

PART I

THE RISE OF CONSUMER CULTURE

In most conventional descriptions of the birth of capitalism, consumption is rarely portrayed as a crucial phenomenon, let alone one which is capable of being the propulsive force behind historical processes. The birth of modern capitalist society is normally explained through a series of diverse variables, all of them inherent, as it were, to the sphere of production: from the industrial revolution to the spread of an industrious and calculating bourgeois mentality. However, the social sciences have recently begun to recognize that the history of consumption – intended as a bundle of practices, a contested object of moral judgement and a category of analysis – is extremely important in understanding the genesis of the capitalist system as well as its late-modern variant which is strongly characterized by an eye-catching circulation of commodities.

Thus, through changes in consumption we can re-read the history of modernity and of the expansion of Western civilization. By way of example, in *Seeds of Change*, the historian Henry Hobhouse (1985, xi) writes that ‘The starting point for the European expansion out of the Mediterranean ... had nothing to do with, say, religion or the rise of capitalism – but it had a great deal to do with pepper. The Americas were discovered as a by-product in the search for pepper’. Of course, it was not only desires of consumption that stimulated transoceanic crossings, or that these alone brought new possibilities for consumption. Nevertheless, capitalism was induced not only by the industrial revolution which reached its apogee in the second half of the 19th century, or by the calculating mentality of the petite bourgeoisie of the 17th and 18th centuries (perhaps inspired by the ascetic Calvinism which so fascinated Max Weber), but also by consumption, from the extravagances of the nobility and high finance to the small luxuries of the masses. This, as we shall see, happened from the tail-end of the late Medieval period.

According to Weber (1930, orig. 1904–5), the Protestant mentality – especially in its Calvinist form – promoted an ascetic and calculating attitude which favoured capitalist accumulation, forming through frugality and hard work the financial capital necessary for the development of the capitalist enterprise. However, we should also remind ourselves that contrasting with this asceticism was a hedonistic mentality which saw as much meaning in the comforts and even in the waste of consumption. This mentality was chiefly represented by the nobility, high finance and, in ever increasing numbers, by the lower orders. Thus, hedonism and

waste existed – and indeed had re-emerged during the Renaissance – alongside asceticism and prudence. In other words, somebody had to consume those goods which were produced through the industriousness of the first capitalists, and they had to have good reasons for doing so.

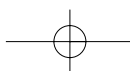
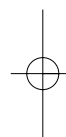
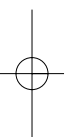
As I shall show later on, contemporary economic and cultural history demonstrate that it is impossible to provide a sharp divide between a preceding puritan and Protestant era which gave an initial impulse to accumulation, and a subsequent period of hedonism from which the so-called ‘consumer society’ sprang forth (Appadurai 1986a; Brewer and Porter 1993; Campbell 1987; Mukerji 1983). From this perspective, the spread of new models of consumption, spurred on by international commerce, the colonies, courtly excess and an increasingly materialistic mentality, gradually favoured the development of a system of credit and debt, and more generally stimulated competition and cross-fertilization between different social groups, other than mere economic exchange. This was accompanied by the speeding up and expansion of the dynamics of taste, freeing them from the constrictions of the medieval period. In medieval society’s closed and tight social hierarchy, the tastes and dynamics of consumption were also fairly rigid, tending to reproduce the existing social order. The consolidation of modern society and the relative social mobility which characterizes it have instead brought forth (and been favoured by) continuous – and ever more rapid – changes in lifestyles.

The same *supply/demand* dichotomy which has been so important in the development of economic analysis does not seem to take account of the phenomenon of consumption. Above all, this is because consumption is not only expressed in the *demand* for goods (the purchase of objects or services) but in their *use* (their symbolic associations, the ways in which they are distributed within families, the practices and discourses through which they are managed, etc.) which in ordinary life fills goods with value. The notion of demand in some way isolates consumption from the web of social activities (including production) and reduces processes of consumption to a series of disentangled and re-aggregated acts of purchase, thus making the commercial value of an object appear to be a good proxy for its social and cultural value. Instead, I will show that *economic value* is *culturally constructed* through deep-seated *historical processes*. Obviously, there are events which make a difference and particular places and periods in which the clock of the history of consumption seems to tick more quickly: just think of the precipitating role that the Second World War had in spreading and making legitimate American lifestyles across Western European countries. However, to understand what characterizes today’s consumer society, one has to keep in mind a series of phenomena which have developed over a long period at different speeds and in different places. The so-called consumer society is in fact profoundly interconnected with a type of society that sociologists conventionally term ‘modern’ (Lury 1996, 29 ff.; Slater 1997, 24 ff.) and which has a complex historical genesis. Consumer society can thus be associated with the wide diffusion of a variety of commodities (which occurred, of course, in different waves: for example, colonial goods like sugar in the 17th and 18th centuries, fabrics and clothes in the 19th century, cars and domestic technology in the 20th century). Broadly speaking, it is also coterminous with the process of *commoditization*, so that more and more objects and services are exchanged on the market and are conceived of as commodities.

The Rise of Consumer Culture

11

Furthermore, it develops along with the globalization of commodity and cultural flows; with the increasing role of shopping as entertainment and spectacle; with the increasing democratization of fashion; with the growth in sophisticated advertising; with the spread of credit to consumers; with the proliferation of labels defining a variety of consumer pathologies like kleptomania or compulsive buying; with the organization of associations dealing with consumer rights or calling into being the consumer's political persona ... The list could hardly be closed and perhaps what is most important here is to realize that all these phenomena are linked to broad cultural and political principles which are themselves also considered typically modern; these range from the identification of freedom with private choice to the consolidation of impersonality and universalism as recommendable codes of conduct for social relations; from the idea that human needs are infinite and undefined, to the expectation that each individual can (and must) find 'his/her own way', as personal as possible. The particular cultural politics of value which underpins the development of 'consumer society' is thus not a natural one, it is one which requires a process of learning whereby social actors are practically trained to perform (and enjoy) their roles as consumers.



1 Capitalism and the Consumer Revolution

For a long time sociology and history implicitly followed a dualist position which gave the organization of production the role of the engine of history. Studies of 17th to 18th century material culture have discredited this *productivist* vision which typically presented consumer society as emerging at the beginning of the 20th century as a sudden and mechanical reaction to the industrial revolution, and then gradually penetrating all social classes through the consumption of mass-produced goods. On the basis of the work of the French historian Fernand Braudel (1979), who began to study this problem not as a separate economic phenomenon but as an integral part of culture and the material life of people, historians have begun to give due consideration to the development of material culture, and, in fact, to give it a propulsive role in the historical process. From the 1980s onward the understanding that consumer society is not comprehensible as just a late derivative of capitalism became established; consumption was now seen as having actively participated in the development of the capitalist system.

In this chapter we shall consider some of the most important overall explanations for the rise of the consumer society which have replaced the productivist thesis. These anti-productivist views have foregrounded various aspects of consumer culture – from promotional techniques, to hedonistic ethics, to commercial incentives (Campbell 1987; De Vries 1993; McKendrick et al. 1982). I will then insist on the need to adopt a multi-causal approach, considering economic, cultural and social dimensions and abandoning a linear model of development in favour of an understanding of the multiple geographies and temporalities of different consumer patterns and values. Drawing on Werner Sombart's work on luxury, the consumption of superfluous and refined, colonial and exotic goods, together with the forms of knowledge which accompanied them, are seen as pivotal for a variety of institutions which have worked as engines for the rise of consumer culture, from the court with its competitive merry-go-round of fashions, to the urban environment with its succession of shopping places, to the bourgeois home with its emphasis on decent comfort and polite refinement.

Consumption, production and exchange

As suggested, traditional wisdom has considered consumer culture as the late consequence of the industrial revolution; in this productivist vision the so-called

'consumer society' was but an effect of the capitalist mode of production. Industrialization is thus seen as responsible for the spread of large quantities of standardized commodities, made accessible to ever-larger segments of the population. In other words, the industrial revolution, conceived of as a radical transformation of the economic structure of production, was at the root of the revolution in demand. From this point of view, the consumer society can be conceived of as a *cultural* response which logically follows a more fundamental *economic* transformation. The consumer society therefore coincides with 'consumer culture' or 'consumerism'. Consumer culture is itself defined in reductive and ambiguous terms, mixing and meshing practices with representations, consumer meanings with advertising images – and indeed reducing the former to the latter, thus reducing consumption to mass culture, which is in turn depicted as a mere derivative of industrial mass production. In this way, even when consumption is the subject of analysis, it is both inappropriately and unwillingly taken back to production.

A first important step towards opposing such a position has been taken by historians. Through the use of a variety of quantitative sources (from business profits and taxes, to wills, etc.) and qualitative data (descriptions of stolen objects in police reports, personal diaries, etiquette guides, etc.) historians are now able to indicate that a growth in material culture in Europe began in the early modern period and, thus, before the industrial revolution (Fairchild 1998). A clear *growth in consumption* was registered above all from the second half of the 17th century and throughout the 18th century in many European nations and in different social classes – from the inhabitants of Paris (Roche 1981), to Dutch peasants (De Vries 1975), to the urban as well as rural English (Shammas 1990; Thrisk 1978; Wetherhill 1988). Of course, given the paucity of adequate sources, it is difficult to identify with certainty the pace of the growth of consumption in this period. It is also evident that the early development of modern consumption has its own particular, uneven and partial geography. Even within a given nation it is difficult to talk of an increase in consumption for the whole population, since consumption could vary massively between social classes, whilst gender and generational differences accounted for the unequal distribution of goods within the same family. Nevertheless, from the second half of the 17th century people of every class and gender began to acquire via the market many more finished goods, in particular household furnishings (paintings, ceramics, textiles) and personal ornaments (umbrellas, gloves, buttons) (Borsay 1989). At the same time the diffusion of sugar and new stimulants like tobacco, coffee, tea and cocoa seems to have played an important role in revolutionizing consumption (Mintz 1985; Schivelbusch 1992). One must not forget either the spread of prints as decorations for domestic space, which paralleled the specialization of rooms in the houses of the nascent bourgeoisie (Perrot 1985; Schama 1987).

These examples are not however due to mass production. Up until the 19th century what was available was the result of flexible production in small units, rather than standardized production in large structures typical of the industrial revolution.¹ In the same way, even though superfluous commodities were widely available, their distribution was through channels of small specialized retailers (Fawcett 1990). Manufactured goods were often retailed directly by the producers, who offered the possibility of various personalized finishings for the goods. The

THESES (AUTHOR)	HISTORICAL CAUSE	SOCIAL GROUP	CENTURY	PLACE
PRODUCTIONIST	STANDARDIZED AND CHEAP GOODS	WORKING CLASS	XX	ENGLAND
ANTIPRODUCTIONIST				
CONSUMERIST (McKendrick)	COMMERCIALIZATION SYSTEM STATUS DISPLAY	UPPER MIDDLE CLASS	XVIII	ENGLAND
MODERNIST (Campbell)	CULTURAL CONSUMPTION IMAGINATIVE HEDONISM	MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN	XVIII/XIX	ENGLAND
EXCHANGIST (De Vries)	HOUSEHOLD ORGANIZATION MONETARY EXCHANGE	RURAL FAMILIES	XVII/XVIII	HOLLAND

Figure 1.1 The theses on the birth of the consumer society

situation was similar in many European nations, fostered by international commerce and the diffusion of commodities from the colonies.

Taking stock of the studies of the general growth in consumption in early modernity, authors like Neil McKendrick (1982), Colin Campbell (1987) and Jan De Vries (1975), have led the way to what I call the *anti-productivist* turn. In fact, not only do their studies push back the revolution in demand to the 18th century or the second half of the 17th century, but they also present alternative theoretical paradigms, providing an anti-productivist view of the birth of consumer society. They all attempt to show that demand, more than production, became a vital part of the economic and cultural process. In different terms, they all underline that it was the desire for consumption more than processes of work that played an active role in giving shape to modernity. Let us consider them one by one, outlining their main arguments (see Figure 1.1).

McKendrick's observations marked a shift in studies of the history of consumption. McKendrick stresses that the consumer revolution was 'the necessary analogue to the industrial revolution, the necessary convulsion on the demand side of the equation to match convulsion of the supply side' (McKendrick 1982, 9). According to this British historian, the revolution in consumption should be placed in the second half of the 18th century in England, and be seen against the background of a society that was becoming more flexible and less hierarchical as a result of the *status aspirations* of the new bourgeois classes; in McKendrick's view they saw a possibility for social advancement in the conspicuous emulation of the consumption of the class which had until then been the custodians of refinement – the nobility. Furthermore, the desire of the bourgeoisie to consume

was stimulated by avaricious entrepreneurs who, despite not yet using industrial techniques of production, knew very well how to use sophisticated modern *sales techniques* to foster these status aspirations.

To this end McKendrick mentions Josiah Wedgwood's porcelain, among the most important of the period and still some of the most appreciated in the world. Wedgwood understood and exploited the pretensions of the nobility and the aspirations of the bourgeoisie, getting his porcelain sponsored by royal families throughout Europe and then benefiting from the aura created by this apparent patronage of the 'great' to sell his wares at a high price to the *nouveaux riches*. This entrepreneur was one of the first to adopt genuine *ante litteram* marketing techniques (that is, the planning of production with the sale in mind) and design (applying sophisticated aesthetics of artistic merit to consumer goods). All this with the intent to produce a large quantity of goods, available at accessible prices, ready to satisfy the ascendant bourgeoisie's desire for taste and refinement. As Andrew Wernick (1991) writes, Wedgwood heralded a 'promotional culture' in which objects are products commercialized with a particular market in mind. For example, he cultivated the growing interest amongst the privileged in archaeology and antiquity, and exploited it by producing 'Etruscan' vases which were exhibited in spectacular fashion in his chain of shops and subsequently achieved even greater prestige through being displayed in the homes of the nobility. From this perspective, the demand for refined goods on the part of the new ascendant middle classes, provoked by shrewd entrepreneurs and artisans, created the market which modern industry needed and soon learned to exploit to its advantage. McKendrick therefore offers us an explanation for the birth of consumer society that I may define as *consumerist*. In this way the process of industrialization is the effect and not the cause of new desires of consumption, and these corresponded with the possibility of displaying one's status and were stimulated through promotional techniques.

In sharp contrast to the productivist thesis, McKendrick treats demand as an active part of the historical process which developed capitalism. However, he does not historicize demand itself. On the contrary, he portrays demand as the result of some 'natural' human inclination to imitate those with power and status, waiting to free itself the moment material conditions permit. The birth of consumer society is thus credited to consumerism, which in turn, is seen as catalysed by the dynamism of fashion fused with social emulation and encouraged by the manipulative sales techniques of wily producers. Therefore, his explanation is not able to take account of the cultural specificity of a social environment in which it was becoming possible, lawful, and even proper (for some) to follow fashion, to spend for their own pleasure, to be attracted by the exotic, to learn to enjoy luxuries and ostentation, etc. The motives and values which pushed the first bourgeoisie to consume more and more are never taken seriously and given the attention they deserve: instead they are reduced to emulation, envy or the demonstration of status.

In an explicit countering of McKendrick's thesis, and in particular of his historically and culturally flat view of the motives for consumption, Campbell offers an explanation I may define as *modernist*. His well-known work *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Consumerism*, (Campbell 1987) is inspired by Weber's (1930, orig. 1904–5) celebrated essay on the Protestant ethic and

capitalism, and at the same time wants to complete it, demonstrating that not only production but also consumption contributed to the birth of capitalism. According to his view, conspicuous consumption is only an incidental, and not even a particularly significant, part of a new ethical and aesthetic attachment to novelty and originality which draws heavily on its roots in Romanticism. Romanticism provided people with both the good reasons and a repertoire of justification for their consumer desires (see also Campbell 1994).

Campbell is concerned with trying to pin down what is distinctively 'modern' about the attitude towards material culture that takes hold with the modern era. In his view, the search for novelty appears to be a fundamental characteristic of modernity, along with a particular type of hedonism: the modern consumer is a 'hedonist' who, Campbell (1987, 86–7) writes, continually 'withdraw(s) from reality as fast as he encounters it, ever-casting his day-dreams forward in time, attaching them to objects of desire, and then subsequently "unhooking" them from these objects as and when they are attained and experienced'. What distinguishes modern consumption is its being a private exercise of a particular kind of hedonism, of the mind rather than of the body, and consequently infinite. The body and its desires are no longer sated by the banquets of old: the mind and the myriad meanings it can give to experience and things, extend the possibilities of consumption to infinity. In other words, in living above the level of subsistence, modern consumers have developed a form of modern hedonism which sees objects as ripe for personal creative fantasy. Their interests are concentrated in the meanings and images which can be attributed to a product, something which requires the presence of 'novelty'. Thanks to 'private and imaginary' modern hedonism, consumption becomes not so much the ability to bargain over price, or to use products, but 'the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product image lends itself, "real" consumption being largely a resultant of this "mentalistic" hedonism. Viewed in this way, the emphasis upon novelty as well as that upon insatiability both become comprehensible' (*ibid.*, 89).

Placing the consumer revolution around the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, Campbell maintains that in contrast to what occurred in ancient and traditional societies, modern consumers tend to construct the context of their personal enjoyment through mixing up and manipulating illusions, thus reproducing their 'day-dreams', primarily through objects. Objects are appreciated above all for their meaning and their images, thus making continual 'innovation' both possible and necessary. Social actors are pushed in this direction by the teachings of Romanticism. According to Campbell, the ethic which is derived from these teachings motivates consumption not through some idea of otherworldly salvation, nor through the ostentation of status and social climbing, but in relation to self-improvement and aesthetic enjoyment. The Romantics maintained that, essentially, the goal of human beings was to set oneself in opposition to society: rather than bettering oneself through work, discipline and sacrifice, one should throw oneself into self-expression, in a search for different and meaningful experiences (Campbell 1987; 1994). The constant search for new forms of gratification is not only anti-traditionalist behaviour, but also the opposite of traditional forms of hedonism. The hedonism of the ancients was, as Campbell reminds us, linked to certain specific sensorial practices (eating, drinking, and so on). As mentioned above, modern hedonism is instead defined

by the pleasures of imagination and so is linked to the capacity to control emotions, for instance the ability to live situations of risk and fear vicariously as one finds in Romantic literature. In fact it was the novel (from the *feuilleton* to Gothic tales) which, due to its structure and commercial circulation, was at the same time one of the first standardized mass products, one of the first examples of mass circulation (and thus potential universality) of culture, and naturally an important diffuser of the very same Romantic ethic to, above all, women of the middle classes (Bermingham and Brewer 1995).

Campbell has rightly shown how some specific motivations for consumption have been fostered by new ethical and aesthetic orientations and have given rise to new cultures of consumption. He has attempted to explain an apparent contradiction in the development of capitalism, namely the fact that it is the very same English bourgeoisie amongst whom the Protestant ethic was strongest that gave life to a revolution in consumption; he maintains that it is precisely the control of emotions within the Protestant ethic which made the modern conception of pleasure possible, focused as it is on the ability to contemplate objects and manipulate their meanings. If we move just a little bit forward in history, we come across the type of person who best expresses the attachment described by Campbell: the English *dandy*. In fact, the image of the dandy, which became a topic of fervent debate between the 19th and the 20th centuries, was linked to a particular conception of pleasure: a general disposition to new and exotic experiences rather than the enjoyment of this or that particular object. As Rachel Bowlby (1993, 16 and 23) has suggested, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be seen as a way of reflecting on pleasure and the price that the life of a dandy bore: Dorian 'exchanges his moral self for the unbounded liberty of the new hedonist', there is no limit to what he can have, 'to the number of personalities he can adopt, to the experiences he can try', he becomes a pure 'container and carrier for sensations'.²

Whilst he does demonstrate the cultural character of individual fantasies, Campbell brushes over those social processes which make some fantasies more suited to some individuals, to their attributes of class, race, sexuality, etc. In fact, for at least the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, the negation of the self typical of Protestantism was able to express itself in the gratification of the self typical of Romanticism, mostly because production and consumption had become two (relatively) distinct spheres, organized in different times and places, and linked to different types of people. As we will see more clearly later on, in bourgeois society it is middle-class women who could (and indeed had to) become the consumers *par excellence*. It was they, above all others, who had to 'day-dream'.³ More generally, what Campbell sees as an 18th to 19th century syndrome – that is, the dissatisfaction with purchased goods and continual search for new objects of desire capable of personal stimulation beyond social distinction – could be found in every urban community which was sufficiently large and commercially developed, where at least a certain percentage of the population had the time and money to spend on the construction and presentation of the self through the growing number of goods on the market (Burke 1978; Mukerji 1983). As Peter Burke (1993, 157) recalls, even back in the 1500s the geographer and political theorist Giovanni Botero noted that living in close proximity in cities had made the Italian nobility more inclined to seek personal identity in demonstrative effects obtained through the use of novel and different goods. Thus, in his major

work, Campbell doesn't fully account for 'imaginary' hedonism as a long-running cultural tendency privileging materialism, nor does he seem to be interested in a cultural genealogy of why and how it happened that, from the 18th century onward, the use of goods came to be problematized as 'consumption' and social actors were addressed as 'consumers'.

To demonstrate the cultural embeddedness of economics Campbell concentrated exclusively on consumption. Meanwhile, the economic historian Jan de Vries (1975; 1993) attempted to reconcile the history of consumption with that of the modes of production and distribution, focusing on the role of distribution and commercial relationships which have developed in modern markets. I may define the explanation he offers for the birth of consumer society as *exchangist*. Concentrating on Holland, he describes how, from the end of the 17th century, spending on consumption increased even as disposable real income decreased, explaining this as due to the reallocation of productive resources within the family unit. De Vries notes that as real salaries decreased and available goods grew, families did not behave 'rationally', saving and reducing their commodity consumption. Instead, they consumed more commodities and financed their expenditures by working longer hours to produce for the market, which enabled them to obtain the money they needed to act as consumers. Rural families were as important as urban dwellers in this shift. 'This complex of changes in household behaviour constitutes' – writes De Vries (1993, 107) – 'an "industrious revolution", driven by Smithian, or commercial, incentives, that preceded and prepared the way for the Industrial Revolution.' The consolidation of mechanisms of freer and safer monetary exchange offered both the opportunity and the stimulus to modify traditional economic tendencies, shaped as they were by conservation and the management of scarcity. Thus, from De Vries's perspective, it was the opportunity and necessity to participate in monetary exchanges which heralded the beginning of the consumer society.

De Vries's explanation is particularly useful in demonstrating that production and consumption are just two faces of the same coin. Already in the 17th century, social actors chose to act as producers for the market in order to become consumers of goods, thus reorganizing the relationships and boundaries between production and consumption. However, the hypothesis of the 'industrious revolution' has its limits. The market mechanism and monetary exchange are presented as the real agents of this transformation. In particular, the market is naturalised as a sort of *deus ex machina* thanks to which production and consumption find a new balance, whilst the exchange value of goods appears as a neutral instrument of economic processes whose meaning resides in the private desires of consumers. Instead, in this period there were political and cultural scripts which constructed commodity value, contributing to the structure of prices and, what is more, to making commercial exchange widely legitimate and highly desirable: commodities were not only objects with a price that could be purchased by anybody who could afford them, often they were also exotic objects of colonial origin, especially from Asia (Carrier 1995; Willis 1993; Zahidieh 1994). Commercial exchanges were thus invested with a particular cultural value: to participate in market relations was becoming a fundamental gesture of agency for the citizens of the Low Countries as much as the private acquisition of new commercial goods was related to political visions that were both progressive and nationalist.

Exchange value becomes something more than a neutral instrument when it is intertwined with modern markets. In fact, these are characterized by processes of de-personalization and disentanglement of relations on the one hand, and by an increasingly rapid obsolescence of commodities on the other, with the risk of disorientating rather than encouraging people. That is why one begins to notice a need to promote not only commodities but also a particular vision of consumers. Contested as it might have been, the 'consumer' was called forth and brought into life as an important social 'role' or 'identity', the economic analogue of the 'citizen': someone able to rely on themselves to assume the responsibility for their own choices and tastes (see Chapter 7).

The genesis of consumer capitalism

Whilst extremely important, the explanations offered by McKendrick, Campbell and De Vries have been variously criticized. As suggested, history is abandoning the attempt to offer univocal and overall explanations for the 'consumer revolution'. The most recent economic and cultural historiography has instead adopted a multifaceted approach which insists on multiple trajectories and shows capitalism to be the result of the reciprocal action of elements that were already present and widely spread before capitalism, as it is conventionally understood, fully manifested itself (Glennie 1995; Trentmann 2004). The development of the consumer society is thus increasingly described as a *long-term phenomenon* with *multiple geographies* and a variety of particular *object histories* (see Figure 2.2, p. 44). Importantly, some studies have underlined how, even during the time of the Renaissance cities of Italy, in courts and city markets, commodities began to exert a direct and powerful attraction on a growing part of the population (Burke 1978; Findlen 1998; Mukerji 1983). The notion that there was a definitive historical event has been brought into question by the knowledge that both capitalist forms of production and the phenomena of modern consumption have developed at unequal paces, and differentially according to country and the types of goods. Historians thus try to account for the wide variety of forms, places and times in which different factors have operated: from international commerce to colonialism, from new technologies of transport and communication to new worldly ethics, and so on. Particular attention has been given to the formation of new needs and to new means of attributing value to commodities linked to international commerce (Carrier 1995; Curtin 1984; Lenman 1990; Mukerji 1983), to colonialism (Mintz 1985; Spooner 1986; Thomas 1991; Zahidieh 1994), and to the relationship between gender and consumer practices (De Grazia and Furlough 1996; Roberts 1998).

Phenomena such as these were much in evidence to a contemporary of Max Weber, the sociologist-historian Werner Sombart. Anticipating the current historical debate, Sombart (1928) explained the genesis of capitalism through combining the factors of economic growth relative to production with those relative to consumption. According to Sombart, we can see traces of the development of a new type of society back in the 14th century – above all in Italy and later in Germany, Holland and England. Here the accumulation of capital saw a marked increase, and was no longer based on the feudal economy; instead, it was based on the trade with, and exploitation of, colonies, on the discovery of new

reserves of precious metals and money lending. To be sure, the exploitation of the colonies and the needs of armies and international commerce were fundamental to the development of capitalism, since they contributed to the total growth of commodities in circulation and the frequency of their exchange. Nevertheless, Sombart is adamant that we cannot simply explain capitalism through geographical enlargement or through a simple increase in the market transactions. The development of the colonies and international commerce were in fact initially linked to particular commodities: luxury goods. On close examination, a large part of the goods which make up the growth in demand of early modernity are precisely those goods which appeared on the European market for the first time: non-essential goods which took on new and refined roles that had previously been filled by more simple resources – and in particular spices and drugs, perfumes, dyes, silk and linen, precious stones and then, from the late 16th century onwards, sugar, coffee, tea and cocoa.

In his book *Luxus und Kapitalismus*, Sombart (1967, orig. 1913) maintains that luxury has the capacity to create markets, essentially because it concerns goods of high value which promote and require capitalisation and economic rationalization, including a growing availability of credit-providing devices. Thus, it is the very ‘nature’ of these commodities which favoured capitalist formation: for Sombart, then, it is above all the characteristics of a part of material culture – those refined goods ‘of superior class’ which go ‘beyond the necessary’, intended as the ‘common currency’ in a given ‘culture’ – which promoted a new capitalist organization within commerce, agriculture and industry. In fact, the desire for luxury goods occupies an important position amongst the genetic factors of capitalism, both materially (supporting consumption and favouring the development of forms of production that are ever more efficient and on a large scale), as well as culturally (as indicator and catalyst of a new configuration of needs which gradually spread from the nobility to the upper bourgeoisie and thus throughout the social fabric). By stimulating commerce and production, the consumption of luxury goods contributed to the accumulation of capital which constituted one of the material prerequisites for the development of modern industry. Furthermore, these forms of consumption also signalled the spread of a hedonistic-aesthetic attitude towards objects. According to Sombart, it is mainly from the 18th century onwards that a hedonistic attitude to shopping developed. Thus, it was those shops selling luxury goods which were the first to arrange themselves as places of elegant entertainment; having reached notable dimensions, they began to differentiate themselves according to the needs they wished to satisfy and to fuel (female *toilette*, soft furnishings, etc.), promoting the diffusion of fixed price, and an increasing depersonalization of the relationship between seller and buyer.

In Sombart’s view, economics, culture and politics contribute together to the development of the capitalist way of life. The new models of consumption which stimulate capitalist production thus correspond to a new political model characterized by the advent of the absolutist state. The Renaissance courts of Italy had already developed a lifestyle that anticipated modernity, and had a crucial role in stimulating the consumption of luxury goods and the refining of tastes. These were followed in the 17th century by the absolutist courts, of which the French remains the most important example: here, as Norbert Elias notes in his classic study (1978/82, orig. 1936/9) and thanks also to a new relationship between the

sexes, refined material pleasures and their manners became social weapons, genuine status-markers in the courtly game. It is from the court that desires of consumption spread, gradually and then in waves, throughout the rest of society. Initially, Sombart insists, it was mostly the upper bourgeoisie who had rapidly accumulated capital through commerce or finance, who represented the new and most important segment of consumption. They wanted to mix with the nobility and used shrewd strategies of marriage, whilst competing with the noble elite not only with their pecuniary power but also through their use of refined goods to demonstrate their taste and sophistication. In the final analysis, Sombart writes (1967, 80–4), ‘the longing for luxury would not have descended to wider strata of Europe within so short a time, nor would luxury expenditures have assumed such gigantic proportions almost overnight, if it had not been for ... the very great need for luxuries on the part of the *nouveaux riches*’ and if the nobility had not participated in the game of emulation, attempting to ‘equal the bourgeois parvenus in ostentatious display’. Supported and stimulated by the provision of financial services and credit, this social game gave way to processes of hybridization between a high culture of waste and refinement and a bourgeois one of thrift and prudence.

In the 17th and 18th centuries there were thus important transformations of the *economic culture* as a whole: these are centuries which saw both the development of a new rationalist orientation to production among emergent social groups, and the appearance of a more reflexive and self-sustained culture of consumption among not only the elites but also the upper-middle strata of the population. These observations enable us to take into consideration what, broadly speaking, characterized the *culture of consumption* during the 17th and 18th centuries. They are helpful in correcting Weber’s well-known hypothesis which, as already suggested, links the birth of capitalism to Calvinist worldly asceticism and thus to a particular *culture of production*. For example, if we consider consumption among the nascent upper-middle classes of the Low Countries in the 17th century, at the apogee of their economic and cultural splendour, a number of interesting cases demonstrate how production, commerce and consumption were profoundly intertwined, and how most groups participated in new lifestyles which combined asceticism and hedonism. Thus, notwithstanding its being a rigorously Protestant country, it is in the Low Countries that we witness one of the most celebrated booms in demand of early modernity: the so-called ‘tulip mania’. This mania reached its apex in 1637 when speculators and enthusiasts were willing to pay the equivalent of a rich and vast agricultural estate for just one tulip bulb (Bianchi 1999; Garber 1989). Such a phenomenon is difficult to understand today if we are unaware of the potent allure of the exotic (tulips came from the Orient), of a new materialist and rationalist attitude which made collecting and the cataloguing of the world a widely approved pastime, and of the commercial and investment opportunity – however risky – offered by such a small and readily transportable good. Similar factors were brought to light in Simon Schama’s 1987 well-known study *The Embarrassment of Riches*, which discusses the spread of paintings and prints amongst devout Dutch Protestants. Schama shows how the passion of Dutch artists for detailed representation, through still lifes so rich in detail and so codified and formal that they are almost catalogues, and the corresponding passion of *petite* and *haute* Dutch bourgeoisie for those paintings was a way of invoking their growing material well-being through subduing it to a regime of temperance.

Going back to Sombart and following his observations, we may consider that the enlargement of the market is initially *qualitative*, with the production of objects of high value which stimulate capitalisation and business mentality on the one hand, and a hedonistic-aesthetic attitude on the other; and then *quantitative*, with the democratisation of luxuries. However, the latter does not simply represent the freedom of the masses from need. The intensification of the capitalist spirit pushes, in Sombart's view as well as Weber's, towards a rationalization of the economic system which may have disciplining effects upon people. In contrast to Weber, Sombart concentrates not only on the rationalization of the organization of work (previously observed by Marx), but also on the rationalization of consumption. The rationalization of consumption – its becoming subject to bureaucratic control and instrumental calculation – may be noticed from the end of the 17th century onward. If the desire for new and non-essential goods is one of the driving forces of early capitalism, the management of luxuries through their creation and domestication in the dynamics of fashion is one of the factors which keep the wheels of commerce in constant motion, stabilizing the capitalist economy in its more mature phases. Thus, Sombart insists on the fact that with the progression of capitalist society luxuries will be produced in series for ever-larger groups of people; in this way they are not only democratized but also rationalized, that is they are subjected to the dynamics of 'fashion', becoming largely 'responsive' – to use a term later proposed by Kenneth Galbraith (1958) – not to the needs of the 'rich' so much as to that of programmed large-scale production. It therefore seems that Sombart would agree with Arjun Appadurai's (1986b, 32) argument that '[m]odern consumers are the victims of the velocity of fashion as surely as primitive consumers [or 'traditional' ones] are the victims of the stability of sumptuary law' which selectively forbids the use and possession of numerous non-essential goods according to status, gender, age, etc. The sumptuary laws prescribed which colours, styles and materials could be used by people of different social positions, at least in public, so that it was in fact forbidden by law to dress 'above' one's station. These laws were slowly abolished, and with the division of labour, social mobility and the monetary economy which have come to characterize the modern period, everyone – provided they have sufficient money – has the right to buy whatever good they please on the market. In this situation, the merry-go-round of fashion stimulates people to buy, but it is also independent of individual volition and with its ever more frenetic speed constantly engages them in new acts of consumption.

The circulation of luxuries tended to speed up following the spatial proximity and cultural amalgamation connected to the development of the large cities of modernity, above all the large colonial and commercial capitals like London and Amsterdam which were filled up with industrious great consumers. As suggested by Sombart (1967, 24):

The large cities of the early capitalistic epoch are basically consumer cities. The most important consumers are familiar with us; the princes, prelates, nobles, who are now joined by a new group, 'haute finance' (which may be regarded as a class of consumer without disparaging its 'productive' function in the politico-economic organization).

In its turn, the consolidation of large modern cities contributes to the growth of the need for luxuries by creating a wealth of occasions for mundane pleasures and

cultural exchange. Parties and social gatherings no longer remain confined to princely palaces, spreading instead to other social circles who find a need for public places of entertainment and pleasure like theatres, music-halls, refined restaurants and hotels. Even shops, which had begun to be furnished with care and refinement from the 18th century, change, becoming spaces of leisure, of worldly amusement rather than just mere places for the supply of goods. Elegant shops were important places for the development of a modern culture of consumption. They heralded the spread of a new recreational attitude to purchasing (which is now taken for granted in the phrase 'going shopping'). They became a public space in which women were not only well accepted, but also over which they were said to 'reign' (all this in a period in which two separate and typically gender-segregated spheres of action become delineated, the public and the private). Recent literature on both England and France has shown that the development of elegant shopping places at the heart of urban environments favoured the public visibility and personal autonomy of middle-class women, otherwise confined to the domestic sphere as mothers and wives (Rappaport 2000; Tiersten 2001). Populated by a mostly female workforce (Benson 1986), the department stores became a feature of the 19th century novel, which charged them with anxieties about female desires, but also with visions of respectability and female emancipation (Bowly 1985 and 2000). To go shopping became a new feminine form of sociability, the germ of a feminine public sphere, which found expression also in a variety of initiatives deploying purchasing power as a political tool (Hilton 2002).

The changing gender order – namely the changing system of relations among men and women and their cultural attributes – and the changing configuration of both the public sphere and the sphere of intimacy are phenomena which have notoriously been associated with the process of commercialization (see Beck and Gernsheim 2001; Giddens 1990). One of Sombart's sharpest intuitions indeed relates to the role of evolving relations between the sexes in promoting and developing modern consumer culture and society. Examining art and literature from medieval Europe, and once again the Italian Renaissance, he suggests that there was a link between the 'secularization of love' – its slow but progressive emancipation from religious institutions and rules – the uses of riches in a luxurious manner and a general hedonistic-aesthetic attitude to things. As love became gradually more justifiable in and of itself as an 'earthly enjoyment' of beauty and the 'emancipation of the flesh', and therefore (in a society still markedly male-dominated) there developed a new 'hedonistic-aesthetic conception of the woman and of love for a woman', the doors to all sensory pleasures and their tireless refinement opened. In this view the development of consumer society was driven not only by men risking huge amounts of capital to arm the large commercial transoceanic trading vessels of the colonies, but also, as Sombart (1967, 39 ff.) writes provocatively, by a specific category of women: the 'courtesans'. These women were not simply lovers, but 'intelligent and beautiful' ladies who incarnated a new female figure, initially intrinsic to the court, but gradually present also in upper-bourgeois society. Expert in refined pleasures and luxury, they ended up creating aspirations throughout society for elegant entertainment and opulence: the gradual social affirmation of the courtesan thus 'contributed to the formation of taste of the honest woman', so much so that bourgeois wives

followed the tastes and styles of the courts, bringing new extravagant desires to the whole of society. For Sombart, sexuality as eroticism and sensory delight was intimately linked to personal luxury and materialism, that which excited sight, smell, hearing, etc. in a refined way. Of course, once they were hooked, the mechanism of luxury also nourishes the desire human beings have to compare themselves with others and to demonstrate their status. Therefore Sombart notes that this emulative-competitive thrust, to which Thorstein Veblen (1994, orig. 1899) gives a primary causal role (see Chapter 3), is a universal feeling which can manifest itself in many different and culturally specific ways:⁴ it develops through conspicuous consumption and refinement only where materialistic attitudes, 'sensory delight' and 'eroticism' have a certain influence on the values and lifestyles of a relevant part of the population.

From courts to cities, from luxuries to fashion

Sombart's work on luxury has been defined as '[t]he best general treatment of the relationship between demand, the circulation of valuables, and long-term shifts in commodity production' (Appadurai 1986b, 36; see also Mukerji 1983; and for a sociological appraisal Grundmann and Stehr 2001). His reflections on consumption help us to consider the importance of a long process, both cultural and material, in which a new form of consumption linked to non-essential goods and social mobility ended up catalysing industrialization. Many of Sombart's points have been taken up in numerous and important studies which have underlined the role of the *consumption of luxuries* linked to the development of a *new spatiality of consumption*, namely a new social and cultural organization of the spaces where practices of consumption are to be found. Institutions and places such as the courts and their thirst for luxury, the urban environment in which luxury shops spread and the latest fashion was on display, and the development of the bourgeois household in which women were confined and reigned as consumers are prime elements of this new spatiality which put luxury into circulation (see Figure 1.2).

The absolutist *courts* have been indicated by many as fundamental in stimulating the desire for consumption, especially from the Renaissance onward (Burke 1993). For instance, the Canadian scholar Grant McCracken (1988) has maintained that the growth in consumption in the last quarter of the 16th century in England was linked to Elizabeth I's attempt to centralize her kingdom using, amongst other devices, the magnificence of courtly ceremony. To better control the nobility and to legitimize her power, Elizabeth was able not only to promote literary texts which smoothed the contradiction between her gender and her power, but also to attract nobles to court and to send them into a 'spiral of consumption': the nobles, who had previously spent with consideration for their rural communities and for future generations of their family, now became increasingly concerned with themselves and their immediate ability to keep up with the styles and extravagances of the courtly game.

When living in close proximity with their subordinates, the lifestyles and sheer possibilities of consumption of the noble classes had *directly influenced*, through bans and gifts, what the lower classes could consume. With the development of

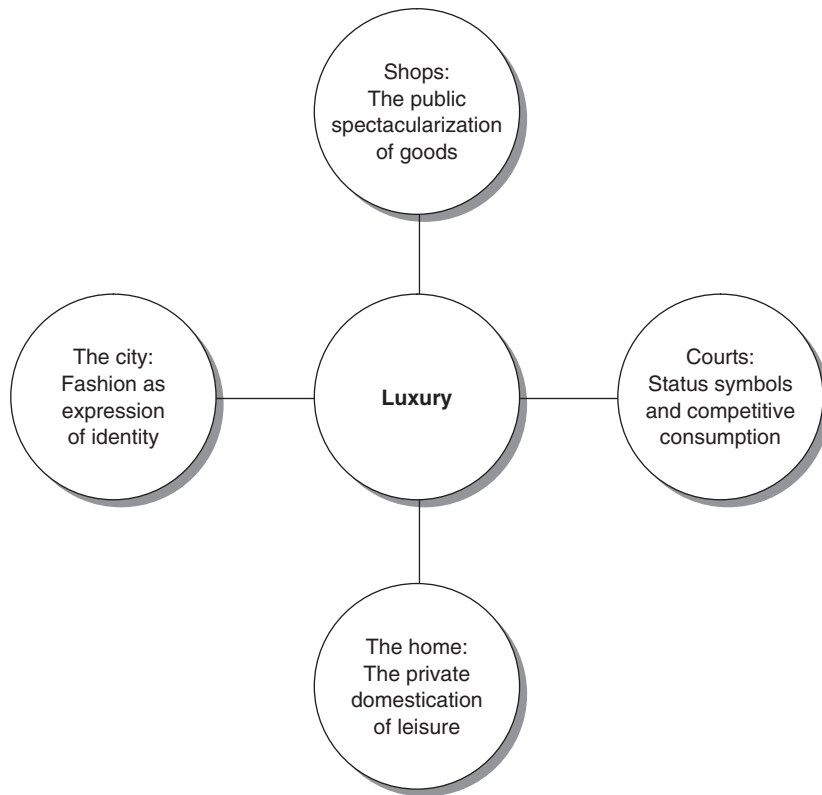


Figure 1.2 Luxury and the new spatiality of consumption

the court, its disentanglement from the wider society and its closure through competitive consumption, the noble classes started to exercise a *mediated influence* on the lower classes, notably through the mediation of an ever-growing industry for the shaping of tastes and fashions. This, in turn, contributed to further disentangle communities which favoured, yet again, the spreading of market-mediated tastes. While courts are now much less relevant, a similar mechanism is to be found in contemporary societies in other social strata. We may see the formation of a relatively close group of people competing for status using lifestyle and consumption in the mass media star system – which includes music, film and TV stars. We may also see that their styles and tastes reverberate outside their circles, influencing a variety of more or less distant social groupings especially through the mediation of a host of cultural goods and professions.

The courts also had a propulsive role because they found themselves at the centre of large modern *cities*, which acted as cultural amplifiers and were also huge concentrations of commerce. The urbanism which developed between the 17th and 19th centuries is undoubtedly connected to the development of capitalism, not only because – as a productivist view would have it – it enabled a high concentration of low-cost labour, but also because it favoured that close proximity and social mobility of different social groups which stimulated processes of

imitation, hybridization and opposition coupled with the spread of new non-essential goods. To be sure, the large commercial capitals of the 17th and 18th centuries, London in particular but also Amsterdam, worked as catalysts for consumer culture: here high finance converged with the arrival of masses of colonial riches from all over the world (Schama 1987). These were the cities in which the distribution of goods came to be radically modified, mostly through a liberalization of commerce from the corporations which had limited the types of goods on sale from circulating through generalized shops, keeping them bound to artisan workshops (Miller 1981). From the 18th century, with the introduction of larger and larger glass windows, street-fronts became window displays and began to be used as 'stages' where goods could be arranged in elaborate scenes as advertisements for themselves (Schivelbusch 1988). As Rudi Laermans (1993) observed, goods were no longer squirrelled away at the back of the shop where the seller could control their accessibility to and meaning for the public; they were transformed instead into a spectacle to attract clients. Increasingly, especially from the middle of the 19th century with artificial lighting of interiors and the increase in the size of glass plate, windows offered an opportunity to put goods on display for the public.

Consumers not only bought, but also learned to gain pleasure from the spectacularization of commodities, something which was amplified by the creation of covered commercial galleries or *passages* – from the first one in Paris, *Passage Feydeau* built as early as 1791, to London's famous *Piccadilly Arcade* built in 1810 to Milan's *Galleria Vittorio Emanuele* finished in 1878. Galleries were complemented by visual events of cultural, commercial and political importance such as the great world exhibitions of the second half of the 19th century. Wandering around enjoying the spectacle of the commodities became a celebrated pursuit for the refined sensibility of the *flâneur*, as the French poet Charles Baudelaire puts it in his well-known *Le peintre de la vie moderne*. The department stores of the 19th century – Harrods in London, Macy's in New York, the Bon Marché in Paris, to cite but a few – popularized this tendency, becoming important aspects of the urban environment. In fact, these department stores presented themselves as places to visit, as the apple-in-the-eye of their respective cities. The Bon Marché, for example, which was France's first department store, was constructed as if it was a monument open to tourists, just like a church or museum; thus it quickly established itself as an essential stop on tourist itineraries (Miller 1981). What changed then, beyond the functions of the seller and the mode of sale, was the characterization of commodities. As suggested, commodities were gradually reconfigured as a spectacle, which alone had to communicate to a public made up of increasingly fewer known clients and more and more anonymous consumers. These new forms of retail did not simply replace previous forms – such as farmers' market or high street boutiques – but went alongside them, forcing them to adapt to a new situation. In general, hand in hand with the *de-personalization of the sale relationship* went a *more personalized relationship with objects* and their meanings. This relationship was and still is guided by a host of culturally mediated principles of selection, such as those which can be found in the many magazines which give advice on lifestyles and consumption. Typically tailored to gendered audiences, such magazines help reduce the complexity of individual choice and ironically have become necessary to make appropriate, identity-marking purchases (Breward

1994; Jackson et al. 2001; Winship 1987). All in all, going shopping has increasingly become a playful activity, but to participate in it social actors have to acquire the serious cultural and economic tools which enable them to play suitably with commodities (see also Chapter 8).

As modernity became consolidated we find that even the consumption of luxuries, which had previously been a possibility for only the nobility with their extravagances, became disciplined under the system of *fashion*. In terms borrowed from Georg Simmel's (1971b, orig. 1904) celebrated observations, we may say that luxury consumption was socially regulated by fashion dynamics, and thus ended up reflecting and facilitating the divergent tendencies of capitalist material culture: standardization and diversification.⁵ The improvement in the possibilities for consumption of intermediate and lower social strata is accompanied by the standardization of needs, stimulated by urbanization, the development of communications and a huge growth in the availability of commodities, their variety and their rhythms of change. The democratisation of luxuries is thus both an effect *and* a cause of the capitalist organization of production which, as we have seen, can create a market for its products, beyond the unpredictable caprices of the rich, disciplining all consumers through some social mechanisms (fashion, style, design, etc.). These disciplining mechanisms are, as I shall show, ambivalent: as Simmel says, they allowed consumers to feel that they belonged to a particular group, while at the same time distinguishing themselves; they also, I shall add, allowed for individual identity, but provided the toolkit for its expression (see Chapters 3 and 7).

Simmel maintained that fashion is often associated with women and femininity. This association has clear historical and cultural roots: the historical weakness of their social position oriented women towards 'comparatively great uniformity' and fashion was instrumental in enabling them to express themselves through a shared language, becoming 'the valve through which a woman's craving for some measure of conspicuousness and individual prominence finds vent, when its satisfaction is denied her in other fields' (*ibid*, 309). Even more than what Simmel tells us, we shall see that *gender* is a social construction which shapes practices of consumption at the same time as it itself is constructed by such practices. As a gendered process, consumption is a site of power relations.

It was precisely while stressing power relations that Veblen (1994, orig. 1899, Chapters III and IV) pondered on the role given to women in the development of capitalism. In his opinion, the production/consumption divide which characterizes the development of the modern economy corresponds to the harmonization by difference of the sexes in the bourgeois family: the sphere of consumption – conceived of as shops, luxury goods, refined tastes, display and opulence – was reserved for women, confined to the role of consumer within the family and always subject to function as a status symbol for their husbands; the sphere of production with its sobriety was restricted to the male head of the family. Considering the urban industrialized US communities of the late 19th century, Veblen maintains that the display of riches, which had previously manifested itself in employing vast numbers of servants, was now transformed into a division of labour within the family. With the development of the bourgeois family the duties of consumption were to be fulfilled by wives, whereas it fell upon men to bring home as much money as possible. Women of the upper-middle classes became a

'subsidiary leisure class', whose delicate office was to perform 'vicarious' leisure and consumption, in the name of the household and its male head. It is no coincidence that one of the rhetorical critiques used to stigmatize consumer society associated consumption and luxury goods with the feminine, intended as superficiality and effeminacy, using this association to denounce the risks run by traditionally masculine civic virtues.⁶ Veblen (1994, 53) thus suggests that commercial culture mingled with the patriarchal tradition:

In a sense which has been greatly qualified in scope and rigor, but which has by no means lost its meaning even yet, this tradition says that the woman, being a chattel, should consume only what is necessary to her sustenance – except so far as her further consumption contributes to the comfort or the good repute of her master.

In this light, all the ambivalences of the role of upper middle-class women in promoting luxury consumption are revealed: theirs was perhaps a golden cage, which defined quite rigidly the duty and rights of women; a necessary luxury which needed continuous surveillance. Indeed, more broadly, consumption has often been constructed – to reinforce the complementarities of the sexes – as a mirror of the sphere of production, a private rather than public space, feminine rather than masculine, hedonistic rather than ascetic and, finally, frivolous rather than serious (Bordo 1993; Bowlby 1993; De Grazia and Furlough 1996) (see Chapter 8).

Even if women had always undertaken unpaid labour and still were, their efforts had to be masked now more than ever: in the house there were to be no signs of work, less still of the mechanization and bureaucratization which increasingly characterized production (Roberts 1998). The *home* has indeed typically been constructed as a private space where one doesn't work but consumes, even if consumption may take the rather disciplined format of bourgeois comfort (see Chapter 2). Especially from the beginning of the 19th century, the home provided a space for the domestication of consumption, it had to be a comfortable refuge from the pressures of work, a place where a man could at last express himself, comforted by a caring wife who had – above all else – a decorative function. As Adrian Forty (1986) suggests, the home came to be seen as a place of non-work also because of the aesthetic qualities of the goods which were fast becoming a part of the domestic environment. In the design of objects, reference to instrumentality had to be abolished, even if an object was entirely functional. This is the case with the domestic sewing-machines which spread widely between the 19th and 20th centuries and which literally brought work into the home. In order to be widely accepted, they had to be designed in such a way as to remove any industrial connotation. This is why Singer, one of the most well-known brands both then and now, produced light domestic machines, small and extremely refined, 'artistically' decorated in order to make them 'a beautiful ornament' for the boudoir. Only in this way could they remain in tune with the homely atmosphere and seem appropriately feminine. The ideals of respectable comfort and refined practical gentility were not only implicated in the construction of gender identities, but were also important features of the emerging middle-class cultural identity, at least in Great Britain (Kidd and Nicholls 1999). More broadly, the home has both been constructed as a private sphere of consumption as opposed to work, and idealized as a place of intimate, warm non-commercial relations

(Zelizer 2004b, see also Chapter 8). As such, it comes to complement public consumer spaces such as the department store, the café, the theatre, the cinema, the restaurant, etc. Just like these spaces though, the home provides a socially and culturally organized context for consumption (and work) which has been crucial in stabilizing the boundaries of economic rationalities such as gift-giving and gratuitous care, ostensibly expelled by commercial relations but strictly intertwined with commercialism in both the private and the public sphere. The spread of luxury goods and refined comforts was thus organized by a number of different spaces and institutions which, as I shall show in the next chapter, offered a complex architecture for the construction of economic value.

Summary

Contemporary historical research has revised the traditional wisdom which considered consumer culture as the late consequence of the industrial revolution emerging at the beginning of the 20th century. This *productivist* vision typically presented consumer culture and society as a sudden and mechanical reaction to the industrial revolution, reaching all social classes through the consumption of mass-produced goods. Recent literature considers that *consumption has had an active role* in the development of capitalism. Authors such as **Neil McKendrick**, **Colin Campbell** and **Jan De Vries** have proposed *anti-productivist explanations* foregrounding factors such as *promotional techniques*, *hedonistic ethics* and *commerce*. Looking at 18th century England and 17th century Holland, these authors show that there were significant historical trends contributing to the development of new patterns of consumption and new attitudes towards the use and enjoyment of goods well before the advent of the industrial revolution. Today historians, sociologists and anthropologists tend to favour *multi-factor explanations* of the genesis and development of the so-called consumer society. They have abandoned a linear model of development in favour of an understanding of the *multiple geographies and temporalities* of a variety of consumer goods and values. The classic work of sociologist **Werner Sombart** has anticipated this perspective, providing a study of the rise of luxury consumption since the late medieval period. He considered the *luxury goods* and the *colonial commodities* which, together with new *values* and *social relations*, contributed to the emergence of a new way of life. These goods and relations were pivotal for a variety of *spaces and institutions* which have worked, since at least the 17th century, as engines for the rise of consumer culture. These spaces range from the absolutist *court* with its competitive merry-go-round of fashions, to large commercial *cities* with their capacity to spread and make visible elite lifestyles, to the development of pleasurable and refined *shopping places*, to the bourgeois *home* with its emphasis on decent comfort and polite refinement.

Notes

1 This may be derived also from studies of proto-industrialization: see, for example, Jones (1968) and Mendels (1981).

2 Mike Featherstone (1991) has suggested that what characterizes post-modern society is the fact that not only the artistic elite but also consumers are *hedonistic experimenters* who have learned to aestheticise consumption. In fact, forms of controlled hedonism (through aestheticisation, irony, etc.) have developed as one of the key rhetorical codes for the legitimization of a number of practices of consumption (see Chapter 7).

3 This can also have perverse effects. For instance, kleptomania is a phenomenon which mostly concerns middle-class women (Abelson 1989) and its whose social roots have recently been underlined even by psychotherapeutic studies (Baker 2000).

4 More recently Colin Campbell (1994) developed a critique of Veblen similar to that which can be derived from Sombart's views. Comparing Veblen's theory of motivations with that of Weber, Campbell draws on Wright Mills's views of agency and maintains that subjective motives should not be seen as universal psychological drives, but as vocabularies which allow people to claim that what they do is not only their desire, but also a fair and moral desire.

5 Simmel's analysis appeared in *The American Review of Sociology* and circulated widely among contemporary scholars. It differs from Sombart's: Simmel was preoccupied with considering the relationship between fashion, modern identity, the attribution of value and processes of identification/dis-identification, brushing over the means of production and of commercialization that Sombart, in a more Marxian fashion, puts centre stage. On Simmel's observations on fashion see, amongst others, Gronow (1997); Nedelmann (1991); McCracken (1988) and Sassatelli (2000b).

6 Some studies, including those by Frank Mort (1996) and Sean Nixon (1996), have shown that today masculine identity is constantly engaged and challenged by 'superfluous' and 'frivolous' commodities, by shopping as entertainment and by visual codes that cross genders. Furthermore, the model of the 'female' 'glossy' magazine covering consumption, health and beauty, which had a key role in linking femininity with luxury consumption, has now been extended to the male public, as the success of magazines like *Men's Health* demonstrates (Jackson et al. 2001). On the other hand masculinity is increasingly represented as an 'object' of desire in commercial images (Savage 1997). See also Chapter 6.