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Reflections on Human Subjectivity in Modern Society

—Based on the Perspectives of Baudrillard, Lacan and Fromm

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Abstract

The problem of human subjectivity is prominent in modern society. By revealing the mechanism of consumption alienation in the symbolic society, Baudrillard critiques this mechanism for causing the loss of human subjectivity and the subsequent surge in human desire. Examining unresolved issues about desire and subjectivity within Baudrillard's "Consumer Society" theory through the framework of Lacan's theory of the subject of desire, we will demonstrate that Lacan's interpretation effectively eliminates the problem itself. From Baudrillard's "consumer society" to Lacan's "desire society," people have changed from pure passivity to active awareness of their situation but still do not have enough subjective initiative. On the contrary, Fromm's humanitarian ethics reflects on the problem of subjectivity from the perspective of holistic man rather than symbol, affirming that the inner power of human love and reason will lead man to transcend the general alienation of man so as to realize one's potential productively with joy and happiness as "being" rather than "thing." Only in Fromm's "productive society" will human subjectivity cease to be an issue.

Keywords

Subjectivity, Alienation, Fromm, Lacan, Baudrillard

1. Baudrillard on "Consumer Society"

With the development of modern society, people who have gone through the Enlightenment have shown their desire for subjectivity. At the same time, society's suppression of subjectivity has become more hidden. The term "consumer society" refers to a new phase in the evolution of capitalism that goes beyond a society focused on production. It also represents a transformation from a "scarcity society" to an "abundance society," which is Baudrillard's view of modern times. The production of commodities determined the forms and types of consumption, and consumption was primarily directed towards the use value of commodities in the previously scarce "commodity society." Consumer goods

are commodities with a certain functionality, whose value follows the objectivity of labor value and is determined mainly by the amount of social labor. However, the emphasis on consumption is shifting from the material attributes of items to their symbolic value in today's affluent "consumer society." That is to say, the commodity's symbolic value, rather than its utility value, determines its worth. Consumption dominates socio-economic life, shifting from a passive to an active mode of production. Individuals in the "consumer society" are constantly encircled by objects and shape their way of life around them. As Baudrillard pointed out, "To become an object of consumption, an object must first become a symbol. That is to say: it must become external, in a sense, to a relationship that it now merely signifies" (Jean, 1996, p. 224). This kind of relationship is mapped through symbolic meaning, and its symbolic value is the key to consumption activities. What is consumed is no longer the object itself but the relationship structure between individuals and objects. This relationship structure has extended to all levels of social life, "circulation, purchase, sale, differentiated wealth and items/ The possession of symbols constitutes our language and our coding today, and the entire society relies on it to communicate and talk" (Jean, 1998, p. 71). Therefore, the "consumer society" with excess commodities is not just a world of objects but also a world of symbols.

Based on the criticism of the political economy of symbols, Baudrillard pushes the thinking of alienation from the category of concrete "signified" to the field of wandering "signifier" and profoundly reveals the hidden essence of alienation in "consumer society"—Symbolic alienation. This logical framework of symbolic alienation is termed "transcendental alienation logic" by Baudrillard. It means that consumers are not subjects of consumer behavior, and Consumers in "consumer society" exhibit entire passivity due to their prevalent a priori mindset. Consumers are so immersed in the invisible dominion of the transcendent energetic order that they have eliminated introspective analysis of their state of being. Capital realizes its new control and exploitation in a nonviolent way, permeating everyone's life with the seemingly non-coercive and seductive freedom to consume. Nevertheless, how is this ghostly alienation accomplished?

First of all, symbolic alienation is premised on the existence of a hierarchical symbolic difference system. On the one hand, consumers are drawn into the differentiation schema of model/series and personalization. The so-called model is the standard product model based on industrial production, which represents an idealized perfection and is an elusive and unattainable state. The so-called series refers to related systematic products. The so-called personalization means that capital uses the difference of symbols to cater to people's desire to pursue individuality and confirm themselves. People follow the models through a series of iterations to pursue personalized self-expression in the "consumer society." They do not know that the differentiation schema is just "the play of signifiers" (Note 1). Individuals merely select expressions within a list of alternative personalities, and this list is arranged by the discourse power of capital, which is limited and passively guided. On the other hand, structural inequality is concealed under consumption equality, "It is not by heaping comfort, satisfaction and social standing on individuals that consumption can defuse virulent social tension...It is, rather, by

training them in the unconscious discipline of a code, and competitive cooperation at the level of that code; it is not by creating more creature comforts, but by getting them to play by the rules of the game" (Jean, 1998, p. 94). The consumption process of consumers is not only in the singular relationship between people and objects but also in the orderly coding of the hierarchical division between people. Those codes also implement the redistribution of rank and class privileges in the non-coercive homogenization process. According to Baudrillard, the appeal of the differentiation logic (Note 2) of the "consumer society" based on differences stems from a yearning and nostalgia for the feudal system's defunct social hierarchy, which compels individuals to reconstruct social hierarchies through laborious consumption.

Secondly, symbolic alienation consolidates symbolic supremacy through non-realistic technological methods. The real world is challenging to reflect authentically in the media-saturated "consumer society." The world scene that individuals are given frequently reflects the coded world, replete with cycles of signifiers that relate to one another. Advertising as a typical mass medium, in particular, does not establish its logic about accurate items or the real world but instead fosters a self-fulfilling prophecy based on the differentiated identity of target consumers, "Advertising is prophetic language, in so far as it promotes not learning or understanding, but hope" (Jean, 1998, p. 138) Advertising then enhances this persuasive discourse that is neither real nor false by constructing a virtual world using modern "simulation" technology. The random associations and arbitrary interpretations of symbolic codes in advertising and other media are filled with illusory substitutes for the real world, thus maintaining the continuous innovation of coded peddling and the resulting waves of follow-up purchases. Eventually, people fall into the trap of "false satisfaction."

In short, individuals become "de-subjectivity" due to the hierarchy, divergence, and non-realization that symbolic alienation generates. People in the "consumer society" have become the existence of no subjectivity. Since the object of desire is no longer a definite thing but only a representation of desire, the symbolic arbitrariness of the representation makes people's desires endless. Concurrently, the perfect model desired by desire only exists in the ideal, and people can only get close to it infinitely. However, they can never really realize it, so the impossibility of realization makes people's desires never satisfied. Moreover, the falsity of symbol consumption also leads people away from real life, and it is impossible to "be authentic self" through consumption. The secret of the "consumer society" lies in the fact that consumption is driven by the perpetual disappointment and eternal fantasy of commodities.

2. Lacanian Interpretation of "Consumer Society"

Baudrillard synthesized semiotics and Marxism to elucidate how the symbol alienates the human mechanism in the "consumer society." Then, he criticized that the symbol alienation mechanism makes people lose their subjectivity and makes people's desires endless and never satisfied. Hence, we must inquire: Can subjectivity be reinstated? What is the origin of desire? What is the connection between

the symbolic alienation mechanism and the mechanism of desire operation? Can people's desires be satisfied and achieve no need of desires ultimately? In the theory of "consumer society," Baudrillard continued the consistent style of the Frankfurt School, focused his critical firepower more on the problem of alienation, and made a good trial of the alienated nature of consumer culture, but ignored the human psychogenesis behind the culture. Lacan's theory of the subject of desire, which combines semiotics and psychoanalysis, can provide us with a possible answer.

Lacan first explains the reasons for desire by describing the distinctions between need, demand, and desire. The need is purely biological, but there is a desire for love in human interaction, and demand arises when people use words to ask for love, "Desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need" (Jacques, 1977, p. 237). So, why is there a gap between need and demand? That is because the object of people's demands is "nothing," an impossibility, and an absence of presence. Humans' longing for unconditional love stems from the discontent produced by leaving the state of perfect satisfaction of the womb, to which they can never return. But why do we say that desire is born in the space between need and demand? It is because the baby continually seeks fulfillment from the Big Other (usually the mother) in order to return to its previous flawless state. However, the satisfaction brought by the Big Other is always limited and cannot fully satisfy the infant's request, so the infant feels frustrated and symbolizes the concrete object used to fill the missing, making it a signifier of love. Thus, desire logged into the symbolic world, making man the subject of desire. Therefore, Lacan desires to use words as "fillers" to fill one's imperfect state. In other terms, desire is directed towards absence, "the desire is the metonymy of the want-to-be" (Jacques, 1977, p. 197). Furthermore, entering language implies constructing the subject's identity, which means that the subject is immediately assigned to a preset position in the symbolic order. According to Lacanian theory, the emergence of desire and the loss of subjectivity in the "consumer society" are not the creation of people's desire for symbols by symbolic consumption. The black hole of symbolic desire arises when people enter the language, and it is not the product of entering the "consumer society."

Lacan then points out that human desire is always the desire of the Big Other. The Big Other registered in the symbolic world has been castrated and thus unable to satisfy the subject's desires. However, the subject still has the desire for lack; the subject attempts to satisfy the desire of the Big Other and let the Big Other satisfy the desires of the subject, so the desire of the Big Other becomes the desire of the subject. The desire of the Big Other is likewise encoded in language symbols. Hence, from Lacan's perspective, the alienation of symbols in the "consumer society" is not a unique phenomenon in the "consumer society" because it occurs as soon as people enter the language. It is also impossible for people to expect to find themselves or realize themselves in the consumption of symbols because the self always exists as the image of the Big Other. The self is not its master but is determined by external forces that cannot be controlled.

Lacan invented the conception of "object a" to refer to the real object of desire of the Big Other, which is the real object of desire hidden behind the appearance of desire. "Object a" is also the cause of desire

since it is the missing position itself. Therefore, "object a is not a simple lack, but an irreducible and irreducible lack" (Fei, 2013, p. 94). The eternity of "Object a" makes the subject drift in the stream of desire forever because its reference always slides on the signifier chain, and the arbitrariness of the symbol makes sliding never fixed. At the same time, the subject fantasizes about finding an object that truly fills the lack, and pursuing a specific object is just a substitute for the desire for "Object a." The various cultural phenomena produced in approaching "Object a" with the imaginary object. However, they may be outside the mental periphery of the individual and are still the products of the signifiers that are preexisting or continuously produced. In other words, external and spiritual reality depends on the signifier's meaning to obtain the symbol level's value. In this sense, the reality people discuss is a set choice rather than an actual reality.

Examining the functional process of symbolic alienation within the "consumer society" from Lacan's perspective, the pursuit of "Object a" reflects people's internal motivation for pursuing difference and hierarchy. Although such a pursuit is futile, the desire is irrevocable, and it relies on symbolism and fantasy to try to possess "Object a." Therefore, "simulation" is only an external manifestation of fantasy. People's desires are not realizable in the virtual world but have never existed in reality since the day of birth, and the natural world has become an unreachable other world. In addition, the flow of desire cannot be blocked, so the point that symbolic alienation makes people's desires endless, this view is nothing new from Lacan's perspective. Therefore, the secret of the "consumer society" is not exactly a secret because this "secret" is hidden deep in human nature and human language, and it is no longer an invention of the modern stage.

Finally, Lacan reserves an openness for his theory of desire, which differs from the prior structuralism. People occupy a subject position after being entangled in the web of language. However, they are not yet subjects in the true sense because people's desires unconsciously follow the desires of others. As a result, the subject position does not represent the subject's genuine generation. However, it must be transformed into an ethically significant subject through the dialectical process of "alienation, separation, and fantasy of traverse." Simply put, The alienated people realize that the Big Other gives their subject position and take the initiative to bear the consequences of the "objectification" by the Big Other and incorporate the norms the other gave autonomously. People consciously take responsibility for their fate and then generate the ethical subject in the original position. It means that individuals have the opportunity to achieve ultimate freedom, not only at the mercy of others but also attain "a novel and unique freedom achieved by 'internalizing' the original external factors and 'self-disciplining' the original heteronomy" (Yi, 2020, p. 113). However, this freedom can only arise after symbolization, unlike psychopathic freedom before entering symbols.

Let us consider the critical problems to be answered by Baudrillard's "consumer society" theory through the lens of Lacan's theory of the subject of desire. We will find that the "consumer society" is no longer regarded as an object that requires harsh condemnation in Lacan. Furthermore, people's vigorous consumption desire in the "consumer society" can become a kind of subjective publicity,

Because according to Lacan's ethics, "The existence of true humanity, or the true subjectivity and ethics of man as an ethical subject, is precisely reflected in the persistence of existence in this lack of existence and this never-ending desire" (Yi, 2019, p. 124). As a desiring being, the subject always desires, and the desire is not a bad part of people but the essence of people becoming the subject. Therefore, the subjectivity and desire issues (Note 3) that Baudrillard tried to solve were directly canceled and meaningless.

3. Fromm's Humanitarian Ethics Reflections on Human Subjectivity

From the above, we can find that from Lacan's perspective, the "consumer society" can be expressed as the "desire society." Although people in the "desire society" have the possibility of transcending the object identity, they are still the subjects in the net of symbols, and the ultimate object referred to by symbols is "Object a" represented by absence. In other words, individuals undergo a massive transformation from being objects to subjects: they go from being passively captivated by symbols to immersing themselves in them. This transition does not surpass the master signifier's dominance. Therefore, the subjective act Lacan termed "taking the initiative to assume one's fate" seems more akin to a passive submission characterized by helplessness, such as surrendering control over one's destiny. This is because "Lacan prioritizes language above all else; the most direct consequence is that the subject is alienated and disregarded as an intuitive or reflective life" (Fei, 2004, p. 75). Man is abstracted into a symbolic man, thus ignoring the totality of life. This view of life strengthens the split between the existence of one's own life and its symbolic meaning, which still intensifies the alienation of human beings. Fromm's humanistic understanding of human nature can overcome the limitation of "human" in Lacan's theory.

Fromm combined Marx's and Freud's views of human nature and believed that humans have both internal rational and emotional and external social natures. Unlike Lacan's understanding of human nature, humans are affected not only by others but also by their intellectual and emotional immanence. Fromm focused on "rational beliefs" while criticizing "irrational beliefs." "Irrational beliefs" are "based on one's emotional submission to irrational authority" (Erich, 1999, p. 201), whereas "rational belief" is based on people's comprehension of their cognition or sensory experience. Rationality under the power system is not real rationality. However, it is understood as rationality acting by the instructions of the church or the state in the constraints of the power system, pointing to the purpose of the Big Other rather than the purpose of the individual. Its essence is caused by irrational emotions, such as fear or yearning for power, rather than out of "rational belief."

"Rational belief" is "based upon our own productive experience, nothing can be its object which transcends human experience" (Erich, 1999, p. 209). This definition contains two meanings: On the one hand, there is a distinction between one's own experience and the experience of others. Lacan's theory points to the latter, while Fromm's theory points to the former. Fromm believes that one's own experience is the first, and only one's own experience can establish one's own reason. This distinction

between them involves the problem of the pre-existence and post-existence of thinking. In Lacan, the symbolic system is given as the carrier of the way of thinking, and whether as the object or the subject, its thinking operates within a set of established rules. However, in Fromm, the preeminence of the symbolic system does not determine human rationality because it is the material rather than the purpose of human experience, and no matter how legitimate the concepts of love and justice are, they need to go through human empirical reflection and experience before they can be called rational attitudes. On the other hand, there is a difference between productive experience and non-productive experience—the difference between the two lies in the purpose for which human power is used. Productive experience only exists in the efforts made by humans to use their own power to develop their potential and become "self-reliant individuals." Unproductive experience is all other experience, the extension of productive experience.

From these two meanings, we can understand "rational belief," the belief tested by acquired experience to externalize one's own potential, ultimately pointing to "presence" - the presence of one's existence. As previously stated, desire in Lacan's theory refers to "absence"—the absence of existence, an empty stance in which one's own existence is constantly elsewhere. As a result, desire denotes a type of "absence." In exploring "rational belief," Fromm addresses relativism, the skeptical consequence of reason. The prevalence of modern relativism makes people's values and judgments uncertain. People lose direction and reliable judgment standards and then lose their own power, which is easily coordinated by the power of external authority and does not bring a good effect after doubt - truth. On the contrary, the "presence" that "rational belief" refers to is the truth about oneself, which is based on respect for the objective facts of one's own experience, and the key is whether one can trust one's own reason.

In the face of uncertainty about belief or disbelief, Fromm proposed his humanitarian ethics to lead people to trust their own reason. His guidance is not a religious call of the past or a kind of willing thinking. However, it is based on the evidence of past human achievements and on the inner experience of each individual he has received as a senior psychoanalyst. The critical point of his humanitarian ethics is that "man is able to know what is good and to act accordingly on the strength of his natural potentialities" (Erich, 1999, p. 210). This viewpoint opposes the belief that human nature is essentially wicked and that we must employ ethics or law to combat evil and utilize fear of punishment to repress evil.

From the psychoanalysis perspective, Fromm explicitly analyzes repression's ineffectiveness in achieving good results. From the point of view of the opponents of humanitarianism, they assume that man is selfish and evil, so man needs to suppress evil in order to achieve virtue. Repression as a defense mechanism can remove the so-called evil impulse from consciousness. However, repression cannot be removed from existence, and the return of repression will function in disguised forms. That is to say, the evil impulse can only be transformed into a more hidden form of evil and cannot be eradicated, so the suppression of evil is ineffective in advancing towards good.

His psychoanalytic journey proved that the destructiveness caused by evil in human nature is directly related to people's incapacity to engage in sufficient productive activities, "The evil has no independent existence of its own, it is the absence of the good, the result of the failure to realize life" (Erich, 1999, p. 218). The development of human life requires man to use his power productively in the world, and only when man feels his own existence in close contact with the world can he not disrespect his own life or the life of others without being able to feel himself. So, he emphasizes that the ethical choice is not between repressing or indulging evil but between repression-indulgence and productivity. The destructiveness of the spirit of authoritarianism precisely causes the evil of man. At the same time, humanitarian ethics aim to enhance the power of man's existence and use man's innate basic potential productively to break his total alienation.

According to humanitarian ethics, people will change from passively receiving external influences to actively creating their reality, and people can become the true subject. Different from Lacan's theory of the subject of desire, Fromm's productive subject not only has the initiative to choose within the symbolic system but also has the initiative to create. This subject can not only interrupt the operation of the signifier chain but also escape and even return to create the signifier system with its traces. Therefore, the subject mentioned by Lacan is the subject in the structuralist sense rather than the subject in the life sense.

Marx's theory profoundly influenced Fromm, and he distinguished human character from the relationship between the individual and the world. Personality structure is composed of temperament and character. Character is different from temperament but acquired through assimilation and socialization with others. He divided character into non-productive and productive. In non-productive character, the relationship with others is either in sadomasochistic symbiosis or in closed and indifferent loneliness, while productive character is about love, "The affirmation of one's own life, happiness, growth, freedom, is rooted in one's capacity to love, i.e., in care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge" (Erich, 1999, p. 130). This kind of love is the most intimate relationship and best protects both sides' integrity. It is important to note that love here is not based on lack, as in non-productive love, but a love on fullness and maturity. Fromm further discusses productive character in conjunction with the ethical purpose of individual happiness and pleasure. He pointed out that action based on unproductive character only removes psychological tension. In contrast, action based on productive character is accompanied by happiness and pleasure, "Happiness is an achievement brought about by man's inner productiveness and not a gift of the gods" (Erich, 1999, p. 189). Hence, he concluded that the opposite of happiness is not pain but depression caused by internal impotence. When the means and ends of people's actions align with inner productivity, and the rational self replaces the irrational id to pursue the truth, the "humanitarian conscience" can be produced. In Fromm's view, the "authoritarian conscience" sinks into what Freud calls the prohibitive superego of the father, and the "humanitarian conscience" is the transcendence of it.

From the moral standpoint, Fromm's humanitarian ethics addresses the problem of people succumbing

to the control of powerful authority and losing their own power (i.e., potential). In contrast, Lacan's theory of the subject of desire only stops at the point of self-consciousness and voluntary responsibility. It does not turn back to the inherent potential of the self, nor does it have access to the ethical state of happiness. Therefore, Fromm studied the subject of human subjectivity more deeply than Lacan and had a more realistic transcendence. With this idea as the base, Fromm's remarks on consumption are also well-known. By reviewing Baudrillard's "consumer society" with Fromm's theory, people know themselves by knowing "things" and mark themselves by owning "things" that are incapable. Baudrillard explains the passivity and impotence of human nature in "consumer society," but he does not reveal the general alienation of human beings, nor does he deeply explore the inner resources of human nature. Fromm argues that we need to treat people as "people" rather than "things" in consumption, "the act of consumption should be a concrete human act, in which our senses, bodily needs, our aesthetic...should be a meaningful, human, productive experience" (Erich, 2002, p. 130) Baudrillard's theory is strongly critical but not genuinely ethical.

Fromm agreed with Marx's attitude to philosophy that changing the world is more important than understanding it. Therefore, he did not stay in the metaphysical analysis of subjectivity, but in his books such as *The Sound Society* and *The Art of Love*, he took how to overcome human alienation as a systematic project. He analyzes and suggests specific aspects of the economy, politics, culture, science, and technology under the capitalist system with a spirit of practical and subtle social concern. Compared with Baudrillard's "consumer society" and Lacan's "desire society," Fromm longs for the "production society" based on love and reason.

4. Conclusion

Regarding the problem of the lack of human subjectivity in modern society, both Baudrillard and Lacan discussed this issue from the perspective of semiotics. Baudrillard also drew on the critical theory of alienation from the young Marx's period to reveal the symbolic alienation of the "consumer society" and fully demonstrate the current picture of the development of modernity in capitalist society. However, he did not combine the Marxist theory of the middle and later periods to touch society and historical development profoundly. Therefore, his theory lacks prospects for further promoting social development, stopping in the whirlpool of symbols. Based on semiotics, Lacan combined psychoanalysis to explain that people have been alienated since they were captured by language, and this alienation did not start in modern society. The ethics of desire he proposed shows that although people are divided and missing in the "desire society" with alienated language, they still have the possibility of transcendence. He appears more fearless than Baudrillard's rejection and resistance to reality after seeing part of reality clearly and the impracticality of finding a way out. However, Lacan's theory overemphasizes the importance of language and neglects other aspects of human nature, which makes the liberation of human subjectivity incomplete. Fromm combined the perspectives of Marxism and psychoanalysis, criticized the general alienation caused by unproductive experience, and proposed

that human subjectivity can be indeed promoted only by upholding humanitarian ethics and developing human potential based on love and reason. In Fromm's theory, the problem of human subjectivity seems to have come to an end. However, for the production and development of potential, what is human potential? Are the universal human pursuits of love and reason the potential of everyone? So, do all people have the same potential? From the perspective of contemporary post-structuralist theory of difference, Fromm's theory still has much room for criticism.

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Notes

Note 1. Baudrillard takes structuralism and poststructuralism as distinct modes of reasoning that correspond to the phases of competition and monopoly under capitalism: The competition stage represents the phase in which symbols operate deterministically, with the signifier, the signified, and referent of symbols maintaining a relatively stable relationship. This stage demonstrates the symbolic operation mode "from signifier to signified to referent." On the other hand, the monopoly stage represents the phase of uncertainty for symbols, where the signifier becomes utterly detached from any association with the signified and the referent. That is to say, the signifier becomes entirely independent, resulting in the symbolic operating mode of "from signifier to signifier and then to signifier." The signified and the referent are eliminated and replaced by the solitary performance of the signifier, which is known as "the play of signifiers."

Note 2. Baudrillard's idea of differentiation logic is based on anthropological studies of primitive tribes' exchange behavior. The study of anthropologists Malinowski and Moss found that the exchange of primitive people was not limited to the exchange of use value but a symbolic exchange that revealed

hierarchical standing and identity. This social function of consumption has always been in human civilization. Thus, consumption should be understood from the perspective of social hierarchy.

Note 3. In his book "Symbolic Exchange and Death," Baudrillard advocates for the use of symbolic exchange originating in primitive civilization, that is, the employment of non-equivalent, reciprocal, and reversible exchange behaviors to escape the "consumer society" that has entered the simulacra dilemma, so as to restore human subjectivity. However, human beings cannot return to primitive society to use the principle of symbolic exchange, so the theory cannot be implemented in reality and can only serve as an empty scream. Moreover, he believes death is a symbolic act in the true sense because it can defy the world encoded by symbols. Such a view reflects his nihilistic tendency to find a way out.