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Covid 19, threatened humanity and the latent desire to consume fashion items: the eternal return of desire?

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Covid 19, threatened humanity and the latent desire to consume fashion items: the eternal return of desire?

ABSTRACT

In the first post-lockdown commercial reopening that aimed to minimize the contagion of Sars-CoV-2, in several world capitals, we witnessed tumultuous scenes of agglomeration caused by anxious consumers. They awaited the opening of stores of major fashion brands and, as a result, generated relevant revenue for these companies. Based on the thinking of philosophers: Lipovetsky, Deleuze and Foucault, we promote a reflection on such behavior. Considering the threatening context and, at that time, the exposure to a risk of unknown proportions, we asked ourselves: what drives this desire to consume? We deal with the logic that governs the capitalist and fashion systems, whose historical relationship gave rise to a desiring consumer. Fleeing from dichotomous thinking, we consider that the reason-system is a condition constitutively produced by the subject, which has its maximum expression in the fashion culture. We conclude that, as fashion culture is the culture of Being, this was sought as an essential consumption.

Keywords: Covid-19. Desire for fashion consumption. Biopolitics.

Covid 19, humanidade ameaçada e a vontade latente de consumir artigos de moda: o eterno retorno do desejo?

RESUMO

Na primeira reabertura comercial pós-lockdown que visou minimizar o contágio da Sars-CoV-2, em várias capitais mundiais, assistimos a tumultuadas cenas de aglomeração causadas por consumidores ansiosos. Eles aguardavam a abertura das lojas de grandes marcas de moda e, como resultado, geraram um relevante faturamento para estas empresas. Embasados no pensamento dos filósofos: Lipovetsky, Deleuze e Foucault, promovemos uma reflexão sobre tal comportamento. Considerando o contexto ameaçador e, naquela altura, a exposição a um risco de proporções ainda desconhecidas, nos questionamos: o que impulsiona essa vontade de consumo? Tratamos da lógica que rege os sistemas capitalista e de moda, cuja relação histórica fez surgir um consumidor desejante. Fugindo do pensamento dicotômico, consideramos que o sistema-razão é uma condição produzida constitutivamente ao sujeito, que tem na cultura de moda sua máxima expressão. Concluimos que, como a cultura de moda é a cultura do Ser, esse foi buscado como um consumo especial.

Palavras-chave: Covid-19. Desejo de consumo de moda. Biopolítica.

Covid 19, la humanidad amenazada y el deseo latente de consumir artículos de moda: ¿el eterno retorno del deseo?

RESUMEN

En la primera reapertura comercial post-lockdown que tuvo como objetivo minimizar el contagio de Sars-CoV-2, en varias capitales del mundo, asistimos a escenas tumultuosas de aglomeración provocadas por consumidores ansiosos. Esperaron la apertura de tiendas de las principales marcas de moda y, como resultado, generaron ingresos relevantes para estas empresas. Partiendo del pensamiento de los filósofos: Lipovetsky, Deleuze y Foucault, promovemos una reflexión sobre este comportamiento. Considerando el contexto amenazador y, en ese momento, la exposición a un riesgo de proporciones desconocidas, nos preguntamos: ¿qué impulsa este deseo de consumir? Nos ocupamos de la lógica que rige los sistemas capitalista y de la moda, cuya relación histórica dio lugar a un consumidor deseoso. Huyendo del pensamiento dicotómico, consideramos que el sistema de razón es una condición producida constitutivamente por el sujeto, que tiene su máxima expresión en la cultura de la moda. Concluimos que, como la cultura de la moda es la cultura del Ser, esta se buscó como un consumo imprescindible.

Palabras clave: Covid-19. Deseo de consumo de moda. Biopolítica.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the spread and devastation caused by Sars-CoV-2 in December 2019, the world population witnessed once again a threat similar to the 1918 Spanish flu. The health crisis practically brought the “machines of the capitalist system” to a halt, making us experience a fear of the unknown, and a concern for family and friends, in addition to drastic social isolation, which culminated in the first lockdown. With the reopening of commerce, people were eager to return to shopping centers; but it was not for food or medicine supplies – items understood as necessities – but for products such as fashion items.

In China, Hermès stores earned US\$ 2.7 million on their first day of reopening (DESIDÉRIO, 2020). In Zara's French stores, a total disrespect for the social distancing recommended by the World Health Organization – WHO (LEMOS, 2020) – was evidenced. Italian Gucci stores implemented a security monitoring model in which body temperature was measured on customers' foreheads (FFW, 2020), something common nowadays, but at the time it seemed like a barrier to access. In Brazil, the first shopping center which opened after a quarantine regime which brought the country to a standstill, was Neumark in Blumenau. It was also characterized by similar scenes and conditions (RIBEIRO, 2020).

These images will certainly be a landmark in our existence as a consumer society (BAUMAN, 2008). We emphasize that in these images, and despite the uncertainty of the future and growth in viral circulation, the desire for these goods considered to be “non-essential” did not abate – or did it? How can we understand this latent need? Is it desire? If yes, a desire for what?

According to Orlandi (2003), desire is a “creative power irreducible to the pleasurable pursuit of some object”. Deleuze

(2005) explains that the organization and dynamics of social spaces are a result of their agencies. Desire, as well as truth, are projections of power (FOUCAULT, 2009) and, therefore, constitute structure and command realities. Therefore, desire is something fundamental to the logic of the system, but it is not imposed on the consumer; on the contrary, it is something inherent that needs to be experienced (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 2010). Given that we understand that realities are socially constructed (BERGER; LUCKMANN, 2004), we can perceive it as an undertaking by the consumer to maintain a status quo. Desire is relational, works like glue, establishing flows between people, products and the market (RUCKENSTEIN, 2015).

If desire is immanent and relational, the context provides evidence for an understanding of fashion culture as characterizing modern consumption, and which is a regulating principle that disseminates the taste for novelty, expands to all spheres of everyday life and is supported by the pillar of individuality. After all, fashion is a promising medium for the production of self-expression, lifestyles and identities (LIPOVETSKY, 2007; MESQUITA, 2004). Fashion brands add representation principles for users, which are enhanced by the work of marketing, and their products are acquired as objects of desire. Using the aforementioned examples, we were able to observe such a phenomenon in our study.

Our reflection will seek to understand the similarity of this consumer behavior in large cities around the world, something that, in itself, is not new. The history of fashion shows us that, in times of world crisis, fashion has played an important social role and, in doing so, has led to changes in the system that governs these spaces (LIPOVETSKY, 2007). This phenomenon has occurred in a synchronic order, but also, at the same time, it belongs to a diachronic order. Therefore, the core of the issue we seek to discuss is precisely what drives this act of

consumption. We suppose that this explosion in the desire to consume was a consequence of the restrictions in the freedom to go, come and consume.

2. THE HISTORICAL PRODUCTION OF THE SUBJECT-CONSUMER

We start from the idea that fashion consumption is due to a culture made viable and maintained by its system, whose gears are supported by power relations strongly engendered by capitalism. Such a relationship produced a subject as a type of consumer, about which we are going to explore more.

To contextualize the current period of consumption, which is linked to "hypermodern times", Lipovetsky (2007) undertook a chronological and historiographical overview of three phases of consumer capitalism. The first phase starts around the 1880s and extends into the Second World War period. During this period, there was the invention of mass marketing and the modern consumer, which is characterized by the process of democratization of desire. The second phase takes place between the 1950s and the subsequent three decades of the post-war period. During this time, the term consumer society becomes popular and marketing begins its foray into market segmentation strategies, and which is underpinned by the sociocultural and demographic situation of the population. Both phases were guided by the modern ideal of happiness.

However, with the exhaustion of this ideal around the 1980s, there is the beginning of the third phase of consumption, called hyperconsumption (LIPOVETSKY, 2007). Whereas some scholars perceive the decline in interest in brands and consumption, the fall of impulse purchases and greater attention to price increases, as an end of consumer society, for Lipovetsky, we have started a reflective stage of

consumption. It is here that we have to ask ourselves: is it possible for an individual, at this stage, to become aware of his or her actions, ceases to be a part operated on by the system, and finally becomes an agent in the process? How can this ontological belief begin to answer our question if we start from the understanding of a socially constructed reality? (BERGER; LUCKMANN, 2004)

We believe that this discussion can be expanded upon. Therefore, we cannot start from the ontological understanding of an individual subjugated to the system, even less as a subject of conscience, who acquires autonomy and who seeks hedonistic experiences of consumption as a way to satisfy their needs. After all, when we refer to needs, we are dealing with something that can be objectively established, as opposed to desire, which can only be identified subjectively (BAUMAN, 2008). Furthermore, we propose an understanding of the system, not as the other in a dichotomous view, but as an ingrained condition, which we produce and which constitutes us. Thus, we seek to understand desires as a machinic production (DELEUZE, 2005), practices which are guided by thoughts that are not of the order of reason – a goal of enlightened liberation.

3. SELF-COMMANDING POWER, THE OPENING OF TRADE AND THE AWAKENING OF DESIRE

We witnessed avid consumers, all sharing similar behaviors, in several world capitals during commercial reopenings right after the first lockdown. However, we propose to diverge from the belief in a reality that imposes itself on the subject, as we understand that this feeds and sustains the logic of the capitalist system, being the practised modes of agency, and a force which is established in the social. Thus, when consumers flocked to the stores, it was not

because they were unaware of the consequences of their act; after all, the subject was widely discussed worldwide.

This indicates how the very existence (bios) of the consumer is the object of economic rationality (FOUCAULT, 2008). These people sought to satisfy their individual wants (not needs), indicating how much they yearn for a return to "normality". We assume that the act (immediacy) was aimed at getting rid of privations or restrictions which were considered to be unbearable. This is consistent with Foucault's (2009) statement that current struggles are primarily against forms of subjection.

Historically, modernity has made life an object of knowledge-power and delineated a subject-form. The biologically considered individual and his or her capacities have become capital, a cog in the system, which governs itself for the benefit of the market. This logic took the form of a policy and, as it focused on the regulation of life, this power was called biopower and its operational technology was named biopolitics (FOUCAULT, 2008). Taking care of oneself and others in this rationality has become an internalized norm, promoting a stylization of life and the practice of ethics (FOUCAULT, 2008).

Considering that the culture of fashion is one of the most effective mechanisms for maintaining modern values – freedom and individuality (LIPOVETSKY, 2007)- can we understand such consumer behavior as an ethical struggle? After all, it is about the fight for freedom and a consideration (or government) for maintaining a way of life.

However, we must emphasize that such desire is not related to the lack of something; it refers to a production of power (biopower) and the political direction of government conduct (biopolitics). They fight to maintain a "cherished" way of life. As stated by Foucault (1995), thought, devoid of

morality, is situated on the plane of immanence, being an ethical experience of itself in the exercise of freedom.

Relational and disputable power is established in a close relationship with knowledge, and opens spaces for resistance, a creative process that promotes the dynamics of social space (FOUCAULT, 1995). When acting in a positive way, it produces truth, reality and desire (FOUCAULT, 2009). However, Deleuze (2002) stresses that, as the production carried out by resistance shakes what are considered to be truths, to act is to plot a map; therefore, before resistance, we find lines of flight which de-territorialize, and which affect subjectivities (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 2010). For the authors, to desire is to manufacture something, to produce, in parallel, a reality.

In this way, we can understand the condition of the consumer subject as a self-commanded subjectivity for productive efficiency (biopower action) and driven by desire (biopolitical strategy). The guiding reason that illuminates the behaviors and generates the ideas for the establishment of desire comes from the reason of the market, in terms of productive efficiency.

We agree with Ruckenstein (2015) that this form of capitalism built and constituted by consumers, and by institutions, has generated profound transformations. However, we reiterate that this system should not be seen as another oppressor, but as a structure that guides us, a historical result of a construction intrinsically linked to our way of Being. Fashion as a pillar of the capitalist system (MESQUITA, 2010) is a stage for the machinery of desire. We conclude by supporting these authors in their belief that subjects and systems can be transformed just by taking on a more responsible ethic of "wanting".

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