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What I'm thinking
about

Ewan Morrison: what I'm thinking about ... why capitalism wants us to stay single

'Now that the market is cashing in on the buying power of single people, the radical choice is to get married'

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We like to think we're free in the free market; that we're beyond the forces of advertising and social manipulation by market forces. But there is a new social trend - the rise of 'the single person' as model consumer - that presents us with a paradox. What we once thought of as radical - staying single - may now be reactionary.

The long-term relationship, like the job-for-life, is fast being deregulated into short term, temporary arrangements with no promise of commitment, [as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has been warning us for over a decade](#). It's hard for two people to be self-employed, with no promise of a stable future, together. Capitalism now wants us to be single.

Being single, has since the 60s been seen as a radical choice, a form of rebellion against bourgeois capitalist conformism. As sociologist [Jean-Claude Kaufmann](#) says, the shift away from family life to solo lifestyles in the 20th century was part of the "irresistible momentum of individualism". But this

"freedom" looks a lot less glamorous when viewed through the perspective of planned changes in consumerism.

It now makes economic sense to convince the populace to live alone. Singles consume 38% more produce, 42% more packaging, 55% more electricity and 61% more gas per capita than four-person households, according to a study by [Jianguo Liu](#) of Michigan State University. In the US, never-married single people in the 25-to-34 age bracket, now outnumber married people by 46%, according to the [Population Reference Bureau](#). And divorce is a growth market: one broken family means that two households have to buy two cars, two washing machines, two TVs. The days of the nuclear family as ideal consumption unit are over.

As capitalism sinks into stagnation, corporations have realised that there are two new growth strands – firstly, in the emerging singles market and secondly in encouraging divorce and the concept of individual freedom. This can be seen in changes in advertising, with products as diverse as burgers and holidays being targeted towards singles - in particular single women. New ads for [Honda](#) and Citibank expound solitary self-discovery and relationship postponement over coupledness.

As Catherine Jarvie says, "[top-pocket relationships](#)" where "neither party is looking for long-term commitment" are the new way - witness the meteoric rise of dating website [Match.com](#). In the US, Craigslist ads expose the subconscious connection between disposable consumerism and self-selling: one reads 'Buy my IKEA sofa and fuck me on it first, \$100'.

This equating of self with product has come about precisely because the cycles of planned and perceived obsolescence in product consumption are no longer delivering capitalist growth. In a period of market saturation, when we have already consumed all we can, we are encouraged to objectify ourselves as items 'on the market', consuming others. Exercises in the disposability of humans.

Consumerism now wants you to be single, so it sells this as sexy. The irony is that it's now more radical to attempt to be in a long-term relationship and a long-term job, to plan for the future, maybe even to attempt to have children, than it is to be single. Coupledom, and long-term connections with others in a community, now seem the only radical alternative to the forces that will reduce us to isolated, alienated nomads, seeking ever more temporary 'quick fix' connections with bodies who carry within them their own built-in perceived obsolescence.

The solution: Get radical, get hitched, demand commitment from partners and employers. Say no to the seductions of the disposable singles market.