

Title: We're Wasting Time: Harnessing the Temporality of Commodities to Motivate Responsible Consumption

Abstract:

In this paper, I argue that an orientation towards commodities that is grounded in the present is ill-suited for addressing the consumption-related crises that await us if we fail to drastically shift the trajectory of our material economy. Drawing primarily from Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and Jane Bennett's vital materialism, I first argue that our experience of commodities is epistemically limited, as it effaces the commodity's past and possible future. Specifically, when we experience a commodity, we discount the human suffering and environmental damages implicit in its production (past) and disposal (future). Thus, our knowledge of commodities is temporally constrained to the present moment. Though commodities are transtemporal object-processes, the market structure inevitably conceals their past and possible futures, which poses a barrier to making ethical consumption decisions. Next, I bring Marx and Bennett into conversation with semioticians like Arthur Berger and Roland Barthes, whose writing has contributed to the widely-accepted sociological theory that commodities are tools of identity-construction. The intertextuality between Marx, Bennett, and semiotics demonstrates that, when we discount the pasts and futures of commodities—and thus consume them as ahistorical, future-less entities—we fail to incorporate their unethical impacts into our notions of who we are. This erasure of injustice from the self, motivated by our present-oriented commodity experience, weakens our ability to make responsible consumption decisions. Put differently, the limited self-knowledge conveyed to us by our material possessions precludes us from fostering the sort of political responsibility necessary to tackle the complex, globalized challenges that lie ahead. Drawing primarily from Judith Butler, I tease out a relationship between self-knowledge and the capacity for political responsibility. I further nuance my

discussion of responsibility with Iris Marion Young's social connections model of responsibility and Shalini Satkunandan's *Extraordinary Responsibility: Beyond the Moral Calculus*. Finally, I end my paper with a call to explore new ways of seeing and being in relation to commodities—ways which allow commodities to be experienced intertemporally—such that we are more cognizant of the environmental and human effects that occur along the lifecycle of the commodity. This, I argue, will allow us to uncover new modes of identity that are inclusive of our intertemporal connections with humans, the environment, and non-human beings. To this end, I discuss some theoretical and practical attempts to facilitate ethical consumption by bringing either the past or future (or past and future) of commodities into consumers' view.