Hegel and consumer culture: an indigenous perspective

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Abstract: Much of the literature on consumer culture looks into how consumer identities are formed and distributed as a result of marketplace interactions. Consumer researchers assume that, because of its dominant position in society, the marketplace is 'the' source from which consumers form their identities. Based on these assumptions researchers have found that consumers gravitate towards the marketplace and its abundant resources to form their personal and collective identities. The basic underlying assumption is that consumers are passive agents who respond in predictable ways to market practices. In this way consumer culture appears to produce a homogeneous society that is easily managed and structured by the dominant societal entities. What, then, are the alternatives, if any, that consumers have at their disposal? And are marketplace prescriptions the only reliable sources of identity construction? This paper addresses the flaws of marketplace assumptions and their consequences and explores the notion of an alternative lens through which to view the consumer landscape.

Keywords: consumer society, culture, marketing

Background

Much of the literature on consumer culture looks into how consumer identities are formed and distributed as a result of marketplace interactions. For instance, Arnould and Thompson (2005) state that "the market produces certain kinds of consumer positions that consumers can choose to inhabit", and that "they are enacting and personalizing cultural scripts that align their identities with the structural imperatives of a consumer-driven global economy" (p.871). One can clearly see the hegemonic relationship that exists between the dominant culture of the marketplace and the dominated culture of the consumer.

Consumer researchers assume that, because of its dominant position in society, the marketplace is *the* source from which consumers form their identities. Based on these assumptions researchers have found that consumers gravitate towards the marketplace and its abundant resources to form their personal and collective identities (Belk & Costa, 1998; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Even those consumers seeking for "personal sovereignty" are forced to do so from within the confines of the marketplace (Holt, 2002).

The underlying assumption is that consumers are passive agents who respond in predictable ways to market practices. Commodities are seen as the primary means of appropriating meaning to culture and society (Baudrillard, 1970; Habermas, 1985; Murray & Ozanne, 1991). Horkheimer and Adorno (1996) go so far as to say that these "culture industries" reduce culture to a commodity. In this way consumer culture appears to produce a homogeneous society that is easily managed and structured by the dominant societal entities. What, then, are the alternatives, if any, that consumers have at their disposal? And are marketplace prescriptions the only reliable sources of identity construction?

This paper addresses the flaws of marketplace assumptions and their consequences and explores the notion of an alternative lens through which to view the consumer landscape. What follows then is more a proposal for a new paradigm of thinking for consumer research than a thorough analysis and discussion of research methodology and theory development. The conceptual development of the paper is intended to question the status quo and provoke discussion and development of the thoughts and ideas contained within. The theory that emerges in this report is that recognition of one's identity is the result of overcoming the demands of the dominant consumer culture through the process of creative production.

Introduction

First of all, though, acknowledgement must be made of my own personal struggle with identity and journey towards self-consciousness, for this acts as the basis for what is to follow. My own experiences display the hegemonic relationship between indigenous cultures and the overriding consumer culture within which we are all embroiled, albeit from a purely microcosmic perspective. Delineating these experiences from the outset will help to provide context for the philosophical development to follow.

Being of Maori descent, I have always felt a strong spiritual link to my tribal-affiliated land (papa kāinga) and the 'people of the land' (Tangata Whenua). This was probably cultivated by the many instances of extended family gatherings (such as family reunions; musical jam sessions; large family feasts during important occasions, such as birthdays and anniversaries; and 'tangis', or funerals). These numerous instances of familial gatherings often took place on 'marae' (traditional Maori meetinghouses) or other significant sites linked to the local tribal land. These experiences also acted as media for passing on cultural meanings and traditions.

However, growing up in a major urban city, I also felt constantly confused and unsure of my place in the surrounding mainstream society which seemed to challenge the concept of self I had attained from my childhood. Being geographically distanced from my extended family and tribal region I found myself being increasingly bombarded with cultural stereotypes that conflicted with my own experience, and modern contemporary concepts of identity formation. School replaced the 'marae' and with it the traditional means of cultural transference. The more familial expressions of enjoyment were replaced with temporal objects and their accompanying immediate gratification. All these things combined to create a confusing environment from which I had hoped to forge my own identity.

During this time I felt like a piece of already-hardened clay in the hands of a mainstream culture intent on shaping me into a more socially acceptable form. For me, mainstream media appeared to portray Maori culture as a romantic and savage society in need of civilisation. In school, any discussion about Maori, and other indigenous cultures, was limited to the period of colonisation which, more often than not, depicted these cultures as savage and brutal and always in the past. This portrayal of indigenous culture did not resonate with my experience of a far more rich and contributive culture that was still very much alive. A soft piece of clay would have inevitably conformed to the mainstream view of indigenous culture.

Being somewhat hardened, though, I found myself inadvertently resisting efforts made by society to transform my perception of identity to reflect societal norms and, thus, merely mirror the actions of the dominant forces in society (e.g. educational institutions, government agencies, and corporate organisations etc.). At school, for instance, despite being placed in a 'streamed' class for the supposed more intelligent students, I would resist being labelled as such through simple acts of non-compliance. For some unknown reason I felt I did not belong in this society and so I reacted in this way. Little did I know but these actions were not only in defiance of external forces, they were equally driven by internal forces.

Added to the external pressure to conform to society was an opposing internal force pushing me to express my own sense of identity. When I came to this realisation I became disillusioned with myself because I felt I was unable to express my cultural heritage. This was partly due to not having learnt my native language and not having learnt 'tikanga Maori' (traditional Maori customs), a result of my geographic displacement. Accordingly, I drew myself away from being associated with social norms and from being what I thought was 'Maori'.

Ironically, this withdrawal only resulted in my abstract identity being tossed to and 'fro by the overwhelming tide of mainstream influences and markers of identity. For example, my acts of non-compliance at school only fuelled the perception of Maori as less intelligent and lazier than the

mainstream. Furthermore, by withdrawing myself I gave up any right to contribute in a more positive manner to my own culture and thus perpetuate the misunderstanding apparent in mainstream perspectives of indigenous cultures.

It wasn't until I placed myself in extremely unfamiliar territory that I was forced to question everything I ever knew about myself and my own identity, and was able to come to a realisation of who I really am. By embarking on a mission for my church to French Polynesia I placed myself in a foreign culture and was forced to learn two totally foreign languages. The struggle that ensued brought about a greater awareness of who I am because I had to actively recreate my own identity by absorbing and mediating the foreign aspects of another culture and language. In the overcoming of this struggle for recognition I was able to transcend my previous abstract identity and create a true consciousness of self.

This journey to true consciousness is accurately described by Hegel in his work, *"Phenomenology of Spirit"* (1977) which addresses the concepts of recognition and consciousness through the master/slave analogy. I will now outline these concepts and then apply them to an indigenous perspective. Following that, I will propose an application of this philosophy to consumer culture and how citizens may be defined in alternative ways.

Hegel's concept of recognition

According to Hegel, desire for recognition is seen as the motivating force of the living subject culminating in satisfaction. This desire is gratified when its object's independence is nullified to the point of being consumed by the subject. However, due to the object being consumed, desire only achieves a temporary gratification and, thus, the process is continuously perpetuated in order to fill the remaining void. To avoid the short-lived nature of this recognition process the subject must allow the object to remain in a state of independence. This condition grants the object its own self-consciousness and the freedom to either submit to, or resist, the subject's desire. In Hegel's words, "self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness" (in Lauer, 1976).

Recognition is a two-pronged approach involving a doubling of consciousness in an initial encounter with the other expressed as self-othering and self-loss; consciousness's ambivalence of needing, but not being able to govern, the recognition of the other; and a relinquishing of coercion by surrendering to the notion of individual interdependence. The approach is two-pronged in the sense that each party plays the dual role of being recognized and of recognizing. The conclusion to this process, according to Hegel, is that the two parties "recognize themselves as reciprocally recognizing each other" (ibid, p.104). This transformational process encourages a 'we' perspective rather than an 'I', a conceptual transition from 'I am *being*', to 'I am *becoming*', to 'I *am*', that requires a reduplication of self and an association with opposing 'selves'. Only through this unity and reciprocity can a complete consciousness of freedom be attained.

Master/slave analogy

Having outlined Hegel's concept of recognition we can now address its application to consumers' lived experiences. The framework employed here follows Hegel's approach by retelling the master/slave analogy while highlighting expressions of self-othering and self-loss encountered in an initial "culture shock" (Toffler, 1970) experience.

Self-certainty exists in the minds of each opposing party but neither certainty can be confirmed as real or authentic until it is objectified in the other. To say that self-certainty exists in itself does not mean to say that there are no other self-certainties but that they do not matter to each other. Each self-certainty remains independent in the sphere in which it resides. Each is merely an object to the other and thus not a 'self'. Neither has objectified itself because to do that would imply that one is dependent on the other. In this state each remains unobjectified and, thus, unrecognised by other recognised selves. It is

apparent, then, that one can only gain true consciousness of self through the process of self-objectification.

At first, though, self-objectification is simply abstracted from each self-certainty mediated by a recognition of the other. Each party then engages in a battle to prove its own self-certainty independent of the other. If not, one's inner conviction of freedom and consciousness remains an abstract exclusivity. The motivation behind the struggle is the conflicting desire to regain the perceived loss of self, manifested by the presence of the other, and the desire to draw one's self from out of the other. This struggle provides the platform from which a decision between life and death must be made if one is to attain full consciousness and freedom.

The manifestation of this freedom can only be attained by expressing the self as an indeterminate entity, unfettered by the abstract recognition of the other. This freedom can be expressed by quashing any opposition to one's self-certainty by the other, or, in other words, by seeking its utter destruction. In this life and death struggle, death is conceivable for either party. However, the destruction of the other only serves to nullify one's own existence. For, what is done to the other is done to the self.

Everything discussed up to this point now converges on the one pivotal decision that the two consciousnesses must consider. Yet, this decision is affected by what "type" of consciousness each brings to the table and by their attitude toward life. For one consciousness, there is a greater desire to assert its independence than there is to live. Faced with the decision between life and freedom, he will choose freedom and risk his own life to obtain the desired recognition. On the other hand, the other party values life more than freedom and will sacrifice his recognition in order to survive. Here, then, the master/slave dialectic sets in motion the process of recognition through the mediation of opposing consciousnesses.

The alternatives to a master/slave dialectic can never lead to consciousness. For if two parties, both valuing independence more than life, face each other, death will result for one, and where there is death there is no recognition. Conversely, when two who are unwilling to interact face each other, neither is able to act, therefore, there is no mediation. Where there is neither recognition, nor mediation, there is no consciousness. Hegel further acknowledges the need for a deficient recognition process in saying that "there is no self-affirmation without negating the life of the other, and there is no negating the life of another without risking one's own life" (in Lauer, 1976, p.105).

Thus, In order for consciousness to be achieved one must struggle, and to struggle, one must risk life, i.e. the abstract self certainty one has of the self, and not the biological life. An individual does not gain independence simply by virtue of being alive. One must move through the transitional phase of *becoming* by neglecting the "I" to create a "You and Me" which leads one on to the "We". Only by risking the inauthentic "I am being" can one move on to the "I am becoming" phase of the authentic "I am" conclusion. Thus, one must negate the purely biological sense of being in order to become truly human. It would seem then, based on this fact, that the master is the winner because he is the only one willing to risk life. However, one should not be fooled into thinking that these initial conditions will result in a seemingly obvious conclusion.

The master has had his self-certainty recognised in the slave and is no longer an abstract exclusivity. The slave, having sacrificed 'selfhood' for 'thinghood', is now held in thrall to the master for his own self-consciousness by working on subjugated nature. However, the joy of this triumph is only experienced through the 'consuming' of things that the slave produces for the master. The master has had no hand in the 'producing' aspect of the things that he enjoys, and so they become for him merely an object to be consumed. The creative process of becoming a true consciousness must be attained and not merely given. Therefore, by subjugating the slave, the master effectively relinquishes the transformational aspect of 'producing' and thus consigns himself to a constant state of being that has no progression.

The master initially believes himself to have coerced the slave into submission. The slave then becomes an abstract negation, an inessential entity whose meagre existence is erroneously perceived to confirm the self-certainty of the master. The error comes in that the master's claim to independent consciousness is dependent on the recognition of an abstract negation. In his apparent victory, the master consigns himself to virtual anonymity. On the other hand, the slave, by choosing life over freedom, now forces himself to view the master, not so much as something to be negated, but more so as something to be understood. He realizes that by choosing to live he must also accept a life that now includes the other.

The slave's transcendence of abstract recognition is achieved by overcoming one's own desire for recognition. This is derived, not out of fear, but out of a conscious realization that, through death, neither party can attain full consciousness. Accordingly, he values life more than freedom. Consequently, the only conceivable course of action is to surrender one's desire for recognition to a state of nothingness, or absolute negativity. For instance, the slave is now forced to construct a totally new concept of self, having relinquished his own self-certainty. As such, everything the slave previously held to be certain is shaken to its roots causing a revival to regain consciousness that he is yet unaware of.

The slave is now forced to work on nature to produce the joy-giving fruits of success for the master. This is not so much that the master has coerced the slave into action but that, having renounced the desire for recognition, the slave has no other means of gaining consciousness than to apply himself to the task of servitude. However, the slave soon learns that it is only through the emancipatory nature of work that he can gain full consciousness.

The master, on the other hand, consigns himself to an endless torment being unable to gain true consciousness. This frustrating state of being drives him to continually oppress the slave in whom he mistakenly believes to be, at once, the reason for his depressing state, and his means of achieving consciousness. Ironically though, this perpetual destructive cycle of domination only serves to keep the master in a fixed state of 'being' while providing the slave with the means to achieve his own consciousness.

True consciousness and freedom is achieved by overcoming absolute negativity, which the slave learns is essential to achieving absolute positivity, or true self-consciousness. This does not advocate an inversion of the master/slave relationship but, rather, encourages the slave to work on nature from which he is able to negate absolute negativity leading to absolute positivity.

The slave comes to a true indication of his own being by seeking unity with the master. Thus, in overcoming opposition at this higher level the slave is in fact overcoming the self, and entering the path to true awareness. At a lower level, by opposing the abstract consciousness of the master, the slave feels a detachment and will thus only seek its negation. Yet, this abstract negation only serves to invert the master/slave dialectic and thus perpetuates the unsustainable, deficient recognition process. Therefore, one limits their chances of attaining the authentic self when they engage in lower, more abstract, levels of consciousness.

What becomes obvious from Hegel's tale is the need to overcome coercion and a desire to seek unity with another independent self-consciousness. Such reciprocity is not 'slavish', "but constitutes an enlarged mentality which becomes embodied in institutions of freedom and justice" (Williams, 2001). Only then can both interdependent parties transcend abstract self-certainty and achieve self-consciousness. For, as Hegel suggests, "self-awareness can only spring from the consciousness of that which is other to the self" (Desmond, McDonagh & O'Donohoe, 2001)

An indigenous perspective

Hegel's master/slave dialectic frames the relationship between marketplace and consumer in a more complex manner than current literature appears to portray. The master mentality would see the

consumer as a passive agent, whereas Hegel's tale depicts a consumer who is more creative. Evidence of this can be seen in Scott's (1985) work which goes a long way to prove the "fallaciousness" of describing the "quiescence" and "overt complicity" of minority groups in "exploitative situations as predictable outcomes of the hegemonic control exercised by dominant ideologies" (Sivaramakrishnan, 2005). By recognising an alternative indigenous perspective to consumer actions one may begin to see how marketplace prescriptions do not necessarily result in predictable outcomes. With a change of mindset, marketers may start to engage in more creative, sustainable relationships with consumers.

A paradigm shift in thinking would, according to Hegel, require a foregoing of many coercive intentions apparent in marketing mentality. For instance, Frank (1997) asserts that marketers have consistently mirrored countercultural movements with their own fake version as a way to nullify its effects on the institutions themselves and to achieve its own ends – otherwise known as "Co-optation theory". Peñaloza and Price (1993) claim that acts of resistance, such as wearing ripped jeans, are appropriated by marketers as identity markers for membership in a certain group of consumers. By viewing consumers as mere objects to be manipulated for one's own interests is a destructive process that will not lead to true consciousness. Therefore, attempts must be made to overcome such coercive tendencies.

Marketers can overcome coercion by viewing themselves as consumers or, as Hegel would suggest, by objectifying oneself in the recognised consciousness of the other. This would promote a more human approach to building relationships with consumers. As Wolf (1969) points out, "the decisive factor in making a peasant rebellion possible lies in the relation of the peasantry to the field of power which surrounds it" (p.290), therefore by working on the relationship one may move towards unity to create more transformational associations.

Many indigenous peoples practice rituals of cooperation and reciprocity allowing them to lessen the likelihood of disagreements and to move forward together. For example, the American Indian wampum belt was seen by outsiders as a form of money that Indians used in transactional relationships. However, the truth, according to John Mohawk (Barreiro, 1988) is that they are:

> …a symbol of a people's successful accomplishment of coming to one mind about how they were going to go on from there in a permanent relationship of peace and tranquillity between the two sides. The wampum said that all that had transpired to create the conflict had been resolved and all that could be done by human beings using their clearest thinking to create an environment for the future generations had been put together in that belt (p.ix).

Protocol requires both parties to clear negative emotions before they can think clearly and begin negotiations. Further evidence can be seen in the symbolic inhaling of two individual consciousnesses in the Maori custom of 'hongi' which encourages each party to envelop themselves in each other's 'being'. The Hegelian concept of recognition is obvious in such practices.

Hegel's master/slave dialectic forces a revival in the slave to regain a sense of consciousness. Such a revival is underway in many indigenous cultures. For instance, the stigma of being Maori in New Zealand, created by mainstream society which associates Maori with low socio-economic status and high incidence of crime, is progressively being overcome by initiatives within the community encouraging more instances and means of expressing what it means to be Maori for those who associate with this ethnic minority. These initiatives *may* create a greater sense of unity that *may* further develop a transcendence of what mainstream society defines as being 'Maori'. However, transcendence is dependent on what one is essentially trying to overcome.

Deliberate use is made of the word "*may*" because transcendence is dependent on which 'level' of recognition one is seeking to overcome. As Hegel's analogy suggests, if one seeks to merely oppose the master, the only thing that is achieved is abstract negation. In this sense, if Maori simply seek to overcome the abstract recognition displayed by the dominant ideology, it will only result in an inversion by replacing one prescribed identity with another. If this is carried out, neither party will

move from abstract self-certainty to true consciousness because there is still a deficient recognition in place, only this time the slave has replaced the master.

A further consequence of low level opposition is that two consciousnesses end up mirroring each other because they essentially become the self-same abstract entity. According to Hegel, each self-certainty cancels itself out and becomes one and the same because "mere self-assertion is self-defeating" (in Lauer, p.103). Hence, it is a possibility that the self-asserted consciousness becomes just what it has defeated. The consequence of such a state of consciousness defeats the initial purpose of self-asserting consciousnesses.

Extending this concept of inversion into a marketplace society, consumer resistance that merely targets a marketing institution will result in a negation of one of the two entities. Either the institution submits to the resistors' demands, or the resistors' demands will be neglected. Such a course of action will not transcend either party's abstract self-certainty. There needs to be some form of mediation between the two opposing identities for unity to replace coercion.

Moreover, if indigenous peoples were to replace mainstream society we would expect to see a perpetuation of institutional domination. This is a concept worth further investigation and evidence, especially in the business domain which is a purely competitive system producing simple win/loss results. Relationships formed within a competitive system should only result in an inversion similar to the master/slave dialectic, and are thus unsustainable in their self-perpetuating nature.

Discussion

Basically, what this report proposes is a paradigm shift in thinking with regards to the scope and nature of consumer society and how the elements contained within it are identified. The current perception seems to be that marketing institutions and consumers interact forming a consumer culture, which, in turn, is merely a subset of the dominant consumer society. Furthermore, culture is viewed as being defined and influenced by the more dominant marketing institution. Hegel's concept of recognition leading to consciousness frames this relationship as a master/slave dialectic with marketing institutions exhibiting a master mentality and culture displaying a slave mentality.

Hegel's analogy allows us to develop a model that may reflect the dialectical nature of the market-culture relationship. For instance, the Mi-C-c model (see Figure 1) reflects the process through which each element within the consumer society asserts its identity.

The Mi-C-c model is derived from an understanding of Hegel's master/slave dialectic being applied to the current view of how identity is formed within consumer society. The model displays the interaction between "Mi" (marketing institutions) and "C" (culture/consumer) with "c" (commodity) mediating the feedback loop to "Mi". This triangular relationship is what constitutes a consumer culture with the wider consumer society asserting a major influence upon all elements within it.

Mi initiates encounters with "C" resulting in transactional relationships. Dominance is assumed on the part of "Mi" as it feels it has persuaded "C", which is seeking its own identity, to engage in these transactions. In return, "C" reciprocates this recognition by producing "c" which is in turn consumed by Mi thus fulfilling the recognition process. Through the relinquishing of its *selfhood* in favour of mere *thinghood*, "C" recognises "Mi" which retains its independence. "C" also retains an aspect of independence in that it is recognised by "Mi", albeit as a thing. This begs the question, if "C" is conscious of "Mi" as an independent consciousness but not of itself as the same, is the independent consciousness of "Mi" authentic?
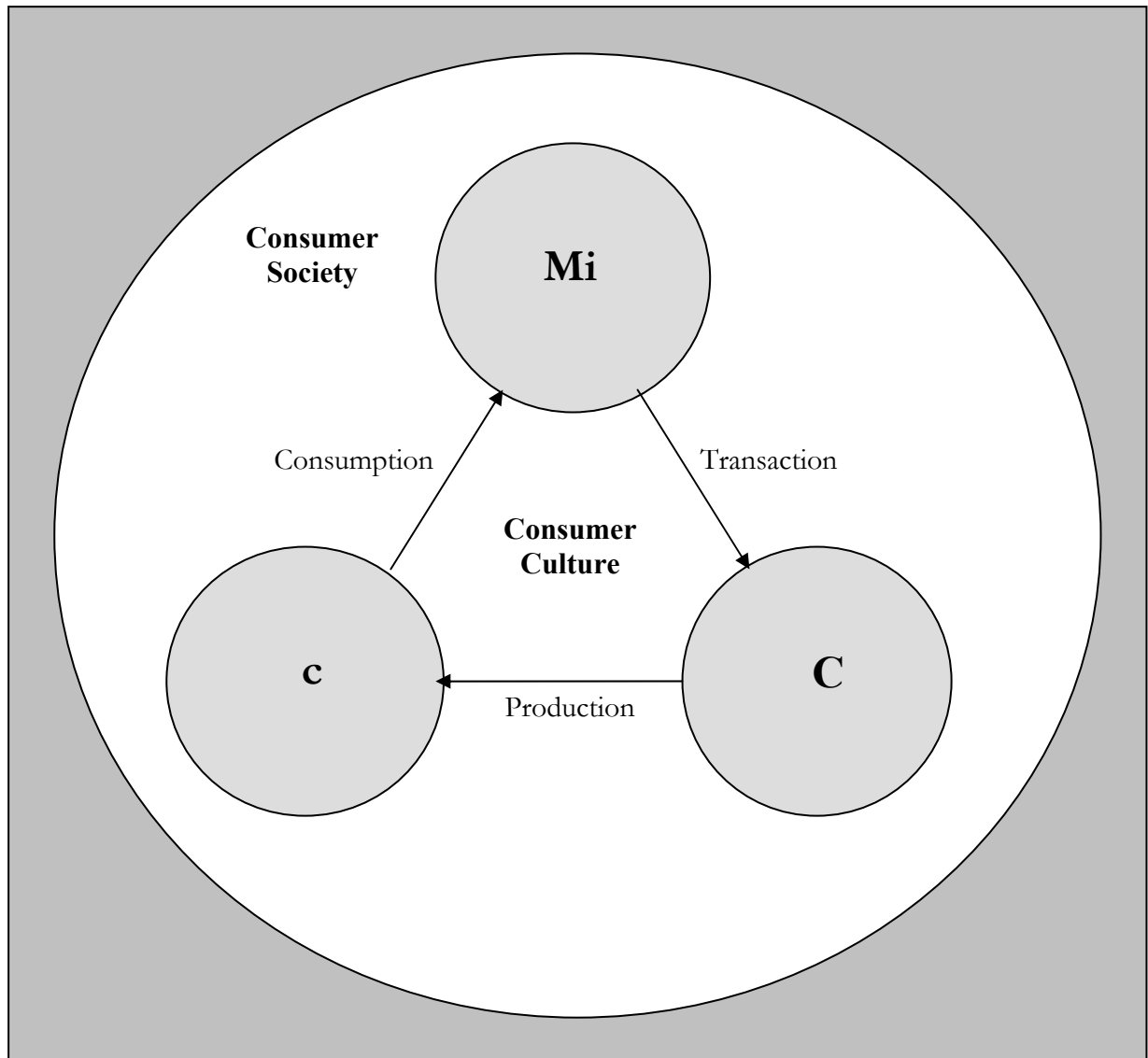
Figure 1. Mi-C-c model of consumer society

Clearly, it is not. "Mi" finds enjoyment in "c" and, thus, it is merely a consumer. Yet, "Mi's" enjoyment of "c" is dependent on "C" to produce it. Thus, through subjection, "C" develops a more significant relationship to "c" than does "Mi". Subsequently, the "c-Mi" interaction represents true consumer culture (see Figure 2), whereas the "C-c" relationship constitutes a producer culture (see Figure 3). Consumer culture is no culture at all given that it promotes no development. On the other hand, the creative aspect of a producer culture represents true culture in that it *cultivates*. Hence, the only real, authentic identity is that of "C" which represents a producer culture.

Through the creative mediation process of production, "C" has the means of negating the otherness (c) of "Mi" literally in its own hands. "Mi", however, has limited itself to negating that which is merely given (c), thus consigning itself to a state of perpetual *being*. Consequently, "C" overcomes the otherness of "Mi", and so is able to overcome mere independence of the self by creating a relationship to "Mi" on a higher level. As such, "C" returns to itself leaving "Mi" free (along with its dependence on "c") and, thus, assuring its own freedom.
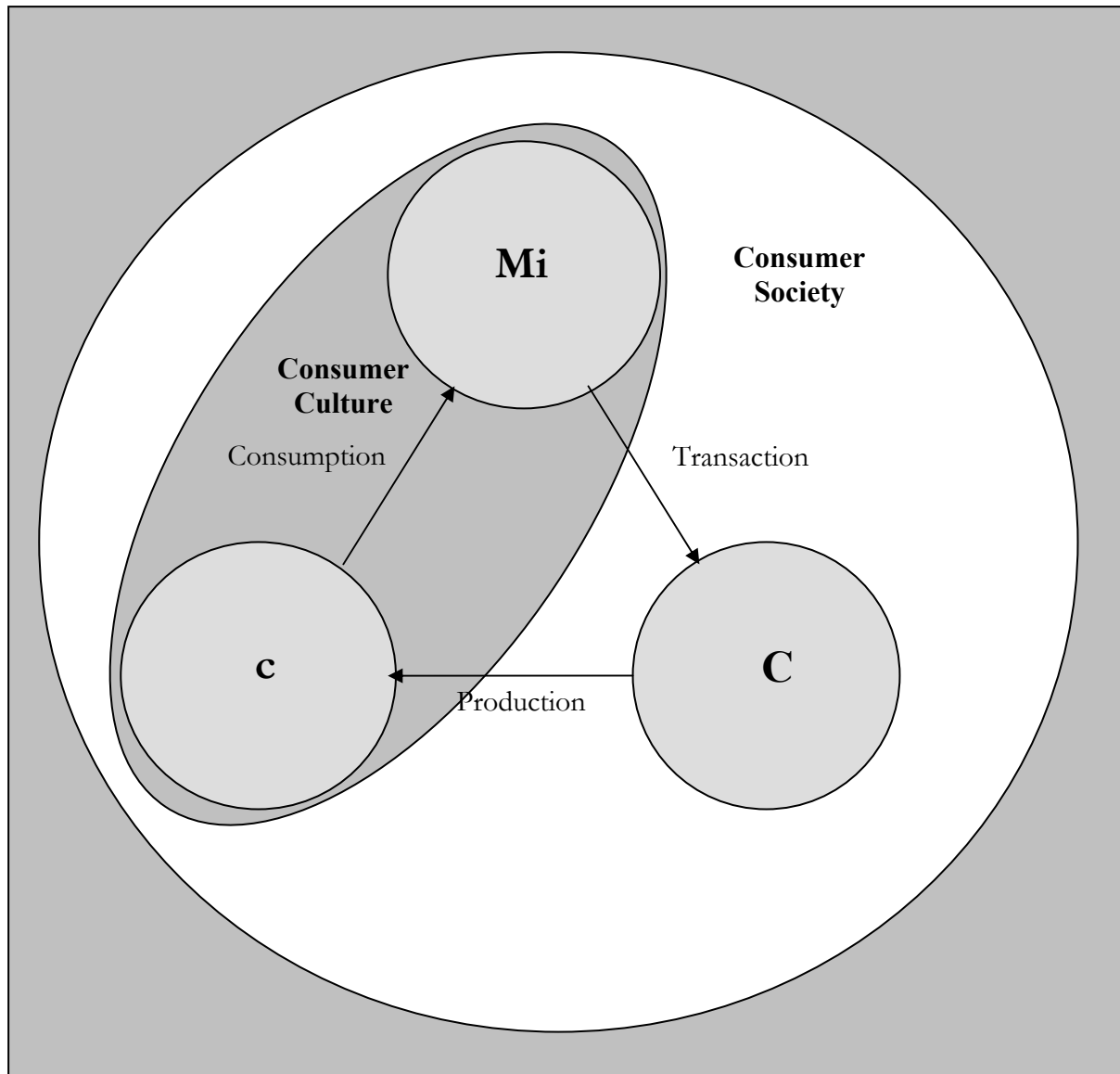
Figure 2. True consumer culture

An Hegelian outlook on this marketplace-culture dialectic encourages more mediation to occur between the two entities. Such a focus on mediation will transcend the notion of mere self-independence by encouraging mutual interdependence while allowing each independent consciousness to emerge. Accordingly, all participating entities provide input to *producing* synergistic results thus creating a 'Synergistic Society'.
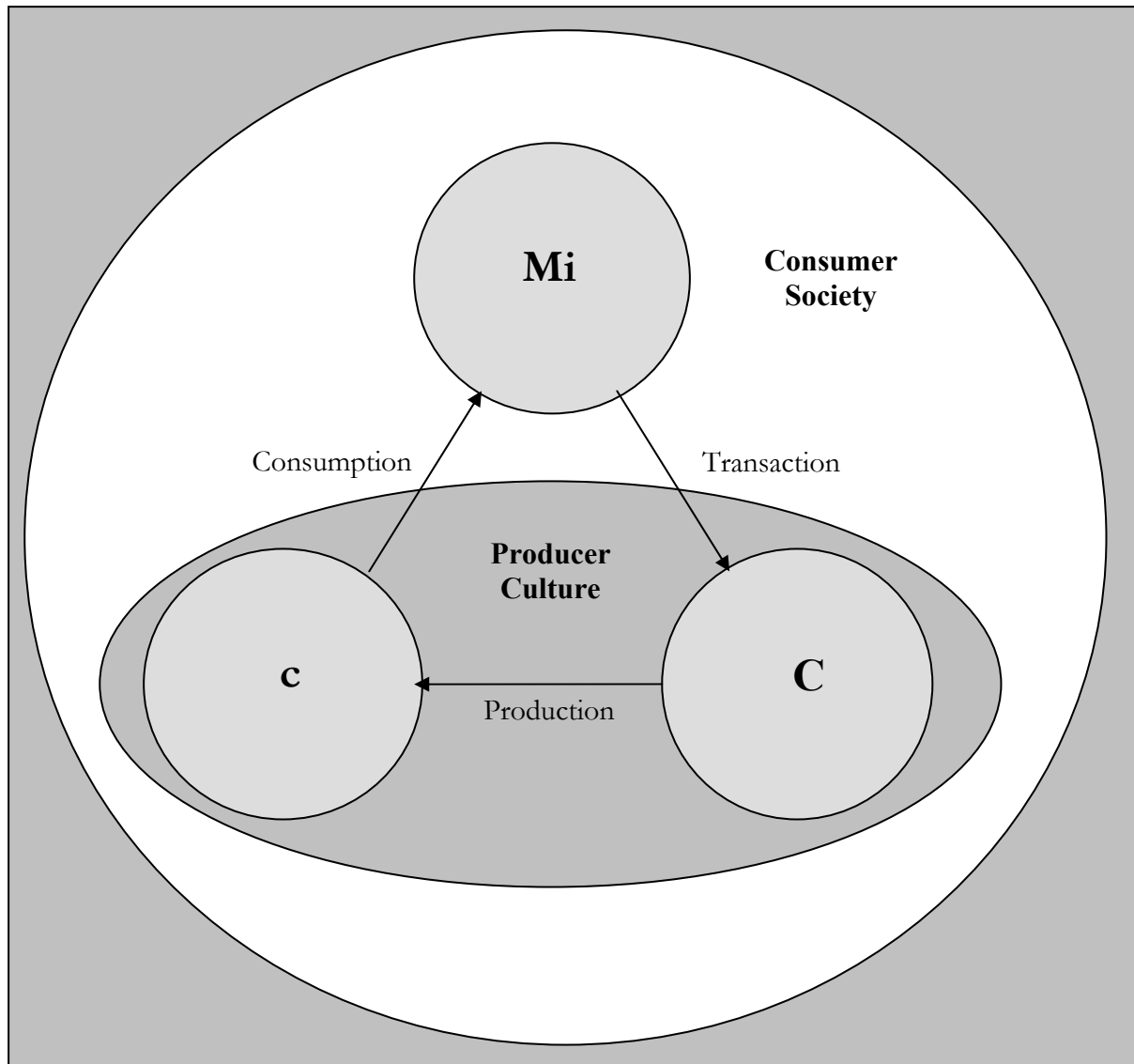
Figure 3. Producer culture

The MaCc (Marketing agents-Culture-commodity) model (see Figure 4) provides the blueprint from which a synergistic society may be formed. The change from "Mi" to "Ma" reflects the requirement for "Mi" to objectify itself so as to be able to then subjectify itself in the consciousness of its object – "C". In this process the more human "Ma" is able to engage in more significant relationships with "C" and "c". There is no longer a consumption culture but a "mediation culture" which sees no need in consuming another identity's consciousness because that would result in an abstract negation of self. The domain of mediation in which all three entities converge constitutes the producer culture from which each individual entity develops its own independent self-consciousness.
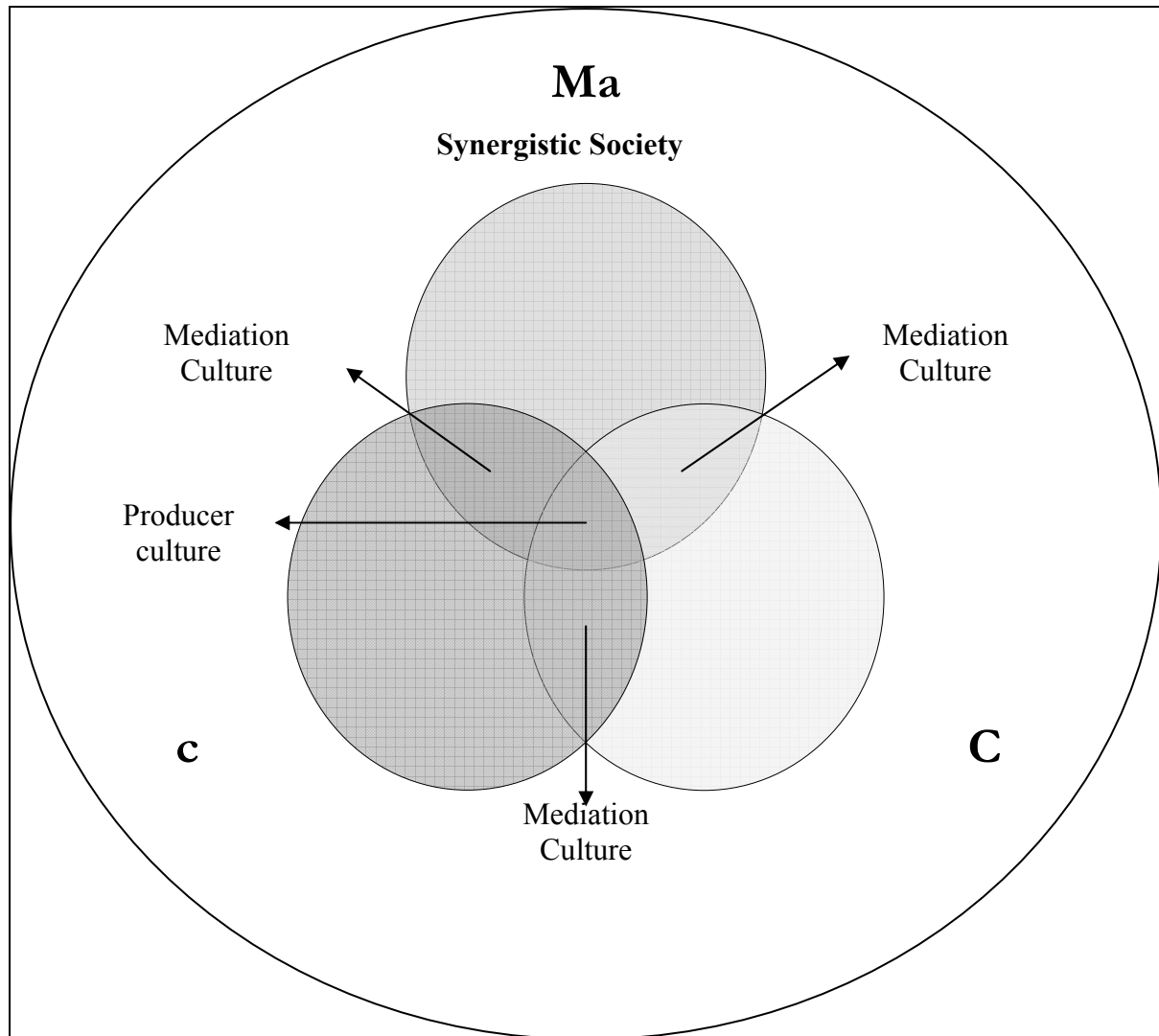
Figure 4. MaCc model of a synergistic society

What needs to be developed and studied in more detail is the mediation process and what is actually involved. Only a few examples of mediatory practices from an indigenous perspective have been mentioned in this report, i.e. the wampum belt, and the "hongi". To see if this model is actually effective and viable further examples must be discovered and then applied in order to produce valid results.

Conclusion

The satisfaction that comes with gaining consciousness of one's true self only leads to a desire for others to experience the same joy. Hegel's analogy does not encourage individual emancipation but a mediation of two consciousnesses that realise the dependence they have on each other to assert their own independence. This seemingly paradoxical conclusion requires both parties to engage in a mutual recognition process leading to true freedom.

Thus, for indigenous cultures to gain recognised independence they must not merely seek to override the institutions of domination that surround them but must work with them to create a mutually-sustaining relationship. This may take some time and much opposition but the rewards far outweigh the struggle. For the joy of consciousness can only be enjoyed with other independent self-consciousnesses.

Finally, it is hoped that what is touched upon here may lead to further developments that may enrich and encourage more mutually-sustaining relationships. By seeking to understand each other may we move from a desire to produce a homogenous culture that is structured to ensure manageability to allowing recognition of one's identity through the process of creative production. Such a shift in focus requires a corresponding shift in thinking for as Einstein once said, "the significant problems we face today cannot be overcome by the same level of thinking that created them".

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