

# Introduction

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## *Born to consume*

Growing up in most contemporary Western contexts, the average individual will be confronted not only with a cornucopia of commodities and commercialized services but also with a variety of discourses and institutions identifying such a context as 'consumer society' or 'consumer culture'. More or less explicitly, these discourses and institutions will address people as 'consumers'. This book is concerned precisely with the practices, discourses and institutions which have brought about and characterize 'consumer culture'. Although the product of an historical process, the contemporary ways of organizing and understanding the relations between people and objects have several distinctive features.

In all societies objects accompany human beings throughout their existence, offering them support and inspiration and, at the same time, imposing limits and difficulties. In most European countries of today as well as the US or Canada, Australia or Japan, the birth of a child is greeted with a profusion of gifts (booties, bibs, dummies) with which parents, relatives and friends demonstrate their joy, just as the departure of a loved one requires the visible demonstration of pain through the purchase and appropriate use of particular goods (flowers, telegrams, cards of condolence). In so-called 'tribal societies', as in most 'traditional' ones, elaborate public ceremonies are described as making use of different things as numerous and just as specific as these to mark the most significant moments in life. Indeed, we know of ancient civilizations – from the diverse cultures which have succeeded one another in the Mediterranean basin, to pre-Columbian cultures, to early Chinese empires – through the remains of numerous objects which accompanied the everyday lives of their members, and which have often been recovered from rich burials. Even in times and places as profoundly characterized by religious asceticism as medieval Europe, people exchanged and made use of all kinds of things; there was in fact a remarkable circulation of non-essential objects linked to religious devotion in this period, including a blossoming trade in religious relics. More generally, the possibility that every culture could be handed down and become an object of cultural reflection for its members is linked to the spread of supporting materials which fix it (from parchment, to books, to CDs); thus it is through the consumption of cultural objects that a given culture can reach beyond the boundaries of the group which originally created it.

However, there are differences between contemporary Western society and those which preceded it, or those which, through traditions which are presented as

marginal or ancestral, still resist it in several parts of the world. These differences often have to do with the processes of consumption. It is frequently claimed, in a tone of regret, that ours is a 'consumer society' or a 'consumer culture'. Such labels – emerging after the Second World War and made famous by authors such as Marcuse, Galbraith, Packard and Baudrillard – were used to suggest that the society which we live in is a particular variant of capitalism characterized by the primacy of consumption. In reality though, underneath the apparent simplicity of the expression 'consumer society' lies profound ambiguity. From its very first appearance, this term has been used more to convey condemnation than to describe; in particular, instead of being deployed to comprehend what characterized actual consumer practices, it served to stigmatize what appeared to be a growing and uncontrolled passion for material things. At that time 'consumer society' constituted an attack on so-called 'consumerism': a continuous and unremitting search for new, fashionable but superfluous things, which social critics have branded as causing personal discontent and public disengagement in advanced capitalism.

With its apocalyptic tones, this moralistic and moralizing connotation masks substantial continuities as well as important differences between our society and other social formations. Even societies radically different from ours can be characterized, at least in part or in certain sectors of the population, as materialist and acquisitive. Thus, people in 'tribal' societies also use objects to distinguish themselves and mark social hierarchy, alliances and conflicts; even in these societies one can find forms of conspicuous consumption which mostly serve to reinforce social and cultural domination by certain members. For their part, the 'new' and 'exotic' have often proved fascinating and alluring even in societies as cautious and traditional as the medieval one – the remarkable diffusion throughout Europe of oriental spices that began in this period being a well-known example. Still, it is evident that these societies are in many ways quite distant from our own. How, then, can we begin to think about the peculiarity of contemporary consumer culture? How can we capture the specificity of our times?

I shall pursue an entry into these issues by borrowing the words which Max Weber (1980, orig. 1923) used to define mature Western capitalism: consumer society is a type of society in which 'the satisfaction of daily needs' is realized 'through the capitalist mode'. This is to say, that daily desires are satisfied through the acquisition and use of 'commodities', goods which are produced for exchange and are on sale on the market. Even if we encounter various forms of capitalism in all historical periods (that is, forms of production characterized by the maximization of profit), according to Weber, it is only in the West, and only from a given moment onwards in the development of modern capitalism, that we can find this type of society. To this, I shall add that in the consumer society we not only satisfy our most elementary daily needs through commodities; we also conceptualize the purchase and use of goods as acts of 'consumption'. Furthermore, we are accustomed to being addressed as 'consumers' by a plethora of scientific disciplines, mundane discourses and social institutions which contribute to circumscribing and delineating what 'consumption' means and what kind of people we are when we act as 'consumers'. Consumption appears to be a world in and of itself, made up of specifically dedicated places and times which are thought of as juxtaposed to, and separate from, those of work. As is evident, consumption gets increasingly coded as leisure, and leisure is increasingly

commoditized. Thus, our daily life is typically organized as alternating between times/space of work and times/spaces of consumption: we wake up and 'consume' breakfast at home or in a coffee-shop, we go to work in a factory or office where we spend most of the day, taking a 'break' from 'work' only to 'consume' a sandwich at a pub, in a canteen or food outlet, we return home where a series of instruments help us complete our diverse acts of 'consumption' – from listening to a new CD we bought in the nearest shopping centre to relaxing in a hot bath with a miraculous essential oil recommended by a friend. And, if we still have any energy left, we might go out to other places of consumption (restaurants, cinemas, clubs, gyms, night clubs, etc.) where we can enjoy specific goods and services made available to us through the work of others, who will themselves consume their lot in other spaces and times. Such a structure is associated with the diffusion of waged work, which requires that employees work in a disciplined fashion, concentrating exclusively on their specific job even in an era of increasingly flexible organization of labour. Because it is paid, work-time is precious and is to be purified of every distraction and amusement. Amusement and distractions are important of course, and so they are provided by institutions of consumption which are temporally and spatially bound and by occasions of consumption which are regulated through commoditization. Whilst these institutions and occasions are superfluous to productive organizations, for most individuals they are the most important, representing 'free time', or at least 'freedom' from the discipline of work.

Acting as an intermediary between these two moments of our existence, work and consumption, is the sphere of exchange. In our society this sphere is characterized not so much and not only by its notable size, but also and above all by the dominance of the monetary economy. As Georg Simmel (1990, orig. 1907) revealed, money's infiltration into every aspect of social exchange during the course of modernity facilitated the possibility of purchase and sale of objects thanks to its 'impersonal and abstract nature', making exchange infinitely easier than in economies based on barter and a myriad of specific and personal agreements (a point which is well summarized by the English word 'currency'). The progressive virtualization of exchange with the introduction of chequebooks and cash-points, and the development of financial services for consumption (from credit cards to mortgages) has further facilitated the commercial circulation of goods; this has reduced the inertia inherent in coins and notes which heavily burdened cash exchanges. Conjoined with a situation of flexible exchange is a rather strong and complex system for the commercial promotion of goods. Even in ancient societies, sellers needed to flaunt their goods, and there existed naïve though nonetheless successful forms of advertising, such as was found on the doors of imperial Pompei's brothels. Nevertheless, it is only with modern capitalism that the promotional system has become central, so much so that today's goods are conceived of with a public of consumers in mind: they are, essentially, made to be sold. Coterminous with the unfolding of the historical process in the last three centuries, various media – from newspapers to the radio, from television to the Internet – have been vehicles for commercial culture, hosting and spreading all kinds of advertising.

As we are often reminded, advertising has an important role in contemporary society. It brings new and diverse goods closer to us, goods produced in distant places, through often unknown processes, which may then be consumed in rather

unpredictable ways. Our society is characterized by an amazing flowering of material culture. If by 'culture' we intend the ensemble of meaningful practices through which social actors orient themselves in the world, then by 'material culture' we intend the ensemble of objects, man-made or otherwise, which are given meaning by those practices and which, in turn, contribute to giving meaning to those same practices. The concept of material culture goes beyond the material/symbolic distinction, and underlines that objects are part of a system of open meanings which require the intervention of actors to become meaningful. Today, material goods are extremely numerous and each of us makes use of a remarkable variety in the course of a day. The objects available to members of 'tribal' or traditional societies were relatively few as well as less varied and distant. While it is easy to provide stereotypical images of 'tribal' communities in remote places or ancient times, we may safely consider that it was likely that members of such communities would eat food they had procured personally from the richness of their natural environment, eating out of a bowl they had themselves made, sleeping on a mat woven by a member of their family, adorning themselves with beads procured through barter with a neighbouring tribe, amusing themselves with objects exchanged within their clan. Even in traditional societies where the inter-local market had developed a certain importance, this didn't include objects of everyday use, only those luxury goods which weren't always available to everybody. In these subsistence economies where work, consumption and exchange were strongly integrated, people used history-thick objects of closer provenance in ways that were taken for granted and had immediate, straightforward significance. Production and consumption were not specialized and separated spheres of action, held together by an equally specialized sphere of exchange and commercialization: the fundamental cultural dichotomy on which social order rested was that of sacred/profane rather than of production/consumption.

In contemporary Western societies, the hegemonic character of discourses and practices which disentangle production and consumption means that we usually find ourselves confronted with objects whose meaning and use escape us. Mirroring this, advertising and the various aspects of the commercialization of goods (from packaging to branding) are busy constructing meanings around products to make them 'consumable', (i.e. significant for the consumer) by placing them within his or her structure of needs, thus inevitably modifying and expanding his or her desires and needs. The process of commoditization, that is the transformation of a good into a commodity exchangeable on the market at a certain fixed monetary price, extends also to services. The image we hold of economic culture in tribal societies as well as in traditional ones underscores gifts, nepotism or the division of domestic labour by age or gender. Certainly, in our society gifts, nepotism and the sexual division of domestic labour persist; nevertheless, we have more recourse to commodities or commoditized services. Various aspects of domestic work have profoundly changed and, following the decline of domestic service, at least partly been replaced by the wide diffusion, especially after the Second World War, of domestic appliances. An army of laundries, companies dedicated to cleaning, and snack bars have also to some extent, replaced the exchange of unpaid domestic services which took place within the extended family. Even when we want to make a gift, we rarely escape the market, as the crowds which fill shops and malls before Christmas testify.

Corresponding with the inexhaustible commoditization of goods and services, each of us relentlessly tries to preserve personal identities and relations from the logic of the market and price, and we often end up adjusting the second to the first. The logic of personal relations still presides over the exchange of gifts and, at least in part, over commodities. In most Western societies, when we purchase an object as a gift, we have to make sure we remove the price; when we receive one, we can at the most say something like 'it must have cost you a fortune', but we know very well that to ask the actual cost would be extremely impolite. When we receive a gift that we don't like we cannot openly and without good moral cause re-transform it into a commodity or 'recycle' it as a present, and if we dare do so we must act with circumspection, as we are transgressing some of the fundamental rules governing relations between people. But even when we leave a toddler at kindergarten, we demand that the employees look after the little one not only because they are paid but also because the child – which appears as the quintessential human being, unmarked by society, politics, economy – deserves attention and affection. Furthermore, the phenomenon of branding clearly adumbrates the power of loyalty and personal(ized) attachments in the mass market. And, even when we appear to be doing nothing more than engaging in a mechanical impersonal exchange, such as when we grab a snack from a vending machine, in reality we activate a whole series of social mechanisms, like trust, which link us to the product, the channel of sale, technology, etc. well beyond the logic of price. One of the paradoxes of our society is that we actually depend on commodities to complete our daily lives, yet we find it necessary to de-commoditize objects and services if we want our activities to have meaning for us as human beings. If the consumer society is that in which daily needs are satisfied in a capitalist way through the acquisition of commodities, it is also that in which each consumer has to constantly engage in re-evaluating these objects beyond their price, in order to stabilize meanings and social relations.

The so-called consumer society thus appears to be in continuity with, yet different from, other societies which, following an established sociological convention, we can posit as its contrasting 'types'. The differences which characterise it consolidated themselves over the course of at least the last three centuries. If it is true, as Weber maintained, that a general predominance of daily needs being satisfied commercially (including outside of metropolitan areas) occurred only in the second half of the 19th century, it is also the case that other characteristics of a consumer society could be found in earlier periods, above all in England and Holland. For example, already by the end of the 17th century some fairly standardized goods of colonial origin were becoming widely available throughout all social strata: tobacco, tea, coffee and sugar. On the other hand the system of the commercialization of goods began to take a modern shape from the beginning of the 18th century, when techniques of promotion, of advertising, of the presentation of commodities in shops, etc. very similar to those we know today began to be used. At that same time consumption became an important theme of reflection in public discourse, repeatedly debated and interrogated in the diffusion of newspapers which themselves were subsidized by advertising.

As will be apparent in the course of this book, consumption is best considered as a complex economic, social and cultural set of practices, interconnected with all of the most important phenomena which have come to make up contemporary

Western society: the spread of the market economy, a developing globalization, the creation and recreation of national traditions, a succession of technological and media innovations, etc. If it is true that in today's 'consumer society' we are born to consume, it is also true that consumption has cultural and practical implications that go way beyond satisfying our daily needs through commodities, or even symbolically play with them in variously elaborated manners. To consume is also to act as 'consumers', that is to put on a particular, contested kind of identity and to deal with its contradictions. In this light, consumer culture is more than commoditization and affluence, more than conspicuous consumption and the democratization of luxuries. Consumer culture also *produces consumers*. But does so *in a variety of ways* which need further investigation. In a growing variety of activities, growing numbers of people now speak of themselves as consumers, and they are being addressed as consumers by a host of institutions, within and without the market. The centrality of the 'consumer', the lengthy and contested historical processes which led to its formation, the many theoretical portrayals of consumer agency, the political implications of conceiving contemporary culture as consumer culture are the main subjects of this book. The following pages thus elaborate on a fundamental research agenda: adopting a constructivist approach to consumer culture, emphasis is placed on the social, cultural and institutional processes which have made consumption into a contested field of social action and public debate, bringing notions of the consumer to life and promoting it as a major social identity in contemporary societies.

## Structure of the book

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The book is organized to offer an historically grounded and theoretically informed discussion of contemporary consumer culture as well as a critical understanding of its diversity, reach and ambivalence. Throughout the book a variety of empirical examples illustrate the rich texture of consumer culture(s). The ambivalence of consumption is shown by looking at the various ways in which it can be conceived as an ordinary and yet socially regulated practice of appropriation: people typically remove commodities from their commercial codes and contexts, but do so by negotiating with routines and meanings which are otherwise deemed culturally appropriate, reasonable, fair and even 'normal'. The chapters are thus divided into three parts, organized around three main dichotomies: *production/consumption*; *rationality/irrationality*; *freedom/oppression*. Both in lay and social scientific discourse, these dichotomies have been applied to understand contemporary consumer culture. Reference to them thus helps in discussing its history, theory and politics, even though much of the book is concerned with showing that consumption challenges dichotomies and involves other, more complex patterns of relation. The first part on *history* maps the multifarious, spatially and temporally articulated historical development of (Western) consumer culture, thus providing a cultural reading of the vast socio-economic and geopolitical transformations this has entailed. The second part on *theory* critically discusses the main theoretical approaches which have tried to model consumer agency from neo-classical economics to sociological classics, from critical theory to communication

approaches, up to the recent emphasis on theories of practice and ritual de-commoditization. The third part on *politics* considers the political dimension of consumer culture, looking at the issue of representation and intermediation and in particular the role of advertising; at de-commoditization as a contested terrain where social actors negotiate hegemonic views of identity and choice; and finally the issues of globalization, localization and alternative consumption. While one part naturally leads into the following, each of them can be read separately. The text closes with a brief conclusion that both helps by drawing the book's overarching theses and threads together and offers some analytical tools for further investigation. Finally, at the very end of the book, the reader will find some selected suggestions for further reading. Their purpose is twofold: to mark out key studies related to the arguments proposed, and to point to auxiliary resources to orientate research and writing in the field of consumption.

