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Newness: same old song?

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The love for newness did not begin with modern consumer society. It has long been capitalism's primary engine and has been central to how it imagines the market. At present, its environmental impact is disastrous.

Reviewed: Jeanne Guien, *Le Désir de nouveautés. L'obsolescence au cœur du capitalisme (XV^e^-XXI^e^ siècle)* (The desire for the new: obsolescence as capitalism's essence from the fifteenth to the twenty-first century). Paris, La Découverte, 2025, 352 p., 23 €.

"Galeries Lafayette: 130 years of newness!" "Total: Pioneers for 100 years." "Black Market: it's not brand new, it's original!" As these slogans suggest, newness is alive and well. It is also a good sales pitch – even if it depends on tautologies and absurd contradictions. Yet "how did claims about newness become a commercial strategy?" (p. 8). This is the vast undertaking that the philosopher Jeanne Guien, a specialist in the history of consumerism, has set out to address in her new book.

The *longue durée* of newness

Guien begins her book with this statement: "This book considers newness as constructed in commercial discourse" (p. 7). Thanks to economic sociology, it is known that the value of goods does not exist prior to exchange, and that exchange is

constructed by commercial discourse. In this "economy of qualities,"[1] newness has made it possible to move an enormous amount of goods. Newness, according to Guien, is the meeting of *primacy* and *transience,* which makes it an extraordinarily effective commercial strategy, inspiring both curiosity and urgency. Commercial discourse thus values "neophile" behavior (from the Greek words *neos,* or "new," and *phileo,* "to love" or "desire") even as it devalues "neophobe" attitudes, reducing opposition to "newness" to a preference for the past. Neophilia has become the cornerstone of supply-side economics and capitalism's inherent tendency to overproduce, as well as the consumerism that is constitutive of the market economy.

Guien thus lays bare how the commercial construction of newness is the result of a long history, which we must now begin to assess. Reexamining this past will end a twofold amnesia: one that leads us to concoct newness out of nothing, even where it does not exist, and one that leads us to downplay the fact that obsolescence has been capitalism's essential and deliberate strategy since its origins, as if the "desire for the new" were a universal and timeless disposition. Guien tears newness away from a convenient timelessness. In doing so, she draws on industrial and business history, which helps us to understand the practices and discourse of economic actors, and philosophy, which provides analytical tools. Without claiming to be exhaustive and while relying on a wide range of sources — packages, catalogues, advertisements, and grey literature of commercial actors and media commentators — her analysis offers a rich panorama of six centuries of neophile discourse. Fortunately— for such is the risk with a project of such breadth— Guien is always attentive to differences between contexts, which she is careful not to conflate. From the fifteenth century to the present, the history of neophilia dovetails with the better-known history of capitalism.

From "far-flung trade" to ultra-fast fashion

According to Guien, the origins of the commercial use of newness lies in colonial trade, described as "far-flung trade." While the expeditions of the fifteenth century resulted in the import of no so-called "exotic" goods, these projects were informed by a powerful colonial imaginary— consisting of assured abundance and the discovery of marvelous things— that whet the appetites of European elites.

[1] Michel Callon, Cécile Méadel, and Vololona Rabeharisoa, "L'économie des qualités," in Michel Callon et al., *Sociologie des agencements marchands. Textes choisis*, Paris, Presses des Mines, 2013, p. 143-170.

During the early modern period, it was thanks to this conquest of newness that "exoticism" and "curiosity" were employed by merchant-adventurers and other tradesmen to open upper-class markets to colonial goods (including such foods as sugar and cacao and clothing). These commercial descriptions also served to justify the conquest and appropriation of resources, to obscure the brutal asymmetry of colonial exchange, and to ensure that the West had a monopoly over the taste for novelty.

By the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries, novelty gave way to "innovation," which legitimated the demands of capitalism as it entered its industrial phase. Guien reminds us that the mechanization of workshops was, due to its effects on employment, conflictual from the outset. Take the case of Luddism, which appeared in England in the 1810s. It was in this period marked by debates over industrial machinery that the obsolescence of the means of production was theorized and promoted by the polymath Charles Babbage, who in 1832 said that "new improved models" could devalue existing machines far more than wear-and-tear. This neophile discourse, which was destined to have a long life, was constantly reinvented. For example, Moore's law, first postulated in 1965 by an American engineer, predicted that innovation would grow exponentially and that its obsolescence could be planned. Yet such models overlook the fact that the corollary of the obsolescence of tools is that of human beings, when they are exploited, disqualified, and rendered precarious, as Marxian critique had already observed. Neophile discourse is based on a highly debatable evolutionary conception of history, which sees "progress" as ultimately consensual (which it never is) and obsolescence as the inevitable means for achieving it.

Another form of neophilia is "fashion," a term gradually adopted by the clothing industry. While, from a historical perspective, the reasons for getting new clothes are multiple (weather, work, growth, wear-and-tear, distinction, and so on), a new reason emerged during the nineteenth century: the need to renew one's wardrobe. Why? In France, the abolition of guilds and industrialization transformed the textile industry, as seen in the rise of clothing manufacturing and the mass production of "readymade" clothing. This supply met a demand thanks to unprecedented forms of distribution and communication practiced by department stores. Based on economies of scales and rapid rotation of inventories, they invented commercial calendars and made novelty an imperative. Since the twentieth century, novelty has further accelerated, consistent first with American and Spanish models (chains of ready-to-wear stores), then with Chinese models ("ultra-fast fashion," distributed online). The obsolescence strategies

used in these models is ultimately based on a simple insight: the quicker a product becomes outdated, the quicker it loses value to another product, which can be glorified as "new" and becomes desirable on this basis. But in this respect too, frantic cadences, tied to fast fashion's excessively cheap prices, have harmful effects. The fashion industry is notorious for being one of the most violent in the world, in addition to being among the most polluting.

Faced with the specter of overproduction, market professionals have thus attempted to coordinate production and consumption. Without ever reducing supply, they seek to stimulate greater consumption, which they present as desirable: such is consumerism. Drawing on the American example, Guien lays bare the mechanisms of the commercial strategy that became increasingly professionalized during the twentieth century. To stimulate demand and legitimate waste, marketing professionals invented, in the 1950s and 1960s, methods of planned obsolescence, adopting a pseudo-Darwinist rhetoric that assigned each product a "lifecycle." It was left to designers, the style's self-proclaimed vanguard, to develop "techniques of the ephemeral," acting on the commodity's form, making it unfashionable and thus no longer desirable. Finally, ad executives never missed a chance to invoke modernity: claims to newness take on a wide range of forms, resulting from technical or aesthetic changes or symbolic constructions -- and, at times, none of the above. Sometimes a product's claim to be new is utterly empty. Some ad executives take pride in inventing novelty out of thin air.

Finally, the book takes a close look at "throwaways", that paragon of neophilia and a capacious category that includes goods of all kinds. From handkerchiefs (dating back to ninth-century Japan) to canned products (which appeared in the late eighteenth century), the common denominator of all throwaway goods, which are new each time one buys them, is that their preservation is a technical, social, and moral impossibility. During the twentieth century, in the age of "domestic Taylorism,"[2] throwaway goods were seen as "practical" because they are ready for use, but also because of collective blindness to these objects' fate. Such is the socioeconomic function of throwaway goods, which delegates and renders invisible the tasks of production and maintenance, while making everyone more available for employment. From early on, these products were determined "cheap," a quality that requires contextualization. On the market, no price can be considered low independently of salaries, and their value is, in any event, high when compared to practices based on reuse. Not only are

[2] "Domestic Taylorism" was a term used by Christine Frederick, an American specialist of "home economics," in the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1912.

throwaways considered "convenient" and "cheap," but they are also seen as "hygienic." Many promises are made about their safety, even though they are regularly condemned for being dangerous and for relying on toxic substances and microplastics. Throwaways, the ordinary face of an apparently unquenchable thirst for novelty, subject even new objects to covers and wrappers. On the contemporary market, where everything is surrounded in layers of wrapping, the act of unwrapping, an irreversible gesture that spells the product's demise, results invariably in the desire to buy anew.

A critique of neophile capitalism

Taking a stance in a debate that has lasted too long, Guien shows that obsolescence (frequently described as "planned") is not an obscure industrial practice or a conspiracy theory. Quite the opposite: the accelerated renewal of goods, even when they are completely functional, has been constantly promoted in broad daylight by market actors since the dawn of capitalism. It is even a criterion of a healthy economy. But what kind of healthy economy are we talking about? Guien presents a different picture of reality. First, she shows that the "desire for newness" results from frequently absurd and abusive discourses steeped in contradictions, vacuousness, and unmet promises. Furthermore, she demonstrates that neophilia, which is always engaged in conflictual relationships, in fact perpetuates a discriminatory economic model. Newness as a norm that has been to varying degrees articulated as a discourse throughout history always devalues those who can do without it, while legitimating forms of domination that are profitable to the neophile economy. This model is not only discriminatory, but also unsustainable. Guien would have benefited from showing a tighter connection between social and environmental critique, a point that is at times understated in her book.

In short, writing *Le Désir de nouveautés* could not have been more urgent, as it deconstructs a familiar injunction and an unavoidable triptych: buy, throw away, buy again. Skillfully blending theory and concrete examples, in a way that will be familiar to those who read her biography of objects,[3] this book proposes a convincing framework for understanding the economic model we have inherited that will inform contemporary debates on obsolescence, which we now realize is capitalism's primary engine. This vast philosophical and chronological panorama also points the way to

[3] Jeanne Guien, *Le Consumérisme à travers ses objets*, Paris, Éditions Divergences, 2021, 223 p.

genuine historical research based on more narrowly circumscribed spatial and temporal contexts. The latter will make it possible to fine-tune Guien's argument and extend her commendable effort to deprive neophilia of its self-evidence by restoring its historical depth.

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