



Introduction

What is “Consumption”?

Broadly understood, “consumption” defies simple definition, encompassing a vast range of human practices and mental and feeling states (shopping, buying, acquiring, using, possessing, displaying, maintaining, collecting, wasting, desiring, daydreaming, fantasizing), all of which involve complex relations and attachments to an infinite variety of objects and experiences. Material expansion and the proliferation of new forms of consumption have rendered mainstream economic ideas about consumption obsolete. Images and information are now consumed in greater quantities than goods and services, a result of tremendous growth in those sectors of the culture industry specializing in signifying processes designed to entertain and sell. This new category includes the packaged experiences of mass media, amusement parks, shopping malls, tourism, and other forms of commodified entertainment and distraction (Gottdeiner 2000; Rifkin 2000). Of special importance more recently is the burgeoning field of information technology, which is transforming older forms of media and amusement.

A subject matter of this scope lacks disciplinary boundaries and analytic center. In the past, mainstream economics, which viewed the consumer as a rational decision-maker creating “aggregate demand,” held a monopoly on consumption studies. However, other social sciences

entering the field have introduced new kinds of studies and discourses dealing with the noneconomic dimensions and “nonrational” factors involved in consumption practices. Despite long-standing alliances between psychology and economics in the areas of advertising, marketing, and retailing, there have also been psychological and psychoanalytic *critiques* of consumption, beginning most notably with the Frankfurt School of critical theory. Additionally, historians and anthropologists have illuminated the broader social and cultural origins of modern consumption.

Ironically, the discipline of sociology has been a latecomer to the field. And oddly enough, sociologists in the United States—the apex of modern consumerism—have lagged far behind consumption scholars in other countries, most notably the United Kingdom, a genuine paradox given the unprecedented material prosperity among the rich and affluent in the United States in the last twenty years or so and the mass media’s unabashed celebration of leisured wealth.

Thoroughly interwoven with the fabric of everyday life in developed societies, and given a dramatic expansion in cultural production, consumption is now an interdisciplinary topic focused on culture. Incorporating perspectives and interpretive methods from anthropology, history, sociology, and the humanities, the burgeoning field of cultural studies has thoroughly reoriented the study of consumption. The widespread popularity of cultural studies is in large measure a consequence of the societal penetration of new cultural forms and apparatuses designed specifically for selling commodities. Growing numbers of social theorists and sociologists, especially those of a “postmodern” persuasion, have recognized in this transition newly forged links between culture and consumption. While the “cultural turn” in sociology was pioneered primarily by those promoting a productivist paradigm (the “sociology of culture”), a discernible shift toward a “cultural sociology” of a more interpretive and ethnographic persuasion has opened this field to the study of consumption practices.

Reading and Writing Consumption

Despite dramatic growth in the field of cultural studies, interdisciplinary work still too often is slow to develop. This is certainly true of consumption studies, too many of which pay small heed to the inter-

connections among economic, cultural, social, psychological, and social psychological processes constituting consumption practices. Moreover, theoretical imbalance weakens those varieties of cultural studies (chiefly in the United States) shaped by critiques of orthodox Marxism and the antieconomistic tendencies characterizing the discourses of numerous cultural and identity movements of the post-sixties era. Rejection of the crude Marxist model of economic base and cultural superstructure was a significant theoretical gain often purchased at the price of an equally flawed cultural determinism leaving little or no room for economic influences. In the rush to uncover the signifying processes of capitalism, linkages between production and consumption have often been obscured, discouraging more nuanced formulations of the persistent connections between economic and cultural forces. With the turn to interpretive methods, semiotic analysis and antitotalizing ethnographic approaches have enjoyed growing popularity. But despite their impressive contributions, these approaches have minimized or ignored the systemic economic foundations of cultural and social practices.

Consumption, like all social practices, is shaped and conditioned by a multitude of material and nonmaterial factors. But compared to other social practices, consumption now forms the most powerful link between the economic and sociocultural realms. Consumption links exchange value and the satisfaction of material need and want to the production of meaning, identity, and a sense of place and social membership.

The roots and nature of distinctly modern forms of consumption, as well as the evolution of consumer culture, are inseparable from the rise of a mature system of commodity exchange ushered in by industrial capitalism. Indeed, the theory of the commodity form, which posits the elevation of exchange over use value, laid much of the groundwork for the very idea of modernity as a new social and cultural formation based on an expanded and rationalized marketplace. These developments always presupposed an ethos of individualism linked to a cultural framework of personal achievement and recognition through the acquisition, display, and use of worldly possessions. Modern Western notions of the formation of an individual/social self therefore have always been strongly bound to a set of beliefs surrounding the satisfaction of economic need and ambition as well as personal desire. In this

sense, modernity itself can be read as the systematic commodification of need and want, a highly rationalized and organized reduction of the full range of satisfactions to the exchange and use of commodities.

At the same time, Western modernity has always been met by countermovements attempting to alleviate or resist the dominant tendencies of a commodifying and rationalizing society. The rise of romanticism, workers' revolts, and the emergence of various utopian movements opposed to modern industrial capitalism are well-known examples of a large array of efforts to confront the worst ills of nineteenth-century modernity with alternative visions and ways of life. With the shift of emphasis in the twentieth century from production to consumption, consumer movements and an assortment of cultural avant-gardes have arisen as countertendencies to the increasing force of the corporation and oppressive bureaucratic institutions. The modern problems of alienation, dehumanization, and inequality have thus generated a continuing succession of responses aimed at restoring dignity, power, and a sense of meaning and identity to those most frustrated and harmed by the ascendancy of the modern economy.

Nonetheless, the wholesale inscription of subjectivity in the modern commodity is the source of a fundamental transformation in identity formation and the structure of the self. The culture of commodities and its modes of consumer involvement shape modern subjects' search for meaning, social membership, and self-definition. By examining the subjective properties of commodities, we can begin to grasp the underlying connections between a wealth-accumulating economy and the cultural positions and understandings of its social subjects.

Such a conceptualization, however, needs to maintain the analytical distinction between the exchange and use values of commodities. Whereas the former is the basis of the commodity form, the latter represents an appropriation of useful objects by social subjects acting as consumers. Consumption, therefore, needs to be considered as a complex, multivalent phenomenon, a manifestation of economic, social, cultural, historical, and psychological processes and effects. In this sense, consumption practices occupy a tension between commercially based commodification and subjectively based satisfactions and meanings.

Keeping these considerations in mind, the present study addresses the following questions: If consumption is now the major lo-

cus of cultural production—of meaning creation—how does this take place and with what effects? How do we theorize consumers as social subjects seeking meaning, pleasure, identity, and place? To what extent are the social and cultural practices underlying the formation of self and identity dependent on consumption as opposed to other factors, and on the commodity form as opposed to other kinds of relationships with objects? These questions will be addressed in a mode that departs from recent academic work. While striving to avoid reductionisms and determinisms, my approach explores consumption generically rather than interpretatively or ethnographically. In this theoretical mode, the particular, local, and subcultural are sacrificed for a *structural* and *processual* framework that views consumption as a “complex unity” but that nonetheless is understandable in terms of lived experience. This analysis is multidimensional in the sense that it takes into account (1) the underlying (“objective”) structural conditions facilitating and constraining consumption practices, and (2) the desires, practicality, and creativity shaping the (“subjective”) actions and meanings of social subjects in their positions as consumers. In other words, consumers will be read as social and individual subjects who are (1) agents acting out of largely unconscious forces shaped by the productive and reproductive needs of capitalism, and (2) as actors consciously seeking to satisfy needs and desires in meaningful ways.

Consumer Culture

An inevitable consequence of the ever-rising consumption requirements of a developing capitalist economy, consumer culture represents an unprecedented interpenetration of economic and cultural forces, an intertwining of the logic of growing markets with the new cultural logics of advanced communications, information technologies, and entertainment industries. Consumer culture is part of the modern take-off of commodification and as such, presupposes and further develops a social/cultural framework of individualism and an ethos of democratized pleasure and self-fulfillment, all in a market setting. Consumption in advanced capitalist society thus has a dual nature in which the economic and cultural are both internally specialized but simultaneously fused.

Consumption constitutes the main link in the circuit of capital flow and accumulation (purchases/sales as the moment of profit realization) that is the source of profit. To this end, consumption has been increasingly rationalized in a Weberian sense (Weber 1958a, 1958b). But consumption also holds complex meanings for social subjects in terms both of the signifying codes and symbolisms governing the social exchange of commodities and the satisfactions and pleasures that consumption provides the self. In other words, commodity exchange is shaped and regulated both by (1) the systemic requirements of capitalist production, and (2) the search for status, power, pleasure, fulfillment, achievement, and other goals that consumption represents subjectively to consumers. The pursuit of these goals is, in turn, structured by the social relations of class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and other socially and culturally marked divisions and differences within the population. Mapping the subjectivity of consumption thus depends upon an economic *and* cultural contextualization of consumption practices.

The triumph of consumer culture means that, while every sale and purchase is at bottom an economic event, the object of consumption today is increasingly culture itself. The views of the controversial French theorist Jean Baudrillard (1981, 1988, 1998) serve as a point of departure for the now widely accepted notion that in technologically advanced and highly mediated cultural systems, the object of consumption is not so much tangible products as coded cultural meanings. This claim is true in a double sense frequently overlooked in discussions of Baudrillard. Beginning with the proposition that commodities acquire the status of signs, Baudrillard argued that the physical characteristics of commodities are less important than their social and cultural significance within a coded universe of objects. The circulation of goods and services gives rise to a semiotic system rooted in the commodity's inherent capacity to signify. In this view, acts of consumption have less to do with the satisfaction of need and want than with the construction of meaning within the social and cultural worlds in and through which commodities circulate and exchange with each other semiotically. But the consuming of culture is to be understood in yet another sense. Television shows, commercial film, videos, advertising in all its guises, theme and amusement parks, packaged tours, shopping malls, fast-food outlets, professional sporting events—all are

examples of the consumption of meanings and pleasures packaged and sold as *discrete experiences and events*. Within this sphere, forms of amusement, entertainment, and even art are commodified and marketed. The first level of interpenetration represents a culturalization of the commodity, whereby goods and services are inscribed in calculated ways with significance and a set of rules. At the second level, commodity logic enters the realm of representation itself. Once commodified, culture acquires a new materiality in the form of (primarily) visual imagery that constitutes a realm of exchange *sui generis*.

The origins of the idea of a consumer culture can be traced to the tradition of critique prefigured in Marx's early comments on commodity fetishism. The view that culture was a system of power and domination embodied in the commodity form was pioneered by the Frankfurt School and later taken up by the Birmingham School of British cultural studies, in whose hands the argument for domination was tempered by the notion of "resistance." Eventually the discourse of the commodity form faded from view, only to be replaced by linguistic notions of culture as a system of constraint and control, a familiar theme in a variety of semiotic and structuralist scholarship. Claims about the vulnerability of cultural codes were soon introduced by poststructuralist theories, which emphasized the instabilities of language and meaning. The common thread in these theories was a linking of culture to power and a reading of the subject as both absorbed by and resisting systems of ideology, signs, and discourse.

From another angle, critical conceptions of consumer culture have drawn on suggestive comparisons between twentieth-century consumerism and the political economy of Marx in the nineteenth. Here, the modern consumer is likened to the factory worker lamented in Marx's classic texts on capitalism. While it is a mistake to think that Marx never addressed consumption, his economic writings, in fact, dwelt almost entirely on transformations in the sphere of production. While Marx saw labor ideally as the vehicle of expressive self-development and fulfillment, he found in the reality of the capitalist workplace a condition of alienation. Estranged from themselves and their own activity, individual producers confronted the products of their labor as alien things. Commodities represented the dispossession of the worker not only with regard to ownership and control, but also in terms of meaningful and satisfying work. Similarly, critics of consumption have

made claims about the alienating and “falsifying” features of *consumerism*, which they see as a manipulation of the needs and wants of the consumer for the sake of profit. In this account, consumerism leads to a state of perpetual dissatisfaction while simultaneously bolstering class inequality and oppression. Further, just as the relations of production dehumanize workers, rendering them powerless before machine and product, the relations of consumption separate consumers in a fragmented, impersonal, and artificial landscape of materialistic excess. In both cases, the individual confronts a reification, a “thing-like” existence emanating from an impersonal system of commodity exchange.

Consumerism

While consumption as a social practice has always rested on cultural foundations, consumer culture is a uniquely modern (some would say postmodern) formation with its own distinctive characteristics. What is perhaps most momentous about consumer culture, however, is that its *raison d'être* extends far beyond a calculated and managed satisfaction of individual needs and wants. Consumer culture has been a breeding ground for the notion that we should embrace the pleasures of *consumption-for-its-own-sake*. Thus, the essence of consumerism is the principle that consumption is an end-in-itself, its own justification. Deeply rooted in the profit motive, consumerism is now a widely shared ideology and worldview capable of creating strong attachments to consumption as a way of life, based on a belief in the enduring power of material possessions and commercial distractions to bring happiness and personal fulfillment. Through consumerism, the experience of self and other is increasingly framed by the idea that life's meaning is reducible to the purchase, ownership, and use of commodities and what these commodities signify about the person.

At the same time, though consumer culture is infused with consumerism, it is important to draw a distinction between the two. Consumer culture consists of a system of meanings, representations, and practices that organize consumption as a way of life. Consumerism, in contrast, is an ideology that seductively binds people to this system. By converting consumption from a means to an end, consumerism turns the mere *acquisition* of commodities into a basis of identity and self-

hood. At its extreme, consumerism reduces consumption to a therapeutic program of compensation for life's ills, even a road to personal salvation. Consumerism thus deforms consumer culture, a system that, for all its faults, contains real possibilities for the satisfaction of human need and desire. Thus, given the distortions of consumerism, it is important to imagine a consumer culture that is uncorrupted by consumerist beliefs, attitudes, and drives. Such an imagining is a persistent presence throughout this book and is explicitly addressed in the Conclusion.

It nonetheless needs to be acknowledged that, at least since the decade of the seventies, consumerism has been in the ascendance, not only in the United States but throughout much of the world. Both driven by and driving "globalization," consumerism has spread rapidly from the United States to Europe and now to other regions of the globe undergoing rapid economic growth and westernization, most notably the countries of east and south Asia. Not only has global competition intensified consumerist policies and practices domestically in the United States, but consumerism is showing its face in aspiring economies everywhere. Domestically and globally, the push for greater economic affluence is supported by frequent appeals to the notion of "consumer sovereignty," an ideological slogan announcing a shift to a worldwide consumerist agenda. While the notion of "sovereignty" only *promises* power to consumers as it provides a smokescreen for corporate control, the part of this global ideology that is real is apparent in the growing internationalization of the consumer marketplace. Consumer products and styles cross borders with astonishing ease, increasingly in the form of eclectic amalgams of cultural traditions from all over the globe. Consumer goods are rapidly acquiring an international look, signifying the spread of consumption as a way of life even before there is a material basis for it in many regions of the developing world.

A theoretical study of consumption of the type I propose may seem far afield from these global developments and only indirectly related to fundamental questions of material existence and survival in societies outside the economically prosperous "first world." Yet casual observation of the growing modernity and Western-style commercialism of other countries points to the increasing dominance and universality of consumer culture and the potential seductions of consumerism among widely varying populations. Analyzing the cultural and ideological

workings of consumption in advanced Western societies thus provides a template for grappling with the social, cultural, and psychological consequences of economic development on a global scale.

Questions of identity are of utmost importance in this regard. The rise of a consumer culture in the twentieth-century West from the beginning depended upon the formation of identities organized around the attractions and social meanings of mass-produced commodities and a belief in goods possession as the bedrock of selfhood and status. The mobilization of desire around buying habits and material possessions was implicitly geared to the production of a consumer identity on a broad scale.

Yet the fruits of the consumer way of life have never been evenly distributed. In this respect, consumerism displays the familiar traits of all ideologies. It promises much and delivers little, it claims to represent the general interest while serving a set of particular interests, it strives to hide discrepancies between the ideal and the real, and it functions as a sometimes powerfully cohesive social force that obscures glaring inequalities. The gap between the rise of consumer identities and the ability of most people to successfully pursue a consumer way of life is an underlying contradiction of advanced capitalist societies and a major source of their chronic tensions. However, this gap also has implications for the future of developing countries as they rapidly adopt the consumerist agenda.

At the same time, the production of consumer identities has always been a flawed process. Much has yet to be learned about the degree to and ways in which people living in Western societies actually identify themselves through their consumption practices or with the idealizations and promises of consumerism. On the one hand, modern identity and selfhood are predicated on achievements of the consumer; on the other hand, it remains unclear the actual extent to which consumerism determines, shapes, or conditions personal and social identity and how this varies with class differences.

Hence, while the power of consumerism seems to grow unabated, there are persistent discrepancies between its claims and the everyday practices and conditions of consumer society. An analysis of the relationship between consumption and identity needs to consider the effects of social inequality in the impact of consumer culture on social relations and identity formation. Beyond this, the challenge in theoriz-

ing consumer identity is to determine the actual degrees and kinds of involvement of social subjects in consumption as a way of life, as well as to sort through the complexities and ambiguities of identity itself.

The Legacy of Critique

The common deficiency in critiques of consumerism stems from the theoretical conundrum plaguing social theory in general, if not all the social sciences: how to reconcile “actor” and “structure,” “subject” and “object”? Despite their many strengths, classical theories of consumption have developed a critical understanding of consumer culture at the expense of an adequate theory of social and individual subjectivity. In the Marxist tradition, economic determinism and manipulation theory, which in their purer readings see the consumer respectively as slave and puppet, beg complicated questions about the nature of human need and desire; its real, imagined, or potential satisfaction under different historically specific conditions; and more generally, the consumer’s search for meaning and place. In another vein, the status-seeking tradition, originating with Thorstein Veblen’s classic *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1934) and continuing through popular writers such as John Kenneth Galbraith (1958) and Vance Packard (1957), has narrowly read modern consumerism as little more than the machinations of a self-perpetuating game of status competition among members of different classes and their assorted strata. Yet another tradition, associated with authors such as Christopher Lasch (1979), Daniel Bell (1978), and others, sees in consumerism a major source of self-seeking hedonism breeding narcissism, social isolation, anomie, and an erosion of the work ethic. Finally, the tradition of cultural studies, while known for its serious engagement with the popular consciousness of consumers and various forms of “resistance” to domination, has tended to limit itself to textual and social readings of consumption practices at the sacrifice of fully comprehending the subjectivity of consumption and its locus in the self. Their enduring contributions notwithstanding, these critical perspectives overgeneralize their conclusions while ignoring important questions about the relationship between commodities and subjects. Not only are these theories overly pessimistic, but also by concentrating on the systemic roots of consumption and consumerism in capitalist society they fail to provide

a balanced appreciation of the place of consumption in the search for self and identity.

The Problem of Subjectivity

It seems odd that, while a terminology of subjectivity is indispensable to discourses about consumption (consider “need,” “want,” “desire,” “satisfaction,” “pleasure”), these concepts seldom if ever get adequately defined or developed. We can begin by saying that needs are minimum shared requirements for survival and well-being, whether biological, material, social, cultural, or psychological. In contrast, wants are more subjective and personal in nature, implying choice. Desire is a more elusive but richer concept associated with appetite, drive, longing, yearning, passion, or other physical, mental, or emotional feeling-states.

While it is important to give these terms a formal definition, the bigger challenge is to delineate the states or conditions to which they refer. One of the key characteristics of high-consumption society is its attempt to *conflate* need, want, and desire, all of which tend to merge in a whole complex of subjective feelings and meanings surrounding the commodity. Related to this is the intriguing problem of insatiability. Given the nature of desire, manipulative advertising strategies, and the incessant novelty of a rapid turnover economy, consumer culture conspires to perpetuate a sense of restlessness and lack. The sources and ramifications of this state—what I call “chronic marginal dissatisfaction”—is the key to theorizing the nature of the system of consumption in our time.

In my view, the problem of subjectivity lies at the center of numerous unresolved controversies about consumer society. One such controversy concerns the fate of social relations. On one side are claims (from “modern” and “postmodern” thinkers alike) about consumption destroying social relationships, accompanied by images of fragmented selves and identities in a world rendered impersonal, rootless, privatized, rapidly changing, and overly differentiated by an ever-expanding marketplace (or “cash nexus”). On the other side are arguments claiming that consumption brings people together in new modes of association in which family and friends spend time together in the enjoyments of shopping and entertainment. To clarify this kind of debate, it is

necessary to closely examine the subjective and social dimensions of the consumer experience.

Finally, how are we to think about the self in the face of critiques of consumerism? Given the implications of self-negation or distortion in the writings of the Frankfurt School, is there any room in theories of consumption and consumerism for notions of genuine self-realization? More generally, how are we to think about the relationships among self, other, and the world of objects? Exploring the realm of subjectivity provides an opening for these questions and a window onto the possibility of alternatives to the prevailing system.

Social Subjects, Consumption, and Identity Formation

To examine the relationship between consumption and identity, one must locate consumption practices in the subjective spaces between the following: (1) the economic and signifying apparatuses of consumer culture (production, advertising, marketing, public relations, entertainment), which constitute consumers as *agents* of a profit-driven system and massive culture industry (the commodity form); and (2) a quest for pleasure, self-definition, fulfillment, social acceptance, place, and a sense of belonging, all of which constitute consumers as *actors* in a world of goods (the object world). In developed societies, the latter are increasingly unrealizable except within a context of commodity exchange. Market-based individualism and bureaucracy assign these functions to a commercialized realm of “leisure pursuits.” At the same time, subjects find ways to appropriate commodities as objects of satisfaction and meaning both within the structure of the commodity form and often outside its coded definitions and rules.

To situate consumption in this fashion, it is necessary to consider identity formation from the standpoint of (1) the social dynamics of consumption, and (2) consumption as a set of cultural processes. From both perspectives, identity inheres in consumption practices as a function of (1) system-based codes imposed on agents, and (2) subjects’ ability as actors to appropriate a range of objects for purposes of self-definition and expression within *and* outside the codes. Identity formation through consumption is often linked to traditional or conventional social roles and loyalties (kinship, occupation, ethnicity) but

can extend beyond these to the creation of new kinds of identities circumscribed entirely by the appropriation of commodities. In both cases, identity formation occurs at the conjunctures of status, lifestyle, and self-processes—the major nodes around which consumption produces its meanings and effects.

Conventional sociological studies focus largely on the structural or positional features of consumption, the conceptual underpinnings of which are class and status. Consumer subjectivity has always been closely articulated with the social and cultural dimensions of class, which correspond approximately to the concepts of status and lifestyle. However, class has lost much of its significance, and with the growth of consumer culture, the sociology of consumption has turned to questions of status and more importantly, lifestyle. Although it can also describe a living pattern outside the orbit of consumer culture, for most researchers, lifestyle refers to the expressive aspects of consumer spending, the practices that identify and differentiate consumers within the marketplace of goods, services, and entertainments. Analysis of the connections between consumption and identity, therefore, revolves primarily around the meaning of lifestyle phenomena and their impact on definitions of self and other.

Modern/Postmodern

Although consumer culture has been theorized as both cause and symptom of a postmodern condition, consumption and consumerism are quintessentially modern themes. But it is important to recognize that these assume different shapes in the critiques of modernity and postmodernity, respectively.

In the context of modernity, critiques of consumption have struck recurring themes of privatization and social withdrawal. The main dynamic of modernity, the argument goes, has been a mutually reinforcing relationship between market growth and privatization within evolving structures of consumption. Thus, self projects and identity formation have been intertwined with a *private* appropriation of cultural goods, with implications of withdrawal from the structures of public and community life in favor of individualized, interpersonal, and often isolated modes of consumption. At the same time, claims abound that modernity has evolved new social forms of consumption centered on lifestyle prac-

tices. But modernity also differentiates and sorts people in unpredictable ways. Moreover, in the realm of technology (today, television, video, wireless, the Internet) modernity, it is argued, leads to an erosion of Enlightenment values of autonomy and reason insofar as it creates dependencies on ever more complicated and mysterious gadgets, even though these technologies in many respects reinforce and extend democratic modes of participation. In these and other ways, modernity thus displays its own dialectics (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972), providing a basis for the distinction between “modern” and “postmodern.”

From the standpoint of the subject, the commodity form leads to an increasing fragmentation of experience and meaning. Inherent in the logic of the modern marketplace, this fragmentation occurs concomitantly with an intensification of difference, also promoted by the market. While many postmodernists’ comments about a “de-centered” subject and fluid, fragmented identities seem overstated, it seems undeniable that in post-sixties Western society, identity has been made more complicated and precarious by an eruption of difference. Conceptually, of course, identity and difference are two sides of the same coin, each existing through and by means of the other. Yet it seems today that identity is overwhelmed by difference. To a large extent, this has taken the form of a relativizing “otherness” that undermines a coherent sense of self and other.

Postmodernity, however, poses the problems of fragmentation and incoherence in yet another sense. Social subjects are disoriented by an accumulated excess (or which is the same thing, deficit) of meaning brought on by the material and visual overabundance of commodity society. In a vast, eclectic, and changing landscape of competing objects and images, identity formation can only be problematic at best and hazardous at worst.

Understanding and appraising consumer culture calls for an examination of these conditions in both their celebratory and critical implications. Postmodernity needs to be understood as a series of mutations in modernity that emerge from its internal contradictions and that develop alongside modernity without entirely replacing it. Hence the two conditions coexist. While in seeming opposition, modern and postmodern conceptions capture different aspects and levels of contemporary consumption. In focusing on the struggle for selfhood and identity, the modern discourses of individuality, impersonality, and

isolation are no less indispensable than the postmodern discourses of fragmentation and difference.

Beyond Political Economy and Cultural Studies

Despite the abiding presence in this study of the tradition of commodity critique, especially the Frankfurt School version, my goal is to construct a theoretical framework and methodology that move beyond overly simple claims of domination to a more balanced and nuanced account of the dynamics of contemporary consumption. The semiotic, poststructuralist, and anthropological strains of cultural studies have played a significant role in modifying, developing, or repudiating certain themes of this earlier tradition, offering a counterweight to one-dimensional readings of consumption. While there is room for skepticism about the textual paradigm's ultimate usefulness for social analysis, to the extent that theory necessarily reflects the sociohistorical circumstances of its production, an emphasis on textuality and language is consistent with the reassertion of culture and particularly the rise of semiotics in the commercialism of advanced capitalist societies.

However, I propose moving beyond both existing critical *and* cultural theory to a position that occupies key tensions between them, attempting to synthesize elements of both. But this is a position that moves the analysis to an entirely different level insofar as it reads consumption practices from the vantage point of consumers as individual and social subjects with everyday conscious and unconscious desires and motivations. In place of the domination/resistance paradigm of cultural studies but not completely unrelated, I propose a less political and more analytical series of distinctions for an accounting of self and identity in commodity society. Such distinctions as “semiotic”/“symbolic” and “actor”/“system” are, I believe, more illuminating of the discursive, social, and psychological dimensions of consumption and more effective in grasping the experiential dimensions of consumer society than conflict models. Threading through this analysis is the question to what extent the meanings of consumption are controlled by the commodity form as opposed to consuming subjects. At the same time, while attempting to maintain a nonpartisan stance, my analysis attempts not to lose sight of

the distortions, deformations, and pathologies characterizing consumer culture and society.

Chapter Schema

This study is divided into two parts. Part One outlines the theoretical terrain of consumption, beginning with the major traditions of commodity critique and cultural theory and concluding with a new mode of analysis focused on the subjectivity of consumption.

Chapter One examines the relationship between commodities and subjects, identifying theoretical lineages in the critique of commodity society, including the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism, the Veblen tradition of status seeking, and portrayals of consumerism as a form of hedonism. This chapter ends by framing consumption in terms of a historical/theoretical transition from need to desire.

Chapter Two outlines culturalist approaches to consumption, selectively retracing the contributions of semiotics, anthropology, and cultural studies, including important figures such as Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu. This chapter concludes by proposing that consumption as a cultural process be read critically in terms of an historical transition from symbolizing to signifying processes.

Chapter Three again examines the relationship between self and commodity. Using the traditions of commodity fetishism and cultural theory as a backdrop, the commodity is “deconstructed” in terms of its internal relations with the consuming subject, disclosing the important psychological and social dimensions of consumption. This chapter examines the meaning dimensions of consumption in terms of signs and symbols. Emphasis is placed on the phenomenon of consumer insatiability and its structural and social psychological dynamics. Finally, consumer culture is situated in relation to the modern ethos of self-fulfillment and its hedonistic strains.

Part Two explores the social relations of identity, with emphasis on the phenomena of status and lifestyle as sociocultural manifestations of commodity exchange and object appropriation. Theories of status and lifestyle are explored and critiqued from the standpoint of consumption as a basis of identity formation and social membership.

Chapter Four addresses the dynamics of status and lifestyle and their bearing on identity. The focus of this chapter is the workings of

the consumer marketplace in a “post-Fordist” economy, where rapid goods turnover and product differentiation accelerate the fashion cycle and the production of lifestyles, blurring and redrawing status boundaries. The major issue will be the extent to which consumption practices are an expression of status-seeking behavior as opposed to a search for social membership and belonging without regard to hierarchy.

Chapter Five attempts an overall theoretical assessment of the relationship between consumption and identity, including challenges to prevailing assumptions about this topic. Following a comparison of “modern” and “postmodern” conceptions of identity and identity formation, the theory of social constructionism is critiqued and applied to the task of analyzing identity formation through consumption. The chapter concludes with an analytical typology structured around a distinction between “codified” and “individuated” modes of identity formation.