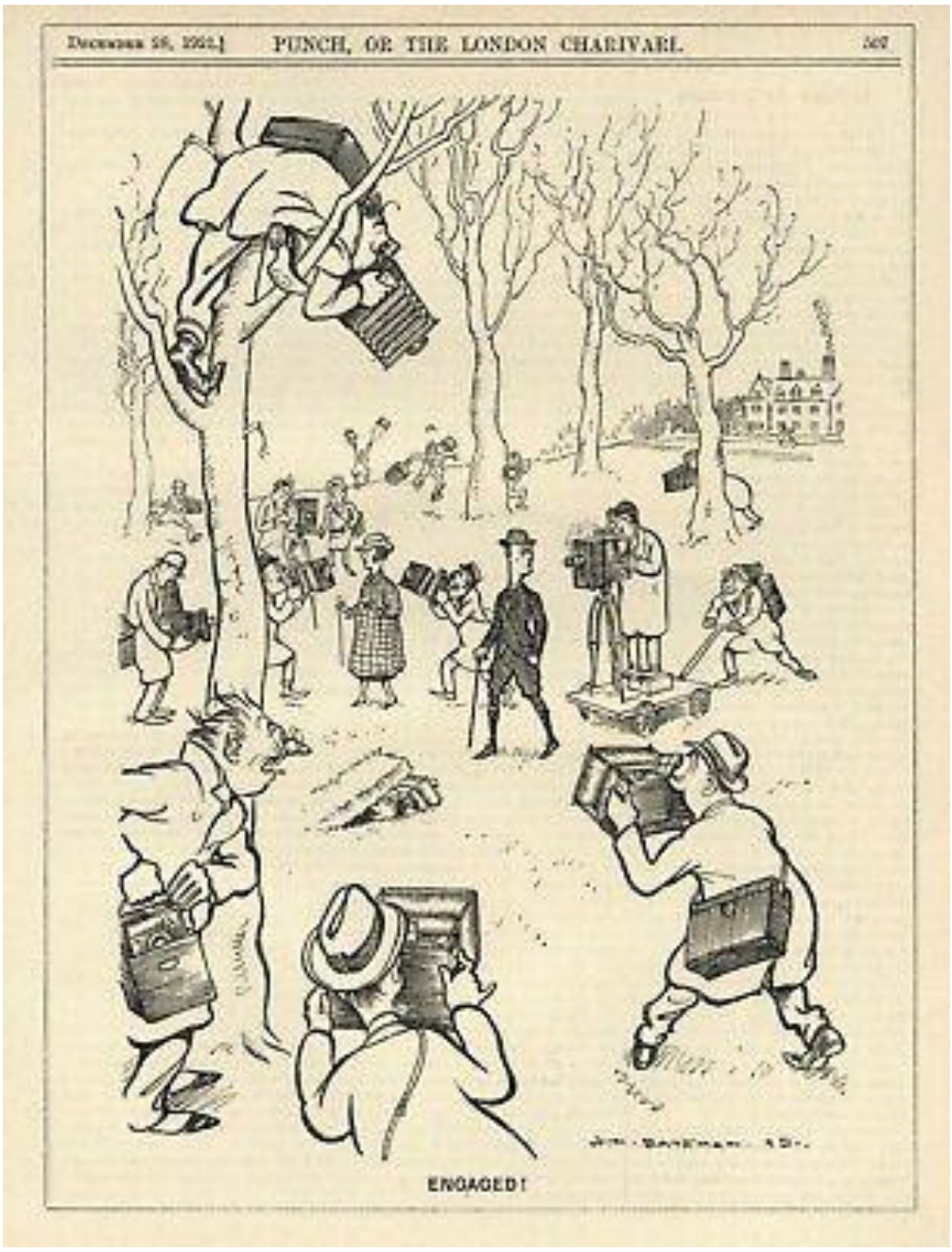
Being a product in a late capitalist society



Suhani Rathi

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Capitalism is defined as an "economic system in which private actors own and control property in accord with their interests, and demand and supply freely set prices in markets in a way that can serve the best interests of society."[1] I think we, as a society, have long passed the point where this definition would suffice to explain our existing economic system. We are now in *late capitalism*. A system characterized by globalized trade monopolized by large corporations who also heavily influence governments; fast paced technologic advancement at the cost of the working people who are either not commensurately compensated for their work or end up unemployed because of it; consumerism at lengths like nothing we have seen before powered by encroachment of data privacy where every word spoken near a device leads to relentless targeted advertisements; less security and fewer benefits for workers as well as severe income inequality. It is a system in which everything is commodified; we have found a way to assign a monetary value to life itself and every interaction is now a transaction.

Karl Marx in his many criticisms of the capitalist system famously proposed the *Labor Theory of Value*, in which he explains that the "value of a commodity can be objectively measured by the average number of labor hours required to produce that commodity."[2] Marx later pushed this theory further to explore how that gave a value to the commodity that workers were selling to the capitalists for their wages, which was, often times, their physical selves. While this theory has its flaws, it brings up the idea of human commodification and what it means for celebrities to be *selling themselves*.

Celebrities can be considered both commodities as well as the controlling class in an economy due to their wealth, platform, and even fan following through which they can

[1]Jahan, S., & Mahmud, A. S. (2023). What Is Capitalism? International Monetary Fund. https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/Series/Back-to-Basics/Capitalism
[2]Prychitko, D. (n.d.). Marxism. Econlib. https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/Marxism.html#:~:text=Labor%20Theory%20

wield influence over society. This phenomenon creates a dichotomy in their place in the world. On one hand they are where they are because they successfully *sold* themselves to the media and the public and people have given them enough attention to make them famous; but they also end up having influence over the same people. Celebrities often find themselves wielding power over the very people who had the ability to make them famous. Celebrities are bought and sold by media conglomerates, brands, and entertainment industries. Their image, persona, likeness, and sometimes even voices are packaged and marketed for profit. Keeping wages aside, we can draw a parallel with the employer-employee relationship where the employer's company relies on the contributions of the employees, yet it is the employer who ultimately exerts control over these same individuals. This prompts us to reflect on the source and ultimate destination of power.

Thomas Piketty criticized traditional economics for its thinking that capitalism inherently reduces inequality over time, instead arguing for what we currently see, which is an accumulation of wealth in the hands of an elite few[3]. This is a reality for our current economic system and has been for quite some time. Theoretically, the only way for capitalists to make profit is to devalue someone's work and compensate them less than what they are selling the commodity for, which segues into exploitation of the workers. Zygmunt Bauman also discusses the erosion of traditional institutions that typically safeguard workers' job security and benefits[4]. An apt example of this is the 2023 Writers Guild of America Strike which went on for weeks to fight for more protections for writers in the entertainment industry.

[3] Piketty, T. (2014). Capital in the twenty-first century. Harvard University Press.
[4] Bauman, Z. (2000). Liquid Modernity. Polity Press.

Late capitalism is also linked to excessive consumerism, a pervasive influence of advertising, and constantly finding consumption opportunities to sell to the public. In his book, *The Consumer Society*[5], Jean Baudrillard talks about the lines between reality and simulation become blurred by the constant bombarding of marketing material that is intended to commodify everyday life and promote sales for products by which people can identify themselves. In today's online world of different make up aesthetics, terms like "clean girl aesthetic", "dewy make up look" which encourage using products by certain companies to achieve a makeup look. Bauman explains how the rise of consumer culture compels people to define themselves through their consumption choices, resulting in a constant sense of dissatisfaction because the identities that are currently in vogue will inevitably shift as the market endeavors to create another fresh and desirable identity for consumers to pursue.[6]

Celebrities offer some aspect of themselves to the public, be it their music, their acting skills, their comedic skits, or simply their lifestyle. I think the reason we are even interested in interviews of celebrities is that they could possibly be a bid for connection with the celebrity as a *thou*, rather than an *it*[7]; giving them a chance to show us how they are as people, outside of the aspect of themselves they are selling to us.

However, I think advertisements are part of the reason for our shift of perspective from *thou* to *it* with regard to celebrities. One aspect is that celebrities are aware of and choosing to be commodified by these companies to promote their products regardless of their actual thoughts about it in exchange for money. This also leads to the dissolution of the trust we have in them because we know their words often come with a price tag. The

[5] Baudrillard, J. (1998). The consumer society : myths and structures. Sage.
[6] Bauman, Z. (2000). Liquid Modernity. Polity Press.
[7] Spiegel, T. (n.d.). The phenomenology of parasocial relations and loneliness - Buber and Stein. Retrieved November 18, 2023, from https://philarchive.org/archive/SPITPO-17

parasocial relationship is now so deeply ingrained in our psyche, leading us, as consumers, to cease seeking the perspectives of celebrities outside of their chosen realms for primarily two reasons. Firstly, because their artistic work takes precedence over their personal opinions which may not be objectively relevant to their craft; for example, an actor voicing their political views publicly can be damaging to their business prospects, create divisions in their fan base, and also lacks a direct correlation to their acting abilities. Secondly, being aware of their endorsements of products, services, and businesses means that we understand that their words might be influenced by financial interests and may be intended to persuade their audience rather than truly reflect their personal beliefs; for example, an Indian actress Alia Bhatt is seen on live television loudly refusing to drink a cup of tea because it had refined sugar in it; however, she has appeared in several commercials for chocolates, artificially sweetened drinks, and ice creams[8]. This underscores the realization that we, as a society, are having that our decisions warrant more consideration than simply a targeted online advertisement featuring our favorite celebrity.

The idea of *building a personal brand* involves meticulous planning and marketing of the self and one's supposed *brand*. We lose authenticity on the part of the celebrity because we know how curated the public part of their lives are which we are given access to. At that point, everything about a celebrity is being commodified and marketed to further their profits, which ties in with late capitalism and hyper commodification of one's identity. In an article for *New York Magazine*, Mark Harris talks about celebrities opening the door to the world of *soft* endorsements where instead of only appearing in

[8] Jain, V., & News, I. T. (2022, May 10). Alia Bhatt trolled for endorsing sugary products after old video of hers refusing sugar goes viral. Www.indiatvnews.com.https://www.indiatvnews.com/entertainment/celebrities/alia-bhatt-trolled-for-endorsing-sugaryproducts-after-old-video-of-her-refusing-sugar-goes-viral-2022-05-10-775437

advertisements, celebrities become the advertisement, they endorse a particular lifestyle and we follow; "drink what I'm drinking, wear what I'm wearing, buy what I'm buying. Love me, love my stuff"[9] he says. Thus, we are also transitioning into a new way of promoting products.

Celebrities walk a fine line between being a commodity and endorsing a commodity. In this evolving landscape of late capitalism, slowly but surely that line is blurring. We are all getting swept up in the storm that is a mix of TikToks, Instagram reels, and a never-ending obsession with the endlessly abundant lives that celebrities seem to be showing us.

[9] Harris, M. (n.d.). The Celebrity Economy -- The New Costs and Benefits of Fame -- New York Magazine Nymag. New York Magazine. https://nymag.com/arts/all/celebrity-economy/fame-2012-2/