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## THE SOCIOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION

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### I

*The significance of the study of consumption for sociology*

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SOCIOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION

In 1978 Robert Mayer published an article in the *American Behavioral Scientist* entitled 'Exploring sociological theories by studying consumers' in which he noted that the increasingly voiced suggestion that marketers and consumer researchers could profitably make more use of sociological concepts could equally be matched by calls for sociologists to pay more attention to individuals in their role as consumers. He claimed that 'sociologists have much to gain from focusing their empirical studies on consumers', and that 'the study of consumption is a useful setting for the testing and expansion of sociological theories' (ibid.: 600). Whilst there is little evidence to suggest that many sociologists took much notice of Mayer's remarks at the time, they can be seen, from the perspective of the 1990s, to have had a certain prophetic ring to them. Not that there has in fact been any rush to 'test' sociological theories by examining consumer behaviour, but there does now exist within the discipline a fairly widespread appreciation of the importance of focusing attention upon the sphere of consumption.

One of the first sociologists in Britain to recognise this was Peter Saunders, who ten years later, issued a very similar call to Mayer's suggesting that sociology needed a 'new research agenda' called 'the sociology of consumption' (Otnes 1988). Although to some extent echoing Mayer in suggesting that economic, political and cultural insights could be gained by treating consumption as a principal research site, Saunders went further by suggesting that it was time for sociology to throw off the old production-dominated paradigm in favour of a new, consumption-oriented one. He continued to develop this theme in subsequent publications, arguing that in place of the old Marxist analysis of a conflict between classes differentially related to the means of production, sociologists should recognise the fundamental conflict which exists between producers and consumers (Saunders 1990). For Saunders it was 'no longer axiomatic that class

location is the fundamental basis of material life chances' (Saunders 1986:319); rather the crucial divisions related to different modes of consumption, especially that between the socialised and privatised forms in such spheres as housing and transport.

Predictably enough perhaps, Saunders' work sparked off a lively debate, one in which he has come under fierce attack (Warde 1990b; Hamnett 1989; Sullivan 1989; Burrows and Butler 1989), principally on the grounds of his apparently unqualified endorsement of consumption and uncritical championing of consumer rights. But it should be noted that he does not focus on the nature of consumption itself but rather studies the contrasting social and political contexts in which it occurs, substituting categories of consumer for the traditional concept of social class. Hence it has been suggested that he is not so much correcting the production bias of Marxist analyses as proposing his own equally general theory of industrial societies (Warde 1990b).

Given that Saunders' background was in urban sociology and the sociology of work (Saunders 1986), it is understandable that the debate which he initiated was at first confined to these subfields of the discipline. However, not only did such views have obvious political significance in Thatcherite Britain, but to challenge the traditional view of the nature of social class in modern society was necessarily to query the orthodox opinions of the majority of contemporary British sociologists. Consequently it was not long before this debate reached a wider audience and in doing so became a critical factor in the development of a British sociology of consumption. This event can probably be dated to 1990, in which year not only was there a special issue of the British Sociological Association's journal *Sociology* (vol. 24, no. 1) devoted to the topic of consumption, but the organisation's annual conference also took 'Consumption and Class' as its central theme. A selection of these papers was subsequently published under the heading *Consumption and Class: Divisions and Change* (Burrows and Marsh 1992). However, the Saunders-inspired debate over class, consumption and modes of provision was not the only factor leading up to the emergence of a sociology of consumption in Britain. This—what one might call the largely 'economic' or 'material' perspective on consumption—clearly played an important part, yet there was another factor at work, one which has been at least as influential, although it involved approaching consumption from a very different perspective, one which stressed its character as a 'cultural' and 'psychological' phenomenon.

This strand of sociological analysis has its origins in traditional culture theory, especially in that perspective on modern mass culture which represents it as basically a 'consumer culture'. This essentially elitist critique existed in both a right-wing and a left-wing form in the 1950s and 1960s, with Leavisites and neo-Marxist Critical Theorists equally eager to condemn such components of mass culture as popular music and advertising. This has proved an influential intellectual inheritance, one which many academics have found difficult to throw off. However this critique was always marked by a general detachment from and indeed even an ignorance of, the reality of popular culture, relying heavily (especially in the British context) upon a suspicion of American cultural influences. Thus even those who

ostensibly espoused non-elitist, traditional forms of popular culture, such as Richard Hoggart, tended to share the pessimistic vision of a culture in the process of being destroyed by transatlantic 'consumerist' values. 'Consumer culture' was, from this perspective, identified with an exploitative, alienating, modern, capitalist culture, and regarded as embodying selfish, dehumanising and materialist values.

Gradually this perspective became modified during the 1970s and 1980s in the face of a new form of culture theory; one that was in closer contact with ordinary people and their cultures (or more usually subcultures) and hence had a firmer ethnographic base. Thus a new generation of researchers found that the supposed 'mass culture' was in reality more of a patchwork of micro-cultures, many of which were genuinely popular creations, expressive of the real concerns and aspirations of ordinary people. This popular culture tradition of study (which gained much of its impetus in Britain from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies), evolved out of the critical theory tradition but tended to see 'protest' or 'resistance', rather than compliance or despair, in the cultural forms adopted by ordinary people. Thus Ioan Davies (1993:142) describes British cultural studies in the 1970s as being, at least in part, a 'consumerist critique' in which work on 'the popular' dealt with consumerism as a form of resistance against a traditional, elitist culture and the society which it represented (see Hall and Jefferson 1976; Turner 1990). The cultural ethnographers who undertook this research tended to focus on aspects of youth culture, especially fashion, style, popular music and fiction (Hebdige 1979, 1988; Fiske 1989; Willis 1978, 1990), and their principal message was that the ordinary 'consumer' was not a passive and easily manipulated creature, but an active, critical and creative person; someone who adapted and moulded material acquired through the mass media to their own ends by means of a diverse range of everyday, creative and symbolic practices. By studying the 'real' consumer of popular products in this way, rather than the stereotypical, exploited and manipulated person portrayed in critical theory, cultural studies laid the basis for a genuine sociology of the consumer of cultural products.

At the same time, the rise of feminism was also having an impact on the development of a sociology of consumption. In retrospect it seems inevitable that feminism should make a significant contribution in this respect because it had long been assumed (rightly or wrongly) that most 'consumers' were women. Thus, to the extent that feminists set out to render women more 'visible' in both sociological theory and research, then this would logically lead more or less directly into the study of such central consumption-related topics as fashion, the body, shopping and household management (see Carter, in McRobbie and Nava 1984). Where feminism combined with the new popular culture ethnography, this focus on consumerism was particularly pronounced (Nava 1987, 1992).<sup>1</sup>

However, there was also another factor at work, one associated with a new and very different style of cultural analysis. This surrounded the debate over the 'condition' or 'culture' of postmodernity. A term originally used by architects to suggest the dissolution of any distinction between the high culture style of modernism and popular, vernacular, cultural traditions, it has since been applied to all areas of culture and in such diverse ways that a standard or common usage is

hard to detect. As Burrows and Marsh (among others) have noted, postmodernism consists of 'a somewhat loose collection of ill-defined notions' (Burrows and Marsh 1992:6). The important theorists of postmodernity are generally recognised to be Jean-François Lyotard (1979) and Fredric Jameson (1991). The key idea that connects their work is that of the fragmentation of culture and the increased importance of symbol over substance in everyday life (see Harvey 1989; Connor 1989). What is significant in this context, however, is the importance which these theorists of postmodernity attach to consumption and the fact that they tend to associate a postmodern society with a consumer society, an equation that has subsequently been adopted by many other writers (see Kaplan 1987; Featherstone 1991). Consequently a concern with consumption as a symbolic rather than an instrumental activity is a thread that unites writers as diverse as Lyotard, Jameson and Baudrillard. In fact, it is the latter's essay on consumer society, rather than the ideas of Lyotard or Jameson, which has probably had a more direct impact on the emerging sociology of consumption. From the perspective of Baudrillard's post-Marxist semiotic view of modern life, contemporary society is essentially a consumer society. What individuals can be regarded as consuming, however, is less products and services than their meanings or 'emancipated signs'; that is signs which no longer have any fixed referent. This results in a vast system of hyper-reality in which any object can, in principle, take on any meaning. The journal *Theory, Culture and Society* has served as a major organ for the dissemination of the views of these, mainly continental, apostles of postmodernism, and its special issue on consumer culture in 1983, together with its editor Mike Featherstone's subsequent publications (1988, 1990), have played a significant part in popularising this approach to 'consumption'. However, it is important not to forget that these postmodern theories generally have little by way of empirical support, suggestive though they might be, and consequently constitute a questionable basis for an emergent sociology of consumption.

Although one can claim that the contemporary sociology of consumption in Britain has something of a mixed parentage, these are the two broad strands which have combined to give it its present form; an 'economic-materialist' one emerging principally out of urban sociology and the sociology of work on the one hand, and an essentially 'psychological-cultural' one emerging out of critical theory, cultural studies and the debate over postmodernism on the other. These two very different approaches to consumption have now, in the climate of the 1990s, begun to mix and mingle to form that diverse body of observation and analysis that currently passes for 'the sociology of consumption'.<sup>2</sup>

In one sense it could be said that developments over the past two decades have resulted in the sociology of consumption being thrust into the limelight. This is because it has become a commonplace for people to express the view that contemporary society is a 'consumer society', with a predominantly 'consumer culture'. That is to say, 'a society organised around the consumption, rather than the production of goods and services' ('Consumer Society', *Blackwell's Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Social Thought*, 1993). This is presumed to mean not merely that the economy is structured around the selling and promoting of goods more than

it is around their production, but also that members of such a society treat high levels of consumption as indicative of social success and personal happiness and hence choose consuming as their overriding life goal. Whether most sociologists actually believe that this is an accurate description of contemporary British society or not, they are nevertheless forced to acknowledge the widespread existence of such views.

Consequently the sociology of consumption is now necessarily at the centre of disciplinary concerns and its rise signals a general reordering of the saliency of different topic areas within the discipline. Increasingly that which was formerly considered central is now viewed as marginal (most noticeably the world of work and employment, but also and more controversially, the phenomenon of social class itself), whilst topics long regarded as insignificant, if not actually trivial and frivolous, such as fashion, advertising and shopping, are now considered critical to an understanding of contemporary 'postmodern' society. Clearly, the latter change should be welcomed, for these phenomena have been unduly neglected for too long. However, it is important to recognise that their study is primarily justified because they are significant components of human life, yielding experiences that are meaningful and important to those who 'follow fashion', or who 'live to shop', and not simply because any information gained may serve to illustrate the (itself fashionable) thesis of postmodernity. Much more questionable is the larger claim that *all* topic areas of interest to sociologists, ones which have generally been studied within a production, that is to say class-based, paradigm, are today best studied within a consumption one. It is this argument which has provoked such a vigorous response to Peter Saunders' claims and his explicit challenge to what he sees as the privileging of 'the formal workplace and workplace relations' by so many sociologists (1988:142). At the same time, it is what makes the arguments of the postmodernists so disturbing as they foreground the isolated individual, juggling with assorted signs and symbols in a never-ending attempt to construct and maintain identity in a fragmented and ever-changing environment. Looked at in this light, the emerging sociology of consumption takes on the character, not merely as a critique of traditional productionist paradigms, but of sociology in general.

### **THE PROSPECTS FOR A SOCIOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION**

One of the central difficulties facing anyone attempting to review work in the sociology of consumption is that, as a result of the trends outlined above, a loose 'consumerist' perspective is now commonly employed to frame the discussion in many different areas within the discipline. Thus work on popular culture or the media is commonly presented in such a way as to foreground the extent to which individuals should be viewed as 'consumers' of products rather than simply as participating in cultural activities, or as the 'consumers' of films or television programmes rather than simply as an 'audience' for them. To this extent, the language of consumption has become widely adopted in areas of research which formerly appeared to manage perfectly well without it. To what extent employing

the term 'consumer' carries with it any implication of the presence of a perspective distinctive of the sociology of consumption is another matter. But then it is first necessary to attempt to define consumption and hence outline what is in effect the proper concern of such a field of study

Several attempts have been made both to define and delineate the topic of consumption within the framework of the discipline of sociology (see Saunders in Otnes 1988; Miller 1987; Campbell 1987; Warde in Burrows and Marsh 1992). The difficulty here, given the diverse influences upon this field, is that since each of these tend to be closely tied to the specific background and interests of the particular author concerned, no one formulation has succeeded in gaining widespread acceptance. Not that defining consumption is in any case an easy matter since it is hard to overcome its accepted popular and professional usage to refer to an exclusively economic activity. Yet the assumptions contained in such usage, especially the idea that these activities can be identified by the analyst without reference to the subjects understanding of 'what he or she is doing', together with the presumption that 'consumption' and 'production' are necessarily exclusive categories, are ones that many sociologists might want to query. On the other hand, some sociologists, in their understandable frustration with economic usage, have fallen into the trap of substituting functionalist definitions for the traditional ones, applying the term 'consumption' to that activity which serves to enhance an individual's status or confirm or construct their identity. This practice is equally unhelpful, obscuring as it does the difference between activities that aim to achieve these goals and those that do in fact realise them, as well as that between 'consumption' proper and its functional alternatives. Perhaps, therefore, for the time being at least, it would be sensible to employ a simple working definition, one that identifies consumption as involving the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service.<sup>3</sup> Now it is important to note that while purchase may be direct and personal, effected through the marketplace, it may also be indirect and impersonal, such as that effected through taxation; whilst it is also important to recognise that this definition embraces services as well as goods. Both these dimensions are sometimes overlooked in those treatments of consumption that adopt a primarily Marxist 'commodities' approach (see Lee 1993). Indeed, as Alan Warde has suggested (1990b), the mode of provision of a good or service, whether it is effected through the market, the state or even supplied privately, is itself an important feature of the phenomenon of consumption and ought itself to be the subject of sociological enquiry.

When considering the classic theoretical tradition that bears on consumption, one tends to think first of the contributions of Veblen and Simmel, and to a lesser degree perhaps, those of Marx and Weber. Certainly the major contributions would appear to be those of Veblen on conspicuous consumption (1925), Simmel on fashion and money (1957, 1978), Malinowski on the kula (1922), Boas on the potlatch (1944), Mauss on the gift (1976), Marx on commodity fetishism, use and exchange value (1971, 1973), Sombart on luxury (1967), and Weber on status groups and the Protestant ethic (1958, 1978). Yet it is not clear how far the theoretical contributions of these writers actually inform contemporary discussions

of consumption. Certainly they are commonly cited, but it is unusual for their theories to be discussed at length, let alone used to analyse or interpret data. Thorstein Veblen is an excellent case in point since his theory of conspicuous consumption is probably the most widely referred to of all theories in this field (especially by academics in other disciplines, such as historians: see Stone 1982; Burke 1987). Yet it is rarely Veblen's specific theory, with its unqualified emphasis on the manifestation of 'pecuniary strength', which is appealed to, but rather a simplified and amended version featuring 'taste'. Whilst, in addition, the many difficulties and ambiguities of interpretation contained within it are rarely mentioned (for a discussion of some of these see Campbell 1987).<sup>4</sup> Simmel, by contrast, has received more attention, probably because, unlike Veblen, he has some enthusiastic supporters among the present generation of sociologists (see Frisby 1981). Consequently he is commonly cited as the source of insights into aspects of contemporary consumerism, especially in regard to the phenomena of fashion and the *flâneur*, as well as the aesthetic and stylistic dimensions of modern, urban life more generally (see, for an example, Bocock 1993). Weber's work is also widely recognised as pertinent to an understanding of a consumer society, mainly because his concept of a status group appears to refer to those who share a common lifestyle and consequently can be viewed as embodying a consumption-based rather than a production-based criterion of social differentiation. However, it is important to note that for Weber, individuals who occupied the same status situation were simply people who were accorded equal 'honour', that is to say prestige or esteem, in the eyes of others. Unlike Veblen, he did not presume that there was any single source of honour in modern society even though status differences might well be expressed in differentiated 'styles of life' (Gerth and Mills 1970:186–188).

In this connection one can observe that it is more common to find sociologists drawing on contemporary theorists, such as Erving Goffman or Pierre Bourdieu, and especially upon such theorists of postmodernity as Baudrillard, Jameson or Maffesoli, than upon the more classical theorists mentioned above. Thus, in the Rob Shields' edited volume *Lifestyle Shopping* (1992), although contributors refer to Marx, Veblen and Simmel, the theorists who receive the most attention are Michael Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, Erving Goffman, Henri Lefebvre and Michel Maffesoli. However, it is interesting to reflect on the extent to which these writers can properly be judged to have advanced theories of consumption, as they are principally theorists of culture, or more commonly, of postmodernity. Baudrillard probably has the best claim to be considered a 'theorist of consumption' since he builds directly upon Marx's concept of the 'commodity'. However, he modifies Marx's original usage by drawing upon semiotics in order to stress the significance of the 'commodity-sign' rather than the commodity itself. Thus, he argues that in capitalist societies, consumption should be understood as a process in which only the signs attached to goods are actually consumed, and hence that commodities are not valued for their use but understood as possessing a meaning that is determined by their position in a self-referential system of signifiers.

Probably the most important contemporary theorist of consumption proper is Pierre Bourdieu, whose work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of*

*Taste*, first published in France in 1979 and only available in English since 1984, bears comparison, in character and importance, with Veblen's *Theory of The Leisure Class* (Veblen 1925). In stark contrast to most of the theorists of postmodernity mentioned above, Bourdieu's theory derives from, and is supported by, ample empirical material concerning people's 'taste'. He uses this to develop a complex thesis in which he stresses the centrality of consumption practices (especially the manifestation of taste) in the creation and maintenance of social relationships of domination and submission. Like Veblen he emphasises the hierarchical nature of the status system of modern society, but, unlike Veblen, Bourdieu plays down material possessions, stressing instead the importance of the individual's possession of symbolic or cultural capital and the way in which this can be put to use to display taste. There is, none the less, the same emphasis upon competition between individuals for the scarce resource of status as one finds in Veblen, with the addition of a subtle analysis of the character and historical development of the various *champs*, or markets, in which this takes place. Unlike Veblen, however, Bourdieu recognises that there are inherent limitations on an individual's chances of succeeding in moving up through such a system as a consequence of their 'habitus', or personal cultural inheritance, and that not even newly acquired wealth will necessarily enable individuals to advance their status.

## II

### *A review of the sociological literature*

Having identified consumption as any activity involving the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service, it will be useful to employ these divisions, if loosely, in a review of the relevant sociological literature. In fact, not all of these topics have been adequately researched, with maintenance, repair and disposal especially neglected. But then even the selection, purchase and use of goods and services has been the subject of more speculative assertion than empirical enquiry.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, it is necessary to be aware of the two contrasting sociological traditions that have been identified as combining to constitute the present state of the sociology of consumption, as these cross-cut these divisions such that each aspect of consumption may be studied from either perspective.

### **THE SELECTION AND PURCHASE OF GOODS: SHOPPING**

The selection and purchase of goods (in addition to services, if perhaps to a lesser degree) is commonly envisaged as achieved through the central consumer activity of 'shopping'. In view of this, it is something of a surprise to discover how little attention sociologists have devoted to the study of this activity, especially in view of the significance which it is accorded in most theories of consumer society. There is, however, a growing literature on the retail environment (see especially Gardner and Sheppard 1989), one which relies heavily on both historical studies of shopping in



general (Adburgham 1964), of the department store (see M. Miller 1981; Williams 1982; Laermans 1993), or of the shopping arcade (Geist 1983); or, alternatively, upon the work of geographers and town planners (see Goss 1993). It is interesting to note in this connection the extent to which the shopping-mall appears to have a special significance for the consumption-as-culture theorists. Typically treated as if it were the very embodiment of the postmodern condition, the distinctive nature of the activities undertaken within its walls is characteristically presumed by the sociologist without the benefit of any evidence gleaned from shoppers themselves (see Shields 1992). Analyses such as these, which treat the department store and the shopping mall as if they were cultural phenomena, might be judged suggestive (see Chaney 1983, 1990; Shields 1992) but they hardly serve as a substitute for a detailed examination of the central consumer activity of shopping. Research that does possess this more empirical focus includes George and Murcott's note on strategies for managing embarrassment when shopping for sanitary towels and tampons (1992), as well as, if to a lesser extent, Mary Douglas' spirited defence of shopping as a social exclusion activity (1992). Yet the most useful contribution to date (at least in the British context) is probably the Lunt and Livingstone (1992) volume, *Mass Consumption and Personal Identity*.

In fact, this volume constitutes a fascinating contrast with the Shields volume mentioned earlier, for whilst the latter collection is a good illustration of that theoretically inspired and characteristically speculative approach typical of the 'postmodern' sociologist of consumption, the Lunt and Livingstone book represents a more 'economistic' approach which treats consumption as if it were a more mundane phenomenon concerned largely with resource allocation.<sup>6</sup> Not that such a perspective is to be deplored, since the information supplied (the results of analysing nearly 400 questions asked to a sample of around 300 people) represents a valuable addition to our understanding on such topics as spending patterns, the use of credit, debt management and household budgeting. (See also Lunt and Livingstone 1991a, 1991b; whilst further material on debt and the use of credit can be found in Drury and Ferrier 1984; Ford 1988; Gardner and Sheppard 1989.) By contrast, the majority of essays in the Shields volume focus on issues concerning image, identity, the gaze and voyeurism, especially in those contemporary public spaces devoted to shopping such as atriums and malls; whilst these comments rest on little more than the sociologists' own observations and speculations.

The Lunt and Livingstone concern with the use of material resources has a natural corollary in the work of those sociologists who focus on the patterns of use with respect to the scarce resource of time. Those who have applied time-budget analysis to the selection of goods and services include Gronmo and Lavik (1988) and Gershuny (Gershuny 1982; Gershuny and Jones 1987). Since this work reveals that the British have doubled the time devoted to shopping over the past thirty years,<sup>7</sup> it provides further justification (if any were needed) for devoting more attention to studying the phenomenological and experiential dimensions of this activity. However, virtually the only example of this kind to date is the work of the Canadians Prus and Dawson (1991), who focus on the means through which the 'social process' of shopping is accomplished. In their interviews with shoppers they

encountered a sharp divide between those who viewed this as an enjoyable, 'recreational' activity and those for whom it was a 'laborious' activity akin to work itself. Employing a symbolic interactionist perspective, they explain this contrast in terms of differences in the manner in which the shopper's self is 'incorporated' into the activity. Their work is undoubtedly a useful first step in the direction of a proper ethnography of shopping, although the emphasis on the nature of self-involvement is probably more comprehensible when related to the wider social roles (especially gender) of the shoppers (see, for example, Campbell 1993b, 1994).

### THE USE OF PERISHABLE GOODS: FOOD AND DRINK

As far as the use of goods is concerned, one naturally thinks first of those most basic of all consumption activities, eating and drinking. Obviously a central part of any sociology of consumption, the sociology of food has, as Beardsworth and Keil observe, been something of a 'lacuna' within the discipline (Beardsworth and Keil 1990:139). There has, however, been some progress in recent years owing largely to the significant contributions made by Anne Murcott (1984, 1988), Stephen Mennell (1985) and Elisabeth Furst (Furst *et al.* 1991). Mennell's work in particular deserves mention, since by building on the historical analysis of Norbert Elias (1982, 1983), he has demonstrated how taste, and even appetite itself, can be shaped by broad social, political and economic processes. In fact, this reflects a general trend in which sociologists working in this field can be said to have benefited considerably from the valuable work of both social historians (Driver 1983; Mintz 1985; Schwartz 1986; Levenstein 1988) and social anthropologists (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 1978; Douglas 1975, 1984; Goody 1982; Harris 1986). Here too one can detect much the same division as noted earlier between that fundamentally materialist approach that focuses on food as related to issues of diet or nutrition, on the one hand, and that which treats food (or 'foodways') as codes or symbolic systems capable of semiotic or structural analysis on the other.

However, there is also a more distinctly sociological approach, one that focuses upon food provision within the household and its structuring by age, gender or life cycle (Kerr and Charles 1986; Charles and Kerr 1988). On the basis of material gained through interviews and diaries, information was obtained about the food and drink habits of some two hundred families in the North of England. This showed how sexual divisions and power relations affect the pattern of food distribution within the family, such that the distribution of meat, for example, is undertaken in accordance with a hierarchy in which men occupy first place, women second, and children third. In addition to demonstrating how the consumption of food and drink is structured by age and sex, Charles and Kerr also reveal the importance attached to the 'proper meal', the universality of the distinction between foods that 'are good for you' and those that are pleasant to consume, the widespread nature of nutritional ignorance, and the fact that many women, in an effort to remain slim and attractive, are engaged in a 'permanent struggle against food'.

This work is important, not merely because it lays the foundation for a sociology of food consumption, but also because in the process it serves to unlock the 'black

box' of the family. As Close and Collins have observed, the idea that the modern family's relationship with the economy operates to a large degree through its function as a unit of consumption is accepted by a wide range of writers (Close and Collins 1985). Indeed, it is common to encounter the claim that the 'unity' of the modern family has been 'restored around its function not of production but of consumption' (M. Young and P. Wilmot, *The Symmetrical Family*, cited in Close and Collins 1985:21). But such an argument often implies that the family or 'household' is regarded as if it constituted a single unit of consumption, and although this is the approach typically adopted in classical economics—in which households are effectively treated as if they were individuals—this ignores those complex intra-familial processes which in practice directly affect consumption. For, as the work of Charles and Kerr demonstrates, it is necessary to understand decision-making processes within the family if one is fully to understand how it functions as a consumption 'site'. Others whose research adds to our understanding of these intra-familial processes, especially as they relate to consumption and finance, include Branner and Wilson (1987), Gail Wilson (1987), Jan Pahl (1989) and Vogler and Pahl (1993); whilst mention should also be made of Peter Corrigan's valuable study of clothing and the family economy. Finally, some mention should be made of the fact that much consumption of food and drink also occurs outside the family. To date, Joanne Finkelstein's examination of the phenomenon of 'dining out' (1989) is one of the few studies in this field, and although intriguing in outlining the extent to which restaurant eating can be viewed as a branch of the entertainment industry, she does not succeed in charting the socio-demographic or social structural features of this phenomenon in quite the way that Charles and Kerr have done for 'dining in'.

Discussion of food and drink leads naturally enough to the topic of the body, since the original referent for the term 'consumption' was to those basic processes through which humans keep themselves alive. Hence it is quite understandable that the growth of a sociology of consumption should bring with it a new interest in the human body, or at least an interest in the processes of 'embodiment' (Bourdieu 1984) or 'corporeality' (Falk 1994). Consequently a focus on the primary consumption processes of eating and drinking is understandably matched by an interest in the body itself. As early as 1982 Mike Featherstone noted the importance of the body in modern consumer culture. Yet despite the very obvious basis of consumption in processes that arise within the body, much of the recent writing on this topic is more concerned with the image of the body than with its biological reality; both the image that consumers have of their own corporeality and those representations of the body contained in the culture at large. This has meant that the human body has been considered more as a medium of expression, or as an object for aesthetic contemplation, or even as the model for self-construction (Falk 1994), than in terms of its direct connection with eating and drinking. Of course, these different perspectives are not necessarily unrelated to the study of primary consumption processes, as there are many ways through which they may be connected. Nevertheless, there would seem to be a need for more empirical studies

of these primary activities, as well as others, such as washing, exercising and using make-up, which involve individuals in interacting with their own bodies.

### THE USE OF MATERIAL GOODS

When we come to consider the use of non-consumable goods, we find that sociologists have paid surprisingly little attention to the interaction of individuals with their possessions. Consequently we know very little about what individuals actually do with the goods they purchase, let alone about the time spent in the maintenance, repair or even the disposal of their possessions. Grant McCracken has called attention to what he calls 'possession rituals' and 'grooming rituals', whilst observing that consumers 'spend a good deal of time cleaning, discussing, comparing, reflecting, showing off, and even photographing many of their new possessions' (McCracken 1985). Yet despite the obvious truth of this assertion, few sociologists have chosen to study these practices. One exception would be Oakley's studies of housework (Oakley 1976) which provides some clues about the significance of such tasks as the washing and ironing of clothes, as well as the general cleaning of furniture, furnishings and other household objects. Yet the fact that these activities were framed within the context of 'housework' somewhat masks the extent to which the individuals engaged in them might have regarded themselves as interacting with prized personal possessions. Consequently Moorhouse's study of hot-rod enthusiasts (Moorhouse 1991) is valuable in filling this gap, since in this instance the subjects of the study were individuals who had both purchased the object in question and devoted themselves enthusiastically to its care and 'grooming'. What Moorhouse demonstrates is that the essence of hot-rodding is buying and *using* automobiles and that the enthusiasts involved, far from being passive, manipulated consumers of a 'mass culture' item, used their vehicles as a means of personal self-expression and creativity; spending long hours building, mending and transforming their possessions. Unfortunately, even in this study, the absence of interviews and the reliance on correspondence in hot-rod magazines, means that the consumer's voice is still only heard 'at second-hand'.

In fact, for direct, detailed information on how people relate to their material possessions, it is necessary to turn to social psychology, where there is an established literature embodying the results of first-hand research (see Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Rudmin 1991; Dittmar 1992). From this it is possible to discern the significance which possessions play in socialisation and the development of the self; how they can function as symbolic expressions of an individual's identity; as well as something about the socio-demographic differentiation in evaluating material objects. Thus we learn that the young are more likely to value toys, televisions and stereos, whilst the old place a greater value on photographs and other 'sentimental' objects valued for their associations or memories. We also discover that, in general, males place a greater value on technology than do females (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). This is a useful contribution, but since the focus is largely on attitudes towards goods rather than upon patterns of interaction with purchased objects, whilst it is not

always clear precisely how 'value' arises out of such interaction, there is still a need for a more sociological perspective on possessions.

One class of objects which sociologists do not appear to have overlooked is clothing, since there now exists a considerable literature on 'the sociology of fashion', although it is important to note that this field has largely been the exclusive concern of those sociologists who have adopted the psychological-cultural mode of analysis. Writers from Veblen and Simmel down to Barth and Bourdieu all concentrate on the distinguishing functions of clothes—that is to say on clothing as a 'code' or system of 'meanings'—whilst the more material strand is noticeably missing. At the same time, the examination of how individuals interact with clothing has been closely associated with the study of 'fashion' and hence with issues of imitation, emulation and the diffusion of innovation. Consequently, although some sociologists have sought to rebut the popular Veblen-Simmel model of fashion innovation (see Campbell 1992; King 1963; Davis 1992), it is still widely invoked as if it represented an explanation of how and why individuals interact with goods. In fact, not only is there considerable doubt about whether 'fashion' is an important consideration in the minds of clothes consumers, but there is little support for either the 'trickle-down' thesis or the stress on emulative motives. There are many examples of 'trickle-up' fashions, such as the frock-coat (Fine and Leopold 1990) and blue jeans (Davis 1992); whilst the stress on emulative motives as an explanation of fashion tends to take the form of a circular argument (see Campbell 1987:49–57), whilst also lacking empirical backing (see Campbell 1993a).

What is more, sociologists still present observer-based analyses of clothing, with the result, as Peter Corrigan has observed (Corrigan 1993), that the 'wearer perspective' is generally ignored. All too often, those who represent clothing as a system of meaning employ historical material to draw conclusions about the way in which clothing may be employed today (see Finkelstein 1991); or alternatively employ material from highly distinctive youth groups or subcultures to support claims about the function of clothing in general (Lurie 1981). The problem, however, is that clothing, in the form of fashion, is an essentially ambiguous system, one which generally employs 'undercoding' (Davis 1992), whilst 'what it says' varies over time and depends critically on who is doing the decoding. Davis provides a useful and much needed balance to the over-concentration on observer-analysis of meaning by exploring the production and distribution stages in the fashion process. However, like most other analysts he focuses on the presumed connection between fashion and identity, tracing what he calls cultural 'fault lines' of collectively experienced identity, and relates these to fashion changes in contemporary society. It remains the case, as Elisabeth Wilson has stressed, that there is still no adequate theory that explains why people 'follow fashion', or indeed, in general what function or functions fashion can be said to perform (Wilson 1985).

## THE USE OF INTANGIBLE GOODS AND SERVICES

Finally, something needs to be said about the consumption of intangible goods, such as information or images. As we have already seen, many theories of consumption (more especially those advanced by sociologists of a postmodernist persuasion), espouse theories that represent all consumption as, in effect, a process in which 'meaning' rather than tangible objects are actually 'consumed'. Be that as it may, the necessities of eating and drinking as well as the purchase and use of cars, clothes, washing machines, furniture and the like does involve people in exchanging money for real objects in a way that is not the case when people enjoy a pleasant view or watch a film. For in the latter cases the 'good' that is purchased is an experience rather than a material object. Viewed in this light the interaction of individuals with all sources of information or images, whether via the mass media, computerised data systems, the telephone or fax machine, or directly through their own senses when viewing artefacts in museums and art galleries, listening to music at concerts, or even simply 'enjoying the sights' as a tourist, becomes, in effect, 'consumption'. This is certainly the view taken by Silverstone and Hirsch (1992) in their study of the way in which information and communication technologies impact on the domestic sphere. Here, in echoes of the Charles and Kerr study mentioned earlier, the black box of the family is once again unpacked to reveal those intrafamilial processes which structure consumption practices and how these may in turn influence not only technological innovation but also popular images of technological products. However, such a perspective leads inevitably to a position in which it becomes impossible to exclude not just the study of advertising and audience research from an all-embracing sociology of consumption, but also, and more controversially, the sociology of entertainment and spectator sports, and even the sociology of the arts and media studies in general. Perhaps such fields of study could benefit from a 'consumer' frame of analysis, but the suspicion must arise that in attempting to encompass so large and diverse a range of topic areas, the sociology of consumption may lose whatever meaningful or distinctive character it is in the process of developing.

### III

#### *Consumption: Why the meaning is not a message*

Consumer goods may serve to fulfil a wide range of personal and social functions. Fairly obviously, they commonly serve to satisfy needs or indulge wants and desires. In addition they may serve to compensate the individual for feelings of inferiority, insecurity or loss, or to symbolise achievement, success or power. They also commonly serve to communicate social distinctions or reinforce relationships of superiority and inferiority between individuals or groups. They can also, on some occasions, express attitudes or states of mind, or communicate specific messages from one person to another. Finally they may be instrumental in creating or confirming an individual's sense of self or personal identity. All these possibilities have been canvassed in the wide variety of theories that can be said to

have a bearing on consumption. Yet it is noticeable that in contemporary sociological discussions not all these perspectives are equally represented. Generally we may say that special emphasis tends to be placed on those theories that relate consumption to issues of identity and, within this, to those that represent consumption as an activity which conveys information about the consumer's identity to those who witness it. Indeed, we can be more specific still and identify theories that represent the consumer as actually preoccupied with conveying specific 'meanings' or 'messages' about his or her identity (or 'lifestyle') to others, as those currently predominant within the discipline.

In general this would seem to be because sociologists have been persuaded that modern industrial societies have evolved in such a way that individuals are presented, effectively for the first time, with the possibility of choosing their identity by varying their pattern of consumption. What is commonly argued is that changes in production techniques associated with post-Fordism, together with ever-greater differentiation in the identification and targeting of market sectors, have led to a significant move away from mass consumption and towards an ever-wider diversity of consumption patterns. Quoting from Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen's book, *Channels of Desire*, Mike Featherstone suggests that such changes can be summed up in the phrases 'Today there is no fashion: there are only *fashions*', 'No rules, only choices', 'Everyone can be anyone' (Featherstone 1991:83, italics in original). Thus, in contrast to the comparative fixity of a hierarchical system of social status groups, the claim is that there is now a completely 'open' system, one in which an individual is free self-consciously to choose to manifest any of the multitude of lifestyles on offer; and 'lifestyle' is the key term in such theories. Very much 'in vogue' as Featherstone suggests, it is usually employed to connote

individuality, self-expression, and a stylistic self-consciousness. One's body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays, etc. are to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer.

(Featherstone 1991:83)

Thus, because of the wide range and character of goods and services currently on offer in the marketplace, and consequently the considerable choice which this presents to consumers, individuals are regarded as free to select an identity for themselves. The consumption pattern that they select, whether represented by their choice of car or clothes, house, furnishings or leisure-time pursuits, can therefore be regarded as indicative not simply of their 'self-identity', but of how they wish others to regard them. Indeed, because George Herbert Mead's thesis concerning the dependence of self-images upon the attitudes of others is generally presumed to be valid, changing one's consumption habits in order to indicate a new identity to others is presumed to be the only way in which consumers can effectively adopt a new one for themselves.

Now, in part, this tendency to assume that the members of modern (or postmodern) society can be more adequately categorised, not on the basis of old

production-style criteria such as occupation, educational qualifications or income, but rather by 'lifestyle', has gained considerable impetus because of recent developments in the fields of advertising and marketing. These professions now typically class people on consumption criteria, often employing what Gardner and Sheppard refer to as 'psychographic techniques', that is 'a way of looking at future market segments by attitudes and lifestyle' (Gardner and Sheppard 1989:217). Market researchers increasingly make use of geo-demographic databases to construct profiles of 'consumer types' based on different 'lifestyles'. These profiles may include types such as 'working-class stay at homes', 'young upwardly-mobile' and 'well-off-retired', or the 'co-op, club and colliery', and 'families in the sky' (see Steve Flowers, 'Information Overload', *Guardian*, 10 Nov. 1993). Or the categories may focus on attitudes and values toward contemporary issues, such as conservation and the environment, with the consequent identification of different varieties of 'greens' (see Gardner and Sheppard 1989:224). In general one may say that marketers have moved over the past ten to twenty years from categorising people by class and purchasing power, firstly to demographics and life-stages, and then increasingly to consumption patterns and 'lifestyle'. However, it was probably with the appearance of the 'yuppie' that the wider public first became aware of this change (see J. Burnett and A. Bush, 'Profiling the Yuppie', *Journal of Advertising Research*, April 1986; J.L. Hammond, 'Yuppies', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 50, 1986). This move has culminated in advertisers abandoning the old socio-economic classifications of A, B, C1, C2, D in favour of lifestyle categories, on the grounds that 'It is now misleading to relate lifestyles simply to income or occupation' (Neil Tharpar, 'Advertisers usher in classless society', *Independent on Sunday*, 6 March 1994). In the light of these developments, there must be a strong suspicion that sociologists, in accepting that it is valid to change from using older 'objective' criteria such as occupation or income to these newer 'subjective' ones, are merely following a fashion, effectively taking their cue from the advertisers and market researchers, rather than modifying their views as a consequence of their own research findings.

However, there may well be good reasons for believing that it is unwise of sociologists to build theories of modern consumer behaviour around the concept of 'lifestyle'. For whilst lifestyle-based categories may be of value in the context of marketing and advertising, there is little evidence to suggest their sociological significance. In the first place it is important to note that even the marketing 'lifestyle' categories are still commonly built around discriminators—such as age, marital status, employment status, or stage of the life-cycle—which are 'objective' criteria and not simply features of a consumption pattern. For, not surprisingly, market researchers are well aware that age, employment status and life-cycle position are major factors influencing disposable income and hence purchasing power. Consequently it is still rare for individuals to be categorised on lifestyle variables alone. Second, when more 'subjective' factors are taken into account, as for example in the development of categories of 'green' consumer, the criteria employed relate more to differences in people's values than to differences in taste. This is clearly critical because although individuals may easily develop new tastes,



there is much evidence to suggest that the values that people hold do not change much throughout their lifetime. Both these considerations suggest that the majority of consumers are not actually in a position freely to adopt a new lifestyle (or identity) simply by the expedient of changing their consumption patterns; either because of the limitations imposed by their objective circumstances or because to do so would require them to undergo the equivalent of a 'conversion' experience.

In the light of this conclusion it is easy to understand why so much emphasis is placed upon youth' in those theories which present consumption as guided by a desire to adopt a 'lifestyle' (see, for example, Langman 1992:59–61). For not only is youth' (especially perhaps adolescence) necessarily a life-cycle stage in which experimentation with identity is a central concern, but it is also a stage when individuals generally have little in the way of regular, fixed financial commitments. Very often lacking a career, if not permanent employment, as well as dependants, property-maintenance payments or mortgages, youth is in an ideal position to 'play' with identities. In addition, they are more likely than 'adults' to be in need of reassurance concerning their identity from their peers, and consequently to engage in the 'other-directed' activities of 'viewing and being seen'. However, it is still necessary to note that, even here, the identities on offer frequently consist of merely one or two subcultural alternatives which are themselves set within clear class boundaries; ones which are experienced by the individual as both objective and subjective (that is internalised values) constraints on their choice. This would suggest that it is unwise to treat the identity-experimentation characteristic of youth as if it were in fact typical of the conduct of modern consumers as a whole. This danger may be most apparent when generalisations are made on the basis of studies of working-class or lower-middle-class youth, but there is a similar danger of treating the attitudes and practices of certain sections of the affluent middle class, for example yuppies, or the *nouveaux riches*, as if they too were typical of consumers as whole.

But there are yet deeper problems with the 'lifestyle' or 'consumption as indicative of identity choice' thesis; ones that surround the suggestion that consumption carries distinct meanings, in the form of 'messages' about identity, to those in a position to witness it. Veblen was the first theorist to suggest that an act of consumption might carry such a message and he was very explicit about what it might be. He considered that it indicated something about the consumer's 'pecuniary strength'. In other words, observers, because of their knowledge of how much things cost, would be able to assess an individual's wealth (and hence in Veblen's terms, social status) from the purchased goods which they displayed. This thesis is problematic enough, given that people's knowledge of the price of goods is far from perfect, whilst the casual observer is often not in a position to judge the 'expensiveness' of items that are conspicuously displayed. Yet modern theories generally presume that consumer goods carry more complex messages than this one, and what is more, they assume that consumer and observer share a common understanding of the 'language' in which they are conveyed. Both must be judged highly dubious assumptions.

It has become almost routine for theorists to employ a communicative act or expressive paradigm when focusing on consumption; with the consequence that consumer actions are not viewed as real events involving the allocation or use of material resources (or even as transactions in which money is exchanged for goods and services) so much as symbolic acts or signs: acts which do not so much 'do something' as 'say something', or more properly, perhaps, 'do something through saying something'. This communicative act paradigm—in which talk or language more generally is the model for all action—is one common to theorists as diverse in other ways as Veblen, Goffman, Bourdieu, Barthes and Baudrillard. Now in one sense the perception that individuals may employ material objects to send messages to others and thus to symbolise or express an existing social relationship or to mark a new one, is something of a platitude in the social sciences. Indeed, it is easy to illustrate this perspective by reference to inheritance practices, the giving of dowries, indeed gift-giving in general, or to 'hosting' (that is, entertaining) and the like. One can indeed 'say it with flowers' (and with other things); that is to say, convey love, affection, gratitude, or the like (the precise message depending on the circumstances surrounding the gift) to one or more other people.<sup>8</sup> However, in these instances not only is it the case that actual objects are transferred to specific targeted others, but such acts are themselves usually clearly situated in time and space, something which helps to determine their 'meaning'. By contrast, sending a message to largely unknown and generally unspecified others merely by a process of displaying or using goods, and often without the assistance of specifically designated display situations, is a rather different matter.

There are several important distinctions which often become confused when the 'meaning' of goods is under discussion. The first concerns the difference between the fact that actions are intelligible and the assumption that they have an agreed meaning; the second concerns the confusion between possessing a meaning and constituting a message; and the third, the confusion between receiving a message and intending to send one. Now one could reasonably claim that most actions that individuals perform are usually intelligible to other fully socialised members of the same culture. Consequently it is rare for anyone to be completely mystified by the goods that others have purchased or by the way that they are being utilised. This is not the same, however, as claiming that all, or even most members of that society would be in a position to agree on what 'meaning' should be attributed to the fact that a particular individual has purchased a pair of blue jeans or chooses to wear them to go shopping. For such conduct does not possess a given meaning in contemporary British society, in the way, for example, that a bride wearing a white dress on her wedding day has a given and widely understood meaning. This is not to say that blue jeans do not carry a range of associations and indeed market researchers devote a good deal of time and effort to discovering precisely what these might be. But this does not mean that the activity of wearing them can be compared in any way with uttering a word or even giving a hand signal. For in this case, there is simply no commonly agreed code (let alone a 'language') which would allow any such 'message' to be decoded.

This is not to deny that cultural categories or even cultural principles cannot be 'encoded' in clothes or indeed in goods generally. The anthropological evidence here is strong (see, in particular, Bogatyrev 1971; McCracken 1985). Yet the case is more easily made for traditional or non-literate societies than it is for modern, complex industrial ones. Here, as McCracken's research has shown, the more that individuals try to employ clothing as a language, that is by making their own combinations of items to construct a personal 'ensemble', the less successful it is as a means of communication (McCracken 1988:55–70). What is more, the essentially fixed nature of a person's appearance renders any 'dialogue' or 'conversation' through clothes an impossibility. Typically, individuals 'read' clothing as if it were a single Gestalt, whilst they employ a very limited range of nouns and adjectives to categorise those portrayed. No attempts are made to 'read' outfits in a linear sense or to detect novel messages. Indeed, only when individuals wear conventional 'outfits' of the kind that correspond to existing social stereotypes (such as 'housewife', 'businessman' or 'hippie') can a 'language code' be read at all.

What is more, the fact that one individual may be able to perceive some 'meaning' (in the sense of clues about 'identity') in the consumption activities of another does not imply either that other observers would discern similar 'meanings' in that activity, or that the meanings discerned correspond to those the consumer intended to convey (if indeed they intended to convey any) through their conduct. In fact, there is a considerable gulf between the wide range of possible meanings which an observer might claim that they can discern in the consumption activities of an individual and the very limited and highly general messages which any individual can possibly hope to succeed in conveying consciously and deliberately to others solely by means of their deployment of consumer goods. Thus despite the many claims that there is a 'language' of goods, especially of clothes (see in particular Lurie 1981), this metaphor, as Davis (1992) has argued most forcibly, is deeply misleading.

None of this should be taken as implying that the material objects that individuals possess or display are not implicated in the creation or maintenance of their sense of self, for there is ample evidence that this is indeed the case (Dittmar 1992). But this is most obviously true in a developmental and particularistic sense, as in the case of a child's cuddly toy or comfort blanket, a bride's wedding ring, a teenager's first car, or an old person's family album. Such objects have meaning to their owners because of the part that they have played (or still play) in their life experiences. Such meanings as these, however, are usually invisible to others (or at least they are to strangers). To assume, therefore, that the casual observer can 'read' the consumer goods that an individual possesses in such a way as to reveal the nature of a person's identity is necessarily to override or ignore this dimension. What is typically put in its place is a categorisation which is necessarily both highly general, far from all-embracing, very speculative and (since consumers are not usually subject to interrogation by observers about their consumption habits) not open to falsification. All of this suggests ample ground for scepticism concerning the general claim that the activity of consuming should be viewed as an endeavour by individuals to indicate a chosen 'lifestyle' to others. The central problem here

ones. Indeed, for the modern consumer, well rehearsed in day-dreaming and fantasising, the appeal of the former typically exceeds that of the latter. The implication of this is that individuals should be viewed as less motivated by a concern with any presumed 'satisfaction' which products may yield, or by a concern to communicate messages to others, as by the pleasure which they derive from the self-illusory experiences that they construct out of the images or associations attached to products.<sup>9</sup>

The essential activity of consumption is thus not the actual selection, purchase or use of products, but rather the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product image lends itself, real consumption being largely a resultant of this mentalistic hedonism. Using this framework it becomes possible to understand how it is that modern consumption centres upon the consumption of novelty. For modern consumers will desire a novel rather than a familiar product because this enables them to believe that its acquisition and use will supply experiences that they have not encountered to date in reality. It is therefore possible to project on to this product some of that idealised pleasure that has already been experienced in daydreams, and which it is difficult to associate with those familiar products currently being consumed. Actual consumption of a product or service, although it might well provide both satisfaction and pleasure, is nevertheless still likely to be a literally disillusioning experience, since real products cannot possibly supply the same quality of perfected pleasure as that which attends imaginatively enjoyed experiences.<sup>10</sup>

This understanding of the dynamic underlying modern consumerism can be illustrated by reference to tourism. This phenomenon has been the subject of considerable academic interest in recent years (see for example, Turner and Asch 1975; Walvin 1978; MacCannell 1976, 1992; Urry 1990a, 1990b; Pearce and Butler 1992; Corbin 1993). Yet, as John Urry has noted, there is a difficulty in understanding just what it is that tourists consume (Urry 1990b: 33). He attempts to resolve this problem by focusing on the visual character of tourism and hence stresses the importance of the 'tourist gaze', suggesting that what are often short-lived forms of ocular consumption lie at the centre of that complex socio-economic phenomenon which is tourism (Urry 1990a). However, he also notes how tourism constitutes the paradigm case of a consumption practice built around imaginative pleasure-seeking, and that the actual practice of 'gazing' is typically framed by such illusory hedonism. As he observes, this essentially 'leisure' activity focuses on pleasurable experiences, with the critical activity being the tourist's 'anticipation, through day-dreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasure' (*ibid.*: 3). He also notes that these pleasures are different from those that may be experienced as part and parcel of the normal everyday routine, being set off from these by space and time, with 'the journey' typically marking the process of transition. Or, alternatively, if the activities that tourists engage in are themselves familiar ones (such as eating and drinking, swimming, or shopping), they are rendered 'extraordinary' by being undertaken in an unfamiliar environment. Consequently he stresses how the pleasures of tourism depend on novelty and the necessity of there being ever-new objects to gaze at; consequently demonstrating that, in essence, what tourists

actually consume is largely novelty itself. In addition, Urry notes that whilst tourism has a good claim to be the quintessentially modern form of consumption, many other contemporary activities, ones traditionally distinguished from tourism, such as shopping and sport, now increasingly resemble it in form, with a consequent ‘universalising of the tourist gaze’ (Urry 1990a). The implication to be drawn from this is that if tourism is best understood as a form of imaginative hedonism, then perhaps this might also be the best way to understand modern consumption in general.

## NOTES

- 1 Feminism also contributed significantly to the more ‘materialist’ strand of consumer studies. See, for example, Pahl 1989.
- 2 One should also mention that there have been important inputs from other disciplines, especially social anthropology, history, consumer studies and psychology. See the other chapters in this volume.
- 3 This is far from satisfactory, even as a working definition, since the phrase ‘product and service’ betrays the continuing influence of economic assumptions.
- 4 Indeed, it would appear that Veblen’s theory has never been subject to the extensive critical evaluation which it deserves. The notable exception in this respect is Mason 1981.
- 5 The degree to which each of these should be the focus of study may vary over time. Thus in time of recession individuals may expend more effort on the maintenance and repair of goods than in periods of comparative prosperity when purchase may be relatively more important.
- 6 The perspective adopted in this volume is not by any means an exclusively ‘material’ one; indeed the title suggests otherwise. Compared with the approach that typifies the culture theorists and postmodernists, however, there is noticeably more concern with the consumer’s resources in general and patterns of debt and spending in particular.
- 7 The change is from around twenty minutes per day to forty minutes per day. This information comes from Jonathan Gershuny’s research as reported in ‘Shopping around for salvation’, *Independent*, 3 Nov. 1993.
- 8 See Peter Corrigan’s (1989) analysis in ‘Gender and the gift: the case of the family clothing economy’, *Sociology* 23 (4).
- 9 In this respect one could say that modern consumers are concerned with the ‘meaningfulness’ of products. This is not the same as a concern with *the* meaning of a product, nor is there any communicative intent. Meaningfulness relates to the import of a product or service, that is, its significance in relation to an individual’s goals, hopes and desires, not to its denotative significance in a code or symbolic system.
- 10 For a full account of the role of pleasure-seeking in modern consumption, see Campbell 1987.

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