

Who is Controlling Our Consumption?

Finger pointing is one thing that has always troubled me, and gotten many an innocent man killed. So when I listened to Slavoj Žižek's discourse on his "Starbucks Logic", I no doubt assumed I would find many reactions that blamed the coffee conglomerate for brainwashing us; that they were evil and must be stopped. But that isn't the answer I received. I was told we should stop brainwashing ourselves.

According to Žižek (and I believe him whole heartedly), back in the "old days" most Americans were consumerists by the traditional definition of the word and if someone wanted to be viewed as even having a marginal conscience, they had to pay for their consumerism by giving back. Essentially, one's buyer's remorse in turn helped to support the community.

"(In) old days of pure, simple consumerism, you bought a product and then felt bad. 'My god, I'm just a consumerist while people are starving in Africa.' So the idea was you had to counteract your pure, destructive consumerism. For example, you contribute to charity and so on," says Žižek. But what companies like Starbucks have done is change all of that.



The "Starbucks Logic" is that the system makes it easier on the consumer, reducing guilt simultaneously during the purchase process. By spending more money with a company that is "green", or sells organic products or contributes a percentage of the cost to a charity, we are handed our form of repentance for being a consumer. The shopper does not need to dedicate any time, or any more money, because the good deed for the day occurred when a Starbucks purchase was made on the way to work. As donations are made by the company, giving patronage to the company starts to moonlight as giving the donation directly.

Žižek says, "The price allows people to be humanitarians while being consumers, because by paying a higher price for a commodity from a company that gives, say, one

percent to Guatemalan 4th grade math book, people feel they have given aid to those children directly. They go back to their 17mpg Suburban, throw the recyclable cup in the *trash* on their way out and feel as if they are a benevolent force in the world.”

I had no doubt when I talked to people, much of the blame would fall upon the shoulders of Starbucks. (Please note: I am not giving Starbucks a Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free card. No body should have to pay their prices for a Taylor Swift album or a jazzy Christmas compilation.) However, I don’t think they can be blamed for our own buying habits. I’m going to come out of the closet, though many of my hipster and community-aware friends will throw up in their mouths just a little bit. I don’t want Starbucks to go away. I don’t think the brainwashers hide behind their doors until we step through them.

Right after the depression of 2009, according to author Bryant Simon (Everything but the Coffee-Learning about America from Starbucks), “the United States moved in tandem with Starbucks and latte sales. The American economy turned almost on buying alone.” At this time, Starbucks had recently seen a strong dip in sales and started closing stores, something that blew the minds of many Americans. According to Simon, what sparked the resurgence of the company was the, “replacement of a civic society by a rapacious consumer society.” In other words, the monster was built by the evolution of buying habits.

So perhaps Zizek actually wants us to realize how we are duping ourselves with buying habits. Take the organic craze, Zizek asks, “Who really believes that those semi-putrefying and over priced, organic apples are really healthier? The point is that by buying them, we are not just buying and consuming a product, we are doing something meaningful, demonstrating our capacity for care and global awareness, participating in a noble, large, collective project.” And many people actually believe it. It allows them to sleep better at night.

So let me close by defending my desire for Starbucks to stick around a while. It is simple. I like having the option of the most reliably terrible coffee when I am on the go or running late. When I am flying early in the morning or am running late for one appointment or another and don’t have time to make my own coffee, I like the convenience of a quick cup of coffee I can at least predict and palate. However, my consumption of the mass-produced only goes so far. I am very aware of spending my money in my small community. I go to Higher Grounds in Golden, Colorado (across the street, hilariously enough, from a Starbucks) because it is owned by one of my neighbors and the coffee and community are there together. My money stays in my town, I get coffee, and the community stays just where it needs to be. It isn’t Starbucks we need to focus on, it is how and where we spend our time, money and energy. Because people that truly enjoy coffee cringe at the thought of buying coffee at 7/11 and I am right there with them. Starbucks simply allows me to avoid 7/11 coffee in those few moments I am guilty of not planning ahead and for that I am thankful.