POLITICAL ECONOMY, DIFFERENCE AND THE GEOGRAPHIES OF CONSUMPTION

David B Clarke and Martin Purvis

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D B Clarke and M Purvis, School of Geography, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT

Abstract: In the current beginnings of the mapping of the consumer society, the engagement of historical materialism with poststructuralist 'philosophies of difference' has manifested itself as a confrontation. This essay examines the possibility of a rapprochement between these philosophies by analysing their stances with respect to the processes, histories, geographies of consumption. It has been suggested that a philosophy of difference does nothing more than mimic a capitalist ideology of choice; that it represents a levelling of philosophy to the vulgar status of consumerism (Eagleton, 1986). The counterposition would assert that there is a lack of tolerance to difference inherent in the rationalism of Marxism, which ultimately adheres to production as its central metaphysical concept. In examining such ideas we arrive at a position which seeks to ground judgmental positions with respect to the political status of consumption (and production) in notions of collectivity and action. By elucidating the political potentialities of different philosophical approaches, which present themselves as opposites, we hope to interrupt - interminably and retroactively - the development of a geography of the consumer society which is simply additive to existing geographies of the productive society.

'Better, as Brecht remarked, to start from the 'bad new things' rather than from the 'good old ones'.

That, however, is where postmodernism stops. Brecht's comment alludes to the Marxist habit of extracting the progressive moment from an otherwise unpalatable or ambivalent reality... [P]ostmodernism... caricatures the Brechtian slogan by proclaiming not that the bad contains the good, but that the bad is good...' (Eagleton, 1986, page 141).

Introduction

There is evidence of a kind of imbrication between particular philosophies and theories of particular social practices. From historical materialism, models of the revolutionary transformation of society trace a dialectical projection which is equally enshrined in political economy and its stress on the moment of productive transformation in the material economy. Anti-Hegelian philosophies, poststructuralist philosophies of 'difference', propose the world according to a textual model characterised by 'dissemination' - in which some have perceived nothing more than the philosophical counterpart of (capitalist) consumerism. More crudely still, these latter philosophies have taken off at a time when consumer capitalism has allegedly reached a triumphant phase, in the flowering of a 'condition of postmodernity' (Harvey, 1989).

To what extent can the positions painted by two self-caricaturing opposites be taken as markers of academic and political traditions when it comes to the political assessment of issues such as consumerism? In the following essay we examine the characteristics of dialectics, difference and consumption in order to propose a more sensitised approach to consumption, consumerism and the consumer society within geography. By exploring some of the detail of these issues it is anticipated

that we may inform the rapidly growing literature on consumption within the discipline in a manner which acts against any new orthodoxy. It is important to work through some of the relations between opposing philosophical positions as they relate to consumption, not least in order that many of the more simplistic understandings of the history and geography of the consumer society can be laid to rest. In their place, a more nuanced understanding gives rise to a more measured appreciation of the politics of consumption.

Three strands will be woven through this essay. Firstly, there is an attempt to indicate the direct line taken on consumption as a social practice in different philosophical traditions. Secondly, the broader ontologies these differing positions imply are explored. This is crucial given that these ontologies impact upon the understandings of practices such as consumption in a quite fundamental, yet frequently neglected way. Thirdly, empirical evidence on past and present consumption is brought to bear on these understandings. Whilst it is not anticipated that this consideration will dramatically transform the way in which consumption is treated in geography, it is hoped that it will have ultimately served the purpose of sensitising us to the way in which philosophical fashions interact with substantive topics of concern in a way which interrupts - interminably and retroactively - the development of a geography of the consumer society which is simply additive to existing geographies of the productive society.

Political economy

'The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they all form members of a totality, distinctions within a unity. Production predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over all other moments as well. The process always returns to production to begin anew. That exchange and consumption cannot be predominant is self-evident. Likewise, distribution as distribution of products; while as distribution of the agents of production it is itself a moment of production. A definite production thus determines a definite consumption, distribution and exchange as well as definite relations between these different moments. Admittedly, however, in its one-sided form, production is in itself determined by the other moments. For example if the market, i.e. the sphere of exchange, expands, then production grows in quantity and the divisions between its different branches become deeper. A change in distribution changes production, e.g. concentration of capital, different distributions of the population between town and country, etc. Finally, the needs of consumption determine production. Mutual interaction takes place between the different moments. This is the case with every organic whole' (Marx, 1973, page 96, emphasis in original).

This famous statement of Marx's, taken from the Grundrisse, on the relations between different moments of the totality of capital circulation, the system by which capitalist society in its entirety materially reproduces itself, provides the classic dialectical statement on the matter. It is certainly more subtle than many critics of Marxism and even many Marxists have assumed. For example, due accord is given to the possibility - indeed the inevitability - that changes in exchange, distribution or consumption affect or effect production, and, of course, vice versa. It is clearly stated, for instance, that 'production is in itself determined by the other moments', though importantly this is held to relate to production in its 'one-sided form'. There is in addition a seemingly contradictory yet unequivocal assertion by Marx that production 'predominates'. Marx here indicates a broader 'antithetical' definition of production and states that '[t]he [circulation] process always

returns to production to begin anew.' In other words, to understand how the social totality, in the shape of the circulation process, is reproduced or transformed, one needs to look to the moment of production as the key moment in transforming the whole. Presumably the 'antithetical' definition, production defined against itself, refers to the fact that production cannot ever be adequately represented in its 'one-sided' definition - precisely because it always already represents this key moment, containing within itself the potentiality to alter the contours not only of itself but of the totality of circulation, of capitalist society as a whole.

This assertion of Marx's, however, and its corollary - that 'exchange and consumption cannot be predominant is self-evident' - remains problematic. It relates to Marx's acceptance, after 1844, of the 'fundamental ontological significance [of] productive activity' (Arthur, 1986, page 5, emphasis in original). It is, of course, important not to misinterpret Marx with respect to his privileging of production. His definition incorporates a stratified view; whilst the 'one-sided' definition is common to economics of all stripes, Marx's 'antithetical' definition, which stands in something like an ex-centric relation to the one-sided definition, marks out the dialectical character of his conception. This conception is (reasonably) safe from criticisms which simply misinterpret it. It is not, though, beyond criticism.

Perhaps the only way to proceed in constructing such a critique is to look to the implications following from it - that is to say, to look at the development of the entire edifice of Marxian theory beginning with Marx's Capital (Marx, 1967). Clearly this is not an insignificant task. We therefore take the

liberty here of short-circuiting this. This carries with it the obvious danger of caricaturing the heterogeneous mantel of historical materialism, but as a means of proceeding we can find no alternative. The most familiar work to geographers lying within this tradition of thought is undoubtedly Harvey's (1982) The Limits to Capital. Harvey provides a close reconstruction of Marx's mature political economy, detailing how Marx elaborates on the circulation of capital in ever more complex ways. Marx's Capital and Harvey's The Limits to Capital both reveal how the many and varied social forms which present themselves as the more or less familiar entities constituting capitalism relate to the circulatory flux of capital. In Harvey's sustained efforts to theorise urbanism, for example, he demonstrates the ways in which the changing landscape of capitalism represents a variety of spatial 'fixes' to crises of overaccumulation in a society whose history and geography is essentially defined with respect to class relations (Harvey 1982, 1985a, 1985b). In spite of the nuanced view of consumption that lies at the kernel of the dialectical process, it is fair to say that on the whole, little note is taken of the possibility that consumption itself might have more than a one-dimensional character. Whilst there have been and continue to be attempts to develop this area of Marxian theory more fully (Lefebvre, 1971; Baudrillard, 1968, 1970; Preteceille and Terrail, 1984; Heller, 1974; Fine and Leopold, forthcoming), many attempts to do just this have ended up parting company with Marxism, most evidently in the case of Baudrillard (1975, 1981).

A by-product of the Marxian line on the place of consumption has been the sociological reduction of the status of consumption

to a private, sole activity, albeit often as a network of - precisely - individuals:

> 'Production, distribution, exchange and consumption thus form a perfect connection, production standing for the general, distribution and exchange for the special, and consumption for the individual, in which all are joined together' (Marx, in Elster, 1986, page 8).

The individuality afforded to the consumer, in contradistinction to the collective solidarity surrounding the workplace has implications in terms of the ideological status it automatically places upon the action of consumers as never more than a form of false consciousness in the shape of 'consumer sovereignty'. This characterisation is in part underpinned by Marx's (1967) thesis on the 'fetishism of commodities' where it is held that:

> 'the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things' (Marx, 1967, page 73).

Whether this leaves any space for the idea that the action of consumers may be constitutive as well as simply constituted, however, is an important question - and one which seems to jar with the cultural possibilities people seem to exercise within their everyday lives (de Certeau, 1984). In fact, where historical materialist enquiry has received most criticism is in areas where it appears to neglect the specificity of certain modes of social practice, especially those such as consumption where it seemingly neglects the possibility of actions which work beyond the direct operation of capitalism. In such situations, historical materialism appears to impose categories from its 'master' generative concepts in a way which overleaps its domain - a tendency especially evident with respect to culture. This can be interpreted as the result, pure and simple, of the

mechanical and unthinking application of a suitable theory in singularly unsuitable ways. One alternative to this view, though, would be not simply that certain areas lie outwith the circulation of capital but, more importantly, that these 'areas' embody characteristics which cannot be successfully appreciated from the dialectical standpoint.

An examination of this possibility requires that we spell out more carefully the hallmarks of the dialectical mode of investigation. Various recent attempts to do just this (Bhaskar, 1989; Harvey, forthcoming) suggest that the Marxian model sketched above provides a specific but generalisable account; to caricature grossly, underlying forces generate more or less stable entities according to characteristic laws. An evident difficulty with such a model, however, concerns the structural conception it suggests. There is a clear danger of the crude mobilisation of such a conception and in terms of social practices such as consumption it would be all too easy to adopt a reductionist account which denies consumption its own specificity, especially in relation to its cultural dimension. Consumption qua consumption is a part of the totality of capital circulation and certainly instantiates elements directly relates to capitalist circulation, most notably in terms of commodity fetishism. But it can also be, in different ways, a source of pleasure, a means of protest, a mode of being; in short, a potential modality of difference. This may evidently be more (Bordieu, 1984) or less (de Certeau, 1984) allied to class or indeed to other social structures. The clear difficulty associated with the historical materialist account is that it is all too easy simply to reduce difference to a form of false

consciousness associated with consumer sovereignty.

What is required to take things further here is a more careful analysis of the idea of the notion of 'totality' in the dialectical tradition. Althusser provides such a consideration in his attempt to debunk historical materialism of the essentially Heglian idea of an 'expressive' or 'spiritual' totality (see Althusser and Balibar, 1975). Easthope's (1991, page 116) example of this conception of totality, applied to culture, is of Christopher Caudwell's argument that 'the tight closure of the heroic couplet in eighteenth-century poetry is an expression (in poetic form) of the tightly controlled mercantalist economy of early eighteenth-century England.' Such a conception holds to extremes the view that anywhere you look reveals the same underlying form, an expression originating in the determinate form of capital. Against this, Althusser proposed the notion of a 'decentred' totality, such that social practices which seem to be in some sense distanciated from the clear cut operation of capitalism are indeed autonomous, possessing their own effectivities. These effectivities may not be directly expressive of capitalism's form yet are nevertheless in the last instance, the 'lonely hour' of which may never be reached, undeniably related. Couching this argument in terms of different practices possessing different temporalities and histories (and, presumably, different spatialities and geographies), Althusser and Balibar (1975, page 100) note:

> 'The fact that each of these times and each of these histories is <u>relatively autonomous</u> does not make them so many domains which are <u>independent</u> of the whole: the specificity of each of these times and each of these histories - in other words their relative autonomy and independence - is based on a certain type of articulation in the whole, and therefore on a certain type of <u>dependence</u> with respect to the whole.'

The implication of this argument is that we should certainly start from difference(s), not unity. We should give specificity its due in analysing the vast panoply of social processes to be found operative in (capitalist) society, but we should equally be attentive to the articulations of all these manifold processes to capitalism as it continues to exert its influence - most notably in terms of the asymptotic process of commodification as it relentlessly ushers in the circulation of capital to areas previously not directly affected by capitalism (cf Harvey, 1989, page 336).

Althusserianism has, of course, received a considerable amount of past criticism, although it has undergone something of a re-examination in recent years (Macdonnell, 1986). In particular, Althusser's development of a Marxian epistemology, the science/ideology distinction standing firmly at the centre of this enterprise, has been charged as representing an impossible assertion of a discourse of knowledge capable of holding jurisdiction over all other discourses (Hindess and Hurst, 1977). This point is also reflected at a more substantive level; for example, the turn to Foucault, which occurred relatively early on in the social sciences (compared to the adoption of other poststructuralist thinkers), was often justified on the basis of the neglect historical materialism had shown to forms of oppression other than those directly associated with class struggle - women's issues, gay and lesbian politics, for instance. On a theoretical level, however, the distrust of such a totalizing epistemological discourse has rested upon a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of discourse. The point, derived from Saussure, that signifieds signify by means of signifiers which themselves operate as a part of a negatively

differentiated system, a system characterised by the play of differences, means not that discourses can never refer to some sort of extra-discursive realm (frequently and problematically termed 'reality') but that the possibility of an authoritative metadiscourse (to which all epistemological discourses necessarily aspire) is rendered impossible. Thus Hirst (1979, page 19) declares 'in the absence of a privileged level ('experience', or 'reason' which imposes form on discourse)' there is no alternative but 'to accept the difference of the referents of the discourse, the potential infinity of referents.' This position does not deny the possibility of the existence of discourses of knowledge per se. Thus, leaving a seminar 'by the door' (Sayer, 1992, page 25) is not dismissed as a silly convention; similarly Hindess and Hurst (1977, page 8) note that their position on epistemology causes them no 'intellectual discomfort' when they 'refrain from walking out of the top windows of high buildings'. It does deny, however, the possibility of general criteria of truth enshrined in epistemology.

What does this mean in the light of Marx's statements on the totality defined by the different moments (production, distribution, exchange and consumption) of the circulation of capital? An acceptance of the critique of (the Althussarian position on) epistemology does not, in and of itself, imply the automatic rejection of the idea of totality. It has implications in terms of the possibility of knowledge concerning the bounds of a totality but it retains the possibility that, for instance, Marx's political economy provides an appropriate theoretical framework for the analysis of consumption. Recent

Marxian work claims to be able to offer insights on consumption through a careful reworking of Marxian categories (Fine and Leopold, forthcoming). It seems to us that this is an avenue well worth exploring. Some have tried to close off this alternative - for example, by using the past neglect of Marxism with respect to certain areas of concern as dubious evidence that Marxian theory cannot develop insights into new areas. The potential of such a rereading of Marx cannot be so easily rejected, however, and although this possibility is not developed here, it certainly cannot be foreclosed.

A different manner of proceeding, though, would be to turn once again to a more detailed ontological examination of Marxian theory, in particular in relation to dialectics and therefore to Hegel. In some ways, this task can best be carried out in the light of poststructuralism, given its frequently-alleged 'anti-Hegelian' stance. Althusser himself bears something of this anti-Hegelianism in his reworking of 'totality' as a decentred totality of differences. Perhaps, however, this conception has shorn Marxist dialectics of only some of its Hegelian heritage. There is equally, though, no automatic guarantee that any turn to poststructuralism will not itself be equally contaminated; the measure of anti-Hegelianism in post-structuralist thought has prompted the following comment from Foucault (cited in Pefanis, 1989, page 11)

> 'We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his [Hegel's] tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us.'

This is an evident danger, but it seems reasonable to explore the avenues opened up by attempts to shed further the Hegelian heritage of critical thought. It is the position adopted by

Bataille (1991) and explored in Derrida's (1978) essay on Bataille in Writing and Difference ('From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without reserve') which provides perhaps the clearest vision of a possible 'moving on' from Hegel. Both these authors adopt something like a deconstruction of the opposition Hegalianism/Anti-Hegelianism in moving toward a dialectic 'without reserve', which equates to 'heterology' - the paradoxical science of differences (Pefanis, 1991). Holding no-thing in reserve moves the materialist dialectic onto new terrain (cf Doel, 1991). It implies the deconstruction of truth/false, ideal/material; it also relegates the priority generally afforded to re-presentational writing. Henceforth only fluxes and flows are to be theorised, not as underlying generative principles casting off categories of the real but in the form of pre-sentation of the world as text, the world as 'a work of art [which] gives birth to itself' (Nietzsche, 1967, 796). In the next section we attempt to follow some of the implications stemming from this position in a partially demonstrative effort to provide some thoughts on the validity of this kind of theorisation in respect of our understanding of social practices such as consumption..pa

Difference

'Marx made a break in the social mystery of exchange value. The concept thus takes all its strategic power from its irruption, by which it dispossesses political economy of its imaginary universality. But, from the time of Marx, it lost this advantage when taken as a principle of explication. It thus cancelled its 'difference' by universalising itself... As soon as [such concepts] are constituted as universal they cease to be analytical and the religion of meaning begins. They become canonical and enter the general system's mode of theoretical representation. Not accidentally, at this moment they also take on their scientific cast (as in the scientific canonisation of concepts from Engles to Althusser). They set themselves up as expressing an 'objective reality.' They become signs: signifiers

of a 'real' signified. And although at the best of times these concepts have been practised as concepts without taking themselves for reality, they have nonetheless subsequently fallen into the imaginary of the sign, or the sphere of truth. They are no longer in the sphere of interpretation but enter that of repressive simulation' (Baudrillard, 1975, pages 47-48, emphasis in original).

Baudrillard's critique of Marxism, worked through in The Mirror of Production (1975) involves, as the passage cited above demonstrates, a fundamentally different understanding of the nature of theoretical discourse - of the kind of writing in which we engage - than that most familiar in existing geographical work; it looks to the fact that discourses operate outwith (beyond) any simple mode of 'representation'. Such a recognition has important implications, especially for those for whom scientific or theoretical discourses are seen purely in terms of the transparent communication of ideas which relate in some direct way to an underlying reality. The acceptance that writing cannot efface its own nature, a nature characterised by the play of difference, carries with it all manner of insights. But importantly it rests on a radically different position with regard to ontology.

The untranslatable Hegelian Aufhebung implies a dialectical movement characterised by both negativity and conservation, which both cancels out different entities yet accumulates the essence of the values endowed in them by a kind of 'gathering up'. This notion is not in any simple sense opposed, but rather deconstructed in the Derridean formulation of difference-as-différance. Derrida's (1978) formulations work according to a semiotic model, but it is a model of Writing which goes beyond all semiotic models since Saussure. As Harland (1987) notes, Derrida's model invokes both the spatiality of language as a system of negatively defined differences (à la Saussure) and a

temporality associated with the interminable character of semiosis; dissemination is an open ended process always allowing for an infinite number of readings and resting on the graphematic ('writable') characteristic of language. Put in other words, the very point of the notion of différance is that it is at once a spatial (differing) and temporal (deferring) concept. (This is, to be sure, an oversimplification; Derrida's invocation of Writing is equally a stress on the necessary [and spatial] graphematic character of language which supplants Husserl's despatialized, subjective [and essentially temporal] Voice (Harland, 1987, page 127)). The pertinent point for our present purposes, though, is the manner in which Derridean Writing materialises the world as language. The adoption of this Derridean ontology - which operates according to an unrestricted or 'general' economy - deconstructs conceptualisations which continue to insist on operating according to a metaphysical opposition, a 'violent hierarchy' which dialecticians would seek to absorb into a third synthetic term. Différance seeks to breach the opposition between terms by means of distention; to overcome metaphysical dualisms by destabilizing, by interminably interrupting their inherent imbalance.

And herein lies a task; to theorise the consumer society with more than a veiled recognition that the commodity now presents itself as a sign, that the entire wealth of Western societies presents itself as a vast system of signs. This conception cannot be taken as a form of 'semiurgy' - of sign fetishism (contra Kellner, 1989) - for signs themselves, under the sign of Writing, point to nothing other than themselves.

They no longer present themselves as re-presentations, as shadows of the real but on the contrary have always and everywhere presented themselves according to a disseminative model of différance. The important point for an analysis of consumption, beyond philosophical misunderstandings, is, therefore, that the commodity system itself displays a quasi-graphematic character.

To develop this idea is precisely to take on the task initiated by Baudrillard (1968, 1970). Baudrillard (1975) later abandoned this task in the light of the paradox that the theoretical mirror of this system of objects can have no metatheoretical recourse from the system itself; better either to engage with and accelerate the logic of that system (Baudrillard, 1983; see also Clarke, forthcoming) or to pursue a mode that forces it into a different form (Baudrillard, 1979). Can we, though, perhaps deflect the kind of movement evident in Baudrillard's theoretical trajectory and once again set on course a study of the commodity system of consumer capitalism as a system of signs? If the commodity system is taken as possessing a quasi-graphematic character, the implication is that consumption occurs as a form of disseminative process. Prima facie, this metaphor resonates with the readily observable flux of the fashion system, with the self-evident yet incredibly complex dynamics of Western commodity culture as a whole.

A number of recent writings on consumption have adopted a position which stresses the importance of an understanding of the sign to any understanding of the nature of ([post]modern) consumption. Elements of this view are evident in Featherstone (1991), Lash and Urry (1992) and Glennie and Thrift (1992). Much of this work emphatically accords a specifically postmodern

significance to the commodity system as a sign system and spells out its importance to people's identities (cf much of the work on consumption in cultural theory; see, for example, Tomlinson, 1990). Some, notably Glennie and Thrift (1992), stress the importance of recognising historical continuities in what many have identified as specifically 'post-modern' developments in consumerism. But what virtually all existing work lacks is an adequate and sustained analysis of precisely how the commodity system functions as a sign system. Whilst early work by Baudrillard (1968, 1970) provides an indication of the enormity of this task, little effort has been made in elucidating the quasi-graphematic character of the commodity system. Yet it is undeniable that there is something very particular at work in capitalism in the way it ascribes meanings to objects (Douglas and Isherwood, 1980) and the way in which this drives - or at least exerts an incredible force over - the dynamics of the entire system. It is as if the semiotic aspect of a system predicated on production and accumulation for production and accumulation's sake has, in time, <u>supplanted</u> the original basis of that system, which will have been found to have always already carried within it new and unexpected 'directions'. This quality has arguably always been present in consumption, was significantly boosted by the development of the branding system (McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, 1982; Winstanley, 1983, pages 123-4) and has come to (pre)dominate to the extent that capital has significantly redefined its form (witness the still-increasing importance of marketing processes, the current significance of the system of commercial media and so on). Whilst there can be no attempt to develop these ideas in any

detail here, we would wish to stress the point that capitalism is, at least in part, a system driven by a dynamic which follows a logic far removed from rational economic processes and is instead imbued with uncontrollable cultural energies (cf Lyotard, 1993). One of the most important questions following from such a view concerns the spatiality of this system. In what ways might the interaction of consumption, exchange, distribution and production practices over different spatial scales define the contours of the processes involved?

The geographies of such a processes are, admittedly, especially difficult to tease out, a difficulty which is partly a function of the naturalism such processes, especially consumption, represent in the Western mind (Barthes, 1973). This difficulty is accentuated as a result of the increasingly global scale of such processes; there is frequently a problem in framing the geography of processes which present their highly specific natures as universal and homogeneous wholes. One of the most important tasks involved in furthering our understanding of consumption must therefore be to appreciate the cultural geographies of the structural commodity system. In the final section, the political significance of such a task is given a fuller airing. For the remainder of this section, however, we wish to make a number of comments on the nature of the consumer. Although the commodity system defines a spatially and temporally configured structure, it is arguably in the subject's everyday connection with this system that both the commodity system and the subject take on their most significant characteristics.

In the Grundrisse, Marx wrote that 'production not only creates an object for the subject but also a subject for the object' (Marx, cited in Lapsley and Westlake, 1988, page 7).

Such a statement can clearly be read in terms of the subject of consumption. The task of understanding the nature of the consumer requires considerable and careful attention. Thrift's (1983) programmatic statement on the need for a sustained effort to theorise 'action' in human geography has remained singularly underdeveloped, despite some recent contributions (see, for example, Pile, 1993). There can be little doubt that existing work on urban consumer behaviour in geography fails to pay even lip service to either the historical specificity of the system of commodities - including its historical geographies - or to models of the consumer which depart in any respect from the basic precepts of homo economicus. A more worrying trend, however, is the failure of new work on the subject of consumption to engage adequately with existing psychoanalytic and semiotic theorisations of the subject (see certain of the essays in Shields, 1992b). A more sophisticated engagement between emerging work in these traditions offers significant promise for the development of new perspectives on consumption as a process simultaneously responsible for the inscription of difference between subjects in relation to the commodity system and the reinscription of other social differences - for example in relation to gender, race, age, sexuality. One of the most important considerations concerns the relation between subject and object. For Lacan (1977), subject and object never relate in an unmediated manner, but always by way of the desire of the Other. In Baudrillard's later 'fatal' theory (see Gane, 1991), the immediacy given to the fatal presence of objects can be read as a rejection of the 'depth' ontology at work in Lacanian theory. The relative values of such different perspectives

deserve considerable attention. And although several of the essays in Shields (1992b) offer valuable insights into the form of subjectivities surrounding (post)modern shopping practices, the complexities of the topic still demand that a far more sustained and concerted effort be undertaken in order to integrate the level of debate from other areas of study into the study of consumption. Whilst one cannot hope for instant solutions in such difficult areas, there must be a possibility of importing some of the insights on the subject which represent the output of a few decades of debate in areas such as film theory (cf. Lapsley and Westlake, 1988) In addition, we would single out the level of debate in much of the feminist literature (cf Williams, forthcoming) as that to which we must aim.

To restate the importance of a developed theory of the consuming subject; the acceptance of the commodity system qua sign system as a key element in the constitution of the subject and the existence of the unconscious as a factor likely to significantly affect the shape of such practices as consumption - and hence of capitalism as a whole - requires that this theoretical endeavour is afforded a good deal more importance than it has hitherto received.

Our efforts to point out the potential importance of poststructuralist ideas for consumption works directly against efforts which, at base, seek to guard historical materialism against poststructuralism (cf Harvey, 1989; Eagleton, 1986). Attempts to represent philosophies of difference as the levelling of philosophy to the vulgar status of consumption are themselves guilty of a reductionist conception of consumption under capitalism. Looking beyond a one-sided definition of consumption, we can perhaps begin to appreciate a model of social

process which bears a striking family resemblance to the ontology implied by poststructuralist thought. The movement between reconceptualising consumption in the light of poststructuralism and appreciating poststructuralism with respect to processes such as consumption will, we would argue, have proved itself an important theoretical shift to have set in motion.

Political geographies of consumption

Thus far we have, of necessity, ranged unevenly over considerable philosophical ground. In this final section we wish to present a more specific argument on the social, geographical, spatial, historical and most importantly political status of consumption. We argue here that there is a definite need to explore in detail geographies of consumption - past and present - as a means of interrogating the real political possibilities which inhere in consumption.

The analysis of the modern consumer society that has developed over the past few centuries presents us with a central paradox. On the one hand we have the rhetoric of consumer sovereignty, so beloved of recent British governments and invoked with reference to an increasing range of goods and services in both public and private sectors. Along with the suggestion of the exercise of power by the consumer has gone undeniable evidence that the experience of consumption has become democratized. Dyer (1989) paints a picture of pre-modern England where a multitude of consumption decisions were taken by the heads of the largest and most prosperous households on behalf of a membership which included dependent relatives and domestic and outdoor servants. By contrast the development of urban industrial capitalism has allowed virtually everyone to exercise a degree of influence as a consumer. All are now supposed to make decisions that materially affect the workings of the market system, resulting in the overall maximisation of benefit. Yet such a conception begs major questions about the distribution of power within an economic system. For against the notion of

consumer sovereignty there is much analysis which points in exactly the opposite direction; to emphasise the manipulative power of the producer over the consumer. The advent of mass-production and mass-consumption may have apparently allowed the gratification of demand, but as Xenos (1989) argues this was also the era of the 'invention of scarcity' with the development of techniques of advertising and marketing (Richards, 1990) to sustain an expansive capitalism by instilling into consumers an insatiable desire for larger and larger quantities of more and new goods (see also Baudrillard in Poster, 1988, pages 24-5). We are worlds away here from the circumstances of the pre-modern craftsman executing often original work on a commission basis for individual customers. Recent developments such as just-in-time production, niche marketing and the customising of goods seek to give the illusion of the restoration of the personal response by the producer to consumer demand (Harvey, 1989). However, these initiatives are located firmly within the framework of a capitalism which is more rather than less wedded to the techniques of the creation of fashion and the manipulation of consumer tastes.

Such observations clearly relate to wider analyses of the economic system where the role of consumption and the consumer is subjugated to that of production and the producer. Marx's classic expression of the relationship between production and consumption has already been noted. It also seems appropriate to consider further the Baudrillard's early analysis of the experience of the population as consumers (Baudrillard 1968; 1970). Here he draws our attention to the interplay between, on the one hand, individuality and sociability, and on the other, between sociability and social control. Consumption is thus

presented as a social activity even if much of the experience of gratification it supposedly engenders is associated with the appropriation of goods by individuals and the consequent creation of a particular self-identity and status (other observers have also seen in consumption an inherent individualism, see Purvis, 1993). However, this is the sociability of a sub-ordinate group

> 'Consumption is a collective and active behavior, a constraint, a morality, and an institution. It is a complete system of values, with all that the term implies concerning group integration and social control.... [T]his is a new and specific mode of socialization related to the rise of new productive forces and the monopolistic restructuration of a high output economic system' (Baudrillard, in Poster 1988, page 49, emphasis in original).

This is to assert that capital exerts an influence over the mass of the population which extends beyond the traditionally regarded and exploitative dependency of labour upon an employer.

> 'Having socialized the masses into a labor force, the industrial system had to go further in order to fulfil itself and to socialize the masses (that is to control them) into a force of consumption' (Baudrillard, in Poster, 1988, page 50).

But more than this, as consumers the masses are in a position of weakness far more profound than that conventionally accorded to labour. While labour creates an active sense of collectivity and thus contains within itself the potential to challenge capital, consumption is credited with no such empowerment

> 'As a producer, and as a consequence of the division of labor, each laborer presupposes all others: exploitation is for everyone. As a consumer, humans become again solitary, cellular, and at best gregarious .... In general then consumers, as such, are unconscious and unorganized...' (Baudrillard, in Poster, 1988, page 54, emphasis in original).

Consumption is thus presented as an inadequate base for the

development of a collective consciousness, rather it is an activity pursued in parallel by a multitude of individuals.

Hence our ideas about the linkages between the structures of economy, society and polity largely revolve around the inequalities of the productive sphere, as manifest in the hierarchy of class. Recent years have, of course, seen some questioning of the continuing relevance of traditional conceptions of class to the contemporary world, but the evidence that the 'consumer society' is generating new collective identities that draw upon the universal experience that supposedly gives our age its defining characteristics is ambiguous. Indeed if we are to cast around for socio-political forces with the most apparent and growing potency in the world today the search will take us outside the economic sphere into the realms of religion, ethnicity and nationalism. The overt power of the forces created here seemingly cannot be matched by notions of self-conscious, organised and empowered collectivities of consumers. For although such organisation does exist its membership and goals are often narrow; single issue campaigns of limited duration abound and while bodies such as the Consumers' Association exert a degree of economic influence they hardly inspire revolutionary fervour either amongst their members or their opponents.

Yet this reading of our contemporary circumstances should not close our minds against other ways of interpreting the role of consumers. As is further discussed in the final section, some detect in post-modern consumption practices a power against capital that is a function of the aggregation of individual consumer actions. Moreover, not all in the past have subscribed to the view of the relative impotence of consumers, seeing in

this shared activity a base for the development of that very collective and self-conscious identity that many of the authorities we have quoted so far would deny. In this context it seems especially appropriate to turn to debate during the nineteenth century as the period which saw the consolidation of the modern experience of mass production and mass consumption; although interestingly Baudrillard sees the rationalization of production as a nineteenth century phenomenon followed during the twentieth century by comparable changes in consumption (Baudrillard, in Poster, 1988, page 50). While debates that surrounded changes in the productive sphere have been extensively explored by academics (for example Thompson, 1968; Hobsbawm, 1984; Harrison & Zeitlin, 1985; Sabel & Zeitlin, 1985; Berg, 1985; Joyce, 1987) ideas about consumption and the role of consumers have, at least until recently, received much less attention (McCracken, 1988, pages 3-30; Fine and Leopold, 1990; Brewer and Porter, 1993). One strand of nineteenth century thought was the search for the means of the redemption and indeed empowerment of the masses. This search took a variety of often inter-connected forms, the quest for direct political representation, struggles over rewards to labour and the redistribution of capital, and attempts to assert control over the sphere of consumption. This last, perhaps most clearly manifest in the consumers' co-operative movement, contains within it sometimes quite radically different visions of the role of the consumer and the relationship between production and consumption from those with which we are most familiar (Purvis, 1993). Co-operation also had a particular social and geographical currency, generally achieving its most enduring popularity in those areas

where workers as labour had the most immediate experience of subordination before the strength of large-scale capitalism, be it as artisans marginalised by innovations in mechanised mass production or as employees within the burgeoning mills, factories and mines (Purvis, 1986; Purvis, 1990). Association within the workplace often helped to shape the initial local co-operative groupings but if capital was exploitative of the mass of the population both as consumers and as labour then it should perhaps come as no surprise that popular resistance and collective action was attempted in the realm of consumption as well as that of production.

Indeed for many co-operators, although by no means all (Backstrom, 1974), consumption rather than production represented the true focus of an economy. It followed, moreover that the power and rewards associated with such a system should be vested chiefly with the consumer. One practical expression of the latter was the co-operative dividend paid in proportion to purchases. Thus one of its early advocates claims, in what seems with hindsight to be a mirror image of Marx's pronouncements, that

> 'Consumption was the source from which profit was derived and capital was unproductive without it; ... and therefore the consumer was entitled (as a consumer) to a return of ... profits derived on his [sic] purchase' (Northern Star, 1839).

More than this the common needs of all as consumers formed the ultimate organisational base of the majority of co-operatives in Britain whose retailing activities were by far the most successful aspect of their work. An increasing proportion of co-operative idealists thus came to regard consumption as the primary experience which all shared and through which they might

take cause to challenge exploitative capitalism. Again there is a sense in which we see quite clearly the inversion of Marxian ideas. Consumption was asserted to be not only a common and binding experience but one that was absolutely universal. Those whose role was that of direct exploitation as wage labour by capital formed only a proportion of the population; the aged and infirm, the young, women in the domestic sphere were not part of the labour force but they all had needs and a potential voice as consumers. In this and other ways the experience of labour was often claimed to be more calculated to fragment than to unify the population, with notions of the solidarity of class being over-ridden by the sectionalism of the individual workplace, craft or trade association. Moreover, victory for one group of workers in securing more favourable terms of employment did not necessarily lead to the reduction of the rewards to capital. Rather this success was traditionally achieved at the expense of the wider population who, as consumers, incurred the increased costs and other penalties passed on to them. Hence the necessity of asserting the control of consumers as an organised and self-conscious collectivity over the processes of production and distribution. Consumers' co-operation thus saw itself as a means of transforming the weakness of consumers under capitalism into an organised strength capable not only of resisting but also of challenging the prevailing economic order.

For some the co-operative project was total, not simply the restructuring of consumption and the assertion of its privileged position over production. For if consumption was the source of profit and value, and reward was due to the masses as consumers, then the potential for the redistribution of resources was enormous. Workers started with only modest assets but if these

could be invested in a retail operation then this would yield not only the immediate benefits of honesty in trade and dividends on purchases but also offer the potential for the accumulation of the resources necessary to extend consumers' control to the spheres of production, thus forging a new and direct link between the worker as producer and the worker as consumer. Particularly early in the nineteenth century, the era of Owenite socialism (Harrison, 1969) and Chartism (Jones, 1975; Thompson, 1984), there were grandiose visions of the wholesale replacement of competitive capitalism by a co-operative system which would forge a new socio-economic and political order. The words of Robert Lowery, a prominent Radical and Chartist leader of the late 1830s, on co-operation and exclusive dealing outline an ambitious vision, although the universalism of his message is tempered somewhat by a continued adherence to a relentlessly masculine rhetoric:

> 'by ceasing to spend our money in the shops of our enemies, we have destroyed their power: by spending it in shops of our own and our friends, we will have increased our own strength and added to our comfort.... The benefits will be a better and cheaper article than they can purchase elsewhere, with a dividend of profits on what they buy, which in every working man's family will amount to some pounds every year, which will pay his rent and increase his comforts; improve his health by living on good, unadulterated provisions; unite him and his class in the firmest bonds of brotherhood, and raise them from the destitute and degraded condition they are in. If properly supported and minded, it will change the face of society: we may be become builders, cultivators, merchants, and producers for ourselves, ... none making us afraid. We shall no longer be under the galling bondage we are under at present, with want continually before us, while we toil for profit-mongers who value neither men's bodies nor souls, except as materials to barter for gain: who hold us in political bondage, and arrogantly claim dominion over our minds, denying to us the right to think for ourselves, and express our opinion' (Harrison and Hollis, 1979, pages 199-200, 202).

That such visions of transformation and redemption went largely unfulfilled is not a denial of their importance as an alternative voice to competitive capitalism and an alternative view of the significance of consumption and the consumer to that which prevails today. The attempted assertion of power by the mass as consumers deserves to be recognised alongside the history and geography of association, conflict and resistance in the workplace and the attempts to break the bonds of the prevailing system by creating new communities whose members identified themselves principally as producers (Hardy, 1979). Such a recognition perhaps also puts a new gloss on Harvey's observations concerning the relative power of mobile capital and a geographically more rooted and fragmented populace whether conceived of as producers or, as here, primarily as consumers (Harvey, 1985c).

In Place of a Conclusion

'...[T]here is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces - reinforces - the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic. But that is a question we must leave open' (Jameson, 1987, page 125).

'Consumption has become a communal activity, even a form of solidarity' (Shields, 1992a, page 110).

It may pay dividends if we consider, once again, the quotation we cited as our opening gambit. Eagleton (1986, page 141), it will be remembered, has suggested that 'postmodernism... caricatures the Brechtian slogan [referred to above] by proclaiming not that the bad contains the good, but that the bad is good...' In the preceding section our peregrinations have attempted to provide at least a flavour of the differences historical materialist and poststructuralist approaches to consumption impart. We have, admittedly, sidestepped any full and careful consideration of the incompatibilities between aspects of these approaches but these are relatively self-evident and demand a more considered treatment than we have been prepared to offer in this paper. By moving on to a consideration of the potentially radical role consumption was at one time, and with particular strength in certain sorts of places, perceived to have we have provided not a judgment on the relative merits of two self-reinforcing positions on consumption - one denying, the other affirming its political potentialities - but on the contrary, have sought to interrupt the common oversimplifications afforded to the politics of consumption.

In this concluding section we would like to offer a brief appraisal of Rob Shields' (1992a) attempt to argue that

postmodern consumer practices once again open up the radical potential of a politics of consumption. To paraphrase Eagleton's own paraphrasing of Brecht, we would suggest that what Shields attempts is a kind of starting from the 'bad new things' rather than the 'good old ones' in order to extract the progressive moment from an 'otherwise unpalatable or ambivalent reality'. In part Shields points to the impossible space, the excluded middle that practices of consumption open up between Tonnies' binary opposition of Gemeineschaft/Gesellschaft. His detailed argument is, though, a far more complex attempt to unpick both changes and continuities in forms of collectivity or sociality (Simmel; see Wolf, 1950) throughout the historical period of Modernity and beyond. Shields sees consumption in post-modern times and spaces as increasingly embodying forms of sociality which act against, for instance, the modern separation of private and public spaces, thus opening up new forms of identification. Although justice cannot be done to the full complexity of Shields' argument in the short space available to us here, it can perhaps be singled out as an attempt to indicate precisely how consumption, as a set of social practices tied to, yet ultimately beyond the complete control of capitalism's inner logic, presents us with process destined to represent a fatal stress to that system.

Albeit in a far more negative vein than the affirmative vision presented by Shields (1992a), the later work of Baudrillard effectively reinforces this view. Consumption assumes the status of a nihilistic battle of wills between the abyss presented by capitalism, into which the masses gaze only to find the abyss staring back. Faced with this situation the

masses simply absorb the empty signs of consumer capitalism and begin to behave like a cancer, voraciously destroying its own body. For Baudrillard (1983a, 46), this fatal strategy signals the vir(tu)al acceleration of the game to a point where the system approaches its own vanishing point and begins to disappear:

> 'a system is abolished only by pushing it into hyperlogic, by forcing it into an excessive practice which is equivalent to a brutal amortization. 'You want us to consume - O.K., let's consume always more, and anything whatsoever; for any useless and absurd purpose.'

And so, whilst leaving the conclusions to be drawn from what has been a very preliminary assessment of the significance of consumption as open as we possibly can, it is clear that the experiences of nineteenth century societies of consumers and twentieth century consumer society (whether Shields' or Baudrillard's versions) present us with some highly charged areas of concern. If we are to make headway in mapping the processes which shape our geographies, which inscribe the shape of our society into the ground, we firmly believe that we need to take much further such explorations of the nature of the consumer society. If we fail to do so, we risk rendering invisible rather than transparent some particularly important social processes.

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