



# ACKNOWLEDGING CONSUMPTION

*A Review of New Studies*

*Edited by Daniel Miller*



London and New York

# ACKNOWLEDGING CONSUMPTION

Today, parents, public transport users, hospital patients, everyone, is being called a 'consumer'. The term seems to have taken over political and economic debate. Yet only very recently have the social sciences woken up to the significance of these changes.

*Acknowledging Consumption* is a survey of the enormous number of writings on consumption produced over the last decade and demonstrates that the study of consumption is no academic bandwagon, but rather a belated acknowledgement of a fundamental transformation in the world.

This is an interdisciplinary project which provides new theories and critical analyses with contributions from the leading researchers in the field. There are chapters on consumption studies in anthropology, consumer behaviour, economics, geography, history, media studies, psychology and sociology.

This volume will provide the first substantive textbook on consumption studies. Each subject area includes a review of the literature, a general assessment of the impact of the new work on discipline as a whole, and ends with case studies exemplifying recent trends. It will be invaluable for students of consumption, students of the many disciplines covered in this book, and anyone interested in consumption.

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First published 1995  
by Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Reprinted 1996

Editorial material © 1995 Daniel Miller; individual chapters  
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Typeset in Stoodleigh, Devon by Florencetype Ltd., Stoodleigh, Devon  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by T J Press, Padstow, Cornwall

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Acknowledging consumption / edited by Daniel Miller.

p. cm. – (Material cultures)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Consumption (Economics) I. Miller, Daniel

II. Series.

HB820.A25 1995

339.4'7-dc20 94-37293

ISBN 0-415-10688-5 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-10689-3 (pbk)

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# CONSUMPTION AS THE VANGUARD OF HISTORY

A Polemic by Way of an Introduction<sup>1</sup>

*Daniel Miller*

of consumption  
in history

## THE CONSUMER AS GLOBAL DICTATOR

This introduction examines the evidence presented in the subsequent chapters that there has been a considerable and relatively sudden expansion of interest in the topic of consumption throughout the social sciences. I shall argue that this is not merely one more topic to be added to various subdisciplines or bandwagons of academic concern. Rather it is a remarkably delayed acknowledgement of social and economic transformations at a global level that had previously suffered from extraordinary academic neglect. My argument is that consumption has become the vanguard of history and that there are clear reasons why the social sciences should previously have failed to acknowledge this development. The remaining chapters provide the evidence that they are now starting to address the consequences of these changes through developing the required perspectives and research. The introduction is intended as an explicit return to the 'grand narrative' tradition, which ironically has become most derided just as the moment when it has become most authentic to history as global-local articulation.

The subsequent chapters provide much of the evidence to support such a strong statement. Although addressing a variety of disciplines, each with its own historical trajectory, what is striking in their juxtaposition within this volume is that the study of consumption does not seem to represent merely an additional accretion – an extra topic to add to a list of previous concerns. Rather, in many cases the topic of consumption seems to present a fundamental challenge to the basic premises that have sustained each discipline up to the present. That this should happen in a single discipline might call for little further comment, but that there seems to be emerging evidence for an 'across the board' sea-change suggests something rather more fundamental with regard to the significance of consumption itself. Such studies may not only cause us to rethink our conception of consumption but also point to the need for a radical rethinking of areas of already acknowledged importance such as economics and politics.

At first the significance of the new study of consumption seems to arise almost fortuitously out of particular histories of particular disciplines. Fine shows how neoclassical economics has used tautology and subterfuge to deny the presence of a consumer that would destroy its key premises, while even the more promising approaches from political economy are still radically challenged by a clear focus upon consumption. Campbell argues that what seemed to be merely a pendulum swing away from productionist interests in sociology is actually a more profound questioning of the presumptions of the discipline as a whole. For psychology, Lunt suggests a similar potential but for now this remains only a 'pollutant' upon the purity of established psychology. Perhaps most surprising is Belk's argument that even marketing studies has only within the last decade started to repudiate formally an unholy mixture of economics and psychoanalysis in order to acknowledge consumers, replete with the complex social relations within which they practise actual consumption.

We can see therefore that each discipline has its own specific grounds for viewing these new studies as of particular importance. But in a sense this begs a larger set of questions. Why should anthropology have previously been so ensconced in this romantic antipathy to the world of goods? Why should economics have succeeded for so long as an ideological abstraction based on quite bizarre models of how social beings actually act in the world? Why have we been so ready to accept premises and beliefs that, once put under the perspective of consumption, come to look so patently absurd? In particular, why should this be so within academic disciplines that are supposed to have been more self-critical than mere colloquial discourse?

The answer I believe lies in the hegemonic control by two major political ideologies conventionally termed the 'right' and the 'left', which first defined themselves by mutual opposition but second combine in their opposition to the notion of consumption as a political activity. These ideologies developed through the cold war oppositions between socialist and market economies. But they are more than political parties. They have emerged as the paradigmatic dimension upon which are clustered most 'opinions' held by modern populations with regard to anything from political preference to general orientation and behaviour. Defining themselves largely by opposition, the right and the left were thereby enabled to act for many decades as relatively abstracted theoretical structures increasingly protected from their consequences for the daily life of mass populations. This situation has recently changed and the rise of an explicit concern with consumption is symptomatic of this change.

I want to argue that the key to the prior political consensus by opposition and its protection from global realities was the rise to power of one particular academic discipline which attempted, where possible, to shift the world in the direction of increasing compliance with its abstract models. In short, modern politics has become a mere dependant of modern

economics. What both resisted was historical change that threatens to make them increasingly impotent against the power of modern consumption processes. We are all brought up within the subsequent ideologies and it is therefore extremely difficult for us, as also for politicians, to acknowledge the degree to which economic instruments such as the International Monetary Fund and political parties of left and right are increasingly the agents, not of international capitalists so much as of international shopping. Both politicians and economists are, of course, having to rethink their roles in terms of global change. Thanks to the development of electronic communications, this is itself not mere pretension. Both in the financial centres, such as stock markets, and also in ordinary living rooms, computer screens and television may make global events closer to 'home' than neighbourhood events (e.g. Morley 1992: 270-289).

Occasionally, however, there are also meetings when in effect 'the globe' delegates individuals to negotiate political and economic interests in a forum which comes closer to the traditions of 'face to face' encounters. One such example was the conference in Rio in 1992, which was largely concerned with environmental change and development. Many anecdotes abound about this conference, but one is of particular importance for the present topic. Not long before the conference it is said that various Third World countries requested that the topic of First World consumption be placed high on the agenda. The reasons for this request were evident enough to those who made it. From their perspective, on the periphery of the world economy, they were often subject to the clear and unmitigated consequences of certain economic shifts that are much more muddled and confused when they occur in the metropolitan core. The change in one commodity price such as bananas or Bauxite can spell the difference between poverty and fortune for many such countries. In earlier periods producers knew little as to the forces that created shifts in such demand. A famine might arise in eighteenth-century India because a fashion for calico in Europe persuaded many peasants to give up growing food in preference for either growing more cotton or taking to weaving. When that fashion changed, for no apparent reason, the peasant starved.

Today, however, the links between First World 'taste' and Third World suffering are understood by the producing nations and it has become evident that increasingly their destiny has become, in effect, a secondary effect of shifts in First World consumption patterns. Furthermore it was also the unspoken premise to both First and Third World delegates at Rio that First World consumption was the primary problem with respect to those environmental issues that were the official focus of concern. First World consumption was not, however, discussed in Rio and according to the anecdote (pers. comm. Desmond McNeil) there was an informal agreement that the Third World would not raise this as an issue if reciprocally the First World did not raise the issue of population control.

When First World consumption does inevitably come on the agenda, it will expose one of the most severe problems of the contemporary world, which is an increasing deficit in the concept of democratic politics. Officially, politics in democratic societies is the supreme exercise of the sovereign will of the mass population through the ballot box. This creates every few years a rise to consciousness and responsibility among the population as to a crucial decision, the consequences of which they must live with for the next period of history (hence the common post-election car sticker 'Don't blame me, I didn't vote for them'). This then is the decision whose consequences are evident, the moment in which the population is itself politicised. In Trinidad (and I suspect elsewhere) there is a joke that makes the rounds at wedding receptions in which the best man notes that the wife will make all the unimportant decisions, such as the household budget, the children's schooling etc., while the husband will make the important decision, as to who will win the next election. To varying degrees in most democratic countries there is a similar division of 'significance' between the properly politicised and the daily mundane world, and this is very commonly based also on a conception of gender differentiation.

The truth of this joke lies in the burden of responsibility taken by the housewife in everyday decision-making with regard to the use of household income on household expenditure. It is evident to all that most such decisions are in themselves trivial: the choice between two brands of the same product or between a cosmetic and a household cleaner. This hardly seems to bear the same weight as a change in government and anyway is generally regarded as merely the tail-end of capitalist strategic planning for profitability. This particular tail, however, is increasingly wagging the dog. As capitalism has become more sophisticated, it has harnessed the new forms of communication and driven deeper into competitive commoditisation of ever more niches of ordinary life. In the major supermarket chains of First World countries, for example, the display consists of an extraordinary range of food and non-food items. The aggregate decisions of housewives are relayed on a daily basis as the nature of demand. The supermarkets themselves have been pushed towards a relatively low percentage of profit extraction. Indeed, bulk-buying warehouses such as Cost-Co are likely to drive profit margins in Britain still lower: while in the United States the success of these out-of-town warehouses which are developing for each product range is credited with the relatively cheap prices of goods compared to Europe. Such margins are acceptable since, given the high volume of sales, the final profits can be impressive. Although each chain attempts to tempt customers with innovations and strategic plans, in general it is both economies of scale and the speed by which they can respond to shifting aggregate 'taste' that is the key to their success. Today they are able to restock almost on a daily basis with instant knowledge of the pattern of purchases. Their ability to analyse purchasing patterns through point of sale electronics makes them also the vanguard of marketing research.

This volume of sales has become the apex to increasing vertical integration whereby the retailers become ever more dominant over distribution and indeed manufacture. The degree to which First World economies have become concentrated around relatively few key retail operations has varied. This is partly in relation to the differences between commodity fields (see Fine and Leopold 1993) and partly in relation to different state attitudes to what threaten to become close to oligopolies if not monopolies (see Wrigley 1993a; Wrigley 1993b). Furthermore this may not be evident to consumers, since retailers in, for example, clothing, divide into six or eleven different stores in order to segment the market (Crewe and Foster 1993). Through vertical integration it is retailers who inform marketing and advertising as to trends in demand, and this in turn is fed back to producers and designers who are told to come up with a new (e.g. low-fat, or conspicuously more safety-conscious, or less gendered) version of a familiar commodity in order to fulfil this aspiration. This represents a distinct shift from the period when producers determined their own priorities and looked for ways to persuade the population to purchase the result (e.g. Galbraith 1969). It also represents an increasing move from opposition to collusion between producers and consumers. We see here only the beginnings of a larger trend which should not be overgeneralised. As anyone who has worked in business will testify, there are plenty of instances where, despite all the information on consumption available, brand managers do their work without much of a clue as to how to interpret or respond to changes in demand.

Retailers in turn feed back the demands for increasing economies of scale and, as the delegates of Rio might have observed (had they been given the opportunity!), this results in quite extraordinary road haulage and other polluting consequences since an international division of labour and an international competition for low-priced commodities create individual supermarket products combining ingredients of astonishingly far-flung origins and varied zones of primary processing. Supermarket and chain-store competition also act to suppress farm and other production level prices to their minimum. Although they may face considerable opposition from producer interests, as reflected in the European Common Agricultural Policy, such resistance is increasingly regarded as a tired legacy of an older ideology which should be removed. The major supermarket chains are often quite effective at squeezing out the middleman through this vertical integration. In general they thereby favour the overproduction of basic food-stuffs across the globe to help force down prices through overcompetition between producing nations, while retaining the power to shift quickly their source of raw materials to whichever gives the lowest costs at that time. In Chapter 4 Fine provides a concise review of some key recent developments in food retailing and the increasing significance of retailing in the British economy as a whole. This provides an example of what Jackson and Thrift

in Chapter 6 call international 'chains', which seem to have developed far more quickly than our ability to trace and analyse them. It is not surprising then that retailing has a prominent role in several other chapters of this volume, including that of Glennie (Chapter 5), where it provides the main case-study.

But it would be quite wrong to identify the supermarket manager as the 'villain' of the piece, as a replacement of the role of the 'top-hat' capitalist of Marxist rhetoric and political imagery. The supermarket may gain considerable profits, but this is based upon the increasing scale of the enterprise, alongside a profit margin that otherwise might be seen as quite low. Certainly top managers and shareholders may gain disproportionate material rewards from this process. Today, however, most of the 'value' extracted from labour does not take the form of profits, but is manifested in benefits to First World consumers. Prices in real terms for non-basic foodstuffs have often dropped. Retailers whose long-term perspective persuaded them to cut prices rather than take quick profits have generally increased market share and survived best (Hallsworth 1992: 43-49). But the improvement of value based on the rise of production efficiency and mass marketing is much more evident when price is broadened to the more general concept of convenience, where, as Becker and others noted, time is as important a measure of value as price. The majority of First World consumers have been almost entirely relieved of seasonality, of distance (once they possess a car) and of scarcity.

Supermarkets provide substances that would once have been rare and of prohibitive cost but now serve as mundane accompaniments for weekly purchasing. For the First World consumer, capitalism has in many respects 'delivered the goods', with vast increases in real wealth for all but a substantial minority. This is particularly the case when those benefits of welfare provision that are paid for by taxes on business are included. The rich of previous centuries might well look enviously at the possessions and mobility of the lower-middle class of today (this is not the less true for being a cliché). It is not just, as some suggest, a case of home commodities and appliances replacing the servants, since today it is the households of those who would once have been servants that also have the basic appliances and associated mass commodities. Overall low rewards for labour, while still creating handsome profits for transnational companies, are above all a means for ensuring low prices for consumers.

In the voluminous writings about post-Fordism there has certainly been considerable concern to document the shifts that have occurred in the global economy in recent decades. Yet it is remarkable how little acknowledgement is given to consumption. As Fine notes, this literature has re-established the assumed primacy of production that it was in part intended to critique. 'Consumption is either disregarded or reduced to postmodern style as a kind of ideological reflection of changes in production (as in Harvey 1989). An

exception is Robin Murray, who pointed out 'The groundwork for the new system was laid not in manufacturing but in retailing' (Murray 1989: 42). He notes four related changes:

- 1 the ability of shops to use new information technology to match exactly supply to demand;
- 2 the market niching of stores now carefully differentiated by segments defined by marketing research and recognised by designers;
- 3 the dynamic forms of customisation with flexible automation;
- 4 the degree of subcontracting by new firms such as Benetton.

What is missing even here, however, is the acknowledgement that retailing was in turn responding to the new forms of demand that preceded such commercial movements. This is the demand that followed from a global shift towards the pluralism of 'roots', 'regionalism', 'identity politics', 'religious revivals' and other anti-modernist movements that arose very quickly after 1968. This preceded and made essential the development of computer aided technology as providing the appropriate flexibility in production and distribution. It is this phenomenon that is misunderstood in most of the writings on postmodernism.

This does not mean that consumption has somehow overcome capitalism. Such a conclusion would have to assume that the interests of capitalism are necessarily opposed to those of consumer demand. Instead it may be that this new power of consumers actually assists capitalism's search for profits. Instead of having to put considerable time and money into finding markets for goods and persuading consumers to buy, a manufacturing and distribution system that largely responds to consumers makes considerable potential savings in storage, in advertising and in reducing wasted investment. Theoretically, then, a demand-led capitalism should increase its potential profitability. In practice, as noted above, it is more likely that the benefits would largely be shunted into better value for consumers. None of this represents an argument in itself in favour of capitalism, since all of this would also be the case for an alternative system for the provision of goods and services, such as the state. It is equally true that the state suffered at least as much as capitalism in a previous era from being production-led rather than demand-led. What we are documenting here is a shift in power from production to consumption, irrespective of the forms of distribution and the behaviour of capital and states *per se*.

The market ideologists claim it is the market itself that has delivered the goods which require a demand for goods that is prior and autonomous, and they contrast this achievement with production-led socialism. To make this claim they have to ignore the long period during which capitalism was just as keen as the state to create consumers as 'the market' upon which they could dump whatever they chose to produce. Historically both the market and the state have had to respond to a shift towards



consumer power for which neither they, nor 'right' or 'left' politics can take credit.

These changes affected politics on two fronts. The First World consumer 'votes' on a daily basis for cheap goods through the competitive mechanisms of capitalism forcing down prices. The same priorities are echoed in formal political voting, where increasingly it is the promise of lower taxes and lower prices that is used to appeal to the voter, often in the forms of electoral bribes and electoral lies. This leads to a 'democratic deficit'. This exists within First World countries where it may produce two-thirds living in relative affluence and up to one-third living in poverty. This is because a relatively well-off majority with a secure political control has no need to pay regard to what can become an increasingly impoverished group within its own society. The poor have little chance of significantly altering the government and any violent protest by them is largely utilised to justify their oppression.

The second form taken by the democratic deficit lies in the distance between First World consumers and Third World producers. The former can vote for a government that to some extent expresses their desires and safeguards their demand for more goods at cheaper prices. By contrast the Third World producers, if they have a vote at all, can only vote as part of the far less significant democratic forum of their own country. Their government is increasingly unable to influence even the local economy that is subservient to the shifts in the larger global economy. They are competing with other developing countries to produce goods at the lowest costs, thereby suppressing wages. But even this may not be sufficient to compete with some First World agricultural producers who pay higher wages but use highly capital-intensive technologies to undercut their rivals.

Of course there is a great variety of consumers divided by many social attributes. For the purpose of this polemic, however, I want to select one image to stand for the idea of a consumer. This is the First World housewife, such as from Western Europe or North America. The number of households in these areas represented by a nuclear family and the traditional 'housewife' role is steadily declining, although this may be compensated for by the rise of such figures in newly industrialised countries. I do not know what proportion of purchasing is made by such housewives, and furthermore it is important to incorporate consumption by institutions and not just by individuals (whether male or female). Nevertheless there are grounds for focusing upon this stereotypical figure. This is partly because in popular culture (from misogynistic newspaper strip cartoons to television sitcoms) the mythic figure of the housewife dominates the image of consumption. The other justification for this reification is because I want to argue (see pp. 34-9) that the housewife in many respects epitomises the contradictions of contemporary consumer power. It is by focusing upon the housewife as the global dictator that the ironies of power may be most



directly confronted. It is ironic in the sense that the housewife is often stereotyped as herself both modest and denigrated. She commands little respect in the social world she inhabits. Her labour in shopping, her skills of thrift and comparative purchasing are largely disregarded and unvalorised. Yet it is she (or at least the consumption she stands for) who may have displaced the top-hat capitalist as the aggregate 'global dictator'. She thereby stands as the potential objectification of tremendous fear and power for the peasantries of the developing world, who are increasingly aware how far their life-chances are dependent upon her.

There are still further complexities to this relationship. It would be easy enough to render this conclusion in terms of the exploitation of poor countries by rich countries, but, as with Marx's original formulation, it is better to understand this phenomenon in terms of fundamental contradictions rather than the working out of particular interests. This conclusion becomes evident when we look within the developing world. In my own research in Trinidad I am investigating the nature of shopping within that island (Miller forthcoming). This is a community that is much closer to the problems of the vulnerability of commodity prices (especially the price of oil) than most First World countries, yet the contradiction of labour and consumption is equally evident here. The people of this island have clear political imperatives and desires, including relative economic and political power and autonomy. In general, however, their decisions as consumers do not reflect these political interests but not surprisingly favour the global economy's search for the cheapest possible prices, irrespective of the consequences for labour. In relation to the wedding day joke, it seems that the bride has the last laugh. This is because her 'little' decision-making in day-to-day consumption effectively renders the 'big' political decision-making of her husband quite impotent. The government he chooses loses all autonomy to increasingly powerful bodies, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which constrain what any local state may do. The IMF takes this action in the name of providing the cheapest goods to the consumer, including here the Trinidadian housewife who responds favourably to any lowering of prices.

This suggests that the issue may be less one of some First World instrumentalist desire to exploit (though this may be there) than one of the fundamental contradictions that would equally apply within a developing country had it the consumer power to express this. That the contradiction lies within and not just between nations is not true simply of the developing world. Also in First World countries there is an increasingly common scenario in which the primary victim of capitalism and the primary beneficiary may be one and the same person: that is, the housewife in her other guise as worker or unemployed. This would be the case where the political and economic priorities that are being 'voted' for by careful shopping act to undermine the demands of the same shopper in bidding