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Religion and American Consumerism

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### Consumerism as Manifestation of Eugenics

Observing and comparing the studies of biology and consumerism results in a heightened awareness of the resemblance between evolution and consumerism. With enough study, the realization occurs that consumerism is a violent evolution: eugenics. To understand why consumerism is comparable to eugenics, it is necessary to explain consumerism's imitations of nature. After gaining this comprehension, the awareness of consumerism's creation of an inaccessible utopia and an "us versus them" mentality ensues. Grasping these concepts can be difficult. As a result of this difficulty, I utilize Rigoberta's Menchu's account of her inability to access the experience of higher socioeconomic classes and their respect. I articulate how the *caporales* and *ladinos* serve as a relic for consumer culture's eugenics and provide more proof of the eugenics practiced by consumerism to support my argument.

Baudrillard's notation of the pharmacy and stores as "an *illusion* of reality" serves as the starting point for my argument. The pharmacy and store are examples of Baudrillard's hyperreality, for they present an imitation of the bounty associated with harvest in store displays. These environments imitate occurrences from the real world, when humanity created their own resources or gained nutrition from nature. Furthermore, the pharmacy and store imitate what one gains from a community, with their ability to produce medicine, entertainment, and essential items in one place. As a result of this manicured environment, a sense of utopia develops, along with a decrease in tolerance for difference. These experiences cause humanity to train its self to

expect homogeneity. Steven Mile's book *Consumerism - as a Way of Life* proves this, for he states that "the desire to be oneself encourages consumers to purchase and wear the same product as everybody else". These spaces in which the consumer indulges encourages homogeneity, and this participation in homogeneity results in the creation of a utopia experienced by the few<sup>123</sup>.

How does this exclusive utopia occur? This utopia results from consumer culture's exclusivity. Lawrence B. Glickman articulates consumer culture's exclusivity in his introduction to *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*. Glickman writes about American history and how "... consumption..has also been a tool for injustice and discrimination, a way of marking outsiders" through the practice of 'red-lining', which is the conscientious decision to prevent non-white/non-European consumers from accessing "products and services"<sup>4</sup>. Consumer culture's exclusivity continues to come across in Glickman's listing of important issues that appear in the following collection of essays which includes the topic of "Incorporation of Difference", where Glickman describes consumer culture as "a homogenizing force...a site at which matters of power and difference are played out". "Differences" include "[g]ender, class, ethnicity, and nationhood" for Glickman<sup>5</sup>. These examples and iterations from Glickman serve as

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1998), 26-30

<sup>2</sup> Steven Miles, *Consumerism as a Way of Life* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1998), 41, 66.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence B. Glickman, "Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History", in *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence B. Glickman, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 4

<sup>4</sup> Glickman, 3

<sup>5</sup> Glickman, 13

further proof of consumer culture's exclusivity that creates "a professional and technical class, [who is] the new ruling class of society"<sup>6</sup>.

Consumerism's exclusive utopia develops into a violent selfishness, eugenics, due to the need to advance capitalism. Capitalism derives from science because "in order for capitalism to advance, reason and scientific knowledge had to be applied"<sup>7</sup>. Here is where eugenics comes into play, the misinterpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution.

Darwin's theory of evolution consists of a list of seven items:

1. Every organism tries to reach biotic potential, the maximum ability to reproduce offspring.
2. Competition results from their attempts to reach biotic potential.
3. Due to competition, some organisms die before reproduction. Those with positive characteristics live long enough to reproduce.
4. Nature picks variations to be able to survive and reproduce.
5. Survival of the fittest/natural selection occurs as a result of 4.
6. The positive variabilities become inherited and are passed on through reproduction.
7. Change in time occurs as the positive variations continue to be passed on as the negative variations go away.

It is easy to see how the theory of evolution is comparable to consumerism; Replace the word "organism" with the word "consumer" and "Nature" with the word "Consumerism".

Consumerism commits its "natural selection" through the exclusivity it produces; Some consumers "live"(participate in consumerism), while the other consumers "die"(unable to

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<sup>6</sup> Miles 73

<sup>7</sup> Miles 62

participate in consumerism). Consumerism is a decisive and premeditated evolution, as proven in the earlier discussion of exclusiveness in consumer culture by Glickman.

Evolution is not decisive and premeditated; It just happens. In the biological process of evolution, there are no inherently good or bad traits; A positive trait is specific to the time and place where it occurs. The best example of this is Industrial Melanism. A change in an organism's environment causes natural selection. Remember, evolution cannot have an influence on the organism's environment; It can only react to it. Before the Industrial Revolution, it benefited the pepper moth to be light colored, for they could blend into the tree bark. As a result, not many dark colored pepper moths existed, for predators ate them due to their visibility. After the Industrial Revolution began, tree bark became darker as a result of the soot covering it. Now, predators ate light colored moths because they were visible. This made it more advantageous to be a dark colored moth, so more of them appeared.

Let's say that after the Industrial Revolution, a way to clean the air developed. As a result of this, the trees' bark became light-colored again. In this case, the light colored pepper moths would be the advantage in this situation. Therefore, fewer dark colored pepper moths would exist. Instead, more light colored moths would exist.

What this example proves is that a positive trait in evolution depends on time and place. Consumerism is a manifestation of eugenics because it decides what is not advantageous from the beginning and does not change those definitions. It can eradicate those who cannot participate in these definitions, and its eradication is prevention of the potential for predetermined outsiders to participate in consumerism. Evolution is organic by nature; It ebbs and flows and changes depending on what is going on around it. An equal chance exists for traits

or organisms to be seen as beneficial, depending on the circumstances in which it manifests itself.

Rigoberta Menchu's experience of being an Indian woman in Guatemala captures how this competition exists in reality. Since Rigoberta and her family were of Indian descent, others made sure that they stayed in the lowest socioeconomic class. Proof of this push to keep Indians in Guatemala poor shows itself in the ways that Rigoberta's parents talk to her. Her parents tell her that "...[she] would have many ambitions but...wouldn't have the opportunity to realize them" and that "[her] life wouldn't change, it would go on the same—work, poverty, suffering."<sup>8</sup> If Rigoberta's fellow Indians and family had the opportunity to progress socioeconomically or considered socioeconomically "well off", her parents would not speak to her in this manner.

The way Rigoberta's bosses treated her and her coworkers shows how they enforced Rigoberta and her family's mindset noted in the previous paragraph. An example of this is how the workers at the *finca*, the place where Rigoberta worked, had to all go in the bathroom in the same place and could only access water from irrigation holes for plants. Further mistreatment also becomes apparent with the bosses lack of sensitivity to and accusations of owing money to the pharmacy for Rigoberta's brother's death. The irony is that Rigoberta's mother could not afford medicine for her son, making the accusation of debts a lie<sup>9</sup>. Such mistreatment occurs because the bosses see Rigoberta and her family as unworthy of surviving in the consumer

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<sup>8</sup> Rigoberta Menchu, *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, trans. Ann Wright (London: Verso, 1984), 48

<sup>9</sup> Menchu 35, 38-41

culture present in Guatemala. These bosses are attempting to eradicate Rigoberta and other Indians in Guatemala through rabid mistreatment that results in the prevention of socioeconomic movement.

Another manifestation of eugenics is the use of *caporales* and *ladinos* as relics.

*Caporales* are “...usually men from our villages too, but they’ve been in the army or have left the community...[who] start behaving like the landowners and treat their own people badly.”

*Ladinos* are “...any Guatemalan — whatever his economic position — who rejects, whether individually or through his cultural heritage, Indian values of Mayan origin...also implies mixed blood.”<sup>10</sup> A relic is a material manifestation of the spiritual that function as intermediaries between God and humans in Catholicism. In this situation, the humans are those who benefit and participate in capitalism/consumerism and the “God” is consumerism its self. *Caporales* and *ladinos* serve as relics because by fulfilling a role that they see as “above” other Guatemalans of Indian descent, they are a part of a different class that is closer to the richer that is more valuable to consumerism. They serve as proof “...for those who have access to the reins of power in a society” that consumerism is acceptable to participate in, for there are people who rejected their heritage or “moved up” in society<sup>11</sup>. Preserving consumerism’s relics is crucial for the eugenics of consumerism to continue to exist because they provide “proof” for the consumerist system.

More proof of eugenic behavior comes across in an account from Menchu: “There was a big scandal in Guatemala when the Guatemalan Social Security Institute began sterilizing women without telling them, in order to reduce the population.” This act of preventing life

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<sup>10</sup> Menchu 22, 249

<sup>11</sup> Miles 82

without consent is part of eugenics, for the people sterilized were most likely women of lower socioeconomic classes. They were not seen as fully human or on the same level as those running the Institute, so those who ran the Institution thought that it was alright for them to sterilize these women. Further proof that this mindset occurs in Guatemala is Rigoberta's account of the righteous anger of her people, who understand that "Our forefathers were dishonored by the White Man — sinners and murderers...It is not the fault of our ancestors...If [the White Man] hadn't come, we would all be united, equal, and our children would not suffer." With the arrival of the "White Man" came capitalism, which directly conflicts with the Indian way of life and caused Indians to become unequal in their home. The "White Man's" ability to see the Indians as unequal to them gives them the ability to separate the Indians and eradicate the Indians from rising socioeconomically<sup>12</sup>. This is the effect of consumerism's eugenics.

Eugenics, the violent evolution of consumerism, owes its creation to consumer culture's inaccessible utopia for those of a lower socioeconomic class. How does this inaccessible utopia develop? It develops from consumerism's imitations of nature. Evolution, which is also part of nature, inspired consumerism, but consumerism's evolution is predetermined and unchangeable. Nature's evolution is not. Rigoberta Menchu's accounts provide examples of consumerism's eugenic manifestation, which consists of the restriction/mistreatment of people in a lower socioeconomic class and false belief in social mobility.

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<sup>12</sup> Menchu 61, 67

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