

# Chapter 18

## The Meaning of Consumption

**Terry Smith**  
University of Chester, UK

### ABSTRACT

*The “un-contestable hegemony of consumer capitalism” (Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 2) as the prevailing ideology of our times locates it as the primary creator and driver of production, competition, innovation, value and, latterly, values. In 1995, Miller recognised that “consumption, rather than production, was the vanguard of history” (p. 1). In that same year, the United Nations issued alarming statistics highlighting the influence of marketing on materialism and the fact that inequality in consumption was far wider than expected, severely undermining the environmental resource base. The backdrop of social theory and political economy within which consumerism and consumption are framed is a fragmented and complex one which has an unstable nature influenced by a range of complicated macro environmental factors. It is a postmodern landscape characterised by an all-pervasive consumer culture, the imperative of consumer rights and the use of consumption as a source of meaning. This chapter attempts to present a critical examination of the dominant academic, political, cultural and ecological discourses which constitute and contribute to this debate. At the epicentre is a post-modern dilemma about the delusion of choice, the illusion of freedom and the imperative of control - shifting priority from conspicuous consumption to conscientious conscience consumption.*

### INTRODUCTION

There is often confusion with the terms ‘consumption’ and ‘consumerism’. They are sometimes seen as interchangeable synonyms, and yet conceptually they are divided by distinctive isomorphic roots: the former associated with a psycho-social process of purchase and social meaning-making; the latter a materialistic, imposed, superficial phenomenon laced with opprobrium. The convergence and divergence of these terms reflects the overlapping but different political, economic, social, cultural

and moral drivers and discourses. An historical perspective sees analyses of consumption either from a quantitative or qualitative perspective: an economic view primarily concerned with goods and commodities and the relationship between consumption and growth; a cultural, anthropological one where subjectivity, status and group affiliation is imperative. Some view consumption as a moral doctrine, the chief vehicle for freedom through choice; a “consumer’s republic” blueprint of economic, social and political maturation (Cohen, 2004). Cochoy (2011, p. 59) posits that

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consumption “engages a triangular relationship between consumers, marketers and a wide array of artifacts such as products themselves.” In socio-logical terms, consumerism is generally defined as the cultural dominant orientation towards the marketing and consumption of goods and services. Featherstone (1990) describes consumption as the actual consumption act: a key stimulus for production; an inducement for workers to work; a major source of social status; and a significant channel for aspirations and pleasures. Murphy and Bendell (2001, p. 304) describe consumption as the new “counterbalancing force to capitalism.” Others see it as a secular substitute with more validity for values than the traditional pillars of the “culturally transfusive triad” of religion, education and family (Blackwell et al., 2000). Consumer capitalism elevates social display - conspicuous consumption - as the dominant driving force of ‘values’, and to a large extent, secularisation has superseded spiritual conformity. Belk et al. (1991) famously claimed that for many people consumption had become a vehicle for achieving transcendence with there being “two processes at work in contemporary society: the secularisation of the sacred and the sacralisation of the secular” (p.59). Miles (1998) claims that consumerism is such a powerful cultural force that “it is arguably the religion of the late twentieth century” (p. 1). According to (Varul, 2013, p. 219), “Consumerism is widely seen as the cultural expression of developed capitalism, and Marxist analyses from the 1970s onwards have tried to show how the development of an absorbent market for consumer goods was driven by the needs of accumulation and valorisation in late capitalism.” In today’s consumer society, social salience is at the heart of customer-orientation and consumer values, a fact endorsed by Sherry’s assertion that brand-based behaviours act as “the principal form of secular ritual in contemporary life” (1986, p. 62).

Discussion on values, however, is not value-neutral. In fact, to any explication of Veblen’s phenomenon of conspicuous consumption- the

“leisure classes” peacock display of purchase - must be added conspicuous waste and conspicuous precision (Miller, 2009, p. 115). Here, the former is a cost that brings no material benefit; the latter is the attention needed to maintain the display of consumption. Another view is that consumer capitalism has established global dominance as the all-pervasive economic ideology, especially with the fall of the Communist bloc and the rise of China in the East. This has been translated, on a more local level, to become the primary political ideology. The ‘marketisation’ of all sectors – public, private, third or voluntary sectors – has seen the discipline of the market, with the accompanying focus on consumer needs, as the key driving principle. The concept of ‘the market’ permeates all aspects of society; it has become “a dominant, if not the dominant influence on how people act and think throughout the rest of their lives” (Ollman, 1998, p. 82). Finally there is the narrative of consumer ‘protection’, instilling a growing sense of conscience and citizenship in terms of consumer oppression and environmental irresponsibility. And therein lays the tension and the contradiction: the common thread with all these viewpoints -the perspectives of projection or protection - stem from the same source. The consumption assumption is predicated on the homogeneity of Western taste, the ubiquitous nature of the consumer ethic (Miles, Meethan, & Anderson, 2002) and an unlimited supply of resources. These predicates are erroneous. Nonetheless, increasingly, and progressively, the marketplace impetus in “the pursuit of economic meaning in society and the pursuit of social meaning in the economy” (Freidland & Robertson, 1990, p.56) has been consumption. Sandel (2009) plots the transition from political to social economy; Dholakia and Firat (1993) describe this shift as being “from political economy to theatres of consumption” (p. 56). The phases thus far of the consumer society have been: the Golden Age after the 2nd World War; the 1960s to 1980s neo-liberal pre-occupation with self-production; and the later globalisation

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