, for example, primarily are motivated to take part in order to be recognized; to gain recognition by posting a top-ranked video, attaining the highest game score, or posting opinions that others praise (Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007). On the relationship between online gaming and depression, see Williams et al. (2008).

^{xx} While it is true that since 1945 many Western workers turned away from the workplace and towards their families and consumption as sites of fulfillment and creativity (Schudson, 1991), to assume that such choices have been made in the absence of affecting structures and abstract power relations is to ignore the role of socialization, marketing and, more generally, the complex processes through which ‘rational’ thought itself is framed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Comor, 2008).

^{xxi} Innumerable examples come to mind: generally, the higher the price of the diamond, the greater the love and commitment it is thought to represent; the more expensive the bottle of alcohol, the greater is the knowledge and cultivation of the drinker; the more one spends on clothes and shoes, the more one is thought to be an attractive, successful and psychologically ‘together’ individual.

^{xxii} Ritzer (2007) traces contemporary prosumption to fast food (e.g. *McDonald’s*) and other corporate efficiency and cost-saving innovations, all of which compelled consumers to labor for free. Banks, for example, now save approximately 80 percent of their costs as a result of online banking.

^{xxiii} Another, less sociological, reason why people are more willing to labor as prosumers is that corporations have purposefully diminished services to customers in ways crafted to reduce costs and impel their increasing participation (Huws, 2003; Ritzer, 2007).

^{xxiv} It is revealing to note the predominant ‘communities’ that online prosumers in fact participate in. According to van Dijck, these overwhelmingly focus on celebrity culture, heavily marketed brands and other relatively apolitical or commodified activities (van Dijck, 2009: 45). Following his definition of a community as a group of people involved in a common cause or interest, surely the predominance of Internet pornography and thousands of ‘live’ virtual sex sites constitute another pervasive hub in which tens of millions share a common interest. As Ritzer (2007) points out, today, perhaps the largest segment of online porn is being created by “amateurs” who produce, disseminate and consume much of their own video and photographs. What these and other such communities tell us about the intellectual and cultural capacities of the heralded prosumer is an area of research that has been (predictably) neglected by the concept’s enthusiasts.

^{xxv} As Archibald points out, Marx believed that variously located individuals have a degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the general conditions of alienation, although predominant relations (such as private property and the commodity form), if not overthrown, make the long-term and universal eradication of alienation impossible (Archibald, 2009).

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