Globalizing Consumption and the Deferral of a Politics of Consequence

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Abstract

How do ‘we’ in the wealthy parts of the world rationalize our constant deferral of doing anything much, beyond symbolic moments of ameliorative action, about the problems starkly presented every night on the world news? Intensifying globalization, from electronic capitalism to techno-science, has drawn the fate of the world into an ever-tightening orbit. Indeed, the plight of others has become increasingly immediate. Images of crisis abound. However, despite the presence of these crises—including projections of global climate change, food insecurity and the deaths of over three million children a year from malnutrition in the global South—life goes on in the North. While there are many ways to approach such an issue, this article asks, ‘What kind of individualism, and what kinds of values and norms, allow for the deferral of an alternative politics of consequence?’ Part of the answer, it argues, is found in a form of projective individualism. This we suggest is a dominant condition of the autonomous personhood long associated with modernization and globalization. It is asserted that desires for self-improvement and self-affirmation have emerged as commonsense understandings of life’s possibilities. In this situation, persons are confronted with a tension between the joyfulness of achieving desires and the world-weariness which accompanies awareness of the scale of global problems. The article examines how the purveyors of a form of soft consumption have stepped in to ameliorate this tension, offering new places and experiences—third spaces of comfortable pleasure, ethically adjudicated experiences—that address the cultural and political needs of projective individuals. Through a series of examples, the article argues that projective individualism prompts a form of sympathy-without-empathy that undermines possibilities for solidarity with the Global South on social and environmental issues.

Key words
globalization, individualism, cultural politics, business practices
Introduction

The intensification of globalization has brought with it an acute awareness of world problems—global warming, crises of exploitation, increasing inequality, poverty and insecurity. Concomitantly, a sensibility has emerged, particularly in the Global North, which centres on a deep-seated, almost irreconcilable tension. Amidst relatively high levels of affluence and educational attainment, many people are both increasingly aware, and inclined to defer, the radical consequences that would follow for their way-of-life, should they take seriously those global crises. Why? What kind of individualism, and what kinds of values and norms, allow for the deferral of an alternative politics of serious consequence?

While this tension is increasingly obvious, the literature in this area, whether drawing on the social philosophy of the Left or Right, tends to be accusatory without explanation. There may be no direct connection between an individual act of consumption and an infant dying in sub-Saharan Africa. However, on the one hand, individualism in the North is anchored in relatively heightened desires for unbounded lifestyles and autonomous choice. Persons there avidly choose from amongst what is on offer and consume in ways that are abstracted from the direct consequences of the capitalistic production-exchange relations which sustain their choices. Meanwhile, on the other hand, the information and stories brought to those same people on the wings of increased global interchange include pictures of injustice, war, and poverty. Examples extend from the United Nations’ International Children’s Emergency Fund sponsorship of the ‘global brand’ Barçelona, the firm De Beers’ efforts to publicize its rejection of conflict diamonds, and the embrace of coffee-producer communities by Nestlé Corporation. Such actions problematize the desires of individuals in the North—if only as a medium for the increasingly commonplace ‘fair trade’ or ‘green’ messages of soft consumption. Here, soft consumption is defined as the attaching to profit-oriented goods and services of social messages that aim to communicate to consumers an ethical commitment to others which extends beyond benefiting economically from the exchange.

A key assertion here is that, even though grounded in a form of ethical commitment, soft consumption does not provide the basis for an effective political will that would challenge what is unjust and unsustainable about globalization from within the relatively well-off North. This is important given the recognition that expressions of mass political will, such as demonstrations, strikes, petitions or civil disobedience, have for some time been losing general support and are declining in effectiveness in the Global North. Both radical and conservative theorists have derided this situation as a symptom of the contradictions of capitalism (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1973 [1947]; Bell, 1978) and the spread of a culture of narcissism (Lasch, 1979; Sennett, 1977). More recently, commentators such as Ulrich Beck have claimed to recognize a collapse of distinctions between egoism and altruism and emergence of irenic subpolitics (2001). However, neither conventional Left and Right critiques, nor Beck’s Third Way, are sufficient, we argue, for understanding shifts in prevailing values and norms occurring within the North over recent years.

Moreover, pronouncements that the situation is one of increased complexity or deepening governmentality offer even less purchase for comment. By first developing an explanatory account of ways that contemporary processes of globalization have fostered the emergence of projective individualism this article makes a partial contribution to rethinking the cultural-political critique of globalization. The proposition here is that the tension between awareness and action is for some in the North being provisionally resolved within the cultural-political realm itself. The argument draws on examples of soft consumption to question how a deferral of the consequences of recognizing this tension has become morally acceptable and, indeed, ethically valued. It seeks to better understand how the normalizing of this culture of deferral is affecting how we in the North view prospects for action with and for those in the Global South.

Autonomous Personhood and Projective Individualism

Reflecting upon the increasingly abstracted and mediated nature of cultural, political, economic and ecological relations across the twentieth century and into the present, social theorist Geoff Sharp (1985) refers to the emergence of ‘autonomous personhood’ or autonomous self-active selves. As a subjective formation concentrated in class groupings characterized by intellectual training,
cosmopolitan mobility, and comfortable metropolitan affluence, autonomous personhood can be understood as a product of the individuated self-sovereignty, personal freedom and authenticity of experience that modernizing globalization makes possible and necessitates (Calhoun, 2003; Dumont, 1986 [1983]; Turner & Rojek, 2001). Indeed, contemporary globalization tends to deepen autonomous personhood. As Charles Lemert and Anthony Elliott argue, persons are now called upon to exercise inner resources of creativity and flexibility in order to engage in everyday life (2006). As sociologists Richard Sennett (2005) and Zygmunt Bauman (2008) demonstrate, globalization increasingly leaves each individual to negotiate his or her own place in the world. In this sense, the present argument situates these sociological arguments about culture within the political context of the neoliberal globalization of life within the North. A key contention here is that the deepening of autonomous personhood means that much of what is meaningful about everyday life is experienced as if significant others did not contribute.

Social theorists have noted the increased importance to globalization of networked forms of social relations. This is especially the case in relation to the globalizing of jobs-markets. However, networking as the basis for integrating one’s self within the social world also extends beyond the new world of work. What is unique about current processes of globalization is that a layer of networked social relations overlays classically modern hierarchical relations, grounded in efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control of the environment through the replacing of human beings by human-organized technologies (Ritzer, 2007).

In relation to questions of cultural meaning, conditions of networked globalization give preference to personal creativity, over following rules, to enhanced flexibility over adhering to ‘how it has always been done’, and to personal mobility over long-term stability (Bauman 2008; Sennett 2005). What has been called the prevailing ‘connectionist logic’ of the networked society (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005 [1999]) means that individuals are increasingly taking part in life as if it were an occupational project, treating involvement in society as if constituted around a series of inter-related but isolated projects. A key proposition here is that the privileging of networked forms of inter-relations creates demands that autonomous selves project their individuality across and within social networks and treat their own existence as if it were constituted around and through a series of interlinked projects. That is, across the Global North, conditions of globalization are fostering a form of projective individualism.

In this situation, ‘the problem of choice is now solved increasingly by the individual, whose capacity to act is coming to rest more and more on a reflexive relationship between experience and cultural options’ and less on collectively ordained knowledges (Delanty, 2000: 161). In short, relatively well-educated and articulate individuals are not merely being asked to autonomously and creatively self-orient in different situations (Giddens, 1991; Joas, 1996 [1992]). More than that, where networked social relations prevail, individual ‘identity is in the process of being redefined as pure self-reflexive capacity or self-awareness’ (Melucci, 1996: 36). In these terms, though disregarding Melucci’s one-dimensional notion of ‘pure reflexivity’, individuals are bounded not only by place and space or by shared belief systems, but also by a common value or norm that implores reflexive commitment to constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing a projective life (Scerri, James, Humphery, & Mulligan, 2008).

The argument here is that this situation tends to fragment prior bases for making political judgements. Justifications for acting on social awareness, such as concerns with injustice or pollution, no longer refer first and foremost to social collective goods but to atomistic and agonistic choices and short-term goals. The qualities of the good networker—flexible, mobile, articulate, non-judgemental, and valuing temporary over long-term commitment, for example—are displacing those classically associated with the good citizen. This is subtly altering what are otherwise generally acceptable as (ethico-moral) reasons for acting or not acting politically: that is, reasons for contributing or not contributing to organizing the rules for a life held in common.

This, it is asserted, arises because the projective individualism that is fostered amidst the predominance of networked relations supports expression of a particular form of ‘enlightened’ sympathy. Sympathy defined in these terms closely resembles that which Adam Smith associated with the ‘impartial’ or ‘disinterested spectator’ of a purified free-market sphere (Boltanski, 1999 [1993]: 36-7). Hence, projective individualism cannot be explained by reference to Hobbesian notions of the selfish and egoistic rational actor. Rather, projective individualism relies upon the sympathy of the self-interested actor, which requires detachment from the Self and Others and an opportunist
orientation towards the world. This is problematic because such sympathy contains little empathy and as such, does not support solidarity with others. Indeed, as will be shown, solidarity is actively undermined or subject to derision as the action of ‘losers’ who cannot ‘put up or shut up’, or keep pace with the demands of 24/7 lifestyles. Indeed, part of the problem is that the projective individualism described here construes atomistic choices to fulfil personal desires as the best way to act politically. The problematic that this particular form of life raises is the challenge that it poses to the cultural and political legitimacy of collectively oriented values and norms. What is of concern here is the establishment of a prevailing ethico-moral code that sustains the privileges of the privileged.

In this sense, projective individualism is emotionally caught between *jouissance* and *lassitude*—between expressions of fragile joy and world-weariness. Such a tension is illustrated, for example, in the oscillation between the despairing hope expressed in giving an Oxfam Christmas goat to an African village and the hopeful despair that solace from the world’s ills and personal pressures might be found in such acts of consumption. Here the term ‘jouissance’ implies conditions that compel the active deployment of the whole self in consummating desire—buying personal-use commodities, buying time, buying ethical engagement, and seeking employment in ‘passionate’ workplaces. It is characterized by the intense activation of projected pre-emptive desiring, which can at times extend to pain and sometimes collapse into emptiness.

Jouissance also carries the implied meaning ‘to have the pleasure of’, in the sense of the sovereign right of an owner or holder of capital to the interest compounding in an original account. In this sense, as individualism has come to be defined in terms of the desire for self-improvement and self-affirmation: a *principle of jouissance* has come to constitute the highest common value for subjective action and for understanding the actions of others. Similarly, references to *lassitude* as a subjectively felt world-weariness or dull cynicism points to an increasing weariness with the promise of politics and a passive distrust in formal political organization. The reflexive commitment to constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing a projective life around efforts at self-improvement here combines with the ‘impartiality’ of the spectator to draw individuals into enlightened consumption, even when it is known that such acts are sponsored by businesses with the ‘mixed’ objectives of ‘doing well by doing good’.

In situations where projective individualism prevails, critical action and discourse is effectively disarmed and classical social analysis is insufficient. When issuing from the Left, direct critique of social conditions has the tendency to sound trite or shrill. When coming from the Right, social criticism appears moralizing or illegitimately judgemental. This said, recent arguments for a Third Way, such as Beck’s claim of the unity between egoism and altruism said to be a condition of individualization (2001), are also insufficient because they are based in an atavistic conceptualization of the problem. The notion that hitherto opposed values of egoism and altruism are unified within the ‘new’ individualism trades upon the continuing relevance of these two opposed values. The argument presented here is that these two opposing values have not so much as coalesced as been *dissolved*.

Whereas Smith’s abstract ‘impartial spectator’ called upon persons to manage their emotions by compartmentalizing them—thus facing down the less savoury effects of free markets, such as exploitation and pollution—projective individualism, formed at the interstices of jouissance and lassitude, indicates the *displacement* of tensions associated with having to compromise between, on the one hand, the access granted to market wealth by creativity, flexibility and mobility and, on the other hand, impartial detachment.

**The Importance of Consuming Softly**

Markets in the Global North are responding to the emergence of projective individualism with a result that the opportunity to defer or displace many of the political consequences of personal actions is being actively delivered to individuals, most often through consumption choices. An increasingly fine-tuned culture of life-style consumption is providing space for negotiating the tension between consumption choices and their political consequences. This includes, but goes beyond, corporate green-wash and green consumerism. It is asserted here that such life-style consumption—sometimes misleadingly presented as post-materialism (Inglehardt, 1990)—has the effect of legitimizing a continual deferral of confronting recognition that the consumer-driven capitalism of the globalizing liberal-democracies may be unsustainable. Soft consumption arises within a cultural sphere that
emphasizes projective individualism. As social relations increasingly privilege personal creativity, flexibility and mobility, it in part defuses the political character of relatively high levels of social awareness. In this situation, actions directed at decreasing the gap between the centres and the margins, and building sustainable relationships between communities or between human communities and the environment, appear politically less than helpful.

Hence the underlying question—how do ‘we’ in the wealthy parts of the world rationalize our constant deferral of doing anything much, beyond symbolic moments of ameliorative action, about the problems that are starkly presented every night in the news? A full exploration of this process is beyond the present essay, but part of the answer, and the focus of the discussion, is the role of globalizing corporations in re-presenting such concerns back to us in ways that purport to resolve such problems. While much research has been conducted on the visible expressions of consumption culture—the global spread of commodities and traded consumer brands and icons—this article seeks rather to examine the implications for politics as globalizing business has attempted to deal with the challenges posed by relatively affluent and mobile consumers. Corporations know that they face a potentially damaging cynicism about their logos and ethos. In the tensions of jouissance-lassitude, it is argued, they have become much more active in dealing with socially aware groups. They do this by presenting their goods and services as if transcending the gap between unthinking consumption and a thorough-going ethics of consequence. In short, as projective individualism has been normalized, ‘soft’ consumption has become an appealing business strategy.

To better understand these concerns, the essay now turns to examine some relatively recent yet widespread innovations in the commercialization of leisure and consumption—extending from independent travel to commodified 3rd Places for ‘ethical’ or ‘sustainable’ consumption and employment. These examples help to illustrate conditions in and through which persons in the affluent North are politically disarmed in the face of concerns about the increasing distance between the centres of relative material-comfort and the margins of wretched struggle. The claim is that soft consumption privileges, constitutes, and is constituted by projective individualism. The examples reveal how sovereign projective individuals are both aware of and concerned to narrow the gap between the planet’s relatively affluent centres and its local and global margins, but that beyond the self-affirmation made possible in acts of soft consumption, they have little capacity for sustained political engagement.

Consuming Travel as Confirming Self-Authenticity

One set of practices that emphasize autonomous individual creativity and combine a personal investment in jouissance with the avoidance of what is here called lassitude is ‘independent’ travel. Since the 1990s, independent travel has become a widely undertaken and increasingly commodified pursuit. Even following the events of September 11, 2001 in New York, the ensuing ‘War on Terror’, rising oil prices, the global financial crisis, and recognition of the consequences of climate change, world travel has increased. Leisure travel has spawned a considerable body of critical commentary. However, several theorists contrast contemporary ‘independent travel’ with ‘mass-tourism’ in ways that are unhelpful. To give a sophisticated example, John Urry sees tourism as parochial, conformist, homogeneous, passive, safe, spatially pre-defined, and temporally de-limited. It is a Puritan’s rite of rationalized expenditure and redeeming of delayed gratification and desires through gaze that involves recording photographic images and obtaining symbolic mementos as souvenirs. For Urry, the ‘mass character of the “tourist gaze”’ is the antithesis of ‘the individual character of “travel”’. Urry seems to cast travel as a rejection of tourism. Travel is independent, romantic, and involves ‘solitary, sustained immersion, vision, awe … [and] aura’ based in ‘different type of scopic regime’ (1990: 24, 31; 1992: 173).

Alternatively, Urry also discusses irony-laden post-tourism. Post-tourists embrace relatively abstract knowledges about the world, such that ‘the apparently authentic fishing village could not exist without the income from tourism or that the glossy brochure is a piece of pop culture’. For post-tourists ‘there is no particular problem about the inauthentic. It is merely another game to be played at, another pastiched surface feature of post-modern experience’. Implicit in this kind of claim are suggestions that post-tourism involves a generalized callousness, a self-based disregard for the Other, and a kind of knowing irony that happily rejects possibilities for authenticity (1990: 34).
Ian Munt’s comments are slightly different, although he too contrasts travel with tourism. For Munt, travel is the postmodern form that tourism takes, and is an expression of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the aspirational new petit bourgeoisie. Munt suggests that postmodern tourism became a significant phenomenon as an array of ‘ethical’, ‘green’, ‘truthful’, and eco-tourism offers began to emerge in the 1990s, alongside a plethora of independent travel guidebooks, such as the *Lonely Planet* and *Rough Guide* series. For Munt, these represent an individualism that ‘experience[s] the world through a pseudo-intellectual frame’, such that eco-travel is no more than ‘a figment of wistful middle-class thinking’. Munt’s work is interesting because he decries Urry’s differentiation between travel and tourism as spurious. Instead, Munt uses Bourdieu’s concept of ‘distinction’ to argue that independent travel is no more than ‘a thinly disguised expression of a sort of dream of flying, a desperate effort to defy the gravity of the social field’ (Bourdieu cited in, 1994: 117, 119).

These brief engagements raise two issues. First, an elision seems to take place in relation to the temporal synchrony between what is figured as (independent) travel and (mass) tourism. Urry and Munt both see travel as a phenomenon that comes after and reacts against mass-tourism. These views ignore the impacts upon travel practices of the counter-culture phenomena of the 1960s and 1970s. Popularized amidst relatively unprecedented affluence and access to higher education, the act of ‘dropping-out’ was a practice that involved eschewing package tourism with the entire society seen as responsible for spawning it. Secondly, dropping out, for all its limitations (and they are considerable in the face of contemporary crises), involved a politics of consequence. While in historical terms, the Hippy alternative to tourism arose contemporaneously with it, it was then drawn back into the discourse of ‘travel’ without substantially challenging the mainstream. Even tourists now desire to drop out of the stressful rat-race for a week or two. Thus, the indeterminate meanderings of the Hippy odyssey, at one stage a picaresque rite-of-passage, later became a comfortable permutation of travel/tourism. The change was commensurate with increased levels of affluence, education, and worldliness. That is, contemporary independent travel offers jouissance: gratification of desire without the long-term risks associated with Romantic excess. In this context, the media gives independent travel a further celebratory twist:

> The freedom to travel safely and cheaply is one of the greatest blessings of our time—something that immeasurably expands the range of human experience. That’s particularly true for one class of traveller; backpackers … few modern social developments are more significant and less appreciated than the rise of backpacker travel. The tens of thousands of young Australians, Germans, Britons, Americans, and others who wander the globe … are building what may be the only example of a truly global community (cited in Allon, 2004: 161).

These comments from international newsweekly *Time Magazine* after the Bali bombing tragedy of 2002 help to highlight a subtle tension that seems to characterize many contemporary leisure practices and discourses. While, indeed, ‘truly global’ communities may manifest in and around backpacker centres, such as Bondi Beach, Earl’s Court, or Khao Sahn Road, the relational bonds that develop within them seem relatively fragile. On the one hand, self-active individuals might bond through comparable experiences, especially where carefree attitudes and novel liberties are on offer. While chance meetings may lead to joy and happiness, the least importune of encounters can readily be cast off. Yet, on the other hand, where movement from place to place occurs within the temporal limits of the gap year, or under the mundane constraints of available wealth, fragility seems the defining feature of such communities. The backpacking community that *Time* lauds might be only marginally more enduring than those others, sometimes said to be exemplary of projected community in the networked society; the internet chat-rooms and weblogs of cybersphere.

The generalizing of independent travel/tourism across the mainstream—with the exception of cruise-liner tours for the superannuated—cannot merely be seen as a petit-bourgeois ‘effort to defy the gravity of the social field’. Rather, it needs to be understood in relation to the predominance of projective individualism and, as such, as a condition of the partial reconstituting of ethico-morality more generally. In these terms, more than tourism, travel involves persons in rounds of practice that force them into reflexivity about the self and the social world—but it does not necessarily offer any way of translating that reflexivity into alternative practices.
This viewpoint resonates with Kate Simpson’s suggestion that global backpacking and international aid-support activity alike have been transformed from the semi-radical actions of a rebellious generation into a cultural experience for enhancing the early CVs of the intellectually trained (cited in, Brown, 2003). The backpacking gap-year that Simpson describes is facilitated by a web of allegedly ethical commoditization, whereby links between international travel and international development are proving ‘economically lucrative for the booming “gap year” industry’. This continues whether or not the projects are actually making a difference in the Global South. Simpson’s suggestion highlights a link between projective individualism and conditions that make travel experience and ethical concern ‘a requirement for success and as inevitable as your degree’ (Brown, 2003: 23). Indeed, comment on this tendency has become increasingly acerbic:

Affluent European adolescents used to do the Grand Tour. They went to Italy to admire art. Now they go to Africa to admire the shit. Gap years are moral and treat Indians as props in the movie of their own wonderfulness. So they invade slums and orphanages and shanty towns. They turn up with teeth like brand-new fridges and shout, ‘Let’s build a waterslide, guys!’ Then they disappear back to Oxford or Exeter or the LSE (Gold, 2008).

Here, autonomous personhood, that reflexively recognizes the plight of the Other, finds common purpose in good travel and good works: that is, in jouissance. Such practices have the added bonus of being (instrumentally) self-enhancing and pleasurable, as well as providing opportunities for building networked relations with like-minded contemporaries. These opportunities contribute to self-improvement and self-affirmation.

Returning to the primary theme of this discussion, the relatively popular Lonely Planet South-East Asia on a Shoestring guidebook is emphatic in suggesting that travel is about self-assertion and the projective dimensions of contemporary individualism:

At Lonely Planet we believe the most memorable travel experiences are often those that are unexpected, and the finest discoveries are those that you make yourself. Guidebooks are not intended to be used as if they provide a detailed set of infallible instructions! (Lonely Planet, 2005).

The similar Rough Guides emphasize ‘information about hostels and low-budget listings with the kind of details on restaurants and quality hotels that independent-minded visitors on any budget might expect, whether on business in New York or trekking in Thailand’. Indeed, ‘Rough Guides had a ready market among impecunious backpackers, but soon acquired a much broader and older readership that relished … wit and inquisitiveness as much as an enthusiastic, critical approach’. The Guides offer to reveal pathways for independent travel that combine the firm’s ‘student origins’ and a ‘journalistic approach to description with a thoroughly practical approach to travellers’ needs’ (Rough Guides, 2004).

Again, the central tension of projective individualism, between jouissance and lassitude, is given expression. At once, travellers are offered stewardship and guidance alongside cultural values that demand the exercise of personal creativity, autonomy and reflexivity. Amidst the precarity of globalization, independent travel itself assuages demands for self-assertion aimed at emending the self. Indeed, such guidebooks do not pretend to offer entry to an untapped wilderness. While travel might for some include self-discovery, and for others the kind of melancholy felt by the late Claude Levi-Strauss upon finding that all the discoveries have been made already, such insights do not form part of the present inquiry.

What these examples represent are situations in which travel appeals to and animates relatively well-educated and articulate, autonomous projective individualism. One upshot of this situation is that, through the satisfactions that travel might afford, opportunities for personal achievement are consumed as so many stops on a journey, while more deeply set, and possibly more ethically challenging situations are obscured or passed over. What is important for the present article is not so much that (mass) tourism may have given way to (independent) travel, or that the former might express conformity and the latter liberty, but the emergence of conditions in which the actions with high cultural value express the autonomous sovereign choices of individuals. Whether or not travel’s
popularity works to undermine its authenticity for some travellers—as is possibly the case for many—is not as important here as the suggestion that travel is practiced in conditions that impel authentic individuals to consistently apply creativity towards emending the self.

Personhood, in this sense, is always and already authentic, and seeks to improve upon the experience of Being through the assertion of personal autonomy. The examples discussed here represent not so much quests for authenticity, but quests by authenticity-confirming individuals. The presumption is that the deployment of creativity and embrace of flexibility and mobility will satisfy and, so, assuage the kinds of existential and ethical dilemmas that an enlightened presence in the social world raises.

Some reasons given by Samantha Selinger-Morris for travel in North Asia are helpful here. She suggests that what is interesting about contemporary travel is that travellers bring the authentic individualism that they ‘live’ to it. Drawing somewhat ironically on writers like Paul Theroux, Selinger-Morris’ suggests, while ‘tourists don’t know where they’ve been [and] travellers don’t know where they’re going. I’m a member of a lesser-known third class, the one that knows where the Starbucks is’. Selinger-Morris derides Theroux, as well as what she sees as ‘seekers of the self in areas untouched by Western culture’:

I’d have to drink piss-warm distilled goat’s milk in a Mongolian yurt to experience the ‘real China’ right? Travelling on the beaten path in Asia has given me the gift of hard-arse introspection. I had to deal with my lack of tolerance, my constant judging. And, now is the time to put up or shut up. I either remain an Orientalist for the rest of my life, or I learn to accept other cultures on their own terms (2003: 24).

The mode of travel that Selinger-Morris reports on involves the exercise of autonomy, the self-development of capacities for ‘going on’ as a relatively affluent, well-educated, and articulate individual: one who has embarked upon the travel experience with acute self-awareness. Making similar claims, the somewhat more urbane Alain de Botton recommends that independent travellers should, ‘reflect upon a fundamental question prior to setting out. What excites my curiosity?’ In a world replete with offers of opportunities for desires’ satisfactions, de Botton implores reflection about why travel is undertaken, and what could be fulfilling about it, ‘lest one slip into anxiety, boredom, free-floating sadness, or alarm’ (cited in, Dessaix, 2004).

Not only anxiety and alarm, but boredom and free-floating sadness are to be reflected upon and, in an act of self-orientation within the world, overcome. Moreover, that the lassitude of ‘free-floating sadness, or alarm’ are recognizable as contemporary features of life within contemporary, relatively affluent societies is a moot point. Put directly by Robert Dessaix, contemporary ‘travel is primarily about me’. Like de Botton, Dessaix recommends travel as catharsis, an experiencing of the self to be arrived at through exclusive private immersion in the social universe: ‘living more intensely, freed for a short time from the constraints of everyday life’ (2004: 1). What Selinger-Morris wants to be, and what de Botton and Dessaix urges their readers to be, is one of the worthy in a world where improvement of the self in the context of Others—rather than engagement politically with others—constitutes an act of the highest value. Such self-orientation can be achieved on a visit to Mongolia or, indeed, as Dessaix suggests, in a suburban shopping mall (2004: 4). It is in this sense that enravation, and then lassitude, presents more of an ever-present threat than the many crises of our time. Should one be unable to revivify the self through the autonomous and necessarily reflexive exercise of projective individualism, then one must, as Selinger-Morris claims, ‘put up or shut up’.

Consuming Places as Globalized Spaces of Comfort

In the late-twentieth century a relatively novel design-concept rose to prominence, labelled by retailers, interior designers, architects, and promotional strategists as the ‘3rd Place’. The phenomenon emerged partly as response to an inchoate, uneven, but generalizing cynicism about mass, globalized consumption culture. It was itself, ironically, a new and globalized presentation of a soft consumption culture that attempted to bring together the mass-public and the intimate-privy by commodifying presentations of undemanding intimacy. Such places came to be presented as offering opportunities for comfort and casual informality amidst often stressful, fractious urban environments. Although
originally associated with soft-Right communitarianism (Oldenburg, 1999), 3rd Places are now merely designed as places of respite in areas where crowds of strangers intermingle—airports, and other mass-transit hubs, public libraries, coffee shops, shopping malls, bookstores, laundromats, gymnasiums, hairdressers, car-washes, florists, and outdoor promenades. The phenomenon is, in the argument presented here, just one aspect of a widespread range of responses by personal-use commodity markets to the emergence of tensions over the processes of living in globalizing cities.

Whether supplied by major globalizing corporations such as Starbucks, Chapters, and Borders or relatively small, local ‘independent’ firms, 3rd Places are new points of intersection between the public and the private, and the global and the local. That is, 3rd Places combine what are promoted as high-quality commodities and spaces for ‘worldly awareness’, ‘social bonding’, ‘stress-free relaxation’, ‘casual amiability’, and ‘pleasurable, light conversation’. Such ‘stress-free places between home and work’ have become an increasingly prominent ways of using private space across cities from Kuala Lumpur and Dubai to London, New York, Vancouver, Los Angeles, Melbourne and Cape Town. They offer (commodified) settings for simultaneously experiencing me-time and expressing creativity and concern for the meaningfulness of everyday life. In certain respects, the generalized commodification of space in 3rd Places—that is, as third spaces that no longer need a corporate-change guru to enunciate and name the practice—might seem to be very different from what Marc Augé calls ‘non-places’, ‘which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity’ (1995). However, as Sarah Sharma (2009) documents, such non-places—airports, mega-mall complexes and highways stops—are replete with both transactions with Others, and act as spaces for refuge from others, such as those who enter as service-providers. In this view, claims that some places are non-places merely express what Bourdieu saw as an elitist new petit-bourgeois ‘dream of flying’.

It is thus the casual informality and undemanding authenticity that is on offer in commodified 3rd Places which is interesting here. Beyond focussing on places of refuge for those in transit, market institutions are increasingly responding to demands for integrated sites of intimacy, connectedness, and ethical sensitivity by accommodating lifestyles that revolve around creativity flexibility, and mobility. In short, 3rd Places appeal to projective individuals. As was first noted in the popular press across the turn of the century, socially responsible business organizations—including Ideo, Intel, Microsoft, and Nike, but also ‘old-style’ industrial corporations such as Shell and BP—have shifted gear over the last decade or so, offering spaces where clients or employees might ‘gather to chat informally or just unwind’ (Benioff & Southwick, 2003; Suterwalla, 1999).

Such prestations appeal to an individualism that takes seriously doing good by doing well when engaging in consumption exchanges proffered by firms that present themselves as doing well by doing good (Hill & Stephens, 2003). It is telling that in recent years, the McDonald’s chain of fast-food outlets has seen fit to embrace not merely the ‘3rd Place’ concept, rolling out its McCafés but also offering-up new healthy eating alternatives that by 2006, had produced a market turnaround for the hitherto ailing global firm. While the shiny-clean, efficient, and predictable gloss of the Golden Arches remains in relatively consistent demand—well positioned for a quick snack or meal-break with children—the nature of the snack has changed. McDonald’s now emphasizes health and well-being, corporate sustainability and high-quality, promoting itself as provider of a space for ‘My me-time: I’m Lovin’ it!™’ (McDonald’s, 2004). Examples such as Starbucks’ 3rd Places, or the revamped McCafes suggest an active obscuring of references to speed, efficiency, and calculability.

The increasing commoditization of downshifting, slow food, and the broader phenomena of organic agriculture, as well as the embrace of stakeholder communities by corporations and governments, are also instructive here. In the ‘tie-dyed aura’ of Starbucks’ 3rd Places, the ‘dignified environments’ of Barnes & Noble and Borders or, the ‘womanliness’ of The Body Shop ‘community’ (Cox cited in, Entine, 2002; McManis, 2007), atomized acts of sovereign self-affirmation and the fulfilment of desires become ethical gestures. Such commodified spaces offer situations in which relentless pressure to achieve, and overcome ennui, is for a moment softened and made more comfortable. These make both self-improvement and social awareness easier tasks.

The emphasis in commoditized 3rd Places is upon high-quality goods and services, informal and undemanding warmth and intimacy, and ethical action. Promotional phrases of this kind pervade the promotional material for 3rd Places, and point to strategies for attracting worldly and discretionary consumers. Offering opportunities for extending and emending the self-as-a-project, 3rd Places offer
the subtlest of templates upon which projective individuals may assert sovereign choice and social awareness in self-affirming ways.

The key elaboration of 3rd Places is that one can now be in touch with oneself while still attending to the complexities of the world. For example, the offers of me-time that the Starbucks firm makes through its 3rd Places and Commitment to Origins™ are premised on perceptions that contemporary individuals ‘need to spend more quality time with oneself’ while exercising social awareness. Such 3rd Places are designed to ‘encourage warmth and intimacy’ between consumers, the businesses responsible for provision of that warmth, and their production ‘partners’ in the Global South. Thus, the consumption experience is augmented through making consumers aware of partner mentoring programs with marginalized local communities, and beyond the globalizing city by ‘connecting [consumers] with supplier communities’ in global locales—East Timor, Papua New Guinea, Columbia. In other words, by being invited to be a part of the socially responsible firm’s Commitment to Origins™ or similar strategy, responsible individuals are offered the possibility of extending their relations across global space while staying comfortably in their local place and continuing their personalized life-projects.

In this sense, a politics of consequence is deferred, but contemporary consumers feel better by consuming with self-affirming authenticity and ethical credibility. Just such an appeal to concern for authenticity is detected by Sharon Zukin in the posters of production that adorn the walls of the Wholefoods grocers to signify its alternative corporate ethos (2008). Such appeals presume an autonomous individual who is creative, flexible and mobile, as well as authentic and worldly-aware. Commodified 3rd Places are thus presented as spaces of respite from the world, offering verily to construct the spatial contexts suited to a worthy human presence in the world. Cast in these terms, fair trade equals good feeling. These are not places that allow a descent into lassitude or cynicism but rather, are sites for becoming more joyfully human by slowing the rush of the outside world; while someone else attends to the question of global justice on behalf and because of the choices made by projective individuals. The 3rd Places complement the relentless buzz of globalizing 24-7 urban lifestyles, while assuaging the uncertain precarity of flexibility and the consumption-oriented debt and credit cycles of corrosive societies. However, to the extent that business firms aim at allaying it, the onset of what is here described as lassitude is bound to return. In effect it seems, commodified chain-store 3rd Places cannot remain perceptibly intimate purveyors of quality and commitment because at least in part, such ambiance is always at risk of being exposed as incommensurate with the orientation to profitability that binds the multinational corporation.

Nevertheless, the undemanding invitation at 3rd Places—to linger, browse, engage in light conversation, or work upon one’s self by taking some me-time—forms an adjunct to an increasingly blurred distinction between occupational and leisure activities and, importantly, the market-based exchange relations that these turn upon. It might be said that 3rd Places are the signature spaces of networked globalization. Here, the brasher commercial aspects of what are essentially market-relations do not so much as recede from view as undergo a surface transformation. When 3rd Places foster the savouring of ‘high-quality’ or ‘ethical’ products within ‘a little space just to hang’ (Ketchell, 2002), the commodification process itself becomes the ground of satisfaction. At the same time, in the absence of any entry fee or mannerist code, such spaces avoid the stigma that might attach to either crude commodity exchange or cultural chauvinism. That is, the gatekeeper mentality of older-style commercial spaces gives way to a softer face. The entry fee is neither apparent as a cash transaction, nor as bourgeois mannerism—nor as the clique-inness sometimes associated with artistic or fashionable sites; rather, it is the principle of jouissance that unites the worthy in ethical authenticity.

In this sense, the proliferation of 3rd Places in actively globalizing cities accompanies a rather complex and abstracted form of social exclusion that can be defined in both economic and cultural terms. The expansion of gatekeeper-less spaces like 3rd Places depends on a kind of fuzzy liberalism that, while blurring the boundaries between those potentially included and those excluded, exclude all the same. In short, it is asserted that the proliferation of commodified 3rd Places in cities across the global North represents the thin end of a wedge for a predominant form of life that is disarmed in the face of increasing distance between the margins and the centre. Links are made explicit between atomized offers of me-time, an ‘uncompromising attitude to quality’ and social messages of corporate social responsibility. Of course, occasionally firms such as Starbucks are accused acts of inconsistency—blocking an attempt by Ethiopia’s farmers to copyright coffee bean types and thereby
denying them potential earnings of up to USD$90 million a year (Seager, 2006), or promoting instant coffee—but, overall, the individualization of political agency and the effective depoliticization of consumption through ‘ethical’ and ‘green’ consumerism rules the day.

Social messaging of this kind offers opportunities for meaningful experiences, along with a wholesome worldly goodness. These offers provide a bridge that connects an autonomous selfhood with market-agency. However, as corporations, institutions, and polities compete to take structural control of emerging and consolidating modes of practice, new forms of exploitation have developed alongside values and norms that do not serve to temper self-interest or sovereign choices (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005 [1999]: 199-201), but to make self-interest consubstantial with the collective values associated with social awareness. These set a benign mask over the overt effects on actual people of global consumption-production chains, whether in far-distant villages, or behind the counter at a street-corner cafe. Of course, even leaving aside the question of the new imperialism (see, for example, Harvey, 2006), there are continuities and discontinuities here with older forms of exploitation. The projections of socially responsible, sustainable or triple bottom-line corporations would suggest otherwise that exploitation of humans or the environment has been overcome. The content of their references to ethical concerns suggest that the Third World is coming back subjectively into the consciousness of erstwhile world-weary Northern consumers.

However, this examination of the objective form of global relations reveals that the exploitation and/or dependency of the wretched-of-the-world on global capital are being taken to a new level. For those countries caught in the loop of the world export-market, for example as coffee, cocoa or timber producers, modern forms of exploitation are now overlaid by a futures market of abstract exchange and communication that (with significant exceptions in oil and drug-production) they can never influence. In this postcolonial moment the Third World-as-local-producer is left as a touching reminder within the abstracted third spaces of the consumption system or, alternatively, distanced as a far-away trouble-spot. Similar things might be said about those involved in the precarious and flexible service economies in the global North. In short, the values and norms associated with ‘projective’ individualism makes it difficult to enunciate critical alternative possibilities for redressing social and environmental issues, both from within the global North and the global South.

Conclusion

This discussion has examined some of the practices and discourses that have coincided with the predominance of projective individualism in the liberal-democratic Global North. The examples discussed have sought to uncover situations in which the desire for self-improvement and self-affirmation are rendered normal. That is, such desires are stabilized and naturalized as common framework for valuing actions, meanings and things. The situations associated with independent travel and in and around 3rd Places have been examined as the products of the interweaving of networked globalization within liberal-democratic societies, where the primary manifestation of autonomous personhood is said to be that of projective individualism.

Throughout the examples, a subtle unity appears to have been established between a globalizing ‘ethical’ market-sphere and relatively affluent, well-educated, and ‘enlightened stakeholders’ in the global North. Opportunities for me-time, whether taken as part of an independent travel adventure or in the relaxed and comfortable surroundings of 3rd Places, and worldly awareness combine in largely commodified prestations that offer possibilities for moments of jouissance, through provision of access to comfort and quality, as well as authentic ‘connectedness’ with others. In the conceptual terms employed throughout this discussion, the principle of jouissance that is detected in the examples belies a naturalizing of desires for self-improvement and self-affirmation through the exercise of creativity, articulateness and informality, the embrace of flexibility, mobility, and commitment. At the same time, moments of personal fulfilment are tinged with a wholesome direct expression of caring and sharing agency. In this situation, the ethical and existential consequences arising from social and cultural engagement are returned as the desiderata of consumer sovereign choices.

The argument has been that jouissance and lassitude are not alternate psychoanalytic states of mind, but rather two tightly-related dimensions of the dominant subjective condition of contemporary autonomous personhood. A concomitant part of this argument is that the purveyors of globalizing consumption have begun, in effect, to offer spaces for managing this process of achieving desires and
overcoming awareness that this is problematic. Such shifts are tied up with how individual identities and differences, personal experiences and relations to others beyond increasingly privatized locales are evaluated (Brennan 2003; Chua 2003; Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2005). Recognizing changes of this order allows questions to be raised about how ‘we’ as liberal-democracy’s individual sovereign-citizens—and, as both subjects and agents of globalization—currently negotiate an increasingly reflexive awareness of ethical dilemmas (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke, & Malpass, 2005).

In this world, doing the right thing has increasingly become an activity of self-negotiated agonism—looking inside oneself to see if a particular action feels OK. This, rather than living within a mutually negotiated ethical universe and occasionally facing censure by significant others has arguably emerged as the dominant level of ethical discourse, layered across an ethics of rights and an ethics of care (James, 2006). This does not mean that people feel better in the long-term. While calls for greater individual autonomy in relation to a homogenizing culture, or indeed, for flexibility in relation to work were once made against values emphasizing order, stability and material security, such claims today manifest in changed circumstances. This makes them self-negating. As Axel Honneth has argued, ‘The individualism of self-realization, gradually emergent over the course of the past fifty years, has since been transmuted—having become an instrument of economic development … into an emotionally fossilized set of demands under whose consequences individuals [and, with them their communities] today seem more likely to suffer than to prosper’ (2004: 274). Under the aegis of abstract, market-oriented and neoliberal-democratic conditions, existential problems seem to enter sociality as ever-further opportunities for the satisfaction of sovereign desire through consumption of ethical life-style opportunities. Persons across the global North are called upon—indeed, call upon themselves—to engage in rounds of self-improvement and self-affirmation in relation to collectively created social worlds and so, to defer the politics of consequence that intensifying globalization otherwise shines in our faces.

References


