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## Consumer Culture and Modernity

Consumption is always and everywhere a cultural process, but 'consumer culture' – a culture *of* consumption – is unique and specific: it is the dominant mode of cultural reproduction developed in the west over the course of modernity. Consumer culture is in important respects *the* culture of the modern west – certainly central to the meaningful practice of everyday life in the modern world; and it is more generally bound up with central values, practices and institutions which define western modernity, such as choice, individualism and market relations. If we were to extract a single defining feature it would run something like this: consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets. Consumer culture marks out a system in which consumption is dominated by the consumption of commodities, and in which cultural reproduction is largely understood to be carried out through the exercise of free personal choice in the private sphere of everyday life.

Consumer culture was not the only mode of cultural reproduction in operation over the last three hundred years, nor the only one now. One can distinguish residual and emergent, oppositional and eccentric modes of cultural reproduction, just as when we think about modes of production. New Yorkers, for example, raised animals for domestic consumption in uptown Manhattan right to the end of the nineteenth century (Braverman 1974: 274). Today we still like to distinguish gift-giving from commodity-exchange; we also may feel that some cultural goods (for example, friendship, character) cannot be bought; we may even make, rather than buy, some of the things we use. Similarly, the very idea of the welfare state originally represented an alternative mode of meeting needs, one that prioritized collective provision over the private consumption of commodities. Consumer culture is not the only way in which consumption is carried out and everyday

life reproduced; but it is certainly the dominant way and possesses a practical scope and ideological depth which allows it to structure and subsume all others to a very great extent.

Nor is consumer culture a purely western affair. It arose in the west, from about the eighteenth century onwards, as part of the west's assertion of its own difference from the rest of the world as modern, progressive, free, rational. But in the idea of consumer culture there was an assumption of dominance and denigration, of the western sense of itself as civilized and righteously affluent, as possessing values that have a universal character. Consumer culture has been a flagship for the advance of western business, western markets and a western way of life. As an aspect of the universalizing project of western modernity, consumer culture has both global pretensions and global extension.

Finally, it may seem odd to define consumer culture in terms of the *modern* west – as a mode of cultural reproduction extending from the eighteenth century to the present. Consumer culture appears to many as fully formed only in the *postmodern* era. However, consumer culture is inextricably bound up with modernity as a whole. I mean two things by this. Firstly, core institutions, infrastructures and practices of consumer culture originated in the early modern period, and some of these were well established (at least for some classes and some economic sectors) by this time. Consumer culture is not a late consequence of industrial modernization and cultural modernity, something that followed after the intellectual and industrial labours of modernity were accomplished. It was rather part of the very making of the modern world. Secondly, consumer culture is bound up with the *idea* of modernity, of modern experience and of modern social subjects. In so far as 'the modern' constitutes itself around a sense of the world experienced by a social actor who is deemed individually free and rational, within a world no longer governed by tradition but rather by flux, and a world produced through rational organization and scientific know-how, then the figure of the consumer and the experience of consumerism is both exemplary of the new world and integral to its making.

### Looking backwards

This *longue durée* view of consumer culture contradicts some common-sense views of it. Consumer culture, in fact, inhabits an odd time-frame: on the one hand, modern forms of consumption – like modern forms of the market in much economic theory – are often regarded as effectively universal and eternal; on the other hand, in everyday experience consumer culture lives

in a perpetual year zero of newness. Consumer culture is about continuous self-creation through the accessibility of things which are themselves presented as new, modish, faddish or fashionable, always improved and improving. In keeping with the fashionable experience it provides, the very idea of consumer culture is constantly heralded as new; in each generation the Columbus of capitalism rediscover the promised land of affluent freedom; while critics – both left and right – report our arrival in a frozen land of wealth without value.

In what follows, I want to disrupt this sense of eternal newness by telling the history of consumer culture backwards. This will allow us to trace each 'new age' back to a previous one and at the same to get a clearer sense of how consumer culture is bound up with 'the whole of modernity'.

The 1980s saw one of the most powerful rediscoveries of consumerism. The consumer was the hero of the hour, not just as the provider of that buying power which would fuel economic growth (though this was central too, and encouraged through phenomenal credit expansion, deficit financing and income tax reductions) but as the very model of the modern subject and citizen. Exemplified in neo-liberalism – specifically in Reaganomics and Thatcherism – consumer choice became the obligatory pattern for all social relations and the template for civic dynamism and freedom. Collective and social provision gave way to radical individualism (as Thatcher put it, 'There is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families.'). And this individual was enterprising – dynamically and unabashedly self-interested – as exemplified in the yuppie and in the character of Gekko in the film *Wall Street*. The 1980s also heralded the subordination of production to consumption in the form of marketing: design, retailing, advertising and the product concept were ascendent, reflected in postmodern theory as the triumph of the sign and the aestheticization of everyday life. Much-publicized claims about the reorganization of capitalist production and its relation to the state (post-Fordism, disorganized capitalism, flexible accumulation) all argued that Fordist mass consumption – the pioneer of consumer culture – was giving way or giving birth to a newer and truer consumer culture of target or niche marketing, in which the forging of personal identity would be firmly and pleasurably disentangled from the worlds of both work and politics and would be carried out in a world of plural, malleable, playful consumer identities, a process ruled over by the play of image, style, desire and signs. Consumer culture was now all about 'keeping different from the Joneses'.

Both neo-liberalism and postmodernism proclaimed and seemingly endorsed the murder of critical reason by consumer sovereignty: standards of value other than the preferences expressed by individuals in the marketplace were derided as elitist, conservative or simply ungrounded. The

ideological consumerism of the 1980s then foregrounds radical individualism and privatism on the one hand, and on the other their grounding in a modality of signs and meanings (rather than needs and wants): this consumer culture is proudly superficial, profoundly about appearances. Materialism is neither good nor bad – it's all there is. And when this situation obtains, as Raymond Williams (1980: 185) puts it, we turn out not to be 'sensibly materialistic' at all: unhinged from core social identities and physical want, consumerism becomes a pure play of signs. The ideological miracle carried out by 1980s consumer culture was to tie this image of unhinged superficiality to the most profound, deep structural values and promises of modernity: personal freedom, economic progress, civic dynamism and political democracy. Through the neo-liberal renaissance and the crumbling of Marxism (in the west and the east), consumer culture was seen in terms of the freedoms of the market and therefore as the guarantor of both economic progress and individual freedom.

Ironically, 1980s positions on consumer culture, whether neo-liberal, postmodern or critical, largely presented themselves as reactions against the 1950s and 1960s, as commentaries on the bankruptcy of the post-war consensus (both its establishment version and its opponents). Yet this consensus had presented itself, in its own time, as marking the arrival of the industrial world in the promised land of consumerist plenty. The great theme of the period is the triumph of economic managerialism, through Keynesian economics and welfare statism, over the crisis-tendencies of capitalism exemplified in the Great Depression. The vista of an 'organized capitalism' (Lash and Urry 1987) with smoothly expanding prosperity placed consumer culture near its centre as simultaneously the engine of prosperity, a pre-eminent tool for managing economic and political stability and the reward for embracing the system. The harmonious marriage of managerial collectivism and consumerist individualism – the mixed economy – is precisely what 1980s neo-liberalism loathed, as exemplified in the idea of regulation and in the split between social provision for welfare and infrastructure on the one hand and private sector enterprise on the other. At the time, however, 'You never had it so good.' This is the period of the economic miracle that was so directly experienced in rising consumption standards. It was so good in fact that – within the ideological climate up to the 1970s – critics of consumer culture had to reach for ever more tenuous accounts of how a world both so systemically stable and individually satisfying could be deemed *unsuccessful* by either intellectuals or their erstwhile revolutionary agents.

In fact the image of the post-war consumer and consumer boom is rather schizoid. On the one hand, consumer culture – especially in the 1950s – appears as a new age of conformity, of 'organization man', of the 'other-

directed' narcissist, of the mass cultural dope or couch potato keeping up with the Joneses through the slavish mass consumption of standardized mass production goods, the land of Levittown and American cars (Mills 1951; Riesman 1961; Whyte 1957). The consumer is the 'affluent worker' (Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1968-9), steadily building up domestic capital within the framework of long-term job security. The stability of the everyday consuming household was itself anchored within the protective harbour of the Keynesian state, which organized itself around a table with chairs set out for organized government, organized business and organized labour. Fordism, it was argued, provided a prosperous yet empty contentment, involving a colonization of everyday life by corporations and consumption norms which rendered it status-driven and conformist, mass and anti-individualist. Prosperity and the good life meant the *ability* to keep up with the Joneses.

On the other hand, 'the affluent society' (Galbraith 1969) could also involve disturbingly explosive and hedonistic consumption patterns among new social groups which were themselves crucially defined by their consumption: the emergence of the teenager, of the Butlins working class, of the suburban family and so on. The affluent society was a consumer society in which economic prosperity brought insatiable and morally dubious wants, a crisis in values over the work ethic, a bifurcation of desire between respectable consumption (consumption within the framework of the family, the spread of bourgeois propriety through the accumulation of domestic capital) and hedonistic, amoral, non-familial consumption (Bell 1979). On the Marxist side, this period also seemed to confirm a long-worked-out analysis of consumer culture as a form of social and political managerialism, a way to ensure political docility through a mass policy of bread and circuses.

If we date it from the post-war period, consumer culture appears as the culmination of Fordist mass production coupled with Keynesian economic managerialism, both together producing a stable affluence which carries the seeds of its own destruction: moral destruction through conformity or hedonism, socio-economic destruction through the triumph of collectivist regulation, and so on. But post-war consumerism represents the spread of social themes and arrangements which were pioneered in the previous era. The 1920s was probably the first decade to proclaim a generalized ideology of affluence. Above all, it promoted a powerful link between everyday consumption and modernization. From the 1920s, the world was to be modernized partly *through* consumption; consumer culture itself was dominated by the idea that everyday life could and should be *modern*, and that to a great extent it already was. Ewen (1976) and Marchand (1986), for example, demonstrate that the burgeoning advertising and marketing of this era were selling not just consumer goods, but consumerism itself as the

shining path to modernity: they incited their publics to modernize themselves, modernize their homes, their means of transport. The exemplary goods of the period are about the mechanization of everyday life, starting with houses themselves, and extending to their electrification; then durables like washing machines, vacuum cleaners, fridges, telephones; then, finally, the automobile for that modern sense of movement into the future and into the jazz age. This is the age of real estate, consumer credit and cars: modern appliances, bought by modern methods, placed in a modern household. The 1920s was probably the first era in which modernity was widely held to be a state that *has already been reached* by the population in general, a state we are in or nearly in, rather than one towards which an avant-garde points: in the consuming activities of the middle-class the ultra-modern future was already readable, already beginning to happen.

The 1920s (and, especially in America, the previous two decades as well) exhibit a similar moral split to the post-war era: Sinclair Lewis's (1922) *Babbitt*, on one side, exemplifies consumerism, 'boosterism', the life of selling and goods, as the route to empty mass conformity (especially within the increasingly privatized, suburbanized and nuclearized family); the flapper, the cinema, the automobile and Prohibition represent the other side: the licentious, youth-oriented, pleasure-oriented orgy of the jazz age, Hollywood and Harlem nights. Again, and quite early on, consumerism shows its double face: it is registered on the one hand as a tool of social order and private contentment, on the other as social licence and cultural disruption.

The 1920s appear as the first consumerist decade, but on closer inspection they seem merely the harvesting of a much longer revolution, commonly periodized as 1880-1930. This era sees the emergence of a mass production system of manufacture increasingly dedicated to producing consumer goods (rather than the heavy capital goods, such as steel, machinery and chemicals, which dominated much of the later nineteenth century). If consumer culture is born here it is because we emphasize several interlocked developments: mass manufacture; the geographical and social spreading of the market; the rationalization of the form and organization of production (see, for example, Aglietta 1979; Boorstin 1973; Fraser 1981; Pope 1983).

Incontrovertibly, it is in this period that all the features which make up consumer culture take on their mature form, but more importantly it is in this period that a modern *norm* emerges concerning how consumer goods are to be produced, sold and assimilated into everyday life. Only now does the following description become normative if not yet universal: goods are designed with standardized, replaceable components which allow them to be produced in very large volumes at low unit cost through an intensive, rationally controlled and increasingly automated technical division of labour.

This is ultimately exemplified in the Fordist model of flow-past assembly lines manned by Taylorized workers. The goods are sold across geographically and socially wider markets – regional, national, global – whose formation is made possible by the interconnection of local markets through new transportation and communications infrastructures (rail, mail, telegraph, telephone); by the concentration of markets in larger cities; by the development of multi-divisional corporations capable of planning and coordinating on this scale; by the integration of markets through *marketing*, using such new techniques as branding and packaging, national sales forces, advertising, point of sale materials and industrial design – all designed to unify product identity across socially and geographically dispersed markets. This is accompanied by the massive development of retail infrastructures (not just shops but also retail multiples, mail order, vertical integration downwards to the point of sale). This massive volume of cheap standardized goods, rationally sold through ever larger markets, is sold to a population which is increasingly *seen* as consumers: they are not seen as classes or genders who consume, but rather as consumers who happen to be organized into classes and genders.

However, if this period marks the true birth of consumer culture it is only because we define consumer culture in terms of mass production and mass participation in consumption. There is no essential reason to do so. We can equally treat the age of mass consumption as the development of a system whose values and aims were inherited from earlier periods, and as the spreading of a culture that had been already well defined in other classes. Moreover, we can consider the fact that critics did not wait for the emergence of Fordist mass production to engage in full-scale attacks and large-scale theorizations of consumer culture (Miller 1981; Williams 1982). Consumer culture existed as a problem for social critics, an ideology for the population and a reality for the bourgeoisie from quite early in the nineteenth century.

Thus we might next look at the prosperous mid-Victorian years from the 1850s to the 1870s. With the industrial and urban pattern of modernization well established as an idea, if not entirely as a reality, and with the economic and political disruptions of the 1840s passed, a new era of confidence is generally held to have been ushered in by the London Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851. In a stunning anecdote, Rosalind Williams (1982) points out that whereas this first international celebration of progress focused on exhibiting the triumphs of modern science and technology, by the time of the Paris exhibition of 1889 the objects on display were beginning to carry price tags. The transformation of modernity itself into a commodity, of its experiences and thrills into a ticketed spectacle, of its domination of nature into domestic comfort, of its knowledges into exotic costume, and of the commodity into the goal of modernity: all this was brewing well in advance

of mass production-oriented towards mass consumption (Richards 1991).

Over this period, consumer culture moves in two contradictory but interrelated directions. On the one hand, consumer culture seems to emerge from the production of public spectacle, from the enervated and overstimulated world of urban experience so powerfully captured in Baudelaire's image of the *flâneur*: (in modernity all the world is consumable experience). And all is display: the development of shopping, arcades, department stores, international exhibitions, museums, new forms of entertainment. Cities, department stores and especially international expositions carry powerful collective meanings as symbols of both scientific civilization and national greatness. The world is a cornucopia of consumable experience and goods delivered by modern progress into a modern carnival, and the consumer is the fee-paying audience for the spectacle and experience of modernity (Slater 1995).

On the other hand, and in opposition to the public culture of commodities, consumerism was made respectable during this period by connecting it to the construction of private, bourgeois domesticity. Consumption is to be turned into respectable culture by wresting it from the hands of both the aristocracy (where it signifies luxury, decadence, terminal superficiality) and the working classes (where it signifies public riotousness, the excesses of the drinking, sporting mob). It is crucial that in this period much debate on consumer culture was carried out in terms not of the consumption of goods but of *time*: a debate about leisure (see, especially, Cross 1993; Cunningham 1980) which concerned how to keep public order outside work hours. How, for example, can (male) working-class leisure consumption be diverted from drinking, gaming and prostitution in public places. Yet once excluded from these public places there are fears about what they get up to in their new privacy – fears about health and morals, about subversion and irreligion. What is Victorian philanthropy and reform but the inculcation of new norms of consumption – of healthy domestic, private consumption in the bosom of the family – calibrated by the scales of bourgeois respectability, medical science and moral discourses on sin and criminality (Rose 1992a, 1992b)? In sum, consumer culture of the mid-nineteenth century appears to emerge from a series of struggles to organize and tame, yet at the same time to exploit commercially, the social spaces and times in which modernity is acted out.

One more stop before the terminus: bourgeois respectability, as well as its opponents, drew considerably on romanticism. As we shall see in chapter 3, romanticism and the concept of culture that it produced were in many respects reactions against industrial, commercial, consumer society from Rousseau in the 1750s through revolutionary and nationalist romanticism up to the mid-nineteenth century. It has therefore provided probably the most enduring source of critiques of consumer culture, which it sees as part of a materialistic modernity that lacks authentic collective values and truths.

Yet paradoxically romanticism also bequeathed to consumer culture many of the themes that we consider most modern or even postmodern. Under the impact of a materialistic and monetarized society, romanticism promoted ideas of personal authenticity, an authenticity that derived from what was 'natural', emotional, irrational, sensual and imaginative in the self. Moreover, it associated these sources of authenticity with aestheticism and creativity everyday life (at least, in the first instance, the everyday life of the artist or genius) should be a process of making the self. The individual's style of goods, activities and experiences was no longer a matter of pure social performance (as Sennett (1977) argues it was for the eighteenth century) but a matter of personal truth and authenticity. The very idea that acts of consuming are seriously consequential for the authenticity of the self (as opposed to mere physical survival or social climbing) is an unintentional consequence of these early developments, as are many of the 'authentic values' in which modern consumer goods come wrapped: naturalness, emotional gratification, ethnic and national cultural values, images of innocent children, natural women and happy domesticity. It is through romanticism that consumer culture becomes both wildly playful and deadly earnest (Berman 1970; Campbell 1989; Sennett 1977; Trilling 1972)

#### *The commercial revolution*

Our reverse narrative has now dropped us off in the early modern period. It is here that consumption comes to be understood in recognizably modern ways and in which recognizably modern ways of consuming begin to appear. It is also the period in which we can see most clearly the ways in which consumer culture and modernity are inextricably interwoven.

There has, however, been a considerable historiographical barrier to investigating this connection, a preoccupation, often dubbed a 'productivist bias', with seeing the relation between modernity and capitalism as an *Industrial Revolution*, with production as the engine and essence of modernization. In the most Whiggish versions, modernity unbinds the Prometheus of productive forces from the chains of superstition, authority and tradition: science and technology, the rational technical division of labour and industrial organization, free labour markets, the replacement of status by contract, demographic shifts to the city, all combine in a forcefield of initiative, ingenuity, invention and energy. Industrial machinery – the school pupil's learned litany of steam engines, spinning jennies and Arkwright looms – encapsulates the spectacle of modernization.

The corollary is that consumer culture chronologically follows industrialization. Work, after all, comes before play. Moreover, culture in

general is often seen to be a matter of economic surplus: until a certain level of material wealth has been achieved, it is often argued, consumption is restricted to basic, effectively non-cultural needs; only above that level can societies sustain that meaning-oriented, 'cultural' choice between desirable goods which characterizes consumer culture. Similarly in economic history, modernization up to the early twentieth century appears as a process of saving, investment and accumulation at a social scale, underpinned by a Puritan, work-oriented ethic. Both the nineteenth century bourgeoisie and the twentieth century Soviet elite saw modernization in these terms – as a period of enforced social saving and investment, of deferred consumer gratification, of a savings plan for the national household. Moreover they acted this way quite sufficiently to give the perspective considerable empirical truth. Energies were invested in producing means of production – machinery, metals, infrastructure such as ships and railways – and some primary goods, such as clothing, that involved large markets for staples. Soviet modernization stated this most explicitly: a policy of forced accumulation of productive resources and the dampening of consumer-oriented production and demand in order to catch up in a few five-year plans the accomplishments of a century of western European industrialization.

The 'productivist bias' has been contested by a growing historical revisionism which argues that a Consumer Revolution preceded the Industrial Revolution, or was at least a central and early ingredient of western modernization (basic references and reviews might include Agnew 1986; Appleby 1978; Braudel 1981; Brewer and Porter 1993; Bronner 1989; Campbell 1989; Fine and Leopold 1990; McCracken 1990; McKendrick et al. 1983; Mukerji 1983; Perkin 1968; Porter 1982; Rule 1992; Sekora 1977; Shamma 1990; Thirsk 1978; Weatherill 1988; Xenos 1989). This argument involves looking at developments as early as the sixteenth century, in which we can discern, firstly, a new 'world of goods' (a wide penetration of consumer goods into the everyday lives of more social classes); secondly, the development and spread of 'consumer culture' in the sense of fashion and taste as key elements of consumption; thirdly, the development of infrastructures, organizations and practices that target these new kinds of markets (the rise of shopping, advertising, marketing).

This revisionism started by addressing a contemporary Keynesian question to the eighteenth century. How can industrialization have proceeded on a capitalist basis without the prior existence of adequate effective demand for its produce? To whom could these industrialists sell? Why did they not simply go bankrupt, leaving to the liquidators a pile of rational and scientific inventions and rationally organized but silent factories? The more econometric side of this debate simply assumed that people already wanted more things (assumed that demand was insatiable).

Historians therefore looked for the sources of finance for this demand: the technicalities of the ensuing debate revolved around the relative importance of home versus foreign demand and thus of home markets versus foreign trade and around the importance of demographic shifts, such as rising population and the role of London as a centre of consumption. It also considered shifts in income structure and differential wage rates. (For some of the original discussion, see Coats 1958; Eversley 1967; Gilboy 1967; McKendrick 1974; McKendrick et al. 1983; Rosenberg 1968; Vichert 1971; Wiles 1968; Wrigley 1967.)

However such debates might be resolved, there is a prior (again Keynesian) problem remaining: the propensity to consume. Given more resources, why would people choose to spend them on more things? Simply to assume an insatiable demand for more commodities is to assume, without evidence or explanation, that a central feature of modern consumer culture was already well established. For example, much evidence exists – from many different sectors of the population and many different periods up to the present – that a major struggle for and within capitalism focused on cajoling people not to stop working and enjoy free time independent of commodity consumption once their needs are satisfied, but rather to want more so that they will continue working in order to buy more commodities (see, for example, Campbell 1989: 18; Cross 1993; Sahlin 1974: 1–40; see also Cunningham 1980; Rojek 1985 on struggles over leisure in the nineteenth century). The concept and practice of ‘insatiable needs’ is not only a historical achievement but a very real social and political battleground (see chapter 3). Making markets and sustaining them requires not only elegant econometric balances but also socio-cultural changes which cannot be assumed. Otherwise, instead of the fallacy of regarding consumer culture as the historically delayed gratification of long industrial labour, we rather assume its basic features to be given and unexplained, not only as preceding capitalism but also as somehow natural and eternal. The central question, then, is: how was the idea and practice of consumption transformed and revalued? And this is a question that must be answered to explain not just consumer culture but the emergence of industrial modernization itself.

Evidence for some kind of consumer revolution around the eighteenth century is certainly plentiful. Firstly, the new historical record offers considerable evidence of a new and expanding ‘world of goods’ during the early modern period. Contemporaries (for example Defoe) certainly commented on it incessantly. Moreover, we are used to linking the period with a sudden wealth of new commodities derived from discovery and colonial exploitation – coffee, tea, tobacco, imported cloths and dyes, new foods (potatoes, tomatoes), fruits, etc. The west was a master consumer of imperially expropriated commodities before it was a consumer of goods it

produced itself (Mukerji 1983; see also Mintz 1985). Analyses of probate documents (for example, Shamma 1990, 1993; Weatherill 1988, 1993), of inventories from shops and chapmen, of commercial manuals and of diaries (for example Mui and Mui 1989; Spufford 1981; Spufford 1984; Willan 1970; and articles in Brewer and Porter 1993) show that entirely new categories of goods appear in homes and shops (e.g. curtains, mirrors); more of traditional categories appear (e.g. chairs and tables); older types of goods are made with newer and more varied materials and are complexly differentiated by prices and qualities (e.g. china plates and cups, clothing); new goods emerge in association with new commodities (for example cups are introduced into homes for drinking the new warm drinks, coffee, chocolate and tea). This ‘world of goods’ was both wide and deep: while we would hardly look for an ‘affluent worker’ among Cornish tin miners or Cumberland peasants in the 1690s, we know that an impressive range of relatively cheap goods was being made and bought in Britain. We can add to this the construction of permanent housing (Hoskins 1963); retail and transport infrastructures (Spufford 1984; Willan 1976); clothing markets and other developments from late Tudor times. Finally, amongst the most adventurous pioneers in the new ‘world of goods’ were the entrepreneurs of leisure: they organized activities such as sport, theatre and entertainment, assemblies, balls and masquerades, leisure and pleasure gardens and so on into commercial events, with fee-paying admission by ticket or subscription. Moreover, the commodification of leisure extends from events to goods: for example toys for children, novels and printed music for the female public – all commodity-based activities (see, for example, Castle 1986; Plumb 1983).

Secondly, the revisionist account of the consumer revolution points to the emergence and social extension of the fashion system throughout this widened consuming public. The system of rapid turnover of styles, the desire for ‘the new’ creates a new dynamic in consumer demand. This is generally linked to the idea of a transition from traditional to modern society: under the *ancien régime*, social status was relatively fixed and consumption was tied inflexibly to social rank. Fashion, in the sense of the conspicuous and changing display of status through consumption, was largely confined to the aristocracy, not just because of the poverty of other ranks but also largely because of social rigidity. The appearance of fashion marks a moment in which the fixity of ranks and status is breaking down. This kind of analysis tends to equate fashion and therefore the consumer revolution with status competition, emulation and conspicuous consumption: new consumption patterns are tied to a ‘trickle-down’ process in which aspiring ranks model their consumption on that of higher ranks. This line of thought is widely identified with Neil McKendrick’s work (McKendrick 1959/60, 1964, 1974; McKendrick et al. 1983) and is the subject of much debate (see chapter 6)

in terms of its adequacy in accounting for either the new scale or new pattern of consumer demand.

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Be that as it may, McKendrick's work points us to a third feature of the consumer revolution: the new form and scale of consumption is crucially related to new forms of business and commercial organization, new infrastructures of consumption. McKendrick focuses on the early rise of marketing and consumer-oriented retailing through examples such as Josiah Wedgwood's pottery industry (McKendrick et al. 1983). His interest is in the way Wedgwood exploited an emulation-based fashion system by, for example, tapping into new vogues (producing 'Etruscan' vases in response to enormous public interest in archaeology and classical culture), obtaining and advertising aristocratic and royal endorsements (getting those vases into the homes of noble 'taste leaders'), opening strategically placed shops in order to make a fashionable spectacle of his goods.

The revisionist account has many problems. For example, Fine and Leopold (1990, 1993) raise valid econometric objections concerning its ability to account for industrialization, and reasonable ideological questions about projecting Thatcherism onto Georgian society such that the heroes of capitalist modernization turn out to be eighteenth-century yuppies. The reliance on emulation and trickle-down accounts of fashion are also problematic. However, I want to explore a different objection: the usual revisionist account simply reverses the standard one so that the consumer revolution now precedes the industrial one. An alternative is to see both as part of a commercial revolution in which concepts of trade, money, new financial instruments and moveable property, contracts and orientation to commercial exploitation of ever more extensive and impersonal markets generated a vast range of new notions and activities which we deem modern.

The crucial point is that the expansion of the world of goods, the new patterns of consumer dynamism and the new commercial organization all predate anything we might recognize as industrialization by anything up to a couple of centuries. In cloth and clothing production for example – the spearhead of industrialization in most textbooks – the main mechanical inventions start only from the 1780s, while much of the 'industry' was still conducted through cottage-based putting out (i.e. organized on a distributed basis by commercial capitalists rather than through a centralized factory system by industrial capitalists) until well into the 1830s. Yet the production of toys with highly diversified product lines sold on a national market was well established in large-scale enterprises with considerable division of labour and wage-relation from the mid-seventeenth century.

Toy production in fact typified a kind of early modern enterprise studied by Joan Thirsk (1978): the 'projects'. Thirsk uses these 'projects' to demonstrate a revaluation and reorganization of production, commerce and

consumption starting from the sixteenth century. The projects and their 'projektors' (early entrepreneurs) originate in a policy of import substitution developed in the context of mercantilism. Worried that demand for foreign 'friperies' was draining the nation's bullion, government policies and entrepreneurial initiatives strove to increase domestic production through new or reformed businesses. The projects were significantly oriented to consumer goods (for example stockings, buttons, pins and nails, salt, starch, soap, knives and tools, tobacco-pipes, pots and ovens, ribbons and lace, linen and aqua vitae). Moreover, Thirsk argues, their often large work-forces probably also provided the first modern, as opposed to elite, consumers: 'the majority of the population in many local communities did not begin to accumulate much cash in hand until they began to produce commodities other than the staple necessities of life . . . [the projects] gave them cash and something to spend the cash on' (1978: 7). Typically of consumer culture, the workers were simultaneously the makers and the market.

These projects could involve considerable technical and organizational innovation without doubt: for example, the pin-makers that Adam Smith made exemplary of the efficiency gains of the technical division of labour were not, as is often assumed, modern mechanized industrialists but one of the early modern projects as studied by Thirsk. The point is that they innovated (and laid the basis for later industrialization) not primarily as an offshoot of science and engineering or major capital investment (they generally involved little), nor through consumer orientation (in McKendrick's sense of being fashion-led). Rather, they emerged and innovated as part of a policy and practice of commercial opportunism, an orientation towards trade. The projects involved large-volume production, to be sold over wide geographically dispersed markets to a 'general public' of consumers rather than locally to known customers.

It is trade and commerce (rather than production or consumption) that looms largest in the early modern mind. They are recognized very early as the catalysts, for good or ill, of the transition from traditional agrarian to modern society. Moreover, it is commerce that provides so many of the new images and concepts through which that society is understood and through which consumption is recognized and revalued in ways that bear the mark of what we now call consumer culture: notions of economy and government, the idea of civil society and of society itself, images of the self, self-interest, reason and desire, new concepts of status and culture.

Firstly, as we will explore in chapter 7, it is in relation to commerce that consumption is redefined in the eighteenth century. In earlier times, consumption meant waste, squandering, using up (without gain), a loss to economic, moral and political flows of value (Williams 1976: 68–70). By the later eighteenth century, the word can be used technically and neutrally

within economic and other discourses to signify a natural part of these flows and at the same time their logical terminus or goal: for Smith, 'Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer.' It is through the idea of commerce that people come to see as necessary and important the social conditions which enable goods to be sold.

Secondly, the revaluation of consumption along the lines of a modern consumer culture is bound up with the experience of a world entirely transformed, not just economically but socially and culturally, by commerce, market exchange and money. Market-based exchange and consumption presupposed that individuals could make unconstrained choices about what goods they wished to buy; and that access to these goods could be regulated solely by the possession of cash, of the money to buy the goods. The idea that people's lifestyles could be determined solely by their money-wealth – rather than by religious prohibitions on luxury and excess, by juridical prohibitions of certain goods to certain status groups, by traditional and communal surveillance, by the cosmological fixity of 'the great chain of being' – indicated a situation of status instability and ultimately status revolution. The spread of markets and market-mediated consumption both required and intensively promoted the breakdown of the old status order, and this is what exercised the early modern mind: the corrosive (or liberating) effect of monetary relations on traditional society. From the late sixteenth century onwards, the hope and dread of a world now more opulently dense with things and more licentiously free to exercise socially unrestricted individual choice was clearly bruited about: the problem or potential of a society in which individuals can make themselves according to their own designs by buying commodities (Sekora 1977). This threat to the old order is not posed by an industrial bourgeoisie alone but rather comprises the erosion of traditional society through all forms of moneyed wealth.

Significantly, 'commerce' meant more than trade in the eighteenth century. From its origins in the sixteenth century, the word has a specific economic sense (it is traffic or intercourse between social beings in the course of buying and selling goods, as well as the whole process and system of exchanging things). But it also carries a general sense of social intercourse, of regular dealings between people, of everyday conversation and interchange of ideas, communication etc. It is a notion of uncompelled encounters between people in the regular and voluntary course of their practical life. For critics of commercial society, the origin of the term in trade (and the idea that modern sociality depends on trade) indicates the disreputability of this new freedom of social interaction. Significantly, 'commerce' also describes

sexual and licentious relations (for example, in Fielding, 'Sophia's virtue made his commerce with lady Bellaston appear still more odious' (from *Tom Jones*, 1749; OED) Both commercial and consumer society are often described as a kind of mad orgy (see, for example, Porter 1993a, 1993b).

Commerce was a new metaphor for the social: the free exchange not only of goods and services within a monetary economy but also of ideas, conversation, opinion within a free public sphere (Burchill 1991; Pocock 1975, 1985). This new image is evident in the idea of 'civil society': not just the market, but a whole world of political, economic and private associations in which men (*sic*) could be free, convivial, contentedly opportunistic, self-interested and energetic. Hirschman (1977) captures this relation between commerce and 'civility' in 'political arguments for capitalism before its triumph': commerce, for example in Montesquieu, is a civilizing process because it promotes peaceful intercourse within and between nations; because the passions, unreason, violence and power of both sovereigns and individuals are tamed by the rational pursuit of self-interest; and because private commercial wealth provides the means of resistance to arbitrary authority.

It could be argued that 'consumer culture' (like 'mass society') is one of several terms that comes to replace the idea of 'civil society' and indicates the degeneration of that ideal of voluntary association in which free and equal men enter into commerce and communication with each other. Civil society becomes consumer culture, on the one hand, when the commercial and economic energy on which the former depends is imposed upon it as an external and disciplinary force by, for example, large-scale corporations, the mass media and advertising, and, on the other hand, when civil society is castigated as comprising merely the irrational, arbitrary, frivolous and above all manipulable follies of the mob, the destabilization of status and overturning of hierarchy. Moreover, the use of the term 'consumer culture' can indicate the reduction of the broad social ideal of civil society to the mere pursuit of wealth, the cult of GNP (Habermas 1991).

None the less, ideas of modern consumption arise firstly in the ideal (or dystopia) of a liberal and commercial society comprising free individuals pursuing their interests through free association in the public sphere. The consumer, as we shall see in the next chapter, is one example or one aspect of the private and enterprising individual who stands at the centre of the very notion of modernity. Commercial and civil society required freedom, took liberties and therefore usurped powers. We are familiar with this process in certain areas of historical change: the assertion of reason and science involved a reliance on the individual's resources of knowledge and an independence from received authority, from 'custom and example' (Descartes, quoted in Gellner 1992), tradition, religious revelation. This is a class struggle in



thought, a revolution by and for 'self-made men' (Gellner 1992). But Enlightenment man – both as an idealized projection and as a real new form of subjectivity – was not just a rational, freethinking individual in the sphere of science, politics or production: he also learned some of these ways of being by being rational and individual in the experience of going to market and of materially constructing new forms of domesticity, in dressing as a fashionable urbanite and in going to newly commercialized leisure activities.

### The outlines of consumer culture

If consumer culture is bound up with 'the whole of modernity' in the ways I have suggested, then a simple definition of it would seem inappropriate. On the other hand, we need some signposts, some way of recognizing just when consumer culture is being talked about. What follows, then, is a limited list of features by which consumer culture has been identified, a list derived from the kinds of material we will be looking at in the following chapters. What kinds of thing have modern thinkers pointed to when they have thought about consumer culture, when they have condemned or applauded modern society as a consumer society? What have they found to be different or dangerous about the way consumption is organized in the modern world? What general modern features and processes seem to have made consumer culture visible and distinctive to modern thinkers as a social phenomenon?

#### *Consumer culture is a culture of consumption*

The notion of 'consumer culture' implies that, in the modern world, core social practices and cultural values, ideas, aspirations and identities are defined and oriented in relation to consumption rather than to other social dimensions such as work or citizenship, religious cosmology or military role. To describe a society in terms of its consumption and to assume that its core values derive from it is unprecedented: a militaristic culture, agrarian culture, maritime culture . . . but a consumer culture?

Thus in talking of modern society as a consumer culture, people are not referring simply to a particular pattern of needs and objects – a particular consumption culture – but to a culture of consumption. To talk this way is to regard the dominant values of a society not only to be organized through consumption practices but also in some sense to derive from them. Thus we might describe contemporary society as materialistic, as a pecuniary culture based on money, as concerned with 'having' to the exclusion of 'being', as

commodified, as hedonistic, narcissistic or, more positively, as a society of choice and consumer sovereignty. The very idea of a culture structured by the consumption of commodities is often regarded as a contradiction in terms (as discussed in chapter 3) because the term 'culture' has been defined as the social preservation of authentic values that cannot be negotiated by money and market exchange. Hence, for example, consumer culture is often equated with 'mass culture', with a society in which the desires and tastes of 'the masses', newly empowered by money and democratic rights, reduce culture to consumption.

Moreover, a central claim is that values from the realm of consumption spill over into other domains of social action, such that modern society is *in toto* a consumer culture, and not just in its specifically consuming activities. The spread of consumption values to the general society occurs firstly because consumption itself becomes a central focus of social life (in the sense that we reproduce more and more areas of social life through the use of commodities, and in the sense that other foci, e.g. work, religion, politics, become less important or meaningful); and secondly because the values of consumer culture acquire a prestige which encourages their metaphorical extension to other social domains, e.g. the extension of the consumer model to public service broadcasting or health provision.

#### *Consumer culture is the culture of a market society*

Modern consumption is mediated by market relations and takes the form of the consumption of commodities: that is to say we generally consume goods, services and experiences which have been produced solely in order to be sold on the market to consumers. We do not ourselves make the goods through which we reproduce everyday life. Rather, integral to our consumption is the act of choosing between a range of alternative commodities produced by institutions which are not interested in need or cultural values but in profit and economic values. The consumer's access to consumption is largely structured by the distribution of material and cultural resources (money and taste), which itself is determined in crucial ways by market relations – above all the wage relation and social class.

We can put this most clearly through Marx's terminology (though many of the basic assumptions are very widely shared). The concentration of means of production under private ownership (as capital) means that workers do not, and for the most part cannot, produce the means of their own subsistence, their own consumer goods. These must be obtained indirectly: people sell their labour power for money in the form of wages by producing goods to which they are normally indifferent, in order to be able to buy on

another market the goods they actually want (and which have been produced by other equally indifferent workers and capitalists). From this perspective, it is the wage-relation (and not industrial mass production), it is capitalist relations of production (and not its technical forces) that produce the consumer, and do so instantly and automatically. The worker and the consumer are born of the same social relation. The wage relation might produce a very poor consumer indeed, for the most part, and one who cannot go to the market for many of his or her needs, instead either going without, or – up to a late historical period – continuing to produce outside of market relations the means of his or her own subsistence. But it is through the market that consumer culture is defined: consumers are produced when the market emerges as the general means of economic regulation.

To state the obvious, consumer culture is capitalist culture. Historically, it develops as part of the capitalist system. Structurally, consumer culture is incompatible with the political regulation of consumption through either suppression of the market or traditionalist sumptuary codes and laws. It does not arise in non-capitalist societies: in the case of both actually existing socialism and religiously fundamentalist states, for example, political control over consumption and the suppression of its 'decadent' culture are crucial. Conversely, when either regime slackens its control or breaks down, in conditions of sufficient technical and material resources, capitalist entrepreneurialism linked to expanded consumer markets does indeed arise.

*Consumer culture is, in principle, universal and impersonal*

Consumer culture is often identified with the idea of mass consumption because it exemplifies the generalization of commodity consumption to the entire population. However, mass consumption is only one form of a more fundamental principle: the idea of making large volumes of goods for sale to a general public rather than for oneself, for one's household or local community or on the basis of a personal commission. The idea of selling a product that is not tailored to the needs of a known and unique individual or community, but which might be sold to any individual anywhere, presumes impersonal and generalizable relations of exchange as the basis for mediating consumption.

Market relations are anonymous and in principle universal: the consumer is not a known 'customer' but an anonymous subject who can only be imagined and constructed as an *object* – the target of a marketing drive, the profile produced by a market survey, a mass market or market segment. Moreover, if the cultural meaning of the consumer good is not immediately provided by the personalized relations in which it is produced and

exchanged, then this too must increasingly be produced and distributed in an impersonal and generalized manner: design, advertising, marketing all start before widespread industrialization because of the need to personalize the impersonal, to culturally specify the general and the abstract.

The idea that consumer culture serves a general public also promotes a more positive idea that it embraces 'everyone'. Although we know that access to commodities is restricted by access to money, the consumption of commodities is treated in principle as the activity of the entire population. We are all formally free and equal when we go to market, unconstrained in our choices by legally fixed status or cultural prohibitions. Moreover, consumer culture appears universal in so far as it portrays itself as a democracy of comfort and wealth. There seems to be a fundamental human right to consume freely and a technical potential to consume well that is given us by modernity: the right and ability to be a consumer is the ideological birthright of the modern western subject.

Similarly, however, if there is no principle restricting who can consume what, there is also no principled constraint on what can be consumed: all social relations, activities and objects can in principle be exchanged as commodities. This is one of the most profound secularizations enacted by the modern world. Everything can become a commodity at least during some part of its life. This potential for any thing, activity or experience to be commodified or to be replaced by commodities perpetually places the intimate world of the everyday into the impersonal world of the market and its values. Moreover, while consumer culture appears universal because it is depicted as a land of freedom in which everyone can be a consumer, it is also felt to be universal because everyone must be a consumer: this particular freedom is compulsory. It is by and large through commodities that everyday life, and the social relations and identities that we live within it, are sustained and reproduced.

*Consumer culture identifies freedom with private choice and private life*

To be a consumer is to make choices: to decide what you want, to consider how to spend your money to get it. This exercise of choice is in principle, if never in fact, unconstrained: no one has the right to tell you what to buy, what to want. 'Consumer sovereignty' is an extremely compelling image of freedom: apart from the modern right to choose our intimate partners, it provides one of the few tangible and mundane experiences of freedom which feels personally significant to modern subjects. How emotionally charged within everyday life is the right to vote?

The 'freedom' of consumer culture is defined in a particular way which

is crucial to modernity, especially its liberal version: consumer choice is a private act. Firstly it is private in the positive sense that it occurs within a domain of the private – of the individual, the household, the group of friends – which is ideologically declared out of bounds to public intervention. The relation between freedom and privacy is crucial to the idea of the modern individual: reason, for example, was conceptualized by much of the Enlightenment as a private resource, found within the individual, with which *he* (as we shall see, the hero of this story is specifically male) could resist the irrational social authority of tradition, religion, political elites, superstition. Private, individual resources were also defined in terms of the interests of the individual, which only he could know and which he had every right to pursue. Consumer choice is merely the mundane version of this broader notion of private, individual freedom.

Secondly, however, consumer choice is private in the more negative sense that it is restricted to the household, mundane domesticity, the world of private relationships. Any particular act of consumption is private in the sense of having no public significance. We do not consume in order to build a better society, to be a good person and live the true life, but to increase private pleasures and comforts.

Consumer culture is marked by this double sense of privacy and its relation to choice and freedom: individual empowerment, meaning, investment in the future, identity etc. are bound up with a restricted area of life. The constant complaint of critical traditions is that in becoming 'free' as consumers we barter away power and freedom in the workplace or in the political arena in exchange for mere private contentment.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the privacy of individual choice seems to contradict social order, solidarity and authority. If individuals define their own interests, how can society hold together? If choice is governed by private individual preferences, what happens to enduring cultural values? In many respects, this is the main preoccupation of critics of consumer culture, both conservative and radical: if we cannot judge or regulate the desires of individuals, how can they work to constitute a good or progressive or authentic collective life?

*Consumer needs are in principle unlimited and insatiable*

In most cultures, the possibility that needs may be insatiable indicates a social or moral pathology (sin, corruption, decadence) or a very particular status marker for social elites (the excesses of competitive display). In consumer culture, uniquely, unlimited need – the constant desire for more and the constant production of more desires – is widely taken to be not only normal

for its denizens but essential for socio-economic order and progress.

The idea of insatiable need is bound up with notions of cultural modernization: the increased productivity of modern industry is widely understood as both a response and a spur to the capacity of people's desires to become increasingly sophisticated, refined, imaginative and personal, as well as people's desire to advance themselves socially and economically. As we shall see in several chapters, these capacities can be heralded as either a quantum leap in human civilization or a descent into decadence. On the other hand, it is generally accepted by most parties that a commercial society is systemically dependent on the insatiability of needs: put crudely, commodity production requires the sale of ever-increasing quantities of ever-changing goods; market society is therefore perpetually haunted by the possibility that needs might be either satisfied or underfinanced.

This fear emerges in many forms and through a variety of historical experiences. There is the perpetual fear that workers will choose more time rather than more goods as the reward for industrial progress (see, for example, Campbell 1989; Cross 1993; Sahlins 1974). The redefinition of leisure time as consumption time, the commodification of leisure, has been crucial in sustaining capitalist growth. Experiences of global economic depression in the inter-war years give rise to an elaborate structure of demand management strategies (Keynesianism, welfare state). It has also been argued that advertising and marketing have not only addressed demand deficits for particular brands and products but also participated in changing values from a puritan orientation to savings, the future, the preservation of goods and sobriety to a hedonistic ethos of spending and credit, orientation to the present, rapid technical and aesthetic obsolescence, the turnover of styles and goods and a playful culture.

For many authors, it is precisely in this domain that the fundamental and ultimately self-rendering cultural contradictions of modernity (and its crumbling into postmodernity) arise: economic modernization is characterized, on the one hand, by rational planning, discipline and labour underpinned by a work ethic; yet, on the other hand, it structurally depends upon fostering irrational desires and passions, a hedonistic orientation to gratification in the present which must surely undermine it.

*Consumer culture is the privileged medium for negotiating identity and status within a post-traditional society*

In Europe, the *ancien régime* inherited the feudal idea, if no longer quite the actuality, of a social structure comprising fixed and stable status: a world in which social position is ascribed by birth and is fixed as part of a cosmological

order (for example 'the great chain of being') in which each entity has an ordained place and has attached to it exclusive rights, privileges and obligations. The latter include rights and obligations to a particular lifestyle. Hence sumptuary laws are important forms of symbolic regulation: that certain animals can be eaten only by nobles (poaching laws), that guild members must wear uniforms, that retainers must wear livery, that the right to move house should be conditional. In a word, crucial areas of consumption were fixed both in order to mark out positions within the status order, and also in order to regulate and police it. Revivals of sumptuary laws were rife in England as 'the great chain of being' began to rust away over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the birth of commercial society.

Modern concepts of individualism, founded on modern practices of market exchange, sweep away the possibility as well as the desirability of a fixed status order. The move 'from status to contract' makes social mobility a matter of principle: mobility either upward or downward, for status is now an achievement of the moment (there is always new and more dynamic money threatening you from below) and not an attribute ascribed to one as part of an inheritance from the cosmic order. In a post-traditional society, social identity must be constructed by individuals, because it is no longer given or ascribed, but in the most bewildering of circumstances: not only is one's position in the status order no longer fixed, but the order itself is unstable and changing and is represented through ever changing goods and images. Access to goods is regulated purely by money, yet these goods still signify social position, and in increasingly complex and creative ways.

Goods can always signify social identity, but in the fluid processes of a post-traditional society, identity seems to be more a function of consumption than the other, traditional, way round. The extreme version of this is found in the idea of postmodernity: society appears as a kind of fancy-dress party in which identities are designed, tried on, worn for the evening and then traded in for the next. Appearances – the images we construct on the surfaces of our bodies, our living spaces, our manners and our voices – become a crucial way of knowing and identifying ourselves and each other, but again, precisely at the moment when these signs have become detached from any fixed meaning or reference. In the new, modern world, we rely on appearances; but only in the old world did those appearances have reliable meanings, were they fixed items in a fixed code.

Consumer culture is crucially about the negotiation of status and identity – the practice and communication of social position – under these conditions. Regulation of these issues by tradition is replaced by negotiation and construction, and consumer goods are crucial to the way in which we make up our social appearance, our social networks (lifestyle, status group etc.), our structures of social value.

*Consumer culture represents the increasing importance of culture in the modern exercise of power*

Consumer culture is notoriously awash with signs, images, publicity. Most obviously, it involves an aestheticization of commodities and their environment: advertising, packaging, shop display, point of sale material, product design etc. have a long history within commercial capitalism. There is an explosion of visual and verbal discourse on, about and through objects (Leiss et al. 1986). Although these features have again come to the forefront of thought over the 1980s, they have been both evident and much discussed from the very dawn of commerce as the ordering principle of everyday modernity.

Firstly, problems of status and identity, as outlined under the previous point, promote a new flexibility in the relations between consumption, communication and meaning. It is not so much that goods and acts of consumption become more important in signalling status (they always were crucial) but that both the structure of status and the structure of meaning become unstable, flexible, highly *negotiable*. Appearance becomes a privileged site of strategic action in unprecedented ways.

Secondly, the nature of market exchange seems intrinsically bound up with aestheticization. As indicated above, commodities circulate through impersonal and anonymous networks: the split between producer and consumer extends beyond simple commissioning (where a personal relationship still exists) to production for an anonymous general public. To reconnect consumer and product within this mediated space both must be personified again, given meaning, and a meaning which connects them. For example, Haug (1986) theorizes this in the notion of 'commodity aesthetics': the producer must create an image of use value in which potential buyers can recognize themselves. All aspects of the product's meaning and all channels through which its meaning can be constructed and represented become subject to intense and rationalized calculation.

This gives rise to some of the central issues of sociological debate on consumer culture. On the one hand, the eminently modern notion of the social subject as a self-creating, self-defining individual is bound up with self-creation through consumption: it is partly through the use of goods and services that we formulate ourselves as social identities and display these identities. This renders consumption as the privileged site of autonomy, meaning, subjectivity, privacy and freedom. On the other hand, all these meanings around social identity and consumption become crucial to economic competition and rational organization, become the objects of strategic action by dominating institutions. The sense of autonomy and identity in consumption is placed constantly under threat. Hence the

constant and constitutive controversy over whether consumption is a sphere of manipulation or freedom, whether the consumer is sovereign or subject, active or passive, creative or determined, and so on.

Moreover, there has been a considerable shift in how theorists perceive the role of culture in social organization. For earlier critics of consumer culture, what passes for culture in capitalist societies appeared to be at the service of economic and political power: advertising, for example, fostered in individuals those needs which were most useful to the system, both in the sense of increasing demand for commodities and in the sense of identifying individuals with the commodity system in general. Much post-Fordist and postmodern theory, on the other hand, argues that culture is now organizing the economy in crucial respects: the value of goods depends more on their cultural value ('sign-value') than on their functional or economic value; advertising and marketing are no longer functions subordinate to production but are actually commanding discourses within firms; more and more commodities take the form not of material goods at all but of signs and representations (for example information, software), of services and 'experiences' (for example tourism, leisure). The logical development of consumer culture (as of advanced capitalism as a whole) seems to be in the direction of the 'de-materialization' of the economy.

### Conclusion

The fact that we can trace consumer culture a rather long way back, and that we can list a number of features through which it has been identified throughout modernity, is not a matter of pedantic historical interest. As we shall see in the following chapters, the fact that consumer culture is bound up with 'the whole of modernity' means that the concepts, issues, and critiques through which we try to understand it also have long histories. If the choice of 'theories of consumer culture' now on offer in today's university bookshop is not to be reduced to a matter of pure consumer preference, then they too must be understood as part of a history of modern times. In the next chapter we will start by looking at what 'the consumer' and 'consumer choice' mean.

## 2

### The Freedoms of the Market

#### Hero or fool?

The consumer is a schizoid character in modern thought. On the one hand a ridiculous figure: an irrational slave to trivial, materialistic desires who can be manipulated into childish mass conformity by calculating mass producer. This consumer is a cultural dupe or dope, the mug seduced by advertising, the fashion victim, the striving *nouveau riche*, the Babbit keeping up with the Joneses, yuppies who would sell their birthright for a mess of design labels. Ostensibly exercising free choice, this consumer actually offends against all the aspirations of modern western citizens to be free, rational, autonomous and self-defining.

On the other hand, the consumer is a hero of modernity. This may appear strange, since heroism is traditionally associated with noble distance from the base pursuit of material gain. But the consumer became a hero precisely when bourgeois culture broke this association and dignified itself in a historically new dramatic form: its liberal tradition connected material gain, technical progress and individual freedom through the motivation of the *pursuit of self-interest*. This laid the basis for a 'democratic' heroism: in the individual's most banal and previously undignified desires (for comforts and for wealth, for trade and for industry) could be discerned the heroic will and intelligence that could transform nature and society and bend them both to mastery by the freely and privately chosen desires of the individual. The consumer is heroic because he (*sic*) is rational and autonomous and because only his self-defined needs can give legitimacy to economic and social institutions. The 'masculinity' of this bourgeois hero is part of the picture as is the supposedly feminine character of the irrational, manipulated and domestic consumer.

Rational or irrational, sovereign or manipulated, autonomous or other.