

**LUNCH OF THE LAST HUMAN:  
NUTRITIONALLY COMPLETE FOOD AND THE FANTASIES OF  
MARKET-BASED PROGRESS**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, we integrate Nietzsche's visions of self-overcoming with a Žižekian toolbox to explore how 'market-based progress' is upheld through a fabric of ideological fantasies. Through an analysis of Huel, a nutritionally complete British food brand aligned with progressive and techno-utopian discourses, we reveal a fantasmatic structure centred on pragmatism, the search for unassailable truth and continuance of a prehistoric legacy. These fantasies function as illusory support for acceptance that humanity's great overcoming is singularly achieved through market logic and ethos. Here, a fetishistic inversion centres on subjects believing that the detached spectatorialism of consumption is closer to the act of the Nietzschean 'Overhuman' than it is to its inverse, the 'last human'. This article provides the parameters for how ideological fantasy insulates the market from its material deadlocks and concludes with a conceptualization of the post-sovereign consumer's subjectification along the fantastical contours of market-based progress.

**Keywords:** progress, Žižek, Nietzsche, fantasy, ideology, food, health

## **Introduction**

Progress is the vague telos of all societal and civilizational activity and intent. As both the signifier of some ultimate end-state of humanity and the instigator for the actions undertaken to reach that end-state, few concepts are as entrenched in the popular imagination as progress (Sklair, 2005). Despite the inherent idealism that underscores and perpetuates progress, the concept today is closely associated with and instantiated in market logic and ethos (Shankar et al., 2006). The relationship between progress and the market hinges on the latter's provision of "use-values" to populations who engage with these to secure ever more meaningful and comfortable ways of life for themselves (Fitchett et al., 2014; Harvey, 2005). Here, the assumption that incrementally improving lifestyles can be achieved through greater access to marketer-generated materials reflects what we call "market-based progress", or the ideology that the market offers the most legitimate framework through which individuals can approach an "ideal future" and access its utopian bounties. By extension then, consumption becomes idealized as a progressive act par excellence; the most effective way to solve social ills (Bajde, 2013).

Consumption is, of course, never universally progressive rather its practices and outcomes can also be assessed as regressive, stagnant or ambivalent. Advances in the market and the consumption it invokes carry alongside them "a broad sweep of environmental and social ills, such as environmental degradation, exploitative labor conditions, social and economic inequity, and mental and physical illness" (Carrington et al., 2016: 21). Within the food marketplace, progressiveness based on liberalized market expansion and breadth of use-values has led to a myriad of problems linked to nutritionally-debilitated, high-caloric processed foods becoming vastly available, affordable, and profitable and the subsequent proliferation of obesity and diet-related illnesses, or so-called "diseases of civilization" (Pollan, 2008). Concerns over the obesogenic environment identify marketing as a cause of poor diet

for which policy responses are called for that regulate promotional strategies, especially those targeted to children (Harris and Graff, 2011). Moreover, market response to the problems of its own making has been to provide purchasable solutions that “commodify dieting as well as eating” (Guthman, 2009: 191). This introduces a host of supplementary problems linked to the medicalization of food, moralizing discourses of calorie control and supposed dietetic normalities, and reliance on industry-supported scientific orthodoxies that displace and undermine conventional wisdoms and traditional cuisines (Askegaard et al. 2014; Cronin and Malone, 2019; Scrinis, 2008). Moreover, the ideology of market-based progress promotes consumption of products that have been commercially processed out of their whole state and bedecked with value-added health claims, such as fat-free, low-calorie, or zero-cholesterol varieties, rather than encouraging the decreased consumption of processed foods. Within these ideological parameters, value-added processing is celebrated as forward-looking even as the high intake of highly processed foods and low intake of unprocessed/minimally processed foods are recognized as dietary risk factors for adverse health outcomes (Lawrence and Baker, 2019).

So how then does market-based progress function as credible and bearable if it is indelibly deadlocked by its own regressions? In this article, we explore how market-based progress is upheld through a fabric of ideological fantasies that ameliorate for consumers its failures and inconsistencies and make its widespread existence palatable. We map out the fantasmatic positioning of consumption as a kind of utopian solution to its own problems, or rather the perseverance of thinking that the answer is always more consumption, albeit in new, ever more innovative, inspirational and captivating forms. The chief critical lens to engage with this will stem from Žižekian theoretical anchors (Žižek, 1989, 1994, 2008, 2011), which position ideology as a fantastical matrix that blurs the true horror of a situation, though we supplement our analysis with Nietzsche’s ([1883] 2005) philosophies about humankind’s will

to power and the urgency for self-overcoming. Here, we consider the ideological operation of market-based progress to hinge heavily on Nietzsche's diametrically opposed archetypes of the 'Overhuman' and the 'last human', and how these are intentionally conflated and confused through the fantasy structuring of consumers' social reality.

To facilitate our analysis, we delve into the fantasies of Huel, a British vegan powdered food brand that promotes itself to be aligned with dietary health, the environment, low wastage and scientific rationalism. As an affordable, sustainable and nutritionally complete solution, Huel invites consumers to overcome their animal nature and sublimate their libidinal need to eat into a more progressive, rationalized form. To understand how Huel upholds this ostensibly techno-utopian call to action requires us to confront the discursive operations that provide market-based progress with its fictional coherence and consistency more generally and here we crystallize two contributions for marketing theory.

First, we contribute to the nascent stream of ideological inquiry into markets, marketing and consumer culture (Bajde, 2013; Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Campbell and Deane, 2019; Carrington et al., 2016; Fitchett et al., 2014), with the view that market actors succeed not because they are able to induce consumers to believe that what is false is true but quite the reverse: They achieve much more ideological power by allowing consumers to consider the truth as false and unreal. By this, we mean theorists must approach the collective functioning of the market as a realm of conceivability that shelters consumers from the absolute objective state of things including the hard truth that not all problems can be solved by the market. Macro-level theorizations must therefore be ensconced in the recognition that market-based solutions, regardless of their particular appeals or genuine innovativeness, are not strictly experienced by consumers as the only route to progress but as the only conceivable one thus ensuring reliance on the market to solve problems, even those of its own making. Recognizing the colonization of progress by market-based solutions helps to provide some explanatory texture to analyses

of how the market can reproduce itself and assimilate even its own resistance (Giesler, 2008; Holt, 2002).

Second, discussing the market along these parameters allows us to contribute to the conceptual development of ‘the post-sovereign consumer’ (Cluley and Dunne, 2012: 252). Beyond post-sovereignty in terms of compromised, self-contradictory or manipulated needs and desires and so on, we suggest that theorizations of the post-sovereign consumer must centre on the absence of a discernible political orientation. The market enables a subject to be free only in relation to a symbolic rather than political notion of freedom thus ensuring, in a Žižekian sense, ‘we “feel free” because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom’ (Žižek, 2002: 2). Market freedoms stifle the felt requirement for individuals to articulate their sovereignty through political demands. In the absence of these demands, political arenas such as food, diet, health and the environment become supplanted by the symbolic and market-coordinated theaters of consumer culture. By equating the post-sovereign consumer with the subordination of genuine political subjectivity, our work continues in the tradition of urging marketing theory to think more critically about the macrostructures our work both speaks to and is located within (Cova et al., 2013) and the depoliticizing effects of these structures on social subjects (Winlow and Hall, 2012).

In the sections that follow, we provide some background to our analysis of market-based progress via Nietzsche’s visions of self-overcoming and the more contemporary concept of interpassivity before outlining the role of ideological critique in Žižek’s writings. We then provide a brief overview of the Huel brand and our analytical procedures before presenting our analyses.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

### *Progress, the Last Human, and the triumph of Interpassivity*

Progress is a “momentum concept” which implies that its meaning is forever in motion and never static, there is a state of infinity to it (Hoffman, 2012). Progress cannot be completed or fully understood; as we move forward with attaining it, its designation moves further along also, remaining just out of reach in the future. Despite its indefinite designation, some theorists suggest moralism is what provides progress with its ontological substance: “Progress is nothing if it is not a moral concept, and to decide whether or not a particular social phenomenon represents progress is a moral decision” (Sklair, 2005: viii). While moral reasoning has enabled progress to be rationalized as an ideological offshoot of post-Enlightenment modern liberalism, its association with some perpetually protracted, unspecified end-state of improvement ensures that it remains forever in abstraction: “what bedevils the Enlightenment concept of progress is that it assumes some ultimate goal – some final resting place – a traditional notion of utopia” (Hoffman, 2012: 142).

The association of progress with utopian thinking, or the imagining of some hazy civilizational ideal, appears in principle to correspond with Nietzsche's perspectives on self-transcendence, the struggle against nihilism, and the will to power; themes which come principally from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche, 2005[1883]). Via the quest of the eponymous character, Zarathustra, to proselytize the utopian ideal of humankind, Nietzsche's notion of the *Übermensch* (translated as Overman, Overhuman, or Superman) emerges. In a famous passage where Zarathustra returns from self-imposed exile to share his enlightenment with people assembled in a town marketplace he proclaims:

The human is a rope, fastened between beast and Overhuman – a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking back, a dangerous shuddering and standing still. What is great in the human is that it is a bridge and not a

goal: what can be lived in the human is that it is a going-over and a going under. (Nietzsche, 2005[1883]: 13).

Zarathustra's imagining of the Overhuman – a greater and more powerful humanity – attained only through ceaseless and perilous progression, some have argued, has parallels with the current era of neoliberal/enterprise culture with its competitive “winner takes all” orthodoxy of personal autonomy, relentless self-improvement, and unremitting meritocratic-oriented targets (Lemm, 2016). Central to the liberal tradition, and its present neoliberal transformation, is the moralistic mandate that one must be prepared to take responsibility for one's self to reach one's true potential; and that it is only through self-determined actions within a free market that individuals can pursue legitimate self-interest and personal growth (Fitchett et al., 2014).

It is at the intersection of autonomous, self-regulating subjectivity with the material appeals of consumer capitalism that the belief that having better access to marketer-generated materials and amenities becomes the route to progress. As Shankar et al. (2006: 488) put it, “marketing has operated hand in glove with economics in underscoring the political ideology that progress, improving the quality of life of the population and ultimately even their happiness, can be achieved through consumption”. There is a certain seduction here in the implication that the Nietzschean Overhuman is realized through the reflexive subject of neoliberal consumer capitalism: a self-directed and self-knowing agent able to extract from the market all the resources needed to build a new, repurposed and excellent self. However, probably a more accurate image of consumption and the consumer would not be Nietzsche's Overhuman but his vision of the ‘letzter mensch’ or ‘last man’ (also translated as ‘last human’), the dead end of human history.

When Nietzsche's Zarathustra goes to proclaim the Overhuman to the people in the marketplace, these individuals mock him, laugh, and do not understand, so he “speak[s] to them



of what is most despicable: and that is *the last human*” (Nietzsche, 2005[1883]: 15) . Instead of “going-over” like the Overhuman, the last human epitomizes *staying-here*, a perpetual stasis characterized by desire to minimize uncertainty: “the extreme representative of weakness, a man frozen at the level of passive nihilism, totally reduced to a ‘herd animal’, rendered uniform, equal, and level – the man who has found happiness” (Haar, 1971: 382). The last humans are “last” to contribute anything, content to wait for others to solve their problems for them, and prefer comfort, convenience, and ease to hard work, uncertainty and overcoming. Although intended by Zarathustra to serve as a nightmarish caveat, he is horrified to be met with the following reply from the people in the marketplace, “Give us this last human, O Zarathustra... Turn us into these last humans! Then you can have the Overhuman!” (Nietzsche 2005[1883]: 16).

The celebratory attitude by those who are “in” the marketplace towards the last human is an important detail. The last humans’ delegation of involvement and engagement to others to bring about progress is comparable to the concept of interpassivity which is central to the operation of contemporary consumerism (Fisher, 2009; Pfaller, 2017; Žižek, 2009). Interpassivity, as an opposition to and an inversion of the concept of interactivity, centres on delegating responsibility, creativity or ethical action to other people or objects. Crucially then, consumerism depends on the marketplace as a site where all accountability can be transferred. By depriving its offerings of the things that make them dangerous, the market disburdens the last human of the responsibility to practice restraint or moderation thereby leading to a paradoxical state of “hedonistic ascetism”:

...it is only today that we can really discern the contours of the Last Man, in the guise of the predominant hedonistic ascetism. In today’s market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol (Žižek, 2009: webpage).

Through the beneficence of “guilt-free” conveniences like decaffeinated coffee or low-fat cream, consumers can engage with neoliberal imperatives for self-care and good health but do so passively by delegating the effort needed to accomplish such things, at least partially, to the marketplace. Interpassivity has ensured that consumerist faith in the logic and ethos of the market becomes written into progress itself: “[t]he fantasy being that western consumerism, far from being intrinsically implicated in systemic global inequalities, could itself solve them” (Fisher, 2009: 15). It is here that we seek to unpack the various ideological operations that help to support and maintain the utopic thinking and interpassivity implicit in market-based progress. To do so, we now turn to the critical lenses popularized by Žižek.

### ***The Real and reality: a Žižekian Critique of Ideology***

Within consumer research, ideology has historically been approached from the Marxian perspective as an exploitative worldview imposed onto naïve subjects to inculcate (or ‘dupe’) them into a false consciousness that once revealed would allow for them to recognize their manipulation and inevitably lead to resistance (Holt, 2002; Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). Conversely, a recent and still nascent stream of Žižekian inspired work in marketing theory positions ideology as a paradox of “enlightened” false consciousness or a falsehood that subjects are well aware of but do not denounce because it conciliates for them their grievances with the material conditions of social life (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Carrington et al., 2016). The Žižekian approach centres on a radicalization of Lacanian psychoanalysis whereby ideology provides a desired fantasy-structure that allows subjects to undergird their relationships with reality: “[i]deology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel” (Žižek, 1989: 45).

The insupportable ‘kernel’ for Žižek is the horror of the Lacanian ‘Real’ – a placeholder term for the unsymbolized and unsymbolizable truth that reality is never ‘whole’, perfect, fully knowable, or harmonious – a traumatic realization that we unconsciously try to avoid coming to absolute terms with. We often approach the Real with the underpinning support of fantasy, such that “the horror of contemplating the unknowable leads people to weave imaginary webs, or fantasies” (Freeden, 2003: 111). This brings up the first major principle of Žižek’s approach to ideology: it provides its subjects with a framework for thinking about the real world, for reconciling them to it and, ultimately, for providing them with a way to *function* within it. Although he or she is well aware of “the distance between the ideological mask and the reality”, the subject Žižek (1989: 29) argues, “still finds reasons to retain the mask”. Here Žižek is adapting a recurring Nietzschean theme that “It seems that all great things, in order to inscribe eternal demands in the heart of humanity, must first wander the earth under monstrous and terrifying masks; dogmatic philosophy was this sort of a mask” (Nietzsche, 2002 [1886]): 3).

This overlaps with the second principle of Žižekian critique: Ideology is never imposed from above but always from within: “ideological illusion lies in the ‘knowing’” (Žižek, 1989: 30). The subject cannot claim ignorance of his/her interpellation. Here, Žižek rejects ideology as a case of *forgive them for they know not what they do*, instead suggesting they “know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know” (Žižek, 1989: 32). Such thinking – what Žižek (1989: 18) calls “fetishistic disavowal” – has been crystallized by two useful essays in marketing scholarship; Cluley and Dunne (2012) and Bradshaw and Zwick (2016). In their treatment of “*as if*” moments, Cluley and Dunne invoke incidents where consumers know fully well that a particular marketer-generated material is, for example, produced under sweatshop conditions or detrimental to their well-being but still go on to consume it *as if* they were unaware. Comparably, Bradshaw and Zwick consider this phenomenon in terms of business sustainability managers who disavow the reality that

capitalism is destructive by believing in another, thereby enabling “a cohesive symbolic realm in which capitalism can be sustainable” (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016: 269).

A third Žižekian principle focuses on the relationship between truth and ideology: “*ideology has nothing to do with ‘illusion’*, with a mistaken, distorted representation of its social content. To put it succinctly: a political standpoint can be quite accurate (‘true’) as to its objective content, yet thoroughly ideological; and vice versa, the idea that a political standpoint gives of its social content can prove totally wrong, yet there is nothing ‘ideological’ about it” (Žižek, 1994: 7, emphasis in original). Only by recognizing this can subjects divest themselves of their utopian progressive fantasies for more authentic encounters with the Real. Out of the subsequent breathing space, Žižek suggests there is potential for accessing a non-subjectivized form of truth – however unbearable it might be – in ways not distorted or mitigated by fantasy. Ideology therefore functions through repression of those unbearable truths by the substitution of bearable representations to the extent that we willingly comply with the inversion of the Real. We now turn to our analytical work to explore how such functioning works to uphold market-based progress and shield consumers (as the Nietzschean last humans) from its unbearable kernels.

### **Methodological considerations**

The aim of our work is to unpack the ideological operation of market-based progress and its fantasy support-structures that perpetuate the belief that consumption, in ever more captivating formats, is the ultimate route to utopia. To do so, we provide a contextualized interpretive analysis of the fantastical appeals that are reflected in the positioning of one particular market offering, Huel. Our approach is consistent with content-centred analyses in marketing scholarship that “use brand-specific data to illuminate broader aspects of consumer culture” (Brown et al., 2013: 600; Bajde, 2013; Pirani et al. 2018).

We selected Huel as the site of our analysis as it exists as a high profile vessel for progressive, techno-utopian visions concerning the for-profit scientization, nutritionalization, and rationalization of feeding and nourishment. Huel – a portmanteau assembly of “human” and “fuel” – is marketed as a “nutritionally complete”, low-waste, convenient and sustainable mealtime solution. Though the brand now offers a selection of bars, granolas and pre-mixed ready-to-drink options, its flagship range remains its line of powders which are intended to be mixed with water and consumed as an alternative to ordinary food. Founded by British internet entrepreneur Julian Hearn, Huel is based in the UK and distributes its products across the UK and around the world through website orders. The brand achieved valuation of £220 million within 4 years of launch and, at the time of writing, the Huel website reports having sold over 50 million meals to more than 80 countries (Huel, 2019).

Huel is designed to be entirely vegan and formulated through ingredients such as ground oats, pea protein, ground flaxseed, brown rice protein, and a bespoke blend of added vitamins and minerals. Across all of its product variants, Huel uses minimalist, sans-serif branding and uniformly monochrome packaging not dissimilar to the utilitarian aesthetics of military field rations, commonly known as MRE (Meal, Ready-to-Eat). Ideologically speaking, the brand centres on and is expressed through a range of entwined utopian principles including, but not limited to, the lionization of science, affordability and ethics. The ideological contours of the brand are reflected in its mission statement: ‘To make nutritionally complete, convenient, affordable food, with minimum impact on animals and the environment’ (Huel, 2019). While Huel’s ambitiousness to deliver essential nutrients in a cost-effective and sustainable format has received a notable level of acclamation, the brand has also attracted suspicion, parody and criticism for its associations with dystopic science-before-nature ‘foodtech’ (Barr, 2017). Importantly, our intention in this article is not to take critical aim at Huel; rather, we explore the symbolic dimensions of Huel as a useful context to unpack the undercurrent of fantasies

that ensure the market is experienced as the premier venue where progress in improving dietary health and preventing eco-disaster can be made. Brands like Huel, however compelling, are linked to private interest that circumscribes alternative political possibilities and thus must be read as the market ensuring the means of its own reproduction.

To explore the fantasy support-structures of Huel, the research team engaged in a 3-year intermittent digital data gathering exercise and analysis of brand-related texts. We combined analyses of the promotional activities of Huel, its website, company statements, its nutritional research reports, and social media pages with media interviews and podcasts featuring the brand's founder and now chief marketing officer, Julian Hearn. As an initial directory for the latter data we used the "Press Coverage" and "Julian Hearn's Bio" sections of the Huel website where selected media attention is curated and promoted. Consumers' discourses, including web-based writings, personal blogs and discussions about their experiences of Huel on message boards, were not collected as the focus of analysis was on Huel's own official, or endorsed, discourses.

In keeping with recent interpretive works that draw on brand-related content, our combined sources of data were pooled, coded, and categorized in a hermeneutic approach which allowed for ideas to be developed or refuted at each iterative turn under the mutual agreement of both authors (Brown et al., 2013; Pirani et al. 2018). This back-and-forth approach helped to reveal initial categories that were then collapsed into sub-themes based on what we perceived to be evidence of fairly discrete underpinning meanings constructed from restricted ranges of language, argumentation and justifications. These sub-themes were then further collapsed together and abstracted through our emerging interpretations and conceptual connections with the literature until three higher-order themes were crystallised. Each of these three themes allowed us to theorise a separate ideological fantasy at the heart of Huel which we developed in conversation with the Nietzsche-Žižekian framework of the study. As with

other work in this tradition, we appreciate that our reading of the brand-related material amounts to only one of many potential interpretations. We reproduce extracts from original sources to ground our interpretations and illustrate our points. In the case of text quoted from the Huel website, we recognise the dynamic nature of the internet and appreciate that the content of webpages may change over time.

## **Findings**

In order to uphold the belief that Huel engenders, for consumers, the ultimate solution to various food-related problems of society, we discovered there to be a triumvirate of core fantasies that are woven together to defend not just its own progressiveness but the ideology of market-based progress more generally. First, we discuss the fantasy of pragmatism, whereby Huel positions itself as the champion of hard-boiled practicality amongst a motley of far-fetched and impracticable idealists both within and without the marketplace. The vision of overcoming here requires the courage to reject both statist interventions and traditional social-liberalism in favour of neoliberal market-located practices. Second, we explore Huel's lauding of the fantasy of universal truth, whereby science, and particularly the nutritional sciences, are upheld as the only legitimate lens to contextualize the relationship between food and body. Third, we discuss Huel's fantasy of legacy, which is achieved through the reproduction and celebration of a semi-mythic past that helps to align with the future that Huel, and brands like it, aim to create. In all fantasies, the delegation of overcoming to the market is espoused as progressive and the last human is allowed to masquerade as the Overhuman in an act of "fetishistic inversion" (Žižek, 1989: 16).

### ***The Pragmatist's Fantasy: Implicating a Panacea to the unbearable***

The first major theme draws extensively on the ways in which market logic is invoked by Huel as the most practical platform to justify and resolve the implications and consequences of consumption. We label this the fantasy of pragmatism and suggest it encapsulates the sentiment that: *although we know that this product, like many products, carries some of the problems of consumer capitalism, we believe that it is the best and most practical chance for progress when compared to all alternatives.* Consumption is left to be imagined as a ‘panacea’, or solution to all of its own problems and, accordingly, these problems are not concealed by Huel but are addressed openly and boldly. The crisis of food becomes a prominent feature of Huel and is reflected on various sections of the brand’s website and through the brand founder’s commentary with various news media. A number of interrelated dystopian narratives are invoked whereby future society will inevitably face catastrophic consequences without significant intervention on the part of innovators in the field of food production. There is something distinctly Übermenschian in Huel’s proclamations that crises of humanity must be *overcome* and, in parallel with Nietzsche, humans are positioned as their own saviour and not in need of divine intervention: “Dead are all Gods: now we want the Overhuman to live” (Nietzsche 2005[1883]: 68). Nevertheless, the difference is that Huel only allows the consumer to *simulate* the Overhuman in principle but not in action. The real pragmatism, the brand suggests, is in ensuring that consumers delegate their change-efforts to the market which offers them a simple and practical solution, consume Huel:

Huel, which is created from a combination of the words Human and Fuel, is what we believe to be the future of food. The world faces serious challenges over its food production. The meat industry produces more greenhouse gases than all the planes and cars in the world combined. 30% of all food in the UK is wasted. And despite having enough to feed the world 1.5 times over, 800 million people don’t have enough food to eat. This is where Huel comes in. We help solve all these problems by offering an ethical, 100% vegan, nutritionally complete product with no waste and a year long shelf life. (‘Our Story’, Press Page, Huel, 2019 [Website])



Huel assumes consumers' responsibility for them ("i.e. *We* help solve all these problems..." rather than "*you* can help solve all these problems") and protects them from having to engage firsthand in significant social change. For consumers, the consumption of Huel represents a credible delegation of ethical and political action through consumption allowing them to derive satisfaction and relief from the outcomes that Huel promotes.

There is a significant kernel of truth at the heart of Huel's pragmatism. In terms of material use-values, there are multiple practical benefits that Huel offers which help to shore up the brand's immediate functionalism and usefulness. Huel is an affordable and animal-product free source of nourishment with a long shelf-life and the potential to significantly reduce the time and money consumers spend on eating and preparing food as well as assisting them in regulating their diets and losing weight. Practicalities centred on ease, low cost, nutrition and sustainability help to reconcile convenience with care, typically considered in oppositional terms as a culinary antinomy (Warde, 1997), and thus represent the possibility of introducing genuine material changes to consumers' diets and the broader food system that can and should be read as progressive. Working in tandem with these material realities however are efforts at the level of the symbolic to naturalise the logic that the market has achieved primacy amongst rival ideological vehicles. Part of this naturalisation process involves moving from the substantial to the subjective through denigrating an elementary adversary. For example, to bolster the fantasy that the market is the most pragmatic entity consumers should entrust their diets and ethical responsibilities to, Huel's founder Julian Hearn spoke candidly about the shortcomings of government in a 2016 podcast about agribusiness and entrepreneurship. For Hearn, the UK's extant regulatory efforts and initiatives to encourage consumers to include great quantities of fruit and vegetables in their diet for a healthier lifestyle are largely ineffective and misleading:

I know they talk about five fruit and veg, the government's recommendations but I've got a bit of a thing about that. Because when people say we need to be more educated, so I say well the government spent tens if not hundreds of millions of pounds on educating the population. If you asked the normal 'Joe Public', I don't know, how many calories you should have? What are the essential vitamins and minerals? What is the ratio of fat to protein? What protein should you have? What amino acids? They wouldn't know any of those things because all the government has spent money on is saying you should have five fruit and veg per day which is really imprecise. It doesn't tell you what you actually need and, yeah, if you have five apples and five oran-- it's just not useful really in some ways. It's just really-- because all they've got to say, I think what they're trying to do is: 'there is so many people, there's so many people with different ideas, let's try and simplify it'. But they have and it just doesn't really work. (Hearn in Collis et al., 2016 [Podcast])

Here, the problems that Huel is seeking to ameliorate are not only related to food, diet and nutrition but also the failures of well-meaning regulators and overly simplistic policy initiatives that, perhaps unintentionally, worsen the crisis by misinforming the public. Government recommendations are further undermined throughout various sections on the Huel website, for example:

“...we've added a unique vitamin and mineral formula to provide, in some cases, more than 100% of the recommended amounts. Since the UK Dietary Reference Values were compiled in 1991, there have been numerous studies in the past 20 years demonstrating that, for many micronutrients, levels higher than the RNI may have beneficial effects to health.” (‘The Huel Powder Formula Explained’, Huel, 2019 [Website]).

To help bolster the view that market enterprise is more pragmatic and effective than government guidance, a careful fantasmatic appearance is put in place by Huel to play up the vision of people as capable of taking responsibility not only for their own dietary health but also for the future of the planet through their sovereign choices as consumers. This is encapsulated in Huel's UK TV advert (“Eat Complete. v2.0”) which is comprised of a montage of outdoor leisure pursuits, such as high-speed cycling and rock climbing, captured from first person action cameras set to a rousing and percussive backing track. Values such as being physically active, adventurous, and appreciative of nature are drawn upon to construct an Übermenschian façade modelled on the ideal neoliberal subject – an entrepreneurial self. It is

not just active consumerist identities that Huel invokes however, it is also positioned as a supremely practical resource for the responsabilised working individual under capitalism. In playing to the idea of harriedness or “time squeeze” as an ontological principle of capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009), the Huel website features a video, under About Us, including interviews with four young professional workers, a business developer, an architect, a personal trainer and a yoga instructor, talking about why they have integrated Huel into their busy lives and how it has improved them. One individual suggests that Huel gives him “a lot of time back” that he would have otherwise lost preparing meals. Through this fabric, the Übermenschian entrepreneurial self is presented through consumers autonomously taking care of themselves and contributing to the work economy via sensible efficient nutrition without the need for statist nudging or interference.

Besides government nudging or intervention, another weak or impractical idea that is rejected in order to bolster the fantasy of pragmatism around Huel and its ethos of market-based progress is organic food production. Huel, as a scientized and mass-produced solution that is sold internationally online and based on dried high-yield ingredients, stands far apart from the localism and community-based solutions to food crises called for by the organic food movement. As Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007: 136) suggest, “organic food symbolize[s] an ideological antithesis to large-scale agribusiness and the corporate marketing of processed foods”. Accordingly, solutions that proselytise localised and organic whole foods production, and are thus counter to globalist and neoliberalized mass-market participation, are dismissed by Hearn as lacking credibility and viability:

Organic is a bit of a strange thing. It sounds very positive but our mission statement is to make affordable food with minimum impact on the environment. So, it's sort of, the problem with organic is that we're trying to feed 7 billion people now, we've got to feed 9 billion people fairly soon. Organic yields are quite poor in comparison so there's a difficulty between those things... . . . . [I]n an ideal world you want to grow your veg at the end of the garden, you know where it's been. And you want to grow your meat at

the end of the garden - that for me is organic. Like, that's the proper way but commercial organic - I don't really know enough about it but what I do know is that the yields are a problem and that's a problem for us when we're moving to trying to feed 9 billion people. (Hearn in Stephens and Jones, 2018 [Podcast])

Here, any criticism or challenge to the market logic of global food production is delegitimized by invoking realities such as population growth. Attempts at progress through independent, local produce are essentially dismissed as well-meaning but ultimately models of an "ideal world" that are impractical, inefficient and ineffective.

Elevation of the globalist entrepreneurial solution is further evidenced through an authoritative discourse of judgments about what constitutes the "right" way we should consume versus an implied "wrong" way. In an interview with *Wired Magazine*, Hearn suggests, "*Huel is nutrition first and taste second*" and "*In the early days, Huel was pretty much made on a spreadsheet*" (Turk, 2018). Here the invocation of a spreadsheet as the foundation upon which the brand was built emphasises the fantasy of pragmatism at the heart of its ideology; the preference to approach eating like a practice in bookkeeping. Nutrients are inventoried, prioritized, and compiled signalling to consumers a practical, matter-of-fact ethic of consumption. Elsewhere, Hearn continues this logic to argue that Huel, and the market more broadly, must determine the hierarchy of purposes of food and justify the proper course of action even if this goes against prevailing wants and desires:

We have been, I don't know – brainwashed is quite too strong a word – but we're partially brainwashed by all the "making food has to be super-delicious". You know every chef you see on TV, it *has* to be delicious, it *has* to be beautifully presented, it *has* to be beautiful looking you know? And the primary purpose of food is nutrition; it's nutrients, it's not to be delicious. If a food has no taste at all but it provides the essential nutrients, you could live. If you have a food that tastes delicious but is absolutely terrible in terms of nutrition, you will *not* live; you will suffer. It's the wrong thing. So the primary purpose is nutrition. And I think sometimes the whole food industry is all about making it delicious or making you crave it so you come back and buy it more and more and look at the state that's got us in. (Hearn in Craske, 2017 [Podcast])

This links to what Žižek (2008: 8) refers to as the basic paradox of liberalism: “liberalism conceives itself as a 'politics of lesser evil', its ambition is to bring about the 'least evil society possible', thus preventing greater evil, since it considers any attempt to directly impose a positive Good the ultimate source of all evil.” The ideology of market-based progress reasserts the possibility of the “positive good”, even if this requires the imposition of means (here the prohibition and discouragement of taste over functionality), ironically against the active choices and desires of consumers themselves. The liberal-ethical position being questioned here diverts attention from a more painful acceptance – the Real - namely that the primary purpose of the food industry is neither nutrition/health nor pleasure/satisfaction but rather the reproduction of the politics of accumulation and market-growth.

### ***The Truth-seeker’s Fantasy: Provoking sense-making***

Secondly, much of our data reveals the operation of a “truth-seeker’s fantasy” – or the active belief in, and commitment to, seeking out some universal indelible truth. This, we summarize as: *we know very well that this product is not in a natural whole state and that nobody would consume this way in natural settings, but we need to move beyond what is natural and seek the clarity, accuracy and answers that only science can provide us.* Huel hinges upon procedures that engender “evidence of ‘Sense’” (Žižek, 1994: 11) and centers almost entirely on the nutritional aspects of food. Accordingly, the brand proselytizes faith in the ostensibly sensible idea that there is a singular, unsurpassable and indubitable notion of “nutrition” that transcends the more ambiguous, holistic and indeterminate classification of “food”. The network of discursive devices used to construct this overall ‘Sense’ begins with Huel’s efforts to strive for precise nutrition; to provide a perfectly balanced diet with every nutrient your body needs for optimal health. As described by the Huel website in reference to its new and improved Huel ‘Version 2.0’ formula:

More vitamins and minerals from natural food sources. We've been able to reduce the amounts of some of the added vitamins and minerals in our bespoke vitamin and mineral blend. This is because we've altered the amounts and ratios of our six main ingredients to enable us to do this. Also, we now have more accurate data from our food ingredients, where previously we were cautious. ('Huel Version 2.0', Huel, 2019 [Website])

Here, we need to be careful when interfacing with this imagining of a seemingly perfect blend of nature-fantasy and science-fantasy, not because of what is said but because of what is deliberately not said or unsayable, either because it is presumed to be self-evident and therefore need not be articulated, or because it would contradict and diminish this pleasing discursive symmetry. Ideologically speaking, the blend of Huel is not, first and foremost, about "natural food sources" and scientific intervention, but what is behind these words: a blend of expectations about the ability of the market to endlessly improve results and deliver "more". The lack of saying and power of assumption – or self-evidence – is supported then through heavy dependence on the "Huel Advisory Panel".

A visitor to the Huel website can scroll down through the biographies of experienced, qualified and registered nutritionists who advise Huel ('Huel Advisory Panel' on About Us, Huel, 2019 [Website]). Specialist university degrees and work experience in the conventional dietetic and nutritional environment help to validate these individuals' opinions, and by extension, Huel's own version of Sense. It appears self-evident that if Huel has achieved this much technocratic support from those who are experts in nutrition that Huel must indeed be good nutrition. This dependence on self-evidence, Žižek (1994: 11, emphasis in original) argues, is one of the essential stratagems of ideology: "Look, you can see for yourself how things are!". 'Let the facts speak for themselves' is perhaps the arch-statement of ideology – the point being, precisely, that facts *never* 'speak for themselves' but are always *made to speak* by a network of discursive devices".

Detailed technorational profiles of the nutritional composition of Huel products are provided on the website and on the products' packaging showing breakdowns of vitamin and mineral composition. Within this techno-reductionist nutrient-by-nutrient fantasy structure, Huel which exists in its real, whole state as a mere powder is now available to be fetishized as something much more according to the value of easily appreciable signifiers like micro-, macro- and phytonutrients completely isolated from both one another and broader contexts. Authors such as Scrinis (2008: 46) have referred to this as the "ideology of nutritionism" and its interpellation of the "nutricentric" subject i.e. the nutrition-conscious consumer whose nutritional requirements must be quantitatively identified, measured, and adhered to with scientific certainty (see also Cronin and Malone, 2019).

In parallel with the Nietzschean last human, the nutricentric subject's requirements are taken care of for him or her and are placed in "a form that can be readily commodified, scientifically and professionally managed, and technologically integrated" (Scrinis, 2008: 47). Fantasy here guards against the traumatic Real that persistently threatens to undermine "reality"; the fact that the consumer, as last human, is relying on a relatively new system (capitalism) for his or her food and the measurements and jargon of an even newer system (nutritional science) for the appraisal of it. As Scrinis (2008: 47) suggests, however, "the reductive focus on nutrients has overridden and concealed the important question of the type and quality of foods and ingredients that are consumed".

Dependence on others' technical expertise and scientific reductionism are common translations of Nietzsche's concerns, where the last humans view the world through a lens provided to them by technocrats that only allows them to see at the level of material science. When asked to engage with abstract concepts like love or yearning or even distant constructs like stars in the night sky, the last humans, Nietzsche laments, reduce the complexity of the situation by not asking why they exist, but simply what these things are or what they are made

of: “‘What is love? What is creation? What is yearning? What is a star’ – thus asks the last human and then blinks. ‘For the earth has now become small, and upon it hops the last human who makes everything small’” (Nietzsche, 2005[1883]: 16).

The Übermenschian struggle to overcome is made redundant; one can delegate effort for achieving good dietary health to the nutritionists and just simply consume what they advise. The underlying appeal to the last human here is encapsulated in the voiceover of an advertisement for the Huel ready-to-drink pre-mixed variant: “*Huel Ready to Drink takes care of what you need so you can focus on what you want*” (Huel, 2018 [advertisement]). Such rhetoric is a direct admittance to being an interpassive medium to health whereby Huel ‘does’ the active thing for consumers “while they can devote their time to something else” (Fizek, 2018: 150).

### ***The Progenitor’s Fantasy: Re-constructing reality***

Lastly, our data reveals a fantasy of legacy – one that overturns the alienating futurism of Huel and connects the brand back to some semi-mythic progenitor. The foundation for this fantasy is Huel’s narrative of congruence with established ways of eating despite the brand’s characterization as a modernist nutritionally-optimized food technology, something *not* inherent to traditional food cultures. To help better position the powdered solution as adhering to legacy, Huel declares itself consistent with humans’ collective pre-history with nature. This we summarize as: *we know very well that this way of eating is entirely different to the ways we have learned to eat over our own lives, but still we should give it a go because this might not be so different to how our ancestors ate.*

The progenitor’s fantasy locates the brand as the progeny of a *forgotten* relationship with nature or, rather, a semi-mythical past where powdered solutions were indeed a natural



and common source of sustenance for humans (but have simply been disremembered). Faber (2004: 139) suggests, “Forgetfulness and amnesia are typically among ideology’s most faithful accomplices”. We, for example, are faced with the gravitas of our “forgetfulness” on the Huel website:

Neolithic humans discovered they could also mill their food down into a powder for easier transportation and to increase the time the food would last for. With food now available from a reliant and constant source, the time spent finding food could be spent doing other things. Primed with this information, humans have continued to farm, mill and powder food ever since for every section of society. (‘The story of a food revolution’ on About Us, Huel, 2019 [Website])

Here, Huel reconstructs itself as more than some futurist product of science and eases potential anxieties through offering comforting representations of the past and our ancestral relationship with nature. To be made acceptable as a food, its technological origins are repackaged; the inspiration for Huel is repositioned so far back in time that it coincides with humans’ earliest food practices (or, at least in this case, those of the Neolithic period). This repositioning is based on what Žižek calls ‘a radically contingent process of retroactive production of meaning’ (1989: 102) or ‘retroactive restructuring’ (1989: 144). Similarly, Faber (2004: 139) suggests, ‘Much like a king who alters the historical documents in order to hide his humble origin as an illegitimate farmer’s son, ideology tends to belie its birth and retroactively burn its cradle’. Alignment with prehistoric ways of eating enables Huel to circumvent the ‘longstanding structural opposition’ between novelty and tradition in eating (Warde, 1997: 55).

In practice, by providing what Žižek (1997: 23) calls ‘a minimum of “idealization”, of the interposition of fantasmatic frame’, the potentially disturbing prospect of consuming water-soluble powder as food is made conceivable and even idyllic. Ideologically, by framing Huel according to legitimate and pre-industrial ‘milling’ – something the brand’s promotional materials suggest we have been doing since prehistory (e.g. ‘Some people struggle with Huel being a food because it is not in a “traditional food” format. Humans have been turning foods

into flour – a powder – for over 30,000 years; it’s not a new phenomenon’, ‘Why Huel is not a Meal Replacement’, Huel, 2019 [Website]) – consuming subjects are allowed to achieve ‘distance vis-à-vis the Real’ (Žižek, 1997: 23). Here, the ethereal image of heroicized Stone Age progenitors provides an idealizing rationalization that allows consumers to bear the raw fact that they are being asked to consume in an unorthodox way. Hearn crystallizes this fantasmatic logic when evoking origin myths to legitimize and validate Huel’s liquid consistency and undermine the current dietary orthodoxy:

I just think that we're now ‘meat and two veg is norm in this country, everyday’ and that isn't the norm necessarily all around the world. And it’s not the norm that it used to be historically. People sort of go 'liquid food?'. I mean pottage, which is sort of fundamentally a stew, was a staple diet for, I don’t know, hundreds, thousands of years or something like that. Pre that, gruel was another one which was a staple diet which was again a sort of liquid porridge type thing. So those were the sort of staple diets. It wasn’t a big chunk of meat with two veg; that is not the norm going back for our ancestors. (Hearn in Collis et al., 2016 [podcast])

The resurrection of Neolithic milling practices is positioned by Huel as superior to the contemporary forms of food engineering that have superseded it. This is evident in a portion of the website where milled oats are proselytized to be better than many of the foods typically consumed today:

The oat powder in Huel Powder has been milled so finely that it’s readily soluble... Plus, as oats are natural, they provide so much more than just carbohydrates: many vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and phytonutrients too. Indeed, it could be said that the inclusion of oat powder is one of the main reasons why Huel Powder could be considered superior to many foods readily consumed today. (‘The Huel Powder Formula Explained’, Huel, 2019 [Website])

Elsewhere, we can again invoke Žižek who asserts, “the starting point of the critique of ideology has to be full acknowledgement of the fact that is easily possible *to lie in the guise of truth*” (Žižek, 1994: 8, emphasis in original). The real mystery revealed is not the remastering – and improvement – of Neolithic milling through the wonders of modern science but the

seemingly concealed magic of the market to produce, distribute and capitalize on this knowledge to deliver utopian outcomes as if almost by itself. There is an interpassivity deep at work here – just as consumers delegate the ennobling act of managing nutritionally balanced diets to Huel, Huel too delegates much of its efforts in manufacturing, packaging and distribution to others. Hearn justifies his brand’s delegation of production to a contract manufacturer as centered on its own particular kinds of Übermenschian struggle and forms of overcoming:

Dealing with external manufacturers is always challenging. They have their own priorities and timelines which often don’t fit with ours, so it can be frustrating. But they have the machinery and experience that we need, so we’ve built relationships and been patient. You overcome the challenges with a mixture of logic, brute force, speed, willpower and long hours. (Hearn in Fox, 2018)

While “brute force” and “willpower” are communicated, the ultimate requirement to deliver is deferred to someone or something else *ad nauseam* such that everyone is in constant need of specialists, professionals and experts to proclaim and fulfill everything – which is in the spirit of the Nietzschean last human. The result is a Real where the end-consumer is so distanced from his or her food by the number and type of actors or middle-persons involved in neoliberal agri-food chains that the very concept of food itself becomes obscured and genericized. As Friedmann notes, as food systems have become progressively more liberalized, globalized and rationalized, this in turn has led to “the suppression of particularities of time and place in both agriculture and diets” (Friedmann 1992: 379).

The loss of particularities leads to food that can be eaten by anyone, could have come from anywhere, and can even taste like anything, which is consistent with the herd mentality of the last human who is, and is content to be, practically the same as everybody else. To shield the last human from the horrors of this Real however, progenitor fantasies like the Neolithic milling imaginary help to uphold that eating in a genericized way is both natural and inevitable

for Übermenschian survival, has always been done, and ought to be done again.

## **Discussion**

There are a number of positive and progressive elements to nutritionally complete plant-based products like Huel, not least their contribution to declines in meat consumption and countervailing the normative hedonism of eating in our modern obesogenic environment. Moreover, by providing convenience and cost-efficiencies that are directly useful to consumers' lives, it could be argued that the product benefits of Huel match up well with some of the most basic material expectations of progress. The pervasive thinking that the market is the most credible force for achieving progress, however, must be approached as less of a concrete truth and more of a "ruling illusion" (Skillen, 1977) that does not just contextualise Huel and brands like it, but frames and constrains how we think about and act upon the problems related to our food system generally. Market offerings like Huel, however progressive they may be on their own merits, would be less needed if the market had not already made calorie-dense, nutritionally vacuous, and otherwise unhealthy food massively cheap and available, if agricultural production had not been subordinated to intensive capital accumulation, if competitive global value-added processing had not displaced indigenous whole foods diets, and if political models of accountability were levelled at producers rather than appeals to individual consumers' personal responsibility (Friedman and McMichael, 1989; Guthman and DuPois, 2006).

The progress that is achieved through purchasable solutions to problems of the market's own making is based on an ontological assumption that personal consumer choices are enough to save both the food system and population health without the need for attendant political intervention or any kind of systemic reformation. Our positioning in this paper has been to critique such assumptions which we believe first, help the market reproduce itself by ensuring

our participation in it and second, distract from the need for a political solution. Using Huel as our context, we sought to provide a theorization of how the ideology of market-based progress is upheld through a sequence of fantasies that keep the unbearable truth of it all at bay. Our Nietzsche-Žižekian derived analyses reveal how these fantasies ensure market-based progress is Übermenschian in tone and ethos despite the ideological call centring on consumers taking up the docile position of the last human and accepting that self-overcoming is achievable interpassively through market solutions. Through a triumvirate of fantasies centred on the market's pragmatism, universal truth, and legacy, the consuming subject is granted the psychic materials necessary to circumvent traumatic dissatisfactions incurred by the demands of his/her consumption-dominated social reality through even further consumption. Our analyses here expose two theoretical considerations of importance to consumer research and marketing theory.

The first point to note is that the ideology of market-based progress operates in accordance with its subjects' complicity. Here, our paper dovetails with a nascent body of critical, psychoanalytically informed work that treats marketer-generated materials and initiatives as symptomatic of consumers' own fantasies (Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Cluley and Dunne 2012; Campbell and Deane, 2019; Lambert, 2019). Unpacking the fantasies at work within and around brands like Huel should not be read as some grand "emancipatory unveiling procedure" (Campbell and Deane, 2019: 252). Brands such as Huel are symptoms rather than producers of an overarching fantasmatic framework at the heart of consumer culture that enables consumers to continue to consume with impunity. The lesson for marketing theory then is that ideology is not ontologically embedded in marketplace resources but in the very mechanisms by which those who gravitate to them indulge in a collective self-delusion, as well as the play of reveries that ensue so that they can remain deluded. That is, when we think of brand messages that centre on fantasies of the pragmatist, truth-seeker, and progenitor, we are

simultaneously thinking about the larger buttressing reverie of our current economic reality: that humanity's great overcoming is singularly and universally achieved through the market. In parallel with Bradshaw and Zwick (2016) who explore fetishistic *disavowal* whereby the subject of capitalism goes on as if they do not know the truth, our analyses reveal fetishistic *inversion* whereby the subject goes on as if the complete opposite was the truth. In practice, this is evidenced in the spectatorialism of market-based progress that confines consumers to the role of the last human while allowing them to fantasize that they are the inverse, the Overhuman.

In terms of the market "equating the subject to an object of fantasy" (Žižek, 1989: 46), we contribute to the conceptual development of what Cluley and Dunne (2012: 252) refer to as "the post-sovereign consumer". Although Cluley and Dunne make only fleeting reference to this figure – as, understandably, their theoretical focus centres elsewhere – our analyses in this paper help to provide some ontological coordinates to the concept. The post-sovereign consumer, we argue, is shaped, interpellated and ultimately enfeebled along the fantastical contours of market-based progress and the seductiveness of attaining incrementally improving comforts, security, and health by delegating engagement and involvement to market enterprise. The arch-fantasy sold to this subject is that by responsibly buying the right things we can solve all of our collective problems (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). Appreciably, this detached interpassivity has inherent appeal, thus ensuring that the subject surrenders those very things that make him or her sovereign, including what Nietzsche calls one's "will to power".

Creativity, for Nietzsche, is both a signifier and a function of humankind's will to power: "the will is a creator" (Nietzsche 2005[1883]: 122). The "will to" something involves the human resolve to create for oneself. The market however promises progress through solutions which negate the need for creativity and institute interpassivity or a collective

“staying here”; a staying-here characterized by perpetual efforts to maintain the status quo; to curb uncertainty by staying within the current market system. The underlying horror – or Real – that market-based progress is thus not about progression *per se* but fundamentally about stasis (i.e. “if we change things here and there, life could perhaps go on as before” Žižek, 2011: xi) reveals the deadlocks of its ideology and the insecure state of relations between meaningful ways of life and marketplace resources. The idea and value of progress is important here both in terms of its meaning and misrecognition. A Nietzsche-Žižekian critique reveals the contradiction of progressive thinking by identifying the prevalence of false beliefs about the potential for human overcoming, concluding that given the choice consumers elect to remain in stasis through the banal comfort and security of market-made solutions and nevertheless insisting that this submission is in fact the pinnacle of freedom, progress and self-will.

Analyses of brands that position themselves as progressive help to reveal that the relationship between consumer and the marketplace is perhaps no longer (if it ever was) about personal improvement or elevation, but instead about stability through consumption that begets more consumption. Here, the post-sovereign consumer as the last human epitomizes the final elimination of producerly will and creativity, which is a far cry from the optimism that often concentrates around the “empowered” and “reflexive” consuming subject (Shankar et al., 2006). Accordingly, we might submit that the marketplace allows for a consumer that is instead what Winlow and Hall (2012: 472) call “painfully free”. We, as the post-sovereign last humans, are liberated by a “post-political” era constituted by neoliberal consumer capitalism but are simultaneously “denied access to any means that might encourage us to reflect on what freedom is and what we might do with it. We seem to be prisoners of our own victories, essentially locked in a cage constructed of freedoms won in the past” (Winlow and Hall, 2012: 472). Through amenities like nutritionally complete food, freedom is available at a marketized and symbolic level that negates the need to achieve it via political processes creating a deadlock

that the consumer will struggle to overcome. This sobering kernel offers consumer researchers and marketing theorists an important gateway into approaching post-sovereign consumer culture and its fantasmatic hold on populations in the liberalized material world. While previous work has shown how market-coordinated forms of responsible consumption and social change can function as rewarding endeavours for individuals and the basis for passionate entrepreneurialism and communal relationships (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Thompson and Kumar, 2018), we argue that the market's fantasy support structures should nevertheless remain an area for critical debate in marketing theory.

Lastly, as an important aside, we encourage future research to consider the intersections of market-based progress with aspects of contemporary life beyond consumption. Our analysis has focused predominantly on the fantasies that ensure solutions for consumers are found in products rather than political processes. However, unpacking how pressures within the wider ambits of capitalism such as the workplace, over-work and work culture reinforce the market as the most conceivable deliverer of progress could form the basis of a sustained and critical study in its own right.

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