

Manifesto for general consumption strike

Conclusion of the book by Paul Ariès : *No conso : vers la grève générale de la consommation*, Golias editions, Lyon, France, october 2006. This text can be used freely with indication of the source.

The society of consumption is sad, unfair and impossible : 20% of the human race monopolizes 86% of the world's natural resources and this "air-conditioned hell" is not generalizable because it overshoots the regenerative capacity of ecosystems. Therefore we must end this domination of one over the other and of all over the planet to simply live as humans. This is the choice of responsible action but also of utopia : only this choice can bring meaning back to our values like liberty. We want to compare the bulimic economic logic with the goal of living with « less goods but with more relationships ». Building a political project based on « free use and expensive misuse » would allow us to solve both environmental and social issues and enable us to see the return of politics. Only the prospect of a « general consumption strike » can give power back to the weakest facing this tiny powerful minority which thrives on our bad-being and the destruction of all things.

The idea of a general labor strike runs throughout the XXth century. But who can still believe in it nowadays ? The general labor strike had many failures but it would be absurd to remember only the failures. Indeed the general labor strike actually became a myth and the essence of a myth is both allowing action and accepting the inevitable failures. Hardness of hyper-capitalism and its new means of management muzzle employees and many people are unable to go on strike because of unemployment or extreme poverty. Furthermore there's often a big difference between claims and our emancipation dreams . That's why some people now think that a consumption strike could take place.

What would be a general consumption strike ? It would be a real social movement with its collective claims against the government and employers. This strike would neither be the continuation of a simple way of life nor a well-targeted boycott but a collective way of refusing to be consumers.

The worker is chained more materially than mentally to the society of consumption. It's the prospect of the difficult (or impossible) end of the month which makes him or her go back to work, not the supposed love of labor. However hyper-capitalism has not invented yet the material structure to chain the consumer to the society of consumption. It is the false enjoyment of consumption which prevents him or her from stopping consuming and not material obligations. How could capitalism force someone to buy beyond his necessities, beyond needful consumption ? In the case of a labor strike time runs against the striker but it runs in his or her favor in case of a consumption strike. The power lost by workers who refuse to produce (this is the deep meaning of any general labor strike) can be found again by the consumers who refuse to remain consumers.

A general consumption strike would indisputably be the crowning glory of a consistent strategy of civic disobedience. First because it would infringe the absolute dictates of consuming; the most vital and sacred part of the system would then be attacked. Second because it would be a social movement against the State and employers to force out another hierarchy of legal norms based on the satisfaction of real human needs. Of course that requires preparation, mobilization, theatricalization and negotiation.

The future ex-consumers must learn to use this weapon. By celebrating each November the "buy nothing day". By organizing actions around simple claims, easily understandable, quite easily victorious. By considering general strikes with goals more difficult to perceive but fundamental to get out of capitalism. The other advantage of general consumption strike is not separating the goal from the path since getting out of the consumption sphere is both the beginning and the end of this revolution.

As long as we remain in Fordism, capitalism needs our daily compromise. The only way out of this is a general consumption strike which can restore collective force to the weakest. It would allow us to stand up as long as possible in front of this opponent who doesn't want to satisfy our desire to live a better life. At best it could unite the weakest and divide those who thrive on the domination of one over the other and of all over the planet.

Let's not delude ourselves : the system will react. It will use blackmail with employment, it will threaten with firing; the shopkeepers will cut prices and manipulate consumers. Luckily, the production system is not fluid and producing for exportation or for the opulent ones will take time. The general consumption strike, like any social movement, is fundamentally the creation of a battle of wills. Probably, it will first be defeated. It will be the hyper-consumption rush again. A seed will remain and gradually germinate. Another consumption strike will take place. We'll probably learn a lot from the failures. Objections against this strike are not appropriate, since not being sure of success never justifies giving up.

Furthermore any general strike is a collective catharsis because it discloses the intimate mechanisms of the system. That's why it is so difficult to get back to normal after this disclosing whose emancipating effects can be very important in one's life. Every strike starts, necessarily, with conventional claims but ends up quickly with un-negotiable claims. It's just a matter of giving time to an un-alienating process. The consumption strike, like any strike, will aim at social conquests but it will actually go much further. Similarly the employee who goes on strike claiming for better wages also experiences another existence. That's why it's always painful to get back to work. That's why even with success we don't know how to end a strike. Let's bet it will be as difficult to become simple "consumption convicts" again after having experienced another life.

This general consumption strike must be an action so that use defeats misuse and gratuitousness defeats venality. We'll go on strike to get free public transportation, to get free social housing, to get different pricing depending on consumption levels, to give everyone a universal existence income so all can live in dignity, we'll go on strike to have those who ruin the planet pay more, to have advertisements limited to a few spaces, to redistribute wealth according to a maximum permitted income, etc. Thinking this strike would be a hunger strike is understanding nothing about what is consumption. A consumption strike means refusing to be a consumer, the kind of human being who belongs to the system. The goal is not to threaten our lives, our hyper-consumption society does that very well without us. On the contrary the goal is to learn how to fully exist, to live as a user in control of his use and no longer as a labor and a consumption convict, no longer as a capitalist market slave.

Let's trust collective intelligence to rediscover long-forgotten use. Let's think right now of our consumption and try to consume much less adopting a minimalist way of life. However we must watch out for purists who could turn this citizen action into a religious, moralizing, or authoritarian posture. Let's trust the collective sensitivity to allow this action to grow in size and consistency.

Of course this general strike will require the boycott of some products vital for the hyper-capitalist system (not only economic products but also ideological products like TV news or most newspapers). A consumption strike wouldn't make much sense if the strikers keep shopping (even for necessities) in those capitalist temples (supermarkets).

Let's bet that soon this invitation to a general consumption strike will become popular, that it will replace the general labor strike myth. We really need it to unify our hopes and to encourage our action. This prospect forces us to realize that real power is not the pseudo power of consumers, who would vote with their wallets, but the power of citizens who refuse to be consumers, as strikers refuse to be producers to adopt a political way of life.