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Review Article

The Great Escape?

David Wright

School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham
E-mail: lqxdw1@nottingham.ac.uk

C. Lodziak (2002) **The Myth of Consumerism**, Pluto Press, London.
S. Miles, A. Anderson and K. Meetham (eds) (2002) **The Changing Consumer: Markets and Meanings**, Routledge, London and New York.

Consumption and consumerism have in recent years become central concerns for social scientific inquiries into contemporary life. A wide range of inter-disciplinary research has attempted to map the historical rise of the consumer as the definitively human agent of western societies as opposed to such historical equivalents as 'the subject' or 'the citizen'. Both theoretical and empirical accounts have attempted to assess the impact on contemporary self-hood of an apparent shift from a society constructed around relationships of production to one in which relationships of consumption are of at least equivalent importance. In simplistic terms this work attempts to question the extent to which 'we are what we buy'. More broadly it can be seen to ask whether the act of buying or by extension the commodification of an increasing number of aspects of contemporary life (including health care, welfare and public transport) is the most meaningful human action in a consumer society. Understandably such work has produced differing perspectives and some controversial findings. These two recent volumes offer an interesting insight into some of the key concerns of this field as it stands and some of the key issues that dominate debate within it.

The popularity of this field of inquiry makes efforts to simplistically categorise and summarise various positions problematic, though both these volumes contain attempts to do so which are in turn useful and controversial. Alan Warde's scene-setting contribution to *The Changing Consumer* borrows from Featherstone (1990) in suggesting three broad approaches that have characterised sociological study of consumption. The first, the 'production of consumption' approach, focuses upon the uneven distribution of power between producers of commercial products and their consumers. Most commonly associated with the work of the Frankfurt School this approach has at its heart the belief that the rise of the consumer represents a colonisation of the leisure time of human agents by the alienating forces of capitalist production. We are, in this view, manipulated through the work of advertisers in the pay of corporate capital to consume what we are told to. The second, 'modes of consumption' approach, concentrates on the role of consumption in social classification, emphasising differences in lifestyles and demarcating social relationships. Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) typifies this approach. His work emphasises the social construction of notions of good and bad taste in the selection of consumer goods and the implicit relationship between these choices and the perpetuation of class differences through the structuring structure of the *habitus*. Finally and perhaps most controversially is a perspective that focuses upon the pleasures of consumer culture,

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the creative potential of consumerism and its place in liberating post or late modern subjects from the restrictive structural constraints of tradition, class, race or gender. This perspective most closely ties itself with debates surrounding post-modernity and the centrality of consumption to organising contemporary societies. Human agents are free, though the quality of this freedom is contested, to 'construct' themselves from the myriad of goods on offer in the contemporary market place. The symbolic qualities of these goods outweigh their functional utility and they connect the consumer either to a reflexive 'self' or lifestyle (Giddens, 1991) or even allow for expressions of resistance or rejection of dominant modes of being through the symbolic manipulation of mass-produced items. This strand of work has, in the UK, been mostly associated with the rise of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and their emphasis on spectacular consumption of youth subcultures such as punk (Hebdige, 1979). Lodziak makes particular, critical reference to the work of John Fiske (1989), borrowing from the theorist Michel de Certeau (1984), who sees in acts of consumption evidence of the strategic, guerrilla tactics of the weak in making spaces for resistant pleasures.

Lodziak's contribution to these debates suggests that this latter perspective has gained the status of 'paradigm' in contemporary sociological and theoretical accounts of consumption and consumerism. Placing himself explicitly within the 'production of consumption' camp (the one which both he and Warde agree has been largely rejected in the current field of research) he suggests that the emphasis on symbolic consumption as the central resource for the identity work of western subjects both marginalises an appreciation of the economic relationships underpinning all acts of consumption and has potentially dire political consequences. Whilst what he refers to as the 'cultural studies' model of consumption might have been initially inspired by a desire to legitimise the misunderstood or deviant consumption practices of subordinate groups, the unproblematic celebration of consumption as resistance and the simplistic association of symbolic things with the construction of personal identities feeds precisely into what he terms the 'ideology of consumerism' that dominates western societies. The essence of this ideology is that freedom of choice equals freedom. Contemporary agents are free to exercise their consumer rights (the only meaningful rights in a consumer society) to become coherent, ontologically secure selves. This freedom though is only accessible to those with the financial capability to make the daily trips to the market place required for identity work.

Lodziak begins his account with a proviso that his work is not meant to be read as a balanced appreciation of the field of consumption or to provide an exhaustive summary of various influential theorists. As such, his generalisation of what he terms the culturalist position seems occasionally simplistic and tends to tar what is itself a complex and contradictory body of work with the same theoretical brush. He is though correct in asserting that the work of the Frankfurt School has been over-simplified in contemporary accounts of consumption as elitist and that the rejection of 'high cultural' constructions of worthwhile cultural behaviour has in the 'culturalist' tradition been accompanied by an unproblematic casting of the popular as inherently resistant.

One aspect of Lodziak's criticism is the similarity in tone and approach of sociological studies of consumption with those of marketing or business. This, he argues, necessarily blunts a critical edge in the exploration of consumerist relationships as potentially exploitative. It is easy to imagine him wincing at some of the contributions to *The Changing Consumer*. The 'consumer ethic', we are told in Miles' own opening essay,

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is ubiquitous. He goes on to describe how consumption has been interpreted by the anthropologist Daniel Miller (1995) as 'the vanguard of history'. Both these assertions would be warmly welcomed by corporate capital as would Russell Belk's closing essay on the changing disciplinary setting of the study of consumption which celebrates the shift away from what he describes as Marxist and neo-Marxist concerns towards more 'positive' ones (as if the concern with human liberation and the construction of a utopian society were 'negative'). A telling passage from Belk's piece suggests that:

> Verbally we still regard it as socially acceptable to ask someone'what do you do?'. Rather than 'what do you own/what have you experienced?' But non-verbally few if any of us fail to notice and predicate our judgements of others upon such consumption goods as clothing, cars, homes, grooming, electronic products (witness pagers, cell phones, PDAs, digital cameras and so forth) movies seen, places visited, foods eaten, type of computer, athletic equipment brands and models, preferences in art and music and any number of other elements of consumption. (Belk in Miles *et al*., 2002:148)

This is a compelling observation that is evocative of the seminal sociological examiners of consumption practices, Veblen (1970) and Bourdieu (1984). Read through the lens of Lodziak's critique it raises a number of questions and implicates the study of consumption with this kind of narrative assumption in perpetuating myths of mass affluence. Alongside Belk's painting of a picture of an all-powerful consumer able to buy plane tickets to any destination from his/her computer screen, there is another significant body of the population for whom such actions would represent unattainable luxury. Whilst, as Belk suggests, ordering the world of consumer goods to create a lifestyle has never been easier for some, for others it has arguably never been so difficult. Bauman (1987, 1997) characterises this distinction as between the 'seduced', caught up in the work of creating the self from symbolic goods and the 'repressed', the flawed consumers unable to enter this world and subjected to increasing disciplinary surveillance in order to protect 'the seduced'.

On the surface then *The Changing Consumer* confirms some of Lodziak's fears about the state of contemporary consumption studies. There is an article about the consumption of men's magazines, another about the appreciation of 'retro' design, another about the DIY programme *Changing Rooms* and another that charts the emergence of the consuming woman with reference to the wonder-bra and Bridget Jones. Lodziak might dismiss all these examples as trivia which cannot possibly be related to broader more critical questions of politics or power except as accomplices. At the very least they seem to confirm his belief that 'symbolic' consumption (i.e. that which is defined by researchers as conducive to personal identity) is more significant than what he terms 'survival' consumption, i.e. the ordinary purchasing of the basic requirements of everyday life, which he argues is a far more important motivation to consume for most people and one characterised by necessity rather than choice.

In fact a closer reading of these articles and others suggests a more subtle and nuanced approach to the study of consumption than that characterised by Lodziak as 'culturalist' and contributing to the ideology of consumerism. Both Warde's introductory essay and Miles' closing re-appraisal of the field of youth studies include calls for new directions in the study of consumption which go some way to recognising and answering Lodziak's criticisms. Warde's summary of recent trends in the field recognises that there has been a

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decline in interest in the material relationships of capitalist production and an 'unhelpful presumption that individuals have the power each equally to determine a personally sculpted identity with an associated social standing' (Warde in Miles *et al*., 2002: 23). He also, following Bauman (1988), outlines the ambivalent freedoms on offer in the marketplace and questions the logical link between 'freedom of choice' and freedom to act or be. Miles also reflects upon the emphasis in the study of the consumption practices of the young on the melodramatic rather than the ordinary. This emphasis might have been constituted by and in the post-war myths of affluence focussed upon the emergence of the concept of the teenager, and he calls for an appreciation of 'ordinary' rather than spectacular consumption. He also questions the legitimacy of approaches to consumption which he suggests often appear 'more concerned with being post-modern and in fulfilling some notion of what it means to write in a post-modern fashion than addressing the actualities of post modern consumption as they exist in everyday life' (Miles in Miles *et al*., 2002: 142).

Central to this more nuanced construction of consumption is a more complex understanding and appreciation of the place of pleasure and a fuller account of the processes of the production of meaning around consumer goods. For Lodziak, the ideology of consumerism's preoccupation with pleasure problematically interprets it as resistance. This stems, he suggests, from a need to legitimise the consumption practices of the 'mass' of the population in order to avoid accusations of elitism and mistakenly results in seeing political consequences in choices of style and image. There are echoes here of the critic Greil Marcus's suggestion that Cultural Studies scholars are analogous to the FBI of the McCarthy era in that they see subversion everywhere. Such an accusation might well be levelled at some articles in *The Changing Consumer*. Franklin's article on the consumption of 'retro' style, for example, declares that the Mini was 'radical and shocking' and 'ruptured the backward-looking tradition bound nature of British society in the late 1950s' (Franklin in Miles *et al*., 2002: 93). That a commodity, particularly one produced by an industry as complicit in the perpetuation of capitalist relations, might be given such powers perhaps requires new words for 'radical' as they apply to what Lodziak would term 'real' politics. Of particular interest in Franklin's article, though, is the way he charts contemporary concerns with the aesthetic qualities of consumer goods back to such critics of emergent capitalist relations as William Morris and John Ruskin. There does appear to be in this construction of the aesthetic pleasures of consumption, typified by Morris's assertion that one should 'have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful', some implicit critique of prevailing capitalist relationships and the imposition of mass conformity. This seems to be a reflection of Campbell's (1987) historical outline of the development of contemporary ethics to consume arising from Romantic suspicions of the utilitarian market place and the effect of mindless industrial work upon the populations. That this is translated in the contemporary context to weekly trips to IKEA or, as Spittle describes in this volume, weekly viewing of *Changing Rooms* might confirm Lodziak's assertion of the illusion of choice. That these activities might be motivated by dissatisfaction, rather than by the belief that all is well, might also suggest that the pleasures of consumerism are still of sociological interest.

While Lodziak stops short of characterising the consumer as a dupe or as mindless (preferring to construct a figure inescapably caught up in capitalist social relationships which are global in scope and thus ultimately beyond anything but the most cosmetic control), he rejects the notion of the active rational calculative powerful consumer. In the

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most interesting passages of this book he draws on the work of André Gorz (1999) to construct the consumer as in a state of active passivity in which the autonomy of action that he suggests is crucial to the construction of coherent selfhood is compromised by the ways in which we are 'compelled to consume'. Miles makes a related point in his essay about the study of youth culture and consumption that it is the passivity, the triviality of certain types of consumption that make them of use to people in their experience of the world. Using Beck's notion of 'risk' (Beck 1992), Miles suggests that every decision that many young people face as they move through the education system is presented to them as if it were crucial to their ultimate position in the labour market and the social world. This produces high levels of anxiety and stress amongst the young that makes consumption and its associated 'play' all the more crucial. It is precisely because they are *not* important that consumption decisions are taken with such relish.

Both these volumes are of use to contemporary researchers interested in pursuing research into consumption. Lodziak's occasionally polemical but lively account offers a critical review of the study of consumption as it has been constructed historically. Miles' collection offers thoughtful re-appraisal of the study of consumption and some intriguing new directions in which it might go, as well as providing some interesting examples of current work. As ever with disparate collections of scholars it is difficult to suggest a coherent message of the book but what comes across is both the complexity and subtlety of current research as well as its potential to controversy. Scholars who unproblematically celebrate the creative and or resistant potential of consumption are always liable to be accused of supporting exploitative capitalist relationships. Equally though, scholars who deny the possibility of pleasure in the moments of consumption and the extent to which relationships of cultural production are themselves embedded in social relationships may miss out on important explanatory aspects of the consuming experience and the contested nature of the 'ideology of consumerism'. One is reminded when assessing these debates of the obligatory scene in prisoner-of-war films in which the evil camp commandant meets the plucky imprisoned officer. The officer reminds the commandant of his duty to escape whilst the commandant reminds the officer of his duty to stop him. That the conversation takes place does not in itself guarantee escape but it does evoke the notion that it is possible and desirable.

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