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'Consumption for Historians: An Economist's Gaze'
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Consumption for Historians: An Economist's Gaze*

Supply and Demand: Taking the History out of Consumption?

Although it is still common to find contributions to the study of consumption that are motivated by the wish to balance its neglect relative to production, the new wave of literature on consumption across the social sciences has grown explosively. It is now well into its adolescence, even if far from maturity. Far from occupying a subordinate academic niche, consumption is increasingly served by a bewildering range of contributions, Glennie (1995, p. 164/5). These draw upon the different objects of consumption themselves, their social significance, the sequence of activities that lead to consumption, and the different sites of consumption across country and household, quite apart from the wealth of illustrations across time and space. Equally varied have been the methods and theories for investigation of consumption both within and across the social sciences, as is evidenced by a number of surveys, which are often necessarily partial, specialised and rapidly dated in their coverage, Fine and Leopold (1993), Miller (ed) (1995), Gabriel and Lang (1995), de Grazia and Furlong (eds) (1996), and Holbrook (1995), for example.¹ In short, consumption is a moving and evasive target, especially in view of the array of analytical weapons with which it has been assaulted.

The purpose of this contribution is to provide a selective sampling of the literature and draw some lessons on how to build upon what has already been achieved. It is far from an overview and is undoubtedly marked by my own confrontation over the past decade with consumption from the perspective of a heretical economist, although the implications for history are my primary concern. My intention is also to draw methodological and theoretical lessons rather than to provide a balanced survey.

Much of the history of consumption literature references, and takes as its point of departure, the volume of McKendrick et al (1982) which did initiate recent interest in the topic. Of necessity, McKendrick et al could not draw upon the wealth of theoretical literature on consumption that appeared subsequently. As a result, and certainly in retrospect, it might have been preferable if the literature had benefitted from a different starting point. McKendrick et al pose the issue of a consumer revolution complementing that of an industrial revolution in eighteenth century England. Whilst profoundly historical in its intent, the underlying implicit theory and approach is remarkably ahistorical and underdeveloped. For the notion of consumer revolution has proven to be definitionally and historically elusive, Glennie (1995, p. 181 and various contributions in Brewer and Porter (eds) (1993). McKendrick et al depend upon a scarcely concealed projection from an idealised celebration of twentieth century living standards and mores.² It has encouraged others to journey through time and space in search of appropriate definitions and corresponding examples of consumer societies and revolutions, inevitably forcing the highly heterogeneous under a common terminological umbrella.³

In general terms, such endeavours often depend upon a more or less sophisticated version of supply and demand, an explicit point of reference for McKendrick who identifies industrial with supply and consumer with demand in making an eighteenth century revolution for each. The underlying, if informal logic is one of shifting supply and demand curves, leading to an outcome, if not equilibrium, at quantitatively and qualitatively higher levels. This, however, raises a number of problems.

First, beyond such informalities, supply and demand analysis is rooted in a particularly simple version of mainstream neoclassical economics. I do not wish to rehearse all of its legion deficiencies,⁴ but the most pertinent in this context is the inability to address major transformations in society. This has been made explicit in the response by those economic historians wedded to the mainstream. With given technology and endowments, shifts in demand can do very little to bring about fundamental change other than in the composition of supply. It follows that there can be no demand without supply revolution.⁵ There are two exceptions - either for some form of endogenous growth or through some

demand-induced shift in the availability of marketable resources. The new growth theory, however, is notable for its limited overlap with concern for consumption (except insofar as affecting aggregate saving).⁶ On the other hand, the consumer revolution has been associated with the rise in demand for commodities inducing a shift of resources (or supply) out of the household. This is discussed later.

Second, the supply and demand approach to socio-economic change, including consumption, suffers from being conceptually ahistorical. Those simple diagrams are notable for lacking specificity in time, place and commodity. Indeed, there is an element of tautology in such reasoning. Irrespective of the difficulties of assigning responsibility to supply or to demand, whatever happened can be disaggregated into shifts along a curve together with shifts of the curve. In general, shifts along the curve are taken as prior and whatever residual remains can be explained by shifts of the curve.⁷

Third, whatever the technical niceties of the foregoing, which might test the patience of those untrained formally in economics, a deeper methodological point is involved. Essentially, supply and demand take the history out of the study of consumption as a theoretical starting point. Having done so, it can be brought back in again to explain the shifts in supply and demand. Characteristically, whatever the sophistication of the initial confrontation with supply and demand, this second stage is attached to more informal analysis in which more or less anything can be incorporated as any number of supply- and demand-side factors and theories are incorporated. McKendrick et al present an early illustration, especially around the shenanigans of Wedgwood together with emulation, distinction, advertising, etc. Such factors, however, are precisely the ones that are necessarily assumed to be constant or non-existent (or irrational) in drawing up the supply and demand curves that, thereafter, are taken to shift.

The attraction in drawing upon supply and demand lies less then in its capacity for, and a knowledge of, its explanatory purchase than in providing an informal framework for organising the factors that are to be addressed.⁸ Each can be assigned to one or other side of the market scissors. Such a framework, however, is itself questionable, especially within a historical context. The decisive conceptual moment is the sale and purchase by producer and consumer, ex ante and ex post activity constituting supply and demand, respectively, although it is not purely a chronological distinction since, for example, producers advertise in order to influence consumers (and can design products accordingly).

Put in these terms, the analysis is simply bizarre. If supply and demand, aggregating over all economic agents, are tied to equilibrium, then historical change cannot be broached. If, however, purchase and consumption are perceived to be followed by subsequent rounds of supply and demand, then this year's demand feeds as a factor into next year's supply and the distinction between the two evaporates.⁹ In other words, a framework of supply and demand precludes consideration both of the reproduction and transformation of the conditions that underpin them.

Much of the literature, usually implicitly, has contributed significantly to undermining the supply and demand approach to consumption, seeking instead, from different perspectives and emphases, to understand how consumption has been socially (re)constructed. The same applies to those other, earlier starting points for consumption, Veblen and Simmel, with their views on distinction and emulation and the gendering of consumption which have been shown to be limited both theoretically and in scope.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the use of ahistorical theory, of which supply and demand is the most general type, persists. De Vries (1993), for example, draws explicitly upon the new household economics, most closely associated with Becker, for which utility maximisation by individuals across and within the commercial and non-commercial sectors (the household) are used to explain the consumer revolution in terms of an exogenously shifting comparative advantage in favour of commerce, inducing a corresponding shift of labour out of the household. Voth (1998) adopts a similar approach, drawing upon ideal notions of the household, the market, consumption, and the interaction between them across stage of history separated by three hundred years in time and, possibly, even longer in socio-economic and cultural context and determinants.¹¹ Without descending into details, it is worth emphasising that such theories ultimately depend upon an assumption of pre-ordained human rationality, translated into biologically determined consumer preferences which remain immutable across generations however much they may be conditioned by bringing in historical and social contingency.¹² As previously observed, the underlying assumptions upon which such analyses rest are rarely made explicit outside the esoterica of their origins in mainstream economics, and are rendered more palatable for consumption by more informal presentation and inconsistent, hybrid integration with other material.

A different example of use of ahistorical elements in addressing consumption is provided in the study of durables by Bowden and Offer (1994, 1996 and 1999). As Fine (1999f) argues, durables only become household appliances in specific socio-economic circumstances and so cannot be satisfactorily addressed in terms of a timeless calculus of household efficiency and utility. Interestingly, Bowden and Offer temper their dependence upon Becker-type analysis by adding a further ahistorical factor to explain patterns of television use by reference to intensity of arousal. This is taken a number of steps further by Offer's (1997) construction of an "economy of regard", the subtitle of his article entitled "Between the Gift and the Market". Essentially, Offer complements utility theory with the theory of regard which is used to stand for any interaction or motivation that cannot be exchanged through the market, thereby appropriating what is primarily an anthropological literature concerned with the gift as the counterpart to the commodity. Consequently, on an individualistic behavioural basis, market and non-market forms of activity and their interaction are accommodated through appeal to a balance, or complementarity, of regard and utility.¹³

In combining and distinguishing regard and utility, Offer contributes a particularly ingenious, if peculiar, illustration of what I have previously argued is a concerted attempt by economics to colonise the other social sciences, Fine (1997a, 1998c and 1999d). This has taken the form of extending the traditional application of economic principles, individual rationality as utility maximisation, from the market to other non-market spheres such as the household. Further, the deployment of such a rational choice methodology by economics has been strengthened by developments within the discipline which, based on market imperfections in the form of informational asymmetries, has putatively allowed it to explain the formation of non-market institutions and the persistence of custom. Remarkably, social theory goes through an inversion in which the social is explained by individual rationality rather than vice-versa. A whole range of new applications has resulted, from the new institutional economics and political economy of rent-seeking through to the economics of crime and the economics of addiction. To a large extent, these developments have not yet influenced the economics of consumption outside economics itself. However, given the scope of the new theory, this might only be a matter of time. The notion of social capital as used by economists, for example, has already attained an extremely prominent position even if more as a way of explaining differences in growth rates and individual socio-economic status.¹⁴ The importance, however, of social capital to the sociology of consumption suggests that it might only be a matter of time before analyses such as Offer's become more common and incorporated uncritically with other explanatory factors to contribute to a history of consumption.¹⁵

In an indirect way, a step has already been taken in this direction by the new versions of business history being promoted on the basis of the information-theoretic economics, Temin (ed) (1991), Lamoreaux and Raff (eds) (1995), Lamoreaux (1998), and Lamoreaux et al (eds) (1999). They have sought to reduce intra- and inter-firm, and even economic relations in general, to the different ways in which informational imperfections are handled. Consequently, as will be argued in the next section, since historical studies of consumption have increasingly shown an interest in the influence of the internal and external activities of the firm, consumption is already, at least implicitly, under threat from the new approach to business history. But this is to anticipate, especially the critical role that culture should play in the study of consumption for which information-theoretic analysis is completely incapable.¹⁶

Bringing Production Back In?

More surprising than the persistence of ahistorical approaches to consumption is that they should have made so little ground. Their relative rarity within the literature is a consequence of the intellectual climate in which they have elbowed for intellectual space, one dominated outside economics by postmodernism, especially as far as consumption is concerned. Here, the wish to provide a counterpart to production is equally strong but it has been developed along an entirely different track. It too tends to take sale as its point of departure but is less concerned with demand in the traditional sense of how much and by whom as with the constructed meaning of the purchase to the activity and formation of the identity of the consumer. Nothing could be further from an ahistorically given content of consumer and consumed.

The postmodernism of consumption has pursued this logic to its extreme in two different but closely related ways - one is by severing the connection altogether from the material content of the

commodities purchased and, thereby, the material processes by which they have been supplied. As Corrigan (1997, p. 32) concludes:¹⁷

Consumption communicates social meaning, and is the site of struggles over social distinction. The fulfilling of more concrete needs arising from, say, individual feelings of cold or hunger seems almost an accidental by-product.

In this way, sale for purchase is not only a point of departure it is even departed from with commodities taking on enormous flexibility in the symbolic content that they can incorporate. Thus, does consumption wreak its most terrible revenge upon the material world of production. On the other hand, postmodernism has increasingly focused upon consumption as being attached to the individual and the subjective at the expense of social and objective determinants.

I do not, however, wish to construct a postmodernist straw to blow away, not least because I consider that its influence is already well upon the wane. Further, the lessons that can be learnt from it have been not least, in the vernacular of political economy, that use values are socially constructed and do not come with a given set of properties and meanings simply by virtue of exiting from the market for the purposes of consumption.¹⁸ It is instructive, however, to dip into the postpostmodernist literature as it sheds light on the analytical path to be taken by the study of consumption. Consider, first, the defensiveness exhibited by Morley (1998, p. 492) in quoting Grossberg's (1995, p. 80) response to Garnham (1995) which bemoans the divorce between cultural studies and political economy:¹⁹

"Cultural studies did not reject political economy, it simply rejected certain versions of political economy as inadequate" because of their "reduction of economics to the technological and institutional contexts of capitalist manufacturing ... their reduction of the market to the site of commodified and alienated exchange and (their) ahistorical and consequently oversimplified notions of capitalism".

Significantly, the issue is not one of whether political economy should engage with the study of culture but what political economy and how, and exactly the same applies to related issues such as class and power, as well as production itself. For Morley (1998, p. 480) himself, there is a need to strike a balance between conjuncturalism and particularity and between categorization and generalisation, "to complement that perspective on the 'vertical' dimension of media power, with a simultaneous address to its 'horizontal'/ritual dimension", p. 487, and to find a defence against, "the eternal verities of political economy and the sociology of mass consumption", p. 489. Bermingham (1997, p. 13) comes to a similar view:

It is impossible to understand the history of consumption without also examining our conceptions of culture, the workings of culture, and ultimately subjectivity. In fact it has been the failure to do this which has resulted in the purely economic accounts of consumption which see it in a secondary role after production or which focus on commodities rather than consumers.

Interestingly, much of the foregoing discussion draws upon the consumption of cultural products themselves particularly following the era in which such artefacts have first become identified historically with high art and then come under threat as such from mass consumption, Bermingham (1997, p. 2/3). Clearly, the culture attached to consumption has shifting meanings as we move across time, place and goods. Consequently, it is necessary to examine what cultures become attached to goods as well as those cultures which do not irrespective of whether the goods are defined as "cultural" or not.²⁰ Thus, it is not surprising that the tension between political economy and culture should be taut when cultural goods are under consideration, for it is more or less unavoidable given the notion that commercialisation modifies the nature of the product, how it is produced and how it is received. Further, the cultural turn of consumption has motivated the notion that cultural commodities as a whole are distinct from others, as in the bringing together, for example, of the collection edited by Bermingham and Brewer (1997) concerned with "The Consumption of Culture" and set apart from the earlier volume of Brewer and Porter (eds) (1993) attached to "Consumption and the World of Goods". Yet, there can be no presumption that the latter have any more in common with one another than the former's attention to "Image, Object, Text" - nor that culture is any less important to the world of goods than it is to image, object and text.

Put in qualitative terms and subject to the vagaries of the meaning of culture, I suspect that these conclusions are fully acceptable in principle to all other than those dedicated to some form of ahistoricism.²¹ The same applies to the implication that I seek to draw for the future study of consumption: that it must seek to address the tension between economic and cultural factors, with consumption understood as the social construction and use of both things and ideas about those things. As Lee (1993, p. xi) puts it:

The essence of all consumer goods can be found in the fact that they are, first and foremost, commodities ... produced in order to be exchanged for profit ... Consumer goods have a social meaning, and that social meaning is, in the first instance, always contingent upon their status as commodities.

Further, he identifies the need to address economy and culture simultaneously "for consumption is the social activity which, above all others, unites economy and culture", p. xiii.²²

It is, however, one thing to accept such conclusions in principle, quite another to put them into practice. Whilst much of the literature referenced above has been extraordinarily disparaging about the economics and political economy they have rejected, it can certainly be claimed that very little has been offered in its place, Lee (1993, p. 147). Further, I suspect that it often reflects considerable ignorance of the available literature on the economics of how consumption is produced even if such literature does not always address consumption explicitly and directly.

The literature does, however, tend to stand on the opposite side of the commodity-divide to the study of the culture of consumption. It is more concerned with how commodities are successfully provided to consumers,²³ although this does include some account of the culture of consumption since those involved in supply do have to address this themselves, however accurately, in order to promote sales successfully.²⁴ Consequently, attention is drawn not only to production but also to the range of activities that connect it with consumption and how these condition one another. In this respect, another obstacle to the study of consumption has been overcome in the literature. This has been the over-reliance upon ideal types, initially focusing on mass production/consumption, Fordism or whatever and, subsequently, setting it against the alternative of flexible specialisation, or neo- or post-Fordism. Scranton (1997), in particular, has offered the most sophisticated account of the development of different forms of production. Whilst wishing to redress the balance against the notion of an historically rampant Fordism, he is equally convincing on the heterogeneity of the organisation of production where it departs from the archetype feedstock for mass consumption.²⁵

There are three important aspects to Scranton's contributions. First, he covers a very wide range of factors - even a partial list would include technology, labour process, market and skills, design, management and organisation, finance, product diversity and differentiation, (sub)contracting, advertising, distribution, and retailing, quite apart from the role of the state and regulation, on the one hand, and the significance of particular geographical locations, especially cities, on the other. Second, these separate elements cannot be put together randomly but nor are they in a fixed relationship to one another. In addition, there are relations across the diverse forms of production - mass production, for example, can be a source of cheap inputs, of demand for other types of products and production as well as providing a source of entrepreneurs, who would otherwise be deskilled, or of unskilled labour arising out of productivity increase and rationalisation. Third, Scranton (1997, p. 10) suggests these factors resolve themselves into, "four broad approaches to the business of making goods and meeting needs - custom, batch, bulk, and mass production".

However valid the apparent reliance upon four ideal types in place of two, the crucial point from Scranton's analysis remains the diversity not only in production and products but in the whole sequence and structure of activities through which commodities are delivered to the consumer. A similar conclusion can be drawn from those studies that have taken aspects of the delivery of consumption apart from production as their starting point, with diversity across both product and time. This is true of retailing, marketing and advertising, for example, as illustrated by the studies of Corley (1987) for DIY goods, brewers and tied houses, and product differentiation within Lever Brothers, by Westall (1994) for insurance, and for the retailing of tobacco products by Hilton (1998).

Three important conclusions can be drawn from this cursory review. First, the production of commodities is heavily dependent upon a multiplicity of factors which lie outside the immediate domain of production itself. Few outside mainstream economics would reduce production to the optimal choice from available technology in light of input prices and demand conditions. Yet, equally, many may have neglected the extent to which production depends upon design, marketing, retailing, etc. It is, in other words, not only consumption that has been neglected in the analysis of production. Second, it is not only a matter of a multiplicity of factors but also how they are integrated with one another. As argued elsewhere in all my work on consumption, the outcome is distinctive systems of provision for consumption which are set apart from one another and incorporate structures and dynamics of their own. Third, such systems of provision, whether accepted as such or not, are dependent upon particular patterns of vertical integration and disintegration, since the activities concerned are generally sequenced (design, production, sale, etc) with them being more or less incorporated under common or separate organisational forms, Langlois and Cosgel (1998).

Interestingly, it is precisely the last issue that is addressed directly by the new household economics. What gets produced within the household and what gets produced in the commercial sphere. The same question needs to be asked of, along and across, commercial activity itself. Here, however, we find that mainstream industrial economics is particularly weak, even by its own account. Formal deterministic models are entirely ambiguous in predicting outcomes. Elsewhere, I have argued, in a critical review of Sutton's treatment of competition and market structure that the mainstream's approach to vertical integration is essentially to see it as modifying or as a modified form of horizontal competition, Fine (1999g).²⁶ This is a consequence of the failure to confront the dynamic factors and tensions underlying the restructuring of the economy in general as well as of particular sectors.

Here, Marx's theory of production has much to offer, both in method and substance. He argues that the accumulation of capital is subject to two contradictory tendencies attached to its development of the division of labour. On the one hand, separate trades are brought together to exploit what would in modern parlance be termed the economies of scope. On the other hand, production processes can be subdivided and form the basis for new sectors, thereby accruing economies of scale. Consequently, the drive for productivity increase depends upon the outcome of a competitive process which cannot be predetermined as it depends upon the combination of factors attached to production and outlined above and which condition the competitive process. Further, the tension between these underlying tendencies and the socio-economic conditions that accompanies them provides a sound basis on which to comprehend the diversity of production revealed by Scranton. It is not a prediction of inevitable trend for the incorporation of production into a single Fordist form.²⁷

This discussion has focused upon vertically integrated activity within the commercial sphere. It has to go much further in dealing with consumption and its history. For, the latter require, as recognised by the new household economics, consideration of the shifting relationship between commercial and non-commercial forms of provision and shifts within, and transformation of, these broad categories. Here, however, because of its lack of historical specificity, the new household economics tends to assume what it has to prove or investigate - that activities shift seamlessly across boundaries according to exogenously given but evolving comparative advantage. Many who would reject such reductionism do so by bringing in sociocultural factors but only as impediments to the forward march of rational choice.²⁸ What is the alternative?

First, there needs to be precision about what constitutes a commodity proper. There is an enormous difference between the mass consumption items produced under conditions of twentieth century capitalism and those goods that have been held in ownership and then sold for whatever reason (and which I would not classify as commodity since they are not systematically produced for the market). For these, and for the range of "commodities" in between which are to be found to a greater or lesser extent throughout the history of consumption, the nature and impact of commercial pressure is very different depending on the socio-economic conditions to which they are attached. Thus, when Brewer (1995) restricts his discussion of culture to "works of imagination and the elegant arts", because these take the form of commodities and are commercialised, they do not constitute commodities at all in the same sense even as the Hogarth engravings, reproduced for the wider audience both qualitatively and quantitatively as examined by Paulson (1995).²⁹

Second, there is a presumption that the commercial sphere is liable to generate higher levels of productivity and incorporate the non-commercial. Such a tendency, however, as in the discussion of

vertical (dis)integration, is associated with countervailing tendencies, not least the provision of cheaper inputs for those forms of production that are not directly commercially oriented. This is apparent in the case of the household where, for example, the sewing machine and haberdashery can reinforce the viability of home production, quite apart from providing opportunities for informal earnings. Once again, the resolution of these opposing factors cannot be simply reduced to a netting out of overall comparative advantage. The outcome is highly dependent, less on the competitive process as such as on the socio-economic relations governing non-commercial provision.

Third, whilst the foregoing implies that not all forms of production for consumption should be reduced to comparative advantage equivalence with the requirement, for example, that mass production or whatever be matched in some sense by some other compensating factor to retain viability, it is necessary to determine how different forms of production for consumption are reproduced and transformed despite their possible lack of a commercial logic and their interaction with it. Both the nature and viability of such production and consumption are liable to be heavily influenced, if not eliminated, by the predominance of alternatives, if only in the form of counter culture as in the contemporary desire for the home-made or the customised (which can, of course, often be supplied en masse in practice).

Such considerations suggest that periodisation is essential for the study of consumption even if not in the form of a sequence of consumer revolutions and despite the disdain with which such periodisations have otherwise often been greeted. In the case of Tedlow (1990), for example, who has chosen to focus on the rise of mass production in order to address shifting forms of marketing, there are charges of lack of representativeness across the United States as well as lack of generalisation to other countries. To some extent, however, this is to miss the point of periodisation which is intended to identify distinct stages in the development of consumption and their dominant, not universal nor determining, characteristics.³⁰ My own work on consumption, for example, was initially prompted by the wish to explore the relationship between the rise of mass consumption and the increase in female labour market participation, Fine (1992). I found it necessary not only to examine the periodisation of production but also of the family (in the light of the demographic transition) and the role of the state. But there is no presumption that such periodisations have neat and tight correspondences with one another either chronologically or in each and every instance of production, consumption, family size and female labour market participation.

This is the result of the previously identified resolution of tensions between conflicting tendencies. Reliance upon the latter is well-established in the study of consumption. Ritzer (1993 and 1998), for example, has put forward the McDonaldisation thesis, and perceives it to be a consequence of a Weberian drive for modernist rationality, although his later work tempers this with considerations of postmodernist aspects. Bryman (1999) offers a complementary alternative in the form of Disneyization based on theming, dedifferentiating (items of consumption), merchandising, and requiring emotional labour. Postmodernism can be understood in terms of the tendency to the consumption of the sign. Last, but not least, globalisation (and localisation and their interaction as glocalisation) have been significant in the study of consumption.

Studies of the food chain have emphasised the tendency for the industrialisation of agriculture and the displacement of activity and control to manufacturing and, ultimately, retailing.³¹ In doing so, it initially settled comfortably into a theory of internationalised agro-food complexes, Friedman (1993 and 1994). Prompted in part by the bio-technology revolution, the influence of post-Fordism, and the empirical diversity revealed by a fuller range of foods, this gave way to a swing to the opposite extreme and to analytical agnosticism.³² Most recently, Goodman and Watts (eds) (1997) for example, a less extreme approach has been adopted, emphasising the impact of globalisation, interaction all along the food chain, diversity and specificity by crop and country, and the need to avoid "mimetics"³³ and address food as such rather than extrapolating from theory developed, however appropriately for industrial production systems.³⁴

The analytical use of tendencies has, however, to be treated with some caution. There is a danger of identifying an empirical trend, possibly overgeneralising, designating it as tendency and even allowing for countertendency so that the theory accommodates all empirical outcomes including counterexamples. Whilst this may reflect sound empirical judgement, tendencies should be analytically grounded, in the socio-economic imperatives of capitalism and be shown to underpin more complex outcomes. In my work on eating disorders, for example, I have attempted to show how they arise in a

multiplicity of forms and severity as a result of the imperatives both to eat and to diet which are themselves possible because of the paradoxical co-existence and symbiosis of eating and dieting industries.³⁵ For Shammas (1990, p. 8):

There are two tendencies in the writings on consumption in the past. One is to view consumers as alienated from the means of production, pushed into the market-place, and force-fed market goods until, through merchandizing and advertisements, they become hooked on a culture of consumption. The other tendency is to interpret the accumulation of all new commodities as an unequivocal sign of general societal advancement and well-being ... [In contrast] ... One has to leave open the possibility that trends over a long period of time may be other than linear and that not all types of consumption change in the same way.

Consumption as Systems of Provision and Culture

The preceding section has sought to offer some sense of the richness that exists in the analysis of production although it may have alienated those who have provided it by tying insights to certain methodologies and theories at the expense of others. Nonetheless, the relationship between such analysis and the culture of consumption has yet to be specified. It is not one of distance. For, many of the analyses covered have been explicitly motivated by the wish to draw out their implications for the culture of consumption. It is to be suspected that their neglect, or the neglect of their implications, reflects ignorance of them and, even more important, a presumption of their irrelevance. For in the most extreme forms of postmodernist understandings, the culture of consumption has increasingly been constructed around the sign value of objects independent of what they are and from where they have come.

Such attitudes, if not prejudices, are revealed in what has become a token dismissal of Marx for having concentrated exclusively on (exchange) value at the expense of the social construction of use value for consumption.³⁶ The prior rejection of Marx follows from the analytical demise of production and, with it, the presumed significance of class for consumption. Yet, it is Marx who is recognised to have established that commodification turns qualitative social relations into quantitative ones of how much money there is to spend. Consequently, consumption patterns cannot be legitimately derived from class relations of production although this does not mean that such class relations in their broader context are irrelevant to consumption.³⁷ But class, production and exchange value are readily left behind in embracing the pertinence of sign value. The leading villain in this respect has been Baudrillard whose stance on the rejection of Marx has continued to be readily accepted even though much else of his work has now been rejected as too extreme.³⁸ It is worth recalling, however, that Marx's early writings often focused on alienation. Unfortunately, whatever its veracity, Althusser's notion that Marx broke with this earlier work to embrace political economy has also encouraged the view that Marx had the most simplistic approach to use value, the evidence of his earlier writings, including those on ideology, to the contrary. Certainly, Marx's work revealed a shift of emphasis but, for example, the treatment of commodity fetishism as a concealed relationship between producers expressed as a relationship between things does not necessarily entail the simplistic attitude to the social construction of the use values of commodities that has been attributed to Marx and to Marxist political economy more generally. In this respect, Haug's (1986) much neglected notion of the aesthetic illusion is instructive as he argues that the shifting products and productions in pursuing profitability create a tension between the material character of commodities and the way they are perceived. Whilst he exaggerates the extent to which that illusion is supported by advertising around sexuality, he forges a close connection between political economy and the culture of consumption.³⁹

What he tends to neglect, however, is that production etc does not simply strain the bounds of the received notions of commodities, it is also positively constitutive of consumer culture. As observed, much concern has been directed at how activity away from the act of consumption itself is significant for the culture of consumption. For Lee (1993, p. 39):

Goods have already been given potential meaning and symbolic value prior to their introduction as the symbolic goods of lived culture ... advertising and marketing do not have the ability to achieve a total symbolic closure around the goods that they promote, [but] the power of such agencies cannot be ignored.

The same conclusion can be drawn from Leach's (1993) study of corporate influence on the culture of consumption. He argues, p. 147:

After 1890 the institutions of production and consumption were, in effect, taken over by corporate businesses ... At the same time, merchants, brokers, and manufacturers did everything they could, both ideologically and in reality, to *separate* the world of production from the world of consumption.

But, he insists, production and consumption remain inextricably bound together despite the wish of commerce to conceal, for example, any connection to work and working conditions in peddling their wares, p. 149:

All of this served to give to consumption its independent character, communicating a sense that, in the world of goods at least, men and women could find transformation, liberation, a paradise free from pain and suffering, a new eternity in time ... But this was illusory. It was illusory because the world of consumption, however seemingly severed from the world of production, was always dependent on and always vulnerable to the capitalist forces that created it.

In addition, Leach focuses on the creation of corporate culture away from the point of sale, not so much in design and product as in public relations, corporate image, and the support solicited from outside direct corporate control, in institutions specifically set up for, or adopting, such a role albeit in the context of formal autonomy and incorporation of other purposes and activities, p. 382:

An immense legacy was passed on, an institutional legacy of corporations, investment and commercial banks, business schools, commercial art schools, museums, universities, and the federal government. These institutions and the services they performed grew dramatically, especially after 1950.

A similar, if less wide-ranging account, is given by Marchand (1998, p. 4/5) who also observes diversity across corporations and their strategies:⁴⁰

As we trace the quest for a corporate soul over the first half of the twentieth century, we will encounter a great variety of stratagems and initiatives as one major company after another discovered the need for a more favorable and distinct corporate image and more self-conscious public relations. No two companies faced exactly the same needs and circumstances; each defined its purposes and strategies in different ways. The striking diversity of these many case studies enriches this story of emerging corporate cultures and public relations strategies.

In short, consumption and its associated systems of provision are conduits for cultural influences that are both diverse and originate and evolve, often purposefully, away from point of sale and use and corresponding commercial activity.

Such insights can be illustrated and extended by my own work on food. Against received wisdoms of the trickle-down of information in healthy eating campaigns, it is argued that information about food (or the knowledge that consumers deploy in the context of adopting a healthy or unhealthy diet), is attached to a food information system, This is distinct from, but integrated with, the food system as a whole which generates information, consciously or otherwise, just as it generates food. Five features are characteristic of the food information system - it is complex, chaotic, constructed, contradictory and contested⁴¹ - all well-illustrated by eating disorders and many other aspects of food culture.⁴² In a similar vein, Cook et al (1998) have examined what they term the circuits of knowledge in the UK food business,⁴³ building upon Lien's (1997, p. 19) suggestion that, "the social production of foods for sale is closely linked to the social production of knowledge".⁴⁴

Although information, knowledge and culture are by no means synonymous even if they could be analytically pinned down, they do have much in common. Consequently, it is appropriate to examine cultural systems for consumption alongside the integral chains of activities that correspond to their systems of provision. Although liable to be more fluid, they can be structured like systems of provision, especially with the professionalisation of design and marketing, for example, which can

adopt a distinctive content and dynamic of their own.⁴⁵ Further, an important implication of this proposed focus on cultural systems attached to consumption is the rejection of a simple opposition between production and consumption or producers and consumers. Studies of consumption have previously proceeded along such lines in sufficiently diverse ways that their shared framework has tended to remain unexamined. Models of consumer sovereignty suggest harmonious interaction with producer ultimately serving consumer. This conclusion is inverted in models of corporate manipulation of consumer tastes and wants. Postmodernist accounts, drawing upon the construction of identity, consolidate the focus on the consumer in relation to a world of signs.

Posing a cultural system as attached to consumption is a break with a focus on the active or passive consumer as can be acknowledged by drawing a parallel with the political system, not least because it and consumption are often used as metaphors for one another; just as politicians try to persuade voters to spend their vote on them, so consumers are perceived as voting for their purchases.⁴⁶ Yet few would seriously consider reducing the political system, or take as analytical starting point, the confrontation of the voter with the ballot box. Why should consumption be different?

There are studies which can be interpreted as having simultaneously addressed systems of provision and their corresponding cultural systems although they might not subscribe to my way of posing their achievements. Auslander's (1996a) study of French furniture is exemplary allowing for, p. 33:⁴⁷

a dialectic between analysis of stylistic change, on the one hand, and of political and economic changes, on the other. The specific use of materials, the historical repertoire of forms, and the products of distance culture emerged out of a set of perpetual dialogues between the culture of production, the system of distribution, and the culture of the court.

In her study of the sewing machine, Coffin (1994, p. 751) admits:⁴⁸

I deliberately bring together subjects that are usually treated separately: family incomes and credit payment, construction of femininity and methods of marketing, and advertising, sexology, and models of the female body.

Mort (1996 and 1998) examines clothing and masculinity, and Nye energy systems and, I presume, the list could be extended.

Where more or less comprehensive coverage of consumption and cultural systems is not possible, and nearly all studies tend to have uneven balance within and between such systems, attention should at the very least be devoted to situating the preferred focus within the wider context. Even where this is not done, it is possible for others to synthesise the various contributions across the systems. In short, I am proposing a framework for studying consumption based on the identification of systems of provision and culture and their interaction around particular commodities. The implications are that, in the context of consumption, neither particular cultural aspects nor particular activities, gendering and advertising for example, respectively, should be studied across commodity groups without reference to the commodity-specific and cultural systems to which they are variously attached. This is not to deny what Mort (1996 and 1998) terms leakage across systems of provision, to which cultural systems can be added, in commenting on debate between Glennie and Thrift (1992 and 1993) and Fine (1993a). Gendering, for example, is to be found to a greater or lesser extent across all consumption with interactive effects at that and other levels. But it is also tied to the gendering in the provisioning of those commodities in ways that will need to be identified, in rejecting universal and oversimplified assumptions concerning consumption, decoration and the mundane chores of women. Further, in recognising variation across time, product and space, de Grazia (1996, p. 3) concludes:

To make sense of the accretion of sexual meanings and gender identities around practices of consumption the authors could not be wedded to any single definition of the polymorphous term consumption.

For Auslander (1996a, p. 277):

All acts of consumption were also acts of production, but some modes of consumption were defined as almost exclusively masculine. This gendering of forms of consumption was not

stable across the century, however, nor were the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine impermeable at any given moment.

Whither Consumption Studies?

Despite the achievements outlined above, I am generally pessimistic about the prospects for studies of consumption to address the interaction between economy and culture adequately. There is almost universal enthusiasm for interdisciplinary approaches to consumption. Nonetheless, such enthusiasm is not matched by practice. To some extent, this is a consequence of interdisciplinary boundaries which are difficult to cross. As Nell (1996, p. 15) observes, "there's no getting around the fact that economics is tough". It might be added both that it is getting tougher and semiotics is hardly a piece of cake! Is it possible that any scholar can be sufficiently grounded in the combination of necessary disciplines, especially given their diversity of methods, techniques and traditions?

There is, however, a more serious aspect to this problem which I will illustrate from my own experience. For, the study of consumption depends less upon being interdisciplinary in the sense of occupying a command of more than one discipline. Rather, it requires an abandonment of disciplinary loyalties, and a straddling in place of multiple occupancy. Whilst recognisably grounded in political economy, my work on consumption has consistently attempted to incorporate the insights of other disciplines and pose questions about consumption as such, not apply economics to consumption. Thus, in first proposing the system of provision approach in Fine and Leopold (1993), careful consideration was given to its relationship to other disciplines, approaches and issues including, for example, the study of adverts and the excesses of Baudrillard in his understanding of use value and its relation to the commodity. Significantly, references to my work tend to point to its particular approach as based on systems of provision, but not to its implications for the culture of consumption. I am also often earmarked as an economist although, to the best of my knowledge, only social scientists who reject the hegemonic mainstream economics, and few heterodox economists, have ever shown any interest in my work. This self-reference is not intended as an indulgent rebuff to the students of consumption but serves to illustrate what I take to be a continuing failure to confront economics with culture and vice-versa, not least in historical studies of consumption.

Footnotes

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¹ The selected bibliography of Furlong in de Grazia and Furlong (eds) (1996) runs to twenty pages, including sections on conceptualizations; historical perspectives; distribution, retailing and shopping as sites of consumption; marketing and design; spectatorship and reception; production of representations; domesticity, household and the family, sexuality; bodies, clothing, and beauty as appearance; and politics and ideologies of consumption. On shopping alone, the brief history and selected literature of Hewer and Campbell in Falk and Campbell (eds) (1997), also of twenty pages, addresses typologizing, instrumental and recreational, gendering, economics, geography, history, literature, marketing, psychology, and sociology. The unlimited scope for the study of consumption, however, arises out of its being attached to the formation of identity - for which anything goes.

² See Fine and Leopold (1990) for further critical commentary on McKendrick et al and Fine and Leopold (1993, Chapters 6 and 7) for a more general discussion of the themes that follow.

³ My favourite example is provided by Adshead (1997) with consumerism identified in both Europe and China between 1400 and 1800.

⁴ In the context of consumption, see Fine (1997b and 1998c) and Fine and Leopold (1993, Chapter 4).

⁵ Agnew (1993) makes the same point from a different perspective in emphasising McKendrick's reliance upon the producer Wedgwood.

⁶ For a critical overview, see Fine (1999b).

⁷ For a critical account in the context of British food, see Fine et al (1996, Chapter 7).

⁸ See Benson (1994, p. 51):

The growth and redirection of consumer demand can be understood only when set alongside the growth and redistribution of supply.

⁹ See Marx's (1973, p. 100) tortuous discussion of production, distribution and consumption in the Grundrisse.

¹⁰ For specific critical discussion of use of imitation and emulation, see Campbell (1995).

¹¹ Witness the tautological in his arguments, p. 168:

The increase in "leisure" over the past one hundred years has to be interpreted as a consequence of ... high income elasticity of demand for earnings intensive commodities.

Further, such conclusions have to be investigated over longer periods to ascertain the exact balance of income and substitution effects throughout history.

¹² See Fine (1999a) in critique of Becker (1996).

¹³ Hence Offer's (1996) attempt to explain advertising in terms of its simulated appeal to regard within the market through portraying the interpersonal.

¹⁴ For critical assessments of use of social capital, see Fine (1999a, c and e).

¹⁵ Note Offer (1996, p. 239) refers explicitly to social capital and how advertising may undermine it, both directly and indirectly through spillover effects, because of its competitive devaluation of credibility.

¹⁶ See Fine (1999h) for this point and a more general critical assessment of the new approach to business history.

¹⁷ See also Campbell (1993, p. 42):

The recent fashion for semiotically inspired analyses of both contemporary and past human institutions and practices has served the valuable function of shifting the focus of analytic attention from behaviour to meaning. Unfortunately, it has also served to promote the idea that "meaning" can be the subject of investigation in itself, independent of purposeful conduct of individuals.

¹⁸ As Mirzoeff (1997, p. 273) puts it:

Consumption only takes place after the sign has been transformed into a culturally acceptable format which may radically differ from its original form.

¹⁹ See the more general debate in Critical Studies in Mass Communication, vol 12, no 1, 1995, pp. 62-100.

²⁰ Just as we should be aware of failed technologies and products, see Lebergott (1993, p. 18) who reports that 70% of market-tested products fail for major corporations; for grocery stores, estimates that only 5,000 of 30,000 products survived between 1960 and 1980, and of 84,933 between 1980 and 1990, 86% failed.

²¹ Ahistoricism is also to be found in the study of the culture of consumption, and not just in the presumption of universal motivation to emulate and distinguish. Fischler (1980, 1988 and 1989), for example, suggests an omnivore's paradox in which the capacity to eat anything runs the risk of poisoning, creating tensions in a world in which we no longer produce our own food locally. For a critique, see Fine (1993b and 1998, Chapter 2). More generally, distance from (commodity) production has been seen as an important aspect of the culture of consumption, Miller (1995). There can, however, be no presumption that we know less about our food or our consumption simply because others produce it.

²² Latouche (1993, p. 24) observes of westernization that it is made up of "economy and culture as two primeval dimensions of human experience, conforming to two antagonistic logics".

²³ As will be clear, the following discussion draws upon the references and themes taken up by Church (1999).

²⁴ See Clarke (1997) for a discussion in the context of bringing studies of the managerial and consumer revolutions together, and also Clarke (1996) for market research and its interaction with GM's strategy towards distribution networks.

²⁵ See also Scranton (1991 and 1999) and, for an explicit discussion around consumer society, Scranton (1994) where he concludes, p. 505:

Unpacking the category "consumer goods" to reveal the variety of production systems involved in provisioning a public could have a useful result in acclimatizing scholars of

consumer societies to the complexity of the networks of design, technology, labor process, and distribution involved in the historical mutations of manufacturing.

²⁶ On the other hand, witness the praise for Sutton from the mainstream. For Cable (1994, p. 6), "the exquisite blend of theory and empirics in Sutton (1991) may prove a model for future work", and Waterson (1994, p. 133) "endorses the approach of authors such as Sutton (1991), who have shifted away from the proliferation of theoretical nuances towards a search for empirical regularities".

²⁷ For more detail in the context of the associated (re)structuring of labour markets, see Fine (1998a, Chapter 7).

²⁸ For Frost (1993, p. 128/9):

Domestic technologies saw little diffusion for other reasons as well. The argument that seemed compelling for rationalization and automation in industry was economic: machines would replace workers and thus save employers considerable wage expenses. Once women were cajoled or forced back into the home, what point was there, in an economic sense, to put them out of "work". Even for well-healed, middle-class families, expenditures on costly home appliances were hard to justify.

²⁹ See also Lippincott (1995) for the common confusion between commodity and commodity form.

³⁰ For Scranton (1999, p. 60), in the context of urban manufacturing:

If the simplifying assumption that the significance of Midwestern cities lay in their service to the emergence of mass production is refused, a more nuanced account of territorial industrialization will be feasible.

But see Roy (1997) for the argument that the dominance of large-scale corporations far exceeded their weight and representativity.

³¹ See Goodman et al (1987) and Fine et al (1996) for a critique, and also Marsden (1998).

³² See debate in Review of International Political Economy, vol 1, no 3.

³³ See Goodman and Watts (1994a).

³⁴ Note the more favourable response to my work in Watts and Goodman (1997) compared to debate with Fine (1994a and b) in Goodman and Redclift (1994) and Watts (1994).

³⁵ Fine (1995c and 1998b, Chapter 3). Note that Becker has argued that eating disorders are the consequence of rational intertemporal choice (for an appropriately specified utility function).

³⁶ See Lovell (1995) and Wayne (1995). Agnew (1995, p. 300) observes:

What began after 1968 as a legitimate effort to correct the labour metaphysic of classical and Marxist political economy and to restore the symbolic dimension of consumption has given way to a blanket dismissal of such categories as subsistence, use-value and labour.

³⁷ For further discussion, see Fine and Leopold (1993, Chapters 18 and 19) and, especially in the context of foods, Fine et al (1996, Chapter 11). For de Grazia (1996, p. 152), there is "no uniform pattern across classes for Mr. Breadwinner and Mrs. Consumer". For contrasting outcomes in terms of the transparency of class in consumption, see Wight (1993) for the working class in the context of unemployment and, for Johnson (1988, p. 42):

It is always possible to identify complex status hierarchies in any society, but it is not always the case that these run counter to more fundamental class divisions. In late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain, however, the immediacy of the status divisions of all levels of working-class society, and the precarious nature of most families' income and social respectability, acted as a barrier to the development of a more cohesive working class outlook. This was not false consciousness, it was real life.

³⁸ Interestingly, recent translation of Baudrillard's (1998) earlier work reveals that he had yet to break with a heavy, if simplistic dose, of economic determinism as monopoly capitalism is seen as homogenising people and products, thereby creating a cult of differentiation, p. 89/90. Moreover, the view from this perspective that only the idea, and not the fulfilment, of consumption has been created becomes very different within a postmodernist framework in which the economic determinism has fallen away, and only the subjective notion of consumption remains.

³⁹ See Clarke's (1999) discussion, drawing upon Hounshell (1984), of the aesthetic trade-off between productivity and product or, in the more mundane terms of the automobile industry, how and how often to change models for marketing purposes.

⁴⁰ He continues, however:

Yet engaging as these individual narratives are, it is also intriguing to observe the ways in which they subsequently converged ...[on] the prevalent association of the great corporation with small-town Main Street ... a contrived sentimentalism ... to address the disproportions in size and power that the giant corporation still signified.

⁴¹ More generally, see Bermingham (1995, p. 14):

The modernist distrust of mass culture which has to a large extent both written the history of consumption and blinded us to its history rests on a tendency to think in essentialist terms about culture, class and identity. Accordingly, culture is high and pure, classes are homogeneous and stable, and identity is unified and transparent. All of these assumptions need to be questioned if we are to write a history of consumption since the seventeenth century. Instead of seeing culture in simple productivist terms as the creation of unique objects by individuals not alienated from their labor, we need to look at uses of culture, at the social context of cultural change and innovation, and at the solutions cultural forms propose to the social contradictions that have generated them.

⁴² See Porter (1993) for consumption conceived as (unhealthy) disorder.

⁴³ The notion of circuits of knowledge is appropriate to the study of creolisation of consumption, which tends to be understood in terms of a meeting of, rather than a dialogue between, cultures. See Howes (ed) (1996), and Lien (1998) for the Norwegian pizza.

⁴⁴ Circulatory or similar models of the culture of consumption can lead but not be reduced to notions of consumption as communication, as in Cosgel (1997), for example. For a critique, see Campbell (1993).

⁴⁵ See, for example, McGovern (1998, p. 40/1):

Whereas admen and consumer advocates were fiercely opposed on the questions of the consumer's best interest or the important characteristics of buyers, these two professions shared remarkably similar views about consumers. They placed themselves squarely in a cultural elite, whose tastes paralleled and reinforced their own social position. They embraced the language of authenticity to discredit mass consumption and elevate their own tastes. By investing their own preferences with the authority of the "real" in a culture long suspicious of artifice, they made those tastes the yardstick of reality.

See also Auslander (1996a), and Walton (1992) for desire of workmen to maintain both their skills and product quality.

⁴⁶ See McGovern (1998) for the notion of consumer democracy as a means of denying (class) stratification in consumption.

⁴⁷ For Auslander (1996b, p. 101):

To adequately explain the gendering of consumer practices in the nineteenth century one must ultimately locate that process within the dynamics of making nation and state and of capitalist expansion in the post-revolutionary era ... and the political and social ... of everyday life, including the acquisition, use and disposal of goods.

See also Walton (1998) on French furnishing.

⁴⁸ See also Coffin (1996).

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