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## **“Summary of article by Colin Campbell: Consumption: The New Wave of Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences”**

Recent years have seen a marked upsurge of interest in the topic of consumption both in the social sciences and in the humanities. This essay surveys leading contributions to consumption research from a wide range of disciplines.

Several factors have contributed to the outburst of recent research on consumption. Historians have recognized that characteristics of a consumer society can be found in pre-industrial societies, giving rise to studies of the role of consumption before and during industrialization. A group of neo-Marxist writers has adapted Marxist ideas, formerly focused on production, to the analysis of modern consumer societies. Trends in cultural analysis have led to a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of consumer culture. Urban sociology has focused on collective consumption. Feminism and women's studies have given prominence to such topics as fashion, the body, diet, advertising, shopping, and housework. Effects of these and related changes are seen throughout the social sciences and humanities.

### **Social Sciences**

Until recently, traditional analyses of consumption in the social sciences, such as those of Veblen, Marx, Weber, and others, were largely neglected in fields other than anthropology. Anthropology emphasizes social systems, structures of interaction, and kinship. This focus has led to concerns for property rights, inheritance, and consumption practices within the context of large systems of social relations. In 1978, Douglas and Isherwood's book, The World of Goods<sup>1</sup> was an isolated contribution to the understanding of consumption. More recent anthropology has focused on "material culture" with a consequent interest in exchange and commodities.

Within sociology, the neo-Marxist Jean Baudrillard has been influential in drawing on semiotics to analyze the "commodity sign" rather than the commodity. For Baudrillard, commodities are valued for their symbolic meanings rather than for their use; in many cases, only the meanings are consumed. Neo-Marxist thinker, Daniel Miller, blends Simmel, Hegel and Marx to develop a theory in which consumption in modern industrial societies is alienating, but at the same time allows the possibility of an escape from alienation. Other new wave writers, not all of them Marxists, tend to echo the theme that there is the potential for liberation within modern consumption.

The recent revival of urban sociology has included a focus on collective consumption. Peter Saunders draws on this and other areas of sociology to develop a theory in which consumption plays a central role, analogous to the role of production in classical Marxism; his work has predictably been controversial. The most important recent sociological work, attributed to Bourdieu, relates

semiotics to neo-Marxist thought, but perhaps it is understood best as a development and extension of Veblen's work. Like Veblen, Bourdieu sees the role of consumption, and the development of socially differentiated tastes, as central to the creation of hierarchy. He differs in stressing the individual's possession of symbolic or cultural capital that can be used to display taste, rather than material goods per se.

"Economics remains the one social science discipline in which least progress has occurred with respect to the study of consumption." (64) Despite the writings of Veblen, Keynes, and Galbraith, little has been done. Important works, none of them current, include Nurkse on the international demonstration effect, and Hirsch and Scitovsky on the inadequacies of conventional theories of demand.

Research on consumption in psychology appears less prominent than it did in the past, although there are signs of stirring and new approaches. The work of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton on the meaning and symbolic significance of material objects has been influential, and is compatible with the approaches to consumption in other fields as well as in psychology.

## **Humanities**

In history the role of consumption in the Industrial Revolution, and its significance in "early" or "pre-modern" societies, has been studied by a growing number of historians. The pathbreaking works are those of Fernand Braudel, especially Capitalism and Material Life 1400-1800<sup>2</sup>. McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb have argued that a consumer revolution was a necessary part of England's eighteenth-century revolution in production. Numerous other historians have examined other aspects of European consumption before and during industrialization, all emphasizing the vital contribution which consumption made to the emergence of modern society.

In philosophy, the debates over the concept of "need," and the associated distinction between "necessity" and "luxury" have been important to economic theory in the past, and to social theory today. Simple distinctions between "true" and "false" needs are generally untenable, while there are still significant questions relating to the distinction between needs, wants, desires, and interests. However, these questions no longer occupy their earlier prominence in social theory.

Semiotics, which emphasizes communication and symbolic meanings, has influenced the discussion of consumption. In the absence of detailed case studies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century consumption, theorists have sometimes turned to fiction of the period as a source of descriptive narratives.

## **Conclusion**

An early phase of research on consumption, dominated by critiques of the conventional utilitarian approach of economics and appeals for the development of new methods, is coming to an end. The "pre-paradigmatic" stage of consumption studies is nearly complete, although it is not yet clear what the new theoretical paradigm will be, nor where the boundaries of the emerging field of study will lie.

Several concluding observations may be hazarded about the further development of the field. "[First,] the tendency, prevalent in economics, to see consumption as an end of human activity has ... given way to a presumption that it is indeed better understood as a means to some further end ... [Second,] the assumption that consumption refers specifically to the selection, purchase and use of material objects has increasingly been questioned ... because of a growing awareness that it is not so much objects as their meanings which are indeed consumed. .. Third and finally, one might predict that the study of consumption will slowly free itself from its present close involvement with cultural theory ... [and] debates over postmodernism ..." (71)

### **Notes**

1. M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York: Norton, 1978).
2. Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life 1400-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973).