

Introduction:

Why Consumption and What Society?

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Consumption is a key element of contemporary society. The consequences of consumption culture and its social structure for human beings are manifold and, quite often, ambivalent. All of them seem to be rooted in the paradoxical nature of consumption itself: on the one hand, the structure of consumer society drives production, generates employment and wealth, and brings about cultural changes. On the other hand, these powerful and extensive capacities rest on seemingly capricious and changing consumer wants, desires or needs.

This basic discontinuity between social structure and individual motivations is the starting point for many approaches to consumption and consumer culture. But building on it further, the social position and agency of human beings within consumer society are usually considered through two different perspectives. For some structuralist approaches, the human being is seen as an individual explicitly or symbolically dominated by social structures, which impel him or her to particular patterns of consumption and so to specific lifestyles. Phenomenologist and postmodern approaches, on the contrary, study the diverse forms of consumption as expressions of individual autonomy and how those practices suit or further the individual's quest for identity. Both approaches are founded on a specific and latent view of human beings: either as a subject whose consumer choices are largely reflected in the dominant needs or rules created and favored by social structures; or as an entirely autonomous subject who chooses in line with wholly undetermined wants and desires, which—in turn—express the “authentic self.”

In this context, structural tensions and cultural paradoxes based on the discontinuity between motivations and social constraints are numerous. Generally speaking, it is possible to identify a specific cultural pattern that tends to encourage viewing society solely as a space for experiential consumption, where everything can be (potentially) consumed, even the human person themselves. However, at the same time, there are some objects that resist or can be withdrawn from this consumption logic because they retain some level of significance beyond their viability for consumption. This significance arises from a concrete relationship with the object or from a relational context in which the object is embedded (for example an object with an attached affective meaning, moral principles, solidification of cultural values, ideologies and so on).

In connection to this, the problem of identity—personal or collective—acquires special relevance in consumer societies. Consumption is not only an instrumental

action, aiming towards the acquisition of status, pleasure, or particular mental states, but is also an expressive or relational action through which people define, reproduce, and construct their identities and lifestyles. Identity is *reproduced*, for example, when consumption is dependent upon social position, where the motivations for consumption are grounded in social emulation, distinction or envy. By contrast, the *construction* of identity is made manifest when identity is conceived of as the result of an unrestrained personal quest. In this case, one's self-motivations are considered to be *de facto* unconditioned by social constraints. Individual consumption, viewed through this lens, appears as a wholly individual and essentially self-referential activity, which leads to the primacy of a type of experiential or emotional consumption.

Key Questions

The reflection that guides all chapters included in this book can be formulated as significant questions, such as:

- What significant cultural or structural transformations can be identified in consumer society, in comparison to earlier societies?
- In discussing consumption, what is the relation between individual motivations and structural constraints? How can these two concepts be linked in order to understand consumer society and its dynamics?
- What processes and tendencies have been—and still are—relevant for the consolidation of a culture of consumption? How does consumption culture affect our understanding of the nature of human beings and praxis?
- To what extent does the culture of consumption spread to other social spheres, affecting social relationships? What are the limits, if any, of this extension?
- In what ways can a culture of consumption lead to isolation, individualization or commodification of human beings?

Structure of the Book

Part I, entitled “Blurring Human Beings: Structural Constrictions in Consumer Society”, focuses more specifically on those structural constrictions that seem to determine human choices and, eventually, become symbolic domination, often via hidden mechanisms (the “illusion” of freedom, for example), through which social structures and certain cultural values exercise their manipulative function.

But, as has been said above, the structural consequences of consumption and consumer culture for human beings cannot explain alone the complexity of contemporary societies. Consumers' praxis is embodied in significant relationships, with material culture and other people. Structures, relationships, and culture are

intertwined. This is why Part II, “Consumer Culture as Mediation in Human Relationships”, tries to explore these connections with a more optimistic view of the place and possibilities of human beings in consumer societies, introducing more phenomenological and relational aspects involved in consumers’ behavior.

So, how can we frame the position of human beings in consumer culture? From different points of view and also from diverse academic fields (political philosophy, fashion studies and a sociological perspective), Part III, “Framing the Human Being in a Consumer Society”, suggests the idea of understanding consumer culture as “lived culture.” In doing so, it also offers a rich analytical framework for understanding that very lived culture by differentiating between the symbolic and cultural aspects diffused socially through commercial advertising, in addition to many other channels. At the same time this analytical proposal devotes attention to embodied dispositions; to practices situated in particular contexts; to the reflexivity, agency or “subjective creativity” that also appears in consumer choices; and finally to the social structure that crosses and is shaped in various ways by those choices.

As a whole, this book offers an interdisciplinary approach to some normative questions related to the good life and human flourishing in consumer societies. Chapters are ordered in order to take into account the structural conditions that consumer culture imposes (Part I), but also try to leave some ground to human autonomy through the connections between those structural conditions and human relationships as a cultural context for human praxis (Part II). Finally, these reflections conclude with some more general approaches and an analytical framework for understanding consumer culture and human praxis (Part III).