

**WELCOME TO THE CONSUMPTION LINE:  
Sustainability and the Post-Choice Economy**

Michael M. Bell  
University of Wisconsin  
[michaelbell@wisc.edu](mailto:michaelbell@wisc.edu)

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I have a problem—two problems, really. My inseam length is 31 inches and my taste is for black, not blue, jeans. My complaint is not with my modest height, to which I've long accommodated my identity. Nor is it with having a minority sense of style, something again to which I've accommodated myself. In fact, I rather like both situations. Rather, my complaint is that in these United States—in this land of choice, where the consumer is king, and always right—it is no longer possible, as near as I can tell, to purchase black jeans with a 31 inch inseam.

I know because, at this writing, I've been trying for several weeks to buy a new pair, as my old ones are all getting a bit too bedraggled for a supposed professional. Almost every US clothes retailer sells jeans only in even inseam lengths: 28, 30, 32, 34, etc. (This is why, perhaps, American drive so much. Half of them find themselves constantly tripping when they walk.) There is one major US retailer who retains the odd habit of selling in odd lengths—good old Land's End. But it is besieged and was recently acquired by another major US clothing retailer, the equally besieged Sears. Their survival remains uncertain. So much for selling odd sizes. And so much for selling black jeans, for I now discover that the new management at Land's End has dropped them for a stone-washed style with grey stitching in place of the jet black of my youth and dreams, and still favored by Steve Jobs and other aging members of what the pundits call the creative class, in which I imagine they would try to place me. (I use a Mac, after all, and you can't do that with honesty in blue jeans.) Land's End is not alone here. Only a few retailers offer black jeans of any length anymore, which I guess is why even Steve Jobs recently started showing up in public wearing blue ones—incidentally, about the same time that Apple switched to Intel chips.

Call me a spoiled consumer brat, coddled by the imperial wealth of the US, the New Rome, but I nonetheless think there is something significant going on in this reduction of choice in the nation where the consumer is supposed to be a brat—or, as it is more politely said, where the consumer is sovereign. What I see here is struggle.

Not just the struggle of capital versus labor that Marx highlighted for us—although that struggle is still with us, however lamely. Not just the struggle of capital versus capital that neoliberalism likes to glorify with its ideals of competition, efficiency, and profit—although some of that still goes on too. I mean the additional struggle of capital versus consumer, the struggle of the owners of the means of production against the owners of the means of consumption.

Because, I'm going to have to buy *something*, and the retailers know that. They are pretty sure that someone like me does not own the means of producing a pair of 31 inch black jeans—does not have the materials, the skills, the time, or the machinery. Division of labor expropriated me of that long ago. They know too that, for all their symbolism of down-market casualness, jeans are high fashion. Plus they know cultural standards of cleanliness and newness will ensure that I will own way more than one pair, leading me to buy this relatively cheap and standardized product many times over. Instead of a small wardrobe with a few expensive and hand tailored clothes that I wear and repair for years, the retailers are pretty sure I have a closet over-flowing with multiple versions of the current cheap fashions and half-discarded items I must now deem a bit too old, too worn, and too out-of-date, the planet be damned. They are pretty sure I am not Gandhi. And they're right. They've got me. I will have to buy something, and soon.

This situation in which I can have any color of jeans I like as long as it is blue, not black, and 30 or 32 inches long, not 31, is increasingly general to all categories of retailing. Go into any US big box store, or what the retailers call "category killers"—Walmart, Kmart, Target, Home Depot, Office Depot, Staples, Borders, Best Buy, whatever. What do you see? A huge number of product categories. Dozens of mini specialty stores in one. But in each category you will find a much reduced range than you would have found in the individual specialty stores that have now nearly disappeared. Plus you will find that they all sell pretty much the same line of nationally advertised brands, and pretty much the same models of them—which, of course, soon become the highest selling models, as there is little else on the shelf, in the catalog, or on the website, and can then be justified to the consumer as being the highest sellers. Sure, there's the web, and thank the consumer gods for that, for there are still specialty retailers out in the e-ther, and you can do some handy price-comparison with them. But how about places where you go in and see the thing first, talk to someone knowledgeable about it who has been on the job longer than three months, and can be more certain that you won't be so quickly dissatisfied with your purchase, making another, hanging out a yard-sale sign, and logging in to sell on e-bay?

Tried to buy a decent car for your family recently? Of course, “decent car” is an environmental oxymoron. But even a relatively decent one is a tussle to find. There are finally a couple of fuel efficient hybrids, but nothing that is both big enough for a family loading up to visit the grandparents and safe enough to ease the mind of the concerned parent. You can only get small hybrids for commuters or hybrid SUVs that only get middling fuel economy and have a top-heavy tendency to flip. And the diesels favored by Europeans with their high fuel taxes spray the air with dangerous particulates. Meanwhile, the rest of the few automakers left in the world are all selling barely distinguishable models of the same basic line-ups, often using the same chassis and interchangeable parts as their other cars, and sometimes even each other’s cars. Yes, to be fair, you can have whatever color Ford you want these days—but only as long as everything else about it is as similar as one t-shirt to another, differing only in the logos and in tiny and easily programmed details of styling.

I could go on, but the above is, I imagine, tediously familiar to anyone who has tried to purchase something outside of the center of the increasingly narrow, yet increasingly fast, stream of commercialism—maybe something that is not so perilous for the planet and for the people who make and use the product. My goal is to put a name to this state of affairs, so that we can more readily recognize it and understand its dynamics. The name I will suggest is the emergence of the *post-choice economy*, in which choice becomes ever more a Coke-or-Pepsi matter of cultural connection to global brands and in which the functional and social diversity of the economy becomes correspondingly ever less.

Central to the development of the post-choice economy and the struggle between capital and consumer that it represents is what I will term the *consumption line*. I have in mind here a parallel to the idea of the production line. A production line organizes an unruly mass of humanity and a resistant environment so together they rapidly produce large quantities of standardized products. A consumption line organizes an unruly mass of humanity and a resistant environment so that together they rapidly consume large quantities of standardized products. In either case, the goal is to make sameness out of difference, inequality out of quality, force out of choice.

But to recognize these dynamics, we need a less idealized understanding of the economy—less idealized from either a Marxist or a neoliberal perspective. This will mean, first of all, a thorough dissecting of the profitism, productionism, and systemism built into our economic theories, including our critical theories, such as the “treadmill of production” model popular in American environmental sociology. To that task I now turn.

## **There Is No Profit Motive**

Capitalism, the popular web site answers.com tells us, is “an economic system based on a free market, open competition, profit motive, and private ownership of the means of production,” citing the neoliberal source investopedia.com for this definition. Answers.com also gives us the American Heritage Dictionary’s similarly neoliberal take, which is that capitalism is “an economic system in which the means of production and distribution are privately or corporately owned and development is proportionate to the accumulation of profits gained in a free market.” Browse over to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, and you can read that capitalism is “an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods mainly by competition in a free market”—which is pretty much the same flavor of definition. It’s a familiar list of catch words and phrases: free market, competition, private ownership, private decisions, and profit motive. Poking around a bit more, one can get some expansion on all of these, such as the view of investorwords.com that the free market is “business governed by the laws of supply and demand, and not restrained by government interference, regulation, or subsidy.”

Marxists generally don’t have much quarrel with definitions like the above, and indeed the phrase “means of production” is their own, now oddly relished by neoliberalism, as indeed the once-controversial word capitalism is. As recently as the 1950s, John Kenneth Galbraith could write that capitalism is “regarded as vaguely obscene. All sorts of euphemisms—free enterprise, individual enterprise, the competitive system and the price system—are currently used in its place” (Galbraith, 1952: 4). No more. From a dirty word of rejection, capitalism, like the term gay for homosexual, has been appropriated as a positive by those once accused of it. This positive weighting of the term is where Marxist and Neomarxist critique finds its issues, pointing out that profit comes from expropriating surplus value from workers, alienating them from what is rightfully theirs, creating much misery and injustice in the process. Green Marxists extend the point to the environment, arguing that capitalism also tries to expropriate value from nature’s own labor, and increasingly dips considerably deeper than nature’s surplus in its efforts. Marxists and other left critics also like to dispute whether capitalism today is truly free market, given its frequent—nay, constant—manipulation of the state and market information for its own ends, and its happy acceptance of whatever subsidies are currently on offer. But Marxism does not dispute capitalism’s existence; rather, it disputes the existence of capitalism.

I take as a case in point the treadmill of production theory that Allan Schnaiberg and his colleagues have advanced for the last 25 years or so. Schnaiberg and company now say the theory isn't Marxist, a shocker that Schnaiberg announced publicly in the fall of 2003 at a conference on the treadmill of production at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, bewildering those Marxists and fellow travelers who, dispute a quibble here and there, had long embraced the treadmill view, with no vocal complaint from the treadmill theorists. Schnaiberg, Pellow, and Gould (2004: 312) call production treadmill theory something that "bridges environmental sociology" with a number of other perspectives, only one of which is "Marxist sociology." But they also call the treadmill of production view "dialectical" (305), "radical structural" (311), and a theory that explains the way that capital is "accumulated" (296) in Western economies amid social and economic "contradictions" (299), which sure sounds awful lot like some kind of Marxism. Indeed, as Buttel (2004: 324) described it in an appreciative retrospective, production treadmill theory is "anchored in neo-Marxist political economy," albeit in a way that "borrows eclectically from Marx's concepts and insights while eschewing other aspects of Marx's work or those of contemporary Marxists."

These family feuds aside, treadmill of production theory focused from the start on the notion that "more capital [is] becoming accumulated in Western economies, and this capital [is] being applied to replacing production labor with new technologies to increase profits." In other words, as you have to do something with capital, other than stick in a mattress, or there's no point in having the stuff. But the "sunk capital" of new technologies presents a fiscal problem: "To further increase profits, managers of firms need[] to increase the levels of production and sustain higher levels" Schnaiberg, Pellow, and Gould (2004: 296-297). Increased production ultimately comes back to the environment, though, and as the easy fruit of primary forests, rich soil, and high grade mineral deposits gets used up, margins drop, requiring increased output to make up the loss. And on the production treadmill goes, gathering up "growth coalitions" of workers, the state, and just about everyone else to keep the flow of profit increases, upon which everyone depends in some way, come environmental and social hell and highwater. The production treadmill encourages a focus on growth at all costs until "Economic expansion [is] generally viewed as the core of any viable social, economic, or environmental program" (Schnaiberg 2002: 32).

There is much to admire in such a view, and I have elsewhere expressed my own appreciation of it at some length (Bell 2004: 51-77). Particularly valuable is the way treadmill theory highlights the expansionist tendencies of contemporary

economies, the deleterious consequences of this expansion for people and the land, and the agency of the environment in social and economic life. But it is also wildly off the mark in some very important regards, and even repeats much of the idealism of neoliberalism, albeit unintentionally.

Let's consider first the production treadmill theory's focus on the capitalist conundrum of profit. Gould et al. (2004), in which production treadmill theorists tell us "everything you wanted to know about the treadmill but were afraid to ask," they find themselves referring to capital's need for "profits" and "profitability" 17 times in 17 pages of text. In this they seem in close agreement with the neoliberal definition of capitalism as centrally based on the profit motive. As is exceedingly commonly emphasized: The dangers and glories of the profit motive are banalities of political debate.

But both perspectives are focusing on the wrong ball. It may seem a heresy to claim, but there is no profit motive in the contemporary economy, except in rare moments of idealism. That is to say, the motive is not to make a profit but to gain, by whatever means, what profit is but one route to: the accumulation of value and the means of its acquisition, retention, and increase. In this day of the "creative accounting" of a Ken Lay and Bernard Ebbers, of Gary Winnick and Jeffery Skilling, of Enron, Worldcom, and Global Crossing; in this day of no-bid government contracts to Halliburton and Bechtel; in this day of government by rotating door, pay-to-play, and corporate-written law; in this day in which even reported profitability has increasingly less relationship to either stock value or executive pay, can we still believe that what we call capitalism is about profit—if by profit we mean what we usually say we mean by it, which is "return on investment," as wikipedia.org defines it, or "the amount earned after deducting costs from revenue," as investordictionary.com proclaims? Where here are the earnings and revenues? Where are the investments or even the costs? Corruption is not something that happens in spite of the economic order. It's scale today compels us to confess that it is part and parcel of that order.

Nor is the contemporary economy all that profit-oriented even on its own terms. Take the United States. As of 2005, government spending accounts for a bit over 30 percent of the annual GDP in the US. As of 2003, non-governmental non-profits account for another 9 percent (NCNA 2006). Thus, nearly 40 percent the US GDP is generated on a non-profit basis. This seems a huge amount to ignore. Even the infamous US private healthcare system is barely larger than its public healthcare system, accounting for only 54 percent of total health spending (US Department of Health and Human Services 2005).

Treadmill of production theorists have also often repeated neoliberal claims

that capitalist profit comes from efficient competition and successful risk-taking in a free market. The word competition hardly appears in their writings in recent years, and rightly so, but it was a central feature of Schnaiberg's original 1980 thesis, as the prominent green Marxist John Bellamy Foster observes (Foster 2005: 11). In any event, we all need to accept some sober truths: That capitalists hate competition, hate risk, and don't care a fig about efficiency—at least as ends in themselves. What capitalists like is “a system that favors the existence of capitalists,” as the Oxford English Dictionary's uninflated but pungent definition of capitalism puts it. But nonetheless, the production treadmill theory's focus on profit, and the race to keep up with it through technological investments that increase production, indirectly repeats the old platitudes about competition and efficiency in the market through the struggle to stay on the treadmill and to keep it going—despite the production treadmill theory's wisdom about the enrollment of the state in the treadmill's growth coalitions.

Treadmill of production theory also places the locus of action among producers, and not among the owners of capital. As Wright (2004: 318) asks in a sympathetic Marxist critique of the treadmill of production theory, “Do we really want to make the pivotal actor in the model those who produce or those who own and invest?” For a similar reason, Foster too has always stood back a bit from the treadmill of production theory. As he writes (2005: 14),

The biggest weakness of the treadmill of production theory, from a Marxist perspective, was that it concentrated on the wrong treadmill. To understand the major thrust and inherent dangers of capitalism, it is necessary to see the problem as one of a treadmill of *accumulation* much more than *production*.

But Foster goes on, as Marxists often do, to indirectly repeat neoliberal platitudes on his own. For Foster (2005: 14), the “accumulation dynamic” has to be understood

in terms of Marx's general formula for capital—M-C-M'. In this formula, money capital is transformed into a commodity (via production), which then has to be sold for more money, realizing the original value plus an added or surplus value, distinguishing M'.

The trouble is, capitalists don't care a fig about accumulating surplus value, the Marxist interpretation of profit, either. The goal is the accumulation of value—just plain value, whether surplus or not, and whether derived from labor, nature, good heartedness, speculation, accounting tricks, government influence, convincing argument, charity, grants, a big smile, a big gun, or any of a host of other ways of

getting control of what you want that others likely also have at least some interest in. Now, I accept that none of this is possible without the creation of surplus value somewhere along the way, and quite a bit of it, and that the continual gap between wage and value lends an expansionist structure to economic relations. This is a powerful insight we neglect at our peril. But most accumulators find themselves far removed from having to worry about such things in their own efforts at accumulation. They want to accumulate independently of the problem of surplus value, and they generally find many other ways of doing it in their own lives.

The *bottom* bottom line is that, aside from a few ideologues, no one in a capitalist economy—not capitalists nor anyone else—cares about capital. The capitalist economic actor cares about accumulation, and its many means. In that sense, our current economy is not capitalist but accumulationist, and what we see around us is not capitalism but *accumulism*.

### **There Is More Than Production Going On**

Foster calls his view the “treadmill of accumulation,” as opposed to the treadmill of production, and I like the phrase. And I also don’t mean to be dismissive of the logic of surplus value, nor of the logic of profit, however defined. Let me emphasize this once more: I am not saying that the dynamics of surplus value and or profit are unimportant, or of minor importance, in our world today. They are hugely important, both as means of accumulation and as moral values, whether regarded positively or negatively. Rather, I am trying to say that they are not the only hugely important features of our economy. And I am also complaining that Foster’s treadmill of accumulation, like the treadmill of production, falls into the unintentional applause of neoliberalism in two ways at least. I have already argued that it repeats the ideology of profit and competition. It also repeats the ideology of production.

Consider again the definitions of capitalism with which I began the previous section. Each of them gives strong pride of place to production, using that word explicitly, and passing over consumption almost completely—and arguably completely completely—except possibly in the references to the “distribution” of goods. They appear to accept the definition of capital as the ownership of the means of production, a now popular view with roots in Marxist theory. Given those roots, I suppose it should be no surprise that Marxist and quasi-Marxist theorists would make the same judgment. The treadmill of production theorists put their productionism front and center, of course, right in the name of their perspective. And Foster does it too, despite advocating for the phrase “treadmill of accumulation.” As he goes on to note (Foster 2005: 14), “In the Marxist perspective, all is traceable to the relations of



production and to the social formation arising out of the mode of production at a definite historically specific period.” No surprise, but annoying theoretically in its single-minded exclusion of consumption.

The treadmill of production theorists do at least consider the issue of consumption, and occasionally note that production wouldn’t go very far without it, as in Schnaiberg’s (2002: 32) recognition of capitalism’s “need to ensure that consumption kept pace with production. If economic growth comes about through increased production of goods, consumers need to have the disposable income to purchase the goods.” But Schnaiberg and colleagues (2004: 303) argue that their theory of “the treadmill is organized under the premise that producers, not consumers, are the major driving factor in the political economy.” Their case (2004: 300) is that the consumer is only reactive:

Decisions about types of technologies, the use of labor, and volumes of production are made outside the realm of consumer decision making. Individuals, communities, states, and corporations can consume only the outputs of a given production technology....Although consumers can accept or reject these products, they have no influence over the allocation of capital to productive technologies.

Consequently, they argue (2004: 301),

To place consumption decisions first in our analyses would obscure the power relations embedded in the political economy....A key dimension of the exercise of power is the ability to influence, if not dictate, the choices of those less powerful. Individual choices to not consume products generated by powerful actors involve an underlying power struggle between highly unequal contenders.

And when I think of my struggle to buy 31 inch black jeans, I have to agree: It is, broadly speaking, a very unequal relationship, especially if we consider the matter individually, me versus the clothing retailers. Yet by that logic treadmill theorists and other versions of Marxism should also dismiss the importance of labor, subjected as it is by the alienating expropriation of its surplus value, and deprived of most decision-making power. But they do not. Gould et al. (2004) mention the condition of the “worker” or of “workers” 53 times in their article’s 17 pages of text, detailing how they are displaced and disempowered by treadmill dynamics, how their unions are crushed, how their health and safety is undermined, and how (303) “citizen-workers need to achieve more control over production decisions.” Where is their fellow-feeling for the consumer in need of critical consciousness and better organizing?

I think the issue here is an underlying sense that it is morally ludicrous to think of my search for 31 inch black jeans as a form of oppression and struggle. To consume is to commit the most culturally bourgeois of acts. Consumption is privilege, this line of sensibility goes, and therefore cannot be struggle. But it is a struggle, a struggle over accumulation through the medium of exchange. And it is an exchange made even more strikingly unequal by the lack of consciousness and organization among consumers, who are left to think and act only in individual terms.

Marxist writers often go on to sideline consumers precisely because of the individualism their theories leave them in. For example, one of the reasons that the treadmill of production authors feel it is appropriate to ignore the consumer is because “the model emphasizes collective actions (such as those of nongovernmental organizations or social movements) over individual choices/actions” (Gould et al. 2004: 302). But consumption is a collective act. It is something we do with others, in response to others, and conditioned by others. The notion that consumption is the result of individual choice repeats once again a neoliberal idealism, and at the same time makes it harder to conceive that this collectiveness could be imagined and organized to far better purpose.

Part of the problem is also that Marxists, Neomarxists, and what Buttel (2004) suggests calling “extra-Marxists” typically understand surplus value in dyadic terms. Perhaps this stems from the way dialectics encourages a dualistic and oppositional understanding of all the world as thesis and antithesis. Who knows. In any event, Foster recognizes that, after money capital gets transformed into a commodity through the worker’s labor, it “has to be sold for more money.” But he does not bring the one who bought the commodity into the account. Instead, we are left with capitalist and worker, bourgeoisie and proletariat, in dialectic conflict, awaiting the new synthesis socialism represent. But there is a tripod of value here, and potential points of conflict, and of cooperation, along every leg and at every foot. There is the conflict and cooperation of worker and capital, capital and consumer, and, yes, consumer and worker, as well as conflict and cooperation among workers, capitalists, and consumers. There are as well power relations realized and unrealized, all made far more complex by the fact that workers, capitalists, and consumers are often, and in varying degrees, one and the same.

But although in Foster’s account shifting our eye to accumulation does not mean a recognition of this tripod, I believe accumulation and a new term like “accumulism” are open to it. No one doubts production’s relationship to accumulation. Surely consumption as well aims foremost at the acquisition of value. Consumption does often destroy value through use and misuse, and in that sense

“consumes” value rather than accumulates it. But that is not its motive. Production too can destroy value through the mistreatment of the means of production, including labor, machines, and the land, although that too is not its motive. The concept of accumulism allows us to see how economic actors stumblingly bend and blend both the means of production and the means of consumption at their disposal in the direction of gathering value. For the means of production and the means of consumption are both the means of accumulation.

### **There Is No System, But There Is a System Motive**

Still it’s all a big mess. Our economics today is a cluttered jumble and tussle of social and biophysical relations built around ideals such as property, profits, production, efficiency, and free markets, directed toward accumulation.

But we usually don’t see it as a tangle of relations, often indifferently connected. One of the intellectual troubles of profitism and productionism is the way, in laying out a case for how it all works, both neoliberal and Marxist theorists argue that it does all work, whether for good ends or bad. For all these perspectives, the word “system” looms large. All three of the definitions of capitalism that I mentioned lo these many pages ago begin by positing the existence of an “economic system” that needs to be accounted for. Correspondingly, the treadmill of production theorists also neo-liberally sprinkle their writings with the word system and phrases built out of it, such as “dialectical system,” “production system,” “social system,” and “social system-ecosystem interactions”—some 14 times in Gould et al. (2004), omitting the 19 uses of “ecosystem” on its own, if you’re still interested in keeping count of such things in that piece I have gone over so much in this paper already. There is a sense here, from both starting places, of the economy as a “complex unity,” as the Oxford English Dictionary defines the word system.

Yet that unity is a fantasy—at times a highly useful kind of fantasy in which we try to sort out what is going on by tracing out the patterns of interaction and connection by which one thing does many things all at once, and by which we understand the world as more than a reductionist assemblage of isolated entities, easily manipulated one by one. But it is a fantasy nonetheless, and one that is common to the kind of structural analysis that the treadmill of production theory sees as its radical utility. The use of system imagery was long ago critiqued by social theorists worried by the functionalist hubris, teleology, and conservatism of a Talcott Parsons in which the lesson is that we need to be cautious of changing anything, lest we crash the whole interconnected thing down on our heads. The political ambition of functionalist analysis is quite different in Marxist theory, of course; it is to show

precisely how we can bring the whole interconnected thing crashing down. But even if we accept that goal as worthy, there is still an empirical problem with the notion of a system, a problem that “complexity” theorists have recently been trying to highlight: systems aren’t. The real world is far too complex and contradictory to regard it in the tidy, balanced, and finalized way that the imagery of systems implies.

The word contradiction is important here. If the economy were indeed a system, contradiction would not be philosophically possible. The struggle over power would be constitutive of power, if it could be considered struggle at all. For there to be contradiction, there must be at least a degree of lack of unity, a lack of wholeness, a lack of connection. And there is, I think we cannot doubt, much, much contradiction in the economy today, despite the seeming victory of neoliberalism and the “end of history” that many have proclaimed.

But although our economy is far from unified, there are many strong efforts to give it unity and to stabilize the flows of accumulation. The treadmill of production theory is very helpful, I think, in identifying the origin of many of those efforts, what it terms “growth coalitions” in a related fashion to Logan and Molotch, who use the same phrase. The treadmill of production encourages a broad constituency that sees its interests as at least in part aligned with increasing production and associated possibilities for accumulation. This includes workers and the state, as the treadmill of production theorists often note, as well as consumers, which they rarely speak of. Parties are elected, laws are passed, deals are cut, and union contracts are signed, all with the production treadmill in mind, and with scarcely a moment’s thought for the environmental and human consequences. There is motive here, system motive, as the coalition of interests tries to arrange means and relations to its own purposes, all the while attempting to overcome through various forms of struggle the internal contradictions in those purposes, and to organize people and environment into situations that rapidly produce large volumes of standardized products—into production lines that extend well beyond the factory floor, as any production line must.

But the production line is not the only system motive out there. Equally important is the existence of what I am suggesting here we term consumption lines that attempt to organize people and environment into situations that rapidly consume large volumes of standardized products. There is, then, a heavily structural component to consumption. The treadmill of production theorists don’t agree, explaining (Gould et al. 2004: 302) their focus on production as based on the fact that

...producer decisions are influenced by the regulations imposed by the state and by negotiations with their labor forces. This is why the

treadmill of production model emphasizes the role of nonelite individuals as *citizens* (polity) and *workers* (labor) rather than as consumers.

Again we see a repetition of the neoliberal assumption that consumption is an individual act. Yet the fingerprints of the state are all over the place. Take for example my, and your, inability to purchase a safe, fuel efficient, and environmentally clean car. The US government has for years steadfastly refused to regulate SUVs, despite their hazards to their occupants and those they hit, despite their appalling fuel economy, and despite repeated calls from consumer groups that they do so. It has similarly refused to institute the CAFE standards that would so increase the fuel efficiency of the US auto fleet as a whole. But as I live in the US, with its sprawling land use, often based on planning regulations that ensure that sprawl, and with its meager public transportation, I'm hard pressed to do without a car. So I'm stuck, and so are you. The consumption line also constantly engages negotiations with the consumption forces, if I may call them that. On the one hand are the sales managers and customer service representatives who secure purchase orders, con the dubious, and resist complaints about shoddy merchandise. On the other hand are the consumers dangling the promise of future purchases as a lure for a good deal today and for responsiveness to requests for better products, better information, better return policies, and better concern for the social and environmental consequences of what gets sold.

In short, the consumption line is full of structure and full of negotiations about that structure. It is also expansionist. There are the efforts to keep quality as low as possible while still gaining the sale, increasingly the likelihood of future ones. There are the fulfillments of promises to buy more in return for decent quality. Both motives encourage an expansionist structure in the consumption line.

It is not only structure that gives the consumption line an expansionist character—at least not structure in the usual sense of the term, the sense of structure as economy, law, and institutions. The comparative culture of accumulation means that one never has enough, whether that accumulation is directed at vertical competitive display, as Thorstein Veblen had it, or towards horizontal community connection, as Mary Douglas has argued it. Just as there is an expansionist treadmill of production, there is as well what I have elsewhere termed (Bell 2004), following many others, an expansionist *treadmill of consumption* that has its origins as much in culture as in structure.

The treadmill of production too is an equally cultural and structural phenomenon. Central to that culture is the ideal of hard work, so crucial for getting

labor to do what capital wants it to do. There are as well our environmental and social justice concerns, or the lack thereof. Plus there is the acceptance of the ideals of profit, competition, and the free market, despite their frequent empirical doubtfulness. But the treadmill of production theorists see their approach as “radical structural,” as I mentioned, and not equally radical cultural, and once again wind up repeating the paeans of the structural virtues of neoliberalism.

And of course, the treadmills of production and consumption interconnect. For example, the cultural value of hard work helps legitimate any qualms one might have about unequal consumption, as those who work hard get to consume hard, the logic goes. We can also see how the structural inequalities that result from the production treadmill create the conditions under which we can see others rising above us, stimulating our consumptionist desires to try to keep up and keep ahead—which in turn stimulates consumption and provides economic opportunity to expand production.

But this interconnection is far from seamless. Every step of the way there are resistances, doubts, contestations, disconnects, and a continuing unfolding and refolding. There is plenty of system motive, but there is no system. In this complex disunity there is always some opening for change.

### **There Is Radical Potential in the Consumption Line**

As we have seen, the treadmill of production theory argues that the real action, control, and power in the world economy is at the level of production, driven mainly by competition between firms to stay in the economic game as labor finds itself weakened and more aligned with the interests of the production treadmill. Here, in traditional left-wing fashion, it looks at how corporate power has overwhelmed workers, it marvels at how the economic knives each firm has out for the other pushes them all along to new and ever-more perilous heights of technological creativity and production, and it wonders how to get the workers more control over production processes and environmental consequence. I don’t want to dispute the importance of giving workers more control over productive and environmental life. I don’t want to come across as saying, as I was earlier at pains to emphasize, that issues of profit are of no consequence anymore. But I want to make the case that these are no longer as central to economic decision making and that we need to look elsewhere *as well* for sources of change in our economic, social, and environmental circumstances.

Consider the extreme levels of monopolization that we now see in the economy. Mary Hendrickson and William Heffernan report that, as of the best data

available in 2005, four firms control 56 percent of the US broiler chicken market, four firms control 64 percent of the US pork market, and four firms control 84 percent of the US beef market. This is not just a national problem. Consider that the world has just two manufacturers of large commercial planes, Boeing and Airbus, and essentially just two kinds of personal computers, Windows-based machines and Mac-based machines. Monopolization is, of course, old news by now—two centuries old at least. But what we have little recognized is that in a world of extreme monopolization, the basic conflict in the economy is increasingly less between firm and worker and between firm and firm. The contemporary economy requires growth, as the production treadmill theory warns and as every contemporary politician well knows. The trouble is, with such economic concentration, kicking other firms off the treadmill is increasingly less an option for growth. There just aren't that many of them left. Nor is there much workers can say about it, as their options for reemployment in a rival firm that might value their skills disappears with the competition. Rather, the basic economic conflict is increasingly at a much less glorious and possibly more contradictory social location: between firm and consumer. Here is where the main constraints to growth are: not in globalizing markets horizontally, which is now pretty easy, but in *shrinking* them vertically; not in developing and gaining a greater share of the treadmill of production, which is pretty much empty of competition now, but in developing and gaining greater control of the treadmill of consumption.

All of which shifts the regions of our economic discontent away from production and more over toward what is now in the rich countries a far larger share of the economy: the retail and service sector. In the US, services are 78 percent of annual GDP and industry is now just 21 percent (CIA 2006). Annual expenditure growth in services and non-durable goods is now routinely double or triple that of the durables that the production treadmill mainly alerts us to. Some 12 percent of the US labor force is in retail alone (New York Times 2006). Consumer confidence is the kiss of life or death for the economy. The ranks of the 25 richest Americans in 2005 do not include even one member from the traditional production corporations, such as energy, minerals, transportation, or heavy manufacturing. Rather, six of the fortunes come from retail, six from software, five from media and entertainment, four from investment funds, and just four from manufacturing—but quite a different version of manufacturing than what the treadmill of production theorists highlight: three fortunes in candy, and one in computer manufacturing (Forbes 2006a). Aside from one steel magnate in India, Lakshmi Mittal, the situation is much the same for the 25 richest in the world (Forbes 2006b).

Thus we should watch with particular care the accelerating monopolization not just of primary goods and heavy manufacturing, so long familiar, but the utter transformation of retailing in the last twenty years. For example, in the US in 1997, the five largest food retailers controlled 24 percent of the US market, Heffernan and Hendrickson (2005) report. But by 2001, that percentage had risen to 38 percent, and by 2004 to 46 percent, with Wal-Mart, Kroger, Albertson's, Safeway, Ahold in the lead—all of them busy internationalizing their dominance as well. In sector after sector—books, hardware, building supplies, housewares, electronics, clothing, pharmacy, restaurants, and on and on and on—locally-owned shops have fallen away and away and away.

As is now constantly remarked on, often in tones of anger and fear. It is this discontent and struggle along the consumption line that the post-choice economy and my search for 31 inch black jeans represent. In the battle for the consumer's dollar, euro, peso, and yen, the trick is to present not choice (which is expensive) but the illusion of choice. The firm's goal is to sell as much as possible with limited numbers of lines in each product category, and to limit choice so consumers buy what's in the category. The goal is to limit transaction costs within the firm by having fewer items in the catalogue, eliminating warehousing, and even contracting out the stocking of shelves. And as long as the monopolistic firm still controls the shelf space, the consumer is forced to support these efforts at transaction cost reduction. And by the way, the competition is selling the same stuff, because they're using the same distributors to reduce transaction costs. The growing concentration in distribution, below the level of the retail store that the consumer directly experiences and recognizes, is one of the seldom told stories of the current struggle for control of the consumer treadmill.

Another goal of the post-choice economy is to limit transaction costs external to the firm. It takes a considerable effort to establish a new kind of product in the market, as any capitalist will tell you. It takes advertising. It takes control of shelf space. It takes control of governmental structures. It takes the establishment of a supply chain and the control of variation. Once a firm has achieved this for a new kind of product, it usually tries to stick with it as long as it can, meanwhile throwing justice and sustainability to the wind.

Once this restructuring of consumption lines has been achieved, firms then present an illusion of choice through the notion of the product line. And that's because once a person has been sold on one product, the goal is to sell them the fancier version of the same product, as you've already gone through the trouble of getting them to reorganize their lives and cast their cultural identity around the



previous product sold, and likely also conscripted the structuring power of the state so as to make this reorganizing more apparently convenient and culturally intuitive. In this way, you only have the hard sell once. And through this reorganization of convenience and its routines of identity, consumers find themselves continually dissatisfied with the ability of the lower level product to satisfy their ends and maintain their footing on the treadmill of consumption.

Fordism was the idea that you could have any color of Ford you wanted, as long as it was black (Henry's old line that I have already referred to a couple of times in this paper). Post-Fordism was the idea that, instead of mass consumption, we were seeing a switch to an economy in which flexible production made it possible to have any color Ford you want—to segment the market and build on postmodern sensibilities concerning the welcoming of difference, to sell everyone a different t-shirt, a different micro-brew, a different design of SUV that appealed to their embrace of self-actualization through a salad-bowl of identity. That still goes on, but what we've missed is that this choice, if it is choice, is no longer about difference, if it ever was, but about sameness—about the control of difference through the language we are *all* supposed to speak: that of t-shirts, micro-brews, and SUVs. Accumulism hates variation. Its goal is to stabilize the flows of sameness that continue to build its economic accretions. If we ever had a post-Fordist economy, we are then now entering a post-post-Fordist economy. And either way, we are experiencing the development of a post-choice economy through the increasing monopolization, and acceleration, of both production and consumption.

All of which sounds pretty depressing, and I think it is. But there is room for optimism—even radical optimism—if we recognize our situation, and hold faith at the same time in the incompleteness of where are and where we might go. If I am right that economic conflict is less and less between firms and workers and between firms and firms, but between firms and consumers, if this is where the new struggle is, then it is here where more of the new resistance has to come from. And there is some good news in this new front in the accumulation battle. In some ways, consumers are potentially easier to organize than workers. There are no laws against product boycotts, at least not yet. There are still no laws against consumer unions, ecoteams, simplicity circles, slow food, fair trade, and local buying. The capitalist rhetoric of consumer choice makes such regulation immensely difficult, politically. Plus you are a lot less likely to lose your job by joining in a consumerist social movement, as your participation in one is far less visible to your employer than joining a strike. So joining a consumer campaign is considerably less materially threatening to the participant.

But there are some special constraints for consumerist movements. Foremost, the personal benefits of participation are far less immediate and direct, lessening consciousness and commitment. Plus, the participants are typically far less mutually involved in the daily relations of community life. They don't know each other, which both lessens commitment and makes it harder to break the prisoner's dilemma of cooperative action.

So consumerist movements for social, economic, and environmental change are likely to take a long time. They have already taken a long time, just like the labor movement did. They have had some notable successes, just the say. And like labor organizing, consumerist movements are very fragile. Still, given the direction of development in the post-choice economy, and the increasing salience of the consumption line as a site for slowing down the treadmills of economic life, it worth trying a little more unity. As consumers unify, they would do well to remember that the older struggle of the firm versus labor continues, however ineffectual current resistance from workers may be. There may be ways to bring the easier face-to-face commitments of labor organizing together with the easier global imagination of consumer organizing. Consumers and workers would do well to remember a few other things too: that workers are consumers, that consumers are workers, and that not all capitalists are pigs, or at least not always. Indeed, in our messy world of economic entanglements, it sometimes is hard to tell the difference between the three legs of the tripod of value, and in that there is further potential for both a redder and a greener reorganization of our relations. For, despite their many differences of power and interest, it is the same unruly mass of humanity that both production line and consumption line alike try to organize. May that unruly mass soon rediscover its unruliness and organize itself along quite different lines. May that unruly mass soon remember that what it really is: not just workers or consumers or capitalists, but citizens too—and not just citizens of a social polity, but of an ecological one too.

Worker-consumer-capitalist-citizens of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chain stores.

## References

To follow shortly...