



“Summary of article by Daniel Miller: The Study of Consumption, Object Domains, Ideology and Interests’ and ‘Towards a Theory of Consumption” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. 52-58.

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“Summary of article by Daniel Miller¹: The Study of Consumption, Object Domains, Ideology and Interests’ and ‘Towards a Theory of Consumption”

Consumption is important to various social functionings, but it also represents an avenue through which individuals can express themselves and combat the contradictions of modern culture. These chapters critique prior sociological analyses of consumption represented by the works of Veblen, Bourdieu, Marcuse and Baudrillard, and then argue for a theory that vindicates consumption's greater role in society.

Consumption as Social Differentiation

Thorstein Veblen's classic, The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899), may almost be credited with initiating the study of consumption as a social phenomenon.

Veblen clarified the two major means by which the relatively small leisure class extended influence over society through its tastes. First, "refined" or "cultivated" taste became associated with distance from the world of work; objects suggesting practical necessity could be dismissed as "cheap." Second, the process of emulation, by which each group seeks to copy those above itself, extends upper-class standards throughout society.

Pierre Bourdieu's recent book, Distinction (1984), also locates the source of tastes in distance from work, and sees such tastes as the key dimension controlling the significance of goods. In addressing the formation of preferences, Bourdieu analyzes Kant's concept of the aesthetic as contemplation which transcends the immediacy of experience. This detached, abstract aesthetic is only one of several possible perspectives - specifically, that of the dominant class, which can distance itself from work and necessity.

Bourdieu contrasts this with the "anti-Kantian" aesthetic of popular culture, which prefers immediate entertainment, and sensual and representational styles of art. The "anti-Kantian" tastes of working people derive from the immediacy of their work experience, and the pressure imposed by their needs and insecurities. In contrast, those brought up in the abstractions of education and capital, secure in their economic position, can cultivate "Kantian" tastes.

Education is increasingly used to develop tastes that support current social differences, since it generates distinctions based on learning rather than birth or wealth. Education gives rise to what Bourdieu terms "cultural capital"; i.e., certain kinds of knowledge, such as knowledge of the classics or memorizing football scores. Education emphasizes the importance of, and provides the means to decode, the abstract and esoteric subjects of high culture. The differing tastes of social groups can be seen not only in the arts, but also in areas such as food, with nouvelle cuisine as the analogue to abstract art and avant-garde theater.

Bourdieu clearly intends to expose the pretensions of middle- and upper-class taste, but his account is limited by his exclusive reliance on a questionnaire, rather than surveys of actual practice; his neglect of the influence of marketing; and his lack of a historical perspective on consumption. Ultimately, Bourdieu implies the same romantic preference for the work ethic and antipathy towards abstraction as Veblen.

Material Ideology

Bourdieu and others assume that differences in consumption practices correspond to differences between predefined social groups. An alternative approach allows that consumption of particular groups of commodities need not be associated with a given social group. Several illustrations can be drawn from consumption patterns in contemporary Britain.

For example, the widespread council (public) housing is a powerful expression of the ideals of communality, technology, and modernism. However, it is created by architects, builders, developers, and other members of the professional middle class. These professionals do not choose council housing for themselves, but rather prefer suburban, semi-detached or detached houses, which can be seen as part of an opposition to elements of modernity and urbanization. The same group of people sustain the image of individualism and opposition to modernity when acting as consumers, yet construct the very image of community and modernity when acting as producers. As a result, the image they create as producers appears to be the image of those who have been excluded from decision-making, namely the tenants of council housing.

The Limits of Objectivism

Objectivist analyses - those which downplay the subject- or agency-centered perspective - have tended toward a totalizing approach, subsuming the whole spectrum of commodities under a notion of cultural dominance. Examples of this approach include Marcuse, the earlier work of Lukacs, Barthes, Lasch, Ewen and Ewen, and Haug. An example of what appears to be the inevitable result of objectivism can be seen in the study of the commodity by the French social theorist Baudrillard. Beginning with a symbolic analysis of modern mass consumption, Baudrillard was concerned to critique the concepts of utility in mainstream economics, and use value in Marxian theory. While initially creative, this critique eventually led to the contention that objects not only did not signify use value, but in fact did not signify anything outside of themselves. The result is typical of post-structuralist thought; one is left with objects without meaning, signs without signification.

All analyses based on strong objectivism tend to reproduce what has been called the mass culture critique, in which the objects of mass consumption today are treated as so tainted, superficial and trite that they could not possibly be worth investigating. In Bourdieu's terms, this rejection of popular taste, in the form of esoteric academic critiques, can be seen as closely aligned with the avant-garde arts as a type of cultural capital.

Recontextualization

Extreme objectivism, expressing an image of overarching class interest or subsuming discourse, linked to production or to capitalism in general, eliminates the possibility of dominated groups as arbiters of cultural form. In the case of building style, this is a viable approach; but other examples suggest an alternative conclusion.

For example, a study of candies purchased by British children themselves, as opposed to those purchased by adults for them, reveals a pattern of symbolically "inedible" colors and shapes, particularly ghoulish representations of corpses, blood, vampires and death. Here a dominated group, children, clearly asserts a perspective of opposition to the interests of the dominant group, adults. This suggests a degree of autonomy in cultural production on behalf of dominated groups. While the candies are mass produced, it is hard to believe that industry has chosen the forms which are popular with their customers; rather, there is the emergence, over time, of a children's culture, and a mutually constituted relationship between the interests and self-images of industry and its young customers.

A balance between objectivism and subjectivism can be seen as a balance between the weight assigned to production and consumption. The two are constantly interactive, not largely autonomous as implied by Bourdieu. Despite enormous efforts made through advertising, profits are always dependent upon the reciprocal ability of marketers to interpret changes in the way goods are used in social relations.

This point is underlined by another example, a study of the changing meaning of the motor scooter. The scooter was originally developed and marketed in Italy as the feminine alternative to the more macho motorcycle. Later, the scooter fit into the emergent polarities in British youth culture, being adopted by the "mods" as part of a softer, continental style, rather than the "rockers," who preferred motorcycles for their harder, American image. No longer tied to gender, the British meaning of the scooter is consistent with, but not determined by, the original image created by the industry.

The three examples, all drawn from contemporary British consumption patterns, lend themselves to different theoretical perspectives. It is no coincidence that they differ markedly in size, and hence in related properties as well. Buildings are enormous, expensive, highly visible, and highly durable objects; the result is extensive involvement of the state, and opportunities for conspicuous consumption. In contrast, "portable industrial artifacts," of which scooters are only one of many examples, are cheaper, less durable, and therefore more amenable to short-term fashion; while not attracting state involvement, they are the subject of mass marketing, and experience dynamic interplay between the worlds of business and consumption. Finally, there are goods such as candies, which are so small, cheap and transient that little research is likely to be put into active promotion of new forms determined by industry, and the producer may be reduced to relatively passive response to apparent shifts in demand. In sum, the nature of material culture itself may be a much underestimated factor in accounting for the patterns and relationships of modern style.

The complexity of the relationship between producer and consumer interests is further illustrated by the case of advertising in women's magazines, which merges with and often overwhelms the articles. Do readers merely put up with the advertising to read the incidental articles? A more

plausible view is that readers want the advertising as a guide to socially acceptable or fashionable consumption, which they look forward to as a reward for and relief from time spent in unpleasant labor. The fact that advertising may have nothing to do with the material and functional nature of the product is beside the point, if consumers are buying a product for its social (or humorous, moral, or sexual) meaning.

Unlike architecture and art, where professionals impose the image of another class on consumers, fashion offers the possibility of mass participation, in which images provide groups with a vehicle for appropriating and utilizing cultural forces themselves. The fantasy involved in fashion may or may not mystify the objective facts of women's oppression; but like religion, it is a world of idealized morals and possibilities, of outrageous alternatives to everyday life - and as such, it has attractions of its own for the consumers.

The complexity of, and differences between, the examples discussed here calls for a recognition of the pluralism of consumer culture. In certain circumstances, segments of the population are able to appropriate industrial objects and utilize them in the creation of their own image. In other cases, people are forced to live in and through objects which are created by a different and dominant section of the population. As in the case of motor scooters, the meaning of a good may be transformed by consumers after it is produced.

Unhappy Consciousness

The feeling of anomie experienced in modern society is due to the contradictions that inhere in modern industry, state, and culture. These contradictions embrace both the conveniences of modern life and the negative aspects of their cumulative impact on modern conditions.

Industry's autonomous interests in their products as vehicles for capital expansion conflict with consumer interests in products as a means of self-creation. This contradiction is evident in the role played by money. Ostensibly, money gives the consumer freedom to choose goods, while industry is interested in capital accumulation, i.e., profit. Since successful industry is determined by profitability rather than by the impact of its products, consumers may suffer when industrial interests are left unbridled.

The state is the only force large enough to limit industry's excessive pursuit of profits. But state intervention to ensure equitable distributions of capital may conflict with its interest in cultural diversity, especially if it becomes an autonomous institution that seeks equality at the expense of pluralism. Finally, the growth of cultural modernism leads not only to the advance of science and social innovation, but also to the rise of sterile art and architecture, and other factors contributing to the sense of modernism as alien abstraction.

Post-modernist critics view consumption and the consumer through the narrow lenses of the commodity-form and the process of commodity acquisition, respectively. This approach fails to appreciate that historical changes in labor conditions (e.g., contemporary laborers work fewer hours) have led to an overall increase in hours spent in consumption, transforming the dynamics of consumption. The extra time for consumption allows the consumer to personalize goods in a manner that overwhelms their alienated origins in the process of mass production. At the

moment of purchase or allocation the consumer begins to integrate the good into process of self-construction, transforming the good from a condition of alienation to one of inalienation. "This is the start of a long and complex process, by which the consumer works upon the object purchased and recontextualizes it, until it is often no longer recognizable as having any relation to the world of the abstract and becomes its very negation, something which could be neither bought nor given." (190)

Modern Consumption and Equality

While individualism and social inequality are often linked to mass consumption practices in capitalist systems, the global diversity of mass consumption societies suggest that consumption is expressed in a range of forms. The central problem for modern consumption practices is that goods are often consumed vicariously for individualistic reasons. When goods are consumed for purposes of class oppression and social climbing, consumption promotes inequality. Alternatively, consumption may promote equality when goods are consumed for the purposes of creating strong social networks. Different goods lend themselves to these alternative purposes. In consumption lies the promise for social equality, but this potential can only be achieved when the demand for greater material advantage represents the demand for sociability, close social peer groups, and normative order.

Consumption practices have become a form of self-production: witness the return to gardening, home brewing, and do-it-yourself activities. Such productive consumption challenges traditional dichotomies between production and consumption as well as Bourdieu's view that all consumption is social differentiation. Bourdieu overlooks the possibility that consumption may be used by all social groups to confront alienation.

Mass goods represent culture, not because they are merely there as the environment within which we operate, but because they are an integral part of that process of objectification by which we create ourselves as an industrial society: our identities, our social affiliations, our lived everyday practices. The authenticity of artefacts as culture derives, not from their relationship to some historical style or manufacturing process ... but rather from their active participation in a process of social self-creation in which they are directly constitutive of our understanding of ourselves and others. (215)

Notes

1. Miller's discussion of consumption is motivated by his view that a better world will be organized around a form of socialism. Progress toward a progressive socialist state can only arise when the alienating effects of mass production are offset by consumption-based activity in which consumers create themselves through modern goods. This summary does not focus on the political implications of Miller's work. Also, the summary starts in the middle of chapter 8, on p. 147.