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# On Post-Modern Consumerist Societies, Crime and Violence

*Stefano Bonino\**

## **Riassunto**

L'obiettivo dell'articolo è quello di analizzare le relazioni tra l'incremento dell'importanza dei valori consumistici ed i problemi del crimine e della violenza nell'ambito della società postmoderna. Oltre ad esaminare il fenomeno del consumismo in quanto tale, questo articolo intende evidenziare l'esistenza di un modello di continuità tra la società consumistica descritta da Colquhoun e l'attuale cultura del consumo che caratterizza la tarda modernità. La cultura del controllo e la punitività che contraddistinguono le società di mercato postmoderne verranno messe in relazione con quei processi di alterizzazione e di esclusione degli strati più bassi della popolazione che sono intrappolati tra le mete consumistiche e la mancanza di risorse adeguate per raggiungerle. A causa della pressione di potenti forze macro-strutturali e di dinamiche socio-politiche, i corpi e le anime degli appartenenti alle classi inferiori sono ghettizzati e necessitano di trovare una via sia per riaffermare le proprie identità ferite che per lottare contro la deprivazione e la mancanza di riconoscimento. E' in un tale contesto che il comportamento criminale, la violenza e la delinquenza possono essere spiegati.

## **Résumé**

L'objectif de l'article est d'analyser les relations entre l'augmentation de l'importance des valeurs de consommation et les problèmes de crime et de violence dans la société postmoderne. Cet article entend non seulement souligner l'existence d'un modèle de continuité entre la société de consommation décrit par Colquhoun et la culture actuelle de consommation qui caractérise la modernité tardive, mais aussi examiner le phénomène de la consommation en tant que tel. La culture du contrôle et la punitivité qui caractérise les sociétés de marché postmodernes viendront mises en relation avec ces processus d'altérisation et d'exclusion des couches les plus basses de la population, qui sont piégés entre le but de la consommation et le manque de ressources adéquates pour l'atteindre. À cause de la pression de forces macro-structurelles puissantes et de dynamiques socio-politiques, les corps et les âmes des membres des classes inférieures sont ghettoisés et ils ont besoin de trouver une voie pour réaffirmer leurs propres identités blessées et pour lutter contre les privations et le manque de reconnaissance.

Par conséquent, il est possible d'expliquer dans un tel contexte le comportement criminel, la violence et la délinquance.

## **Abstract**

This article aims at exploring the connections between the rise of consumerist values and problems of crime and violence within the framework of a post-modern society. Besides exploring consumerism as such, this article will show that there is a pattern of continuity that runs from the consumerist society depicted by Colquhoun to the current culture of consumption that features late modernity. The culture of control and punitiveness that characterise post-modern market societies will be linked to those processes of otherization and exclusion of the lowest strata of the population which is caught between consumerist goals and lack of adequate resources. Under powerful macro-structural forces and socio-political dynamics, the bodies and souls of members of the underclass are ghettoized and need to find a way to both reassert their wounded identities and fight against their deprivation and misrecognition. It is within such a framework that criminal behaviour, violence and delinquency can be explained.

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## 1. Introduction.

Investigating the relationship between the rise of consumerist values and problems of violence and crime in contemporary societies is an extremely sensitive matter, which might easily cause to be examined just from a particular point of view – for example, the economic or the sociological one – or to approach it blindly taking the stand of either a pro-capitalist or an anti-capitalist. Nevertheless, consumerism and the values it produces nowadays are certainly a prominent aspect of late modernity, but they are not a unique aspect of it, since they are interrelated and interdependent with its macro socio-economic structure. Thus, consumerism is one piece of a complex mosaic and it is in considering the whole that the connection with crime can be examined effectively. It is a difficult endeavor that will be driven by a “culture of openness” that “should lead to a process of theoretical *synthesis*.”<sup>1</sup>

Starting from Veblen, consumption will be illustrated as an eternal force capable of defining social status and founding power on its possession, regardless of the historic period and socio-economic advancements: Mencken’s standpoint will mediate this position, adding the agency’s value to the social impositions of consumerist values. Thus, moving to the individual level, consumerism will be examined as a power capable of generating needs and desires which, referring to the work of

Baudrillard, will be explored as individualistic means played into the social structure to reach happiness, and also adding Bauman and Girard’s remarks, will be considered as they relate to the contemporary complex scenario. Widening the discourse to the socio-economic level, first it will be traced as a pattern of historical continuity between Colquhoun’s consumerist (and corrupted) society – where crime is considered to be a rational choice, while policing should be devolved to responsible individuals – and contemporary market societies, based on situational prevention measures.

This will expand the discourse to the social level, where consumerist values work. In particular, it will be argued that, taking into consideration Young and going further than Merton, socio-economic changes are shaping a society in which the lower-classes are constantly excluded on the structural level and where violence comes to play not just an instrumental role but mainly an expressive one. Also, Garland’s point of view will be of paramount importance to address a severe political punitiveness in response to those developments that have produced new experiences and perceptions of crime within the middle-class. It will be from this point of view that it will be argued that, eventually, such perceptions have modeled a collective criminalization and otherization of the lowest strata of the population that, being ontologically ghettoized – they are socially isolated, misrecognized, and deprived of the opportunity to gain wealth and cultural capital –, try to rebalance their condition through violence and crime, as an expression of humiliation and derailed lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Bottoms A.E., “The Relationship Between Theory and Empirical Observations in Criminology”, in King R.D. and Emma W. (eds.), *Doing Research on Crime and Justice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p. 82.

## 2. Conspicuous consumption: Veblen meets Mencken.

*In the sequence of cultural evolution the emergence of a leisure class coincides with the beginning of ownership<sup>2</sup>*

Unlike Marcuse – who argues that it is in advanced industrialism and capitalism that consumerism operates as a form of social control, furthering false needs to objectified people<sup>3</sup> – Veblen in his masterpiece *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, combining a provocative tone with ferocious criticisms, outlines the perimeter of a social order grounded on consumerism as being driven by primitive traces. He argues that, from pre-historic times, societies have been ruled by people of the higher-class through division of labor. In primitive tribes, the leisure-class asserted and retained such a superior status through the exemption from humble jobs and the use of coercion, both direct – as lower-class' individuals were unable both to learn how to fight and to carry weapons – and indirect – the privilege of the leisure class with respect to warfare and religion made its members indispensable to the tribe as protection from hostilities and as mediators with deities. According to Veblen, all societies throughout history are just a different form, and expression of such a pre-historical stage and privileges always have been afforded to the members of the leisure class (for example, nobles in the Middle Ages and white-collar workers nowadays). His conception of conspicuous

consumption is significant as it provides the grounds for understanding how social status is modeled: Veblen argues that, historically, a display of conspicuous consumption (scarce and expensive goods) and conspicuous leisure (unproductive activities) are a prerogative of the higher-class' members: despite these being a waste of money and time, individuals long for them and become embroiled in a process of mimesis and desire.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the idea that all luxury goods and enjoyable activities are a waste of money and time is contrasted by Mencken, when, quite wryly, he states that:

It may be true of a few luxuries, but it is certainly not true of the most familiar ones. Do I enjoy a decent bath because I know that John Smith cannot afford one – or because I delight in being clean? [...] Do I prefer terrapin à la Maryland to fried liver because plowhands must put up with the liver – or because the terrapin is intrinsically a more charming dose?<sup>5</sup>

Mencken's quite relativistic point of view disproves the more universalistic consumption theory proposed by Veblen, suggesting that people define consumption as being either wastefulness or pleasure, according to their own needs and perceptions; thus, consumption is not imposed completely on society at a structural level but it is also defined at a micro-level by agency. Such a conception will be useful in investigating the role of desires and needs in relation to society and individuals, whether they are connected primarily to consumerism, and how increasing them could lead to negative feelings and subsequent violent actions.

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<sup>2</sup> Veblen T., *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Dover Publications, Mineola, 1994, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Marcuse H., *One Dimensional Man*, Routledge, London, 1964.

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<sup>4</sup> Veblen T., *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, cit.

<sup>5</sup> Mencken H.L., *Prejudices: First Series*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1919, p. 72.

### 3. On needs and desires.

*It seemed to me that what I desired might never  
come to pass*<sup>6</sup>

One of the major criticisms of consumerism focuses on the constant demands and increased needs that people living in contemporary societies feel they are bombarded by every day. This view is basically grounded on an ontological pessimism about consumption and its alleged power to augment frustration, dissatisfaction, and insecurity at an individual level while enhancing individualism and inequality at a socio-economic level: violent actions would be considered acts of transgression by which people “lose control only to take control,”<sup>7</sup> a re-appropriation of their own identities, a way of constructing and modeling their statuses in a society dominated by market values.<sup>8</sup> Such an argument could be more than a theory since it retains well-structured patterns of factuality: indisputably, a society built on social status, economic wealth, and individual success can produce anomie and social strain, easily inoculating cultural goals in people but quite problematically providing widespread institutional means to achieve them.<sup>9</sup> Merton synthesizes it effectively stating that “a cardinal American virtue, ‘ambition’, promotes a cardinal American vice, ‘deviant behavior’”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cervantes M., *Don Quixote*, transl. by Montgomery J.H., Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, 2009, p. 195.

<sup>7</sup> Hayward K.J., and YOUNG J., “Cultural Criminology: Some Notes on the Script”, *Theoretical Criminology*, Vol. 8, N. 3, 2004, p. 268.

<sup>8</sup> Hayward K.J., *City Limits: Crime, Consumer Culture and the Urban Experience*, GlassHouse, London, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Merton R.K., *Social Theory and Social Structure*, The Free Press, New York, 1957.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 146.

Nevertheless, from an anthropological point of view, it should be considered not only the failure of a “market society” that creates strain by producing continuous needs, but also whether these needs are typical just of consumerism or intimately related to individuality as a mechanism whereby every society works. Baudrillard argues that the basis of any need is an innate proclivity to happiness, not an innermost happiness but one that, socio-historically, “takes up and come to embody *the myth of Equality*”<sup>11</sup> (emphasis in original). Happiness here necessitates visibility and tangibility and, since measurability is its primary feature, evidence is its functionality; it is a well-being principle shaped on an individualistic need for equality and played out in social structures.<sup>12</sup>

However, if the (presumably) most important goal of individuals is gaining happiness – which, harking back to Pascal’s philosophical concept, is regarded here simply as what “all men seek” with “no exceptions” since “however different the means they may employ, they all strive towards this goal”<sup>13</sup> and not as an utilitarianism concept distinguishable in lower and higher forms and quantifiable in terms of amount of pleasure<sup>14</sup> – the process of need-satisfaction plays a main role, while the substance of the need itself is negligible. Needs are tightly related to the socio-historical moments of a particular society, and their definition mirrors a collective tendency to define a

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<sup>11</sup> Baudrillard J., *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, transl. by Turner C., Sage Publications, London, 1998, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 49-68.

<sup>13</sup> Pascal B., *Pensées*, transl. by Krailsheimer A.J., Penguin Books, London, 1995, p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> Mill J.S., *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government*, J.M Dent & Sons Ltd, London, 1947, pp. 1-60.

way to achieve happiness: possession of power, wealth, social status, masculine identities are just means, not ends. The ends are the results of these mechanisms of “happiness through need-satisfaction” incorporated into the social structure: individuals are not dominated by power, wealth or success but employ them to define their social identity, since they need social needs. In this sense, consumerist values reflect the current socio-economic tendency and define required goals – which vary depending on different historical periods – as perceived by social actors. When Bauman argues that “goods acquire their lustre and attractiveness in the course of being chosen”<sup>15</sup>, the stress is placed on the process of social choice and approval as shaping a mainstream status, not on the object itself. Baudrillard expresses a similar position, stating that “need is no longer need for something but a need for difference, the desire for *social meaning*”<sup>16</sup> (emphasis in original), and Girard argues that such mimetic desires, which are internalized through social interactions as needs for what others have, reach their acme in a consumer culture and produce a crisis of identity, a detachment from traditional mores, and various kind of conflicts.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, crime problems and violence supposedly related to the advent of consumerism have to be analyzed in that broader context and sphere of action that encompasses cultural, social, and symbolic structures and values as well as (and not only) economic ones. Also, to better understand

<sup>15</sup> Bauman Z., *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, Open University Press, Maidenhead, 2004, p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> Baudrillard J., *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, p. 78.

and contextualize the effect of consumerism on the macro-structures of society and on the small scale of social interactions and agency, it could be worth tracing existing patterns of continuity with the past.

#### **4. The present mirrors the past: a lesson from Colquhoun.**

*The accession of wealth, thus rapidly flowing into the Capital, through the medium of trade and commerce, must, in the nature of things, produce an increase in crimes*<sup>18</sup>

Two centuries after the French, American, and first Industrial Revolutions, these words, drawn from Patrick Colquhoun’s *Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis*, published at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, still sound extremely modern and familiar. Delinquents were considered rational actors, driven by wealth-related increased temptations and opportunities to commit crime – as Colquhoun puts it, “acts of delinquency and the corruption of manners, have uniformly kept place within the increase of the riches in the Capital”<sup>19</sup> – , while ideal policing measures were supposed to be structured on a situational crime prevention model and, as a collective duty, partially devolved to the citizens.<sup>20</sup> Two hundred years later, Currie defines most western contemporary societies as being a true approximation of his abstracted “market society”, a result of neo-liberalist capitalism and late modernity’s socio-economic structures, in which private gains guide people’s actions, downplaying a public experience of social

<sup>17</sup> Girard R. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and the Other in Literary Structure*, transl. by Freccero Y., The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1966.

<sup>18</sup> Colquhoun P., *Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., H. Fry for C. Dilly, London, 1798, p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. vi.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

organization into status-oriented lives in fragmented societies, places of socio-economic inequalities, weakened communities, and broken families.<sup>21</sup> Also, Garland argues that governments are restructuring their policies on a more distant and indirect way through the responsabilization of agencies, communities, and individuals in employing situational crime prevention measures to fight criminality. It is quite remarkable that such strategies take place in a society where crime is now considered a normal aspect and experience of people's lives, a risk to be avoided, an opportunity to be reduced, as if all citizens were possible victims and all criminals were rational actors, capable of calculating pros and cons of their actions.<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding such a time-frame, from Colquhoun to Currie and Garland a pattern of continuity clearly emerges in the mode in which, even if more intensively now, societies are driven by private and individualistic ends; in this sense, Colquhoun's account paradigmatically proves how the past could be a mirror for the present, since the "consumerism question", despite being a prominent feature of modernity, emerged well before the twentieth century. Furthermore, considering that, despite the fact that at a macro-level our society has been radically transformed, at a micro-level some trends have not changed, it appears that the acquisition of status through consumption has deep roots in the intimate nature

of individuals and their need for self-realization. However, nowadays consumerist values are just a part of a more complex entity, produced by various changes and developments in social interactions, politics, and the economy, which are modeling a collective feeling of precariousness, and a new experience and sensibility toward crime.

### **5. Precarious equilibrium: the insecure middle-class ostracizes the underdogs.**

*Vertigo is the malaise of late modernity: a sense of insecurity, of insubstantiality, and of uncertainty, a whiff of chaos and a fear of falling*<sup>23</sup>

As already mentioned, when people are not provided with the institutionalized means to achieve the cultural goals required by social pressures, strain can arise and produce anomie. In an over-simplistic analysis it could even be generalized that consumerist values themselves generate strains, since such values overemphasize the attainment of economic, social, and personal goals, often beyond the reach of some strata of the population. In this sense, Merton indicates five different modes of adaptation to cultural and social values – conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion – which should serve as a basis to understand individual behaviors and actions as played out in social structures.<sup>24</sup> However, assessments of the same conditions vary according to individual perspectives; considering strains objectively, just according to individuals' exposure to them, disregards the different subjective evaluations that individuals

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<sup>21</sup> Currie E., "Social Crime Prevention Strategies in a Market Society", in McLaughlin E., Muncie J., and Hughes G. (eds.), *Criminological Perspectives: Essential Readings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Sage Publications, London, 2002, pp. 369-380.

<sup>22</sup> Garland D., "The Limits of the Sovereign State: Strategies of Crime Control in Contemporary Society", *The British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 36, N. 4, 1996, pp. 450-455.

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<sup>23</sup> Young J., *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, Sage Publications, London, 2007, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Merton R.K., *Social Theory and Social Structure*, cit.



provide when dealing with strains.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, some individuals relate to social structures differently from the majority, some simply scaling down the cultural goals imposed by the dominant social order, and some, as Topalli clearly indicates when treating hardcore and street offenders, abandoning the mainstream rules and values and developing their own set of norms.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, just pointing out that violence is an anomic response to strain caused by inequalities (in income and class distribution, for example)<sup>27</sup> and blocked opportunities does not serve the purpose of understanding the relationship between individuals and crime in a consumer-shaped society. In drawing a picture of such a relationship, it would be helpful to analyze the social structure as a whole, which is the deterministic framework in which people can (or cannot) play a role as rational agents.

It is probably that deep social fracture that causes the inequality representing the most symptomatic aspect of the consumerist revolution that contemporary societies have been experiencing. As other British Left Realists have done, Young recently revived Merton's theory, stating that the underclass, despite living in the mainstream socio-economic structure, is walking on a path parallel to that of the middle-class: he argues that the product of late modernity is "a bulimic society where massive cultural inclusion is accompanied by systematic structural exclusion"<sup>28</sup> (emphasis in

original). It is not an absolute exclusion but a relative one: it works as if to serve and preserve upper-class' comforts. Moreover, it is not an ecological explanation of how socially isolated people react to their condition: instead, it recognizes that contemporary societies create quite blurred boundaries so that contacts and interactions between people of different races and classes are more and more frequent. It is through that (real or, sometimes, mediated) contact that the deprived feel their deep humiliation increasing, since the American dream is their dream, and they are the ones who alleviate their poverty in the cult of consumption. Combining structure with agency, Young goes further than Merton, suggesting that the real victims of consumerism are the lower classes, whose cultural incorporation and structural rejection produces intense dynamics of resentment; its most dramatic result – violence and crime – is a transgressive act engaged in for the purpose of dignity and identity re-assertion.<sup>29</sup> Young's position is probably too supportive of the lower classes and the miserable fate of the underdogs, but, nonetheless, it is significant in comprehending the perspectives and the roles played by the people living on the opposite side of the dominant society of the "morally lazy white middle class"<sup>30</sup>.

It is Garland who can help draw a picture of the middle-class' renewed daily experiences, arguing that recent changes in the social structure have reshaped a previously collective unfamiliarity of crime into a tangible perception of it as an ordinary problem, since the distance between the

<sup>25</sup> Agnew R., *Pressured Into Crime: An Overview of General Strain Theory*, Roxbury Publishing Co, Los Angeles, 2006, pp. 1-17.

<sup>26</sup> Topalli V., "When Being Good is Bad: An Expansion of Neutralization Theory", *Criminology*, Vol. 43, N. 3, 2005, pp. 797-836.

<sup>27</sup> Quetelet A., *A Treatise on Man and the Development of his Faculties*, transl. by Knox R., William and Robert Chambers, Edinburgh, 1842.

<sup>28</sup> Young J., *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Young J., *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, cit.

<sup>30</sup> Jensen R., "The Morally Lazy White Middle Class", in Hartman C. (ed.), *Challenges to Equality: Poverty and Race in America*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, 2001, p. 54.

middle-class and its undergoing violence has been reduced: the promotion of mass consumption, a more fragile middle-class' organization, weakened social institutions and networks, the new role of women in the labor market, a shift in the provision of security with the involvement of the private sector and individual responsibilities, and the withdrawal of public support are some of the many changes that have contributed to augment a sense of insecurity that is embedded deeply in everyday life.<sup>31</sup> The recent public and political reactions to these anxieties primarily have taken the direction of an over criminalization of delinquents and a severe punitiveness toward crime that, according to Garland, is grounded on "a *criminology of the other*, a threatening outcast, the fearsome stranger, the excluded and the embittered"<sup>32</sup> (emphasis in original), the conception of the delinquent as a monster, an alien, and a burden who is to be taken out of circulation. Such a display of toughness and power – that Foucault, de facto, opines serves the purpose of reaffirming the state sovereignty<sup>33</sup> – goes side by side with a modern form of social control, one that it is not moral in its discipline, authority-abiding and committed to the precepts of the welfare state but, instead, combines a reduction of opportunities for offending, often provided by private security agencies, with socio-economic policies such as "zero tolerance" and "broken windows", aimed at deterring and

fighting criminality at its grassroots; the consequence of this orientation is a further exclusion of whole groups of people (the poor, minorities, etc.) that are segregated into a socially degraded dimension.<sup>34</sup>

It is a sort of vicious circle where a perception of increased threat and victimization encourages social prevention measures that heighten that same perception of insecurity within the middle-class and lead to the targeting of a supposedly deviant strata of the population, ostracizing already marginalized people who could, as an act of transgression/identity reaffirmation (expressive crime) or as a way to make a living (instrumental crime), resort to violent acts and, thus, reactivate the circle. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that this well-constructed, highly criminogenic society suggested by Garland has been contrasted by Beckett, who remarks that victimization data (mainly from the National Crime Victimization Survey) does not show a real increase in crime rates.<sup>35</sup> Could it be that those articulated macro-socio economic developments and changes brought by a market society and the embeddedness of its values have, along with molding a "precariousness of being"<sup>36</sup>, increased merely the overall perception of crime, not crime itself?

## 6. Constructing "non-persons"<sup>37</sup>: from migration to ghettoization.

<sup>31</sup> Garland D., "The Culture of High Crime Societies: Some Preconditions of Recent 'Law and Order' Policies", *The British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 40, N. 3, 2000, pp. 347-375.

<sup>32</sup> Garland D., "The Limits of the Sovereign State", *cit.*, p. 461.

<sup>33</sup> Foucault M., *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, transl. by Sheridan A., Allen Lane, London, 1977.

<sup>34</sup> Garland D., *The Culture of Control*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 167-192.

<sup>35</sup> Beckett K., "Review: Crime Control in the Culture of Late Modernity", *Law and Society Review*, Vol. 35, N. 4, 2001, pp. 899-930.

<sup>36</sup> Young J., *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, *cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Dal Lago A., "Non-Persons", *Associations. Journal of Social and Legal Studies*, Vol. 3, 2001.

*The fear of the 'stranger' and the fear of the deviant would therefore go hand in hand, and the 'otherness' of the stranger and the 'otherness' of the deviant are collapsed in the social portrayal of the criminal immigrant*<sup>38</sup>

While current market societies have been shaping cultural values based primarily on “consumption as a mode of *expression*”<sup>39</sup> (emphasis in original), macro-social and economic changes have not just restructured societies within their own geographical boundaries but also blurred those same boundaries, facilitating transnational movements of money, of goods, of culture, and, mainly, of people.

Having decided to investigate consumerism within the whole political and economic context of a supposedly criminogenic society, migrants are of particular interest since they have been criminalized as a concrete risk for domestic security and targeted as a socio-economic menace.<sup>40</sup> While consumerist values, mentioned previously, are feeding people with an average increased wealth and an ontological sense of instability, flows of migrants are bringing dispossessed people into countries whose social inequalities, weakened communities, and fragile identities are not a fertile ground for their structural inclusion and demand for equality and integration. Since the early twentieth century, there has been a paradoxical contrast between “the rigid consolidation of the nation-state and its quest for monocultural homogeneity” and what has

been continuously remarked on so far, namely “the proliferation and deepening of social differences within metropolitan societies”<sup>41</sup>; as if they are walking on thin ice, individuals need the perception of stability and certainty, not further imbalance and uncertainty. Ontologically insecure people feel that immigration is a new threat to their precarious identities and, according to Young, they respond by denigrating and essentializing them in a process such that otherness is constructed by the majority as a way to reinforce their security; it is here that nationalism and racism arise. Problems of crime and, consequently, of social disorder are attributed to immigrants; eventually, they are considered troublesome for the dominant social order.<sup>42</sup> Quite interestingly, Young notices that “othered” migrants end up, like the native underclass, in that mainstream process of bulimia that, at the same time, includes them on a cultural level and rejects them at a structural one. As a consequence, they suffer from both relative deprivation and misrecognition – a combination of economic, social, and political marginalization<sup>43</sup> – to which they respond through violence.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, an interesting feature of migration is a proclivity shared by immigrants to reproduce their cultural and social patterns in the new context; this is aimed at preserving their representation of their selves, their identities, and their sense of nationhood.<sup>45</sup> Thus, micro-communities of migrants living into the macro-social structure

<sup>38</sup> Melossi D., “Security, Social Control, Democracy and Migration Within the ‘Constitution’ of the EU”, *European Law Journal*, Vol. 11, N. 1, 2005, pp. 15-16.

<sup>39</sup> Hayward K.J., *City Limits*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Wacquant L., “Penalization, Depoliticization, Racialization: On the Over-Incarceration of Immigrants in the European Union”, in Armstrong S. and McAra L. (eds.), *Contexts of Control: New Perspectives on Punishment and Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, pp. 83-100.

<sup>41</sup> Laliótou I., *Transatlantic Subjects: Acts of Migration and Cultures of Transnationalism Between Greece and America*, University of Chicago, Chicago, 2004, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> Young J., *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, cit.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup> Young J., “To These Wet and Windy Shores”, *Punishment & Society*, Vol. 5, N. 4, 2003, pp. 449-462.

<sup>45</sup> Laliótou I., *Transatlantic Subjects*, cit.

detached from the mainstream social order are also a product of emigrants themselves; in this sense, understanding clearly whether exclusion comes from the mainstream social community or from the excluded people themselves, who retreat into the certainty of compatriotism, is highly problematic.

Wacquant approaches this topic from a more political point of view and, referring to the European iron fist in tackling such problems, argues that current policies have ostracized immigrants “through *external removal* via expulsion and *internal extirpation* via expanded incarceration”<sup>46</sup> (emphasis in original) and have stressed immigrants’ delinquency by targeting both their criminal actions and their foreignness as being ontologically criminal.<sup>47</sup> According to Melossi, immigrants are “responsible for a true ‘crime of modernity’, that crime that is tightly connected with mobility and capitalist development”<sup>48</sup>; thus, there is an interdependence between the contemporary socio-economic scenario that furthers migration, the distorted perception of it as a crime carrier, and the actual violence perpetrated by immigrants, as favored by that same setting. Foreigners’ offending is, at the same time, a natural product of high-crime societies, an act of reaction to structural exclusion, and the expected consequence of harsh policies; migrants are perceived (and often they are) as more violent and deviant than natives, in part because they may commit crimes strictly related to their condition of foreigners (such as illegal

entry and germane infractions), but undeniably, they are also both the preferential targets of the police and the victims of differential administration of justice.<sup>49</sup>

Wacquant, expanding his discourse from race to class, stresses the fact that foreigners are more likely to commit delinquent actions due to socio-economic factors: they come from the lower strata of the population, they are poor and unemployed, and they live in degraded neighborhoods, where they are more exposed to criminal behaviors and can more easily engage in such activities.<sup>50</sup> Thus, it emerges that class, as continuously pointed out throughout this paper, plays a key role as it interconnects with particular socio-economic structures (class is modeled by such structures and models them contemporaneously) that favor the development of criminal behaviors. Furthermore, this can help in better understanding how crime retains its primacy among lower-class people, since, according to Sutherland’s differential association theory<sup>51</sup>, criminal behavior is learned through social interaction with others and individuals become delinquents due to “definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law”<sup>52</sup>; this can also explain how pressures toward deviance from criminal groups could conflict with recommendations to conform from institutions of formal control.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the fact that members of the lower-classes (where most foreigners belong)

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<sup>46</sup> Wacquant L., “Penalization, Depoliticization, Racialization”, *cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>48</sup> Melossi D., “Security, Social Control, Democracy and Migration Within the ‘Constitution’ of the EU”, *cit.*, p. 14.

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<sup>49</sup> Wacquant L., “Penalization, Depoliticization, Racialization”, *cit.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>51</sup> Sutherland E.H., Cressey D.R., and Luckenbill D.F., *Principles of Criminology*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., Altamira Press, Lanham, 1992.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 89.

<sup>53</sup> Melossi D., *Controlling Crime, Controlling Society: Thinking about Crime in Europe and America*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 128-146.

often form micro-communities and sub-cultures, productive of a shared set of norms and detached from the dominant social structure, could illustrate, through studies on sub-cultures (for example, Topalli's research on hardcore and street offenders)<sup>54</sup> the high rates of crime perpetrated by these individuals, and, recognizing the differential association theory, how criminals construct a delinquent attitude as played out in the social structure. Going back to Wacquant's point, the foreignness handicap clearly proves that race plays a key role upon class in defining individuals' belonging to one class or another. In the fragile socio-economic structure driven by capitalism and consumerist values, the upper-class feels that it has to preserve its privileges and secure its identity (or what remains of its identity) from jeopardy by structurally excluding foreigners and including them in the hopeless lower strata.

The last point that is worth considering is an expansion of what has been stated so far and a tentative explanation of how, in the contemporary context that has been traced, these criminal dispositions can reproduce. Unlike Young, who argues – as already mentioned – that the boundaries between individuals of different classes have become blurred by the socio-economic structural changes that make members of the middle-class more dependent than before on the services provided by those in the lower-class to maintain their comfortable lives,<sup>55</sup> Wilson posits that ecologically concentrated poverty prevents some individuals from interacting with the dominant society so that they end up being

socially isolated.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, like Young's position, the social isolation theory recognizes that deprived individuals just adapt to constraints without internalizing the norms and practices produced in their new social setting (basically, they do not create a culture of poverty).<sup>57</sup> It is the endless question of the extent to which individuals can be detached from the dominant set of values and rules and adhere to an alternative social order. However, here the purpose is just that of noticing the role of structure on modeling a new social space for individuals that, going back to Veblen's theory, have been placed historically on the lower-classes by coercion: a direct one, since nowadays they are not provided with money and education (which in a society based on success are what weapons represented in previous historical periods: a status symbol), and an indirect one, since the higher classes place themselves in the position of ruling and molding concepts of social status and personal success. To complete such a picture, and referring to Bourdieu, in contemporary stratified capitalist societies, the hegemonic classes retain power by means of their privilege over the cultural capital that predetermines what people can achieve in their lives; disadvantaged people's inequalities are reproduced culturally by social and educational institutions that work to preserve the supremacy cultural system of the ruling class.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Wilson W.J., *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990.

<sup>57</sup> Sampson R.J., and Wilson W.J. "Toward a Theory of Race, Crime and Urban Inequality", in Hagan J. and Peterson R.D. (eds.), *Crime and Inequality*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1995, pp. 37-54.

<sup>58</sup> Bourdieu P., and Passeron J.-C., *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, transl. by Nice R., Sage Publications, London, 1990.

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<sup>54</sup> Topalli V., "When Being Good is Bad", *cit.*

<sup>55</sup> Young J., *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, *cit.*

Thus, particular strata of the population are ontologically ghettoized, as contemporary structural forces are constraining and orienting agents to pre-determinate individual, social, and economic ends. As if they are living in a modern society based on an extreme vision of social Darwinism, some people are regarded as not fit enough to survive in a market society that demands more than what it can produce. Many lives, thus, are left free to derail and crash, and the illusion of equality and disadvantages' counterbalance is generated, even just for one moment, by what, according to Thomas and Znaniecky, is the only alternative to money and education, namely violence.<sup>59</sup>

## 7. Conclusion.

Consumerism is a prominent feature of contemporary societies, as it forms a conspicuous part of individuals' experiences in their everyday lives. Analyzing the culture of consumption, however, means contextualizing and explaining it for the effects that it imposes on structure and agency, being both an instrument for the dominant classes, throughout history, to create social status and retain power on the basis of that, and a multiform concept that diverse agencies define in different ways. Undeniably, consumer cultures promote a need for needs and a desire for desires. However, the first end of those needs and desires is the achievement of happiness, and, as Baudrillard and Girard show, their main power is the social meaning attributed to them, so as to state that money, success, and power are employed by individuals as merely a medium to

reach social and individual ends. Having examined consumerism as such, in exploring the relationship between consumerist values and crime, however, one must notice a path of continuity with earlier socio-historical moments drawn by Colquhoun's consumerist society: rational criminals and social prevention measures that connect to recent market and, mainly, responsabilizing and preventative societies, as illustrated by contemporary criminologists such as Currie and Garland.

Nevertheless, the central point of that relationship is based on the role that consumerism plays as one piece of the complex jigsaw puzzle of late modernity, whose socio-economic structures are tightly connected with the recent developments and changes outlined by Garland. It clearly emerges that an insecure and precarious middle-class perceiving an increased victimization and a new experience of crime as normal and new punitive policies are aggravating the criminalization and favoring the process of otherness of the structurally excluded under-class (where foreigners very often belong just as a consequence of their foreignness). These outcast strata of the population are victims of those same dreams that market societies sell without equipping them with the means (cultural, economic, and social) to realize their ambitions; it is such a strain that represents, as Merton and Young suggest, a reason for their violent reactions. Furthermore, their turn to crime is related strictly to that complex of contemporary socio-economic conditions in which consumerism plays a significant (but not exclusive) role, and it can be explained as both as an expressive way to reassert killed identities, and an escape from deprivation and misrecognition. Eventually, it is

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<sup>59</sup> Thomas W.I., and, Znaniecky F., *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958.

mainly the ghettoization of their bodies and souls – as a result of the macro-structural forces and socio-political dynamics outlined throughout this paper – that furthers violence, the reproduction of criminal behavior, and delinquent practices.

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