



## **Marxism and cellulite**

### **A consumer's guide to marketing**

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Marx never wrote about cellulite, though I am quite sure he suffered from this 'unsightly condition'. He endured several excruciating physical ailments throughout his lifetime: carbuncles, insomnia, bronchitis, a bad liver, pleurisy and haemorrhoids. If he were alive today I am sure he would definitely have a few more 'backaches' to contend with, the current cellulite epidemic being one of the many. It might be very much lagging in order of importance, but nevertheless an examination of this modern phenomenon vividly illustrates the manipulative powers of both advertising and marketing, two wasteful and exploitative processes which are an integral part of capitalism.

Firstly, what exactly is cellulite? It is quite simply a form of body fat. Obviously, fat is an essential biological substance. For health reasons it should not fall below a certain level in the body nor rise too high. Internal fat protects vital organs, but the majority of fat cells rest beneath the skin in the adipose layer. This layer does many useful things like cushioning the muscles, conserving heat and acting as an energy store and insulator. It is this layer which gives a person their shape. The adipose is visible beneath the skin. Some of it is tight and appears smooth, but some of it is waterlogged and appears dimpled. *Voilà la cellulite* – as it was the French who coined the term! It was they who first decided that this dimpled texture or *peau d'orange* on the body's surface was unsightly and deeply undesirable.

Cellulite has nothing to do with excess fat, it simply refers to the texture of the skin. A person who is their ideal medical weight can have it. It also can appear anywhere on the body, and is metabolised when food intake is reduced, though not easily. It is a tenacious form of subcutaneous fat that poses no medical threat whatsoever. Many doctors believe that endowment is genetic, a bit like freckles: some people have it and some do not. Cellulite is, of course, a cosmetic concern rather than a medical one. Even though it appears on male and female bodies, because it is deemed more important for a woman to look good, it is seen as a female affliction.

Until about 25 years ago nobody outside France knew what cellulite was. But since then the beauty industry has managed to enlighten the rest of the world, and in the process has made billions from the sales of anti-cellulite products. Perhaps the most sinister aspect of the marketing campaign is how cellulite has been linked with illness. Cellulite is supposedly the result of a build-up of toxins in the body due to bad nutrition, lack of exercise and a sluggish lymphatic system. Yet cellulite is present in newborn babies who have never eaten chocolate or drunk coffee, two of the substances which supposedly encourage 'the condition'. It is also present in professional athletes who adhere to a strict nutritional diet and a gruelling exercise regime.

The starting price for anti-cellulite treatments is around £20. Forty Cellasene tablets cost £24.95, whilst 200 ml of Lipo Factor Anti-Cellulite Toning Lotion costs £18.95. It is a scientific fact that no substance massaged in the body's surface can sink through the skin's layers and dissolve fat – unless it also dissolves the skin. As if it needed to be proved, the John Hopkins University in the USA recently tested 32 international brands of anti-cellulite cream. It concluded that none of them work.

Detoxifying diets seem to temporarily reduce cellulite, but levels return to normal when ordinary healthy eating patterns resume. There is a huge range of anti-cellulite treatments on the market: fardic fitness equipment, body brushes, nutritional supplements, bath

preparations, tablets and specialised massage treatments, to name but a few. Most of these products and services will improve skin condition, but they all have two things in common: they are all very expensive, and none of them will get rid of cellulite.

The beauty industry has cynically fabricated a disease so that it can profit by selling false cures. This is not remarkable when you consider that, apart from beauty products, there are thousands of other useless and, in some cases, pernicious commodities which exist solely to exploit people. The variety of these worthless goods is endless. You can choose anything from magic beauty potions which make wrinkles, baldness, cellulite and your money disappear, to countless superfluous household products which are being successfully marketed as domestic necessities and are usually environmentally harmful. But how would you cope without that handy spray which neutralises that hard-to-deal-with giant odorous teddy bear you have stuck in your wardrobe!

The marketing of household cleaners is similar to that of beauty products. A scientific spiel is spun up, spouted out and swallowed, and a superhero cleaning agent sorts the invisible threat out. It all culminates in a press full of brightly coloured bottles, all for very different tasks made from very similar ingredients.

Whilst beauty and household goods manufacturers shamelessly play on people's insecurities regarding their appearance or family health to sell their dubious wares, other advertisements adopt a different approach. In general, ads for foodstuffs humorously exaggerate one characteristic of the item, the objective being product recognition. It might be argued that advertising a food product is a harmless exercise compared to the unscrupulous promotion of wrinkle potions and questionable cleaning agents: I mean, we genuinely need food! But what we don't need is 145 different types of breakfast cereal. From Sugar Puffs to Alpen, people are partial to different types of flakes in their morning bowl, and a little choice is nice. But there are only so many combinations of bran, wheat and sugar you can have before you get duplication, excess and ultimately waste. They will probably all be sold, or they would not be on the supermarket shelf, but at what price? In many cases the advertising and marketing of each of these brands costs more than its production. A typical supermarket sells 20,000 different brands. There are currently twenty different varieties of white bread and 64 different types of dental floss on the market. This amounts to an enormous waste of human and natural resources, a very high price to pay for an excessive range of dental hygiene products.

The marketing of potions, lotions and Sugar Puffs is child's play compared to the antics of some baby food companies. Women in developed countries are being encouraged by the medical profession to breastfeed, as it is considered the best form of nutrition. Yet in the third world western food companies are promoting expensively packaged baby food milk. Instead of mother's milk, women are being encouraged to feed their babies commercial formulae made up with dirty water. The World Health Organisation claims that this practice causes the death of 15 million babies a year. The Nestlé food company, one of the largest producers of baby food in the world, makes \$50 billion annually, whilst spending \$7 billion on advertising. However, you do not have to go to the third world to witness the unscrupulous marketing of pernicious products. The promotion of cigarettes is one commonplace example. Mercenary tactics are as much a part of marketing as clipboards and pie charts.

Advertising and marketing constitutes part of the modern system of production and consumption. Advertising in particular is the dominant cultural form in capitalist society. It mimics and subverts every genre of art and cultural practice to enhance and alter the meaning of lifeless objects. But advertisements do more than exaggerate the basic function of a product. They imbue products with all kinds of social abilities. Marx called this process the fetishism of commodities. But surely people buy a particular soft drink or breakfast cereal because they like its taste and are thirsty, hungry or want to keep regular: they are not

hypnotised into thinking that they are going to be or have the beautiful woman in the TV commercial? But advertising does not adhere to such a crude formula. Utilitarian items such as food or drink become exaggerated props in advertisements that subtly portray or imply an ideal lifestyle. This ideal is not an outlandishly glamorous way of life. It is a comfortable and customary one which we can all realistically aspire to, one which the product will bring us nearer to. But some commodities bring us nearer to this coveted lifestyle than others.

It seems that a car is not merely a four-wheeled vehicle which gets you from A to B quicker than your feet. If it were, everyone would be driving Ladas (well, pushing them). I do concede that a Ferrari is more mechanically proficient and aesthetically pleasing than its east European counterpart. A Ferrari is never bought for its craftsmanship alone, however, but for the status and lifestyle ownership infers. All cars great and small are marketed on this premiss. The same principle applies to clothes. It is not good enough for the rich and famous to look good, their clothes must have a designer's signature. Taking into consideration that many of these creations are handmade with fine fabrics, the price is still exorbitant. Indeed, the garment's monetary value is paramount to its appeal. At the same time many ordinary people fork out on overpriced, synthetic sports gear, bearing conspicuous logos, which is made for a pittance in the third world. This popular trend has many appeals. The clothes are colourful, comfortable, and not just cool but machine washable! But its street credibility probably has more to do with its price tag than its washing instructions. In capitalist culture, clothing is not merely an aesthetic and essential pursuit. It is a symbol of wealth, status and lifestyle.

Advertising is the capitalist propaganda machine that attempts to shape people's aspirations and desires. It is the visualisation of capitalist ideology whose insidious value system prevails and permeates every economic and social class. So the Ferrari-driving, designer-clad rock star is not a zillion light years away from the crystal-collecting housewife, who stores her booty in cabinets resembling Egyptian tombs. From sports cars to sports gear, the examples are rife but the ethos remains the same: the accumulation of symbols of wealth, for their own sake, will elevate the self. The belief that money symbolises success tragically dominates our culture. All creativity and human endeavour must be financially profitable before it is truly valued and encouraged. The way capitalism mistreats artistic expression is testament to this philistine philosophy.

Individuals with creative ability are employed as designers of commodities, such as fashion designers, graphic artists, product designers etc, whilst fine art, artistic expression for its own sake, is hijacked as artists are forced to exhibit their work in exhibitions sponsored by commercial firms. Manufacturers use these events to promote and enhance their public image as patrons of the arts. Paintings are bought as investments to hang in office buildings or, worse still, are sentenced to life imprisonment within a security vault. But artistic expression is a resilient and intrinsic part of humanity, which manages somehow to survive despite the battering it receives within capitalist culture. It is a little known fact that many recognised Irish artists and their families exist on social welfare payments and part-time teaching whilst relying on Arts Council grants to fund the production of their work. Contrary to popular belief, success and recognition in the art world, for the most part, is not pursued for financial wealth, nor does it result in it. A lot of modern art cannot be easily commodified, such as performance, video, installation, body or land art. Perhaps then, it is not surprising that an artistic vocation is something which society fails to value or understand. All cultural practices are stifled by commercial concern. If a brilliant piece of literature is written yet no profitable market exists for it, it will not be published. A system which devalues art is one which rejects human development and understanding. But perhaps this is the least of its crimes.

The consumer society is one which thrives on women's oppression. Products that profess to change people's appearance target both men and women, but there is a stark and

disturbing difference in the way women are manipulated and exploited for commercial gain. It does not matter how clever or talented a woman is, how much she has achieved career-wise, or how hard she has worked to raise her family. She is not considered successful unless she is attractive. This emphasis on female physical beauty has little to do with aesthetics and more to do with power, as it is based on the premiss of inadequacy. A woman's attractiveness is measured by the discrepancy between her and the ideal of female beauty. Ads for dubious beauty products promote the ideal which women are urged to tirelessly pursue. A woman should have a pretty face with no facial hair, blemish-free skin, shaped eyebrows, voluptuous lips, a small nose and soft silky hair. She should be tall (but not too tall) and slim, with a high centre of gravity. Her legs should be long and hairless, and her feet should be petite like her manicured hands. She should have a small waist, firm buttocks and a flat stomach. She should have no underarm hair or cellulite. Breasts are optional depending on the fashion – both reduction and augmentation services are available. Thousands upon thousands of beauty products and treatments are at women's disposal to aid them in their quest to realise the ideal, or to help those who cannot (the majority of womankind) make the most of themselves. Women's magazines sponsored by the beauty and fashion industries perpetuate the ideal by publishing articles on how to improve your looks, and dress it up like a lesson in self-development.

Every part of the female form has been idealised. This elaborate definition of beauty is relentlessly shoved down women's throats on a daily basis, from every section of the mass media. The female body has become a commodity in itself. Cosmetic surgery and beauty treatments deal with problem areas of the body as if they were components of a car. A lot of women cannot afford many of these expensive beauty products and services. But because of the promotion of this unobtainable and contrived concept of beauty, a staggering number of women loathe their bodies.

But the world is full of women and men who do not value this unnatural concept of femininity, people who reject the dominant culture, who do not swallow the lies of advertising and marketing or crave a materialistic lifestyle. Most individuals simply desire a decent standard of living and quality of life for themselves and their families. These fundamentals capitalism, with all its false promises, has failed to provide.

Above all other things, capitalism purports to offer 'choice'. The consumer is supposedly in a privileged position. They can take advantage of a bountiful market of useful goods and services that compete for quality and price, investing their disposable income in items that will elevate their life, whilst manufacturers solicit their patronage through the mass media. A tough but fair system, that promises those who are hardworking enough a decent standard of living, and those who are enterprising enough a life of wealth and excitement. A system where production thrives on creativity and exploration by industries into the fields of technology, and medicine accelerates human development.

When the truth is that exclusive advances in the fields of technology and medicine are peddled to those who can afford it, whilst artistic expression is reduced to a commodity and women are dehumanised in the name of beauty. Wealth is generated by the exploitation of others in a cut-throat market where ordinary people have to incessantly work hard throughout their life to achieve the basics. And those unfortunate enough to fall beneath the poverty line are deemed responsible for their own decline. So what about quality and choice? The average person has their pick of a huge range of overpriced mundane goods dressed in colourful wrappings that cost more than the contents themselves. Products are not created in response to genuine human demand. The exasperation of natural resources and environmental destruction are the results of manic mass production of commodities made with only profit in mind. As the success of anti-cellulite products illustrates, a commodity does not have to be either useful or even beneficial. Advertising and marketing, the great capitalist instruments of persuasion, step in and create false needs, using every

form of deception and manipulation imaginable, all with one goal in mind: to persuade people to part with their hard-earned cash. Perhaps cellulite, the paragon of marketing, represents what capitalism truly offers humanity—a multi-billion dollar industry which produces cures for a disease which does not exist.

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