

# *The* **SOCIOLOGY** *of* **CONSUMPTION**



**Peter Corrigan**

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# The Sociology of Consumption

*An Introduction*

Peter Corrigan



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# **The Sociology of Consumption**



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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
1 Introduction: Advents of the Consuming Society	1
2 Theoretical Approaches to Consumption	17
3 Objects, Commodities and Non-commodities	33
4 Shops and Shopping: the Department Store	50
5 Advertising	66
6 Women's Magazines	81
7 The Home	96
8 Food and Drink	115
9 Tourism	132
10 The Body	147
11 Clothing and Fashion	161
12 Conclusion	177
<i>References</i>	183
<i>Index</i>	189

# 1

## Introduction: Advents of the Consuming Society

O, wonder!  
How many worldly goods are there here!  
How beauteous commodities are! O brave new world  
That has such consumers in't!

– Miranda Postmodern

Although consumption takes place in all human cultures, it is only in the present century that consumption on a truly mass scale has begun to appear as a foundational, rather than merely epiphenomenal, characteristic of society. Where there is subsistence production, there will be subsistence consumption: all that is produced is consumed without remainder, and such items as food and clothing appear entirely plain and functional. It is unlikely, however, that such a minimalist society could exist under anything other than extreme conditions. Production generally implies more than subsistence, and the question of a surplus to be distributed has been rather a contentious one in class societies. Production here becomes subsistence for some but the source of consumptionist pleasures for others, and the reader may recall Marx's outrage at this fact in his writings on alienation (Marx, 1975 [1844]). But now the majority of the populace have access to the ever-growing consumerist fruits of the productivist tree, and so perhaps it is time to stand Marx on his head and claim that consumption, and not production, is the central motor of contemporary society. Competition among status groups, which, according to Weber (1948), are organized around modes of consumption, now seems of more import than struggle among classes, which, according to Marx, are organized around modes of production.

This book begins with a look at the rise of consumption over the last few centuries and its development into an increasingly important component of the ways in which we live our daily lives. The second chapter switches attention away from historical developments towards the more abstract sociological approaches which have tried to make theoretical sense of consumption and consumer practices. The remaining chapters take a detailed look at various specific areas of consumption.

Students of sociology will be familiar with the notion of the Great Transformation, which refers to the large number of economic, political and social changes that accompanied the process of capitalist industrialization in nineteenth-century Europe (Lee and Newby, 1983: 26–39). So if one asks



sociologists to locate the beginnings of industrial society, they will probably have no real difficulty in assigning them to the first part of the nineteenth century, or possibly slightly earlier. But if one asks sociologists to locate the beginnings of consumer society, one may get a few puzzled looks. Many may be tempted to go no further back than the aftermath of the Second World War, when the Marshall Plan helped rebuild Europe and an economic boom lasting a quarter of a century ensured that social classes that previously could never have hoped to accumulate much suddenly began to have access to all sorts of goods their parents never could have imagined. The period here, then, would be the 1950s. But it would be a mistake to assume that consumption had no important role to play before then. Grant McCracken (1988) maintains that the first Elizabeth's insistence that nobles attend at court led inevitably to competition among them to be noticed, and modes of consumption were an ideal way of catching attention. As nobles jostled for position, the consumptionist weapons they used became increasingly subtle and complex, and a class of people began to form that wanted goods different in kind, and not merely in measure, to those desired by subordinate classes. Distinctions could now be indicated through the types of goods consumed. By the eighteenth century, more than just courtiers were engaged in social competition, and so there was a ready market for the great expansion in the availability of consumer goods: "luxuries" came to be seen as mere "decencies", and "decencies" came to be seen as "necessities" (McKendrick et al., 1982: 1).

Campbell (1983, 1987) provocatively argues that the industrial revolution necessarily entailed a *simultaneous* revolution in production and consumption: just as making money came to be seen as an end in itself, so consumption of goods came to be seen as an end in itself, and both of these represent breaks from tradition. In traditional societies, particular patterns of 'proper' consumption could be learned, but in modern societies a general orientation to consuming is acquired. Campbell contends that, just as the Protestant ethic provided the spirit of production, Romanticism, with its cult of the expressive individual, was central in providing the spirit of consumption. If the working classes were fundamental to the development of production, readers of novels were fundamental to the development of consumption.

### **Consumption springs from politics: the court of Elizabeth I**

Grant McCracken (1988) notes two particularly important moments in the expansion of consumerism in Europe: a consumer boom in Elizabethan England, and an eighteenth-century explosion in the fashionable use of consumer objects such as pottery (Josiah Wedgwood is an important figure here).

Why was there a consumer boom in England in the last quarter of the sixteenth century? Where did this desire to consume come from? McCracken

locates it squarely in the attempt by Elizabeth I to centralize her realm. Consumption here flows from the political sphere and not from the desires of the isolated individuals familiar to economic theory. It may seem a little strange to claim that consumption was an instrument of Elizabethan rule – how could this work? Firstly, argues McCracken, the court was to become a splendid theatre of ceremonial and spectacle which would show the world that Elizabeth's rule was indeed splendid. But splendour for its own sake was not the point, for splendour is perhaps the theatrical form of political intimacy. It is also very expensive, and Elizabeth managed rather cleverly to get the nobility to foot part of the bill. In order to do this, she had first to get them to come to court. Up to this time, the nobility could quite happily spend their days in their country seats, receiving their share of royal goods and favours through various intermediaries. Elizabeth put an end to this, and insisted that everything come directly from her and not through go-betweens. As a result, the nobility had to come down to London and press their case directly before the queen – and if they wanted to get what they desired, they had to take part in the ceremony and theatre of the court. This, of course, was enormously expensive, and thus the nobility became even more dependent upon royal largesse. So Elizabeth not only managed to proclaim her power through the magnificence of ceremony, but she also managed to get the nobles to pay for part of this (McCracken, G., 1988: 11–12).

The second factor is closely related to the first, and concerns the new position of the nobleman. At home in the country, he was indisputably at the top of the local hierarchy and was duly treated as such. At court, however, he was just one nobleman among others. One can easily see the problem these poor fellows faced: how to get the queen to notice them, how to stand out in a crowd. They were driven to further expenditure above and beyond what the queen expected for her ceremonies of royal power, as they wore more magnificent clothes than the next, gave better feasts and more gifts, perhaps built better town houses. In McCracken's words, the nobleman was 'drawn into a riot of consumption' (1988: 12).

Now none of this might matter very much if it had no consequences beyond the immediate bounds of the court – but McCracken shows that it did have broader consequences, consequences on both the form of the family and the form of local communities. Family consumption at this period was not limited to the nuclear core, as would generally be the case today. Rather, goods were purchased with a view to establishing the honour and prestige of the family across a number of generations. One used the goods of an earlier generation to capture and continue their honour, and one bought new goods with a view to increasing the honour both of one's present family and of one's descendants. But the nobleman newly decamped to London was, as we have seen, forced to spend vast sums of money in order merely to survive, let alone prosper, in the competitive consumer hothouse of the court. As a result, he began to spend less for the generation-spanning family and more on himself for the necessities

of the here-and-now: instead of the family as basic unit of consumption, the individual became the consuming unit. This notion of the here-and-now is also important, for it marks a break with older valuations of time and the rise to prominence of a new temporal principle. Under the old system where goods were bought for transgenerational family honour, the longer the goods remained in the family the more honourable they became (McCracken, G., 1988: 13). Under the new system of social competition at court, no one had the time to hang around and wait for goods to get older and thus accrue honour and prestige. The old system was turned upside down: it was not the family heirloom with its accumulation of ancient honours that counted, but the new, the up-to-date, and the different. We see here the birth of one of the most important phenomena in all of consumerdom: fashion.

What of the consequences for the local community? It was mentioned above that the nobleman was at the top of the hierarchy in his local area and this meant, among other things, that he was the main channel through which outside resources came into the community. It was through his offices, good or otherwise, that wealth was spread about a little more widely (McCracken, G., 1988: 14). We should not think that the nobleman kept everything for himself and his family, for the concept of *noblesse oblige* meant that he also had duties and responsibilities towards others. But now he was down in London, trying to catch Elizabeth's eye through spending money as if it was going out of fashion – although, of course, spending money was what allowed him to remain *in* fashion in the first place. Clearly, a lot less money was going to find its way back to the local community under these circumstances. Before Elizabeth's clever plan, the nobleman's subordinates would expect that goods would eventually trickle their way down towards them, but this particular warbling brook of wealth was now blocked. If the nobles and their subordinates once lived in much the same conceptual universe of consumption (that is, they more or less agreed on the sorts of goods that were relevant and valuable), they now began to live in quite different conceptual universes – what the noble got up to at court must have seemed very odd indeed to the folks back home. Here, then, we find the beginnings of the division of the world into different consuming universes, a division that has multiplied many times in our own world. As the noble was at home much less often, there was also a growing social distance between the two worlds (McCracken, G., 1988: 14–15).

Despite all of this, McCracken maintains that the nobles still influenced the consumption patterns of their subordinates, although to perhaps a lesser degree than earlier. After all, society was still very hierarchical in the sixteenth century and ruling royal heads had not yet begun to be axed, so the idea that different and more frequently changing modes of consumption were possible began to spread over the social spectrum, preparing various strata, mentally at least, for a new way of living in the world.

**From the old to the new: McCracken's account of the end of patina**

Consider the following: Rich person A – 'I'm fed up having all this money, it causes more problems than it's worth. I'd like to give it all away.' Rich person B – 'But you've had it for such a short time!' Now most of us would probably interpret B's utterance as a put-down: old money sneering at the pretensions of the new. But surely, you might argue, money is just money: anyone's money is the same as anybody else's – \$10 million of old money is worth the same as \$10 million of newly acquired wealth. At the risk of offending economists, logicians and mathematicians, we may say that no, X dollars is not the same as X dollars. Why do we make a distinction between old and new money? Old money proves that a family has been successful over several generations, that it has known how to live in a properly rich manner over time and has not lost its wealth. It is secure in itself, and derives high social status from being considered almost naturally rich. These people just *are* rich – it seems to be in the nature of things. Nobody questions their wealth, for their claims to high status appear perfectly legitimate. For the Elizabethans, it took five generations of riches before a wealthy family could be considered 'gentle' (McCracken, G., 1988: 38). New money, however, lacks a track record: it could be gone in six months or a year and could simply be a freakish occurrence. One could put no long-term trust in these people, and the ways they made their money may still be highly visible. They have not yet acquired the fixity of apparent laws of nature and thus their claims to high social status may be built upon shifting sands.

This contrast between old wealth and new wealth is perhaps one of the few surviving forms of a more general process of old/new distinctions that governed social status claims in the period before fashion became dominant. Instead of talking in terms of money, McCracken (1988: 32) talks in terms of the objects of material culture – furniture, cutlery, buildings and the like. These functioned as a means of claiming that social status was legitimate, and they did this by showing signs of age. The more bashed about they looked, the higher in social value they became. They took on a new surface thanks to the knocks they experienced as part of long-term existence, and this new surface was known as patina. Patina showed that the family had owned these objects over a long period and so, as McCracken (1988: 32) puts it, served as a kind of visual proof of status. An expensive plate with no signs of age may prove that one has money, but it says nothing about how good one's family is. Patina was proof against those who wanted to pass as legitimate members of the upper classes without any of the 'proper' claims – it was a defence against money that was new and lacked proper 'breeding'. Patina protected against pretenders.

McCracken considers several ways in which these pretenders to social status could be unmasked and kept at bay, but they all have disadvantages compared to patina. A rather crude approach can be seen in the case of sumptuary laws. These prescribed the proper attire for persons of different

social strata, and it was an offence to dress above one's station. For example, only a knight might be allowed to wear fur, or members of different strata might have rights to wear different numbers of colours or different amounts of material. Sumptuary laws were to be found all over Europe, and here are two instances from my own country. An old Irish law used colour in an attempt to make an exact correspondence between social rank position and external appearance:

The Peasantry and Soldiers were to wear garments of one colour; – military officers and private Gentlemen, of two; – Commanders of battalions, of three; – Beatachs, Buighnibbs, or Keepers of houses of hospitality, of four; the principal Nobility and Knights, of five; the Ollamhs and dignified Bards, of six; and the Kings and Princes of the blood, of seven. (Walker, 1788: 16)

According to an Act of Parliament at Dublin in 1541, noblemen, vassals, grooms and labourers could wear shirts containing respectively 20, 18, 12 and 10 cubits of linen cloth (McClintock, 1943: 67). These laws were hard to enforce, however, and few paid attention to them. Nobody could really be sure whether somebody was dressing above their station or not if external appearance was all they could go on – unless of course they knew the person in the first place. If anything, sumptuary laws might make deception easier, because they were very explicit about what each rank was entitled to wear.

Another way of rapidly detecting pretenders to status is through what McCracken calls the 'invisible ink' strategy. Here, groups make knowledge of certain things central to belonging to that group. So if you want to join a gang but say you like the 'wrong' singer, or painter or novelist, or wear the 'wrong' make of shoes, then you simply cannot belong. This strategy is particularly effective if you do not know what the 'correct' singer, painter or novelist would be in the first place. This sort of knowledge must remain secret to the in-group if it is to function properly as a rampart against unsuitable outsiders who want to become insiders. McCracken maintains that this really only works for closely organized groups with a steady membership, and so is not entirely suitable to a rapidly changing world. Nevertheless, I think many of us in situations such as a job interview would worry about saying the 'right' sorts of things that show we really are 'one of them' and would fit in, but job applicants often do not really know what an interview panel requires beyond the obvious things like qualifications. I recall a long job interview that included candidates taking lunch with the panel. One of the latter remarked to me afterwards that that part of the day was known as 'trial by knife and fork'. He was more than half serious, as table manners seemed to join academic qualifications as a way of selecting a candidate. So the 'invisible ink' strategy may not be as outmoded as McCracken seems to think.

Status may also derive from particular sorts of honours or coats of arms and the like (McCracken, G., 1988: 34). Here such honours are granted by a particular authority, but that authority may find it hard to take such

honours back. The disadvantage here, then, is that such honours may not accurately reflect the current state of play in the great game of social status.

Patina overcomes the problems in the above approaches while retaining many of their advantages, which is why it was so important in pre-fashion societies. Patina immediately shows that wealth is old; lack of patina shows that it is new. Where sumptuary legislation depended upon the state to enforce the law, here the local social actor can detect fraud. The 'invisible ink' strategy may also be retained, for those with wealth of long standing may have quite a sophisticated understanding of the nuances of patina, nuances that remain hidden to more recent gainers of riches (McCracken, 1988: 35). Patina may also be quite an up-to-date indicator of status, for previously rich families may be forced to sell their valuable items – it is not the loss of the items themselves that matters so much as the loss of the legitimizing patina that has accrued over the years. With less and less patina-based proof of social status, claims become less and less legitimate (McCracken, G., 1988: 35).

The advent of fashion displaced patina from the central status-control function it fulfilled for so long. Out with the old, in with the new. This, according to McCracken, had several consequences. Firstly, it meant that old wealth could no longer be distinguished from new in many areas of consumption – if you could afford it, you could have it. Secondly, lower classes could imitate upper classes much more closely now that signs of newness rather than signs of age were what mattered – we get what McCracken calls 'an explosion of imitative behaviour on the part of low-standing consumers' (1988: 40). Thirdly, to reiterate a point made above, lower-class imitation led the upper classes to differentiate themselves again, only to be imitated again, and then differentiate themselves once more, then be imitated again, then yet again differentiate themselves – and so on without any apparent limit. Patina today, argues McCracken (1988: 42), is important only to the super-rich. The rest of us are caught up in the status competition based

Table 1.1 *Patina versus fashion*

Patina	Fashion
Favours 'old' money	Favours 'new' money
Proves that wealth stretches across generations, hence: establishes historically grounded legitimacy and prestige beyond current moment	Shows that wealth at least exists here and now, hence: establishes 'punctual' legitimacy and prestige valid only for the moment
Is difficult for competing classes to emulate	Is easier for competing classes to emulate
Provides relatively low impulse to the expansion of consumerism across social classes	Provides relatively high impulse to the expansion of consumerism across social classes
Today is a strategy for demonstrating social prestige suited only to the super-rich	Today is a strategy for demonstrating social prestige suited to all except the super-rich

Source: based on McCracken, G., 1988

around the fashion process. The relations between patina and fashion are summarized in Table 1.1.

### **Consumption springs from economics: eighteenth-century England**

The economic prosperity of England in the eighteenth century opened up the world of fashionable goods to ever more social classes, and it is at this historical point that McKendrick et al. (1982) locate the beginnings of consumer society. The springs of consumption appear to be quite different to the political ones of Elizabeth, and are to be found in economics. As McKendrick suggests, 'the consumer revolution was the necessary analogue to the industrial revolution, the necessary convulsion on the demand side of the equation to match the convulsion on the supply side' (1982: 9). Here we have the beginnings of *mass* consumption as opposed to the *elite* consumption of McCracken's sixteenth century. It took until the late eighteenth century for the idea of consumption as a motor force of the economy to be accepted: 'as the growth of new wants stimulated increased effort and output, improved consumption by all ranks of society would further stimulate economic progress' (McKendrick et al., 1982: 19).

Compared to other European societies of the time, England was unusual because of the relative closeness of social ranks, a closeness that made transitions between ranks easier to achieve than elsewhere (McKendrick et al., 1982: 20). The goods at one's disposal were a convenient index of one's social standing, and of course obtaining the goods associated with a higher stratum was a convenient way of publicly (pro)claiming rank. This appears to have been a realizable goal for many in the England of the period, if not elsewhere in Europe, and so the closeness of the ranks and the possibility of mobility may have facilitated the growth of emulative consumer expenditure. With entire families employed in certain growth sectors, even parts of the working class were propelled into the class of consumers at this period. McKendrick et al. (1982: 23) point out that with many women employed there was also bound to be a demand for those goods that women would once have produced in the home but that could now be supplied by manufacturers. Furthermore, 'With women having command of earnings of their own and access to a greater total family income, one would expect a greater demand for goods dominated by female consumer choice – clothes, curtains, linens, pottery, cutlery, furniture, brass and copper for the home; buckles, buttons and fashion accessories for the person' (McKendrick et al., 1982: 23). Sociological analysis may have had a tendency to ignore the importance of such apparently 'small' things in the past, but we can see that they loom large in both the economy and everyday life: huge fortunes could be made from such small things, and women had more opportunity to create home and personal surroundings suiting their own designs. It may be that female consumer demand played a considerably more important role in the advent

of industrial society than has hitherto been suspected, but further research would be required to establish this.

If having the socially 'correct' goods would grant one social status, and if 'correctness' was still set by the upper classes, then classes lower in the hierarchy would imitate as best they could the consumption patterns of the higher classes who, of course, would then change just to make sure a difference was retained. The upper classes made fashion for themselves or followed the court – but what if the tastes of the upper classes could be influenced by something outside of this? Here is where marketing and advertising begin to enter the consumptionist picture. Josiah Wedgwood, owner of Wedgwood potteries in north Staffordshire, deliberately tried to direct upper-class taste through these means, hoping that success here would mean that lower social classes would also begin scrambling for his pottery to prove their good breeding and refinement. In his own words, 'do in this as we have done in other things – begin at the *Head* first, & then proceed to the inferior members'; 'Few ladies, you know, dare venture at anything out of the common stile [*sic*] 'till authoris'd by their betters – by the Ladies of superior spirit who set the ton' (quoted in McKendrick et al., 1982: 110, 112). McKendrick et al. (1982: 100–45) show just how spectacularly successful Wedgwood's approach was.

Other items were also subject to these new attempts to mould taste through the spread of advertising and marketing. The important point to note here is that the hold of local and traditional ways of consuming was being loosened by the extra-local and new ways that were being promoted by all sorts of magazines and salespeople that found their way across the English provinces. Fashion began to draw more and more goods into its mighty maw, and the use-value of an object began to become less important than its fashion value: if it ain't broke, throw it out anyway – we would not be seen dead using it now, for we would lose the social status fashionable goods give us. This, historically, is a new way of looking at goods. Fashion meant repeated purchases of goods, a very desirable state of affairs indeed from the point of view of manufacturers. So fashion affected both more and more goods and more and more social classes: the eighteenth century, then, saw the beginnings of *mass* consumption, as opposed to the elite consumption characterizing Elizabeth's court.

### **Consumption springs from the heart: Romanticism and the consumer ethic**

As interesting and convincing as McCracken's account of the rise of consumption is, he does not really try to get under the skin of the consumer. He remains at the level of political life and status competition. Colin Campbell, however, tries to understand why consumers actually consume in the way they do in a more 'idealist' way. Just as Weber tried to complement Marxist approaches to production by studying developments at the level of



ideas (certain forms of Protestantism) rather than at the level of historical materialism, so Campbell tries to approach consumption by exploring the possibility that there might be an ethic of consumption based on particular sorts of ideas of the person. Weber, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1976 [1904]), provided powerful evidence of the role of ascetic Protestantism in the development of an ethic that led to ever more production and accumulation as a duty to God, as an end in itself. He did not discuss consumption in this context. Campbell wants to know if it is possible to argue that consumption also became an ethic, an end in itself, and if so, how? If Weber found an ethic leading to the accumulation of capital for the greater glory of God, can Campbell discover an ethic leading to consumption for the greater glory of ... what exactly? The individual human person, as it turns out.

A point common to modern production and consumption lies in the fact that they both represent breaks with tradition. What sort of tradition does consumption break with? Traditional consumption is quite fixed: there is a finite number of needs to be filled, and the only wants and desires anyone might have would relate quite directly to this rather narrow sphere. Just as Weber's traditional peasants would regard anyone who worked for more than normal fixed subsistence as rather strange and possibly dangerous to their whole way of life (and they were right), so the traditional consumer would regard with alarm anyone who consumed outside the boundaries sanctified by tradition. Today, of course, matters seem to be reversed – the modern consumer considers with alarm anyone who does not want to consume more and more, who does not seem to be interested in new wants and desires. We've come a long way.

Let us deepen the contrast between traditional and modern consumption. Campbell (1983: 281) argues that the fixity of traditional societies meant that one could learn the actual patterns of consumption – there was quite a limited number of things that entered into the consumer consciousness, and so one could learn the proper modes of consuming relatively easily. But in modern societies a general orientation to consuming is required – what may be consumed is not fixed in number or kind, and may be undergoing rapid change. It is not so much that we desire very particular things, although of course we might sometimes, it is rather that we want to want, we desire to desire, and we want new and different things in an endless pattern of discontent (Campbell, 1983: 282). This wanting and desiring is a process separate from the actual concrete things that might be desired, and is, in fact, a generalized mode of being. As Campbell (1983: 282) puts it, 'The crucial feature of the role of the modern consumer is the primary obligation to want to want under all circumstances and at all times irrespective of what goods and services are actually acquired or consumed.' He further points out that this has nothing to do with human psychology as such (that is, there is no innate disposition to want to want), but has to do with a particular form of civilization. This form of civilization is industrial civilization, which split production and consumption apart in a way unknown to societies marked