Consumer identities

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Introduction

Consumption is best considered as a complex economic, social and cultural set of practices, interconnected with all of the most important phenomena which have come to make up contemporary Western society: the spread of the market economy, a developing globalisation, the creation and recreation of national traditions, a succession of technological and media innovations, etc. If it is true that in today’s ‘consumer society’ we are born to consume, it is also true that consumption has cultural and practical implications that go way beyond satisfying our daily needs through commodities, or even symbolically play with them in variously elaborated manners. To consume is also to act as ‘consumers’, that is, to put on a particular kind of identity and to deal with its contradictions. In this light, consumer culture is more than commoditisation and affluence, more than conspicuous consumption and the democratisation of luxuries. Consumer culture is deeply implicated in the fabrication of identities: it produces consumers, and does so in a variety of ways. For a growing variety of activities growing numbers of people now speak of themselves as consumers, and they are being addressed as consumers by a host of institutions, within and without the market. The centrality of the ‘consumer’, the lengthy and contested historical processes which led to its formation, the many theoretical portrayals of consumer agency which have followed each other in a succession of criticism and cross-reference, the political implications of conceiving contemporary culture as made of consumers are addressed in this chapter. Placing emphasis on the social, cultural and institutional processes which have made consumption into a contested field of social action and public debate, I shall consider how consumer identities have been constructed and promoted as major social identities in contemporary societies.

Historical and intellectual development

In the rendering the historical development of consumer capitalism, sociology and history traditionally followed a productivist position giving production the role of the engine of history. This view, which typically presented consumer society as emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century as a reaction to the industrial revolution penetrating all social classes through
the consumption of mass-produced goods, has been discredited by studies of early modern and modern material culture which have documented its growth and differentiation both before and during the industrial revolution. Attention has been given to the role of structural changes within the consumption sphere (from the diffusion of colonial goods and luxuries to housing changes, from the reverberation of a fashion system through emerging media to new ways of shopping, from increased social mobility to new gender arrangements) and to the emergence of a new social identity: the consumer (Sassatelli 2007). The latter has meant to consider the intellectual development of the notion of the consumer together with the social practices that sustained and were marshalled through it.

**Asceticism, hedonism, materialism**

An important step into this direction has been Colin Campbell’s (1987) work on the ‘Romantic ethic’ and the ‘spirit of consumerism’. Inspired by Weber’s celebrated essay on the protestant ethic and capitalism, Campbell maintains that, from its start, capitalism needed cultural and subjective changes on the demand side as well as the production side, and concentrates on the motivational set-up which grounds modern consumption as well as production. A particular ethical and aesthetical attachment to novelty and originality drawing heavily from Romanticism is indicated as crucial. Romanticism provided people with a repertoire of justifications for their consumer desires: not some idea of otherworldly salvation, nor the ostentation of status and social climbing, but self-realisation and aesthetic enjoyment. The Romantics maintained that the goal of human beings was to make oneself in opposition to society: rather than bettering oneself through work, discipline and sacrifice, one should throw oneself into self-expression in a search for a variety of different and meaningful experiences. The constant search for new forms of gratification is not only anti-traditionalist behaviour, but also the opposite of traditional forms of hedonism. If the hedonism of the ancients was linked to certain specific sensorial practices (eating, drinking, and so on), modern hedonism is defined by the pleasures of imagination and linked to the capacity to control emotions. The modern consumer is a ‘hedonist’ who, Campbell (1987: 86–7) writes, continually ‘withdraw[s] from reality as fast as he encounters it, ever-casting his day-dreams forward in time, attaching them to objects of desire, and then subsequently “unhooking” them from these objects as and when they are attained and experienced’. In other words, in living above the level of subsistence, modern consumers have developed a form of modern hedonism which sees objects as ripe for personal creative fantasy. Their interests are concentrated in the meanings and images which can be attributed to a product, something which requires the presence of ‘novelty’. Thanks to ‘private and imaginary’ modern hedonism, consumption becomes not so much the ability to bargain a price, or to use products, but ‘the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product image lends itself, “real” consumption being largely a resultant of this “mentalistic” hedonism. Viewed in this way, the emphasis upon novelty as well as that upon insatiability both become comprehensible’ (ibid.: 89). While we can imagine that certain sectors of the population in the West – for example, bourgeois inhabitants of Renaissance Italian cities – might have been exposed to similar cultural tendencies of refined materialism and hedonism early on, we come across the incarnation of such consumer subjectivity when moving a little forwards in history and meet the nineteenth-century ‘dandy’. In fact, the image of the dandy was linked to a particular conception of pleasure: a general disposition to new and exotic experiences rather than the enjoyment of this or that particular object. Oscar Wilde’s *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* may be seen as a way of reflecting on the pleasures of consumption and their price: the possibility of exchanging one’s own moral self and sense of security for the exploration, via fashion and commodities, of new experiences and new selves.
Along with the historical emergence of modern economic forms, a mix of hedonism and asceticism have come together in the fashioning of identity for ever larger sectors of the population. As Mukerji (1983: 4) nicely puts it ‘[h]edonism and asceticism seem, on the surface, contradictory, but they share one feature an interest in material accumulation’; both ascetics and hedonists put accumulation (of capital or consumer goods) to profit for self-enhancement (either through economic power or prestige), ‘[they] acted as economic innovators in the early modern period replacing a traditional pattern of hoarding wealth with new ways to use it, to make it a more active part of social and economic life’. The consolidation of the market was accompanied by shifts in economic culture with both the development of a new rationalist orientation to production and the appearance of a more reflexive and self-sustained culture of consumption. In his *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* published in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Adam Smith, the founder of economic liberalism, sees even excessive and luxurious consumption through mercantile lenses as a factor in economic development: in his view, the expenditure of the ‘great’ aided the birth of a class of merchants and bourgeois who drove society towards modern capitalism and who, freed from all personal dependence, guided the entire population to civil liberty. Smith does, however, emphasise production, and it is by modelling consumption onto production that he defines correct and incorrect forms of consumption. Merchants, as we all become under market conditions, are not pictured as ascetic monks, they do not disdain the decencies of life, they are indeed good, well-behaved, rational consumers as opposed to the immoral, irrational, whimsical wasters impersonated by the old, declining nobility. To discriminate among goods, Smith thus uses the notions of convenience and decency. Decencies indicate those goods which can be used for non-ostentatious comfort. They are neither needs nor luxuries and incarnate a type of consumption which brings both order and rationality: they are bourgeois comforts, responding to the ‘calm and dispassionate desire’ of bettering one’s own condition, while diverting from ‘profusion’ or the ‘passion for present enjoyment’. Smith’s thinking naturalises a particular way of conducting oneself as a consumer which still acts as a normative background for the legitimation of contemporary consumer culture, placing value onto the search for personal gratification whilst emphasising self-control and individual autonomy.

**Flows of commodities, flows of knowledge**

The growing thematisation of consumption and the consumer are crucial elements of the rise and dominance of consumer culture, which itself cannot be reduced to increased consumer spending. In all cultures and societies we may find a variety of discourses and practices through which objects and our modalities of relation to them are classified. Nevertheless, these classificatory processes were becoming markedly visible as a contested terrain from the early modern period, when the need to take account of new forms of consumption based on the growth and diversity of objects on sale, the predominance of monetary exchange and competitive display, became strongly felt (Sassatelli 2007). Consumption started to be identified as a meaningful category, standing side by side and eventually supplanting the notion of luxury in moral discourse. ‘Luxury’ had been the classic category used to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ uses of objects in Western thinking. But, already half a century before Smith, with Bernard Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees*, luxury became de-moralised: it became relative (to taste, life changes, etc.) and legitimate if favouring the prosperity of the Nation. This placed emphasis on consumption as something which may simply spur commerce and which cannot be easily judged on transcendental grounds, something private and disentangled from the kind of legal–political regime provided by sumptuary laws which had regulated the acquisition of goods differently.
for different people in pre-modern societies. Consumption instead became caught up in the cultural–economic regime found in the dynamics of fashion. In the fashion regime, aesthetic judgements such as ‘tasteful’ and ‘tasteless’ may work as political and moral tools, to justify social inclusion or exclusion (see Bourdieu 1984).

This needs to be placed in a broader cultural geo-politics: Westerners as a whole were becoming ‘consumers’ and as such they had to be capable, beyond their specific social position, to procure their own satisfaction using the inflow of colonial goods. A kind of individualist materialism of the masses developed, with its roots in international commodity flows and in the idea that the satisfaction of individual desires of consumption is the principle source of the social order and a vital characteristic of any life worth living. The individual desires of Western consumers – constructed through an international division of labour that made the colonies distant reservoirs of new exotic and mysterious commodities – are described as inexhaustible and come to appear as the origin of the social world and as the source of the value of things. Thus, it is through the consumption of goods which today appear as banal – sugar, tea, coffee, etc. – that the fervent debate around the role of the consumer was born, a figure who soldered together the links between identity and consumption characterising Western contemporary culture (Sassatelli 2007).

As suggested by Appadurai (1986), material objects always implicate forms of social knowledge: as the flows of commodities became more complex, global and above all long distance, they brought with them flows of more articulate yet unequal knowledge which provided new arenas for the construction of value that engaged producers, traders and consumers. In increasingly long distance flows ‘the negotiation of the tension between knowledge and ignorance becomes itself a critical determinant of the flow of commodities’ (ibid.: 44): the emphasis is thus put on the ability of the consumer to recognise the value of things and it is by instructing them on the value of things through discourses of taste that consumption can be governed. In this new situation what prospective consumers are after is less exclusivity than authenticity and they have to measure themselves through narratives connecting their identities with their desires of consumption.

**Consumption as a meaningful social activity**

All in all, the legitimating rhetoric which emerged in the eighteenth century to justify market societies and modern cultures of consumption epitomised the entrenchment of a new sphere of action and new modalities of justification for the enjoyment of goods. Consumption was defined as a private matter, constructed as opportunely opposed to production, and envisaged as the pursuit of private happiness indirectly but firmly linked to virtuous mechanisms in the public sphere. Within this framework consumers were thus constructed as private economic hedonists, preoccupied with individual pleasures and doing all right – for the common good and themselves – provided they behaved in disciplined ways within the rules of the market. Still, as suggested, market rules themselves contained a vision of moral order and the purification of consumer identity from political and moral repertoires was never fully accomplished. As a contested identity, the consumer became an important device for political, social and cultural change.

It is especially from the late nineteenth century that a number of economic, cultural and political agencies increasingly claimed for themselves the right and duty to address consumers and to speak for them. Shopping has been recognised in a number of historical studies as crucial to this (see Sassatelli 2007). For example, studies on the development of the department stores in France, the US and the UK provide a good demonstration of how they marked the way we
consume. It was thanks to the development of places which made a large quantity of goods visible to the whole population that the connection between personal identity, commerce and objects became central to a growing number of people, and it was thanks to a thematisation of consumption as a meaningful social activity that the changing patterns of consumption gave way to a consumer society as such. This was accompanied by the rise of the ‘consumer’ as a powerful social identity, called into life and engaged by a host of discourses and situated strategies of enticement which both democratised desires and standardised them. Market actors, and in particular retail entrepreneurs, were pivotal in such development; still, commercial processes were embedded in a conducive social environment, which, in many cases, amounted to the urban circuits of power, including universities and art museums. This should not surprise us, as shopping in the department store was indeed often portrayed as the quintessentially urban and civilised leisure activity. If the invention of leisure time for the masses can be traced to the end of the nineteenth century, mass leisure was immediately and strongly connected to commercialisation and shopping. From the nineteenth century, someone walking the streets of the first metropolises could be considered, and consider themselves, a ‘consumer’, an actor who could buy objects for sale in the department stores and who gained part of the meaning and significance of their walks from the display of commodities. Presenting themselves as potential buyers, everyone could enter and leave the shopping place when they desired, looking at commodities, imagining using or purchasing them, mixing the new and the old: shopping became a typically bourgeois leisure activity, a socially approved way of spending time, equal to going to the theatre or visiting a museum. In the same way the discourse surrounding commerce stopped insisting on the immediate acquisition of particular goods, and attempted to provoke a state of constant desire.

Social actors were in fact increasingly referred to as ‘consumers’. This came about thanks to, among other things, market actors such as the advertising and marketing agencies which, especially in the United States, developed significantly between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such development was accompanied, particularly between the two world wars, by the consolidation of new professional forms of knowledge and the institutionalisation of various professional figures: advertising executives, marketing experts, shop-assistants, etc. On the whole, especially from the beginning of the twentieth century, advertising contains an increasing emphasis on self-realisation, self-presentation and impression management, stressing the self-creating potentialities of the choosing self. Marketing and advertising were complemented by a number of other increasingly professionalised figures such as designers or fashion journalists. These different figures, the so-called ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Bourdieu 1984), partook to a broad process of institutionalisation, which gave way to a variety of diverse collective actors (professional organisations, market watchdogs, consumer movements, etc.) that were all busily engaged in providing their portrayal of consumers, of their wants and capacities.

Recent scholarship has shown that political actors were also involved in providing an image of the consumer and in designing a more explicitly public role for consumption (see Sassatelli 2007). Political ideologies and movements which dealt with consumption range from the late eighteenth-century movements against the trade slave, to nineteenth-century movements concerned with the welfare and moralisation of the lower orders, to consumer cooperatives and consumerist movements underscoring the agency and rationality of consumers in the early twentieth century. They not only responded to changes brought about by the consolidation of modern consumer society, they also imagined, theorised and mobilised people as consumers – and did so in a variety of distinctive ways according to different national traditions.
Getting personal: the consumer in society

Whenever new consumer goods have become available to upward mobile social groups or to women, strong hostile sentiments towards material riches have emerged. These sentiments may well have a disciplining function if it is true, as Veblen (1994: 53) insisted, that ‘consumption of luxuries in the true sense is a consumption directed to the comfort of the consumer itself and it is therefore a mark of the master’ which elicits social control. It is not surprising thus that consumption has often been seen as a negative expression of the triumph of the modern market which weakens men, turning them into useless citizens incapable of defending their own country or participating in politics, whilst making women superficial and idle, unfit as wives and mothers. Critical commentaries on the decline of ‘culture’ in contemporary Western societies have often featured consumer culture as the main culprit, and consumers as gullible accomplices. Voices from a range of quarters have rallied to stigmatise consumption, casting it as a source of moral disorder, a soul-corrupting mirage: ‘consumerism’ or ‘consumer culture’ gave birth to spiritual impoverishment for which people sought comfort in material goods, a surrogate for traditional forms of satisfaction, self-realisation and identification through work and political participation. Authors such as Jean Baudrillard (1998) and Christopher Lasch (1979) offered polemic views of consumer identities, considering that consumer culture had given way to unhealthy cultural contradictions which may ultimately lead to pathological subjectivity traits. If Baudrillard ultimately maintains that the possibility of subjectivity constitution through consumption is in fact removed by the incessant juxtapositions of signs produced by commercial images, Lasch maintains that the collapse of the public sphere and the bureaucratisation of work combine with a ‘consumer culture’ that promotes a ‘narcissist personality type’. The narcissist is so obsessed by his own needs that he only sees others in relation to himself. In consumer culture, identity formation is no longer based on stable ideals maintained by the traditional family, but by the possibility of ‘presenting’ a convincing ‘saleable’ image of the self. In this perspective, where the ascetic culture of production favours the development of strong personalities attached to duties and to the family, consumer culture favours the development of weak and isolated personalities, who continually search for gratification in objects and who are fated to be continually deluded: the pleasures which they are desperately seeking out to fill their ‘empty interior’ is in fact a form of ‘aggression’ which knows nothing as sacred but reduces all to a commodity, an object interchangeable with other objects. The culture of commodities that enters the home and transforms everyone into isolated consumers is a constant source of dissatisfaction. In Lasch’s view, ‘[t]he best defences against the terrors of existence are the homely comforts of love, work, and family life, which connect us to a world that is independent of our wishes yet responsive to our needs’ (Lasch 1979: 248). Thus, consumption is positive only if it is functional to production, instead it becomes a threat where it turns in on itself and away from the rules of the traditional family.

The identification of a pathological splitting of culture within modern capitalism is a recurrent theme in academic literature and public discourse at least since Daniel Bell’s works on the cultural contradictions of capitalism, and it has been taken up again by the American feminist Susan Bordo (1993). She maintains that the contemporary self is constructed around contradictory demands: to incorporate the discipline of the work ethic and to consume as many goods as possible surrendering oneself to immediate enjoyment. According to Bordo (ibid.: 199) the regulation of desire becomes a constant problem because subjects find themselves besieged by temptation and condemned if they indulge: ‘[o]n the one hand, as producers of goods and services we must sublimate, delay, repress desires for immediate gratification; we must cultivate the work ethic. On the other hand, as consumers we must display a boundless capacity to capitulate to desire and indulge in impulse; we must hunger for constant and immediate satisfaction’.

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Eating disorders are examples of the chaos in the regulation of desires caused by consumption, something which is much harder on young women pressured to demonstrate their independence and power. Anorexia and obesity figure as opposed attempts to solve the contradictions induced by consumer culture: anorexia being ‘an extreme development of the capacity for self-denial and repression of desire (the work ethic in absolute control)’, and obesity ‘an extreme capacity to capitulate to desire (consumerism in control)’. As such they ‘can never be tolerated by a consumer system’ which is, however, intimately connected to pathology. Postulating a radical split between production and consumption, Bordo (ibid.: 201–2, 187) in fact ends up maintaining that ‘the “correct” management of desire’ requires ‘a contradictory double-bind construction of personality’ and produces ‘an unstable bulimic personality type as its norm’.

Analyses such as these take seriously the idea that consumer culture or society produces consumers, but offer a polemic view of consumer identities, which does not account for the plurality of ways in which consumption and identity are intertwined. They tend to consider consumer culture as producing pathological identities, and consumer agency as ultimately dominated by the commercial and promotional systems rather than embedded in meaningful social relations. In the next section, I shall consider the main contemporary theory of consumer action, departing from economics emphasis on rationality and moving towards sociology and anthropology emphasis on ritual action, showing that they stress the consumers’ activities as related to their communicative and relational functions.

Main claims and contributors

A number of perspectives within sociology and anthropology specifically addressed to consumption have tried to stress the activity of the consumer, engaging with empirical studies rather than abstract theorising. They have often taken off from a criticism of neoclassical economics – its instrumentally rational, highly individualist view of the consumer. In neoclassical economics, consumption is, broadly speaking, very much emphasised, and in fact rendered through the notion of individual rational choice. Consumption is not a cultural domain but a myriad of individual, instrumental cost-benefit calculations: it is ‘demand’, the sum of individual purchase decisions aimed at utility maximisation predicated on consumer sovereignty. This characterisation poses a number of problems that have partly been addressed by injecting some social characterisation in an otherwise too abstract and individualistic portrayal of the consumer (Sassatelli 2007). To figure out consumers as active and social agents, to conceive of consumption not as instrumental, autonomous calculation but as a practical accomplishment and a ritual activity, a clearly social view of rationality has been adopted in anthropology and sociology. Consumers in current sociological and anthropological perspectives are active, but neither free nor so self-sufficient, being embedded from the start in social relations.

Sociological classics

Such a ritual, fully social perspective featured in the classic sociological works of Veblen and Simmel who considered consumption as a ceremonial process whereby social position is demonstrated and pursued. In his The Theory of the Leisure Class (1994/1899), Thorstein Veblen proposed the concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’ to indicate those phenomena of consumption which escape the logic of utility maximisation at minimal cost. He observed that, alongside necessity and calculating acts of consumption explainable by the use-value of commodities, there also operated ceremonial forms of consumption linked to status and honour; in his view, the value of some goods was exclusively determined by their capacity to make a given social
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Position visible. Conspicuous consumption and waste thus served as demonstration/recognition of elevated social position, founded on the knowledge that ‘wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is granted only in evidence’ (ibid.: 30). Indeed, as we can still witness on a daily basis, a costly object may be sought out precisely because of its high cost, because through displaying it social actors can visibly demonstrate what Veblen called ‘pecuniary strength’, thus obtaining ‘good repute’ and showing their good chances of controlling the future course of the social and symbolic processes.

Georg Simmel provides a similar, but more refined, perspective. In his Philosophy of Money, the German sociologist (Simmel 1990/1907) maintains that the value of things depends on the value they are given by the subject, rather than being founded on absolutes such as the intrinsic value of their material properties, or the amount of work necessary to produce them such as in Marxian theory and critical theory more generally. However, this subjective valuation is itself conditioned by the historical and cultural context in which it takes place. To be sure, the inhabitants of modern large cities are increasingly able to translate the value of things in monetary terms, to consider lengthy chains of cause and effect and to perform some kind of cost–benefit calculation, but they do not ever reach the calculative instrumentality which neoclassical economics holds to be the basis of action. On the contrary, it is the possibility of self-recognition within a group and distinction from others which is of utmost importance in large urban environments where one is all too easily lost in the anonymous crowd.

Consumption thus appears to Simmel as a culturally ordered field of action, rather than a threat to social order, as his French contemporary Emile Durkheim would have it. For example, it is precisely in the chaotic and over-crowded metropolis that more and more people need to dress themselves in clothes that signal their identity to others, both as a members of a group and as an individual. Fashion is indeed an excellent means of achieving both these effects, responding to both the need for cohesion or union and the need for differentiation or isolation (Simmel 1971/1904). In following fashion we align ourselves with some people and differentiate ourselves from others, but at the same time we enjoy expressing ourselves in a common language that is widely understood. For Simmel fashion is also a metaphor for the allure that ‘newness’ exerts on the modern subject in general, and on the bourgeoisie and the middle classes in particular. Indeed, the social position of the middle classes predisposes them to fashion; in contrast to the nobility, the bourgeoisie cannot rely on tradition and established styles and, unlike less well-to-do classes, they hope to better their social position and to find their own style.

Communication and distinction

The social and cultural embeddedness of consumer actions and identities is central to the work of both Mary Douglas and Pierre Bourdieu, both having set the standard for contemporary studies on consumption in sociology and anthropology. For these authors consumption functions as relational work, not only being embedded in social relations but also being used to maintain, negotiate and modify interpersonal connections, especially those related to family and household life, their hierarchies and power structure. Consumption may be seen as expression of kinship and other social and personal relationships, and the density of a consumer’s purchases may reflect the density of his social networks.

In particular, Douglas underlines the communicative function of goods and the communicative rationality of consumers. In The World of Goods, a seminal work by Douglas and Isherwood (1979), we are invited to consider that objects serve as a material support for interaction as well as symbolic indicators in making the world intelligible. Goods function as sorting devices:
they ‘can be used as fences or bridges’ to regulate social access and belonging (ibid.: 12). Her emphasis is on identity and classification. Following Lévi-Strauss, she considers that goods ‘are good to think’: they can be treated as symbolic means of classifying the world, as the tools of a particular form of non-verbal communication. The social actor requires an intelligible reality of visible signs to orientate in the world, and goods serve this function through providing the material basis for stabilising cultural categories. The acquisition and use of objects is therefore a way of ‘mak[ing] firm and visible a particular set of judgements in the fluid processes of classifying persons and events’ (ibid.: 65, 67). Douglas conceives of consumption as a cultural battlefield, reflecting the fundamental choices on the type of society which we want to live in and on the type of person we wish to be. Interestingly, wishes are often predicated on opposition: we choose these goods over others precisely because they are culturally incompatible and even opposed to those perspectives on the organisation of society and identity which we want to refute. While the adoption of a new commodity, or the innovative use of an existing one is seen as a way of controlling precious bits of information, consumption permits a continual marking and re-marking of the surrounding world and a constant confrontation with others, and thus a control of respective identities.

While Douglas’s emphasis is on cognition, Bourdieu’s is on embodiment. Consumers operate though a sense of distinction which they have incorporated through taste. Consumers not only distinguish between goods in order to distinguish themselves, they also cannot do anything but distinguish goods and themselves; that is, they are placed in different categories, included or excluded, according to their capacity for distinction. Although it is expressed in the apparently neutral and innocuous language of individual preference, taste ‘marries colours and also people, who make “well-matched couples”, initially in regard to taste’ (Bourdieu 1984: 243). Thus it is a generative and classificatory mechanism which, at the same time, classifies the classifier and contributes to stabilising his or her social position. Bourdieu proposes a theory of practice in which human action is constructed as something material and concrete and human experience understood in terms of mimesis: to this end he elaborates the notion of ‘habitus’, a system of durable and transposable dispositions, ‘structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures’, which is written in the body through past experiences, it is established in the first years of life and works as an unconscious but extremely adaptable mechanism orientating actors towards objects, themselves and others. Tastes are conceptualised as subjective realisations of the mechanism of habitus which organise consumption.

To this complex and finely calibrated description of habitus, Bourdieu juxtaposes a hierarchical and linear vision of the social structure and of its relationship with the structuring of taste. In fact, the individual habitus stands in a relationship of homology – that is, of ‘diversity within homogeneity’ – with respect to the class habitus defined by structural forms of capital derived from one’s own professional position, education and social networking. Tastes are thereby implicated in ‘classificatory systems’ which freeze ‘a state of social struggle’, or rather ‘a given state of the distribution of advantages and obligations’, and are ‘not so much means of knowledge as means of power’ (ibid.: 471). For example, if we consider the health market, we can clearly see that there are very different attitudes to the body and its state of health which correspond to different forms of health service consumption. The middle classes tend to operate around the idea that they can and must control themselves, their body and their state of health, and thus they generally have more medical check-ups with the result that they effectively have a longer life-span. Instead, the working classes tend to adopt a fatalist attitude, not worrying about small illnesses or discomforts, and they only reluctantly visit the doctor in cases of emergency, with the result that their life-span is less, and they are more prone to invalidating disease, therefore almost enacting their fatalistic prophecy at its worst.
Appropriating goods

Contemporary research on consumption tries to render the complexity of contemporary consumer practices in relation to ever more complex social structure while emphasising the relative autonomy of consumer practices from the broader social structure, and their role in the structuring of identity and habitus. Therefore, not only tastes and consumer practices are internally complex, but also the different contexts and cultures of consumption are key mediators in the formation of taste. As a relatively autonomous sphere of action, consumption has come to be defined as a practice of ‘appropriation’ which occurs in a variety of socially organised occasions, from shopping, to servicing in the home, to display in various public places, etc. (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987; McCracken 1988). Each of these occasions is relatively self-governing, it is constituted in terms of its own symbols and rituals, and translates in these terms what has been inscribed in commodities by the circuits of production and distribution. In particular, in contemporary societies consumption engages with the nature of objects as commodities. The moment of purchase is clearly only the beginning of a complex process in which the consumer works on a commodity to re-contextualise it, so that it can eventually end up no longer having any recognisable relation with the world of monetary exchange. In fact, even the most simple article of trade does not inevitably and constantly have the character of a commodity: it may start off as such, but it often ends up being something different, at least for those who consume or possess it.

One of the key objectives of the sociology of consumption today is to focus on the concrete, active, fluid and different ways in which people transform and make their own those resources which they have acquired on the market. A similar position is held by the British anthropologist Daniel Miller. Considering consumption as a ‘relatively autonomous and plural process of cultural self-construction’, Miller suggests that the imperatives of consumption may be as varied as the cultural contexts from which consumers act. Consumption represents the variety of local relational networks that maintain their specificity in the face of the homogenisation of the mechanisms of production and distribution. Miller (1987: 17) maintains that, from the point of view of the subject, consumption can be considered as a form of ‘re-appropriation’ or ‘assimilation’ – that is, ‘the way in which a subject assimilates its own culture and uses it to develop itself as a social subject’. Thus, consumption too contains the potential to realise the human being which Marx tended to attribute only to work. The term ‘re-appropriation’ is eloquent: obviously it implies the capacity to make an object properly for and of oneself. Commodities that are anonymous, identical or fungible at the moment of purchase can be re-contextualised in numerous different ways by consumers, so that practices of consumption tend to generate diversity rather than homogenisation. However, in Miller’s view appropriation also implies feedback effects on identity, thus by appropriating, the subject expands and modifies him or herself. It is in this process of renegotiation of one’s identity that a space opens up in which the advertising industry intervenes trying to manage and modify our needs. But it is thanks to this process that consumption can also be a creative act and produce something truly ‘authentic’ – that is, something which actors not only may use in a personal way, but which can also become part of them.

Similar views have been put forward by French theorist Michel De Certeau (1984). He sees consumption as a form of bricolage production, an ‘ordinary poaching’ which may be subtly subversive as it ‘does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order’ (ibid.: xii). They also resonate in British cultural studies, and in particular in the works of Dick Hedbige and Paul Willis, and their emphasis on the creativity of sub-cultural appropriation. Youth subcultures in particular,
as Hebdige (1979: 103) puts it, have been addressed as ‘cultures of conspicuous consumption – even when, as with the skinheads and the punks, certain types of consumption are conspicuously refused – and it is through the distinctive rituals of consumption, through style, that the subculture at once reveals its “secret” identity and communicates its forbidden meanings’. Also in the hippy and bikers cultures studied by Willis (1978: 166), goods were attributed distinctive meanings through which the group constituted itself: the styles of consumption demonstrates the ‘profane’ power of subordinate and marginal groups ‘to select, develop and creatively make some objects their own, to express their own meanings’. As we have learned, and these very authors acknowledged, sub-cultural appropriation may be quickly subsumed: private rebels may not become public revolutionaries and, if they do, the meanings originally associated with rebellion may be altered and subversive results are by no means guaranteed. This portrays an active but far from sovereign consumer, and a continuous dialectical constitution of consumers’ identities facing the world of commodities.

The contemporary sociology of consumption is aware of the ambivalence of consumption and of the normative character of its link to the pursuit of identity. Looking at consumption and identity from the perspective of an active but socially bounded and culturally normalised identity, we may certainly appreciate that consumers are not always able to complete their rituals of consumption, appropriating commodities successfully. As Simmel (1990; see also McCraken 1988) anticipated, ‘sterile ownership’ is a typical disease of modern society, fuelled by the growth in material culture, the diversity of objects and their continual innovation. Thus, consumers may find themselves with objects which are useless and meaningless or even alienating, and they may be upset by having discarded an object which still represented something for them. Paradoxically enough, as consumption requires time, some forms of sterile ownership may be a feature of economies where leisure time is the shortest for the moneyed elite. Luxury requires time, thus expensive leisure goods (sophisticated cameras, camping equipment, sport accessories, etc.) may be purchased by time-pressured high-income earners to be left unused, remaining in storage at home as symbols of a potential future and a wished-for self-identity. While these luxuries are only virtually consumed, being as much bearers of frustration as they offer symbolic support in daily life, they do contribute to consumption expenditure at the macro-economic level. The idea of sterile ownership thus adumbrates the gap between consumer practices as the use of goods and demand as the purchase of commodities. It also hints at the lack of reciprocity between consumption as subjective culture and consumer culture as objective or material culture. This lack of reciprocity means that even successful appropriation in ordinary life may have perverse effects on identity and creativity. Indeed, following Simmel, Miller (2004) himself suggests that the increased pressure on individual consumer choice may have unintended cultural effects. In a recent paper he illustrates this by setting a puzzle: why do Western women dream of colourful dresses and increasingly buy black, grey and plainly unadorned clothing? His reply points to the fact that choice has become so overwhelming that it might be given up altogether or indeed strictly regimented by resorting to hegemonic codifications: the ‘little black dress’ is seen as an anxiety-reducing response to the variety of clothing available and the de-classificatory trends in the fashion system.

**Routine and reflexivity**

While habitus, in Bourdieu’s theory, is a deep-seated often unconscious mechanism for the matching of taste and goods, the normative and strategic dimensions of identity constitution through goods have been foregrounded in theories of late modernity. Participation to the market as consumers features as crucial for the accomplishment of individual identity in the age of
what authors such as Beck (1992), Giddens (1991) or Baumann (1992) have called ‘reflexive individualization’. Much emphasis has thus been placed on purposive individual stylisation of oneself through consumer choices. In this perspective in a situation of cultural de-classification and increasing emphasis on individuality, the self becomes a reflexive and secular project which works on ever refined levels of body presentation (Giddens 1991). This involves unremitting self-monitoring, self-scrutiny, planning and ordering of elements and choices into a coherent narrative of identity.

If, for liberalism, choice is just freedom, for these theories choice is somehow compulsory: we are forced into it not so much by the drive of the capitalist economy, but by the absence of a stable social and cultural order in a post-traditional society. Consumer choice is not only central, it is obligatory. We have ‘no choice, but to choose’ – writes Anthony Giddens (1991: 81). For Beck (1992: 131) ‘[l]iberalism presupposed a coherent identity, yet identity seems to be precisely the main problem of modern existence and is itself something to be chosen’; the self is thus ‘a project which is directed to us by a pluralized world and must be pursued within that pluralized world’. Of course, together with choice comes self-responsibility for the chosen self, and risk-perception changes accordingly: now risks are in the region of anomy, linked to the incapacity to perform convincingly a positively valued self through one’s own choices. As Giddens observes (1991: 80), late modernity confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices which is ‘non-foundational’, produces anxiety and offers ‘little help as to which options should be selected’. The solution to such risk and anxiety to be found in consumer culture is, for Baumann (1990: 200), ‘technical’: it solves the problem of the durable and coherent self in the face of incessant non-foundational complexity by treating all problems as solvable through specific commodities. Each of them may be highly functional to a precise task, but they still have to be arranged in a coherent, credible whole. Lifestyle, as a reflexive attempt at consumer coherence, can be seen as a way in which the pluralism of post-traditional identity is managed by individuals and organised (or exploited) by commerce.

Giddens stresses that in the context of post-traditional societies ‘the cumulative choices that combine to form a lifestyle define the nucleus of a person’s identity’: ‘the very core of self-identity is ‘mobile’ and ‘reflexive’, made of ‘routinized practices . . . reflexively open to change’, with consumer choices, the ‘small decisions a person makes every day’, being ‘not only about how to act but who to be’ (1991: 81). Lifestyle orders things into a certain unity, reducing the plurality of choice and affording a sense of ‘ontological security’. Social reproduction is thus transferred from traditional culture to the market for goods (and labour). The notion of individual wants becomes central to economic growth and standardised consumption patterns become central to economic stability, reducing risks not only for individuals but also for corporations. This may bring us to conceive of the self as a commodity itself, and indeed Giddens seems to adumbrate a process of self-commodification with ‘self-actualisation [being] packaged and distributed according to market criteria’ (ibid.: 198). While similar approaches may run the risk of over-emphasising reflexivity and its burden on identity constitution – thus echoing the works of authors such as Lasch or Baudrillard – they have recently been very important for the establishment of a reflection on consumer identities, and we shall critically elaborate on their suggestions in the last section.

Main criticisms

Polectic views on consumer identities inspired by the different works of Lasch, Baudrillard or Bordo, and often drawing on critical theories – from Adorno to Marcuse – have been as influential as they have been criticised. Not only do they rest on a value-laden opposition between
the sphere of consumption and that of work which is being increasingly contradicted in the lives of especially the new middle-classes engaged in creative professions, but also they do not consider that rather than producing a pathological consumer as its norm, consumer culture offers visions of normality which people are asked to engage with. Furthermore, polemic views are often characterised by a textualist bias which derive consumers’ meanings from analyses of objectified promotional texts such as advertising messages and images. Despite their popularity, such views have thus been strongly criticised as being unable to grasp the lived social experiences of consumption: consumers are not simply bombarded by advertising images, they have to decode such images and will do so in different ways according to locally situated contexts of consumption. To identify consumer culture with its most visible surface, advertising culture, draws a biased picture. How we experience ourselves, manage embodied identities, participate in social rituals and relations is, to a great extent, mediated by consumer culture. But consumer culture cannot be reduced to a collection of signs in advertising images; rather, it should be understood as lived culture made by embodied agents situated in specific institutional contexts and embedded in social relations.

As suggested, the main contemporary theories which have addressed consumer agency and identity have brought consumption back into everyday social relations, opening the way for an embedded understanding of this relevant aspect of modern subjectivity constitution. Once we move away from theories that consider consumption in late modern society as either purely instrumentally rational (such as crude versions of neoclassical economics) or purely irrational, induced or determined (a few variants of critical theory), theories of consumer agency can be placed on a fairly simple review synopsis. They may largely be divided into theories that focus on what consumers do and theories that focus on what they are, on the one hand; theories which focus on relations of power and meanings among consumers, and theories which focus on relations of power and meanings of consumers with other institutions or phenomena of modernity, on the other.

Theories of anthropological background – such as the seminal works of Bourdieu or Douglas – tend to focus on what consumers do among themselves: communication, distinction, appropriation for ritual purposes, symbolic power relations featuring consumption as a communicative or embodied practice which stabilises social relations. As such they tend to lose sight of what consumers are, or better of how they are constituted in particular vis-à-vis powerful collective actors such as the commercialisation system. That is, they tend to discount the normative aspect of consumption, and the cultural working of the circuit of the commodity. Extremely influential, the works of both Douglas and Bourdieu have also been positively criticised (Sassatelli 2007 for a detailed review). Douglas has been criticised for her cognitivist approach to identity and the possibility of re-introducing a maximising rationality connected to the reflexive pursuit of identity rather than utility. Bourdieu, on his part, has been accused of providing a fairly hierarchical and determinist picture of social stratification and of running the risk of falling into dualistic reasoning (with a structuralist explanation regarding homology and the standardisation of taste coupled with a voluntarist one at the level of individual action).

Bourdieu’s work in particular has been a major source of inspiration not only for a vast amount of empirical research, but also a number of fruitful theoretical reaction and refinement. Bourdieu’s thesis that differences in wants and styles are always representative of, and reducible to, intimate dispositions of taste has, for example, been considered a sort of ‘material ideology’ (Miller 1987: 161), a situation whereby the representations of a particular group deny alternative perspectives access to a given aspect of culture and portray the forced preferences so constructed as belonging exclusively to those excluded – such as when dominant classes attribute degrading hygienic preferences to subordinate classes, which are in fact the result of a state of necessity.
More broadly, scholars of consumer practices have focused on their internal complexity, on their creativity and on their capacity to generate classifications, styles and ultimately ‘capital’ in their own right (Sassatelli 2007). Whilst they are far from being the direct expression of a natural individuality or of self-interested calculation, the cultures of consumption may consolidate identities and dispositions which are relatively disarticulated from structural division (class, profession, gender). In particular, at least in some cases – for example, sub-cultures or amateur practices – it is the practices of consumption themselves which create a structure for the standardisation of taste. Bourdieu’s habitus helps us consider that it is not enough to postulate a relationship between taste and the world of things, since the second does not generate the first, or vice versa. Still, to approach consumption and identity, we need to consider that their encounter is indeed creative: understanding how tastes and material culture find correspondences and are mutually shaped requires more attention to the local contexts of consumption, and in particular to the institutions which mediate acquisition and use, organising identities, interaction and manners in ways which consumers consider appropriate.

More recent works such as those of Miller, De Certeau and the British cultural studies tradition have coupled an emphasis on everyday practice with attention to the circuit of the commodity, emphasising the active role of consumers in finishing and, in fact, transforming commodities. This new wave of studies also focuses on what consumers do. Yet their attention to power relations is addressed as relations both among consumers (rituals, sub-cultures) and between consumers and other social actors (the promotional system, for example), which may illuminate the dialectical processes of commoditisation and de-commoditisation. Still, they have also been criticised. Miller’s works can be read as running the risk of placing a disproportionate emphasis on a defiant consumer, emphasising the subjective consolation offered by consumption and discounting the systemic differences in power between producers and consumers. Similar criticism have also been addressed at De Certeau’s discussion of consumption as a form of production, against Hedbige’s treatment of sub-cultural consumption and, to a lesser extent, Willis’s notion of symbolic creativity. Despite their emphasis on symbolic processes surrounding commoditisation and de-commoditisation, these approaches also largely eschew questions as to how consumers are constituted as such, in particular questions as to the normative power of the notion of the consumer as a social category.

It is precisely in addressing what consumers are that authors such as Giddens, Baumann or Beck have looked at consumer identities. This has been done largely in the framework of a theory reflexive individualisation which tends to stress reflexivity, either in a triumphant or in a worried voice, as paramount characterisation of the consumer. As suggested, identity, consumption, choice and projectuality are indeed strongly related in contemporary culture, and yet we should be wary of considering consumption as a purely reflexive activity as it may appear in theories of reflexive individualisation. Indeed, in many domains of action mediated by commercial relations we are not asked to rely only on our freedom of choice to account for participation, preference and taste. Reference to an ultimate ‘authentic’, ‘original’ and ‘natural’ self are becoming strong cultural options, often related to the advice of experts and supported by the norms of consumers institution, as much as other cultural options such as snobbism, imitation, distinction or fashion have come to be looked at with some suspicion (Sassatelli 2007). More broadly, routines have been shown to be important in understanding ordinary consumer practices – from eating to supermarket shopping, from going to a gym to using a car. When we consume, precisely because we act in practical ways, we do not reflect on everything; to the contrary, the meanings we attribute to our practices and the narratives with which we reflexively create our trajectory of consumption at least partly reflect (that is, blindly construct upon) the conditions in which we find ourselves and act. The bounded reflexivity of
consumption corresponds to the fact that people not only express but also constitute themselves through what they get and use. Consumption not only expresses but also performs identity: through making objects their own, social actors make themselves, both as consumers and as selves with specific and different roles linked to different identity markers such as ethnicity, gender sexuality, gender, social status, etc., which are loosely coupled with specific styles of consumption. There is a tendency in the reflexive individualisation thesis to provide fairly abstract theories of consumer identity to the effect of overlooking everyday consumer practices (what people do with goods) and how they engage with a variety of social identities not reducible to consumption. This tendency corresponds to a conflation of the normative aspect of identity building (what consumers are as normative social persona) and the practical aspect of agency constitution, which is much more embedded, varied, conflicting and contested, and which provides feedback on the consumer as a normative social identity.

Future developments are anticipated

A number of issues have become central in the current scholarship on consumer agency and identity: choice, reflexivity and normativity. Developing some of the arguments sketched in the previous section, I shall consider the theory of reflexive individualisation on the backdrop of these main issues offering a few suggestions about future developments. Such developments are very likely to be crucial for contemporary culture, politics and society given the centrality that the ‘consumer’ as a social persona has gained in contemporary societies.

Admittedly, in post-traditional societies defined by consumer culture, the relation of the self to commodities is crucial and subjectively elaborated (via personal style, self-narration, and so forth). But just like it is wrong to conceive of it as crystalline, all-powerful reflexivity, it would be a mistake to consider that reflexive individualisation preludes to the death of the subject, as if what is expected of the consumer-self at the end of their projects is meaningless subjugation. To explore this, let us consider what Simmel, an acknowledged source of inspiration for the theories of reflexive individualisation, suggested. According to Simmel (1990), as modernity progresses social actors move from a situation in which their identity is, as it were, imposed by the things which they happen to possess (i.e. their actions are determined by bundles of objects corresponding to a traditional and rigid distribution of roles and resources), to a situation of ‘absolute potentiality’. With the triumph of commercial culture individuals are freed from the structural links with goods that ‘enslave’ them: objects have become commodities, they can be bought and exchanged by subjects. The most immediate consequence of this is the neutralisation of the power of things to determine people’s identity. However, the freedom that money confers paves the way to indeterminacy, it is a freedom ‘without any directive, without any definite and determining content. Such freedom favours that emptiness and instability that allows one to give full rein to every accidental, whimsical and tempting impulse’ (ibid.: 402). In this situation thus we have greater ‘negative freedom’ – that is, freedom from external bonds, including restrictions as linked to tradition, religion and magic, etc. – on what to consume and how, but ‘positive freedom’ – that is, freedom to do things – may be in jeopardy. In fact, negative freedom does not afford indications for the constitution of individual identities consistent through time; thus people’s lives may be dominated by a nostalgic desire to confer new meanings to things and a constant uneasiness with respect to the rationale of their consumption.

As suggested elsewhere (Sassatelli 2007), this perspective is resolutely opposed to the idea that commoditisation, and with it the multiplications of images and objects, accompanies the dissolution of the subject and the collapse of available space for appropriating, decoding and de-commoditising objects and images. Instead, the space available for the subject increases, but
paradoxically it is precisely for this reason that one can find oneself paralysed, incapable of giving personal value to things. In other words, the constitution of the subject through goods is an active but inconclusive process, a never-ending endeavour which cannot provide once and for all a stable identity. Still, it is precisely because of this inconclusiveness that consumption is a creative and dynamic process, an ongoing emancipation from the constraints implicit in the possession of any particular good or goods combination. As a corollary to this we shall consider playfulness and aestheticisation, the logic of self-experimentation, of imaginary or tamed hedonism (see Campbell 1987; Featherstone 1991; Sassatelli 2000) associated with the modern consumer as the result of a cultural obligation to produce oneself as the original source of value of commodities. Expressed in wider social-theoretical terms, we may say that contemporary consumer practices allows for a maximum of individual specificity, but pass onto the subject the onus of justification, the possibility that such specificity finds its place in the social order. This may well correspond to what Erving Goffman famously branded as ‘bureaucratization of the spirit’: the fragmentary condition of the modern subject who has to manage a highly specific set of different roles while projecting a unitary and coherent self. Clearly in many ways this is broader than consumption. The experimental, experiential investment of the self, for example, extends into the corporate world whereby creative workers are expected to be good at selling themselves; adopting an entrepreneurial, promotional outlook as to themselves, needing a projectual, flexible, creative self who is always pursuing some sort of activity, never to be without a project always to be looking forward to, and preparing for, something.

On these premises we should avoid considering that reflexive individualisation simply couples with an unremitting process of commoditisation which extends entirely to the self. Surely commercial relations extend today in private domains which were often encoded through what was construed as opposed to the market and coded as interpersonal, affective relations. But we have come to appreciate the extent to which market and emotions are and have always been intertwined, sustaining each other in a continuous dialectic made of conflicts and accommodations. Furthermore, if we focus on consumption and identity, we should appreciate that modern consumers are first and above all asked to be active, to produce themselves as the source of value, participating in the process of de-commoditisation and indeed constituting themselves as agents of such process. Put differently, consumption is a sphere of action regulated according to the cultural principle of individual expression. Obviously, this is not to say that the actor is absolutely free. To the contrary, the subjectivity required by consumption is, in some ways, a binding individuality. In order to adequately perform their social roles as consumers, actors must thus find a point of balance between the bored indifference of the blasé, the pursuit of difference as an end in itself of the eccentric, and indeed the other-directed strive for distinction of the snob. They must express their deepest and most peculiar subjectivities.

As a normative cultural identity, the ‘consumer’ appears in striking continuity with hegemonic modern views of subjectivity. As Sennett and Taylor have famously shown, the development of capitalist society has consolidated and popularised a particular notion of the subject: the autonomous actor in a growing distance from objects. As commodities, objects are increasingly seen as radically different from humans, and this growing distance between the nature of people on one side, and that of objects on the other accompanies the idea that objects can compromise people’s humanity rather than complete it. Still, from Locke onward, modern identity also relies on material objects and property for grounding. There is thus a fundamental contradiction in the way in which we conceive modern identity: a paradox between idealism and materialism which clearly defines our relation with consumption. Briefly, such paradox entails that subjects perform their identity through commodities as difference from commodities. Idealism thus stimulates materialism: in fact, in contrast to many tribal societies where people become the objects through
which the values of a culture are fixed, in our culture things have been given the fundamental role of objectifying cultural categories, of tangibly fixing meanings and values (Miller 1987).

In such circumstances, the notion of individual choice acquires momentum as a hegemonic normative frame which has been both sustained by expert knowledge and deployed through a myriad of local norms and particularities to evaluate consumer practices, their worth, moral adequacy and normality (Sassatelli 2007). Choosing things just for a try or just for fun, for present physical enjoyment or for sophisticated aesthetic pleasure is fine so long as it is the self who is playing the game. As such, choice relies on specific anthropological presuppositions: invited to think of themselves as choosers, individuals are asked to promote their desires and pleasures as the ultimate source of value while keeping mastery over them. To consume properly, people must be masters of their will. In other terms, consumers are sovereigns of the market in so far as they are sovereigns of themselves. The consumer’s sovereignty is a double-edged sovereignty: hedonism, the search for pleasure, must be tempered by various forms of detachment which stress the subject’s capacity to guide that search, to dose pleasures, to avoid addiction, to be, in a word, recognisable as someone who autonomously chooses. If renouncing the material world has been one way that many cultures have used to signal a spiritual calling (early Christian anchorites, Buddhist monks, medieval saints refusing food, etc.), our world, both idealist and materialist, calls on us all to positively demonstrate our capacity to choose. In this situation, even the fact that our desires may discover different objects, and that our chosen objects are continuously changing may help in sustaining the game of having a self-possessed self. The development of the so-called post-Fordist economy may be seen in this light: the ceaseless innovation of consumer goods, the continuously superseded adoption of different fashions, the endless combination of styles appears to grant consumers a continuous liberation from the specific objects which they have chosen, allowing for the renewed exercise of choice. Paradoxically enough, the possibility to ‘exit’ (i.e. choose not to choose, to discard or change) a particular good remains a powerful means to guarantee that what links us to it is indeed our choice. This obviously does not imply a return to asceticism, but rather a quest for novelty and authenticity, in the view that the emphasis must remain on the subject and his or her right to satisfy desires with objects, and not on the objects and their pleasures. Individuals who are sovereigns of themselves and of their will have not only the capacity to continue willing what they once chose as it corresponded to their desires, but they can also exit that choice should the conditions of choice be altered, the initial wants remain unsatisfied or shift in accountable ways matching market novelties and individual authenticity, or indeed their capacity for autonomous choice be put into question as happens when the specter of ‘addiction’ is evoked.

Today, consumption increasingly appears as a terrain of ambivalence for the development of human identities. By this I am referring to its dual character, whereby it may be able to emancipate people from some power relations, while binding them to other specific conditions; offer significant capacities which may become heavy burdens; and solve certain problems but create others. Consumption is a disputed terrain which not always heralds freedom, but nonetheless potentially carries social change, creativity and satisfaction – depending on its organisation. As suggested, in (late) modernity it has largely been organised around the expression of individual identity, with a far too autonomous, self-contained, self-possessed vision of the self as its reference point. Consumption is instead a symbolic and practical affair of a deeply social nature: it can only partly be reflexive as it is grounded in institutionally enforced rituals and interactions; it can only partly reflect the wishes of an autonomous self as this very self partly constitutes itself through practices of consumption. While not simply absorbing and dissolving the subject into the process of commoditisation which largely defines its horizon in late modern societies, consumption does not overturn commoditisation: it re-frames it, re-works on it, often at its margins, with limited consequences, and in subterraneous, rather than triumphant, ways. Sure,
the same fear of consumerism and materialism which is often found in sociological reflection on consumption can also be found in many consumers all over the world, precisely when they buy, use and organise goods in everyday life. Likewise, the consumption of commodities can be one way in which global brands may be successfully confronted – that is, it is through certain kinds of consumption (green, alternative, local, traditional, etc.) that people can oppose the homogenisation promoted by capitalist production and global business. Still, the power of consumption as a practical everyday activity is also its weakness: informal, local, relatively autonomous, relatively inconsequential as such, it needs structural valorisation through the mediation of intermediaries (cultural, political, economic and the like) to acquire the normative force of a path to socially recognised and normatively approved consumer identities.

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