CONSUMER CULTURE REBORN

The cultural politics of consumption

MARTYN J. LEE

ROUTLEDGE

Consumer Culture Reborn

How does the organisation of our economy affect our everyday culture? Why does the commodity find itself at the heart of modern social life? *Consumer Culture Reborn* examines the relationship between the economy and culture in contemporary society. Focusing upon consumption as the point at which economic activity and cultural practice combine, Martyn Lee draws together the often polarised areas of political economy and cultural studies in order to understand our social situations as we approach the end of the millenium.

Taking as his central theme the idea that capitalism is compelled to transform the material and social world which sustains it, Lee traces the impact of key twentieth-century economic and political developments upon many of the ways in which ordinary people reproduce their life and their patterns of life. He charts the rise and fall of the 'first' mass consumption society of the post-war years and assesses the evidence supporting the emergence of a new form of sonsumer society today, arguing that such a change may hold profound consequences for the formation of everyday cultural life.

Neither simply a descriptive history, nor purely theoretical, *Consumer Culture Reborn* brings together the work of a wide range of thinkers—most notably Marx, Pierre Bourdieu, David Harvey and Stuart Hall—in an attempt to fuse some of their theoretical insights with concrete historical occurences.

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For my Mother and Father

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Preface

The soul of things

> All objects which surround us have souls of their own, have human qualities because they only exist in a human world…There are no raw inhuman objects. The moment furniture, houses, bread, cars, bicycles, or other products appear in our life, they are related to us, they are human.
>
> (Dichter 1960:93)

This is a book about consumption, a book about the ways in which we reproduce our life and our patterns of life.

For me consumption became an important issue at some point during the mid-1980s. The time is significant, for the 1980s seemed to be a period in which old, familiar social and physical landscapes were being transformed. Simultaneously at global, national and local levels the world appeared to be changing in quite dramatic ways. This was the decade, for example, which saw the disintegration of an autocratic and often brutal communism throughout much of Eastern Europe and which was said by many to mark the triumph of capitalism as *the* world system of economic organisation. It was also the decade of micro-computer technologies and of the ability to convey information around the globe at the speed of light. It was a decade of a new internationalised system of trade and commerce, and of the staggering flow of invisible currencies between the world money markets; a decade where, backed by a powerful rhetoric of 'enterprise' and 'individualism', a new form of free-market politics appeared to be sweeping away the old orthodoxies of state intervention, welfarism and consensus.

This was also the decade where the image attained an unprecedented pre-eminence: it was, for example, the decade of video technology, computer graphics and of media production generally; a decade which placed a new emphasis on questions of style, design and fashion, and which seemed to herald a shift away from notions of substance and content and towards packaging, aesthetic form and 'the look'.

It was a decade also characterised by new forms of work, of a great diminution of the powers of labour organisations, and of the dramatic introduction of new technologies into the production process. This has led some leading commentators to proclaim the birth of the 'post-capitalist society' while others waved farewell to the working classes. Beyond the sphere of work, a new 'leisure society' had begun to take shape. This saw the rise of the theme park, the heritage industry, new types of pubs, clubs and other entertainments, and more exotic forms of tourism and travel.

The 1980s also witnessed the emergence of new social groupings and their stereotypes,

new social values and ideologies: a decade that saw the rise of the yuppie, the new man, the career woman and the lager lout; the decade of a shameless pecuniary greed and an unchecked veneration of materialism and affluence.

In the arts and academic circles, the fervour of the streets was matched by the excitement generated by a new intellectual concept: that of postmodernism. Extraordinarily multi-faceted and highly adaptable, postmodernism, with its emphasis on the ephemeral, the eclectic, the aesthetic and the rhetorical, seemed to capture for many of the 'chattering classes' the same sense of feverish activity and flux that was evident in so many other areas of everyday life.

But it seemed to me that at the centre of all of these developments was consumption. At the most visible level, consumption was responsible for the remarkable transformation of the physical environment. There were, for example, new cathedrals of consumption: new shopping malls, precincts and consumer centres that were sometimes the size of small towns. There was also the rise of the niche retail outlet: the specialist shop that forsook the old retailing practices of bulk buying and selling for a new emphasis on product diversity and quality. More often than not this would be coupled with new forms of advertising and marketing which were usually aimed at the small but highly profitable 'market segment'. There were also more sophisticated methods of reaching consumers: tactically targeted mail shots, the birth of tele-shopping and a rebirth of mail-order retailing. All of these forms were fuelled by a new socialisation of finance: in-store credit facilities and credit cards generally, personal loans and hire-purchase schemes, all became for many perfectly acceptable methods of payment. In short, the 1980s saw an increasingly elaborate infrastructure of selling, providing more diverse settings and means for the moment of economic exchange.

However, none of the above developments in particular, or even a combination of them, initially drew my attention to the subject of consumption and social change as an area for investigation. What seemed to be of primary importance here, and in some ways to provide a common, but by no means obvious, thread between all of the changes taking place during the 1980s, was one thing: *the commodity*. In a manner that I could not easily explain, the commodity—the object of consumption and of exchange—appeared to hold a privileged and almost magical status in contemporary life. On two very different social levels—an economic and a cultural—the commodity presented itself as a vital touchstone, at once being the focus of national economic prosperity as well as providing an important material and symbolic resource by which ordinary people could, both materially and culturally, reproduce their life. Commodities were used to help construct a wide variety of identities, to confirm memberships of particular cultural communities and, increasingly it seemed, to signify invidious and often antagonistic social and cultural differences between groups. Endorsed by their advertising and marketing, commodities were used as objects to make visible personal affluence, to suggest sexual potency and physical attraction and, perhaps more than ever before, to function as the index of intelligence, education and social literacy.

It is important to stress at this point that I am not speaking here about specific consumer goods, about this brand of perfume or that make of car, about this type of training shoe or that brand of cigarette. To distinguish between individual commodities in this way would be to invite comparisons and value judgements that are in many ways

misleading. It would also be to suggest unnecessarily the very dubious dichotomy between 'useful' and 'useless' goods, and therefore invoke the equally dubious dichotomy between true and false needs. On the contrary, my initial interest in consumption and the commodity was not inspired by a desire to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' forms of consumption, or between 'good' and 'bad' commodities. The true essence of all consumer goods does not lie in their function, their economic value or their physical and aesthetic appearance, nor does it lie in the ways in which those consumer goods are sold or contextualised in advertising, marketing or other forms of promotion. Rather, the essence of all consumer goods can be found in the fact that they are, first and foremost, commodities. It is thus the *commodification* of products, or the fact that they are first produced in order to be exchanged for profit, that gives them their distinctive character or, to borrow Dichter's term for a moment, their 'soul'. In short, consumer goods have a social meaning, and that social meaning is, in the first instance, always contingent upon their status as commodities.

Of course the fact that commodities have a variety of cultural uses in a variety of social contexts is a phenomenon by no means unique to the 1980s. Uses similar to the ones described above can be dated as far back as the eighteenth century. But it appeared to me that the influence of the commodity and its power to touch so many discrete areas of our social life had, by the mid-1980s, reached a hitherto unparalleled intensity. Amongst other things, this led me to consider my own private responses and relationship to consumption and commodities. The more I thought about my own relationship to consumption, the more ambiguous my reaction to it seemed to become. On the one hand commodity consumption often provided a source of genuine pleasure and enjoyment which I was reluctant, and indeed saw no reason to deny. On the other hand, I knew that no form of commodity was socially neutral. I was, for example, well aware of the all-too-easy temptation to use commodity consumption as a weapon of 'cultural terrorism', as a means of reproducing social differences and inequalities at a cultural level. This ambiguous response to consumption was compounded by another, far less visible, dimension to the commodity: the fact that while commodities may become vital utilities in reproducing everyday life they have also had another existence, that is, as objects in production. What appeared initially as a rather 'common sense' and trivial observation—that commodities are produced by people under particular industrial circumstances—slowly began to assume quite profound dimensions. Why, for example, when the commodity arrives in our shops, should it show no manifest trace at all of the labour that was invested in it during its production? Similarly, why does the commodity rarely display any evidence of the social conditions under which that labour occurred? These facts about the commodity were surely no accident, and they suggested to me that there was a certain hidden or mysterious logic which oversaw the production and exchange of commodities. These and other questions about consumption, which always seemed to find a final focus in the commodity, did not seem to yield any easy answers.

It was from these very personal considerations that the inquiry presented in this book slowly began to take shape. However, this was to prove anything but a straightforward task. For one thing there was a relative paucity of literature on the subject of consumption to be found upon the shelves of the academic libraries. Many of those books which did exist seemed to offer little more than fairly obvious statements. Alternatively, the

theoretical and analytical value of some other books was rendered relatively limited by a highly moralising, indignant and condemnatory tone which suggested that, as a social activity, consumption was something that was undertaken by people other than the authors concerned. However, there was one book that did seem to provide a solid foundation from which to begin to consider the complex issues raised by contemporary consumption. Ironically, this was a book which, throughout its 820 pages, said almost nothing about consumption itself. That book was Marx's *Capital*.

Although written over 100 years ago, the initial premise put forward by Marx in chapter one of *Capital* seemed irresistible. The first sentence of *Capital* begins thus: 'The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of commodities.' From this opening statement Marx goes on to show how the social relations of production and, therefore, the dominant social relations of capitalist society as a whole can, in the final analysis, be traced back to the commodity-form. For encased within the commodity, Marx argues, is the essential information about the ways in which those social relations are configured. If we can understand what it is that gives the commodity this essential character then we can also understand the fundamental basis of modern social relations.

This book is written from the same premise. It is a book which takes as its central theme the commodity as the primary index of the social relations of modern capitalist societies. Using some of the insights into the workings of capitalism that were left to us by Marx, I take as my starting-point the fact that any significant change to the nature of modern society can ultimately be seen reflected in the commodity-form. Moreover, any changes to the commodity-form itself, that is, any changes to the ways in which we produce, distribute and exchange commodities, will have important implications for the composition of our social needs and of society generally. To explain the nature of changes to the commodity-form is therefore the primary goal of this book. Consequently, I do not work from a premise which attempts to draw together, in any piecemeal fashion, the whole array of discrete changes that have occurred throughout the 1980s, but rather, by considering the ways in which changes to the nature of commodities may have possibly impacted upon social life, often in quite diverse and sometimes unexpected ways. Such an approach necessarily draws together economy and culture, two areas of social life so often treated as autonomous and distinct from one other. That is why this book is about consumption, for consumption is *the* social activity which, above all others, unites economy and culture. It is therefore partly a book about the nature of human needs and about some of the ways in which human needs have changed over recent years. It is a book about a certain logic of capital which *requires* that human needs change over time and is, therefore, a book about the transformational nature of capital and its effects on everyday life. Finally, it is a book about the ways in which capital and the practices of everyday life, drawn together in the sphere of consumption, articulate a relationship to each other within this sphere, a relationship which is ultimately condensed into the form of the commodity.

The writing of this book has incurred several debts. I would like to express my thanks to Graham Murdock, whose critical eye and unstinting support made sure that I kept asking the right questions; to my colleagues at Coventry University, in particular David French, Philip Rice, Perry Hinton and Valerie Hill. Thanks are also due to Joanna Taylor,

for reading and commenting upon earlier drafts of this book, to Caroline Battson, and to Rodney and Jane Mace for giving me access to their home in the quiet depths of the Herefordshire countryside so that I could complete my work without distraction. I would also like to thank Claire L'Enfant and Rebecca Barden of Routledge for their support. My greatest thanks, however, are reserved for Sarah, for her patience, love and just being there.

Finally, I feel it necessary to offer what psychoanalysis calls a seductive defence. Any credit which this book may accrue is to a large extent owed to the people mentioned above. Any errors and inconsistencies are of course all mine.

Part I
Preliminaries: perspectives on capital, consumption and culture

Chapter 1
Capital, labour and the commodity-form

PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION AND NEEDS

Any study of consumption must inevitably begin with a recognition of the fact that, whatever else it may represent to us in contemporary society, the consumption of mass-produced commodities constitutes a vital dimension of the modern capitalist economy. Consumption is the final link in a chain of economic activity in which capital, existing in the form of money, is transformed through a process of material production into commodity capital. It is the exchange and consumption of commodities which allows for the realisation of profits, which, when returned back to the money-form, can be reinvested into further production and so begin the circulation of capital once again. This process represents the primary characteristic of capitalist enterprise, and it is from this basic process that a vast social environment begins to take on its distinctive character.

Since by far the most thoroughgoing and detailed analysis of capitalism has been undertaken in the work of Marx, it would seem to be appropriate to begin this study of consumption with a consideration of some of the important issues he identifies. However, before it is possible to explore Marx's critique of capitalism *per se,* let alone some of the implications that this may have for modern practices of consumption, it is first necessary to outline some of the central principles expressed in materialist philosophy and which inform most of Marx's ideas. These were to be firmly established in many of Marx's earlier writings, but can be seen principally in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* written in 1844 (Marx 1975) and *The German Ideology* of 1846 (Marx and Engels 1974).

One of the central questions addressed by Marx in these early works focused upon the ontological difference that marked out humanity from the rest of the animal world. What was it, asked Marx, that made human beings not merely a highly advanced form of animal life, but a unique species-being? For Marx the answer to this question lay in the nature of human needs and the manner in which they were satisfied. To be sure, humans, in common with all other forms of animal life, must appropriate materials from the resources of nature in order to satisfy their needs and secure their means to life. Nature therefore provided the means by which all animals could reproduce themselves and their species. Unlike other animals, however, humans actively and consciously *produce* their means to life from nature. It is this act of material production, of adapting and working upon the resources of nature through conscious activity, that signalled the distinctive essence of human species-being. In an often cited passage from *Capital* Marx comments:

> A spider conducts operations which resemble those of a weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of

> bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which has already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realises his own purpose in those materials.
>
> (Marx 1976:284)

But for Marx production represented something more than merely the production of the means to life, for in the production of its means to life humanity also possesses the unique potential for its own ontological self-realisation and advancement. Unlike the rest of the animal world, humanity is not chained solely to its basic physiological and subsistence needs, but is capable of adapting the resources of nature far in excess of those needs. In Marx's schema, human ontological development corresponds directly to the development of needs. In turn, the development of needs is historically contingent upon the development of ontological potentialities. In a dynamic and mutually dependent relationship of evolution, needs and the processes of satisfying them through the mastery of nature and the development of new modes of material production allow humanity to achieve real self-advancement.

Implicit in this early formulation of needs is the concept of culture. But this is a view of culture seen from the basis of material production: through their material production, or through the production of their means to life, humans develop 'a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life*' (Marx and Engels 1974:42). This makes culture much more than some mere 'symbolic echo' of economic activity or, for that matter, far more than a social concept representing those 'residual activities' that are left over after material production has occurred. In this schema, culture is seen as the meaningful expression of human life and social relations, and the real foundation of all human life and social relations is to be found in material production. This makes culture neither an isolated, independent or autonomous sphere of spiritual and idealistic contemplation, nor some neutral 'by-product' of material production, but an inseparable dimension of productive activity. As Marx and Engels were to argue: 'As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce' (Marx and Engels 1974:42). Given this, the formation of human cultures and cultural activity is dependent directly upon the material and historical conditions that daily confront individuals and with which those individuals must engage in order to reproduce themselves. Elsewhere Marx was to write: 'Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted' (Marx 1973a:146).

From this basis it is not difficult to see why Marx was drawn to investigate the areas of labour and the products yielded by that labour. In the sphere of production there is found the critical site where human societies developed their distinctive characters. Indeed, it was through the activity of labour, through the utilisation and adaptation of the resources of nature in the process of satisfying needs that human consciousness came to be what it was. This meant that human consciousness was itself realised, that is to say *objectified,* in the material products of labour: