

Mike Featherstone. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London: Sage Publications, 1991. 147 pp. plus bibliography.

*Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* interweaves a critique of current modes and institutions of consumption with an elaboration of the major emphases of postmodern culture, seeing each of these major areas of contemporary life as a manifestation of the other. Tracing postmodernism back through the "emotional decontrol" and interest in pluralism of the 1960s to the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century, Mike Featherstone includes among its important characteristics the effacement of the boundary between art and experience, the attendant collapse of the distinction between high art and mass/popular culture, a general movement toward anti-foundationalism in systems of thought, and the "aestheticization of everyday life and the transformation of reality into images" (p . 65). His fine chapter on this last dimension of contemporary culture historicizes the "controlled decontrol of the emotions" within the sea change from modernity to postmodernity and the expansion and extension of patterns of consumption in urban society.

Featherstone's structure is at once illuminating and problematical; less linear than circular, or better "musical," it repeatedly doubles back to pick up a theme or aspect of post modernity and expand on it in a new context. In this way he expresses in the very form of his text the inter functionality of the concepts he is discussing. This is especially useful in linking his two major ideational complexes—consumption and postmodernity—until each interpenetrates the other. At the same time, this strategy too often results in the repetition of points clarified sufficiently in earlier sections of the book.

Featherstone's broader agenda is to come to terms with what, in Habermas's phrase, is a "legitimation crisis" in the social sciences themselves. The spread of postmodern theories, with their fore grounding of the cultural (as opposed to the social), their move to deconstruct the meta-narratives of Western modernity, including scientific rationalism, and their assertion of the subjectivity and "textuality" of all human experience, has posed a challenge to the political goals, methodological commitments, and—no small concern to those involved—the status of field and scholar within the social sciences and the academic hierarchy generally. Featherstone's text dramatizes the plight of the social scientist uncomfortable with the apparent failure of political action and the

demise of the sociologist's advocacy role, and seeking to absorb ideas such as the "death of the social" (which Featherstone can neither accept nor convincingly refute). "Postmodernism," he writes, "thrusts aesthetic questions toward the center of sociological theory" (p. 31). This development, in turn, has been a result of changes "which have raised the profile of culture within the culture-economy-society configuration" (p. 64). Thus has the traditional empiricist/ethnographer been left in a bind that is only exacerbated by theories such as Deconstruction, which suggest that our social texts no longer, if they ever did, refer to any fixed external reality, but only to other texts—that the researcher's field notes and interviews can be, at best, indirect expressions of what they purport to represent.

Social scientist Featherstone ultimately affirms the multicultural possibilities inherent in postmodernism's movement toward cultural declassification and the dismantling of symbolic hierarchies, and he looks forward to a more equitable and humane form of scholarship as intellectuals abandon their traditional role as confident legislators of a single Cultural Tradition and become less prideful interpreters of cultures. In spite of this reassuring denouement, however, what remains with the reader of *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* is the scholar's present—perhaps perennial—dilemma: how to translate theory into socially useful practice, how to exercise C. Wright Mills' "sociological imagination" in a world in which even the theoretical frameworks of one's own profession seem to close down the possibilities of a scholarship of engagement.

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