

THE COMMODIFICATION OF SELF

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THE COMMODIFICATION OF SELF WOULD SEEM TO BE A misnomer. If a commodity is a product, something that can be bought and sold, then in what sense can the self be commodified? Without any claim to being exhaustive, I want to discuss two possible meanings. A first is that self-understanding is mediated by the consumption of goods and images. In this sense, self-definition depends on the appropriation of the traits of commodities. We know who we are and we judge the quality of our inner experience through identification with the things we buy. A second meaning of self-commodification involves the reorganization of our personal lives and relationships on the model of market relations. This adaptation is well illustrated by the recent practice of “personal branding,” a strategy of cultivating a name and image of ourselves that we manipulate for economic gain. Both of these meanings of self-commodification concern the terms in which we define ourselves and our well-being, and each has been facilitated by the loosening of self-definitions from specific social roles and obligations.

I begin with the shift in self-definitions and then consider evidence for the commodification of self.

From Institution to "Impulse"

In the 1970s and 1980s a body of literature appeared discussing and documenting a modal shift in the way that Americans conceive of and express themselves. Compared with the 1950s and before, scholars argued, people now put less emphasis on institutional roles in their self-definitions and more weight on internal criteria or "impulse." The shift in self-conception, these writers argued, was fueled by ongoing social and cultural changes and was having important personal and public consequences.

In a characteristic article, published in 1976, the sociologist Ralph Turner found evidence that "recent decades have witnessed a shift in the locus of self...."¹ He characterized the movement in self-anchorage—in the feelings and actions that we identify as expressions of our "real self"—as movement along a continuum from "institution" to "impulse." At the institutional pole, one recognizes the real self in the pursuit of institutionalized goals. Self-control, volition, and exacting standards within institutional frameworks are paramount. At the impulse pole, by contrast, "institutional motivations are external, artificial constraints and superimpositions that bridle manifestations of the real self."² At this end of the continuum, the real self consists of "deep, unsocialized, inner impulses" waiting to be discovered and spontaneously expressed.³ Though few people occupy the extremes, Turner emphasized, the personal relevance of institutions seemed to be declining and personal reality increasingly indexed to impulse.

Turner's observations were not unique. Earlier, Nathan Adler had suggested that an "antinomian personality," a character type who rejects conventional morality, was emerging for whom the expression of

¹ Ralph H. Turner, "The Real Self: From Institution to Impulse," *American Journal of Sociology* 81 (1976): 989.

² Turner 992.

³ Turner 992.

impulse and desire is central.⁴ Similarly, Christopher Lasch, in his best-seller *The Culture of Narcissism*, saw the spread of a “therapeutic outlook” in American society that seeks peace of mind in the “overthrow of inhibitions and the immediate gratification of every impulse.”⁵ In a more empirical vein, Joseph Veroff and his colleagues, comparing the results of national surveys they conducted in 1957 and 1976, found a significant shift in the way that people structure their self-definition and sense of well-being. They characterized this change as one from a “socially integrated” paradigm to a more “personal or individuated” paradigm and identified it in three aspects: “(1) the diminution of role standards as the basis for defining adjustment; (2) increased focus on self-expressiveness and self-direction in social life; [and] (3) a shift in concern from social organizational integration to interpersonal intimacy.”⁶

Along with others, including Daniel Bell, Robert Bellah, and Daniel Yankelovich, these scholars saw the sixties and seventies as giving rise to a new emphasis on the exploration of personal desires and immediate experience, on distancing oneself from institutional (i.e., external) norms and goals, on finding one’s unique inner voice, and on freely expressing one’s intimate feelings.⁷ None of these sentiments were new, of course; all reflect an old Romantic sensibility. Yet the evidence suggested that they resonated as an ideal and as terms of self-expression with a much wider swath of the public. On the way to the seventies, many Americans had, in effect, internalized the harsh fifties’ critique of the “organization man.”

⁴ Nathan Adler, *The Underground Stream: New Life Styles and the Antinomian Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

⁵ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Warner, 1979) 43.

⁶ Joseph Veroff, Elizabeth Douvan, and Richard A. Kulka, *The Inner American: A Self-Portrait from 1957 to 1976* (New York: Basic, 1981) 529.

⁷ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic, 1976); Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985); and Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981).

The Commodification of Real Selves

Consumerism and the commodification process were among the key forces that social critics such as Lasch and Bell identified as leading to the attenuation of social identities (e.g., mother, deliveryman, member of the Elks Club) in self-definitions and the destabilizing of the older institutions of identity formation (family, school, church, and so on). These developments created a vacuum of normative expectations and bonds. The very terms of the new self-definitions did so as well. The nonconformist appeal of “individuated paradigms” and “unsocialized, inner impulses” required that they lack social definition and normative structure. The “real self,” in this view, has its own criteria. Each person works out his or her own self-definition in relative isolation from others. The need for socially-derived identity criteria and the social recognition of others is in principle denied.

The very market forces that helped create the vacuum now rushed in to fill it. New “scripts,” to use Louis Zurcher’s apt term, were written to channel those inner impulses into intentional consumer choices.⁸ Branding, for instance, the powerful marketing strategy used by companies to sell mass-produced goods and services, was transformed in the mid-to-late 1980s. Companies, some with no manufacturing facilities of their own (e.g., Tommy Hilfiger), began to emphasize that what they produced was not primarily things but *images*.⁹ A brand became a carefully crafted image, a succinct encapsulation of a product’s pitch. But a successful brand is also more than that. According to branding expert Scott Bedbury, in an interview with the business magazine *Fast Company*, a “great brand” is “an emotional connection point that transcends the product.” Myth-like, it is an evolving “metaphorical story,” that creates “the emotional context people need to locate themselves in

⁸ Louis A. Zurcher, “The Bureaucratizing of Impulse: Self-Conception in the 1980s,” *Symbolic Interaction* 9 (1986): 172.

⁹ Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador USA, 2000).

a larger experience.”¹⁰ Inspiring passion and dreams of gratification, the theory goes, successful brands *impel* people to buy.

The new marketing scripts incorporate the language of self-determination and transformation, and build on the knowledge that being true to our unique inner selves is a powerful moral ideal. Indeed, authenticity has been so thoroughly appropriated and packaged in the metaphorical stories of the mass marketers that we barely notice anymore. Advertisements rail against the conventional demands of society and sell products as instruments of liberation. Brands of jeans signify rebellion and rule breaking, fruit drinks and sneakers have countercultural themes, and cars let us escape and find ourselves. In the person of the bourgeois bohemians or “Bobos,” as journalist David Brooks portrays them, we have a social type that lives on precisely this model of “self-determination,” merging an ethic of nonconformism and impulse with a vigorous consumerism.¹¹ Theirs, to use Thomas Frank’s term, is a “hip consumerism.”¹²

Even such ostensibly intimate concerns as sexual expression, self-development, and spiritual growth are now the subject of expert advice and prepackaged programs. Self-actualization, as Louis Zurcher once wrote, has become a “product marketed by awareness-training organizations that are subsidiaries of dog food and tobacco companies. Are you only a ‘three’ on our self-actualization scale? Too bad! We can make you a ‘ten’ during one of our weekend seminars in Anaheim, minutes away from Disneyland, for only a few thousand dollars.”¹³ By purchasing the right workbook, following the right steps, or getting the right makeover, we can change the quality of our inner experience, enhance our psychological well-being, and finally achieve true self-fulfillment.

¹⁰ Quoted in Alan M. Weber, “What Great Brands Do,” *Fast Company* (August/September 1997): 96.

¹¹ David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

¹² Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹³ Zurcher 172.

The marketing scripts have power because they are points of personal identification. The marketers recognize that an inwardly generated self is a fiction. We are selves in dialogue, both internalized and in direct conversation, with others. People need to “locate themselves in a larger experience,” and they need social recognition for their identity projects. To the degree that social identities are attenuated as the mooring of self-identification (and this, of course, is widely variable), companies can position their goods and images (and ever more precisely with niche marketing) not simply as fulfilling desires but as meeting a felt need for connection, recognition, and values to live by. At the same time, consumers can feel liberated, seeing their consumption choices as facilitating an expressive self and the articulation of personal style without the constraints of tradition or convention.

Social identities remain but as one is turned into a consumer, they are increasingly shaped and conditioned by patterns of consumption. We identify our real selves by the choices we make from the images, fashions, and lifestyles available in the market, and these in turn become the vehicles by which we perceive others and they us. In this way, as Robert Dunn has written, self-formation is in fact exteriorized, since the locus is not on an inner self but on “an outer world of objects and images valorized by commodity culture.”¹⁴ There is more than a little irony here, but the mediation of our relation to self and others by acts of consumption also has significant implications. These implications overlap with another form of self-commodification and to that I turn.

The Brand Called You

The shaping and conditioning of our self-understanding by consumption is one form of the commodification of self. So-called “corporate revolutionaries,” who have been insisting for some time that private life be reshaped on the model of business culture, champion a second form. This form, nicely illustrated by the practice of “personal branding,”

¹⁴ Robert G. Dunn, “Identity, Commodification, and Consumer Culture,” *Identity and Social Change*, ed. Joseph E. Davis (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2000) 115.

fuses self and market quite self-consciously and endows this fusion with deeper justification.

Although personal branding sounds like something done at a tattoo parlor or a rodeo, its meaning is much more mainstream. Personal branding, like product branding, is a form of image marketing. In 1997, *Fast Company* devoted a cover story to “The Brand Called You.”¹⁵ With typical sensationalism, Tom Peters, new economy guru and author of the story, explains: “We are CEOs of our own companies: Me, Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is head marketer for the brand called You.” If branding is such a powerful tool for selling products, he reasons, then it makes perfect sense that individuals should “self-brand” in order to stand out from the competition, become the “go to” guy, and get to the top. The concept struck a nerve. Since 1997, assorted career coaches and image managers, including Peters, have created a virtual cottage industry of how-to books, websites, workshops, and more.

Personal branding follows the logic of product branding step for step. A successful brand, as the advertisers say, “knows itself.” Marketers must know the characteristics of their product or service and what it promises to deliver and use this knowledge to focus and position the product. To self-brand, therefore, individuals must get in touch with their skills, the “selling parts” of their personality, and any and every accomplishment they can take credit for. Then they must consciously craft these traits into a relentlessly focused image and distinctive persona, like the Nike swoosh or Calvin Klein, even testing their “brand” on the model of the marketers by using focus groups of friends and colleagues. Substance isn’t nearly enough; self-branders also need style. According to Peters, “packaging counts—a lot.” Finally, like the famous brands that have become a part of our consciousness, self-branders have to go about enhancing their profile and increasing their visibility through marketing, marketing, marketing. Via self-promotion, they too can become objects of desire.

¹⁵ Tom Peters, “The Brand Called You,” *Fast Company* (August/September 1997): 83.

At least one observer of the self-branding phenomenon has suggested that it is a new language for self-empowerment. It may be. Advocates, such as David Andrusia and Rick Haskins, the authors of the self-help book *Brand Yourself*, pitch personal branding as an exercise in self-discovery.¹⁶ Yet self-branding is also much more. It is an exercise in self-commodification, because people are asked, in essence, to relate to themselves as a commodity, a product. Interestingly, advocates also recognize this but do not flinch. In fact, they insist that if people treat themselves as a product, then they can beat the corporate world at its own game, turning the power of branding around to personal advantage.

At least that's the theory. The people profiled in *Brand Yourself* and the other the self-help books certainly seem delighted with their branding and marketing efforts and the career success it has brought them. Still, it's hard to see how relating to oneself as a product defeats market forces. After all, as Haskins observed in an interview, companies already "treat us as products." If that is true, then treating ourselves in the same terms doesn't outmaneuver business culture; it only submits us further to its logic, its demands, and its mode of relations.

The implications of this submission are many, not least is how we conceive of ourselves and our personal relations. To commodify something is to relate to it as an object that can be bought and sold, or as Marx would say, as an object that has "exchange value" in a market. Thus, commodifying ourselves in the interest of maximizing our "exchange value" or "market worth" means that we envision ourselves as marketable objects. Doing so necessarily implies that the criteria of self-definition we use become more narrowly instrumental, impersonal, and contingent. To be successful at Me. Inc, my traits, values, beliefs, and so on—the qualities by which I locate myself and where I stand—must be self-consciously adopted or discarded, emphasized or de-emphasized, according to the abstract and competitive standards of the market. And since the market is never static, staying "relevant" like the

¹⁶ David Andrusia and Rick Haskins, *Brand Yourself: How to Create an Identity for a Brilliant Career* (New York: Ballantine, 2000).

great brands means that these qualities must be constantly monitored and adjusted to retain the desired image. Self-branders, says Peters, should “reinvent” themselves—their brand—on a “semiregular basis.”

Commodifying and marketing ourselves also necessarily implies a change in our social relations. Relentless self-promotion, even if carried off without appearing to be self-absorbed and self-aggrandizing (as Peters recommends), requires a carefully controlled and utilitarian way of relating to others. They too must be objectified in the interest of the bottom line. On another level, self-commodification also means that at least certain relationships must be more attenuated and even displaced as sources of meaning. If I make what the market values the measure of what I value, then non-instrumental relations, obligations, and commitments lose priority and significance for what I am and what I do. Being a business-like CEO, it would seem, can leave little meaningful room for anybody who doesn't advance the cause of Me, Inc.

These implications for self and social relations are, of course, logical extremes, and few, presumably, would push self-branding to its self-devoted limits. Nonetheless, self-branding is part of a trend that we all experience, as many aspects of the consumer society contribute to a redefinition of the self in commodity terms. To the degree that the yardstick of the market shapes and justifies the way we live, so our self-understandings and relationships are unavoidably altered and diminished.