
Many of the arguments made in Edward A. Comor’s book, Consumption and the Globalization Project: International Hegemony and the Annihilation of Time will not be new to most readers. Much of this book is dedicated to providing a historical account of the rise of capitalist consumption, its expansion via globalization and their interdependence. These are topics that have been considered at length in communication and cultural studies literature. However, Comor writes to fill a “lacuna” in the field of international political economy (IPE), where consumption is often dismissed as a merely personal activity, while production is favoured as the “essential moment in the political economic process” (p. xi). In an attempt to revisit the place of consumption and globalization in IPE studies, Comor situates these topics within our contemporary global political economic system. He provides an interdisciplinary account of the role that capitalist consumption practices play in constituting global economic structures as well as the conceptual frameworks we use to resist the project of globalization.

Comor shows that capitalist consumption, as a structuring institution, neglects history and “annihilates time” in favour of “efficiency, fashion and immediate gratification” (p. xi). The implications of this structure his inquiry: How has this annihilation of time altered our modes of dissent and with what consequences? In what way is the lack of historical consciousness responsible for international violence and disorder? What kind of critical reflective practices are needed to reverse this trend? The author examines these issues by carefully historicizing the rise and growth of consumer capitalism and its expansion. With particular attention paid to the role of space-controlling and time-annihilating media, such as advertising, Comor effectively demonstrates how modern conceptions of time and space eliminate the possibility for imagining alternative social, political and economic configurations that do not take capitalist consumption and its values as central organizing principles.

The volume is accessible and systematically organized. The first half of the book provides a wide range of theoretical tools and heuristic devices to guide the reader through the book’s later chapters. Drawing primarily on Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, Harold Innis’ media theory and Marcuse’s analysis of commodification and consumption to anchor his arguments, Comor demonstrates how capitalist consumption has come to act as the primary structuring institution of the twenty-first century and how it has come to shape our economic realities as well as our “conceptual systems.” While his analysis doesn’t provide any particularly new insights into these debates, Comor clearly synthesizes their relevance and masterfully guides the reader through an essential intellectual genealogy. For this reason the book may be especially welcome for senior undergraduate classroom use.

The latter half of the book features more interesting and original arguments. For example, Comor carefully unpacks theories of Global Civil Society (GCS) that treat GCS as a space of resistance in a “global village”. He demonstrates that this theory is
built on a “faulty conceptual edifice” that underestimates the degree to which consumer capitalism has structured our conceptual systems in ways that readily promote the individual consumer. Nonetheless, scholars cling to the conviction that “some kind of progressive GCS is almost naturally unfolding” (p. 87) due to the spread of information communication technology (ICT) that levels the playing field by providing global access to information. Comor convincingly argues that there is no guarantee that mere access to information, via technology, will lead to a “qualitative transformation in how people think,” (p. 90) nor will it successfully promote global citizenship rather than global consumer society.

In an attempt to balance the argument, Comor provides slight acknowledgement to “more sophisticated proponents” of GCS theories (e.g., Ronnie Lipshutz, Martin Shaw); however he utterly ignores much more nuanced work coming from critical cultural studies scholars (e.g., George Yudice; Nestor Garcia Canclini), critical sociologists (e.g., Boaventura de Sousa Santos) and cultural policy scholars (e.g., Toby Miller), all of whom develop far less “rosy” views of GCS and avoid the assumptions that Comor takes umbrage with. These scholars theorize GCS as a complex space where social agents frequently act in ways that work both for and against their own perceived interests, showing that GSC is a dynamic space, at least within the global imaginary, which is leveraged by civil society movements, NGOs and corporations for a multiplicity of purposes and outcomes with no pre-determined objectives. We must be careful not to confuse a poorly theorized concept with its purchase in real world politics; we ignore these complexities at our own peril. Interestingly much of the aforementioned theoretical work shows greater familiarity with the social movements of the global south, a topic that Comor critically engages with through his case studies.

Comor’s book offers the case studies of India and China as evidence that it may be possible to resist the edifice of consumerism. Developing countries, he argues, harbour greater potential for resisting consumer capitalism because these resistance movements are formed in direct opposition to economic policy changes that blatantly attempt to alter a society’s cultural or dominant “conceptual systems” and are less likely than Western movements to be predetermined and shaped by consumer values (The Gap’s “Red Campaign” is one of the highlights). The introduction of consumer values often rubs against other societal values to create friction and forms of resistance. Comor’s case studies usefully reveal the possibility of incorporating new actors and new centers of resistance rarely given agency in academic discussions of global economic politics. They also implicitly suggest that in any discussion of global political economy more attention should be given to multiple actors, actual struggles and the concrete practices of resistance taking place.

Comor concludes the book by calling for what he refers to as a “re-mythologizing of globalization” that begins with the recognition that the future is not cast in stone (p. 157-159). Re-mythologizing globalization could mean turning the discourse of neoliberalism in on itself, “rather than a globalization that is largely about the global driving the local...a re-mythologized globalization could be about the local or the national driving the global [or about] the flowering of human and cultural rights through institutions, organization and technologies and the political and economic empowerment of local and national citizens and workers” (p. 158). Unfortunately,
however, Comor has spent the majority of the book successfully convincing the reader of the near complete dominance of capitalist consumption and its continual growth through globalization. He gives us no sense of how a “re-mythologized globalization” might change the institutional dominance of consumer capitalism and the rapid expansion of neoliberal agendas via globalization.

Nonetheless, Consumption and the Globalization Project is an accessible text that manages to push tired arguments concerning consumption and globalization into some new and interesting areas, particularly for political economists and international political studies scholars.

Nicole Aylwin, York University