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Review: Consumer Culture, Modernity and Identity

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Mathur, Nita, ed. *Consumer Culture, Modernity and Identity*. New Delhi: SAGE, 2014. xl +399 p., ISBN 9788132111276. £45.00; hardback; also available as an electronic book.

This timely volume of thirteen commissioned chapters asks what Third World countries such as India will do when it adheres entirely to the consumer society, as we know it in the Western countries? This worrying phenomenon is not new in our era of globalization; in fact, many symptoms confirm this trend. As noted in Chapter 2, the number of malls in India has doubled in just three years between 2009 and 2011 (p. 47). Writing about the increase of shopping centers in Indian cities, Sanjay Srivistava explains, "Malls have created an environment that combines the legitimacy and desirability of consumerism" (p. 59). People from wealthy countries cannot just watch from a distance as if they were stranger to these shifts. One of the main reasons for the rise of consumerism in Third World countries is the emergence of business process outsourcing (BPO) in India, which contributes to create a new category of consumers: "The consumption patterns of the Indian middle class have been postulated by acquisition of material objects" (p. 72). Surveys of young working women in India confirm, "how the work culture is inducing a consumerist culture among young women and this kind of consumerism has become a way of self-expression among young working women" (p. 75). Even though this situation occurs far from Western countries, studying this group matters because "the BPO sector in India represents the corporate sector having the ideologies of Western corporate world" (p. 75).

All chapters are excellent and original. While most essays concentrate on India, some chapters present case studies in countries such as Russia (Chapter 9) and the Czech Republic (Chapter 10). The final essays highlight the ethical dimensions of consumerism. For example, in her essay linking the politics of consumption with social justice (Chapter 11), Roberta Sassatelli (from the University of Milan) re-conceptualizes "political consumerism" understood broadly as "shopping for human rights, ethical or environmental issues" (p. 300). Focusing on the ethical choices made by environmentally aware consumers in India (despite the neo-liberal slogans), she concludes by noting the limits of what she coins as "the democratization of luxuries and superfluous goods which mark status" (p. 312), which are considered as "a dangerous and pointless game" (p. 313). Elsewhere in Chapter 12, Nicki Lisa Cole questions ethical coffee consumption in the USA and asks, "What consumer values, desires, and identities does an ideology of ethical capitalism both respond to and interpellate?" (p. 324). Using the case of fair coffee, she convincingly shows that fair trade does not eliminate the general source of the problem, which is capitalism itself: "the act of purchasing an ethically coded good then, such as Fair Trade or 'Farm Direct' coffee,

offers a momentary alleviation of the postmodern stress and anxiety that many US consumers feel” (p. 341).

Perhaps the most accurate verdict on consumer society is demonstrated in Douglas Kellner’s excellent chapter about advertising and identity: “despite propaganda from corporations and advertising agencies to the contrary, one should see advertising itself as a parasitical industry dedicated to manipulation, and not providing information as advertisers claim” (p. 200).

Much has already been published about the limits of overconsumption in the Third World countries, but this new book edited by Nita Mathur goes beyond a simple judgment easily made by Western citizens who are commenting about poorer people living in emerging economies. On the contrary, here we have scholars from the inside and from the outside who nonetheless agree to see this complex problem as a global issue created and actually fueled by some normative views conceived and circulated from wealthy nations to global markets. As a direct consequence, there are now cases of excessive richness and luxury lifestyles in poor countries where such attitudes only underline the immense contrasts and unfairness of such situations. In sum, this *Consumer Culture, Modernity and Identity* reaffirm the model of consumer society not only created to serve as an apparently enviable lifestyle but also as a subtle normative practice which is now going global.

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