

THE WORLD OF CONSUMPTION

The material and cultural revisited

Second edition

Ben Fine



London and New York

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THE WORLD OF CONSUMPTION

Consumption has become one of the leading topics across the social sciences and vocational disciplines such as marketing and business studies. As a result of this, a number of overlapping analytical problems have arisen: how to integrate contributions from the different disciplines; how to address the relationship between society and the individual in a postmodernist world; and how to bring material and cultural factors together. This book provides an answer.

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- systems of provision and culture;
- the consumer society;
- public consumption.

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THE WORLD OF CONSUMPTION, SECOND EDITION

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Second edition

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PREFACE

A decade has passed since the first edition of *World of Consumption* was drafted. In the interim, the contours and context of the study of consumption have changed enormously, if not out of all recognition. This new edition offers the opportunity to take stock. In doing so, the volume has been so much revised that it is essentially a new publication altogether. The structure, the sequencing and the vast majority of the content of the original have been set aside. Newly written material has replaced the old, and the scattered chunks of the old that remain have been heavily rewritten, amended or reorganised. The vast majority of references in this new edition did not appear in the old one!

Yet, despite these drastic measures, the core approach and arguments of the original stand as before. Indeed, they have been strengthened not only through the new text but also through the impression that the system of provision approach that the original pioneered is growing in popularity and influence, although evidence occasionally takes the form of criticism, some extremely harsh, as well as praise. So why and how is the content of the new edition being changed, far above major updating? It is necessary to explain the nature of, and reasons for, the revisions.

At the time of the first edition, the burgeoning literature on consumption had begun to depart from its infancy but it still remains short of adulthood and maturity. As explained then, and again in Chapters 5 and 6 of this edition, much of the understanding of consumption has been organised ‘horizontally’, addressing theories and factors *within* social science disciplines and across a range, possibly not delimited, of consumption goods or aspects of consumer behaviour. The original edition established this in Chapters 3 to 5 (and elsewhere in the text), covering consumer studies, economics and psychology, respectively. With the exception of economics, now sited in Chapter 7, these chapters have now simply been omitted.

The opening chapter of these three on different disciplines was unusual since it addressed consumer studies, a discipline that has primarily been developed and practised in the United States. Nonetheless, it had a wider relevance. Analytically, it has been based on an amalgam of marketing, psychology, business, marketing and any other disciplinary fragments that proved convenient in

such an academic mongrel. The fate of consumer studies, in degenerating into what its own circumspect practitioners confess is a chronic state of fragmented disarray, serves as a salutary lesson to the more scholarly pretensions of those newly engaging in the study of consumption. For the problems of consumer studies as a discipline did not derive from any lack of intellectual integrity or quality of research and methods (deficient though they may have been when viewed loftily from the standards of more established disciplines). Rather, the goal of consumer studies has been at fault in seeking to stack together a collection of horizontal theories to provide for analytical generality and comprehensiveness in case studies.

The inadequacy of horizontal and intra-disciplinary approaches remains, as does the relevance of the warning against simplistic and forced interdisciplinary articulations. These propositions are less controversial and more familiar than before, as the study of consumption has become more analytically street-wise. In particular, and in addition, the hazards associated with intra-disciplinary and naïve interdisciplinary research have been recognised. Instead, a different issue now challenges, possibly haunts, the study of consumption. It is, or should be, at a higher intellectual level than before and locates itself across disciplines. Latterly, in the vanguard of social theory and not just the study of consumption, is the issue of how to relate material and cultural factors to one another. Material culture as an object and subject of study was by no means new or negligible at the time of the first edition. Indeed, our volume was itself an attempt to place the culture of consumption on a sounder footing by emphasising its material determinants. But material culture has grown in prominence in the study of consumption over the past decade. Nor is this simply a matter of the weight of its popularity and a count of publications. The relationship between material and cultural factors has correctly become seen as decisive for the study of consumption as for other aspects of social theory. This is a healthy reaction against the economicless ‘subjectivity’ of postmodernism and the cultureless ‘objectivity’ of economic reductionism.

As a result, the opening chapters have totally shifted in content and orientation. Instead of exposing the shortcomings of the horizontal and the intra-disciplinary, they have engaged with the leading social theory concerned with material culture. Key concepts in this regard are use value, exchange value, commodity, money, gift and capital. Whilst not always immediately and directly relevant to consumption, such categories have been increasingly incorporated in studying it over the past decade. The mode of doing so has often been casual, inconsistent, arbitrary and ill-conceived, not least because postmodernism, or its influence, has usually been the poor starting point of departure from which something more substantive has been attempted. There has, however, also been extremely rewarding insight and scholarship. This study of consumption, then, begins not with how the various disciplines have addressed consumption but with the social forms in which contemporary consumption primarily presents itself.

This has also involved moving forward some of the material from the old

edition that was concerned with the contribution of, and debates over, Marx and the study of consumption. Marx, after all, even by his numerous detractors, is widely recognised as the theorist *par excellence* of many of the concepts listed towards the beginning of the previous paragraph. Misunderstandings and misapplications of his theory have been rife. Together with dissatisfaction with the limited, if far from negligible, insights that Marx himself provided on consumption, it has often been presumed that his approach precluded further progress. As is shown, the opposite is the case, and Marx's concepts are rich in potential for addressing the material culture of consumption.

The rise of interest in material culture is not the only significant shift in the cultural climate that is recognised and highlighted. Over the last ten years, economics imperialism, or the colonisation of other social sciences by economics, has accelerated in scope and depth. Whilst previously gaining a presence where rational choice had already been accepted, certain theoretical developments *within* economics have strengthened its appeal and potential across a much wider range of social theory. Thus, there has been an epidemic of new economic fields, dealing in politics, institutions, geography and welfare as well as customs, norms, culture, and so on. With limited exceptions, consumption has not fallen victim to the dubious charms of the dismal science.

This provides two reasons for retaining and revising the chapter on the economics of consumption. First, like the dog that did not bark, the limitation of economics in colonising the study of consumption reveals some of the strengths of existing approaches from other disciplines that might otherwise go unrecognised by them for being taken for granted. These concern the nature of culture and its irreducible contextual content properly understood. Second, by the same token, economics is pitifully inadequate with respect to the more traditional factors commonly treated within its own discipline in comprehending the economics of consumption itself (the nature and sources of technology etc.). But this situation has been far from conducive to a challenge to mainstream economics. For social theory has tended to retreat from the economic in addressing consumption (and more generally), not least because of the lingering legacy of an economicless postmodernism, the alien and absurd postures of mainstream economics, and the formidable intimidation posed by its technical virtuosity and pompous and invalid claims to science and rigour. Despite the limitations and failings of mainstream economics (and the now longstanding wish for consumption not to be reduced to production), it remains imperative that the economic be treated as central to the study of consumption. But mainstream economics must not be taken as its starting point even for departure.

One highly telling indication of the weakness of mainstream economics in addressing consumption or otherwise, and despite economics imperialism, is its inability to participate in debate over globalisation. Its methodological individualism and corresponding discomfort with, or denial of, systemic or holistic analysis pre-empts its contributing except in a piecemeal fashion along the lines of recognising, and generally welcoming, more international openness in trade

and finance etc. Yet globalisation has been the most prominent concept across the social sciences from the 1990s onwards and has inescapable economic connotations. Consequently, Chapter 7, on economics and consumption, has been complemented by one, Chapter 2, on economics imperialism and globalisation. This precedes the chapters on commodities, gifts, etc., in order to set the latter against what are shown to be appealing, at times insightful, but ultimately flawed starting points.

The inclusion of a chapter on economics imperialism and globalisation (and the retention of one on economics) is paradoxical in light of a further thematic shift from the old to the new edition. Much of the previous volume, written by dissenting economists, took persuasion of economists as an important goal, partly through the critique of economics itself and partly through the introduction to them of material from other social sciences. The response from this intended audience has been underwhelming if not non-existent. For the intervening period has unambiguously demonstrated that this effort is a futile waste of time and effort. Despite considerable interest in the system of provision approach across the social sciences, there has been none from mainstream economics, not even in the form of dissent. As a result, the inclusion of more economics material, despite the absence of an audience of economists, needs to be justified. The intention in the new edition has been twofold. As already indicated, one is to advise on the dangers of economics imperialism and globalisation as sources of economic analysis for the study of consumption. The other is to reiterate the importance of the economy whatever the deficiencies of economics.

In short, the major change in, and influence upon, thematic priorities in the new edition have been derived from consideration of culture, and how to relate it to the economic. But this is not all. Neglect of culture has long been the charge made against those who emphasise the economic. There is, however, a counter charge that can be made with some venom, and is equally serious to the extent that such things can be quantified. This, as noted but not redressed in the first edition, is lack of interest in public consumption – rarely, if not proscribed from being, the subject of semiotic analysis. The new edition begins to make up this deficiency with two new chapters. The first seeks to explain why public consumption should fail to enter popular and academic discourse over and above the obvious reason that it might be construed as too mundane (and there has, in any case, been a cultural turn to the everyday). The answer is simply that once consumption becomes public it begins no longer to be construed as consumption as such unless ideologically as a pale imitation of, and alternative to, private provision.

The second chapter addresses the leading illustration of this point, the welfare state from which both ‘public’ and ‘consumption’ have overtly been terminologically dropped. Recent developments in how the welfare state has been understood are critically assessed, revealing how the aforementioned economics imperialism is becoming increasingly influential. Alternative

approaches are urgently needed, those drawing from the insights of material culture and its application to consumption. In a sense, two steps need to be taken at once – to make up for the failure of postmodernism to deconstruct the welfare state, and to locate welfare as a form of material provision. Suggestions are made along these lines, drawing upon the systems of provision approach.

The new opening chapter, as introduction and overview, necessarily reflects the changing content of the volume already reported. The closing chapter has also been replaced. The old looked forward to public consumption, the new takes advantage of the passage of time to review briefly some contributions to food studies. This is less as a means to present case studies and more by way of exploring themes developed earlier in the book.

Finally, though, reference must be made to other departures in content from the original. They had not outlived their useful life but room had to be found for the new and more contemporary material already described. Chapter 17 of the previous edition critically assessed the theory of consumption classes, closely associated with Peter Saunders, and very much a response to different forms of housing tenure and the privatisation of public (council) housing. A decade ago, the idea gained both appeal and notoriety, both of which have mercifully subsided. Chapter 20 contained a close, technical and critical review of the idea of retail capital as a generic form of capital. The purpose, apart from dealing in retail itself, was to provide an illustration of the pitfalls of proceeding with horizontal categories of analysis (as well as with horizontal theories). Retail capital is distinguished more by the different commodities to which it is attached than by its common attributes as a form of capital without connection to specific systems of provision – the same applies to advertising or a putative design capital for example. Whilst the chapter remains a pertinent contribution, the length, detail and narrow specialisation of the content led these to be put aside, not least because the general point about horizontal approaches will already have been covered and more readily be accepted. Third, what again might be considered too esoteric a contribution is the discussion of the relationship between Baudrillard and Sraffa, previously found in the old Chapter 19. This showed that they are, in a sense, mirror images of one another. One departs from exchange value by exclusive preoccupation with its constructed use value; the other targets exchange value by exclusive preoccupation with unreconstructed use value. Whatever the merits in omitting these contributions, they remain available to the dedicated reader in the old edition.

The same applies to the case studies and illustrations from the original volume. It is with great reluctance that these have not been included, as initially planned, in the revised edition. For the proof of the theoretical pudding, as well as its illumination, lies in its more concrete digestion. But space simply did not allow, with the application of the systems of provision approach previously taking up a third or more of the first edition. The discussion of the history of clothing, food adulteration, advertising, and the critique of trickle-down approaches and of the putative consumer revolution of the eighteenth century,

could have remained much as before with minor editing and updating. The case studies of food have, to some extent, been supplemented and also complemented by subsequent work (Fine *et al.* 1996, Fine 1998c). However, the initial contributions belonged more to the present-day than the other case studies, and food has been subject to significant change and attention over the past decade. So the new edition closes with food around, as previously mentioned, material and cultural themes.

The new, like the old, edition covers a vast subject matter. The depth of scholarship and attention to detail are uneven from topic to topic. Occasionally, a footnote has flown off on a tangent with days of investigation to make an esoteric point and reference or three. At other times, major issues have only been treated cursorily. By the same token, some parts are more up to date than others, although the volume as a whole is skewed towards addressing and incorporating the most recent literature. Success in doing so has depended in part on the vagaries of what has been available once identified as of interest. Where Internet access has been used, page references have been omitted even though published versions might also exist. For the reader seeking to dabble, and not necessarily interested in consumption or foundations for studying it, each chapter has been made relatively self-contained, a few basic ideas apart, without unduly incurring the cost of overlap. Study of globalisation is to be found in Chapter 2, the welfare state in Chapter 10, food in Chapter 11, the gift in Chapter 3, cultural systems in Chapter 6, and so on.

I take this opportunity to thank all who have commented on and contributed to the research. Most of it was undertaken as part of a broader initiative between March 1999 and March 2001. I was then in receipt of a Research Fellowship from the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under award number R000271046 to study *The New Revolution in Economics and Its Impact upon Social Sciences*, although the final writing up took another six months. The book is dedicated to Jack whose special needs delayed completion and more careful scholarship but also allowed significant pause for contemplation over content and structure. Last, but by no means least, the new edition has lost an author. Ellen Leopold did not participate directly in the redrafting of the new, and generously and selflessly allowed the old to be drastically shorn to make way for it. Nonetheless, her contribution to the systems of provision approach remains immense as does her influence across each page of what follows. The pity for the content and the reader is that other obligations precluded her from being more fully involved in the new edition.

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Introduction

The study of consumption has expanded prodigiously over the last twenty years. The first edition of *World of Consumption* was written as the field was reaching its adolescence with all that this entails in terms of growing pains and experimental pleasures. The following decade has witnessed an accelerating interest in the subject. Now, far from occupying a subordinate academic niche, consumption is increasingly served by a bewildering range of contributions (Glennie 1995: 164–5). These draw upon the different objects of consumption themselves, their social significance, the sequence of activities that lead to consumption, and the different sites of consumption across country and household, quite apart from the wealth of illustrations across time and space. Equally varied have been the methods and theories for investigation of consumption both within and across the social sciences, as is evidenced by a number of surveys, which are often necessarily partial, specialised and rapidly dated in their coverage (e.g. Fine and Leopold 1993, Miller 1995b, Gabriel and Lang 1995, de Grazia and Furlough 1996, Holbrook 1995, Miller (ed) 2002).¹ To the extent that such surveys have dropped off in numbers, the reason is that the subject matter has become too vast to cover. In short, consumption is a moving, expanding and an evasive target, especially in view of the array of analytical weapons with which it has been assaulted.

In the previous edition, a warning was signalled that unless it was careful, the study of consumption would be liable to degenerate into a more scholarly version of US consumer studies, a hodgepodge of eclectic theoretical and empirical elements, leading to a self-confessed chronic state of disarray.² Is the same true of the more academic study of consumption that only lags the emergence of consumer studies by a decade or so?³

Although not addressing this issue directly, and not necessarily departing from the assessment to follow, Miller *et al.*, (1998: 1) would seem to suggest otherwise. They see consumption as shifting from ‘academic outcast’ through three stages of research over the past two decades.⁴ The earlier works are perceived to have emphasised lack of theory and empirical studies and the diversity of social relations attached to consumption, rendering it a confusing catch-all in taking

account of gender, kinship, ethnicity, age, locality, etc. Apart from concern with interdisciplinarity and with knowledge and meaning, the literature was marked by being unfocused and by endless debate over central terms. This first stage was prompted by four motives: to make consumption more visible through study of the new landscapes of consumption (supermarkets, retail parks, shopping malls); to counterpose consumption to production; to place culture in opposition to political economy; and, primarily through advertising, to inspire interpretative studies especially around subcultures. The second stage is characterised by five aspects: the creation of a presence for consumption as its own subfield within disciplines; consumption is set adrift from production; emphasis is placed upon subjectivity, self and identity; the scope of study is expanded to include festivals, collecting and the like; and consumption is seen as a key aspect of the history of modernity through display and gaze, tied to time, place and construction. Finally, the third stage reflects five main issues: the restoration of production and the inclusion of distribution, thereby incorporating the active role of consumers and workers; emphasis upon material culture and the interaction between the subjects and objects of consumption; corresponding interest in contextual specificity; more work on the history of consumption; and also on space and place as instrumental in the making of consuming identities.

As a broad brush, the account of Miller *et al.* has much to commend it. But, not surprisingly, it is far too neat and tidy, leaving as many questions unposed as answered. In particular what is the timing of this periodisation (and can three stages be squeezed into two decades), and does it fit equally across disciplines and topics? Although the study of consumption across the social sciences may have exhibited some changing emphases and postures, it can also be interpreted as having become increasingly chaotic, not least because the progress identified by Miller *et al.* is far from uniform or complete across the literature, with successive stages supplementing rather than displacing one another. Not everyone can be in, let alone recognise, the analytical vanguard. Even those that have been in the lead in some respects are capable of straddling the divides posited by Miller *et al.*, as in Ritzer's (1993, 1998) successive contributions, ultimately leading to a brutally frank stages-defying amalgam within a single contribution let alone across the literature as a whole (Ritzer 1999a: 76):⁵

In the end, this is not a work in postmodern theory, or any other theory for that matter. The goal is to gain a greater understanding of the new means of consumption and to that end theoretical tools that work will be employed, whatever their origins. In order to create the theoretical framework for this book, I have borrowed the ideas of exploitation, control, rationalization, and disenchantment from modern social theory and the notion of re-enchantment from postmodern theory. This book offers what the postmodernists call a 'pastiche' (a mixture of sometimes seemingly contradictory ideas) of modern and postmodern ideas in order to analyze the cathedrals of consumption. The latter, of course,

are themselves combinations of modern, postmodern, and even premodern elements. Both the subject matter and the theoretical perspective of this book stand with one foot in some of social theory's oldest ideas and the other in some of its most contemporary thinking.

If periodisation *within* the study of consumption is questionable, a notable neglect in Miller *et al.* is consideration of the broader intellectual context as if the study of consumption has experienced a self-contained inner momentum of its own. But its evolution, as is at least implicit in their account, has depended upon a much broader renegotiation across the social sciences of the relationship between what might be conveniently termed economy and culture, although other oppositions are represented and representative, not least production and consumption. Thus, Ashkenazi and Clammer (2000) acknowledge how consumption has been at the forefront of the study of material culture in view of its bringing together a number of core and classical themes – gender, class, critical theory, mass society – and new themes such as media studies, popular culture and the ethnography of conformity and resistance in everyday life. The study of consumption emerged during, out of, and as a major part of the rise of postmodernism. The social sciences are now, unevenly and variously, on retreat from its excesses. What exactly has this all entailed?

One consequence has been a number of notable achievements in the study of consumption. Six readily spring to mind, and these will be elaborated and justified at greater length during the course of the chapters that follow. First, as already mentioned, contributions have been both wide ranging and diverse. In addition, in contrast to a decade ago, it is no longer so common to find studies of consumption that are motivated or rationalised by the wish to balance its neglect relative to production. But the pendulum between the two has now swung towards or past its midpoint, if not so far as presumed by Quataert (2000: 1), 'the consumption of goods, not their production, drives history. ... Modernity is also marked by the rise of mass consumerism, and by its ascendancy of the consumer over the producer'.⁶ Indeed, the pendulum has in some respects begun its return, albeit perturbed, journey. Many have become interested in bringing production back into the study of consumption.

Second, rational choice methodologies, or those more generally based on methodological individualism, have made remarkably little headway in the literature on consumption. The two obvious candidates for rendering this otherwise are economics and psychology. In their mainstream versions both have generally been studiously, even contemptuously, ignored. From psychology, the idea of consumption as the means by which to fulfil natural, instinctive or biologically determined needs has proved an anathema both to postmodernist preoccupations with the meaning of identity and the objects of consumption themselves and to social theory more traditionally based on structures, relations and agencies.

If such psychology is dead for consumption, economics might be considered undead. For everyone recognises that prices and incomes, and the economy

more generally, are vital to the study of consumption. But much of that vitality has been lost in the cultural turn. As a result, more by accident than design, the study of consumption has not fallen prey to ‘economics imperialism’, the process by which the traditional subject matter of the other social sciences has been appropriated by economics, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 7. This is despite the success with which economics imperialism is currently sweeping, albeit unevenly, across the other social sciences. Whilst it now purports to incorporate history, institutions, custom and culture, mainstream economics remains empty when it comes to the meaning of the consumed to the consumer (and, indeed, treats the consumer much like a mini-enterprise with utility as its sole product). Given the meaning of consumption as starting point, and production as point of departure, it is apposite that mainstream economics should be studiously ignored in the recent rise of the study of consumption.

Third, not surprisingly, the study of consumption took the popular notions of consumer society or consumerism as an initial analytical prompt in two different, if closely related, ways. On the one hand, following the pioneering work of McKendrick *et al.* (1982), the birth of a consumer society is seen as part of the historical landscape. On the other hand, whether through the questionable notion of consumer sovereignty or through the less sanguine perspective organised around the diseases of affluence, consumerism has encouraged an unduly ethical reading of consumption. Is it good or bad? Humphery (1998: 209) observes an intellectual legacy of ‘participation in consumption cultures as socially destructive, culturally bereft and politically dangerous’. But there has been some shift towards less negative approaches over the last two decades as well as celebration of consumption as resistance. Further, Humphery

emphasises the importance of the *mundane* and the *everyday*, rather than the spectacular. ... Consumption is undoubtedly connected to these fantastic worlds. But it may be that pleasure and excitement are overly ‘written in’ when it comes to the cultural analysis of consumer society.

(p. 26)

However, whether for ethics or for history, on which see Chapter 8, the notion of consumer society has been so widely and indiscriminately used that it has become recognisably empty of precision and explanatory content.

Fourth, with the major exception of economics, the study of consumption has been highly conducive to interdisciplinarity. An initial phase in the literature like so many newly emerging topics, was marked by the simple intra-disciplinary application of ready-made, off-the-shelf theory to consumer and consumed. But this has given way to genuine fertilisation across disciplines in appropriate recognition that the subject of consumption knows no analytical boundaries. The exceptional exclusion of economics is paradoxical. For it reflects both the authority and impenetrability of the discipline – to other social sciences and as it presents itself, it is technically formidable – and the narrowness of the analytical

terrain upon which it exercises its command. The result is both an absence of mainstream economics and a neglect of the economic, a point to be taken up later and throughout.

Fifth, whilst consumption may have taken production as its point of departure, it has increasingly rejected a simple dichotomy between production and consumption. The literature has liberally incorporated other, intermediate activities between production and consumption, and recognised them to be of significance. This is true of design, retail, advertising, shopping and so on.

Finally, primarily as a reaction against the interpretative excesses of postmodernism, the study of consumption has increasingly sought to integrate material and cultural factors. What objects are and how they are perceived are inextricably linked to one another, and to the processes by which they are brought to the consumer and used (and discarded).

The approach to consumption as material culture, however, confronts a major stumbling block – its relationship to the economy and to economics. How can the economy be brought back in following the postmodernist cultural turn, and the much longer standing divide between social and cultural and economic analysis? In many ways, this is how the first edition of *World of Consumption* can be interpreted and justified. It represented an attempt to convince cultural theorists of consumption to take the economy seriously (and economists to do likewise for culture). There is a world out there that must be acknowledged as a source not only of the objects of consumption but also of how they are and can be interpreted. Hopefully, this message is now increasingly pushing against a door that is ajar if not fully open. As a result, it is possible to move on to a new message, one that avoids the horns of the dualism between the material and the cultural.

The new message is disarmingly simple. Consumption in the modern world is primarily served by capital and capitalism, and these must analytically figure prominently both as material and cultural categories in the study of consumption. Whilst mainstream economics is appropriately set aside as being incapable of providing that material, let alone the cultural, element, a political economy of capitalism is essential. It must address the nature of commodities and money, for example, as the unavoidable conduits in the provision of consumption as well as those of its aspects, cultural or otherwise, that appear to evade or negotiate commercialism. But this is to anticipate the content of what is to follow for which an overview is now provided.

Overview

The next chapter establishes certain features of the present intellectual environment. Currently, there is a dual retreat, uneven and faltering, from the excesses both of neo-liberalism and of postmodernism. On the one hand, the idea no longer prevails that the market does or could work perfectly. Consequently, greater interest has been stimulated in examining how economic and non-economic factors, the market and the non-market, interact with one another. At

or below the national level, for example, this has allowed the notion of social capital to flourish. On the other hand, emphasis on the interpretation or deconstruction of the meaning of the material world is conceding ground to attention over how that world is materially created. In this respect, to an even greater extent than the fashionable social capital, the idea of globalisation has exploded across the social sciences during the last decade. It too has sought to confront the articulation of the economic and the non-economic. It has tended to do so by positing them as being in opposition to one another – as the heterogeneity of the national, social, etc., is washed over by the homogeneous tidal wave of the global economic. The culture of consumption, in particular, is perceived to be resistant to globalisation despite McDonaldisation.

Globalisation has, then, provided a ready-made framework for examining a wide range of economic and social phenomena. But it is flawed not so much in terms of being exaggerated or not, the dominant issue in a literature marked by pros and antis, but in its understanding of the economic and the corresponding opposition drawn with the non-economic. This is demonstrated in Chapter 2 by discussion of finance, the markets for which have been understood to be the epitome of, and metaphor for, globalisation.

It follows that globalisation has limited purchase in explaining rather than describing the articulation of the material and the cultural. Another candidate has, however, presented itself for the task, economics imperialism. Again, over the past decade or so, mainstream economics has sought to colonise the other social sciences and has succeeded as never before. This is because it has moved from an approach based on the non-economic, as if reducible to being equivalent to a perfect market, to one in which the non-economic is to be understood as the rational response to market imperfections. The new phase of economics imperialism has, however, made limited impact on the study of consumption because it is incapable of genuinely addressing the social construction of the meaning of objects, taking these (as well as the identity of consumers) as self-evident.

What, then, are the alternatives to economics imperialism and globalisation? This is the subject of Chapters 3 and 4 in which a critical but constructive review is undertaken of a number of traditional concepts deployed across the social sciences. Two broad conclusions are drawn. First, in Chapter 3, the dichotomy between commodity and gift is discussed and shown to be an invalid dualism. What is crucial is to uncover the social relations underpinning the forms that these represent. For the two broad categories conceal a diverse range of material and cultural relations. Little is to be gained, and much to be lost, in treating all commodities and commodity forms as mutually equivalent in some other sense and also as the ‘other’ world of an equally heterogeneous category of non-commodities or gifts. As the literature has come to recognise, commodities can express gift relations and vice versa. Nonetheless, the chapter concludes, a full understanding of capital commodity production is an appropriate starting point for examining the differentiated nature of more general forms of exchange – putatively commodity, gift or otherwise.

Chapter 4 is concerned to establish, contrary to much received wisdom, that capitalist commodity production as analytical starting point does not preclude an appropriate study of use values as opposed to exchange value. It takes Haug's (1986) aesthetic illusion as point of departure. Haug argues that commodities tend to be degraded in their material properties in pursuit of profitability through cheaper production. To guarantee sale, this is veiled by endowing them with a sexual content through advertising. Significantly, Haug establishes the connection between how commodities are produced and how they are construed. But his analysis is too narrow in presuming that commodities are always worsened and that compensation only comes in the form of sexuality and advertising. Commodities pick up their highly diverse meanings from a variety of sources. Nor is it a matter of adding more means and content to the making of their use values. For this leaves open to a large extent the systemic source of initial meanings and whether and how these are reproduced, transformed or set aside rather than simply supplemented.

In posing the system of provision approach in Chapter 5, Haug's approach can be interpreted as being extended, possibly beyond recognition. The argument is that commodities designed for consumption belong to distinct 'vertically' integrated chains of activities – incorporating production, distribution, retailing, etc. The food is distinct from the clothing system in the way in which the different moments along their provision are linked together. The system of provision approach is defended against criticisms that have been made against it, particularly that consumption is so 'leaky' across commodity chains that they are not distinguishable from one another. Further, Chapter 6 moves beyond the idea of a circuit of culture by arguing that each system of provision is attached to a cultural system that conditions the meanings taken by consumption.

Chapter 7 returns to economic issues more centrally, examining in detail why mainstream economics is incapable of contributing to a material culture of consumption. This is done both through close consideration of the work of Gary Becker and through debate over how consumer durables should be understood. For Becker, all economic and social phenomena can be reduced to the aggregated behaviour of individuals single-mindedly maximising utility. Both individuals and objects of consumption are unproblematically taken as given – an unpromising starting point for a material culture of consumption. But the emptiness of the approach can be seductive. Rather than simply being questioned and rejected in light of its emptiness, the latter allows omitted factors to be appended as qualification or critique. This needs to be recognised so that a more appropriate economic (and cultural) analysis can be broached as is illustrated by the discussion of consumer durables.

More generally, the insidious persistence of Becker's economic approach is marked by informal appeal to supply and demand as explanatory tools, where these can range over any material or cultural factor. Such is the impetus behind the idea of consumer society, where the demand blade comes to the fore out of the market scissors. Chapter 8 is concerned with the notion of consumer society,

consumerism or the consumer revolution. These concepts are popularly used to explain, and often to condemn, the mores and practices of present-day society, with its presumed opposition between the creation and satisfaction of ‘false’ and ‘real’ needs. But as a concept with analytical content, consumer society is found to be both vague and insubstantial. First, a glance at some of the history of consumption reveals that consumer society can be traced back hundreds of years. Applied to the distant past, it has too readily been associated with bursts of consumption, often of particular, newly available items, even though this is almost inevitably a concomitant of any period of economic growth. It is more noticeable in retrospect because of association with the luxury or conspicuous consumption of the wealthy, and hence more likely to have survived and to have acquired antique value in the present.

For the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the analysis of the consumer revolution is inevitably richer. It has been linked to particular transmission mechanisms, such as the retail or distribution revolutions (via transport and communications). It has been seen as the counterpart to the mass production of uniform consumption goods. Advertising has been considered crucial in creating a domestic revolution around the working-class consumer, primarily represented through the purchases of the housewife – with the major exception of the male prerogative over the motor car. Paradoxically, the consumer revolution has served simultaneously to suggest increasing uniformity, even democratisation, of consumption *and* increasing differentiation as particular market segments, whether men or women, rich or poor, young or old, are cast as vanguards of demand, leading the economy forward. Critical assessment of such notions confirms the usefulness of the alternative systems of provision approach based on the presumed co-existence of heterogeneous systems of provision.

Chapters 9 and 10 turn from private to public consumption. The first of these chapters puzzles over why public consumption should so readily disappear off the agenda of consumption studies. An answer is offered in terms of the discursive and practical transformation of consumption into something else once it becomes recognisably public. This is illustrated in Chapter 10 by consideration of the welfare state as an alternative both to private and public consumption. In addition, in reviewing recent literature, the book returns to its beginnings in showing how mythologies around globalisation and the economics (imperialism) of welfare have been increasingly influential.

The final chapter offers a whistle-stop tour of some recent developments in food provision and food studies, suggesting that the system of provision approach is capable of addressing them. In this way, earlier themes are illustrated, not least that the cluttered landscape of consumption (studies) can be placed in some order, especially if drawing upon a critical appreciation of capital and capitalism as both material and cultural categories.

FROM ECONOMICS IMPERIALISM TO GLOBALISATION?

Introduction

Those wedded to traditional Marxist political economy must view the contemporary prominence and popularity of the idea of globalisation across a wide range of discourses as a mixed blessing. For, on the one hand, it recognises the systemic nature of capitalism on a world scale in contemporary conditions. It opens up questions both of power (and powerlessness) and of underlying economic and social forces. On the other hand, globalisation is the correspondingly anodyne equivalent of the Third Way, open to multiple and shifting interpretations and definitively forestalling certain perspectives, not least those associated with the idea of imperialism.

This chapter is concerned with ideas, specifically the relationship between *economics* imperialism and globalisation. Because the notion of globalisation has shot to prominence in academia and popular discourse on the nature of contemporary capitalism, it has inevitably drawn attention to economic issues, even where the economic is not the immediate focus of attention. Yet, remarkably, globalisation essentially remains unexamined within the discipline of economics itself. In a sense, this is not so surprising, after reflection, for two separate reasons. First, mainstream economics has strengthened its attachment to an analytical framework based on the optimising behaviour of individual agents. This is hardly conducive to use of historically specific, even contemporary, concepts of a systemic type, especially when pitched at a global level. Second, economic theory itself has shifted towards examining the incidence and consequences of market (and non-market) imperfections, precisely those factors that are supposed to impede globalisation. Consequently, within mainstream economics, globalisation tends to be understood implicitly as the piecemeal and incomplete removal of barriers to the free flow of resources and knowledge. At best, mainstream economics understands globalisation as international expansion and integration of trade, finance and investment, as convergence of fluctuations, and the emergence of, and need for, international as opposed to national regulation.

It follows that the attention to globalisation across the social sciences other than economics offers an opportunity for the re-emergence of radical political

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