209124116 Assessment Two

“Consumer culture has had a destructive effect on western societal culture and fanned the flames of criminality.”

Featherstone (2007) defines consumer culture as an ideology that prioritizes acquiring commodities and their associated symbols. Consumerism surpasses consumption – the obtaining of necessities such as food or water – and instead favours the superfluous accumulation and continual replacement of commodities. Consumers no longer purchase goods solely for their practical value, but to construct their own identity through the consumption of different consumer products (Kotzé, 2020). This essay will argue that the most significant crimes exacerbated by consumerism are those committed during the manufacture of consumer goods – including ecological crimes and labour exploitation.

A contemporary application of the Treadmill of Production theory will be used to demonstrate the link between environmental crimes, and the cycles of production and growth that consumerism necessitates. Then Marx’s Commodity Fetishism (1976) will be used to explain the crimes that occur in Less-Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) as a result of western consumerism. Finally the argument that sweatshops in LEDCs should be encouraged because they give workers autonomy and stimulate economic growth will be refuted.

Hayward and Smith (2017) provide historical context to the modern phenomenon of consumer culture. They identify Veblen (1994) as an early consumerism academic, describing conspicuous consumption; the theory that the wealthy intentionally buy luxury goods specifically to display wealth. The authors then outline Strain Theory (Merton, 1938), which states that criminal activity occurs when socially prescribed goals become unattainable due to a lack of means. The marriage of these ideas provides a compelling model to explain how consumerism aggravates acquisitive crime – as people crave the status symbols that accompany commodities, but if these symbols cannot be purchased due to a lack of means, then illegitimate, criminal methods must instead be employed.

In this essay environmental criminology will feature heavily, which White (2013) defines not only as crimes against the natural environment - such as illegal deforestation - but also the social issues that are often interlinked with ecological destruction. For example, the health issues that water pollution can cause for the surrounding population. Whilst these social issues are not always necessarily criminal, the literature surrounding this topic identifies these acts as a ‘harms’. White (2014) elaborates that while a crime is an illegal act, a harm constitutes any act that causes suffering, but is within the remit of the law. White argues that in the context of environmental destruction, even legal harms - such as the use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam war - can be considered criminal, as humans intentionally destroy a natural environment in the pursuit of a goal, such as militaristic advancement. In this essay, both crimes and harms will be explored, with White’s understanding that even legal acts can be understood as criminal when the harm is intentionally done in order to achieve another goal – in this case, the goal of maximizing profit through consumerism.

Lynch, Stretesky and Long (2020) apply Schnaiberg’s Treadmill of Production theory (1980) to understand green crimes and their damaging long-term effects. The Treadmill of Production states that consumerism requires constant and growing rates of production, causing enormous amounts of ecological destruction. Schnaiberg explained that consumerism drives progressively more production as consumers are made to feel inadequate, and only by purchasing the newest commodity could they feel complete and satisfied – something Dawson (2005) would later term ‘manufactured dissatisfaction’. It is this manufactured dissatisfaction that means natural resources must be relentlessly harvested to continue the endless production of goods.

Lynch, Stretesky and Long identify multiple green crimes associated with production: such as palm-oil extraction used in food manufacturing, which contributes significantly to global deforestation. Or the increasing use of open-pit mines, which when drilled into release asbestos-like minerals and radioactive elements - polluting the air and water of surrounding areas. These extraction practises have been linked to species extinction, climate change, natural disasters, and the threatening of ecosystems that we rely upon to sustain life (Brulle and Dunlap, 2015). Environmental crimes are some of the most life-altering and far-reaching acts, and they happen on a daily basis. No other type of crime – white collar, acquisitive, interpersonal violence – can claim to threaten the survivability of our species.

Fussey and South (2012) support Brulle and Dunlap, citing consumerism as a key contributing factor to climate change. Moreover, the authors argue that as the climate deteriorates, both environmental crimes and other forms of crime will intensify. Environmental crimes will increase in severity as societies run out of essential resources like oil, and more harmful extractions methods will be needed. Using the example of oil, drilling will need to take place deeper into the Earth’s crust, causing progressively more harm to our environment. To illustrate how other crimes will be aggravated by climate change, Fussey and South use the example of drought. When the climate worsens droughts become increasingly common and extreme, as water is an essential resource to produce food, this is problematic. The authors argue that when societies experience food and water shortages crimes such as theft and interpersonal violence will increase, as the public enter an anomic state of frenzy and panic. Therefore, as more ecological destruction is wrought to produce consumer items, the more of both green crime, and street crime we can expect to see.

Not only is crime exacerbated in countries where resources are extracted, but consumerism also ensures the rise of criminal acts in countries that manufacture commodities. In Naomi Klein’s ethnographic research No Logo (2000), she explores the plethora of crimes that occur in the LEDCs that facilitate western consumerism. Klein describes a clothes factory in Indonesia where hundreds of employees burn to death every year, as their dormitories lie above firetrap sweatshops. Workers here are routinely underpaid, denied toilet breaks, and sick days. A Nike factory in Vietnam punished employees wearing incorrect uniform by forcing them to run for hours in the sun, until dozens had collapsed from exposure. In Haiti, a Coca Cola factory denied workers’ their legal right to unionize, while in the Philippines Coca Cola unlawfully fired 600 employees. These are all criminal acts, violating both local law and the employees’ Human Rights.

Hensman (2011) directly ties these crimes to consumer capitalism, the underlying economics of consumerism. She states that as the capitalist mandate dictates, companies must extract profit from any area of production possible, and negating workers’ rights are an easy way to accomplish this. By underpaying employees that manufacture consumer goods, companies like Nike and Coca Cola reduce costs, and increase profit.

Böhm and Batta (2010) use Marx’s Commodity Fetishism (1976) to explain why consumers continue to purchase goods from unethical companies despite the crimes they commit being widely publicized. Commodity Fetishism states that western societies impose symbolic meanings on products, and these symbols create a skewed idea of their value and the labour that went into their production. As a result, Commodity Fetishism shields western consumers from the truth of the abusive conditions their commodities were manufactured in.

Hope (2019) advances this argument, arguing that Commodity Fetishism allows western societies to ignore environmental harms in the same way that it allows them to ignore labour exploitation. Furthermore, Hope argues that this western indifference towards ecological destruction and workers’ rights abuses has a corrosive societal effect. As western societies become more normalized to benefiting from other people’s exploitation, the more unempathetic and narcissistic citizens of western countries become. Therefore, as well as increasing criminal acts in countries that manufacture commodities, consumerism also has a destructive effect on western societal culture – eroding values such as compassion and egalitarianism.

Finally, the idea that sweatshops should be allowed to continue because they contribute meaningful economic growth to LEDCs will be refuted. Many western economists and criminologists have defended sweatshops in LEDCs, arguing that they provide employment (Powell, 2014; Lemieux, 2015). They argue that this building of industry is necessary, and will eventually result in higher wages and improved working conditions. Therefore, they argue, we should let sweatshops persevere. Kates (2019) refutes this. He argues that this convenient interpretation of human right abuses allows western societies to maintain an illusion of philanthropy, while benefiting from easy access to commodities. Kates also argues that adopting the mindset of Powell or Lemieux allows one to feel negated of any responsibility to help workers in LEDCs, and that allowing this ideology to become commonplace risks compromising western moral integrity, and the values of empathy and altruism that western societies identify themselves by.

The Choice Argument is also used to validate exploitative work practises. This claims that sweatshops give workers autonomy, and that because workers have freely chosen this work, we should respect their decisions (Zwolinski, 2007). Kuyumcuoglu (2020) performs an extensive literature review surrounding the Choice Argument, and shows it to be unsound. Kuyumcuoglu argues that the Choice Argument ignores the reality that many employees of sweatshops do not chose to work there, but are coerced by the lack of alterative employment options and economic circumstance (such as low availability of welfare). These injustices are then exploited by consumer businesses who use other people’s misfortune as an opportunity for profitable gain, frequently breaking employment law because they know their employees have no other option but to stay.

In conclusion, the essay has shown that consumer culture exacerbates a multitude of grievous crimes, some of which will impact the Anthropocene for centuries to come. Compounding this, consumerism provides fertile ground for criminal acts in the LEDCs that manufacture consumer goods; in the form of human rights abuses and routine infractions of employment law. Furthermore, the apathy displayed by western societies towards these crimes has a destructive effect on our cultural moral values. Lastly, a prevailing argument in favour of the poor conditions consumerism utilises in LEDCs has been refuted. It has been shown that both the Choice Argument, and the statement that sweatshops are worthwhile because they stimulate economic growth are flawed, and therefore there is no justification for these crimes that are committed as a result of consumerism.

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