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Colin Campbell

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ARTICLE

The Craft Consumer

Culture, craft and consumption in a postmodern society

COLIN CAMPBELL

University of York

Abstract. This article proposes that social scientists should explicitly recognize the existence of consumers who engage in 'craft consumption' and, hence, of an additional image of the consumer to set alongside those of 'the dupe', 'the rational hero' and the 'postmodern identity-seeker'. The term 'craft' is used to refer to consumption activity in which the 'product' concerned is essentially both 'made and designed by the same person' and to which the consumer typically brings skill, knowledge, judgement and passion while being motivated by a desire for self-expression. Such genuine craft consumption is then distinguished from such closely associated practices as 'personalization' and 'customization' and identified as typically encountered in such fields as interior decorating, gardening, cooking and the selection of clothing 'outfits'. Finally, after noting that craft consumers are more likely to be people with both wealth and cultural capital, Kopytoff's suggestion that progressive commodification might prompt a 'decommodifying reaction' is taken as a starting point for some speculations concerning the reasons for the recent rise of craft consumption.

Key words

creativity • customization • decommodification • personalization • self-expression

INTRODUCTION

Two images of the consumer have long dominated the social science literature on consumption. The one, central to economic theory, is that of the consumer as an active, calculating and rational actor, someone who carefully allocates scarce resources to the purchase of goods and services in such

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a manner as to maximize the utility obtained. The other, most often encountered in the writings of critics of 'the mass society', is that of the passive, manipulated and exploited subject of market forces, someone who, as a consequence, is largely 'constrained' to consume in the way that they do. Don Slater has referred to these two images as 'the hero' and 'the dupe' (Slater, 1997a: 33). However, over recent decades, a third image has come to the fore, largely as a consequence of the impact of postmodern philosophy upon social thought. This represents the consumer as neither a rational actor, nor as a helpless dupe, but rather as a self-conscious manipulator of the symbolic meanings that are attached to products, someone who selects goods with the specific intention of using them to create or maintain a given impression, identity or lifestyle (Featherstone, 1991). Dominant though these three images have been, they do not exhaust the manner in which the consumer is represented in contemporary social science, nor do they (either singly or in combination) appear to correspond all that closely to the picture of consumer behaviour that research reveals.¹ For, increasingly, evidence has been mounting to suggest that a fourth image may be a better guide to an understanding of consumption practice in contemporary society, an image that could perhaps go by the name of 'the craft consumer'.

This model could be said to resemble that of Slater's hero rather than the dupe, since it rejects any suggestion that the contemporary consumer is simply the helpless puppet of external forces. On the other hand, it does not foreground rational self-interested conduct, nor does it presume, as is the case with the postmodern model, that the consumer has an overwhelming concern with image, lifestyle or identity. Rather, the assumption here is that individuals consume principally out of a desire to engage in creative acts of self-expression. Thus, although this model embodies the presumption that consumers actively respond to commodities and services, consciously employing these as a means to achieving their own ends, there is no assumption that they are trying to create, or even necessarily to maintain, a sense of identity.² Rather, it is claimed that these consumers already have a clear and stable sense of identity; indeed, that it is this that gives rise to their distinctive mode of consuming.

SOCIAL THOUGHT AND THE CONCEPT OF CRAFT

The traditional (that is to say, the 19th- and early 20th-century) view of craft's relationship with culture is probably best expressed in the writings of such social critics as Karl Marx and Thorstein Veblen. For these thinkers, the form of labour that was undertaken by the craftsman or craftswoman

was the most quintessential of all human activity. It was seen as ennobling, humanizing and, hence, the ideal means through which individuals could express their humanity. Thus it followed that the replacing of craft production with factory-organized machine production, a process that constituted the essence of the industrial revolution, was seen by these same thinkers as necessarily a dehumanizing process and one that led, in Marxian terminology, to the state of alienation. As a consequence of the widespread adoption of this worldview, craft activity became the very symbol of the premodern age, with the consequence that to argue for the virtues of this mode of production was tantamount to opposing modernity itself. Consequently, present-day advocates of craftwork have tended to be labelled romantics, uneasy with the modern world and either yearning for a return to an earlier preindustrial age or nurturing unrealistic dreams of future postindustrial utopias. Now it is clear that this particular way of viewing craft activity is still current in society today, such that the assumption of a basic dichotomy between craft and machine (or mass) production still underpins much contemporary thought. The artist craftsman (or craftswoman) is still set against a division of labour that involves the separation of design and manufacture – a dichotomy that carries with it the implied, if not explicit, contrast between inalienable, humane, authentic and creative work, on the one hand, and purely mechanical, unfulfilling and alienating labour, on the other.

Those writers who first formulated this essentially Manichean view of the nature of work largely disregarded the sphere of consumption. The societies they were concerned to understand were, as far as they could see, manifestly dominated by the activity of production, while consumption, in societies where the majority of the population were ill-nourished in addition to being poorly clothed and housed, did not appear to be an issue that warranted much investigation. When, however, in the years following the Second World War, social scientists did begin to give more attention to the arena of consumption, there was a tendency to carry over this predominantly anti-modern romantic worldview and apply it to the other side of the economic equation. The assumption tended to be that if large-scale factory-based machine production was an essentially alienating experience for those involved, then it would seem to follow that the consumption of commodities produced in this way must be similarly alienating. Or, if the activity of consumption could not itself be judged to actually add to productive alienation, then at the least it could not serve to dispel or counteract it in any way. Hence, consumption in modern societies, generally labelled 'mass consumption', came to be seen, at least by

intellectuals and leftwing social scientists, as a 'bad thing', while consumers were generally portrayed as being at the mercy of the advertisers and marketers, who were able, by exploiting the mass media, to manipulate them for their own ends. Thus, consumers were largely portrayed as dupes, conned into buying quantities of aesthetically uninspiring standardized products, many of which they did not actually need and few of which were capable of bringing any real or lasting satisfaction (Slater, 1997a: 63). However, the past few decades have witnessed the gradual development of a rather different interpretation of the role of consumption in late modern capitalist societies, one in which this association of consuming with the stifling of authentic modes of self-expression has effectively been turned on its head.

THE REJECTION OF THE CONSUMER AS DUPE

The first shift in thinking that signified a move in this direction came with the development of a programme of work, most of it undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s, into youth subcultures. This work tended to highlight the extent to which the youthful members of these groups did not simply use mass-market products uncritically, but rather employed them in ways that signified their defiance of, or resistance to, the 'dominant ideology' (see Hall and Jefferson, 1976). Then, in the second half of the 1980s, as the sociology of consumption emerged as a distinct field of study for the first time, came the suggestion that consumers were doing more than simply resisting the pressures of the advertisers and marketers. For, as Daniel Miller argues in *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987), contemporary consumption could be regarded as possessing 'dealienating' potential. His claim is that consumption ought to be seen as a process in which a general, abstract and alien object (a commodity) could become transformed into something that is its very opposite. He writes that: 'consumption as work may be defined as that which translates the object from an alienable condition; that is, from being a symbol of estrangement and price value, to being an artefact invested with particular inseparable connotations' (1987: 190). What Miller suggests transforms the object is not simply the process of taking possession of it, but its incorporation into a total stylistic array, such as a ritual gift or memorabilia. Such a process he refers to as involving the recontextualization of the commodity in such a way that goods are 'transmuted' into 'potentially inalienable culture' (1987: 215).³ Miller's focus is on consumption as 'cultural practice', with a consequent emphasis on the manner in which the meaning of a product could be transformed by the context and manner of its use. Hence, such activities as collecting, gifting

or stylizing could be seen as effectively 'negating' the product's status as a commodity (1987: 192). Although Miller does not refer to this form of consumption as craftwork (he does refer to it as 'work'), let alone as 'craft consumption', it would seem that such a term can appropriately be applied to the activity of consumption as he envisages it. Hence, it will be his perceptive insight that is taken as the starting point for the argument to be developed here. This is that much of the consumption that individuals undertake in contemporary western societies should be conceived of as craft activity; that is, as activity in which individuals not merely exercise control over the consumption process, but also bring skill, knowledge, judgement, love and passion to their consuming in much the same way that it has always been assumed that traditional craftsmen and craftswomen approach their work.

WHAT IS CRAFT CONSUMPTION?

The verb to craft means to 'make or fashion with skill, especially by hand' (Hanks, 1979), while the kind of activities that have commonly been regarded as warranting the label 'craft' would include weaving, handblock printing, embroidery, silversmithing, jewellery working, bookbinding, furniture making, and so on. Tanya Harrod (1995) defines craft as 'made and designed by the same person', which is a definition that would seem to fit the activities listed above, although she adds that this definition also applies to the fine arts, such as painting or sculpture, such that the boundary between these two spheres is hard to identify. The crucial feature of this definition, however, is the emphasis placed on the fact that the craft producer is someone who exercises personal control over all the processes involved in the manufacture of the good in question. Hence, the craft worker is someone who chooses the design for the product, selects the materials needed and generally personally makes (or at least directly supervises the making of) the object in question. Thus, one may say that the craft producer is one who invests his or her personality or self into the object produced. And it is, of course, on these grounds that this form of work activity has traditionally been regarded as expressive of the more humane, creative and authentic aspects of human nature. It follows that the term 'craft consumption' is similarly used to refer to activities in which individuals both design and make the products that they themselves consume. However, it is important to stress that the term 'product' is being used here (in keeping with Miller's use of the phrase 'stylistic array' above) to refer to a creation that may itself consist of several items that are themselves mass-produced retail commodities. That is to say, the craft consumer is a person

who typically takes any number of mass-produced products and employs these as the 'raw materials' for the creation of a new 'product', one that is typically intended for self-consumption. Thus, if we make the parallel with craft production, we could say that the craft consumer is someone who transforms 'commodities' into personalized (or, one might say, 'humanized') objects. And it is because such consumption is usually characterized by a marked element of skill and mastery, while also allowing for creativity and self-expression, that it is justified in being described as 'craft consumption'.

Now, the term 'craft' is actually a shortened version of the word 'handicraft', a term that immediately draws attention to the contrast between the traditional worker, who produces objects 'by hand', and the modern factory worker, who produces them with the aid of a machine. It is, of course, the very prevalence and dominance of the machine in contemporary society that are the principal reasons why the term 'craft' would seem such an inappropriate one to apply to any aspect of modern life. However, it would be wrong to equate 'handicraft' activity with the complete absence of machines, for such traditional crafts as pottery and weaving clearly involve the use of 'machines' (that is, the potter's wheel and the loom). Hence, it is less the absence of machines that distinguishes handicraft from more modern forms of manufacture, but rather the fact that the former tend to be powered 'by hand' (or more accurately 'by foot') and, of greater significance, are directly under the worker's control. Indeed, it is really this latter point that is most critical, since it is the factory system, with its associated forms of discipline and control (such as the assembly line), that constitutes the real contrast with handicraft production. Hence, the contrast is not really between hand production and machine production, but rather between a production system in which the worker is in control of the machine and one in which the machine is in control of the worker. Viewed in this light, it is possible to see how one of the intriguing features of modern consumer society is the way in which machines have become reappropriated by the craft tradition, aiding and abetting craft consumers rather than robbing them of their traditional autonomy. Thus, the power tool has become the crucial aid of all DIY enthusiasts, the electric mixer of amateur chefs and the electric hedgetrimmer and lawnmower of enthusiastic gardeners. What is significant about all these examples is the fact that the human is in charge of the machine and not the machine of the human. Although this is an obvious feature of the modern process through which household tasks have increasingly been 'mechanized', its potential importance for self-development and self-expression has tended

to be overlooked in favour of a stress upon its role in reducing the 'burden' of household 'drudgery'.

APPROPRIATING, PERSONALIZING AND CUSTOMIZING

To talk of the craft of consuming is not, in the first instance, to refer to those processes through which individuals first select and then purchase products and services. One could perhaps refer to those people who devote a great deal of time, effort and intelligence to discovering 'the best buy' or to ensuring that they obtain 'value for money' as crafty consumers, but these activities are not what is under discussion here. Rather, the concern is with what individuals actually do with the products that they buy once they get them home. Now, this has only begun to be a topic of serious sociological investigation in recent years. However, one thing that has been established is that consumers commonly engage in what have been called 'possession rituals' (McCracken, 1990: 85ff.); that is, activities that fulfil the important function of enabling consumers to 'take ownership' of the goods in question. A housewarming party can be regarded as just such a possession ritual, as too can the common practice of trying on the new clothes that have just been brought back from the shops (even though this is not the occasion upon which the consumer intends to wear them). These rituals help in the process of overcoming the inherently alien nature of mass-produced products and of assimilating them into the consumer's own world of meaning. This is a function that is then reinforced by what have been called 'grooming rituals'. These would involve such activities as washing and cleaning one's car, polishing one's furniture and, of course, washing and ironing one's clothes – all of which serve the same important function of helping consumers to appropriate standardized or mass-produced commodities to their own individual world of meaning.⁴ However, not all the activities that individuals engage in once they have acquired a good could be said to come into the category of engaging in the 'craft' of consuming. Indeed, there are important distinctions that need to be made between such activities as those of 'personalizing' or 'customizing' products and that of real craft consumption.

PERSONALIZATION

One conventional means through which consumers could be said to achieve 'the appropriation effect' is through the process of 'personalizing' standardized products. Here, mass-produced products are 'marked', either by the retailer or the individual consumer, so as to indicate that they are the singular possession of a specific individual. Adding one's name or initials

to a product such as a watch, pen or briefcase, for example, is a practice that has long been established in the array of services offered by retailers. Viewed from a purely instrumental standpoint, this practice could be considered to amount to little more than a device for ensuring that the objects in question remain in the possession of their owners, as in the case of the name tags sewn into children's clothes when they commence school. However, it is also clear that in very many cases, the addition of the owner's name or initials to a product is an important possession ritual in its own right and, hence, a direct indication that some subjective 'appropriation' of the item in question has occurred. Of course, in some cases, as in that especially brash and self-assertive version of the name tag that is the personalized car registration plate, the possession ritual involved can also be seen as having the added advantage (from the consumer's viewpoint) of enabling the owner to engage in conspicuous consumption. However, it is clear that these examples cannot be seen as true instances of craft consumption, if only because no significant modification to the nature of what is still a standardized product has been undertaken. Rather, it would appear to be more appropriate to regard such activities as ones that simply result in commodities being 'personalized'.

CUSTOMIZATION

Activities that approximate more closely to what one might consider cases of craft consumption would be those where consumers 'tailor' products so that they are better adapted to meet their needs. Taking up the hem of a dress or taking in the waistband of a pair of trousers are both examples of modifications of 'off the peg' items of clothing that might seem to justify this designation. However, these are the kinds of services that are increasingly offered by retailers themselves, so it is important to distinguish between such activity when undertaken by the retailer and what, by contrast, could be called genuine self-alteration. Even here, however, although consumers may be required to exercise some element of skill, it is still not the case that the activities engaged in result in any significant modification to the basic design of the product. In that sense, 'self-customization' is still not necessarily equivalent to the kind of creative action implied by the term craft consumer, as defined above, for it is the element of design modification that is such a crucial feature of any consumer activity that deserves to be labelled a craft and, even then, only if undertaken by consumers themselves. Of course, it has long been the case that consumers, if they possessed the resources, could purchase a 'customizing service' from either producers or retailers; that is, a service in

which products were specifically designed and manufactured to meet an individual's tastes and preferences. The aristocracies of most countries have long been able to ensure that the majority of their goods came into this category, while, today, even the middle classes can often afford to have certain critical purchases personally designed and made in this way, the prime examples being the architect designed house and the bespoke suit. Even here, however, although the customer may express clear preferences concerning the design of the products in question (as well perhaps as the materials to be used in their 'construction'), it is still the case that they are made by others and not by the consumers themselves. Hence, if one adheres strictly to the definition of craft activity as one in which objects are 'made and designed by the same person', then this kind of customizing would still not count. Craft consuming clearly refers to more than either the simple personalization or customization of products; that is, it has to signify more than simply having a product marked with one's name or initials or even employing a specialist to design a product especially for one. For consumption activity to warrant being described as a craft, then the consumer must be directly involved in both the design and the production of that which is to be consumed.

SUBVERSIVE CUSTOMIZATION

There is another sense in which manufactured products could be said to have been 'customized' and this is when they are employed in a manner other than that intended by the manufacturers. Of course, many different motives could prompt individuals to use products in an unusual or unanticipated fashion and not all of these 'adaptations' could be viewed as stemming from a desire for self-expression or creativity. In many cases, this may simply represent a mistake on the part of the consumer or a response to unusual circumstances. On the other hand, consumers may simply have more ingenuity and creativity than manufacturers and retailers may credit them with.⁵ One particularly interesting example of such customization is the adaptation or employment of standardized products in ways other than those intended by the manufacturers, such that they serve as marks or 'badges' of subcultural membership. An obvious example of this practice would be the wearing of baseball caps the 'wrong way round'. Clearly, a modification of this kind can hardly be said to represent an example of individual creativity, although its initiation and adoption by a group might be considered examples of 'subversive customization'. Other classic examples of this practice would be the defiant modification of the norms of dress that are supposed to apply to uniforms, which are typical of

'rebellious' schoolchildren. Practices such as wearing socks rolled down instead of pulled up, shirts hanging out instead of being tucked in, ties worn loosely rather than tightly around the neck, and so on.

Such examples serve to illustrate that advertisers and retailers are not the only forces influencing the manner in which consumers choose to make use of goods – not that this trend is especially new. Members of youth subcultures, for example (as the reference to baseball caps suggests), have been inclined to act as subversive consumers in this way for some time. The so-called teddy boys of the 1950s, for example, actually asked tailors to make up suits to their own Edwardian designs, ignoring the professional advice that the tailors themselves offered concerning what was considered aesthetically acceptable in men's wear. The unique garb that distinguished such groups as the hippies and the punks was also first introduced not by fashion designers, but by young people themselves. In each of these instances, the wearers largely designed their clothes – something that is still true today and is manifest in the well-known phenomenon of 'street fashion'. What is perhaps new is the tendency for a broad swathe of consumers – consumers who are not art students or members of any youth group – to also begin to want to act in this way; that is, to take a degree of personal control over the nature and design of the clothes they wear and, indeed, over a wide range of the products that they routinely consume. This would appear to stem from a desire to imprint their own personality, via a statement about their taste, on the product itself. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that female consumers, in particular, increasingly want to customize their own clothes, as in the example of the shopper who sets about changing the handle on her recently purchased (expensive) Gucci handbag (Craik, 2000). Other similar examples that were cited in the same article involved the shortening of just one arm of a brand new dress, adding lace trim to a skirt or making rips or tears in a new pair of jeans. Such 'modifications' to items of apparel that have been carefully and deliberately designed to look as they do clearly reveal the existence of a powerful desire to personalize consumer goods.⁶ What is especially interesting about these examples is that they can be seen as actions that aim to recover that 'singularity' or 'uniqueness' that has traditionally been the hallmark of the handcrafted object. Thus, consumers can be said to engage in these actions in order that the commodity in question not only 'becomes theirs', but also becomes marked off from its numerous manufactured identical twins. For the majority of people who cannot afford an *haute couture* original, uniqueness is therefore achieved through the work undertaken by the consumer once the apparently finished object is in their possession.

CRAFT CONSUMPTION AS ENSEMBLE ACTIVITY

However, customizing individual commodities is not typical of most contemporary craft consumption. This is far more likely to take the form of the creation of new 'ensemble-style products' out of the raw materials of finished commodities than the direct modification of the latter, as can be seen if we turn to consider the most obvious and important areas of consumer activity in contemporary society where a craft dimension clearly exists. These can be identified as the worlds of DIY and home modification and improvement, together with gardening, cooking and the building and maintaining of a 'wardrobe' of clothing 'outfits'. What is significant about these forms of consumption is that it is possible to buy a finished or 'off the shelf' product in each case or, alternatively, to pay experts both to design and supervise the 'manufacture' of the end product. However, it would appear that increasing numbers of people are rejecting these options and choosing instead to 'craft' such products for themselves; that is, they are deciding to both design and make the end result. The very popularity of television programmes that feature food and cooking or the redesign and redecoration of household interiors or gardens, together with the many associated magazines and books, supports the suggestion that there exists a large population of consumers who want to be successful in creating their own aesthetically significant end products.⁷

The preparation of food is a good case in point. In one sense, of course, this is a production activity as much as (or, indeed, rather than) a consumption one. However, when not undertaken as paid labour and by those who also intend to eat the end product, such a distinction is difficult to make. It is clear, however, that more and more consumers are prepared to engage in the considerable effort necessary not merely to select the ingredients, but also to undertake the subsequent (often complex) preparation, cooking and presentation necessary to deliver that set of culturally prestigious culinary dishes that comprises the entity called 'a meal' – food that, even if it is not always intended merely for self-consumption, is usually not intended for sale in the marketplace. There would seem to be little doubt that it is reasonable to call this a craft activity. After all, the end product is made or fashioned with skill and by hand and even if 'the basic design' may be taken from elsewhere (i.e. a recipe book), some improvisation frequently occurs. It is also an instance wherein skill and knowledge may enter into the choice of the 'raw materials' (i.e. the ingredients) and where there is ample room for creativity. At the same time, there exists an easy and readily available alternative consumption strategy, one that avoids the craft route, given that there are both a wide range of ready meals on the market as well as

innumerable restaurants and takeaway outlets. However, what is crucial to note about much of this 'craft consumption' (even if it is sometimes less apparent in cooking than in areas such as interior decoration, personal dressing or gardening) is that it does not normally involve the physical 'creation' of a product. Rather, what is actually 'created' is an 'ensemble' or a 'putting together' of products, each of which may itself be a standardized or mass-produced item. Indeed, it is this kind of 'ensemble creativity' that is so typical of the modern craft consumer, being apparent, for example, in the way that individuals choose to coordinate the clothes that comprise an 'outfit' or in the manner in which they arrange furniture and decorative items to create a given 'style' in a room or in their home as a whole.

COLLECTING AS CRAFT CONSUMPTION

However, recognizing that much contemporary craft consumption takes the form of the construction of assemblages serves to draw attention to collecting, which, because it focuses exclusively on this particular activity, helps to highlight certain distinctive features of modern craft consumption. Collecting as an activity has been defined as 'the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing, things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences' (Belk, 1995: 67). It is clear from this definition that collecting, with its emphasis on an active orientation and passionate involvement, is itself a form of craft consumption, with 'the collection' as the 'handmade' end result. It is also clear that this process not only requires skill and knowledge, but is essentially creative in nature. For collectors actively recontextualize individual products, situating them in a larger creation called 'the collection' and thereby giving them a new meaning and significance. This is a process that not only involves possession and grooming rituals, but also the considerable investment of the 'self' of the collector consumer in this new creation. As such, it bears comparison with the creative activity of the DIY, gardening or cookery enthusiast, although, in this instance, the individual manufactured products purchased in the marketplace (not all collections are of saleable products, of course) are not, when considered as discrete entities, modified in any way. Here, too, we may note that collecting is another widespread and fast growing feature of contemporary consumer societies. These comments also serve to draw attention to a further distinctive feature of craft consumption, which is that it has a crucial autotelic or aesthetic dimension and, as such, has a fundamental resemblance to 'play'. For, as Bjarne Rogan observes, collecting is 'much more than a matter of distinction and social emulation. It is also fun and play' (1998: 44).

FROM CUSTOMIZING TO CRAFT CONSUMPTION

Although there are several paths that individual consumers could take that might lead them to engage in craft-like activities, the most obvious is as a 'natural' development out of normal grooming or possession rituals. Thus, if the act of redecorating a room involves changing the colour from what it was when it was first occupied, then the activity in question could be said to approximate to the process of 'customizing',⁸ that is, to changing the product in some fashion to meet an individual's particular needs, tastes or desires. This could then, in turn, spark a more lasting interest in interior decoration, one that leads to the acquisition of specialized knowledge and skills, such that the simple act of customizing has turned into the more long-term programme that is 'craft consumption'. But, then, a concern with grooming and possession rituals may also be one symptom of a pre-existing 'hobby' or 'leisure time pursuit' that is itself built around a mass-produced commodity and, hence, it is this interest that leads directly to customizing activity and, thence, genuine craft consumption.⁹

CRAFT CONSUMPTION AND THE LARGER CULTURE

It is not intended to suggest that the majority of consumers in contemporary western societies are craft consumers. All that is being claimed is that a significant and growing section of modern consumers falls into this category. Clearly, as noted above, the non-craft option not only continues to exist, but is also the form of consumption chosen by many. Thus, it is still the case that a sizeable number of modern consumers never garden or redecorate or physically modify their living quarters in any way or even spend much time choosing clothes or preparing meals. And, for many of these people, such non-craft consumption is forced on them by the impoverishment of their way of life. Thus, they may lack either the money and/or the time to craft a meal, while perhaps they simply do not have a garden or live in rented accommodation. On the other hand, there are also a number of affluent owner occupiers who, although they do indeed possess the resources (including the time) to engage in craft consumption, choose not to do so and, in so doing, continue to conform to the stereotype of the modern mass consumer. Of course, it is not simply the absence of sufficient time or wealth that prevents many consumers from taking the craft option, for, as Bourdieu observes, one also needs a certain amount of 'cultural capital' in order to be in a position to reappropriate mass-produced products in such a way that they express a person's individuality or serve as a means to self-fulfilment. More specifically, one can say that a certain kind of cultural capital is needed in order to envisage commodities as 'raw

materials' that can be employed in the construction of composite 'aesthetic entities' and also to know what principles and values are relevant to the achievement of these larger constructions. In fact, craft consumers are likely to be people who do not merely possess just such cultural capital, but are also more concerned than most about the possible 'alienating' and homogenizing effects of mass consumption – something that helps to account for their enthusiasm for the craft option, since they are likely to view this as the appropriate way of successfully resisting such pressures (see Holt, 1997).

However, this does not mean that members of the poorer ranks of modern societies (poor, that is, in either the conventional and/or cultural sense of the term) are necessarily excluded altogether from undertaking craft consumption, for not all activities of this kind require considerable capital or expenditure, nor are all sections of the less well off without sufficient leisure time. In addition, the requisite cultural capital is often relatively easy to obtain, often via the media outlets mentioned above. Finally, it is important to note that for some aspects of craft consumption, this capital may indeed be populist rather than elitist in nature. This is because, when judged in relation to the overall complex cultural system of modern societies, craft activity could be said to exist at the intersection of genuine popular folk knowledge with fashion and high art; that is, on one side, there is a body of personally acquired practical 'know how' of the kind that is often passed down through families or transmitted from practitioner to practitioner by word of mouth. Examples would include granny's recipe for Yorkshire pudding or ginger cake or the allotment's longest serving resident's secrets concerning how to grow prize leeks. On the other side, one finds those artists and designers whose innovative activity tends to establish the current fashion or style, whether it be for bathrooms, furniture, garden plants or ways of serving food. The point at which these two influences intersect could be said to represent the 'cultural middle ground' most commonly occupied by the craft consumer.

WHY DOES THERE APPEAR TO BE A GROWTH IN CRAFT CONSUMPTION?

Igor Kopytoff suggests that not merely is 'There . . . clearly a yearning for singularization in complex societies' (1986: 80), but that this process should not be seen as existing in simple opposition to commodification. Rather, he suggests that the two should be seen as existing in a kind of dialectical relationship, such that the progressive strengthening of the one serves not so much to eliminate the other, but rather to stimulate an equal and opposite reaction. The basis for this claim is that each is essential if an

'orderly and meaningful social order is to exist' (1986: 80). This is an intriguing suggestion and offers a possible explanation for the rise of craft consumption in societies in which commodification clearly continues apace. For, not only is this latter process repeatedly 'contested' (sometimes with considerable success; see Radin, 1996), but it is more than possible that its intensification prompts individuals to seek new and more effective ways to combat its effects; that is, more ways of 'making things precious', 'special', 'singularly meaningful' or 'beyond price'. While it is obvious that this cannot easily be achieved simply by 'turning one's back' on commercial society or by refusing to be involved in 'the world of goods', the more realistic strategy is to 'embrace' the world of commodities and to use one's own cultural and personal resources to transform these into 'singularities'.

Certainly, it is possible to see how the growth of craft consumption in contemporary western societies might represent such a reaction to progressive commodification. For it is possible that, as more and more aspects of modern life become subject to this economic imperative, so more and more individuals might come to experience the need to escape from, or even counteract, this process. That is to say, they might come to desire some small corner of their everyday existence to be a place where objects and activities possess significance because they are regarded as unique, singular or even sacred. Seen in this light, the arena of craft consumption could become highly valued because it is regarded as an oasis of personal self-expression and authenticity in what is an ever-widening 'desert' of commodification and marketization.

Of course, to suggest this is not to deny that the growth of craft consumption is not at the same time entirely functional for the continued expansion of consumer capitalism or that, ironically, it might not actually serve to provide yet further opportunities for commodification. For, as we have already seen, such craft activities do themselves generate an increased demand for a wide range of consumer goods and services from paint to specialized cooking implements, from recipe books to new species of plants. At the same time, it could be argued that such activity, like all leisure pursuits and hobbies, also functions as 'recreation' in the sense that it enables individuals to recover their faculties and energies so that they are once again 'fit' to fulfil their productive roles (see Slater, 1997a: 2). However, it could be that craft consumption possesses a somewhat different relationship to the world of work, one that also helps explain its rise to prominence.

For what is also clear is that it is largely middle-class and professional people who have embraced craft consumption so enthusiastically, just those

groups who, in recent years, have experienced not merely deprofessionalization, but also increased bureaucratization, external monitoring and formal performance assessment. Could it be that, as a result, these people are increasingly retreating into a privatized world of self-expression as a direct consequence of the decreasing opportunities for independent creative and expressive activity available in their occupational roles? For these are just the people whose work has traditionally had many of the attributes of a 'vocation', which is to say that it has not merely been viewed as a 'life task', but also that it has been regarded as offering both a clear sense of identity and profound personal satisfaction. However, as their occupations have progressively lost their professional character – largely as a consequence of government intervention – then this might explain their tendency to seek in the private sphere just those satisfactions that they find are no longer available to them in the public one. In this respect, it could be claimed that deprofessionalization is doing to the middle classes exactly what Hoggart (1957) claimed industrialization did to the working classes, which was to divert the creative human energies that were formerly expressed in the world of work into the world of leisure.

But then, perhaps, rather more cynically, one might argue that the growth of craft consumption is merely evidence of how the middle and upper middle classes have succeeded in adapting a postmodern consumer society so that they can continue to give expression to their traditional sense of cultural superiority. Thus, instead of merely bemoaning 'the crass materialism and acquisitiveness' of rampant consumerism (something which, in their eyes, has become all too pervasive, largely as a consequence of the uninhibited greed and hedonism of their social inferiors) or alternatively attempting to escape the worst effects of a materialist and consumerist society by downsizing or joining the simple living movement, they have co-opted and adapted consumerism in such a way that it can give expression to their own distinctive cultural values and traditions. Essentially this involves aestheticizing and ethicizing (if not also spiritualizing) this world. For, as long as consumption was seen as an arena in which the dubious motives of greed, envy and status striving prevailed, then it was also necessarily anathema to people with a strong moral and ethical cultural heritage. However, if it could be redrawn as a sphere in which considerations of taste, beauty, authenticity and personal expressiveness were dominant, then it could indeed become assimilated to this very tradition. Viewed in this way, the craft consumption/commodity consumption distinction does not so much represent a new social cleavage as constitute an old one in a new form.

CONCLUSION

Assumptions deriving from 19th- and early 20th-century writing in the social sciences have long structured thought about production and consumption in modern industrial societies. Significant among these has been that dichotomous mode of conceptualizing the creation of goods and commodities that is conventionally expressed as the contrast between craft and non-craft or industrial production. This contrast is typically envisaged not simply as a division between two different modes of production, but as two fundamentally contrasting ways in which human beings relate to the object world, ways that are diametrically opposed in their effects on those involved. Thus, while craftwork is seen as humane and liberating, enabling individuals to engage in authentic, expressive and creative activity, factory-based and automated machine production is considered to have the opposite effect, not simply eliminating this possibility, but also creating a class of alienated workers. It is this model that has, by extension, frequently been carried over into the realm of consumption. Thus, while the consumption of craft objects is seen as a sign of a healthy educated discernment and 'good taste', the consumption of mass-manufactured goods is commonly regarded as both a symptom of, and a further contribution to, a general state of 'alienation'. What is suggested here is that this picture should be radically modified to recognize that just as there are two contrasting modes of production, so there are also two different modes of consumption. These do not correspond, however, in any simple manner to consumption of different kinds of goods (craft consumption is not in that sense to be equated with the consumption of craft goods), but rather to contrasting ways of relating to commodities. Just as craft production is significant less for how the good is actually manufactured than for the opportunity it offers for human self-expression and creativity, so too is craft consumption important because of the opportunity it presents for the manifestation of similar valued human qualities. For, consumption, just like work or 'productive activity' generally, can be experienced as nothing more than 'a chore', a mere necessity. On the other hand, it can also be the most significant part of a person's inner life or, to use C. Wright Mills's words, 'an exuberant expression of self . . . the development of man's universal nature' (1951: 215). Such a mode of consumption does not merely exist in contemporary consumer society, but is actually flourishing and can be seen as part of the widespread aestheticization of everyday life and the fact that consumption imperatives rather than production ones now tend to mould contemporary culture. What is more, it is increasingly the consumption needs of those with disposable income and ample leisure time that dictate

the nature of the commodity world and the way that these products are marketed and used. And it is clear that many of these people want to be able to use products in more and more expressive and creative ways; that is, they want to be able to 'realize their potential' and 'express their true selves' by means of consumer 'props'. They desire, in effect, to become craft consumers, and if it is assumed that this trend is set to continue into the near future, then the prospect exists of a postmodern society in which craft consumption is not merely the dominant form of consumption, but also the principal mode of individual self-expression.

Notes

1. In fact, Gabriel and Lang (1995) propose a far more complex set of images of the consumer. These three are, however, those that one most commonly encounters in the literature.
2. This is not to deny that consumption activity may relate to issues of identity. It is merely to reject the prevalent postmodern assumption that consuming is motivated by a desire to create identity (see Campbell, 2004).
3. Danny Miller is here recovering the Hegelian concept of 'sublation' or reabsorption (Miller, 1987: 12, 28); see also Tim Dant's discussion (1999: 32–4).
4. Individuals also engage in 'divestment rituals', such as 'divestment grooming', which involves such activities as cleaning, repairing and decorating items that one intends to sell (see McCracken, 1990: 83–7).
5. Of course, disjunctions between the advertised use of products and their actual use may simply stem from the advertising strategies employed by the manufacturers themselves. Thus, the manufacturers of computers may advertise their value as educational aids simply in order to persuade parents to buy them for their children. The latter, however, then use them to play computer games, something that the manufacturers had in fact anticipated (Silverstone, 1994).
6. The subheading to the *Guardian* article from which these examples are taken states, 'You've Bought it, Now Make it Yours. Fashion Editor Laura Craik Explains How to Customise Your Clothes' (Craik, 2000).
7. It is recognized that much of the appeal of such programmes also lies in their entertainment value and that people might watch them simply for fun rather than for instruction. However, it is also important to note that television is an especially important medium for the transmission of this kind of cultural capital because much of the knowledge needed is discursive in character and, hence, aspiring practitioners need to be shown rather than told how to do it.
8. This would appear to be equivalent to what Dale Southerton refers to as 'personal improvisation' (2001: 165).
9. The distinction between undertaking craft consumption and simply engaging in a 'hobby' is clearly not an easy one to make. If a hobby is defined as an activity that is pursued in one's spare time for pleasure or relaxation, then this would clearly also be true of craft consumption. However, the term 'hobby' does not necessarily carry the added suggestion that the individual concerned has developed any special expertise or knowledge. Nor does the term 'hobby' necessarily imply that the

individual displays the passion and commitment that has here been suggested marks the craft consumer. See Slater (1997b) on consumption and hobbies. See also Bert Moorhouse on how elite hot-rodgers pursue their hobby in a manner that justifies their being described as 'craftsmen' (1999: 293).

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Colin Campbell is Professor of Sociology at the University of York. He is the author of *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987) and co-editor of *The Shopping Experience* (with Pasi Falk; 1997). He has also written on sociological theory in works such as *The Myth of Social Action* (1996) and on the sociology of religion in 'Weber, Rationalisation and the Evolution of Religious Thought in the Modern Western World' in *Religion and Social Theory* (edited by Jim Beckford and John Walliss; forthcoming). His most recent publications on consumerism include 'I Shop Therefore I Know that I Am: The Metaphysical Basis of Modern Consumerism', in *Elusive Consumption: Tracking New Research Perspectives* (edited by Karin Ekstrom and Helen Brembeck; 2004) and 'On Understanding Modern Consumerism and Misunderstanding the Romantic Ethic Thesis: A Reply to Boden and Williams' (*Sociology* 37[4]).
Address: Department of Sociology, University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD, UK.
[email: cbc3@york.ac.uk]
