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BY
CRAIG J. THOMPSON

Politics of consumption analyses often evince a moralistic subtext that traces to the nineteenth-century fusion of Calvinism and patriarchal sexual politics. This spermatic legacy has channeled these critical discourses in a therapeutic direction that attenuates their realpolitik relevance. Drawing from Bakhtin's account of the carnivalesque, the author argues for an analytics of the excretory economy that eschews therapeutic goals in favor of muckraking scholarship that critically analyzes specific market systems and their constitutive networks of power relationships and material consequences. The author concludes by discussing some ways in which muckraking scholarship can mobilize citizen-consumers to the activist cause of transforming structural conditions that render specific facets of commercial culture problematic.

Keywords: muckraking scholarship; grotesque realism; moral critiques of consumption; therapeutic consumption

This article addresses the moral critique of consumption—culturally canonized by Veblen's (1899) stinging indictments of conspicuous consumption—as a profligate pursuit, driven by status emulation, leading to indolence, insipidness, and invidious comparison. As this grim postindustrial tale goes, personal well-being, family life, aesthetic virtues, natural resources, and the inhabitability of the planet are all being sacrificed on the altar of status-chasing consumerism, as consumers vainly waste their time and money trying to emulate the voluptuous lifestyles of media celebrities (e.g., De Graaf, Wann, and Naylor 2001; Frank 1999; Kasser 2002; Lasn 1999; Putnam 2000; Schor 1998, 2000; Taylor 2003).

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Contemporary social critics seldom consider the historical roots of this Veblenesque legacy, in large part because they are applying this critical viewpoint to macro-level problems that appear self-evident in terms of their significance and consumptive etiology: escalating consumer debt levels, the rampant commercialization of childhood, ecological degradation, a looming peak oil crisis, and global warming (Schor 2000). Under these crisis conditions, why worry about antiquarian origins if this critical viewpoint can precipitate solutions to these consumption-driven dilemmas and avert impending disasters? However, a genealogical reflection raises the unsettling prospect that Veblenesque moralizations—which after a hundred-plus years have done little to slow the accelerating pace and mushrooming scale of consumerism—are further affirmation of Foucault's (1978) paradoxical interpretation of the repressive hypothesis: that is, a seminal discourse that produces a self-perpetuating dialectic of discipline and desire.

The moral critique of consumption is intimately connected to the normative discourses and ascetic practices of the spermatic economy (the belief that sperm ought to be conserved and not squandered) and its ideological fusion of patriarchal sexual politics and the Calvinist emphasis on diligent work and self-abnegation (Haraway 1994). As discussed by Barker-Benfield (1972), Freud's influential ideas regarding the sublimation of libidinal energy crystallized beliefs that had been in cultural circulation throughout much of the eighteenth century. In this proto-Freudian folk theory, seminal fluid represented an *élan vital* that flowed through the body (and body politic), which men needed to judiciously conserve if they were to have the energy and strength to succeed in an increasingly competitive economic marketplace (Kimmel 1996). This spermatic conception drove the moral panics over masturbation and promiscuous sexuality that raged throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth century.

During this period, sexual continence functioned as a potent metaphor for the Protestant (and capitalist) ideals of wealth accumulation and productive investments in one's entrepreneurial calling—both deemed to signal that one had been predestined for salvation (see Weber 1905/2002)—and the concomitant Calvinist censures of extravagant spending and social displays of wealth (Freedman 1982). Rosenberg (1973) contended that this bourgeois sublimation of sexual desire enhanced the social standing of middle-class men by forging a symbolic distinction to the servant class and working-class laborers, who were portrayed as lacking self-control and being prone to wasteful intemperance.

As the twentieth century dawned, the middle- and upper-class segments of American culture came to fear that the psychic stresses, bureaucratic constraints, and proliferating material comforts of the bourgeois household were draining men of their vitality, leaving them enervated and ill prepared to assume their patriarchal responsibilities in the family and society at large. The idolatry of Teddy Roosevelt and his embodiment of the vigorous outdoor life stands as the therapeutic counterpart to this spermatic economy construction of masculinity and its anxious quest to regain phallic potency (see Kimmel 1996; Haraway 1994). This crisis-of-masculinity narrative shifted the spermatic economy to a

psychological register, no longer tied to the literal conservation of semen. Accordingly, professional-class American men immersed themselves in commercial recreations of atavistic masculinity via mythic stories about the American West (though the frontier had long been closed); retreated to homosocial enclaves that reproduced the fraternal order of the guild tradition; sought revitalization through hunting and other primal experiences of nature; and ardently participated in virile sports, such as boxing and body building (Kimmel 1994).

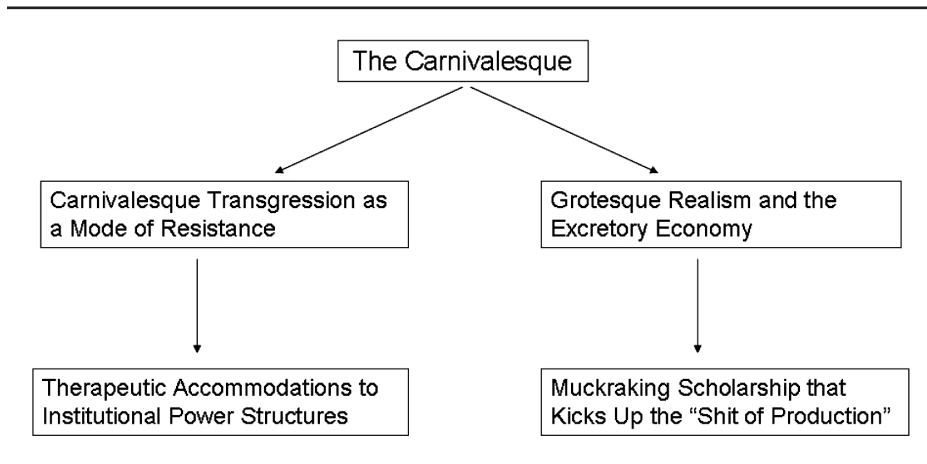
This therapeutic orientation also forged a broader cultural association between consumption and humanistic ideals of self-expressiveness, self-development, and self-fulfillment that reverberates to the present day (Lears 1994).¹ Over the course of the twentieth century, therapeutic consumption became an increasingly prominent marketplace narrative, widely propagated by advertising, mass media, business leaders, journalists, and politicians who campaigned on promises of endless prosperity and implemented government policies that facilitated this fertile coupling of mass consumerism, cultivated individuality, and corporate capitalism (Cohen 2004; Cross 2000). As copiously documented by Roland Marchand (1985), this therapeutic framing of consumption would also become integral to American cultural conceptions of democracy. Rhetorical appeals to the democracy of goods and the democratizing forces of capitalist markets are now central themes of neoliberal punditry and its relentless praise singing for deregulated global corporate capitalism (see Frank 2000).

In this article, my aim is to retheorize the politics of consumption in carnivalesque terms (Bakhtin 1965/1984) that circumvent the moralistic and ideological tropes of the spermatic economy. Following Bakhtin (1965/1984), the carnivalesque is a linguistic and embodied social practice that “degrades” culturally rarefied discourses by transferring these texts, which speak in the language of the “high, spiritual, and abstract,” to their material grounding in the “bodily lower stratum” (pp. 19-20). As a bit of foreshadowing, my carnivalesque theorization poaches a degrading phrase from Paul Willis (1978, p. 170), who characterized commercial culture as “the shit of production,” a genuinely unseminal conception I shall unabashedly bend to suit my carnivalesque agenda.

The Carnavalesque and the Excretory Economy

According to Bakhtin (1965/1984), medieval carnivals exuberantly conjoined eating, drinking, copulating, and shitting in a pagan cosmology that celebrated the fertility of the Earth and the maternal body, the procreative power of sex, the fecund nature of excrement, and the corporeal fate of returning to the Earth as organic matter. The carnivalesque body is equally copulative and excretory, salacious and scatological, vibrant and on the way to becoming decomposing humus that feeds the earth. Thus, the carnivalesque decenters subjectivity and directs attention toward the web of transpersonal and ecological interconnections that sustain an indissoluble cycle of degeneration and regeneration.

FIGURE 1
DISCURSIVE DIMENSIONS OF THE CARNIVALESQUE



As illustrated in Figure 1, Bakhtin’s (1965/1984) portrayal of the carnivalesque is structured by two dimensions: transgressive resistance and grotesque realism. In these postmodern times, the transgressive dimension has been enthusiastically embraced as an emancipatory practice through which consumers can elude and defy the ideological imperatives, conformist mandates, and materialistic temptations of the capitalist marketplace (Debord 1967; Firat and Dholakia 1998; Lasn 1999). In contrast, academic writings on the politics of consumption have studiously ignored the implications of grotesque realism and the degrading project of critically situating socioeconomic relationships of power, and their ennobling rationalizations, in the excretory economy. My overriding agenda is to assert the generative power of this latter dimension for developing realpolitik critiques of commercial culture and mobilizing consumer-citizens to take transformative actions. As a preliminary step, however, I need to clear the theoretical ground by clarifying the utopian sensibilities that have equated the carnivalesque almost exclusively with transgressive practices while omitting the dimension of grotesque realism.

Carnivalesque transgression as resistance and all that utopian shit

In this utopian formulation, transgressive consumers are a geographically and temporally dispersed counterdominant force that provocatively subverts the conventions and norms of bourgeois consumerism and instigates a critical consciousness toward market capitalism (Debord 1967; Lasn 1999). Some proposed exemplars of carnivalesque resistance include defiant consumers who, à la the Situationist movement (Debord 1967), proactively reject prepackaged experiences and identities (Firat and Dholakia 1998); the stridently antimaterialistic,

“no spectators allowed” community that annually congregates at the Burning Man festival (Kozinets 2002); Lesbian and Gay Pride parades whose exaggerated displays of camp and vamp mock the heterodominance of mainstream consumer culture (Kates and Belk 2001); the unruly cybercommunities of digital file sharers who jam their iPods with pirated music (Giesler and Pohlmann 2003); fantasy reenactors who retreat into anachronistic worlds that predate corporate capitalism, such as the Mountain Man Rendezvous (Belk and Costa 1998); and neopagan festivals that contest technocracy and commercialism through archaic polytheistic rituals and incantations (Pike 2001).

Some of these studies do address ways in which carnivalesque transgressions (and festive gatherings) remain paradoxically intertwined with commercial culture (e.g., Giesler and Pohlmann 2003; Kates and Belk 2001; Kozinets 2002). However, their prevailing argument is that these transgressive (and marginally perceptible) communities, identities, and social practices are effecting at least a partial resistance to corporate capitalism’s ideological hailings and, thereby, afford consumer experiences that are more intense, authentic, and librating. This qualified utopianism is further buttressed by Romantic jargon about the indomitable spirit of human freedom. Owing to these predilections, theoretical accounts of transgressive consumer resistance often meld therapeutic accommodations to institutional power with collective struggles to transform the means of production, the circuits of distribution, and the modalities of consumption (Thompson 2003). This dilemma can be brought into clearer relief by considering Bakhtin’s (1965/1984) sociohistoric motivations for (mis)attributing revolutionary potential to these defiantly unregenerate folk rituals.

According to Bakhtin (1965/1984), the medieval carnival was a configuration of space and time in which oppressive rule was forced to confront the irrepressible will of the people. Carnavalesque practices ritualistically mocked the sanctimonious authority of the church and court, transgressed the sacred boundaries and aesthetic norms imposed by these disciplinary regimes, and asserted a collective refusal toward regal and papal subjugation. These ribald parodies exposed that not only do the king and the pope have no clothes, they shit just like everyone else, and no amount of pomp and circumstance will save them from the universal fate of death and decay. This inalienable knowledge gave the folk a collective power that could not be contained by oppressive authority.

Yet Bakhtin’s (1965/1984) lionization of carnivalesque resistance was a utopian allegory that poetically envisioned a collective revolt against Stalinism, rather than a historical reality (see Clark and Holquist 1986). As Stallybrass and White (1986), among others, have noted, the Church and the court came to embrace the medieval carnival as a means to incorporate pagan traditions into the liturgy of Catholicism and to gradually distance these Saturnalian rituals from their historical roots. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the emerging bourgeoisie ideologically justified their sociopolitical dominance by representing the proletariat as a grotesque body of odors, boisterous laughter, drunkenness, and licentiousness, uniquely suited to life in the shop floor, the alehouse, and coarse conditions of poverty (Stallybrass and White 1986). In symbolic contrast, bourgeois

consumers claimed the intellectualizing mantles of transcendent rationality, Kantian aesthetics, and civilizing mannerisms (Elias 1939/2000). In this same historical time frame, the commercial realm became more carnivalesque, as the rationalizing demands of industrialization instilled a recurrent need for (temporally and spatially bounded) moments of bacchanalian release. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, religious observances, most notably Christmas and Easter holidays, were also reconfigured as carnivalesque festivals, and the medieval celebration of St. Valentine's Day was reborn as an impassioned frenzy of consumer romanticism (Schmidt 1997). In sum, the commercial and the carnivalesque make for not-so-strange bedfellows.

These paradoxical dynamics raise perplexing questions about who is actually shitting on whom during these transgressive power struggles. In academic discourses, however, this dialectical complexity is typically buried under a pile of polemics. Theorists enamored with the glassy-eyed visage of the "disenchanted" or "alienated" consumer excrete thick narratives recounting how the forces of global capitalism are weakening the moral fiber of society by making consumers more materialistic, more harried, less civil, and less civically engaged (Putnam 2000). Theorists who are captivated by the carnivalesque image of the "defiantly elusive" consumer are similarly stricken with logorrhea: effusively spewing forth about how these carnivalesque transgressions and myriad acts of *détournement* are rendering corporate capitalism impotent and ineffectual (Debord 1967; Lasn 1999).

Bridging this chasm between the politics of consumption (as commonly formulated in academic discourse) and the reeking reality of corporate capitalism's shit requires that critical theorists abandon moralistic preoccupations with consumers' well-being, their existential states, their creative defiance, or slack-jawed submissions to the interpellations of the marketplace. Reflections on the travails or triumphs of the consumer provide a convenient intellectual path for tiptoeing around the shit of production; we may catch an unpleasant fetid waft here and there, but we can hold our noses and neatly avoid tracking any unpleasant substances into our pristine ivory towers. By forgoing this detour, we have to traipse through the fields of capitalist production and confront the question of just what to do about all this shit.

Grotesque realism and the shit of production

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, and abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of Earth and body in their indissoluble unity. . . . To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. (Bakhtin 1965/1984, 19-21)

To illustrate these peculiar notions of grotesque realism and degrading critical analysis, let us consider a bane of politics of consumption discourses: the automobile. From Galbraith's (1958) indictment of Cadillac tailfins as an icon of wasteful

stylistic obsolescence to contemporary condemnations of gas-guzzling, greenhouse-gas-spewing, status-symbolizing SUVs, the automobile has been a potent symbol for the presumed ills of consumer society. This spermatic critique overlooks the degrading historical fact that the automotive transformation of urban metropolises had little to do with status competition or the Machiavellian machinations of the marketing apparatus. Rather, the automobile was initially hailed as a public health innovation and a major boon to urban living. At the turn of the century, American metropolises were being suffocated by the sickening miasma of horse manure and rotting dead horses. As McShane and Tarre (1997) explained,

While the nineteenth century American city faced many forms of environmental pollution, none was as all encompassing as that produced by the horse. The most severe problem was that caused by horses defecating and urinating in the streets, but dead animals and noise pollution also produced serious annoyances and even health problems. The normal city horse produced between fifteen and thirty-five pounds of manure a day and about a quart of urine, usually distributed along the course of its route or deposited in the stable. While cities made sporadic attempts to keep the streets clean, the manure was everywhere, along the roadway, heaped in piles or next to stables, or ground up by the traffic and blown about by the wind. Citizens frequently complained about the “pulverized horse dung” which blew into their faces and houses and which covered the outside displays of merchants. The paving of streets accelerated the problem, as wheels and hoofs ground the manure against the hard surfaces and amplified the dust. Writing in *Appleton’s Magazine* in 1908, Harold Bolce argued that most of the modern city’s sanitary and economic problems were caused by the horse. Bolce charged that each year 20,000 New Yorkers died from “maladies that fly in the dust, created mainly by horse manure.” (pp. 105-6)

*[T]he automobile was initially hailed as a
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Under these material conditions, automobiles were a genuine breath of fresh air that made for a much better technological complement to the urban environment. By 1915, the major metropolises of New York, Paris, and London had largely replaced horses and carriages with automobiles and electric trolleys as the dominant modes of urban transportation (McShane and Tarre 1997). In our contemporary era, the gas-powered automobile is functionally equivalent to the horse and carriage of old, and it has precipitated new constellations of societal problems ranging from greenhouse gases to the health-threatening stresses of urban congestion. However, the current market system is structured and

entrenched in ways that are not nearly as conducive to the rapid transformations enacted by our horse-and-carriage forebears. Structural barriers to enacting necessary changes in the material organization of commercial culture constitute a significant problem worthy of academic attention. More to the point, the resulting critical insights need to be publicized in ways that bring consumer-citizens to their “I am not taking this shit any more!” tipping point and productively inform activist strategies.

An important implication of grotesque realism is that nothing mobilizes consumer-citizens to social activism more than shit in the face. Rather than trying to cure consumers from affluenza or save their souls from materialistic seductions, an analytics of the excretory economy gets down and dirty into the degrading flows of shit (both productive and toxic) that circulate within specific market systems—linking consumers, producers, suppliers, laborers, advertisers, media, and regulators in particular networks of power relations—and then throws this institutional shit back in the collective face of the consumer-citizenry.

The Excretory Economy and Muckraking Scholarship

The theoretical and realpolitik differences that distinguish the politics of consumption, in its moral/therapeutic form, and an analytics of the excretory economy can be demonstrated through a comparison of two parallel critiques of commercial culture, one that is unabashedly spermatic in moral tenor and the other that digs into the excretory muck: George Ritzer’s (1993) *The McDonaldization of Society* and Eric Schlosser’s (2002) *Fast Food Nation*.

As a quick review of the McDonaldization thesis, Ritzer (1993, 1998) argued that the rationalizing principles that made McDonald’s a global goliath—efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control through standardization—have come to dominate many other sectors of society ranging from tourism, education, politics, and medicine. Ritzer conceded that these dominant principles have yielded tangible benefits to society, but, echoing Weber (1905/2002), he warned that these gains have come at the high cost of spiritual disenchantment and the rationalized circumscription of creativity and freedom. From Ritzer’s standpoint, McDonaldization has displaced authentic human relationships with scripted interactions, leaving workers and consumers with little or no opportunity to exercise genuine creativity in this world of standardized actions and prefabricated choices. To escape this postindustrial iron cage, Ritzer (1993) provided a trickster action plan: eat lunch at a local greasy spoon rather than a McDonaldized establishment, pay with cash rather than credit, make more meals from scratch, assiduously avoid corporate chains for any kind of service provision, boycott television with the exception of PBS programming, refuse to patronize domed sports stadiums, and read the *New York Times* rather than *USA Today*.²

Ritzer delivers a clever cultural reading of the homogenizing trajectories at work in global commercial culture that can spark a disconcerting sense of intuitive

recognition. However, his emancipatory strategies are oriented toward therapeutic goals. Absent from this individuated politics of consumption is the realpolitik agenda of mobilizing consumer-citizens to hold corporations accountable for their actions and to reform their problem-inducing structures of operation (Kelly 2001; Klein 2002a). In fairness, Ritzer (1993, 1998) did enjoin consumer-citizens to collectively organize for certain political purposes such as keeping corporate fast food out of school cafeterias and creating work conditions that allow for more creativity and personal autonomy.

Much like proposals for downshifting and voluntary simplicity, however, Ritzer's (1993, 1998) action strategies seek to place some (therapeutic) boundaries on the corporate colonization of everyday life, but they do not challenge the underlying structural conditions that make these encroachments possible and problematic. For example, the persistent underfunding of public school systems has greatly facilitated the corporatization of education (Klein 2002b). Furthermore, America's overprocessed and cost-driven public food culture has resulted in unappealing and nutritionally suspect meals being standard fare in (noncorporatized) school cafeterias (Pollan 2006). In other words, keeping McDonald's out of school cafeterias may not improve the nutritional profile of the meals being served, and it most likely would lessen the culinary enjoyment of the students.

A more efficacious strategy would be to pressure fast-food providers to shift away from their standard cost-saving ingredients (such as corn syrup and hydrogenated vegetable oils) that unnecessarily increase the health risk of fast-food consumption and to invest more resources in effectively marketing healthier menu options. As Gladwell (2001) astutely noted, the first rule of successful fast-food marketing is to never promote something as "healthier" (even when it is), owing to the negative taste connotations that this phrase invokes. Another viable option would be to confront plans (and standard rationales) for McDonaldizing school lunch programs with counterexamples such as the Appleton Central Charter High School initiative (in Appleton, Wisconsin), which successfully implemented a whole foods lunch program. This holistic approach entailed nutritional education; an extended lunch period with a calmer and more relaxed atmosphere; the removal of vending machines from school grounds; and most important of all, well-prepared lunches consisting of a fresh entrée, free of additives or chemicals, fresh fruit, a salad bar, whole grain breads, low-fat cookies for dessert, and an energy drink and/or milk (see Keeley and Fields 2004).

To create positive alternatives to the McDonaldization of the diet (rather than just rely on prohibition strategies), consumer-citizens need to understand the institutional intricacies through which McDonaldization has been implemented and perpetuated and to what effects. In other words, they need concrete answers to the questions of how and why this shit is produced in this form and with this mix of consequences. In the spirit of excretory analysis, Schlosser (2002) did not make moral presumptions about what kind of food consumers should be eating or lament their moral failings for frequenting McDonaldized restaurants. He even acknowledged that this shit tastes pretty good, even when these enticing flavors and aromas have been chemically engineered. Instead, Schlosser explicated

how the fast-food industry became such an ubiquitous economic and cultural force in the United States and the world at large.

Schlosser (2002) teased out, in remarkable detail, how this globally pervasive market system arose from an ensemble of tax policies, labor laws, suburban development initiatives, technological infrastructure, corporate alliances (e.g., McDonald's and Disney), media and advertising saturation, and strategies of vertical integration—all of which have been underwritten by incessant and quite successful corporate lobbying, revolving-door employment schemes, and other tactics of political influence. Schlosser illuminated how this institutional configuration has diminished the role of unions throughout the fast-food industry, thereby creating perpetually depressed industry wage scales and high-risk working conditions (particularly for meat packers) (also see Brueggemann and Brown 2003) and systematically compromising the economic positions of farmers, beef producers, meat packers, and restaurant workers. Schlosser also documented the fast-food industry's harmful material effects on the environment, animal welfare, and yes, consumers. In this latter case, however, his concern is not whether consumers are being disenchanting by standardized cuisine; rather, it is why fast-food consumers are routinely sickened by exposure to *e. coli* and other food-borne pathogens.

[I]nstitutional erasure of investigative journalism . . . is a major structural impediment to consumer citizenship and democratic dialogue.

I cannot think of a more fitting coda for this article than the most memorable line from *Fast Food Nation*: “eating a hamburger can now make you seriously ill [because] there is shit in the meat” (Schlosser 2002, 197). Though not quite horse manure in the face, this circumstance has sparked considerable public interest in the backstage production processes of the fast-food industry. If you tell consumers that they are being disenchanting and dehumanized by McDonaldized cuisine, they probably will not look up from their ketchup-stained Big Mac wrappers. If you tell them that they may literally be eating shit, they will see a different kind of red. Such grotesque realizations tend to pierce the veil of habit, complacency, and corporate ideology.

By exposing all this corporate shit, Schlosser (2002) has fostered greater critical awareness among consumers about the grotesque realities of fast-food

production and laid the groundwork for political actions that can transform these industry practices. Indeed, consumer and worker rights groups are aggressively pushing key institutional players in the fast-food industry and government to redress these workers' rights, ecological, animal rights, and nutritional infractions. In responding to these diverse grassroots movements and multiple boycotts—further energized by Morgan Spurlock's (2004) supersized shit bomb—McDonald's has taken steps to make substantive improvements in its menu, labor policies, environmental footprint, and supply chain sources, though U.S. franchises still lag behind those in the European Union in terms of the pace and scale of these reforms (BBC News 2005).

An action-oriented insight that academics can glean from Schlosser (2002) is the importance and realpolitik value of investigating a defined market system within commercial culture, rather than making sweeping generalizations that presuppose the operation of a singularly dominant ideology (e.g., McDonaldization) or a pathological zeitgeist (e.g., affluenza). Teasing out these complexities calls for muckraking scholarship that unpacks critical institutional details about how a market system functions and the specific effects that emanate from its organizational structures and processes.

Owing to a confluence of ideological, economic, and institutional forces, investigative exposés of exploitive corporate practices have become one kind of informative shit that media conglomerates almost never produce. In the increasingly consolidated world of corporate-controlled media, shareholder imperatives to increase profits (which often entails cutting costs), "if it bleeds it leads" sensationalism, and, more subtly, an obsequious stance toward the official stories espoused by corporate advertisers and their lobbied advocates in government have made muckraking investigative journalism (of the Upton Sinclair, I. F. Stone, or Erwin Knoll variety) too expensive, too risky, and too controversial for mainstream media (see McChesney 2004).

This institutional erasure of investigative journalism—which can shine a critical light on all the shit that corporate power brokers would just as soon remain out of public view—is a major structural impediment to consumer citizenship and democratic dialogue. If the "fourth estate" is suffering from investigative constipation, being unable to move muckraking exposés past the colonic blockages of ideology, economics, and institutional disincentives, then some roles for academics are to leverage their skills and cultural authority to bring institutional power structures to light, to critically interrogate the network of relationships and alliances through which they operate, and to identify their institutional contradictions and susceptibilities to various kinds of change strategies. For this reason, an analytics of the excretory economy does not tolerate the intellectual conceit that the mere act of writing academic papers and books can instigate social change. Rather, this critical shit has to be distributed in the fields of political action through linkages with activist social networks and the strategic use of popular media forms, such as information pamphlets, Web sites, blogs, popular press books, documentaries, and radio talk shows, to name a few.

Media studies scholar Robert McChesney (1993, 2000, 2004) exemplifies this muckraking orientation. McChesney is Marx meets McCluhan meets Mother Jones: the medium is the power structure, and this dominant condition calls for a rabble-rousing message. His historical analyses map out the institutional alliances among corporations, politicians, and government regulators and the arrays of policies, strategies, and tactics that have enabled the public airwaves to be thoroughly colonized and consolidated by corporate power. McChesney adroitly interjects this academic research into the public sphere through his radio talk show, *Media Matters*, which is distributed through a network of NPR and community radio stations (and podcast through <http://will.uiuc.edu/am/mediamatters/default.htm>) and his Free Press organization (<http://www.freepress.net>), which functions as an information clearinghouse for media activism.

[A]n analytics of the excretory economy does not tolerate the intellectual conceit that the mere act of writing academic papers and books can instigate social change.

By transgressing conventional boundaries between academics and activism, critically minded researchers can facilitate grassroots political action and empower consumer-citizens with realpolitik knowledge for collectively redressing specific failings, excesses, abuses, and exploitations of a given market system. The incentive for consumers-citizens to actively participate in these (institutionally anchored) activist projects is also provided by the excretory economy: it is about the only way they can make sure that the shit stays out of the meat.

Notes

1. This therapeutic motif also enables redemptive “anticonsumerist” practices, such as downshifting and voluntary simplicity (Schor 1998; Taylor 2003), to be commodified as a minimalist aesthetic, indicative of refined consumption tastes, and marketed to affluent consumers as a status-conveying lifestyle (see Holt 2000).

2. This moralistic privileging of certain consumption practices—consumers should eat food prepared in this manner, read this kind of literature, watch this kind of media programming, and go to these kinds of retail establishments—steps right into the elitist tirades that critics of commercial culture are always having to scrape off their Blackspot sneakers (see, for example, Heath and Potter’s [2004, 133-34] ad hominem lambasting of Naomi Klein and her *de rigueur* loft apartment and lifestyle preferences for artsy bohemian neighborhoods).

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