In Defense of Consumer Critique: Revisiting the Consumption Debates of the Twentieth Century

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In the past twenty-five years, the literature on consumption has gained analytic power by positioning itself against the consumer critics of the twentieth century (Veblen, Adorno and Horkheimer, Galbraith, Baudrillard), arguing that these accounts were totalizing, theorized consumers as too passive, and simplified motives. The literature moved to micro-level, interpretive studies that are often depoliticized and lack a critical approach to the subject matter. The author argues that developments such as the emergence of a global production system, ecological degradation, and new findings on well-being warrant a reengagement with the critical tradition and macro-level critiques. This article considers three traditions—Veblenian accounts of status seeking, the Frankfurt School, and Galbraith and the economic approach to consumer demand—arguing that the flaws of these models are not necessarily fatal and that the debate about producer versus consumer sovereignty should be revisited in light of the changing political power of transnational corporations.

Keywords: consumption; consumer critic; Veblen; Galbraith; Frankfurt School; producer and consumer sovereignty; status seeking

In the past twenty-five years, there has been a flowering of literature on consumption across a wide range of disciplines. Scholars in history, anthropology, cultural studies, English and other literatures, sociology, geography, and marketing (among others) have studied consumption from a large number of angles, with a multiplicity of research methods and perspectives (for reviews, see Slater 1997; Miller 1995; Arnould and Thompson 2005). These contributions have enormously enhanced scholars' understandings of the emergence and growth

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of consumer society; how consumers experience their consumption activities and goods, subcultures, consumer agency, and meanings; the role of consumption in the constitution of social inequalities such as gender, race, and class; the connections between consumption, nationalism, and empire; the nature of retailing; spatial dimensions of consumption; and many more dimensions of consumption.

Before the emergence of this new field of consumption studies, the theoretical starting points for work on consumption were typically a handful of consumer critics stretching back almost a century—Veblen, Adorno and Horkheimer, Galbraith, Baudrillard, and Marcuse among others. The new literatures gained analytic power and forcefulness in part by differentiating themselves from these earlier perspectives, in what was undoubtedly a productive positioning. Among the objections to the critical accounts were that they were overly totalized; that they failed to give the consumer sufficient credit for acting intentionally and with consequence; that they portrayed too unitary a consumer marketplace; and that they were elitist, indeed reactionary, in their privileging of high rather than popular culture.

These are important objections. However, I will argue that their legacy has become constraining by ruling out more sophisticated and less problematic versions of the critics' arguments and by putting macro-level or systemic critiques of consumer culture off limits. In the process, the field has ended up with a certain depoliticization and difficulty examining consumption critically. Interpretive accounts, while important, have their own limitations, including the tendency to accept consumers' own accounts of themselves without a critical or more complex and macroscopic lens.

This development has become especially problematic in the contemporary United States, as the ecological impacts of domestic consumption patterns have become devastating, as the rising consumer norms associated with a middle-class lifestyle are increasingly difficult for households to attain, and as the psychological evidence questioning the contributions of consumption to well-being becomes more compelling (Layard 2005; Kasser 2002; Schor 1998, 2005; Easterlin 1973, 1995).

In this article, I will consider three major traditions of consumer critique and the debates about them (for a study of the consumer critique literature, see Horowitz 2004; see also Slater 1997; Schudson 1991). First, there is the line of argument begun by Veblen with *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899/1994) (and extended by Duesenberry 1949; Hirsch 1976; Frank 1985; Schor 1998; and Heffetz 2006). Pierre Bourdieu (1979/1984) is a related but more sociological treatment. Second, there is the tradition begun by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Finally, there is the tradition of Galbraith (1958), Packard (1957), Friedan (1964), and Ewen (1988).

My larger point is to show that the flaws of these models are not necessarily fatal and to try and stimulate new work that builds on some of their insights. Furthermore, I attempt to clarify some of the features of the models and to show that they may be more compatible with recent formulations (such as rational, or "agentic," consumers) than may be generally assumed. Finally, I argue that the debate about producer versus consumer sovereignty should be revisited in light of the changing political power of transnational corporations.

Veblen and Models of Status Consumption

The Theory of the Leisure Class (Veblen 1899/1994) is a biting analysis of the spending patterns of the rich and *nouveau riches* in the late nineteenth century. The basics of Veblen's account have been reproduced in later treatments, including formal analytic models. The core of the approach is a hierarchical social structure driven by a competitive status competition in which position is determined by wealth. Publicly visible consumption is the mechanism by which wealth is validated in the competition, or "game." The need for public display, or visibility, is caused by the possibility of what contemporary theorists call moral hazard, that is, the incentive to lie or behave unethically, which in this case is the exaggeration of wealth. Visibility is in many (but not all) ways an efficient, that is, low-cost and accurate mechanism for transmitting information. The need to commit real resources eliminates pretenders and provides a readily assessable status claim. Visibility is central to the model and provides much of its analytic power as well as a host of falsifiable hypotheses. The emphasis on visibility also signals that this is a model, not of all consumption spending, but of the relationship between visible consumption, and not only nonvisible expenditures, but also alternatives to private consumption (such as public consumption, savings, and leisure time). This is a point that has perhaps not been as clear in the literature as it should be.

Let me briefly note some of the features of the model that are relevant for the later critiques. Dynamically, the model uses a "trickle-down" mechanism in which status goods are first adopted by the wealthy, whose spending patterns are eventually mimicked by households further down the wealth distribution. As incomes rise, high-status luxuries become lower-status necessities and new luxuries develop (see also Simmel [1957] for this model applied to fashion). A second feature of the model is that individuals are highly intentional status maximizers. They are fully informed, in command of their desires, and operate in a well-organized social environment of shared assumptions and values. Consumption is neither individually expressive nor nonrational. (This is similar to conventional economic theories of the rational consumer and to some postmodern accounts of consumption.) However, in contrast to those approaches, Veblenian consumers have a pure social orientation. Consumption is carried out for its social value, rather than for intrinsic product benefits or personally inscribed meanings. In that sense, it is akin to anthropological accounts that stress the role of consumption in the construction and reproduction of culture (Douglas and Isherwood 1978) or sociological accounts that emphasize symbolic meanings (Baudrillard 2001). Like some of these culturalist accounts, Veblen's theory relies on a commonly recognized set of consensual status symbols. However, in contrast to most culturalist accounts, in which consumption is a satisfying and welfare-enhancing activity, Veblenian consumers are frustrated because all status is positional and Prisoner's Dilemmas abound. (Absolute increases in spending only yield social value when they improve relative position; when increases in standard of living are general, they are like being on a treadmill, merely keeping people from falling behind.)

The Backlash against Veblen

For much of the twentieth century, class-based status-driven models were the dominant approach to consumption, especially within U.S. sociology (Lynd and Lynd 1929; also see Schor [1998, chap. 3] for a discussion of this literature). Visible consumption display was thought to be more important in the United States than Europe because birth-based status claims were weaker and there was more upward mobility. Most of the research in this tradition was heavily materialist and studied purchasing patterns rather than qualitative data on consumers' intentions or their interpretations of goods. (The literature called these concepts the "coding" and "de-coding" of consumption symbols.) In the 1970s, this weakness was exposed, and critics argued that (1) consumers did not actually know which goods were more expensive, and (2) the proliferation of consumer goods had eroded the homogeneity of the status system (Felson 1976, 1978). Later, cultural studies accounts of media consumption emphasized an active viewer making her or his own meanings, undaunted by the symbolic meanings intended by producers or any hegemonic structure (such as a price-driven ranking). More generally, research in both sociology and other fields shifted from a critical to an interpretive framework that relied far more on consumers' own interpretations of their actions and what consumption means to them. By contrast, in status-driven systems, consumers may not be willing to discuss their motives with researchers. Evidence of status seeking is largely behavioral.

Status models fell into widespread disfavor and denunciation of Veblen became almost ritual. In his influential *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987) and elsewhere, Colin Campbell claimed that the Veblenian approach was not empirically supported and failed to sufficiently account for the importance of novelty in "modern" consumer societies. As an alternative, he argued that consumers were driven by an endless cycle of daydreaming-purchase-and-disappointment. Interestingly, in view of the subsequent discrediting of the "consumer as dupe" model, scholars failed to notice that Campbell's consumers are trapped in an unsatisfying and costly purchasing cycle (see also McCracken 1988; Campbell 1994).

Postmodern consumer theory also rejected Veblen. Although social differentiation was an essential principle for foundational postmodern consumer theorists such as Baudrillard, as the characterization of postmodernity as an era of fragmentation, pastiche, and *bricolage* developed, it became less compatible with the single-minded, consistent, purposive Veblenian status seeker (Jameson 1984; Featherstone 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). (See Negrin [1999] for a discussion of postmodern fashion theory.) The "postmodern" consumer is a playful and adventurous individual, putting on and taking off roles like costumes from her or his eclectic closet, shunning conventional (upscale) status aspiration. As Holt (2000) has argued, the "good life" is no longer a matter of acquiring a well-defined set of consensual status symbols but is a project of individual self-creation. Studies of subcultures also rejected the trickle-down model on the basis of a growing tendency for consumer innovation to come from the social margins, as trends in fashion, music, art, and language were originating among poor inner-city youths, rather than the wealthy.

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In the midst of this ferment, Bourdieu's *Distinction* (French edition 1979, English 1984) affirmed the principle of class patterning of consumption, but it expanded on the standard status model by adding "cultural capital" as a second component of status. *Distinction*'s unmistakable Veblenian roots may account for some of the negative reception the book received in the United States. An interesting although limited debate ensued, in which key tenets of the class/consumption approach were explored, such as whether taste and consumer choice follow class patterns in the United States or whether consensual status symbols still exist (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Halle 1993; Holt 1997, 2002). The dominant view continues to be that this is an outmoded theory of limited usefulness in explaining consumer behavior. (Tellingly, two Veblenian accounts of the past decade—my *Overspent American* [Schor 1998] and Robert Frank's *Luxury Fever* [1999]—were written by economists, rather than sociologists.)

Are Status Models Still Useful?

The critics of Veblen have rightly identified key shortcomings and limitations of both his theory and status models more generally. For example, the universe of goods is far more complex and less unidimensional than the model suggests, and the informational demands on consumers to keep up with the array of goods are substantial and increasing. (On the other hand, the Internet has made information cheap and accessible, and there appears to be an increasing preoccupation with consumption, perhaps partly because the informational demands are so high.)

Critics are also correct about the reversal of the flow of cultural and consumption innovation and an increase in the speed of diffusion, although this is not a fundamental critique. (The diffusion path does not have to be linear; it just needs a significant downward-sloping segment.) The point about the project of self-creation in consumer society is also undoubtedly right, but it does not require that that process occurs in a vacuum with respect to social inequality and status. One of the questions the literature has not sufficiently explored is the extent to which the project of the self is driven by individual traits or whether it is heavily influenced by class and other group positionality and constrained by economic resources. As an oft-heard quip puts it, Why is it that those people who are attempting to construct themselves as differentiated individuals are wearing the same logos, buying the same Crate & Barrel couches, and watching the same television programs? The status model is compatible with a certain, although not unlimited, degree of individuation, as long as differentiation is matched by consumers' ability to decode consumption styles and choices. Furthermore, the postmodern point about fragmentation can be accommodated by reformulating the balance between local and global status competitions. (Here global is not used literally, but in relation to the overall society [see Frank 1985].) While Harley-Davidson riders, Star Trek fans, or club-goers may reject the global status game, they do exhibit strong local status hierarchies (Schouten and McAlexander 1996; Jenkins 1992; Thornton 1996).

It is regrettable that the literature largely failed to test the model against data in part because the interpretive turn led away from falsifiable behavioral analyses. Some economists have conducted empirical tests of status seeking and found strong support for its existence in purchasing patterns (Brown 1994; Chao and Schor 1998; Heffetz 2006). Other evidence, such as the growing role of brands, the increase in brand value, and the growth of luxury brands support the ongoing importance of status consumption. However, the literature seemed intent on going in another direction.

Partly, this was due to a view that society has become more mobile and less unequal, which in turn has led to a collapse of consensual status symbols, and the distinction between "high" and "low" culture (Twitchell 1999; Lipovetsky 1994). The idea is that consumption has become more "democratic" and "egalitarian" because society has become more democratic and egalitarian. However, the data reveal just the opposite. Socioeconomic mobility (across income groups) has declined markedly (Bowles, Gintis, and Groves 2005). The distributions of income and wealth have grown far more unequal in the past twenty-five years, along a number of dimensions. The proportion of income and wealth going to the top 20 percent (relative to the bottom 80 percent) has risen significantly. The proportion going to the top 5 percent and the top 1 percent relative to the bottom 95 percent and 99 percent has also increased dramatically. Within every quintile, both income and wealth have also become less equally distributed (Wolff 2002; Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto 2004).

These trends in the distributions of economic resources were mirrored in consumption patterns. Beginning in the 1980s, luxury goods markets expanded dramatically, with both upscaling of goods and services and product innovation at the high end (Frank 1999). As the corporate financial scandals of the early twenty-first century came to light, so too did the consumption excesses associated with this public looting. Curiously, consumption studies, which were busy rejecting the models that make sense of this behavior, had little to say about these developments. Perhaps they had thrown out the proverbial Veblenian baby with the bathwater.

Adorno and Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School Critique

Within the humanities, the Frankfurt school has been the most influential of the consumer critiques. In their classic article, Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1972) outlined a pessimistic view of the "culture industries" (for which read "consumer culture") in which consumers are trapped in a "circle of manipulation and retroactive need" (p. 121). Drawing on Marxian formulations of the alienation of workers in capitalism, Adorno and Horkheimer theorized the sphere of culture as being driven by imperatives from the production side. Indeed, theirs is a functionalist analysis in which life outside the factory (the sphere of leisure) is an "afterlife," structured by a dehumanized workplace. The requirements of profit making lead to cultural production that is formulaic, soothing, and banal, but that maximizes audience size. Art loses its revolutionary potential, instead acting like a drug that lulls the worker into passivity outside the factory and makes it possible for him (this is a very male vision) to return the next day to the mindless work on offer. Capitalist production creates capitalist culture and a passive citizenry, in which cultural consumption is used to reproduce an exploitative economic system.

Not surprisingly, critics have taken issue with much of this account. One problem is that it is a so-called totalized and functionalist vision without contradiction or possibility for resistance. The realm of consumption is structured to reproduce the realm of production. Even the contradictions of a more conventional Marxist account are absent because culture undermines the development of revolutionary consciousness that would otherwise occur in the course of alienated production. Thus, the model cannot account for the fact that consumer resistance is always present in the marketplace. Furthermore, while functionalist accounts are not always incorrect, they often are, in part because they fail to specify the mechanisms by which the hypothesized functional relationship is reproduced. In this case, there is no reliable microeconomic (i.e., enterprise level) explanation for why culture producers act to ensure workplace docility for industrial manufacturers. (The argument that a common ownership structure across the two sectors is evolving is a weak one, and with the exception of General Electric's holdings in the culture sphere, it has not been historically validated.)

On the other hand, the inclusion of both the production and consumption side in the analysis is a major methodological strength, a point that has not been sufficiently recognized. Analyses that look only at production or consumption are always partial and risk either incompleteness or getting it "wrong." This point is worth remembering in light of some of the literature on the relation between production and consumption that emerged in the early days of "consumption studies." The move, prompted by feminist, postmodern, and interpretive traditions, to revalorize consumption analytically and symbolically from its degradation in the Marxist and culturally conservative traditions is essential for the field. But the line of argument that inverts the relationship, arguing that consumption has somehow become "dominant" and that production is now merely an appendage to a consumption-driven system, is as wrongheaded in its own way as the production-centric analyses of Marxism. (For examples of the consumption-dominant line of argument, see Baudrillard [2001] and Firat and Venkatesh [1995]. For an insightful study that analyzes both sides of the market, see Schneider [1994].) It is a theoretical overreaction that has undermined a more analytically powerful approach.

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A second criticism is that the approach is elitist in its denigration of popular culture. I will bracket this point and return to it in the next section in my discussion of Galbraith. Let me turn instead to a related topic, which is the debate about "dupes versus agents," a long-standing preoccupation of the literature in which Adorno and Horkheimer figure prominently.

Agents versus Dupes and the Micro-Macro Relation

This debate has been widely discussed in the literature, (so I will not belabor it here). The hapless, manipulated consumers in Adorno and Horkheimer's (1944/1972) dystopic formulation gave way to a view of consumers as motivated, discerning, even demanding, in their relationship to producers of cultural texts, products, and advertising. Beginning with the contributions of the Birmingham School on subcultures, and continuing with studies of fan cultures, brand communities, and many other consumer activities, research on consumers over the past twenty-five years has painted a very different picture of an active, or, as the literature terms it, "agentic," consumer (Hall 1980; Jenkins 1992; de Certeau 1984; Fiske 1989; Davis 1995). Whether it is Trekkies rewriting the scripts of their favorite episodes, cosmetic-surgically altered women with feminist sensibilities, or off-road vehicle enthusiasts, the literature describes a consumer experience in which participants emphasize choice, control, and even power. In marketing circles, the failure of the New Coke became the canonical example of this view.

It is worth asking how representative these accounts are—I suspect the consumer does not feel as empowered at the bank, phone company, and auto dealer as in her or his Manilow fan club or reading group—but my larger point is that this literature is a fairly good account of an important realm of consumer activity. There is little question that consuming is a, if not "the," realm of agency in contemporary society. In the simplistic formulation of agents versus dupes, the agentic view is clearly preferable. After all, it is hard to do good social science from the assumption that people are idiots. (On the other hand, it is also important not to overstate the case for the agentic consumer. For every hip indy music connoisseur, there is most likely a bleached-blond, Coach-carrying, North Face–jacketed college student with a Tiffany heart bracelet around her wrist who is inarticulate about her consumer choices.)

But the agents versus dupes framing has been a theoretical cul-de-sac. The strong agency view results in an inability to analyze producers' power or the relation between individual choice and predictable market outcomes. Furthermore, it often conflates the micro and macro levels of analysis—the individual consumer and the market (or economic structure)—and insists on an isomorphism between them. That isomorphism exists in neoclassical economics, although I suspect most consumption scholars do not accept that model's strong conclusions. It was probably also a feature of the period that Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1972) were writing in. As Douglas Holt (2002) has argued, in the 1940s and 1950s advertisers wielded enormous cultural authority, and we might say that consumers willingly ceded their "agency" to them.

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However, for every era, this micro-macro identity needs to be established or refuted, and not assumed, and some of the most productive analyses of contemporary consumer society are those that make those analytic linkages. Bourdieu's (1979/1984) *habitus* is one mechanism that reconciles agentic consumers with a high level of determinacy in outcomes. Far from being duped, Bourdieu's individuals are savvy strategic actors (i.e., agents), yet they reproduce determinate and predictable class-based consumption outcomes. Partly, they are operating on the basis of motives that have become subconscious, and partly they are rational actors in a system that is characterized by considerable social irrationality. Of course, in Bourdieu's account producers are almost incidental, but this need not be so. One can reconstruct his analysis in such a way that the market (i.e., producers) plays a large role in generating meanings and driving the pattern of tastes.

An even stronger formulation of this point is that agency (or more properly subjectivity) is increasingly constructed *by* producers, rather than being deployed against them. Nike is an example of an enterprise whose success might be interpreted as stemming from the mobilization of a type of consumer agency that is actualized through the purchase of Nike products. This is a twist on a point made by Slater (1997) Holt (2002), and others, which is that in the contemporary period, consuming has become the privileged form (or site) of identity construction. If we accept the view that individual agency is now central to the operation of consumer society (in contrast to an earlier era in which there was more overt social conformity), it is the companies who figure out how to successfully sell agency to consumers that thrive. In this formulation, subjectivity does not exist prior to the market (à la neoclassical economics) but is a product of it. This does not make subjectivity "false" as in earlier critiques, but it does imply that subjectivity is constrained and market driven. After all, only certain forms of subjectivity are profitable. So while consumers have gained one kind of power (market innovations begin with them), they have lost the power to reject consumption as a way of life. (Baudrillard 2001; Holt 2002). They are trained from the earliest ages to be consumers (Schor 2004), and it becomes nearly impossible to construct identity outside the consumer marketplace. As has been frequently noted, even those who choose to live as anticonsumers cannot escape the fact that theirs has become an advertised and marketed lifestyle, with magazines, courses, clothes, and accoutrements to promote simplicity and a rejection of consumerism.

John Kenneth Galbraith and *The Affluent Society*

If Veblen and the Frankfurt School were each dominant in sociology and the humanities, respectively, *The Affluent Society* (Galbraith 1958) was the most influential popular discussion of consumption in the post-WWII era. It was an instant and long-lived best seller, and its intellectual legacy helped define the "counterculture." (After all, the culture that was being "countered" was consumer culture.) (See Horowitz [2004, 102-8] on the impact of *The Affluent Society*.) *The Affluent Society* makes three major claims about consumption—that producers create consumer desire, that the consumption–well-being link is weak, and that the structural pressures to increase private consumption drive out public goods. Like the other two critiques, Galbraith's views have been widely discredited in the scholarly literature.

First, Galbraith takes aim at the standard economic assumption that consumer desires (or preferences) are determined outside the market and that what firms do is respond to those preferences. Galbraith reverses the model, arguing that the system has elevated production to a "paramount position" and desire (or preferences) is the adaptive variable. Second, once affluence has been achieved, consumers no longer have urgent or intrinsic needs, the satisfaction of which yields significant increases in human well-being. Instead, firms turn to sales and marketing to create the "craving for more elegant automobiles, more exotic food, more erotic clothing, more elaborate entertainment—indeed for the entire modern range of sensuous, edifying and lethal desires" (Galbraith 1958/1998, 115). And of course, they are responsible for those "bigger and better tailfins" which the critics made so much of. Finally, the system is no longer in "social balance" because the emphasis on private consumption crowds out public goods.

The rejection of Galbraith must be seen partly in its historical context. Holt (2002) has argued that the Frankfurt view lost favor partly because marketers responded to the backlash against them in the late 1950s and 1960s by becoming culturally less authoritative and more responsive (see also Frank 1997). Something analogous happened with Galbraith. As the neoliberal economic regime that began in the 1980s developed, ideologies of consumers' independence and intelligence became deeply naturalized. Furthermore, marketing and advertising has become so successful that the need for producers to "create" wants came to seem like a quaint early-twentieth-century idea. With mall parking lots filled to capacity, credit card debt soaring, and consumers trampling each other in holiday shopping stampedes, it is hardly surprising that biological determinist arguments of insatiable desire became dominant (see Twitchell [1999] for an influential version). The delegitimation of modern liberalism, paternalist state policy, and Keynesian economics (with its passive workers), plus the right-wing celebration of the individual, combined to further undercut the consumer critics.

At the same time, however, a growing body of empirical literature provides support for one of Galbraith's central tenets, namely, the weakness in affluent societies of the link between consumption and well-being. This comes from both cross-sectional studies in psychology, which show inverse correlations and in some cases causal relations between materialism and a large number of measures of human functionings and well-being (see Kasser [2002] and, on children, Schor [2004, chap. 8]), and from time series data that reveal that in the wealthy countries of the global North, the substantial rise in consumption of the post-WWII period has been accompanied by *no* increase in subjective well-being at all (Layard 2005). Furthermore, in the United States the de-linking of income and social well-being indicators is a powerful challenge to the prevailing notion that consumption promotes human well-being. The now substantial empirical findings on well-being, materialism, and income have not yet been well integrated into the consumption literature, but they should be.

Elitism and the Content of Consumers' Choices

Like the Frankfurt School, Galbraith has been criticized for viewing consumers as passive and manipulated. He has also been attacked as a hypocrite and an elitist, a charge that is leveled at many consumer critics. Galbraith's singular status as an academic celebrity exposed his personal consumption habits—ski trips to Gstaad and summers in Vermont appear in the attacks on him (Lebergott 1993; Twitchell 1999). But it is worth noting that for all the ink that has been spilled on Galbraith's famous tailfins, the book has relatively little discussion of particular consumer choices and far more about volume of consumption.

The tendency to make the conversation personal is worth noting for a moment. Moral philosophers are not attacked in print for adulterous behavior or ungenerous actions toward colleagues. Economists are not exposed as frauds for accepting tenure and removing themselves from the vicissitudes of the "free" market they believe in so passionately (for other people). Yet personal consumption habits are fair game. It is a curious double standard.

[V]irtually all consumption goods and practices have social meanings and effects. They should therefore be as much fair game for analysis and critique as any other social phenomena.

The charge of elitism is more important. The disdain for popular culture and tastes is certainly a feature of much consumer critique, and it is not surprising that scholars have become reluctant to make critical analyses of consumer choices. This reproduces the liberal position embodied in economics and political theory that consumer choices are not discussable, as noted by Stigler and Becker (1977) in their classic article "De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum." One might have expected that the widely noted erosion of the high/low divide in culture would have opened up space to discuss particular consumer choices, but it seems not to have.

Curiously, there seems to be far more willingness to do so when those choices reveal strategic intentions to reproduce dominant race and gender positions, rather than class. In the antebellum period, white consumers shifted from purchasing colored items to a preference for "white goods" such as white linens, white gravestones, white household decorations, and white clothing, as a way of differentiating themselves from slaves and other people of color (Heneghan 2003). Few scholars would find it illegitimate to critique this consumption for its role in expressing and reproducing the system of racial domination. But critics who analyze goods whose primary purpose is to express exclusiveness and high social position are criticized for questioning people's choices.

The general point is the well-known one that virtually all consumption goods and practices have social meanings and effects. They should therefore be as much fair game for analysis and critique as any other social phenomena. But liberal ideology cordons off this particular sphere as purely private, or asocial, and therefore not a legitimate subject for analysis, and such a view has permeated much of the consumption studies literature. This may be a personally comfortable position, especially for academics, whose high cultural capital puts them in a vulnerable position. But its democratic veneer is thin, and analytically untenable. It has also become a de facto defense of the consumption status quo.

Producer versus Consumer Sovereignty Redux

So where does the discussion of market sovereignty leave us? Are we closer to the now-conventional wisdom that consumers rule, either through their considerable power to reject products they do not like, or through their growing role in the production of cultural innovation and ultimately not only products but marketing messages as well? Or is the growing corporate power that is widely acknowledged in other spheres, such as the state and the university, also relevant in consumer markets, in ways that are not identical to what Galbraith (1958) argued, but closely related? Having succeeded spectacularly well in ensuring growing demand for goods, perhaps the transnational companies that dominate consumer markets have redirected their attention to consolidating control over the environment in which they operate. This has entailed the capture of state policy and the undoing of decades of regulation and consumer protection, as well as the creation of international institutions and treaties such as the WTO, which privilege corporate profitability above democratic control, labor rights, or environmental protections. Their approach to the youngest consumers (Schor 2004) is another variant of this strategy, for ultimately the attempt is to control the very formation and development of consumers' preferences. These are empirical and debatable questions. For my part, the view that corporations have grown more rather than less powerful is the more compelling one. And in that light, it is striking that this growing power has been accompanied by the dominance of an ideology that posits the reverse—that the consumer is king and the corporation is at his or her mercy.

I also wonder whether Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1972) merit a rereading in the post-9/11 U.S. context, with the militarization of everyday consumption (camouflage fashion, flyovers at sporting events, and Hollywood movies glamorizing the military), the linking of patriotism with spending, and the growing climate of political and cultural repression. After all, what they were ultimately concerned about was the growth of a totalitarian society, anchored by a conformist consumer culture. While that vision may not have seemed particularly credible in the mid-1980s, when the new consumption studies began, it looks more insightful from the perspective of 2006.

Finally, I want to note that my argument in this article is not that a return to the critical traditions of the early twentieth century is a sufficient basis for articulating a compelling challenge to contemporary consumer culture. That, after all, is a reactive move. But it is a necessary first step to recovering a tradition of engaged, critical scholarship at the macro level. From here the task is to construct a truly twenty-first-century approach, a new, critical paradigm that engages the ways in which consumption has grown and radically transformed notions of individuality, community, and social relations. I look forward to collaboration—with the authors of this volume, other consumption scholars, and those in the emerging consumer activism sector—to make that new paradigm a reality.

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