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Consumption as a Key Concept

Given the flourishing literature on the subject, we might simply take it for granted that consumption is a ‘key concept’ in the social sciences. But what is a key concept, and does consumption deserve that status?

The metaphor of a ‘key’ suggests a number of features. A key unlocks the way to another place, enabling us to explore new domains. A key in music is a tonal system that structures our perceptions and organizes our experience. A key is a solution to a puzzle, mystery or code; with it, we can decipher the meaning of people’s words and acts.

This metaphor may obscure the fact that key concepts are contested. People disagree profoundly about their definition and significance. On reflection this is hardly surprising, given that reality is defined through concepts. George Orwell’s novel, *1984*, offers an arresting demonstration. A language, ‘Newspeak’, is constructed to impose meanings by systematically impoverishing the English vocabulary. It does so in two main ways. First, the sense of words is brazenly inverted: the Ministry of Peace wages war, the Ministry of Truth spreads propaganda, the Ministry of Plenty enforces rationing and the Ministry of Love tortures dissidents. Second, all the nuanced evaluative words in the English language are reduced to a stark contrast between ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Even that is too rich for the authorities, who cleverly replace ‘bad’ by ‘ungood’. The citizens of Oceania are left with a sixfold scale on which

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their feelings are quantified: doubleplusgood – plusgood – good – ungood – plusungood – doubleplusungood. The scale lacks a middle term, preventing people from taking up a neutral position. It is, as a character in the novel smugly explains, really only one word. When Newspeak becomes universal, ‘thoughtcrime’ will be impossible.

Newspeak requires the suppression of history and memory. As each new edition of the Dictionary is published the previous version is destroyed, erasing what little linguistic variety had survived. As with any key concept, to understand the contemporary meanings of consumption we need to recover its history – an essential part of Raymond Williams’s project in his illuminating book *Keywords* (1976).

The word ‘consume’ dates from the fourteenth century. Its original meaning was pejorative: to use up, destroy, devour, waste, squander, exhaust. ‘Consumer’ dates from the sixteenth century, with similar pejorative connotations. ‘Consumption’ originally referred to any wasting disease, before becoming the (now old-fashioned) term for severe pulmonary tuberculosis.

From the mid-nineteenth century, Williams points out, ‘consumer’ mutated into a neutral term in bourgeois political economy. Increasingly what was spoken of was ‘*the* consumer’, an abstract entity in opposition to ‘producer’, just as ‘consumption’ stood in contrast to ‘production’. This neutral, abstract usage passed into general use in the mid-twentieth century, and has since become dominant.

The ascendancy of the abstract bourgeois consumer, Williams argues, imposes an ideology that flattens out meaning. Older terms slowly decline. ‘Customer’, which from the mid-fifteenth century implied a continuing personal relationship with a supplier, was gradually replaced by ‘consumer’, an abstract figure in an impersonal market. Customers have needs which they have freely chosen, and these needs are met by suppliers. Consumers have needs that are created by people who then purport to satisfy them. Unlike the customer, the consumer inhabits a world saturated with advertising. Once no more than information tricked out with puff, advertising becomes an insidious mechanism for the creation of need. Ironically, there is much talk of ‘consumer choice’ – for Williams, a self-contradiction.

'Consumer' and 'consumption', he argues, have become the dominant terms through which we conceptualize our relationship to all manner of goods and services. Relevant distinctions are in danger of being lost. He points to the irony of so-called consumer organizations, whose aim is to act both as pressure group and as source of information for people seeking quality and value. How revealing, Williams suggests, that discriminating purchasers should be referred to as their opposite: consumers. My own work has made a similar point, though at the time I was not aware that Williams had been there before me: the Consumers' Association, I wrote (A. Aldridge 1997: 406), 'has succeeded in delivering commodified information to individual consumers, but failed to create an informed public'.

The pejorative meanings associated with consumption, consumerism and 'the' consumer are ammunition for cultural critics. Many examples will be discussed throughout this book. Consider just one: Bauman's exposition of what he calls 'the consumer attitude' (Bauman 1990: 204, cited by Lury 1996: 50). What does it mean, Bauman asks, to have and to display a consumer attitude? He identifies five elements:

'It means, first, perceiving life as a series of problems, which can be specified, more or less clearly defined, singled out and dealt with.' Ours is a life of decisions rather than of chance, destiny or drift. We are required to manage our life as if we were running a small business. I would add that if we are very successful we might become a celebrity, in which case we shall be running not a small business but a modern corporation.

'It means, secondly, believing that dealing with such problems, solving them, is one's duty, which one cannot neglect without incurring guilt or shame.' This is Puritanism in modern dress. We are expected to treat consumption as work, and to perform it as a duty to society and to ourselves. Vocations from God may have declined, but society calls – and is even more demanding than the Almighty.

'It means, thirdly, trusting that for every problem, already known or as may still arise in the future, there is a solution – a special object or recipe, prepared by specialists, by people with superior know-how, and one's task is to find it.' Two

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cultural elements are combined here. One is optimism: no problem lacks a solution. From this stems the managerialist cant that there are no problems, only 'opportunities'. Consumerism, as we shall see, pervades the world of work. The other element is faith in expertise. Consumerism and professionalism form a paradoxical but deep alliance: the sovereign consumer needs constant professional advice.

'It means, fourthly, assuming that such objects or recipes are essentially available; they may be obtained in exchange for money, and shopping is the way of obtaining them.' Here is the recurrent theme of commodification of culture. Solutions are packaged and sold to us. Bocoock's bitter comment captures the essence of the critique of commodification: for him consumerism is 'the active ideology that the meaning of life is to be found in buying things and pre-packaged experiences' (Bocoock 1993: 50). Problems are manufactured precisely in order to sell solutions.

'It means, fifthly, translating the task of learning the art of living as the effort to acquire the skill of finding such objects and recipes, and gaining the power to possess them once found: shopping skills and purchasing power.' The consumer attitude is part of our very being, creating the very anxieties that it claims to allay. This is how we live our spiritually impoverished lives. We do not just consume, we have become consumers.

One theme picked out in Bauman's second point is the legacy of Puritanism, at least in Protestant cultures. The British suspicion of extravagance – an attitude that until recently encouraged a drab rejection of 'fashionable clothing, jewellery, eating and drinking well at home and restaurants' (Bocoock 1993: 12) – can be traced back to the sixteenth-century Reformation and to Cromwell's government in the seventeenth. Bocoock points the contrast with the more relaxed, guiltlessly self-indulgent cultures of Catholic France, Spain and Italy.

Exactly the same argument is made about the USA by Scitovsky in *The Joyless Economy* (1976). According to him, American consumerism carries the deadening impress of Puritanism. People who 'graze' throughout the day deny themselves the pleasures of a regular cycle of mealtimes;

technological innovation, the rush of fashion, and planned obsolescence mean that energy is drained into expenditure on and maintenance of consumer goods; over-reliance on the automobile deprives consumers of the pleasure of walks in the open air; central heating and air conditioning produce a sterile controlled environment inside buildings; and life's minor troubles are turned into occasions for medical and psychiatric intervention.

Bauman is not alone in stressing the profound anxieties, ambivalence and contradictions of consumerism. Miles (1998), for example, writes of the 'consuming paradox'. Consumption is experienced as both enabling and constraining. Despite the multitude of opportunities apparently available, we are severely limited in the choices open to us. Commercialization and commodification attract and repel, satisfy and alienate. One telling example is the commercialization of association football in England and other rich countries (Miles 1998: 136–40). Football teams are multi-million pound merchandizing corporations with brand names to protect and nourish. Television plays a dominant role in commodifying football for the fans. Supporting a premier league team is far more comfortable than standing on the bleak terraces once was, and the football is more athletic and skilful; but these seductions are bought at the cost of alienation, exploitation and financial exclusion.

Edwards (2000) similarly writes of the 'contradictions' of consumption. Consumers enjoy power but are also constrained; consumption is enjoyable and frustrating; people are embraced by the world of consumption and excluded from it; consumption is essential to free market capitalism but also corrosive of it.

Consumption is not merely contested, it is – like 'power' in Lukes's influential analysis – an *essentially* contested concept (Lukes 1974). Consumption is, moreover, a member of a family of essentially contested concepts including 'the' consumer, consumer society, consumer culture, and consumerism. It is in the nature of such concepts that no agreement about their definition will ever be achieved; the contest is interminable. We cannot all agree on a definition, because to do so would inevitably mean a victory for some of us and

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a defeat for others. Take, for example, the definition of consumerism. Definitions are endless, but can be grouped into three broad categories.

First, consumerism may be defined as a *social movement*, referring to pressure groups that test goods and services, recommend best buys and campaign for consumer rights. This is the definition commonly adopted in textbooks in economics and business studies, for example Loudon and Della Bitta's *Consumer Behavior* (1993: 627): 'Consumerism is a social movement of citizens and government to enhance the rights and powers of buyers in relation to sellers.' Here citizens are equated with consumers, and consumers are equated with buyers. Consumerism is presented favourably: it is about the empowerment of consumers as citizens, upholding their rights, protecting them from abuses of power, and supplying them with objective information that will help them to make rational choices. All this is held to contribute to the efficient working of a healthy market economy.

Second, consumerism may be defined as a *way of life*. It often implies, as many authors have noted, an excessive, even pathological preoccupation with consumption – 'lifestyles geared to possession and acquisition', in Lyon's words (1994: 67). Writers who, like Fiske (1989), emphasize the pleasures of consumption are attacked for providing an uncritical celebration of consumption that ignores the operation of power in capitalist society.

Third, consumerism may be defined as an *ideology*. Its purpose is to legitimize capitalist societies, contrasting them favourably with such alternatives as communism, fascism, and neofeudal despotisms, none of which come anywhere near satisfying the needs and legitimate expectations of ordinary people for comfort and prosperity.

Whatever definitions are adopted, important issues are at stake. The literature on consumption is a battlefield for competing visions of the good life. Key features of these battles are the following:

Consumption is a value-loaded concept

Essentially contested concepts are not value neutral, which is one reason why they are contested. They are a moral battle-

ground for competing values and ideologies. As we shall see in chapter 3, the vision of the free market as the good society in operation is supported by its claim to deliver a wealth of goods and services to free and rational consumers who know what they want. Conversely, we can see the dark side of consumption in the pejorative meanings associated with consumerism, such as materialism, opportunism, selfishness, hedonism, and narcissism.

Consumption is typically seen in opposition to other concepts

Consumption does not stand in isolation. As with all key concepts there is an implied other. Among the most common oppositions are:

- consumption – production;
- consumption – investment;
- consumption – citizenship;
- consumption – conservation.

In each case there is usually a latent implication that consumption is inferior to its opposite: parasitic consumers versus useful producers, profligate consumers versus prudent investors, passive consumers versus active citizens, and selfish consumers versus responsible conservationists.

Consumption is a focus of dispute between academic disciplines

The literature on consumption is polarized into two camps, in accordance with a strict academic division of labour between, as Slater (1997: 51) puts it, ‘the study of formally rational behaviour (economics) and the study of its irrational, cultural content (the rest)’. Sociologists, cultural theorists and social and cultural anthropologists are in the vanguard of attacks on economic models of consumption, ‘the’ market and ‘the’ consumer – attacks which economists serenely ignore.

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The war between economics and its detractors is not the only contest. Sociology has been regularly criticized by social anthropologists for its sweeping generalizations unsupported by serious ethnography. According to their account, sociologists are often little better than economists, since they both peddle stereotypes of ‘the’ consumer. Similarly, cultural studies has often involved a critique of sociological writing. Cultural studies has been seen to offer imaginative and fine-grained accounts of consumption that are attuned to the rich aesthetics of contemporary lifestyles, and that have broken free from sociology’s apparent obsession with social class and production.

Consumption is integral to images of the good society and its opposite, dystopia

Utopian writing typically envisages a fundamental reordering of the relationship between production and consumption. Some utopias are societies of abundance, others abstain from material gratifications in pursuit of higher ideals. A typical utopian move is to abolish money, promising to reward us according to our needs or our merits. Most, perhaps all, utopias can just as plausibly be seen as dystopias. This is the subject of chapter 3.

Consumption is bound up with notions of what it is to be a fully developed human being morally and spiritually

According to an influential theory put forward by Abraham Maslow (1970), human motivation across all societies and at all times is organized in a hierarchical structure of need. As each lower level of need is met, so the next higher level comes into force. Maslow’s ‘need hierarchy’ has seven levels, which in descending order are:

- Self-actualization needs;
- Aesthetic needs;
- Cognitive needs;
- Esteem needs;

Belongingness and love needs;
Safety needs;
Physiological needs.

One way to read Maslow's need hierarchy is as a ladder on which we climb from brutishness to humanity. And one way of stating the limitations of consumer society is to say that it can satisfy only our animal needs. Consumerism can meet our physiological need for nutrition and our safety need for shelter. By the time we reach the third and fourth levels – belongingness, love and esteem – consumerism, like Mephistopheles, delivers the semblance but not the substance. We may try to purchase love, friendship and respect, but what we buy will be prostitutes, parasites and toadies. At levels five and six – our cognitive need for knowledge and understanding and our aesthetic need for beauty – consumerism is a spent force. As for self-actualization, the fulfilment of our potential as human beings, consumerism is its antithesis. Consumerism does not raise us up, it drags us down.

Another strand in thinking about consumerism and what it is to be human derives from the ethical writings of Aristotle. His influence runs powerfully through MacIntyre's (1985) analysis of the poverty of contemporary moral philosophy, and Sennett's (1998) discussion of the processes by which character has been corroded by changes in the world of work. In his contribution to a collection of essays on the good life, Scruton (1998) argues in Aristotelian fashion that we must not confuse pleasure and happiness. Pleasure results from satisfying desires, but happiness comes through fulfilment as a person. Pleasure is precarious because it depends on good luck, but happiness is robust because it flows from virtue. Consumption delivers only pleasure, not happiness. But happiness, not pleasure, is the final goal of human life, and only virtuous people can be happy.

Stereotypes of the consumer

In figure 1.1 below (p. 16) I propose a classification of images of the consumer. This classification will be referred to

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throughout the book. It is offered, as I shall explain, as a tool with which we can analyse the issues at stake in debates about the meaning and significance of consumption as social movement, way of life, and ideology.

Debates about consumption and consumerism frequently revolve around stereotypes of the consumer. Consumers are treated as though they fitted neatly into one and only one stereotype. A useful list of these stereotypes has been provided by Gabriel and Lang (1995: 27–186), who identify nine different images of the consumer: as chooser, communicator, explorer, identity-seeker, hedonist/artist, victim, rebel, activist, or citizen.

The consumer as chooser

As rational actors, consumers are normally the best judges of their own interests. Hence they benefit from having the maximum possible choice, and access to objective information on which to base it. Consumer society brings more choice for the vast majority of people. The expression of choice through consumer demand is the driving force of economic efficiency, prosperity and growth. Choice is beneficial for social order, promoting the genuine social stability that only a free society can enjoy.

The consumer as communicator

In this portrait of the consumer, consumption is an activity through which people convey symbolic messages primarily to others but also to themselves. Material objects are not just useful items but carriers of meaning, typically serving as markers of social status. Veblen's (1925/1899) work on conspicuous consumption and Simmel's (1957/1904) discussion of fashion are pioneering texts on consumption as communication. Later theorists such as Douglas and Isherwood (1996) and Bourdieu (1984) built on the classics, replacing speculation with evidence and satire with analysis.

The consumer as explorer

Driven by insatiable curiosity, the explorer is on a quest for new experiences. A key activity for the consumer as explorer is bargain-hunting. This is not the same as demanding value for money. Instead, it involves taking advantage of anomalies in the market, and discovering hidden treasures such as the priceless Brueghel stacked unrecognized in someone's attic. Gabriel and Lang compare the bargain-hunter to the trickster, a mythological opportunist who uses guile and cunning to exploit the social system and other actors in it.

The consumer as identity-seeker

Arguably, we are less inclined than at any time in the past to think of identity as assigned at birth or conferred by society as a permanent status. Identity and status are achieved, not ascribed. The construction of identity is a lifelong self-aware project. Identity is fluid, potentially unstable and context-dependent – a key theme in postmodernist writing. Although this is often presented as liberation from fixed categories and assigned status, the struggle for identity is not necessarily benign. We crave wholeness and authenticity. Image can be purchased, and narratives can be made up; but what of respect and self-respect? Are we not concerned to distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy people, ourselves included? In Gabriel and Lang's account, the consumer as identity-seeker is presented as a forlorn and perpetually anxious figure.

The consumer as hedonist (pleasure-seeker)/artist

The emphasis here is on the pleasures of consumption. According to Campbell (1987, 1995), while traditional hedonism involved opulence, sumptuousness, and a multitude of voluptuous pleasures derived from the senses, modern hedonism seeks pleasure less in sensations themselves than in the emotions that accompany them. All emotions – including

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apparently negative ones such as sorrow, melancholy, and anger – can serve modern hedonism, if subject to appropriate self-control. Because it depends on emotional experiences rather than sensations, modern consumption stimulates imagination, dream and reverie. Life is aestheticized, and the consumer has therefore become a kind of artist. Traditional hedonists indulged themselves in the present; modern hedonists defer gratification in eager expectation of more intense pleasures in the future.

Daniel Bell (1979) argued that a cultural fault line runs through contemporary capitalism. Production requires discipline and hard work, whereas consumption generates the irresponsible pursuit of pleasure. On Campbell's analysis, however, there is no contradiction. Since hedonistic consumers continually seek new stimuli, their orientation is perfectly compatible with economic growth. Contrary to Bell, the spheres of production and consumption are driven by the same ethic. Consumption is a realm of seduction (Bauman 1990, 1998). What Bell identified as a contradiction in capitalism becomes in Bauman's hands a profitable symbiosis.

The consumer as victim

This theme, once a commonplace – Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) is a popular rendition of it, Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964) an intellectual version – has fallen from favour. Economists see the consumer as sovereign. Sociologists and anthropologists may repudiate 'sovereignty' as an ethnocentric ideological construct, but they still emphasize consumer agency. It has become a platitude to say that the consumer is not a 'dope' or a 'dupe' – but even so, smart people can still end up as victims. In some cases, intellectuals are more gullible than most, as shown by the sorry sight of Western thinkers lionizing Stalin at the height of his purges (Caute 1988). More prosaically, a conjuror who claims to bend spoons by psychic means has little to fear from an audience of physicists, whose faith in rationality means they can easily be deceived.

Consumer protection is widely recognized as necessary, and even free marketeers usually concede that consumers

should be protected against fraud and deception. Some consumers may be particularly vulnerable, for example children, and people who are old, or sick, or infirm, or poor. Many writers have noted the gendered construction of victimhood: men are sovereign, women are victims. In some situations, typically where objective information is hard to get, most of us are easy targets for the swindlers (cowboy motor mechanics, corrupt financial advisers). Governments can gain political capital through protecting consumers, just as they can lose it if they fail to do so, as the crisis of 'mad cow disease' in Europe demonstrated.

The consumer as rebel

Rebellious consumers use mass-market products subversively and iconoclastically. They are guerrillas fighting against commodification. At the politically quiescent, fun-loving pole of rebellion, we find young people playfully distorting mass-market products – ripping their jeans, in Fiske's example (1989: 1–21) – as a stylistic expression of identity politics. At the radical pole, an angry revolt has erupted against transnational corporations as the vehicles of global capitalism. This is frequently allied with a commitment to alternative economic institutions, including self-provisioning, credit unions, and barter systems such as LETS (Local Exchange Trading Systems).

The consumer as activist

Consumer activism is expressed through pressure groups and social movements that declare themselves champions of the consumer cause. Gabriel and Lang distinguish four phases of consumer activism in the West: the co-operative movement, which embodied the principle of mutuality, vesting ownership in members, not shareholders; value-for-money consumer movements such as the Consumer Union in the USA and the Consumers' Association in the UK; politically engaged movements, such as Ralph Nader's, which promote the idea of consumer as citizen and attack giant corporations for their anti-consumer practices; and a morally charged

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alternative consumerism, including green, ethical, and fair trade consumerism. The inescapable tensions between these varieties of consumerism mean that they are seldom able to form a rainbow alliance.

The consumer as citizen

Is consumerism one way in which citizenship asserts itself, or are they incompatible? The claim that citizens have been *reduced to* consumers implies a loss of political engagement. Citizenship expresses a fundamental equality, while consumerism generates and feeds on inequality. Citizens have social, economic and political rights, but they also have duties and responsibilities; consumers have merely consumer rights, and the dubious 'protection' provided by regulators. Citizens engage in collective action to make society better, whereas consumers are preoccupied with improving their own individual lot. Citizens move in the public domain, consumers retreat into a private refuge. On such accounts, citizenship is not an aspect of consumerism but its antithesis.

Against this is the argument that if people have rights as consumers of goods and services, it empowers them as citizens. Without consumer rights, citizens may be left at the mercy of private companies, public sector bureaucracies and powerful professions. While each of these may claim to be acting in the best interests of the people they 'serve', clients do not always find it so. Consumer organizations and consumer self-help groups have proved one of the most effective ways in which consumers can assert their rights as citizens.

So much for the details of Gabriel and Lang's list. Their underlying point is that 'the consumer' is a cultural fetish. Too often, in academic discourse and public debate, only one stereotyped image is held up as the true portrait of the consumer. Alternatively, the nine images are presented as mutually exclusive, excluding consideration of the complex ways in which they can be combined.

One reason for the prevalence of stereotypes of the consumer is the defence of disciplinary and ideological boundaries. The consumer as chooser is the property of neoclassical economics. Against this, rival disciplines, notably sociology

and social anthropology, have emphasized other images, above all the consumer as communicator. Cultural studies has intervened in support of the consumer as hedonist/artist.

Academics are not the only interested parties. Pressure groups variously paint portraits of the consumer as chooser, or activist, or rebel. Organized consumerism, as I shall argue in chapter 6, is a project designed not simply to promote the interests of consumers but to create rational consumers, instructing us in what consumer organizations regard as the values, virtues and behaviours appropriate to rational consumption.

Our lived reality as consumers is not captured by the stereotypes. We often feel a welter of ambivalent and conflicting emotions. We can be irrational and rational, spontaneous and disciplined, individualistic and conformist, engaged and detached, knowing and innocent, bored and stimulated. Consumption can be a great liberation or a tedious chore. It may be a sphere of self-indulgent frivolity or moral engagement. We may be swept along or shut out. We may lose or find ourselves in it. And if we try to escape from consumption, where if anywhere shall we find the exit?

A classification of images of the consumer

Gabriel and Lang's catalogue of portraits falls short of being a classification or typology. First, the categories obviously overlap, as Edwards (2000: 11) points out. Activism and rebellion merge into each other, exploration is a subcategory of choosing, and identity-seeking is a form of communication turned inward on the self. Second, some of the types are underdeveloped, particularly the notion of consumer as explorer. Third, it is questionable whether the consumer as citizen is a face of consumerism at all. Citizenship, as Gabriel and Lang go on to argue (1995: 173–86), is not a variety of consumerism but a radical alternative to it. Fourth, the basis of the classification is unclear. What are the underlying criteria or dimensions? What are the relationships between the categories? Is the classification exhaustive, or are there other

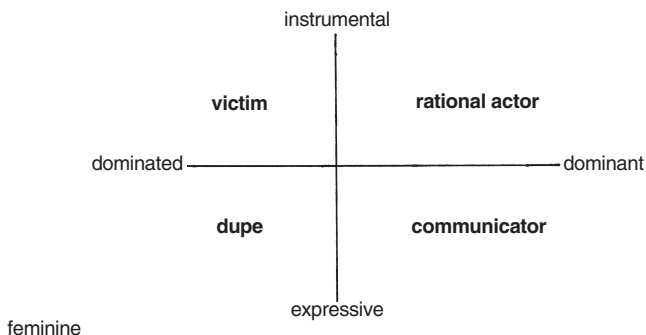


Figure 1.1 Images of the consumer in Western discourse

types that have been left out? Without answers to such questions, what we have is not a classification but simply a list.

I suggest that two fundamental issues underlie images of the consumer. The first is the question of power. Are consumers sovereign? Is it consumer demand that powers the market, forcing firms to respond by supplying people with the goods and services they want? Or are consumers' desires implanted in them by advertising, marketing, and the mass media – a manipulative apparatus of persuasion that seduces them into 'demanding' what the producers want to supply?

The second fundamental issue is this: what is consumption about? Is it primarily concerned with the instrumental purchase of goods and services for practical purposes – the car as a means of transport? Or is it a symbolic realm in which people exchange messages about class, status and identity – the car as status or sex symbol?

The horizontal axis in figure 1.1 represents the objective dimension of power, contrasting the powerful rational actors and communicators with the dominated victims and dupes. The vertical axis represents the subjective dimension of orientations to consumption, contrasting the instrumental rational actors and victims with the expressive communicators and dupes.

Since this classification will be referred to throughout the book, there are a number of crucial points to be clarified at the outset.

First, it is a classification of images of consumers, not of consumers themselves. It is concerned with the social construction of consumers in Western discourse about consumption. The classification is intended to help us to analyse that discourse and to examine what it tells us about the ways we construct our society and ourselves. An important aspect of this, as signalled in figure 1.1, is gender. The point is not that women are dupes while men are rational actors, but that much of Western discourse *constructs* consumption as gendered in this way.

Second, the underlying dimensions are more important than the classifications they generate. In the contrasts between rational actors, communicators, victims and dupes, the core issues are the distribution and exercise of power in society, and the nature of the human subject.

Third, the horizontal axis represents the dimension of power, not of rationality. Victims and dupes are not necessarily irrational, though the discourse may construct them so. Conversely, neither communicators nor even rational actors are necessarily rational. Attributions of rationality and irrationality are one way in which power manifests and legitimizes itself.

Fourth, although the vertical axis represents the dimension of subjective orientation to consumption, the opposition between instrumentality and expressiveness is a feature of discourse that may well stand in need of deconstruction. It is strikingly gendered. One might argue that a sign of a balanced personality and a healthy society is that the instrumental and the expressive are not driven apart but united.

Having established that the purpose of the classification is not to construct stereotypes but to analyse discourse, what follows are some preliminary comments about the four images of the consumer generated by the two dimensions.

The rational actor

The discipline of economics rests on the assumption that consumers behave rationally in pursuit of their self-interest.

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'Economic man' is calculative and selfish; yet out of this seeming mediocrity arises the glory of free market capitalism, a society in which people are free, creative and prosperous. Adam Smith put it graphically:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens. Even a beggar does not depend on it entirely. (1970/1776: 119)

Benevolence is a virtue, as Smith himself insists. The point, however, is that society runs on self-interest, not altruism.

Although the economist's rational choice approach focuses on the consumer as rational actor, it can deal reasonably comfortably with two of the remaining three types. First, it can recognize victims. People do make poor choices, sometimes because they behave irrationally, sometimes because they lack objective information, and sometimes because they have been swindled. Hence the need for consumer protection. Hence too the role of consumer organizations, campaigning for consumer rights and supplying impartial assessments of goods and services. Advocates of the free market usually recognize a place for consumer protection, though they tend to warn against 'the nanny state'. *Caveat emptor* – let the buyer beware – is a treasured axiom. Their remedy for victimhood is more freedom, not less.

Second, the rational choice approach can easily embrace the consumer as communicator. Take for example the case of luxury goods. Contrary to what is sometimes thought, luxuries are not a problem for rational choice theory. Cultural critics may well see the purchase of Parisian perfume as foolish extravagance, since equally good alternatives are available far more cheaply, including soap. Economists do not take this view. Snob value is still value, so cheap substitutes are not 'equally good'. The dance of seduction involves symbolism and imagination, and scent from Paris can enhance its wearer's allure. Similarly, young people who

buy fashionable branded sportswear at premium prices because they give them status among their peers are not mistaken. It is consumers, not critics, who are living in the real world.

The rational choice approach is resistant to the notion that consumers are dupes. Such talk is seen as no more than condescension by intellectuals towards people they take to be their cultural inferiors. 'Taste', as Bourdieu (1984) argued, is an expression of symbolic power.

The communicator

Four of Gabriel and Lang's nine images of the consumer – *communicator*, *identity-seeker*, *hedonist/artist* and *rebel* – are variants on the consumer as communicator. This focus on communication reflects the dominant concerns in sociology and cultural studies. It is a vivid illustration of what Campbell (1995) has called 'the communicative act paradigm'. Consumption is interpreted as the exchange of symbols between actors who are trying to convey to one another messages about their lifestyle and identity. Instrumentality is denied: we never buy things simply because they are useful. It is impossible, on this view, to consume without communicating. Anti-consumerism cannot avoid being a style of consumption.

The communicative act paradigm involves, I suggest (A. Aldridge 1998: 2), an *over-culturalized* concept of humanity. On occasions we should treat a washing machine less as a symbol than as a machine for washing clothes (Goldthorpe et al. 1969: 184n).

The victim

Victims have been neglected in the literature on consumption. Little interest has been shown in these failed rational actors, yet consumer society offers limitless opportunities to be victimized. Consumers may unwittingly purchase forgeries or stolen goods; they may succumb to chain letters, pyramid selling operations and similar get-rich-quick schemes; they may make unwise investments in ostrich farms or cham-

pagne; they may buy a car that was seriously damaged in a crash and has been repaired only superficially. More likely, at least in the UK, they have been misold financial products by reputable banks and insurance companies whose sales staff masquerade as financial advisers. At one time or another, most consumers will have made such mistakes, though they are often minor and can be simply absorbed as a lesson for the future.

Rational choice theory celebrates success rather than failure, and has a disposition to blame the victim, as in the principle of *caveat emptor*. On this view, victims are rightly condemned for their foolishness and should not be compensated for it. Blaming the victim is particularly plausible, at least to men, when the victim is a woman.

In contrast to economists, sociologists and cultural theorists have concentrated on the *communicator–dupe* axis, and on the critique of rationality. The rational actor is rejected as an artificial construct, and the victim is unfortunately thrown out with him.

The dupe

The most powerful and influential exposition of the consumer as dupe is to be found in the work of the Frankfurt School, discussed in chapter 3 (pp. 81–5). For the moment, we may illustrate the notion of the dupe by Finkelstein's analysis of the cultural practice of eating in restaurants.

Most people think of eating out as convenient and enjoyable. They are misguided, Finkelstein tells us. They may claim to experience it as pleasant and sociable, but the structural reality is artifice, control and surveillance.

Finkelstein robustly asserts the thesis of consumer as dupe. Consumers are easily manipulated by restaurateurs and waiters. People show so little insight into their own conduct that it is pointless to ask them about their opinion of dining out. Interviews and surveys will simply yield stock answers. Her aim in writing the book is to educate the reader by presenting arguments and insights 'in order to elicit a new vision of him/herself that opens up the possibility of personal reorientation' (Finkelstein 1989: 18). The goal is what Socrates

called 'the examined life' – which according to him is the only life worth living. People are not, as writers such as Giddens (1991) believe, intensely reflexive. The examined life is rarely achieved, and consumerism cuts against it.

The problem with eating out, according to Finkelstein, is the commodification of experience. As an example, take the 'romantic' meal for two: the secluded corner table, candle-light, flowers, subdued music, the sunset over the harbour. All this is formulaic and scripted. We have purchased a sham. A stereotype has been packaged and cynically sold to us.

How could it be otherwise? Finkelstein's answer (1989: 177–8) is that eating out would be civilized if it were conducted without 'artifice', 'paraphernalia', 'hyperbole' or 'chicanery', and with the elimination of all 'ulterior' motives, including our own. What could be done about the restaurateur's ulterior motive of making a profit is not made clear.

For Finkelstein (1989: 8), a civilized appreciation of our companions can occur only 'in exchanges between individuals who are equally self-conscious and attentive to one another, who avoid power differentials and who do not mediate their exchanges through signatory examples of status and prestige'. This call for honesty without artifice is, as Mary Douglas (1973) has demonstrated, a typically 'Protestant' view. Ritual and symbolism are encumbrances to be swept away in order to arrive at pure authentic experience.

An evening out *à la* Finkelstein may be an authentic engagement with a fellow human being, though some might judge it a shade intense. In response to her despairing analysis, Warde and Martens suggest that people have good reasons to enjoy eating out. In Britain and elsewhere, it has become far less of an ordeal than it was in stuffer times. The intimidating rules of formal etiquette, a cause of embarrassment and derision, have disappeared from all but the most pretentious establishments. Restaurateurs are attuned to their clients' wish for companionship and conviviality. Warde and Martens conclude their book with this affirmation: 'In a world of geographic mobility, small households, smaller and unstable families, discontent with traditional divisions of labour, eating out is a rich source not of incivility, as Finkelstein maintained, but of conviviality and co-operation' (2000: 227).'

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The classification set out in figure 1.1 recognizes the fact, as I have said, that Western discourse about the consumer is deeply gendered. At its most extreme, men are portrayed as autonomous and instrumental: 'economic man'. Women are constructed as dominated and expressive: 'fashion victims'. Men are rational actors, women are dupes.

In his analysis of lifestyles, Chaney (1996: 20–1) suggests that critics of consumerism tend to assume that women are susceptible to irrational persuasion and need protection from it. On this account, women and children are deliberately targeted by the advertising industry because they are so easily influenced. The contrast between men and women rests on two other oppositions: between producers and consumers, and between the public and the private spheres. Women's location in the private sphere of consumption is crystallized in the suburbs: 'Suburban housing', says Chaney, 'is the perfect physical form for the citizens of mass consumerism' (1996: 21). Chaney's argument is not that women are essentially dupes while men are essentially rational actors. Quite the reverse: these are not essences but social constructs.

Nowhere is the social construction of gender more evident than in discourse about shopping. Women are implicated in three ways: as shoppers, as shop assistants, and as shoplifters (Miller et al. 1998: 11–14). Shopping is typically dismissed as trivial. It is seen, not only in academic writing but in everyday talk, as a realm of self-indulgence, hedonism, individualism and materialism. We routinely equate shopping with excess, and use it as a symbol of the decadence of Western civilization. Shopping is a symbol through which we lament the spirit of our times.

Miller's (1998) ethnographic work shows how far the stereotype of shopping-as-indulgence strays from the lived reality of shopping as skilled action directed towards others, specifically to other members of the household. It is women's work; many men make poor companions on shopping expeditions, and when they go shopping by themselves for routine items their rationality deserts them. Women do 'treat' themselves during shopping, enjoying small indulgences as a reward for their hard work, but this concept of 'the treat' as an exceptional purchase points up thrift as the core activity

and paramount concern of shopping. Shopping is both more banal and more important than culture critics recognize.

Three reasons to take consumption seriously

Although consumption is widely acknowledged to be a key concept, many sociologists are uneasy at the seeming frivolity of some of the literature. Sport, television, fashion, fandom, shopping, clubbing: these activities may be fun, but are they not trivial distractions from the serious things in life – work, politics, and maybe religion?

Perhaps the literature on consumption is an example of what Rojek and Turner (2000) call ‘decorative’ sociology? The term ‘decorative’ is an allusion to the work of the Victorian political analyst, Walter Bagehot. He argued that Britain’s constitutional monarchy should be seen as belonging to the decorative side of politics because it is divorced from effective political decision-making. The monarchy is a repository of national symbolism, and survives only because it remains useful to politicians in their quest for legitimacy, not because kings and queens wield power.

Decorative sociology, in Rojek and Turner’s account, ignores or misrepresents the operation of power in society, and lacks any coherent concept of social structure. It therefore mistakes the aestheticization of life for the politicization of culture. Identity politics replaces political reality, and political correctness substitutes for political action.

Some writers on consumption are keen to distance themselves from the charge of decorative practice. That is why, for example, Edwards (2000: 28–31) goes to some trouble to assert his preference for the term ‘consumer society’ over ‘consumer culture’. He does so to demonstrate that he is concerned not simply with aesthetics, but with the grounding of consumption in its economic and political context.

To many critics, the communicative act paradigm (referred to on p. 19 above) is a clear case of decorative sociology. Lodziak (2002), for instance, is a trenchant critic of post-modern ‘culturalist’ theories of consumption that disregard politics and economics in order to treat consumer culture as

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a set of meaningful symbols imaginatively created by active consumers. The communicative act paradigm represents consumers as communicators operating skilfully in the expressive realm of symbolism. The focus is on spectacular displays of conspicuous consumption, rather than the everyday routine acts which, as Warde (2002: 19) reminds us, constitute most of our consumption practice. Buying bulk items such as petrol may seem unworthy of our attention as cultural theorists, until we remember the social, economic and political repercussions of the oil crisis of 1973–4. In the glorification of expressive consumption, dupes are not recognized – they are seen as the fictional creation of elitist critics who allow themselves to be scandalized by popular culture. Victims and rational actors are also excluded from the scene, because they are not thought to communicate anything (except perhaps frustration and resentment on the one hand, and self-satisfaction on the other).

What follows from the critique of decorative sociology is not that consumption fails as a key concept in the social sciences and should therefore be ignored, but that it is too important to be trivialized. I propose three reasons why consumption matters.

The good society: utopias and dystopias

Patterns of consumption are an integral part of conceptions of the good society and its opposite. In the contemporary world, the dominant utopian vision is that consumer paradise has been delivered by liberal democracy and free market capitalism. With victory over fascism and the implosion of communism, it has even been claimed that ideology and history have come to an end (Fukuyama 1992).

Critics argue that the fruits of free market capitalism are extreme inequality, conspicuous consumption, the erosion of community, the decay of civil society, rampant individualism, narcissism, and commodity fetishism. On these accounts, consumer society is not paradise but hell.

If we live in consumer society, we are bound to want to determine the accuracy of these rival accounts and to consider the likely consequences of acting on the basis of them.

The good life: pursuing pleasure or cultivating virtue?

Is consumer paradise the good life? Not according to much of the sociological literature, which paints a portrait of consumers as pathetically warped pleasure-seekers devoid of moral worth. At the opposite pole is the view that consumers are rational citizens pursuing their interests free from artificial restrictions and liberated from the internalized imperatives of the Protestant ethic. Between these two poles are more nuanced accounts which explore the multifaceted nature of consumer society as simultaneously liberating and oppressive, offering choice while also denying it, embracing some of us but excluding others.

Changing society: the role of culture

From 1979 to 1990, when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, the UK experienced a huge social upheaval. It became obvious that Thatcherism was a programme of cultural as well as political and economic reconstruction. People would be freed from bondage to state bureaucracy, so that they could benefit from competition between private companies operating in a free market. Publicly owned assets would be transferred to the private sector, and everyone would be invited to reap the rewards of shareholder democracy. Dependency culture would be replaced by enterprise culture. The result would be freedom through self-reliance and mass affluence through the market.

Cultural reconstruction at the macro level was replicated at the micro level: managers of capitalist firms were spurred to embark on programmes of culture change, eradicating established working practices in pursuit of profit. Social institutions that stood in the way of reform – the professions, the education system, local government – were either transformed or abolished.

The triumph of Thatcherism caused disarray among the left. Thatcherism was a devastating hegemonic project, combining political and ideological strategies to gain popular

consent. In Stuart Hall's words, written at the height of the Thatcherite era: 'It moulds people's conceptions as it restructures their lives as it shifts the disposition of forces to its side' (1988: 274–5). A crucial question for the left was, how to challenge Thatcherism's claim to have empowered the consumer?

For Hall and those associated with him, it was a claim that could not simply be dismissed. The left had to abandon its obsession with production and come to terms with consumer capitalism. The Puritan moralism of the left was offensive to most of its potential supporters (Stevenson 2002). Hall derided those on the left who liked the working class to be 'poor but pure' and 'unsullied by contact with the market' (1988: 213). The failures of state bureaucracies had to be faced, as did the market's potential to liberate people from dependency on the state and from deference to their social 'superiors'. Thatcherism was interpreted by Hall as 'authoritarian populism', a term which pointed not only to its inherent contradictions but also, equally significantly, to its grip on the popular imagination and its success in capturing people's dissatisfactions and aspirations. Mort put the challenge succinctly: 'the twin issues of consumerism and the market lie at the heart of the debate over our vision of the future of socialism' (1989: 160).

For First World societies, consumption is part of their vision of the good society, the good life, and the way to achieve them. It is hard to think that these subjects, which are addressed in the rest of this book, are merely decorative.

Consumption as a hidden key

Throughout the book we shall encounter widely diverging perspectives on consumption, consumerism and consumer society. The literature abounds with sharp contrasts and stark dichotomies. Consumption is set over against production, investment, citizenship and conservation. Dupes are contrasted with communicators, and communicators with rational actors (victims are usually forgotten). We appear to be faced with choosing between a bright but shallow optimism

or a gloomy but deep pessimism; deep optimism appears to be self-contradictory. For most intellectuals there is little option: better to be gloomy than shallow. Hence cultural pessimism is the dominant mode in scholarly analyses of consumer society.

There is, as I said at the beginning of the chapter, a vast literature on consumption. Given the centrality of consumption to our visions of the good society and the good life, this abundance is scarcely surprising. What also needs to be observed, however, is that consumption plays a vital part in all manner of writing that appears at first sight to be about something else. It is always worth looking in the index of social science texts to see whether they contain any references to consumption, the consumer or consumerism. They frequently do. If we follow up these ostensibly stray and inconsequential leads, we are likely to find that, far from addressing consumption merely in passing, authors are grappling with the central issues we shall examine in this book. Consumption may be latent in these texts, but it is often crucial to comprehending what is at stake in debates about the good society and the good life.

Key concepts are even more influential when they are encoded and hidden from view.