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Article Title: Consumption's Potent Political Purchase

Year of publication: 2002

Citation: Nava, M. (2002) 'Consumption's Potent Political Purchase' Times Higher Education 20 December

Link to published version:

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=173710>

DOI: (not stated)

Publisher statement: (not stated)

Consumption's Potent Political Purchase

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[Published in *Times Higher Education* 20 December 2002]

Until the late 1980s consumption was a neglected topic of study. This is despite its centrality to the production-consumption cycle and therefore to the historical development of capitalism and related political, social and symbolic formations in the West. For over two centuries, consumption practices and aspirations to transform ourselves and our environment through the acquisition of goods have been crucial elements of the modern world. Yet, as Canadian anthropologist Grant McCracken put it in 1990, 'the history of consumption has no history, no community of scholars, no tradition of scholarship'.

This has changed. In 2001 the Economic and Social Research Council, in collaboration with Arts and Humanities Research Board, developed a major £5 million research programme, Cultures of Consumption, which attracted an unprecedented number of proposals from a wide range of university departments and theoretical perspectives. Publications, journals and courses in the field are proliferating. Expansion is only one feature of the new picture. There has been a paradigm shift: consumption, previously considered uninteresting, is now often conceptualised as being as significant a determinant of historical and global change as production. For some it has become *the* motor of history and the primary means through which individuals have participated in culture. Its theoretical importance has contributed to the broader shift of focus, in the humanities as well as in the social sciences, from structures and high-cultural texts to everyday life. Cultural studies has been at the forefront of this development. Yet some consider that the turn to consumption has had a de-politicising impact on the field.

One way of addressing this view is to consider why consumption was so marginalised in the first place. Its absence from the intellectual agenda throughout the middle decades of the 20th century must be attributed in part to the legacy of neo-Marxists whose focus was predominantly on production, the public sphere and the (male) workforce. Consumption was perceived as part of capitalism's drive to fetishise commodities and delude the masses. Among the most influential proponents of the latter view were Adorno and Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School. They argued that mass culture -- which included cinema, fiction, popular music and modern commerce -- was not only without aesthetic and social value, it was also part of a strategy by the culture industry to engineer political acquiescence. Their conceptual framework, which persists to this day in some strands of consumer and media studies, assumes that consumers -- shoppers, viewers, readers -- are easily-manipulated and incapable of making critical judgements. The passive masses in this dystopian vision are usually coded as women. During the 1930s women constituted the overwhelming majority of cinema goers, shoppers and readers. Adorno and Horkheimer were ambivalent about these socio-cultural transformations and elsewhere in their writings expressed their anxieties, shared by the left and right, about the growing personal and economic independence of women and their increasingly *active* participation in consumer culture.

Thus my argument is that the long absence of consumption from political, social and cultural theory is -- like all intellectual work -- embedded in part in historical factors outside the theoretical frame of the topic itself. Consumption was for many years ignored or trivialised because of the privileging of production and the neglect of demand, because of an elitist disdain for mass culture and the world of commerce, and because of its association with the labour and imagined pleasures of women.

This genealogy explains the multi-pronged recovery of the subject. During the 1980s and 1990s, consumption was 'discovered' and developed. Anthropologists refocused the field through their interest in the meanings attributed to objects in different contexts, rather than their material worth or who produced them. Weberian historians were interested in the influence of consumer desire and aesthetic preferences on the formation of demand and on modern capitalism. This was a neglected topic in the orthodox Marxist accounts which maintained that markets were driven by the need for profit and that needs were created by producers and marketers.

The contribution of cultural studies was seminal to the new focus on consumption. Analyses of the meaning of youth culture styles and the semiotics of appearance in everyday life were linked to the study of the consumption of media texts through their common emphasis on the active participation in meaning making of ordinary people. Some of this work suggested that deliberate opposition to the dominant culture could be played out in the realm of consumption and the 'sign'. This general approach was in contrast to that of political economists and followers of the Frankfurt School who continued to presume that the public was easily seduced and duped. The new work on advertising focused on the discriminatory skills of audiences as well as the haphazard ways in which advertising texts were produced. Feminists reinforced the emphasis on the agency of audiences by pointing to the strategic ways 'feminine' cultural texts (romantic fiction, magazines and cinema) were consumed. It was also feminists who first insisted on the value of the labour, knowledge and social networking involved in shopping. One paradoxical outcome of women's authority in the market place, it was argued, was a heightened awareness of rights in other sociopolitical spheres.

Another focus for feminist theorists and historians was the part played by women in the production of the symbolic maps of class distinction and the processes of individualisation. This was achieved in part via the consumption of goods in the new spaces of modernity such as department stores in 19th and 20th century western society. This rich literature shows that, during the early years of the 20th century, commercial spaces offered more congenial and supportive climates for women shoppers and workers, as well as for supporters of the women's suffrage movement, than did the public service sector and trade unions.

The relationship of citizenship to consumption has also turned out to be more complex than political economy approaches allow. The denial of equal access to the market place has sometimes had more far-reaching political consequences than has exclusion from conventional democratic processes. The trigger for the civil rights movement in the southern states of the US in 1950-60s was the racial segregation of lunch counters and buses, not the denial of the vote. The rhetoric of the free market contributed to the mobilisation of citizens of the former communist bloc. The power of organisation at the point of consumption has been underestimated by political

theorists who have found it hard to imagine politics outside the traditional spaces of the workplace, government, media and the street. Yet consumer militancy is able to be dramatically effective, as was demonstrated by the boycotts of South African products in 1980s and unethically-produced brands and GM foods more recently. Moreover consumer activism is able to enfranchise shoppers on a daily, not five-yearly, basis. But these practices remain relatively untheorised – a consequence yet again of the association of shopping with women’s work and the feminine.

This compressed account of some of the developments in the study of consumption cannot do justice to the complexity of the work but gives a flavour of the innovative and polemical range of theoretical, ethnographic and historical investigations. What is surprising therefore is the persistence of the political economy denial of its significance. Even where consumer culture is the focus of attention, the centrality of women to both the processes and the literature of consumption is sometimes disavowed. An example of this is political economist Martyn Lee’s edited collection *The Consumer Society Reader* (Blackwell 2000) which claims to be ‘the most substantial collection of...literature on consumption and the consumer society’. Although it includes many good pieces, only one and a half of the 28 chapters are by women, and of these, the one is minimally concerned with gender. The subject index suggests that there are only two references to women in the whole book. The path-breaking scholarship by and about women which has made such a significant contribution to the constitution of the academic field is completely overlooked. This is despite the fact that Lee’s aim is to demonstrate how ‘theoretical, philosophical and speculative approaches to consumption...have emerged and [are] connected with *real material and historical developments* during the last one hundred years’ (my italics).

So, despite the expansion of the field, the case for the study of shopping and the participation of women in consumer culture needs to be made over again. The claim that consumption is somehow ‘not political’ perpetuates old priorities and prejudices.

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