

Unmasking Estranged Labor: Consumerism and Ethical Disconnect

Karl Marx theorized in “Estranged Labor” that as time goes on workers become more alienated from the products of their labor. Modern day consumers do not know who made their products or what their products are made of. Marx theorizes that this is in part due to the increased demand in commodities and their heightened perceived necessity, a phenomenon he dubbed “commodity fetishism.” Marx argued that the alienation of a worker from the products of their labor causes them to lose part of their own self determination and “become a slave of his object.” This theory of estranged labor is best exemplified in the process of McDonaldization, where workers lose creativity and self determination in the name of efficiency and affordability.

George Ritzer argues that the McDonalds’ hugely successful franchise model is the inspiration behind many of America’s large retail businesses. These businesses like H&M, Walmart, and Subway have structured their businesses around efficiency and affordability, just like McDonalds. As corporations like these have grown larger and began to dictate more aspects of the consumer’s life, the divide between the worker and their object has only deepened. Work is outsourced to countries with cheaper labor and less restrictive labor laws, often at the cost of poor working conditions, utilizing child labor, and/or polluting the environment.

In the age of the internet, the exploitation of workers by large corporations is no longer a secret. McDonaldized companies like Nike, Tesla, and Shein have been proven to profit off the usage of child labor. While society as a whole disapproves of the actions of the corporations, the products they put on the market are so alienated from the exploited worker who made them that this type of information coming to light rarely manages to even dent their sales. However, there is a large group of consumers, typically younger consumers, who wish to shop more ethically

companies have made minimal steps to improve their environmental impact even if it is reducing plastic waste by 0.01%. These companies then market themselves as “environmentally friendly.” This issue already has a name and it is known as “greenwashing.” Consumers will still buy Tesla cars because they reduce pollution, while an 11 year old in the Democratic Republic of Congo spends fourteen hours a day mining cobalt for their batteries.

Many companies make minimal changes when promoting ethical business practices, like H&M which promoted themselves as “sustainable” and “socially responsible” while simultaneously promoting their fast fashion model which glorifies overconsumption and has allegations against them for low wages, long hours, unsafe working conditions, and child labor. However, these pitiful attempts at social responsibility do not underscore the importance and effectiveness of consumer activism. Actions taken by consumers like boycotting, protesting, and raising awareness have made effective changes to disagreeable business practices. The backlash to Nestle's sourcing of its palm oil by consumers led Nestle to adopt more sustainable and transparent sourcing for their palm oil and commit to zero deforestation for their palm oil farms.

In the last few years there has been an uptick in people promoting more traditional lifestyles characterized by a sharp decrease in consumption. Many influential individuals online share all their 100% made from scratch recipes in which the person goes so far as to grow their own wheat and grind it down to make flour. While the majority of Americans don't participate in this lifestyle, its popularization may indicate that America's collective consciousness is beginning to shift to reject consumerism and commodity fetishism.

In the last few years, there has also been an increase in the promotion of “wellness” products. This increase in wellness products seemed to coincide with the COVID-19 pandemic.

about by the pandemic. When retail sales plummeted due to quarantines, the consumer became the commodity. While it can be argued that a new outfit is not a necessity, the same can't be said for health and well-being. Consumers became obsessed with the idea of being healthy, while supplement and exercise equipment sales skyrocketed. The need to have commodities didn't go away, it just took a new form.

These large McDonaldized businesses have an invisible wall protecting them. Many of their unethical business practices are public knowledge and can be found through a simple google search yet the consumer feels so far removed from those practices that they figure their purchases will have no effect. However, when most consumers have this mindset, it enables the corporations to continue their unethical business practices.

In conclusion, consumers often purchase from businesses with unethical practices because the labor that made the product they are buying is so estranged from the actual product itself. McDonaldization normalized these types of business practices to make commodities cheaper and easily accessible. However, these practices will not cease until consumers demand accountability from these businesses and more importantly, change their shopping habits to reflect their opposition to them.