

# Introduction

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This collection of essays maps recent developments of social scientific approaches to the understanding of consumption. Consumption now looms large in academic curricula – from marketing to anthropology, economics to sociology. It is also a matter of contemporary concern to governments and their populations. The four volumes in this set make available, in a convenient compilation, important contributions to contemporary debates which will allow a reader without easy access to a well-stocked research library to appreciate the current state of scholarship on the social aspects of consumption. The selection represents a range of social science disciplines, but with a pronounced emphasis on works at the interface of sociology, anthropology and cultural studies. I have included a few important and influential pieces from the history of the development of consumption in the social sciences to give some theoretical context. However, as classic texts are readily available in any library, this collection focuses on articles, especially from scholarly journals, which may be less accessible, including much recently published material, so that trends since 2000 can be appreciated. Though difficult, I have tried to select material that draws upon different methodological approaches, different theoretical traditions and relate to consumption in different social contexts.

This introduction first reviews the major trends of intellectual influence on the analysis of consumption since the 1960s, putting key positions into a historical and intellectual context. The threads of influential general social theories – of mass society, neo-Marxism, neo-classical economics, postmodernism and globalisation – have left their mark, testament to the co-evolution of economic thought, cultural analysis and social and anthropological theory. The study of consumption is an irretrievably inter-disciplinary field, one characterised by a permanent tension between understandings based on competing models of *homo economicus* and *homo sociologicus*. One emphasises individuals making autonomous decisions in the light of their personal

self-interest or utility, while the other stresses the interdependence of individuals, their responses to prevailing norms of behaviour, shared with others and patrolled by social or cultural institutions.

## The Social Science of Consumption

Terms like consumer culture and consumer society play a central role in characterisations of contemporary social arrangements (e.g., Bauman, 2002; Trentmann, 2004 and 2009). (References in italics are included in the collection.) Many accounts suggest that the central features of industrial capitalism – a world where disciplined labour in manufacturing goods was the key axis of social order in the face of material scarcity – are receding, replaced for most people by the appeal of consumption in a context where leisure, shopping and the home become the focal points of everyday life in affluent societies (e.g., Bauman, 1988, 1998 and 2002).

Social scientists turned their attention to consumption in reaction to an unprecedented material abundance coincident upon mass production. Such conditions were commonly understood to have become embedded in the USA by 1950 and in Western Europe by the end of the 1960s. Interpretations polarised. The optimistic interpretation observed the end of poverty and severe material deprivation previously suffered by the industrial working class. However, many responses were negative, inspired by normative disapproval of luxury, ostentation and indulgence, a critique which had deep roots in religious doctrine, especially ascetic Protestantism. Nevertheless, it was the Frankfurt School's analysis of commodification and its critique of mass culture and 'the culture industry' which proved most relevant for subsequent studies of consumption (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1979[1937]); Adorno, 1990; for a review see Gartmann, 1991 and 2004). In a period of strong working-class movements in Europe – powerful trade unions, strong class alignments of electorates, expanding welfare state provision – critical understandings of consumption were based upon the macro-structural features of the political economy of post-war capitalism and its inherent crisis tendencies (e.g., Aglietta, 1979 [1976]; Marcuse, 1964). Nevertheless, both positive and negative accounts were 'economistic', meaning that they assumed that economic forces were fundamental to the understanding of social relations and cultural practices. The Marxist base-superstructure model of societies was probably the most transparent theoretical formulation, but most political economies and sociological theories of inequality assumed that property and employment relations (typically in the guise of social class) were the principal determinants of life chances and style of life. Discontent with such formulations began to grow in Europe from the 1970s as economism came to be seen as at best partial, at worst totally misleading. This resulted eventually in the relationship between production and consumption becoming

problematised, encouraging scholars to examine consumption as a phenomenon in its own right.

America, or rather the USA, followed a different trajectory; much less critical of capitalism, with a much more benign public and intellectual appreciation of mass consumption (Lebergott, 1993) and more persuaded by the freedoms associated with the role of 'consumer' (Cohen, 2003 and 2004). As a result much more social research was conducted in relation to marketing and business – spawning the tradition of consumer behaviour (Belk, 1995b) – which was less obviously connected to mainstream research in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. The USA was late to develop a sociology of consumption. It is no accident that much of the American research presented here comes from marketing journals, especially the highly influential *Journal of Consumer Research*, rather than from mainstream sociological or anthropological journals.

Though a minority voice, American scholars did generate understandings that were focused on the pathologies of consumption, on the detrimental effects associated with an industrial system of production and its consequences for social regulation. Perhaps the most widely known early critic was Thorstein Veblen (1925 [1899]), celebrated for his ironic account of conspicuous consumption among the upwardly mobile American middle class. His *Theory of the Leisure Class* argued that while high status had previously been indicated by not having to work – by plentiful leisure time – in industrial urban contexts this could not be made visible, so richer Americans were adopting new strategies involving conspicuous displays of wealth. In turn, others in less privileged positions sought to emulate the rich, thereby ratcheting up demand for material status symbols. The critique was reiterated frequently in different forms, and the invidious relationship between class and consumption provided a mainstay of social scientific research (e.g., Packard, 1960). But social scientists identified many other problems besetting consumer society. Schudson (1993, see also 1999) neatly summed up five traditions of critique, none of which he found entirely satisfactory, though all contained an element of truth. These he called the Puritan, Quaker, Republican, Socialist and Aristocratic critiques. The essence of these critiques were, respectively, detrimental effects on character, unnecessary waste, withdrawal from the public and political realm, disregard for the people whose labour is embodied in commodities, and the inferior qualities of mass-produced commodities. (For reviews of pessimistic interpretations see Horowitz, 1985; Cross, 1993; Schor, 1998.) As Schor (2007) argues, these critiques are not irrelevant today, but they have been joined by new concerns, foremost among them fears about the environmental consequences of contemporary patterns of consumption. However, until the 1990s these normative arguments were largely without empirical support, with a single important exception that implicitly, if incidentally, sociologists and economists contributed to the analysis of consumption through studies of

poverty and critiques of the adequacy of welfare provision, which necessarily revolve around forms and levels of consumption.

## Identifying Consumption

Contemporary studies of consumption are irrevocably multi-disciplinary in nature. Geographers and marketers, economists and psychologists, as well as sociologists and anthropologists all research consumption with much greater intensity than a decade ago. As Miller's (1995) edited volume of essays, reviewing consumption from the viewpoints of history, geography, psychology, media studies, political economy, etc., demonstrated, there has been remarkably little overlap across the different disciplinary literatures. It is hard to see any radical change in the years following its publication. Partly as a consequence of this lack of integration, the focus of the field of consumption studies seems weakly defined. This is not so much a matter of where it shears off at the edges into arenas like, for example, studies of household organization or literary criticism, but about its core. It is difficult to find a satisfactory and consistent definition of the term 'consumption'. Raymond Williams (1976) noted a dual application deriving from two separate historical roots, both of which continue to resonate for social scientific purposes. The first, emerging from Latin into early English, has a negative connotation – to destroy, to waste, to use up. Only later, with the emergence of the political economy in the eighteenth century, did a neutral sense develop in the description of market relationships, whence the distinguishing of consumer from producer and, analogously, consumption from production developed. This second meaning signalled interest more in the changing value of items being exchanged, rather than the purposes to which goods and services might be put. As so often is the case, the meaning of the term and its derivatives changes, or diversifies, in rough parallel with the institutions governing the behaviour that it purports to describe (Wyrwa, 1998).

Campbell (1995: 101, 102), as a prelude to reflection on sociological approaches, noted that 'no one formulation has succeeded in gaining widespread acceptance' and offered rather hesitantly 'a simple working definition, one that identifies consumption as involving the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service'. Campbell anticipated difficulties in this broader definition gaining acceptance because it has been pre-empted in everyday language by economists' preoccupation with acts of purchase. If consumption covers purchase, use and disposal of goods and services, then it denotes a very wide range of activities. I advocate adoption of just such a broad definition, one which includes functional equivalents of provision through the market, which repudiates a model of consumption based on the process of an individual going shopping, and which focuses instead in detail on the social processes involved in the utilisation of goods,

services and experiences. I define consumption as ‘a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some discretion’ (Warde, 2005: 137). That understanding underlies my selection of essays in these volumes and its concentration on socio-cultural rather than economic or psychological approaches.

### Economy, Society and Culture: Production and Consumption

Much of the literature on consumption from the second half of the twentieth century derived from considerations of the economy, from macroeconomics and critical political economy. One pole of analysis was Karl Marx’s (1976 [1867]) work on commodities. A revival of Marxist analysis throughout the social sciences in Europe in the 1960s meant a strong representation for this critical tradition. Typically it did not examine the minutiae of consumption, but work like that of the Regulation School (e.g., Aglietta, 1979) argued that mass consumption was a necessary condition of the Long Boom after the Second World War. For much of that period, Keynesian macroeconomics co-existed with the neo-classical tradition, with forms of Keynesian intervention, market regulation and welfare provision emphasising the relevance of aggregate consumption to economic stability. The rapid advance of neo-conservative thought and neo-liberal economics, associated at the political level with Reagan and Thatcher, had a profound impact. They celebrated the market, criticised the ethos of the welfare state, opposed state services as a hindrance to personal and economic liberty, and proclaimed self-reliance and independence to be cardinal virtues. Increasingly, in political circles, market mechanisms came to be considered as not only the best but the only way to conduct economic exchange. In parallel, micro-economics of neo-classical inspiration came to dominate the professional field, first in the USA and the UK, with econometrics subsequently spreading to countries where alternative and heterodox traditions had previously flourished (Fourcade-Gourinchos, 2001). Neo-classical economics is not entirely without insight, having earlier, through Marshall (1920) and Lancaster (1966) for example, had some success in elaborating on the mechanisms of consumer demand. Gary Becker (1996) also made impressive contributions, for instance, from within the neo-classical camp, though by relaxing some of its assumptions. However, from the 1970s onwards an ascendant micro-econometrics deployed assumptions of rational, calculating, individual consumers to operationalise its models and game theoretic axioms.

Confidence in the superiority of market mechanisms for the promotion of human well-being in all its diversity has persuaded some people that economics is more an ideological discourse offering policy prescriptions rather

than a form of social scientific analysis (Callon, 1998; MacKenzie et al. 2007). Yet critiques of the narrowness of economists' accounts of consumption are not new. Among others, the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979) observed the meaningfulness of consumption and proposed analysis of how people actually went about the activity of purchase (e.g., Douglas, 1996). Currently, behavioural economics is posing challenges to mainstream (mis)understandings about, for example, the consequences of asymmetry of information in economic exchange, of transaction costs, and of forms of market failure. An approach seeking to *test empirically* the assumptions of the rational action model, using experimental methods and drawing on psychological research, provides an alternative to the professional consensus. So too does institutional economics (whence Veblen hailed) though it has had a limited impact, despite support from the new economic sociology in the USA (e.g., Granovetter and Swedberg, 1992; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). Critical political economy also lost influence, though Fine (1997) is just one example of creative analysis of consumption heralding from this tradition. Fine and Leopold (1993) and Fine et al. (1996) advance historically informed and institutionally specific analyses of how systems of provision for different products construct the world of consumption. By contrast, the more orthodox economists promoting micro-economics and econometrics, adopt a much narrower vision of consumption.

Other social sciences had also favoured economic explanations. Sociology, in line with its classical texts, in which industrialisation and the transformation from traditional to modern societies supplied the *raison d'être* for the discipline's existence, saw economic production, the accumulation of capital and especially the occupational order, as the primary determinants of social organisation and social inequality. Sociology thus also saw consumption as the corollary of production processes, according it little autonomy or existence in its own right. However, during the 1980s the landscape was transformed. The decline of neo-Marxism, the critique of economism, and the resurgence of neo-liberal market economics coincided with the emergence of linguistic and semiotic inspired studies and a reappraisal of the role of culture and the associated rise of postmodernism. Accordingly, the relevance of class as a line of division and a dynamic of social change was widely questioned.

Bourdieu (1984 [1979]), rather ahead of his time in recognising the importance of culture, nevertheless used the lens of social class to explain patterns of cultural taste. *Distinction* had the most profound impact in the 1990s once empirical studies of consumption emerged. His approach was one of three that Featherstone (1990) earmarked as paving the way for a sociology of consumption. The other two were the Frankfurt School's account of the role of the culture industries in mass consumption (see Horkheimer and Adorno, 1979) and a new and much less well-defined body

of scholarship arising from cultural studies. These approaches focused on, respectively, the uses of culture to mark social position, the logic of the production of cultural commodities and the experiential aspects of modern cultural consumption.

The concerns of Bourdieu for the role of cultural knowledge and taste in the reproduction of social inequality have since been thoroughly explored, with some modifications to his account coming, predictably, from the USA. Gans (1974) exploring the relationship between social locations and taste cultures had argued for the existence of a cultural pluralism wider than that captured by economic class analysis. Subsequently, DiMaggio (1987) provided an influential schematic account of why cultural classification might vary across contemporary societies. While some sociologists remain concerned with why people from different cultural backgrounds and the occupational order are more or less successful in the educational system, many others became more impressed by the symbolic aspects of modern consumption.

From the mid-1980s onwards an appreciation of the importance of global markets, the emergence of cultural studies, a developing concern with material culture, and a determination to understand the role of consumption in everyday social interaction and practice has produced a vast amount of new research offering new perspectives and theoretical innovations. Increasing attention paid to consumption as a fundamental, if not *the* central, force in contemporary societies has engendered a steadily increasing flow of historical investigations into the continuities and disjunctures with the past and the origin of current attitudes and practices. Campbell published a very influential book, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1989), which challenged the economic assumptions of sociology (a version of the argument appears as Campbell, 1994). Also, the much older work of Georg Simmel (1991 [1909]) was revived as sociology took what came to be described as 'the cultural turn' (e.g., Gronow, 1997). In addition, we now have a much more nuanced sense of the origins and distinctiveness of contemporary consumer culture. Sassatelli (2007), Strasser (2003) and Trentmann (2004) all offer insightful and detailed reflections on the processes of the emergence and transformation of modern consumption patterns and provide a guide to the burgeoning literature on a global consumer culture.

Social history, anthropology and perhaps even more cultural studies, began to demonstrate the many forms and purposes of consumption. British cultural studies found its early objects of study in popular culture, in the tasks of rescuing working class culture from the condescension of posterity and understanding often rebellious youth sub-cultures (Willis, 1978). Attention focused on creative adaptation of commercial products to express group solidarities, the new purchasing power of youth and their innovative tastes, and a shift from the constriction of wants in the face of scarcity to exploration of new sources of entertainment, fun and pleasure. Cultural studies emphasised desire, emotions and excess, non-rational aspects of the

experience of consumption, promoting thereby a serious examination of lifestyles and aestheticisation (Featherstone, 1990 and 1991; and the journal *Theory Culture & Society*).

It was to the credit of cultural studies that consumption was rescued from puritanical and elitist critiques of popular practice. What sociologists of culture learned, and subsequently developed, was an appreciation of the virtues of mass consumption. Among these we might include that it is enjoyable and pleasurable, supplies intellectual stimulation, provides refreshing entertainment, sustains comfort, facilitates social innovation and meaningful informal work, promotes an aesthetic attitude, expresses personal and social identity, supports socially meaningful practices and helps maintain social relationships (Warde, 2002).

Baudrillard proved a central and controversial figure in this intellectual re-orientation. Beginning from a critique of Marxism for elevating use-value at the expense of the symbolic value of goods (1988 [1970]), his subsequent examination of the symbolic realm persuaded him that the system of signs established through mass communication was, increasingly, a self-referential code (1981 [1972]). Signs, simulations of reality, were all that was accessible for analysis in a postmodern world. Consumption, above all else, was a process of communication.

Firat, Fuat and Ventakesh (1995), in a compendious account of the nature, genealogy and impact of postmodern thought, focus on the consequences for consumer research of its critique of modernity, spelling out very clearly some of the theoretical alternatives that arose from the cultural turn. They identify many differences in the way consumption might be approached once the authority of science, the power of rationality and the primacy of the economy had been thrown into doubt. A fragmentary world, with less centralised imposition of social discipline and more space for personal self-determination and pursuit of pleasure, rendered consumption potentially liberatory, an avenue to a better society.

Others sharing the postmodern critique were, however, much less optimistic. Zygmunt Bauman made consumption central to a sociology of postmodernity. In philosophical and reflective vein, he observed the passing of a society of work and industrial production and its replacement with a consumer society driven by a very different logic (e.g., Bauman, 1998). Consumer society marks a shift from needs to desires, employment to shopping, constraints to choices, and domination to freedom. Yet consumer society, served by a market in which individuals express their freedom through making personal choices as consumers, delivers a shallow and insubstantial kind of life experience – impermanent, flexible, discontinuous, fluid. He describes the predicament as ‘institutional erosion coupled with enforced individualization’ (2002: 200).

During the 1990s, the lens through which contemporary consumption was observed increasingly emphasised its function in the creation of self-identity. Consumption was considered a personal, individual and self-regarding matter

(i.e., priority was accorded to the consumer as an 'identity-seeker', in the terms of Gabriel and Lang's (1995) classification of nine social scientific 'models' of the consumer), rather than as a collective and socially-embedded set of practices. Bauman, aided and abetted by Beck (1992; Beck and Beck-Garnsheim, 2001) and Giddens (1991), associated individualisation with the inevitability of making free choices constitutive of identity (for a critique see Warde, 1994). Such a view exhibits some parallels with the model of the sovereign consumer of neo-classical economics, tending to overestimate the power of individual 'agency'.

In retrospect, the cultural turn overemphasised some aspects of consumption. First, because consumption was presented as a code or language, it was often analysed pre-eminently as a mode of communication. The frequently reiterated view that consumption is primarily a process of personal identity creation through presenting a chosen self to the world depends, according to Campbell (1995, 1997), upon an implausible view of the capacity for communication through consumption display. It seriously neglects the fact that most action is directed not towards communicating with others but towards the fulfilment of self-regarding purposive projects which presume consumption to involve routine application of items in pursuit of use values. Second, much of the work on the culture of consumption focused on conspicuous consumption, the display to others of marks of identity. However, whereas earlier accounts of conspicuous consumption were directed towards an understanding of class and status, this became increasingly uncommon. It was as if to uncover positive functions of mass consumption was sufficient justification for completely absolving it from criticism. Moreover, focus on conspicuous consumption obscures the fact that most consumption is ordinary or inconspicuous. Those actions which require little reflection, which communicate few social messages, which play no role in distinction, and which do not excite much passion or emotion, have typically been ignored. As Gronow and Warde (2001) argue, social scientific investigations have concentrated on musical taste, clothing fashions, private purchase of houses and vehicles, and the attendance at 'high' cultural performances like theatres and museums, to the exclusion of everyday food consumption, use of water and electricity, organisation of domestic interiors and listening to the radio. Such activities may require a different approach and a different set of concepts to understand their social uses.

## Contemporary Theoretical Developments

Schematically, the clash between economism and postmodernism created a platform from which the empirical social science of consumption took off in the 1990s. Political economy and cultural studies bequeathed useful understandings which are far from superseded yet, but which left considerable

room for further development. Arnould and Thompson (2005), dubbing their own approach 'Consumer Culture Theory' (CCT), document a cumulative body of largely American findings which focus on the consumer as an interpretive agent. At the heart of the enterprise is the understanding of meanings, experiences and symbolic boundaries. Adopting techniques of cultural analysis rather than positivistic social science, CCT draws upon postmodernist themes but remains focused on problems conventionally associated with consumer research. They foresee future progress coming from institutional and historical analysis, explorations of the impact of the globalisation of consumer culture on less-developed societies, and exploration of the moral status of consumption – issues acknowledged as important by other contemporary schools of thought, not least political economy.

While we have learned of the dangers of allowing normative stances towards consumption to overwhelm empirically founded understandings of people's practices, consumption does not cease to raise ethical issues which legitimately motivate analysis. Some of the earlier critiques of consumerism would be hard to defend now, but other, new sources of disquiet are emerging. Foremost among these are issues associated with the environment, emphasised for instance by Schudson (1999) when updating an earlier (1984) synoptic critique of consumer capitalism (see also Wilk's (2001) response to Miller (2001)). Moreover, there is a constant need to revise understanding of the consequences of consumer culture as it matures and diffuses. Belk (2004) offers one account. However, many of the articles in these four volumes contribute to a broad debate about the historical distinctiveness of contemporary consumption, its potential to foster well-being, and whether it is globally sustainable.

To see how the field is now developing, essays have been grouped in terms of three inter-related component processes – acquisition, appropriation and appreciation. These framing concepts can be employed to structure empirical observations and the analysis of mechanisms generating behaviour. Schematically, *acquisition* involves exchange (by market and other mechanisms) which supplies the means for personal and household provisioning. *Appropriation* involves practical activities entailing the use of goods and services for personal and social purposes. *Appreciation* covers the myriad of processes giving meaning to provision and use. The next three sections deal with each in turn, identifying key issues and processes that have recently come under scrutiny in the attempt to clarify the socio-cultural significance of consumption.

### **Acquisition: Between Scarcity and Excess**

Acquisition refers to processes of economic and social exchange, by means of which goods and services are obtained for immediate gratification, display, investment or further and later use. Part of the process of provisioning,

acquisition is a function not just of industry, but also of the state and communal and domestic production. The mixed origins of provisioning are embedded in historical trajectories which differ from country to country. Despite globalisation, the configuration of institutions sedimented from national histories of war and revolution, state-building, religious settlement, economic transformation, urban transition and family formations continue to influence consumption patterns. The volume of goods and services available, and the varied principles governing their distribution makes appreciation of variations in institutional setting of the utmost importance for understanding acquisition. Simple but misleading stories of social evolution, based on the experience of the USA, the country with the earliest claim to have developed a consumer society or consumer culture, assert the inevitability and superiority of individualism, negative liberty, market freedom, low taxes and a small state. It is often imagined that all other countries will eventually follow, because the motivations, pleasures and satisfactions valued by Americans are assumed to be irresistible and ultimately universal. However, the trajectory of the USA in the post-war years (see Cohen 2004 for one brief account) will probably prove exceptional. Other countries started from different positions, and many populations share norms and values suspicious of free markets and commercial culture. The development of consumer culture in China, by contrast, draws on very different traditions of legitimacy and the agents introducing new consumption practices in the last 20 years have exploited different instruments and strategies of persuasion (Zhou and Belk, 2008). Among other things that China shares with countries of the Far East is a much different reaction to credit and debt (Garon and Maclachlan, 2006).

Historians have made major contributions recently to developing a more sophisticated account of the role of consumption in contemporary societies. Their scepticism of simplistic periodisation has proved very valuable. For example, Trentmann (2009: 110) argues cogently against such 'stage models' of history and three assumptions associated with them: 'that since the 1950s–1960s consumer culture is a new phenomenon; that it has replaced diversity with homogeneity; and that the growing importance people have attached to things and leisure has eroded civic engagement'. Nevertheless, even Trentmann would not wish to deny the growth and diffusion of opportunities for consumption occurring during the Long Boom. Although uneven, the economic growth in the industrialised world in the last 50 years has been enormous. Populations of Western societies experienced unprecedented affluence and an abundance of goods. Economic growth in the West in this period expanded the market for cultural products and services, which now provide a much greater proportion of jobs and profits. Commercial provision of culture exploded, with the number of TV channels, books, DVDs, records and other visual media increasing multifold.

The vast potential accruing to the strategic manipulation of commodities for personal or group symbolic advantage encourages diverse forms of cultural

expression. The consequences are hotly debated. As Lizardo (2008) notes, some commentators anticipate the emergence of a homogeneous global culture of consumption. However, micro-level ethnographic studies of particular cases of cultural change provide contrary evidence. He argues that expectations of global diffusion in the form of cultural imperialism will be confounded, since the impact of disjunctive global cultural flows will be greatest within Western populations.

Adam Smith (1994 [1776]) long ago foresaw a civilising effect for commerce, breaking down social barriers and increasing mutual sympathy between people. One current form of sympathy is cosmopolitanism. A cosmopolitan orientation, in its ideal form, transcends the narrow confines of national experience and orthodoxy and celebrates wider contacts and diverse cultural values without reference to narrow national stereotypes or prejudices. However, as Thompson and Tambyah (1999) show, despite its appeal, cosmopolitanism may be restricted to privileged sections of the populations of rich countries. Symbolic differences can, instead, be just as socially divisive as unequal distribution of wealth, income or property. The flexibility of symbolic expression has some surprising manifestations, creating circumstances where sometimes the rich even seek to deploy the traditional symbols of poverty and low status (Halnon, 2002).

In Europe especially, affluence was accompanied by the expansion of welfare state provision. The arguably mixed consequences of affluence and abundance, and the allocation of resources between private consumption and public services, became a matter of considerable dispute. Galbraith's (1957) diagnosis of 'private affluence and public squalor' in the USA remains a key marker of tensions around social inequality, both within affluent societies and between rich and poor countries (see Trentmann, 2009). The attention devoted to symbolic meaning has sometimes been to the neglect of issues of distributional justice.

Campbell, as recently as 1995, observed that the stimulation for sociological investigation of consumption arose more from concerns with the provision of social welfare as from issues of consumer culture. Sociologists had examined household organisation, expenditure and consumption for more than a century but considered it a contribution to the understanding of poverty, inequality and welfare. Comparative analysis, of which we have far too little, quickly reveals that patterns and levels of private household consumption vary in accordance with local standards of public provision, both through transfer payments and substantive service delivery (e.g., Wilska, 2001). It is important to recall that not all consumption is necessarily routed via markets. Commodity exchange is a restricted, if steadily increasing, source of provision, one among several channels for appropriation, each of which is embedded in different institutional complexes. Warde (1992) identifies other mechanisms of provision – the state, voluntary transfers, household self-provisioning – where the social relations of exchange are

very different. Personal gifts, charitable donation, state allocation and communal provision stamp meanings onto objects and services. Gifts bear marks of their origins; those that originated as a commodity require to be disguised; there are complex social norms and conventions governing their exchange concerning whether reciprocity is required, and in what time frame, to signify what kind of social relationship, and with what reference to instrumental calculation (Mauss, 1990; Miller, 1998c).

Social sciences have always oscillated between description and abstraction, case studies and generalisations. Theory comes as thick description at one pole, abstract and parsimonious axioms or propositions at the other. In mainstream economics and consumer research the latter approach dominates, and the individual's choices are taken as the object of analysis. The challenge for those who find neo-classical models reductive and inadequate at the level of meaning is to identify equally persuasive alternative approaches. One alternative is to explain choices in terms of situations, dispositions and contextual factors, as does Allen (2002) in his advocacy of holistic, practice-theoretical analysis of the social and historical shaping of students' choice of college. Another alternative is to begin from an understanding of the material environment of consumption. A vibrant and diverse set of studies documents the pervasive impact of material culture on social life (e.g., Miller, 1998b; *Journal of Material Culture*). The injunction to 'follow the thing' – which has led to studies of all manner of commodities – has proved popular and illuminating (e.g., Cook, 2004 and/or 2006). So has concentration on material devices which mediate in activities of consumption. For example, Cochoy (2008) uses a focus on a particular object, the supermarket cart, to explore the calculations that shoppers make, highlighting the processes and procedures involved in mundane instances of market exchange but which have complex determinants and collective consequences (see also Cochoy, 2007a).

The reaction against economism reduced the amount of attention devoted to cultural production, but the topic remains of great importance. As the culture industries expand and the aesthetic properties of products determine their value, new occupations, new roles and new techniques have emerged to increase the circulation of goods and services. It has long been recognised that valued cultural items are produced and circulated in ways often very similar to any other commodity. Products, including performers and artists, are designed, advertised, tested, praised by fans, evaluated by critics and positioned by marketing departments before being acquired by consumers. Influential in the USA, Peterson's approach to cultural production emphasised the many and diverse social and economic processes involved in making and selling cultural products (Santoro, 2008). Prominent among these today is branding, which is central to the accumulation strategies of firms, but which also gives consumers varied opportunities for both expressivity and political resistance (Holt, 2002). Brands are themselves a form of commercial

intermediation, designed and promoted consciously by organisations hoping to steer their products into the shopping carts of receptive targeted buyers. As the relationship between producer and consumer becomes less immediate and direct, intermediation grows in significance. A key strategic role has been attributed to cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 1991; Florida, 2002; Negus, 2002), though their importance relative to firms or materialised forms of communication, as for example with fitness manuals examined by Maguire (2002) remains an open question.

Because of the cultural turn, questions of how much a person might need or indeed deserve in the face of abundance was much less debated by the end of the twentieth century. The issue was kept alive in particular by environmentalist critiques and by a growing concern that the diffusion of consumer culture to poor countries poses a problem for the carrying capacity of the planet. As Miller (2001) argues, it is hypocritical of the rich to demand constraint by the poor in order to resolve societal problems arising from unsustainably high levels of consumption and over-exploitation of the earth's resources. Yet as Wilk (2001) said, in response to Miller, there surely are problems on the horizon which, without radical modification of expectations and behaviour, will have profound and damaging effects. Schor (2007) is just one of many social scientists making a case for the importance of careful analysis, with a view to intervention, to reduce the global volume of consumption. However, more significant than the opinions of social scientists is the degree and type of political mobilisation against the operation of the consumer society.

Etzioni (1998) examines people who restrict voluntarily their consumption, a tendency manifest in the USA as downshifting and voluntary simplicity. Emerging from the counterculture of the 1960s, advocates of voluntary simplicity propose that there are social and spiritual purposes and goals the achievement of which will give greater satisfaction than opulence and material possessions. Etzioni recognises that this is a strategy available only to those who already live materially comfortable lives and neither could nor ought to be expected of the poor – though a reduction of demand for luxurious material commodities on the part of the rich could have redistributive consequences consistent with the requirements of social justice.

Consumer politics has, historically taken many forms, from the setting up of cooperatives and cooperative parties, to the organising of consumer associations concerned with product quality, through specific campaigns of boycotts and buycotts to bring companies to task, via campaigns for better working conditions for producers and fair trade, to the demonstrations of the anti-globalisation movements contesting the legitimacy of the capitalist economic order (Daunton and Hilton, 2001; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Klein, 2000; Micheletti, 2003). Currently, social movements organise to contest the dominant justifications for economic exchange by seeking to subordinate economic rationality to ethical considerations. Ethical consumption demands

that corporations act in socially responsible ways and that ordinary people consider the moral status and consequences of their consumption behaviour. As Sassatelli (2006) remarks about ethical shopping guides, people can, and in certain circumstances do, consciously bring moral and political considerations to bear in their role as consumers, for instance by purchasing fair trade goods or observing No Shopping Day. Others more explicitly seek to act in accordance with environmental ethics, although the basic sense of individual empowerment may generate considerable personal doubt and insecurity and have contradictory effects. (Connolly and Prothero, 2008).

## Appropriation

How people get access to things matters, but so too does how they appropriate them and what they do with them. The notion of *appropriation* is particularly valuable. Socio-cultural studies of consumption have come to consider appropriation as central to its understanding, capturing the importance of people 'domesticating' mass produced and alien products, converting them into items with particular personal meanings and which they can use and enjoy for their own purposes. The idea of appropriation emphasises use and performance; the practical activities involved in consumption require tools and appliances, temporal and spatial organisation, and a conventional sense of acceptable conduct. By appropriation I mean making personal use of a product, whether that use be exhibited as ingestion, display, hoarding or operating a tool. This may include eating food at dinner, receiving therapeutic treatment, wearing clothes that communicate messages to others, investing in a house that will bring profit when subsequently disposed of, or playing the piano. All these are acts of appropriation through someone making use of them.

One of the main platforms for a critique of the mass culture thesis is precisely an understanding of the ways in which goods, when they are appropriated, are ascribed personal, or singular, meaning. Social psychological studies from the 1980s indicated the meanings that people attributed to goods, including that they represented the web of a person's relationships (e.g., Cziksentsmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Appadurai (1986) extended the power of these observations to contest the coherence of the prevailing critique of commodification and its social consequences. *Inter alia*, he noted that items were not once-and-for-all commodities since particular objects moved in and out of the commodity state, some being withdrawn from circulation because, for example, they are sentimentally precious. An influential essay by Kopytoff (1986) describes how people make things – even the most uniform, mass-produced goods – their own. Modification, combination with other possessions, extensive handling, frequent use and habituation through domestic display make some things personally very precious, irrespective of their initial source or cost. One implication is that what was once

an anonymous, undistinguished commodity, produced as Marx would have said simply because it could be sold at a profit, becomes a meaningful, valued and special element in an individual's symbolic universe or life-world.

Belk (1988) gives a classic account of how possessions work as an extension of the self. Possessions, the artefacts of material culture, cannot be simply relegated to the category of the inanimate, solely subject to manipulation in the light of human volition. This idea has been articulated theoretically in Actor Network Theory (ANT), which has received increasing exposure recently in studies of consumption (Callon et al., 2007). Cochoy (2008; see also 2007) uses a study of the supermarket shopping cart as a complementary and determining factor for understanding the conduct of the person doing the shopping. While actor network theory may appear to encourage the anthropomorphising of non-human actants and thereby attribute a purposive effectivity to things and beasts which are more properly considered outcomes of social arrangements and organisation, goods and technological systems undoubtedly play a major role in determining forms and levels of consumption and in establishing and reproducing social relationships (Miller, 1987).

The study of material culture has become a basis for a theoretical perspective and a distinctive approach to consumption. Goods have many functions beyond their capacity to operate as markers of social distinction. One example is their role in the activity of collecting. As Belk (1995) reports, people make collections of the most diverse types – from figurines to stamps, cigarette cards to horse brasses. Bianchi (1997) suggests that such activity, far from being idiosyncratic, is paradigmatic of consumption itself, exhibiting both seriality and the generation of novelty. Out of the anthropological tradition, and fostered notably by Daniel Miller (e.g., 1987, 1998c, and 1998b; see also *Journal of Material Culture*), the material culture approach emphasises the fundamental place of manufactured artefacts in the conduct and coordination of everyday life (see also Lury, 1996 and Dant, 1999 for sociological accounts of culture as material rather than cerebral).

Ilmonen (2004) emphasises not only the symbolic and functional aspects of goods, but also their 'productivity'; they have a capacity to enhance the skills and competence of their users as they engage with them. Goods, so to speak, teach us how to do things, and then we become able to improvise upon our own performances. Analogously, Hennion (2001; see also Teil and Hennion, 2004) shows how groups of enthusiasts, collectively, in interaction with each other, making claims and counter-claims, and reflecting on the judgments of others, come to agreements, always provisional, about what is good and what is bad. Taste is not so much innate to the product but the outcome of performances of determining quality. In another context, Woodward (2003) shows that these processes occur in the private realm of the household as people temper hedonistic impulses, disciplining their dreams and desires in order to make morally virtuous accomplishments of their homes.

Appropriation, then, is more than simply purchase or acquisition; it refers to the incorporation or adaptation of items to serve human purposes – though those purposes may not always be clearly apparent to the individuals concerned. Much can be read off from the process of appropriation (which, unlike the instantaneous act of market exchange, may occur over an extended period of time). Recent scholarship has been especially interested, perhaps obsessed, by how consumption displays identity; not only personal or self identity, but also class, ethnic and national identity. Much has been learned, such that we can see shopping as a form of cultural politics (Jackson, 1999). Less attention has, however, been devoted to what people *do*. Nevertheless, a recent revival of pragmatist thought has inspired the application of practice theory to consumption. Practice theories emphasise habits and routines, based on conventionally shared understandings about appropriate conduct, and pay attention to both ‘sayings’ and ‘doings’ (Schatzki, 1996). In some versions (e.g., Warde, 2005), the theory of practice sees consumption as explained by the necessity for people to become competent exponents of the many practices which each necessarily embraces in the course of everyday life and for which particular services and goods are mandatory.

Examination of how people use things shows that the same object comes to have different purposes over time. Gartman (2004) gives the example of the automobile. In its early days it was a symbol of distinction, when only a few rich people could afford cars. It subsequently became a mass consumption item, considered a necessity in America. More recently, in the postmodern era, the car became a mark of identity for sub-cultural groups, subject to an aesthetic logic. The motor car reflects the historical dynamic involved in the cultural logics of consumption. Similarly, Shove and Southerton (2000) show that the domestic freezer was initially a means of storing produce subject to glut but then, in association with a changing infrastructure of refrigeration where supermarkets supplied frozen part-prepared or complete meals, became an instrument of convenience. Consumption items not only adopt different roles at different times but also in different places. Wilhite et al. (1996) point to the consequences for energy-use in the home of the relative and disparate cultural importance attributed to lighting in Norway and bathing in Japan. Intensive energy-use is an environmentally sensitive aspect of all industrial societies, but mostly is invisible in everyday life. As Shove (2003b: 395) argues, ‘patterns of resource consumption (especially of energy and water) reflect what are generally inconspicuous routines and habits’. She demonstrates how standards of comfort, cleanliness and convenience developed and their implications for the normalisation of practices embedded in infrastructures over which consumers have no personal control (Shove, 2003b and 2003a).

Time is another resource over which people often have limited personal discretion. Though less frequently resorted to as a source of data on consumption than expenditure, analysis of time-use is very revealing. Making time for family occasions is something that women are particularly concerned about, a problem

exacerbated by high levels of participation of married women in the labour market. Thompson (1996) describes some of the problems associated with coordination of the schedules of household members. A much analysed example is daily eating patterns, where malign consequences for family stability are attributed to the decline of family meals. As economies become more flexible in their working hours, with more irregular patterns reflecting the longer trading hours of service industries, opportunities for household members to coordinate their schedules in order to eat together diminish (Southerton, 2003). Advocates of sustainable consumption also emphasise that time is a hugely valuable resource which is misrecognised in dominant forms of economic reckoning where per capita GNP is the primary measure of political and commercial success. As Reisch (2001) shows, the human loss involved is not simply the absolute amount of time given over by most people to unpalatable paid work, but also the constraints on the rhythm of lives, on personal control over schedules and the capacity for coordination with others in leisure.

The ratcheting-up of overall levels of consumption has led to repeated searches for mechanisms generating the apparently insatiable wants of Western populations. The environmentalist critique that contemporary consumption is unsustainable is gaining support (Jackson, 2005). Current rates of increase of overall consumption in the West portend physical harm and severe political conflict, as do the consequences of the populations of India and China reaching USA levels of automobile use or domestic heating and cooling. A range of mechanisms have been identified. Emulation, social comparison, and the search for novelty are probably the most widely explored. Fashion has been seen as important (Blumer, 1969). McCracken (1990) brought the Diderot effect to light – the process whereby one new item, for instance a piece of furniture put in a room, requires that others be replaced in order to achieve a consistent appearance. Muniz et al. (2002) identify another recent phenomenon, the brand community. Ordinary people not only actively engage with their favourite products but come to feel a sense of attachment to networks of devotees who admire the same brand. Many other competing and countervailing mechanisms also operate, suggesting that the processes driving consumption are multiple and therefore difficult to control (Daloz, 2008; Warde, 2005). One which has had less than its due attention is disposal. While the critique of the throwaway society has its exponents, empirical studies suggest that most people are not thoughtlessly wasteful and that what is saved and what is discarded is part of arrangements for the preservation of important social relationships (Gregson et al., 2007).

## Appreciation

People's conceptions of their needs and desires are based in broad frameworks of symbolic value. Associated moral, social and aesthetic judgments

can be treated as part of the process of *appreciation*, which is partly a matter of pleasure and satisfaction and partly related to the meanings attached to different activities, possessions and their aesthetic representation.

Socio-cultural studies of consumption have addressed these activities in terms of taste. Taste is a complicated concept, with many dimensions (Teil and Hennion, 2004), but socio-cultural studies have been much influenced by Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984), probably the most widely cited sociological monograph of the late twentieth century, and one widely recognised across all disciplines (see Miller, 1995). This study of Paris and Lille in the 1970s constructed a theoretical and substantive position still attracting widespread attention (Sallaz and Zavisca, 2007). Bourdieu argued for a particular understanding of the relationship between cultural consumption and power. He maintained that dominant classes regularly succeed in establishing that their own cultural practice is intrinsically of superior quality which becomes consecrated as 'legitimate' taste. Established as a marker of distinction and social superiority, taste comes to play a central role in not only representing but also reproducing class privilege. This argument, and the theoretical framework within which it was advanced, has proved highly controversial and has inspired many subsequent studies (Silva and Warde, 2010). Some provide broad, if often qualified, support for his central thesis (Bennett et al., 2009; Holt, 1997a., Prieur et al., 2008). Other empirical studies of similar phenomena are more critical (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2010; Lahire, 2004; Lamont, 1992). Yet others, looking from a comparative and historical perspective show convincingly that distinction could be manifest through means other than competence in legitimate culture and that likes and dislikes may neither be symmetrical nor structured only by class (Daloz, 2007 and 2008; Wilk, 1997, respectively). Lizardo (2009) in a recent review of the relationship between stratification and cultural consumption argues that exploitation of cultural advantage increasingly is achieved through face-to-face interaction, evidence of new forms of mediation between class and culture rather than their disappearance. Meanwhile DiMaggio and Mukhtar (2004) show that preferences for legitimate cultural forms are in decline, specifically among the younger generation in the USA.

One problem for the Bourdieusian position is the way in which the escalation of cultural production, the increasing availability in the market of a diverse set of cultural products, has altered, blurred, even dismantled, the boundaries between types of culture. As cultural studies maintain, if there ever was a strong demarcation between high and popular culture, then the culture industries of the late twentieth century did a great deal to eliminate it, partly by de-masking it as a tool of elite privilege, partly by documenting the high level of interchange between the realms in the postmodern cultural system. Sociological studies took a slightly different tack when charting the emergence of 'cultural omnivorousness'. Peterson (1992 with Simkus; 1996 with Kern) propounded the influential thesis, extensively re-examined since, especially in the journal *Poetics*,

that people of high socio-economic status now obtain greater kudos from displaying tastes drawn from *both* legitimate *and* popular culture. With an affinity to eclecticism, omnivorousness involves familiarity with many different types and genres of cultural product, television as well as opera, sport in addition to theatre. In many ways this is simply to say that those of high socio-economic status make most use of all the available facilities provided by consumer culture. But as Erickson (1996) suggests, this may conceal instrumental interests in, for instance, the contemporary business world in order to build connections and lubricate social relationships across hierarchical divisions. Whether omnivorousness is itself a form of distinction, or simply the adoption of a benign pluralist orientation, remains in dispute, though importantly Holbrook et al. (2002) show that it is possible for effacement of cultural boundaries, omnivorous orientations and distinction to co-exist simultaneously.

Beneath the umbrella of these general theses about the relationship between culture and social hierarchy many detailed studies of the sources of differential taste have flourished. Studies of social differentiation continue, there being signs of a revival of interest in the role of consumption behaviour in establishing social distinction and status hierarchies, implying re-recognition of the importance of interpersonal comparison (see Warde, 1997; Schor, 1998; Storper, 2000; Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Chan, 2010; Bennett et al., 2009; Ollivier et al., 2010). How much class still matters remains controversial (compare Chan and Goldthorpe, 2004 with Gayo-Cal et al., 2006 and LeRoux et al., 2008 for the UK). One conclusion from a vast raft of studies would be that it matters to a different extent in different countries. Katz-Gerro (2002) is one of many whose systematic comparative studies show variation across countries in the relative importance of class and other lines of social division. Studies of youth sub-cultures since the 1960s, in association with accumulated survey evidence, suggest that age is probably increasingly important in cultural differentiation (Bennett et al., 2009). There are also gender differences, with for instance women in most countries more engaged than men with legitimate culture (Katz-Gerro, 2006; DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004). Sufficient evidence is not yet available to assess systematically the difference that ethnic group makes, though Lamont and Molnar (2002) in a case study of African-Americans show some significantly different commitments and orientations. While socio-demographic differences continue to register, segmentation may be as much a matter of horizontal diversity as social hierarchy.

While statistically significant associations between social position and cultural taste exist everywhere, the objects of group preferences differ from place to place and often change rapidly. The forces of globalisation affect not only the availability of goods and services, but also estimates of the symbolic value of both transnational and local attachments. A pessimistic view of globalisation, echoing of the critique of mass society, bemoans the homogenisation caused by the availability of the same retailers, the same products and

the same activities from one town to the next, one country to the other. McDonalds is the often cited exemplar of the geographical dispersal of sameness. Yet fast food, like many other manufactured commodities, can be a source of discrimination and social differentiation as it comes to symbolise modernity, convenience and 'cool' for some groups, but also a major threat to tradition, gastronomic value, and indeed health, for others (Fantasia, 1995). Indeed, even McDonalds, despite being the watchword for uniformity, consistency and standardisation, modifies its menus to suit local tastes (Watson, 1997). *A fortiori* in other spheres, the external threat of imposed uniformity leads to stronger expressions of local distinctiveness, creating a global-local dialectic, or glocalisation (Robertson, 1992). Global flows – of people, money, messages, ideas and commands – are a source of hybridity and local particularity (Appadurai, 1990, 1996). Local consumption cultures persist, indeed their elements are often created anew (Jackson, 2004). Processes of adaptation, incorporation, modification and re-definition operate in the food realm (e.g., Wilk, 2006). Miller (1998), for example, maintains that Coca-Cola is just not the same in Trinidad as it is in Chicago. Another strong impulse behind responses to globalising tendencies is the attempt to reassert local or national traditions, an instrumental economic process in the face of the symbolic role for international tourists of 'authentic' culture (MacCannell, 1989). Of course, the authentic is often highly fabricated; sometimes traditions are consciously invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). But to dismiss all such activity as commercial sham would be too sceptical, for movements of consumers, often themselves enthusiasts, seek items of superior quality which they consider embody aesthetic value. The Slow Food Movement is just one example of the collaboration involved in bridging the gap between production and consumption through shared commitments to particular aesthetic principles and standards (Miele and Murdoch, 2002).

Reviewing the role of appreciation raises the issue once again of the purpose and function of consumption in modern societies. What human satisfaction does it serve? Of course, consumption could never be eliminated; but it always takes different forms. One important consideration in light of the argument that current levels of material consumption are environmentally unsustainable is whether alternative models of the good life, ones which do not irreversibly deplete the earth's natural resources or have a heavy carbon footprint, will gain in appeal. A very influential article by Easterlin (1974) argued that after reaching a certain level of consumption happiness ceases to increase in proportion to wealth. In a review of subsequent studies, Easterlin (2001) suggests that people continuously adjust their thresholds of satisfaction, mostly upwards. A key question then is what kinds of less damaging practices can deliver equivalent, or greater, pleasure and satisfaction? A suitable topic for utopian reflection, one thought-provoking solution is Darrier's (1999) panegyric to laziness; perhaps doing less, rushing less and striving less for material possessions would increase the total sum of human

happiness? In the end, fittingly, the moral and normative dimensions of a critical appraisal of consumption re-emerge, a provocation to an orthodoxy which equates economic growth and ever greater consumption with happiness, human progress and political success (Jackson, 2009).

## Conclusions

Two decades of research within socio-cultural studies of consumption have produced some substantial intellectual achievements. The recognition that consumption is a necessary, enjoyable and often constructive process, a process of creative appropriation of goods and services and their application to reasonable and commendable personal and sociable ends, has reversed the condescension expressed towards popular culture and popular practices by critics of mass culture. People find within their activities both frustrations and satisfaction, not all of which are simple matters of calculation. The limits of a purely cognitivist approach to explaining commodity purchase and consumption have become more widely appreciated. Emotion, dreaming, fashion, addiction, emulation, insignia of membership, gifts – phenomena which can hardly be subsumed under a model of *homo economicus*, and which typically are ignored within a notion of revealed preference – encapsulate personal and social mechanisms which configure consumer behaviour. This is not to suggest that the economic dimension of understanding consumption can be dismissed, rather that it requires reformulation. Neither neo-classical economics nor the economic presumptions of other social sciences are adequate, but their manifest weaknesses have made space for a better understanding, and more balanced critique, of markets and commodification.

The cultural turn enhanced understanding, even if it exaggerated the importance of consumption as communication. Conceiving of consumption as appropriation and as an element of practice has, by emphasising what people do, provided counterpoise. On the way we have obtained detailed knowledge of many mundane elements of everyday life which would previously have been ignored – shopping, laundry, telephoning, watching TV. That has led to the rediscovery of the social relations which constitute the collective dimension of consumption. Consuming together is not only a means of creating and affirming group belonging but also an essential aspect of reproducing social relationships. The link between inequality and cultural consumption has kept the issue of class on the agenda and focused attention on the new cultural intermediaries whose behaviour both as producers and consumers marks out the parameters of a changing consumer culture. In addition, other dimensions of social inequality – of ethnicity, gender and generation, as well as between nations – have been highlighted.

Overall, the research of the last twenty years has shifted us from a situation of speculative critique of the consequences of consumption in an era of

material abundance to one in which we have a much better grasp of what channels consumer aspirations and what issues of social justice it raises. Despite considerable progress, much remains to be done. At a theoretical level there is little sign of persuasive syntheses of the different approaches to the understanding of consumption, either within or between disciplines. A more thorough specification and classification of the social mechanisms that generate patterns of consumption would help. So too would greater investment of effort in systematic comparative studies to establish the difference that institutional context makes. Specification of the relationship between production and consumption remains as intractable as ever, though further analysis of intermediation processes should advance knowledge significantly, necessary as the coordination of production and consumption becomes an increasingly political matter. In the face of serious concerns about the sustainability of current and projected patterns of consumption, disputes over the best arrangements for promoting personal and social well-being may be expected to figure prominently in the near future. It will continue to pose a challenge to social science, poised as it is between empirical analysis and normative critique. Let us hope that social science will be able to offer sound evidence about the causes and consequences of different ways to socially organise consumption.

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- AQ:1 "Geographies of food: following" this sentence incomplete? Please check.
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