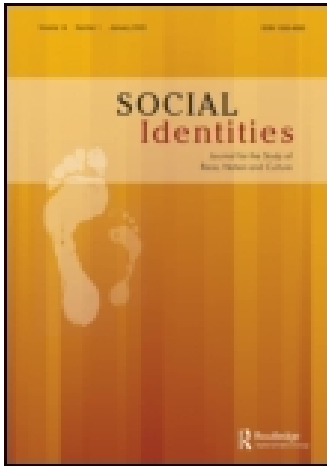


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## Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csidi20>

### The prosumer

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Published online: 20 Feb 2015.



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To cite this article: Pal Ahluwalia & Toby Miller (2014) The prosumer, *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 20:4-5, 259-261, DOI: [10.1080/13504630.2015.1004830](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2015.1004830)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2015.1004830>

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## EDITORIAL

### The prosumer

Of all the social identities discussed in the pages of our journal, one of the newest, at least in terms of popular usage, is that of the prosumer. This concept was invented by Alvin Toffler, a lapsed leftist Reaganite public intellectual in the US. Toffler was one of a merry band of male futurists who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (think Ithiel de Sola Pool, Daniel Bell, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Herman Kahn). They made reputations and money through predictions about broad social, cultural, political, and economic trends.

Toffler coined the term ‘prosumer’ in 1980 to describe the vanguard class of a technologized future. In the 30-odd years since, but especially the decade of the World Wide Web, it has become a favored word (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Toffler, 1980). But rather than being entirely new, in Toffler’s view, the prosumer partially represented a return to subsistence, to the period prior to the Industrial Revolution’s division of labor – a time when we ate what we grew, built our own shelters, and gave birth without medicine. The specialization of agriculture and manufacturing and the rise of cities put paid to such autarky: the emergence of capitalism distinguished production from consumption via markets.

Toffler discerned a paradoxical latter-day blend of the two seemingly opposed eras, symbolized by the French invention and marketing of home-pregnancy tests in the 1970s. These kits relied on the formal knowledge, manufacture, and distribution that typified modern life, but permitted customers to make their own diagnoses, cutting out the role of doctors as expert gatekeepers between applied science and the self.

Toffler called this ‘production for self-use.’ He saw it at play elsewhere as well: in the vast array of civil society organizations that emerged at the time, the craze for ‘self-help,’ the popularity of self-serve gas stations as franchises struggled to survive after the 1973–1974 oil crisis, and the proliferation of automatic teller machines as banks sought to reduce their retail labor force.

The argument Toffler made 35 years ago, that we are simultaneously cultural consumers and producers, i.e. prosumers, is an idea whose time has come, as his fellow reactionary Victor Hugo (1907) almost put it.<sup>1</sup> Internally divided – but happily so – each person is, as Foucault put it, ‘a consumer on the one hand, but ... also a producer’ (Foucault, 2008, p. 226).

Toffler acknowledged the crucial role of corporations in constructing prosumption – they were there from the first, cutting costs and relying on labor undertaken by customers to externalize costs through what he termed ‘willing seduction.’ This was coeval with, and just as important as, the devolution of authority that would emerge from the new freedoms (Toffler, 1980, pp. 266, 269–270, 275). Translation: get customers to do unpaid work, even as they purchase goods and services.

Just as Toffler imagined prosumers emerging from technological changes to the nature and interaction of consumption and production, he anticipated that these transformations would forge new relationships between proletarians and more educated

workers. At the same time as coining the term ‘prosumer,’ Toffler introduced the idea of the ‘cognitariat’ (Miller & Ahluwalia, 2012): people undertaking casualized cultural work who have heady educational backgrounds, yet live at the uncertain interstices of capital, qualifications, and government in a post-Fordist era of mass unemployment, chronic underemployment, zero-time contracts, limited-term work, interminable internships, and occupational insecurity. Drawing on his early-childhood experiences of Marxism, Toffler welcomed this development as an end to alienation, reification, and exploitation, because the cognitariat held the means of production in its sinuous mind rather than its burly grasp. The former could not be owned and directed as per the latter’s industrial fate (Toffler, 1983, 1990).

Cognitarians are sometimes complicit with these circumstances, because their identities are shrouded in autotelic modes of being: work is pleasure and *vice versa*; labor becomes its own reward. Dreams of autonomous identity formation find them joining a gentry poor dedicated to the life of the mind that supposedly fulfills them and may one day deliver a labor market of plenty (Gorz, 2004). But they also confront inevitable contradictions, ‘the glamour as well as the gloom of the working environment of the creative economy’ (Pang, 2009, p. 59).

From jazz musicians to street artists, cultural workers have long labored without regular compensation and security. That models the expectations we are *all* supposed to have today, rather than our parents’ or grandparents’ assumptions about life-long – or at least steady – employment. Cultural production showed that all workers could move from security to insecurity, certainty to uncertainty, salary to wage, firm to project, and profession to precarity – and with smiles on their faces (Ross, 2009). Contemporary business leeches love it because they crave flexibility in the people they employ, the technologies they use, the places where they do business, and the amounts they pay – and *inflexibility* of ownership and control (Mosco, 2014, pp. 155–174).

Today, Toffler Associates (<http://www.toffler.com/>) promises that ‘Using our proven FUTURE PROOF<sup>SM</sup> consulting services, we help clients survive – and thrive – in an environment of accelerated change by creating agile and adaptive organizations, able to anticipate and keep pace with the world around them.’ It avows that ‘TA clients join the ranks of thousands of the world’s best-known and accomplished pioneers in business and government – from Ted Turner, Carlos Slim Helú, and Steve Case to Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan – who were inspired to great success by the Tofflers’ vision of a rapidly-changing world’ (<http://www.toffler.com/about-us/>).

For those of us who don’t move in such circles, it is hard to imagine how corporate shill of this kind can be so supremely appealing. But we must recognise that Toffler was onto something with his neologisms, for good or ill, in naming practices that have actual, material coordinates. We may deride the idea of the prosumer and the cognitariat as descriptions, but their efficaciousness as concepts in use cannot be ignored.

## Note

1. Hugo wrote ‘On résiste à l’invasion des armées; on ne résiste pas à l’invasion des idées’ in *Histoire d’un crime: Déposition d’un témoin* (1907, p. 554), which is often rendered in English as the *cliché* we just used. The next sentence is, ‘La gloire des barbares est d’être conquis par l’humanité; la gloire des sauvages est d’être conquis par la civilisation,’ which translates as ‘The glory of barbarians is to be conquered by humanity; the glory of savages is to be conquered by civilization.’ Thanks for sharing, Vic.

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