

Why I Love Shoplifting

From big corporations

2000-09-11, [CrimethINC](#)

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Nothing compares to the feeling of elation, of burdens being lifted and constraints escaped, that I feel when I walk out of a store with their products in my pockets. In a world where everything already belongs to someone else, where I am expected to sell away my life at work in order to get the money to pay for the minimum I need to survive, where I am surrounded by forces beyond my control or comprehension that obviously are not concerned about my needs or welfare, it is a way to carve out a little piece of the world for myself—to act back upon a world that acts so much upon me.

It is an entirely different sensation than the one I feel when I buy something. When I pay for something, I'm making a trade; I'm offering the money that I bought with my labor, my time, and my creativity for a product or service that the corporation wouldn't share with me under any other circumstances. In a sense, we have a relationship based on violence: we negotiate an exchange not according to our respect or concern for each other, but according to the forces that we can bring to bear on each other. Supermarkets know they can charge me a dollar for bread because I will starve if I do not buy it from them; they know they can't charge me four dollars, because I will go somewhere else. So our interaction revolves around unspoken threats, rather than love, and I am forced to give up something of my own to get anything from them.¹

Everything changes when I shoplift. I'm no longer negotiating with faceless, inhuman entities that have no concern for my welfare; instead, I'm taking what I need without giving anything up. I no longer feel like I am being forced into an exchange, and I no longer feel as if I have no control over the way the world around me dictates my life. I no longer have to worry about whether the pleasure I receive from the book I purchased was equal to the two hours of labor it cost me to be able to afford it. In these and a thousand other ways, shoplifting makes me feel liberated and empowered. Let's examine what shoplifting has to offer as an alternative way of life.

The shoplifter wins her prize by taking risks, not by exchanging a piece of her life for it. Life for her is not something that must be sold away for seven or eight dollars an hour in return for survival; it is something that is hers because she takes it for herself, because she lays claim to it. In stark contrast to the law-abiding consumer, the means by which she acquires goods is as exciting as the goods themselves; and this means is also, in many ways, more praiseworthy.

Shoplifting is a refusal of the exchange economy. It is a denial that people deserve to eat, live, and die based on how effectively they are able to exchange their labor and capital with others. It is a denial that a monetary value can be ascribed to everything, that having a piece of delicious chocolate in your mouth is worth exactly fifty cents or that an hour of one person's life can really be worth ten dollars more than that of another person. It is a refusal to accept the capitalist system, in which workers have to buy back the products of their own labor at a profit to the owners of capital, who thus get them coming and going.

Shoplifting says NO to all the objectionable features that have come to characterize the modern corporation. It is an expression of discontent with the low wages and lack of benefits that so many exploiting corporations force their employees to suffer in the name of company profits. It is a refusal to pay for low quality products that have been designed to break or wear out soon in order to force consumers to buy more. It is a refusal to fund the environmental damage that so many corporations perpetrate heartlessly in the course of manufacturing their products and building new stores, a refusal to support the corporations that run private, local businesses into bankruptcy, a refusal to accept the murder of animals in the meat and dairy industries and the exploitation of migrant labor in the fruit and vegetable industries. Shoplifting makes a statement against the alienation of the modern consumer. "If we are not able to find or afford any products other than these, that were made a thousand miles from us and about which we can know nothing," it asserts, "then we refuse to pay for these."

The shoplifter attacks the cynical mind control tactics of modern advertising. Today's commercials, billboards, even the floor—layouts and product displays in stores are designed by psychologists to manipulate potential consumers into purchasing products. Corporations carry out extensive advertising campaigns to insinuate their exhortations to consumption into every mind, and even work to make their products into status symbols that people from some walks of society eventually must own in order to be accorded respect. Faced with this kind of manipulation, the law-abiding consumer has two choices: either to come up with the money to purchase these

products by selling his life away as a wage laborer, or to go without and possibly invite public ridicule as well as private frustration. The shoplifter creates a third choice of her own: she takes the products she has been conditioned to desire without paying for them, so the corporations themselves must pay for all of their propagandizing and mind control tactics.

Shoplifting is the most effective protest against all these objectionable attributes of modern corporations because it is not merely theoretical—it is practical, it involves action. Verbal protests can be raised to irresponsible business practices without ever having any solid effect, but shoplifting is intrinsically damaging these corporations at the same time as it (however covertly) demonstrates dissatisfaction. It is better than a boycott, because not only does it cost the corporation money rather than just denying it profit, it also means that the shoplifter is still able to obtain the products, which she may need to survive. And in these days when so many corporations are interconnected, and so many multinationals are involved in unacceptable activity, shoplifting is a generalized protest: it is a refusal to put any cash into the economy at all, so that the shoplifter can be sure that none of her cash will ever end up in the hands of the corporations she disapproves of. In addition to that, she will have to work less for them, as well!

But what about the people in the corporations? What about their welfare? First of all, corporations are distinct from traditional private businesses in that they exist as separate financial entities from their owners. So the shoplifter is stealing from a non-human entity, not directly from the pocket of a human being. Second, since so many workers are paid set wages (minimum wage, for example) that depend more on how little the corporation can get away with paying rather than on how much profit it is making, the shoplifter is not really hurting most of the workforce at any given company either. The stockholders, who are almost always far richer than your average thief, are the ones who stand to lose a little if the company suffers significant losses; but realistically, no campaign of shoplifting could be intense enough to force any of the wealthy individuals who actually profit from these companies into poverty. Besides, modern corporations have money set aside for shoplifting losses, because they anticipate them. That's correct—these corporations are aware that there is enough dissatisfaction with them and their capitalist economy that people are going to steal from them remorselessly. In that sense, shoplifters are just playing their role in society, just like C.E.O.s. More significantly, these corporations are cynical enough to go about their business as usual, even though they know this leaves many of their customers (and employees!) ready to steal anything from them that they can. If they are willing to

continue doing business in this way even when they are aware how many people it alienates, they should not be surprised that people continue stealing from them.

Shoplifting is more than a way to survive in the cutthroat competition of the “free market” and protest corporate injustices. It is also a different kind of orientation to the world and to life.

The shoplifter makes do with an environment that has been conquered by capitalism and industry, where there is no longer a natural world from which to gather resources and everything has become private property, without accepting it or the absurd way of life it entails. She takes her life into her own hands by applying an ancient method to the problem of modern survival: she lives by urban hunting and gathering. In this way she is able to live much as her distant ancestors did before the world was subjugated by technology, imperialism, and the irrational demands of the “free” market; and she can find the same challenges and rewards in her work, rewards that are lost to the rest of us today. For her, the world is as dangerous and as exciting as it was to prehistoric humanity: every day she is in new situations, confronting new risks, living by her wits in a constantly changing environment. For the law-abiding consumer, it is likely that every day at work is similar to the last one and danger is as sorely lacking in life as meaning and purpose are.

To shoplift is to affirm immediate, bodily desires (such as hunger) over abstract “ethics” and other such ethereal constructs, most of which are left over from a deceased Christianity anyway. Shoplifting divests commodities (and the marketplace in general) of the mythical power they seem to have to control the lives of consumers... when they are seized by force, they show themselves for what they are: merely resources that have been held by force by these corporations at the expense of everyone else. Shoplifting places us back in the physical world, where things are real, where things are nothing more than their physical characteristics (weight, taste, ease of acquisition) and are not invested with superstitious qualities such as “market value” and “profit margin.” It forces us to take risks and experience life firsthand again. Perhaps shoplifting alone will not be able to overthrow industrial society or the capitalist system... but in the meantime it is one of the best forms of protest and self-empowerment, and one of the most practical, too!

Shoplifters of the world, unite!

1.

In a love relationship, conversely, people usually think of themselves as benefitting from giving to others, and vice versa. ↩