The Sociology of Consumption: Its Recent Development

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Abstract

This article examines the development of the sociology of consumption. It identifies three periods in its evolution: origins prior to the 1980s; the years between the 1980s and the mid-2000s under the influence of the cultural turn; and the subsequent decade, when new theoretical perspectives and political issues have emerged. Achievements of the second period are reviewed and three areas of fresh and productive recent research are identified: cultural consumption and its intersection with inequality and stratification, sustainable consumption and the organization of everyday life in Western societies, and the politics of consumption. The article concludes with a discussion of possibilities for future research.

INTRODUCTION: LOCATING CONSUMPTION

The social scientific study of consumption has grown rapidly since the middle of the twentieth century. The sociological subdiscipline is, however, still at a relatively early stage of development. It enters into a wider field of interdisciplinary endeavor to which the research contributions of economics, psychology, and marketing have been substantial, so part of the sociological task has involved contesting uncongenial elements of dominant established understandings. Sociology has also conducted its own specific investigations to address core issues of inequality and exclusion, social divisions, leisure, distinction and taste, household organization, everyday life, self- and social identity, economic exchange, and material culture.

This article traces the evolution of the sociology of consumption, identifying three periods of development: distant origins prior to the 1980s; the years between the early 1980s and the mid-2000s, when the influence of the cultural turn was paramount; and the past decade, when the cultural turn is beginning to unwind. After reviewing some achievements of the second period, three areas of fresh and productive recent research are identified: cultural consumption and its intersection with inequality and stratification, the organization of everyday life in Western societies and its consequences for sustainable consumption, and the politics of consumption. The paper concludes with a discussion of some major future challenges and opportunities.

Defining Consumption

Sociological approaches to consumption vary along a rough continuum or axis that puts consumers at one pole and consumption at the other. Where the scientific object or the focus of study is the consumer, there is a tendency to examine the process of exchange, usually but not necessarily market exchange, and the role of individuals therein. There are several possible approaches, but sociologists typically interview or observe individuals to understand their personal values, objectives, experiences, and circumstances and then locate those accounts in an institutional context examined through archival or secondary sources. The basic story is one of individuals negotiating their way in institutional contexts over which they have limited control. Some fine studies have generated insights into processes of the acquisition of goods and the reception of services (e.g., D. Cook 2004, Zelizer 2005b, Zukin 2004).

If, by contrast, the starting point is the process of consumption, conceived as the appropriation and use of goods and services, attention is paid less to exchange and more to the social organization of activities through which items are incorporated, deployed, and disposed of. As Zelizer (2005a) remarks, "consumers" are usually doing something. The consequence is a much broader but less easily demarcated object of study, for the logic of consumption is found not in the selection of items but in the practices within which they are utilized. This requires attention to a wider range of social relations, interactions, and processes, complicating explanation and often appearing to render secondary the processes conventionally designated, specifically or singularly, as consumption. Thus, little may be said about consumption in general terms, as explanation focuses on how people accomplish the tasks and practices that compose their daily lives.

Thus, much of the variation in approaches to consumption hangs on the definition of the basic terms, consumers and consumption. It is not that definitions are themselves theory dependent; rather, they direct empirical observation, the findings from which are not amenable to incorporation by every interpretive or theoretical scheme. The concept of consumption has two separate historical roots. One emerged from political economy in the eighteenth century to describe market relationships by distinguishing the consumer from the producer. The other, an earlier notion, emerging from Latin into Early English, had a negative connotation—to destroy, to waste, to

use up. Use, not acquisition, was primary. The tension between the two meanings drives current public and scholarly debates about modern consumerism. This can be seen in the developments reviewed in this article. Narrow definitions, for example, a "process of choosing goods" (Zukin & Smith Maguire 2004, p. 173), tend to echo the formulations of economics and enthrone the consumer as the principal agent to be analyzed. Trentmann (2006), by contrast, emphasizes the process of construction of the concept of the consumer and its variations and evolution over time, the implication of which is that it is more an ideological than an analytic concept (Sassatelli 2007). The notion of the consumer not only reinforces the dominance of the neoclassical understanding of economic exchange, but also tends to preclude those aspects of consumption that are not reducible to individuals choosing what to buy or use on the basis of personal preference. Cook (2013, p. 76) addresses this from the perspective of studies of motherhood and consumption: "Being able to discard assumptions about individualistic action serves as a point of departure for grasping the expansive and interconnected forms of exchange in social life, both contemporaneously and between generations."

In their defense, definitions grounded in acts of purchase have a delimited focus and resonate with dominant and popular understandings of a global consumer culture distinctive in its ever-increasing involvement with goods and services acquired as commodities through the market. In this vein, Graeber (2011), in a wide-ranging and provocative overview of the genealogy of the concept of consumption, examines its principal metaphorical forms and the relationship between desire and possession and criticizes broad definitions. He notes a problematic tendency for consumption to be considered as everything that is not production or work, suggesting that without a precise object for study it is unlikely that either new or consolidated theoretical understandings will emerge from research.

ORIGINS OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION

Implicitly, sociology has always studied consumption under the guise of poverty, which requires estimation of needs, wants, and their satisfaction. Otherwise, empirical investigation was limited. As Daloz (2007) argues, Veblen, Simmel, Weber, and Sombart all made passing comments about consumption when trying to capture the nature of the modern industrial social order and the role of status and reputation. However, as he cautions (Daloz 2007, 2010), these classical social theorists were interested in consumption only incidentally in order to illustrate and further their own central theoretical arguments, hence producing one-sided and somewhat distorted analyses of the topic. As Wyrwa (1998) noted, in the interwar years consumption was a scholarly domain mostly for macroeconomists, whose influence remained strong until the 1970s. In that period the only significant sociological contribution was probably the critique of mass culture as formulated by the Frankfurt School (Adorno 1991, Horkheimer & Adorno 1979), which took a dim view of popular entertainment and taste.

After the end of the Second World War, social theory and social commentary began to take more notice. Notwithstanding valuable caveats by historians about the hazards of putting dates on turning points (e.g., Trentmann 2009), the standard account of the process associated with the growth of mass production and mass consumption has some force. The volume of goods and services purchased by the average household increased substantially, resulting in many people being better fed, owning cars, living in bigger houses (as measured by square footage per person), and having more clothes and new durable goods. These conditions were associated with strong economic growth, rising incomes, a diminished propensity to save, and a changing quality and quantity of life. Sociology, and economics even more so, provided public commentary on the consequences of affluence, yet it was the growing discipline of consumer behavior that did

applied research. Sociological reflection was strongly normative and was directed toward characterizing the level and ethos of whole societies (Schudson 1999). Empirical research explicitly about consumption was scarce, indeed almost nonexistent, within sociology until the end of the 1980s.

During the 1980s the landscape was transformed by the demise of economism (by which I mean the tendency to consider consumption subordinate to, and to be explained in terms of, production), by the cultural turn in the humanities and social sciences, and by the growing dominance of neoliberal market economics. One might hypothesize that consumption became a central sociological topic in societies for which welfare services were provided by the state and in which changing political circumstances generated strong contestation over the virtues and evils of the market. The sociology of consumption in Europe emerged in response to acrimonious disputes about welfare provision, conceptualized as a shift from collective to private consumption (Castells 1977, Saunders 1978), whereupon it began to be isolated as a relatively autonomous domain of activity, a tendency accentuated by the diffusion of postmodern thought and cultural theory.

GLOBALIZATION AND CONSUMER CULTURE

Cultural studies had a major impact on the sociology of consumption. As Santoro (2011) notes, cultural studies was a peculiarly British creature, nurtured in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, with its special interest in subcultures and social divisions, before being exported to an international audience near the end of the twentieth century. Cultural studies was notable for contesting both dominant economistic explanations and the widespread moral condemnation of consumer behavior. In its hands, consumption was transformed from an epiphenomenon of capitalist production, wherein the consumer was if not a dupe at least passive, to a central principle of social order and a realm for individual agency and choice. Consumption became the raison d'être rather than a means to survival. Consumption was understood not simply as instrumental; nonrational elements, emotions, and desires were fully recognized. All aspects of life could then be viewed through, tinged by, and connected with consumption.

Mike Featherstone, a founding editor of the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*, was highly influential in defining the boundaries of the subdisciplinary field in the late 1980s. His book of essays, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (1991), is the most heavily cited work by a sociologist in the areas of consumer culture, consumerism, and the sociology of consumption. It drew on the ethos of the cultural turn and the widespread preoccupation across the humanities and social sciences studies with postmodernism. Two decades of sociocultural research, in the context of globalization, aestheticization, and commodification, delivered substantial returns. Much of the best work about globalization was historical in orientation, studying institutional arrangements to evaluate the character and extent of change (Trentmann 2012). Globalization and Americanization, processes attributed with the creation of a homogeneous consumer culture, were key objects of critical evaluation. The debate was subsequently resolved in terms of counteracting tendencies of globalization and localization (e.g., Appadurai 1996, Robertson 1992), with accounts becoming steadily more nuanced (see, for example, Lizardo 2008b, which shows that not all social groups are affected in the same way by the global–local dialectic).

Fittingly, the titles of the most successful early textbooks bore the term consumer culture (e.g., Lury 1996, Slater 1997). Speculative critique of the consequences of consumption in an era of material abundance was thereby replaced by a much better grasp of the channeling of consumer aspirations and associated issues of social justice. Recognition that consumption is a necessary, enjoyable, and often constructive process, a process of creative appropriation of goods and services and their application to reasonable and commendable personal and sociable ends,

reversed the condescension toward popular culture and popular practices expressed by critics of mass culture. People typically find within their activities both frustrations and satisfactions, anxieties and pleasures, not all of which are simple matters of calculation.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF CONSUMER CULTURE

Identity and Aestheticization

From the 1980s there was a focus on activities involving goods and services, supplied through markets, which contribute symbolically to the construction of distinct lifestyles. Consumption was seen as a means of communicating, especially signaling self-identity, with others. Micro-level studies demonstrated the meaningfulness of consumption, its role in identity formation, aesthetic expression in everyday life, and the experience of being a consumer confronted with a profusion of commodities. Analysis of the spread of consumer culture produced valuable empirical studies of shopping, clothing, leisure pursuits, and household possessions, among others (e.g., Entwisle 2000, Falk & Campbell 1997, Miller et al. 1998, Woodward 2003, Zukin 2004). Commodities are easily and frequently commuted into personal possessions which excite commitment, investment, and meaning. By emphasizing communication, agency, and engagement, exponents of the cultural turn demonstrated how and why people make consumption into personal and social priorities. For example, in a classic essay, "Possessions and the Extended Self," Belk (1988) demonstrated how the sense of self was intricately tied to mundane and emotionally charged material belongings. On the basis of a wide-ranging review of the general psychological aspects of the importance of possessions, Belk (1988, p. 160) demonstrated that it is "an inescapable fact of modern life that we learn, define, and remind ourselves of who we are by our possessions." If goods and chattels constitute an extension of self and are responsible for "generating meaning in life," then in a world characterized by an abundance of commodities, the significance of possessions intensifies (p. 160). Belk drew out lessons for understanding consumption and directed his gaze on collecting, pets, gift giving, organ donation, and the care and disposal of goods.

Many other cognate studies explored how both possessions and activities comprise extensions of self and means to create self-identity (Hebdige 1988, Woodward 2007). Micro-level studies also showed how consumption oils the wheels of social interaction, friendship and kinship, elite formation, the gift economy, collective mobilization, social solidarity, and rebellion (Casey & Martens 2007, Maffesoli 1996, McCracken 1990, Noble 2004, Reimer & Leslie 2004, Thornton 1995). Many of the most reliable and best-documented findings in the sociology of consumption emanate from this body of research. Nevertheless, despite much reference to social identities (of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, youth subcultures, attachment to alternative lifestyles), emphasis was laid on how processes involving social identification mold or impact personal identities rather than on the mechanisms that create social identities in the first place.

One nuanced stream of cultural research emerged under the auspices of a group of North American sociologists and anthropologists (mostly in marketing departments and business schools) operating under the umbrella of consumer culture theory (CCT). Arnould & Thompson (2005), in a manifesto-like summary of the position, recapitulate key themes, topics, and findings of the ongoing program of research, which conceives the consumer as an interpretive agent and therefore concentrates on meanings, experiences, and symbolic boundaries. CCT finds its shared focus in cues taken from the cultural turn and a commitment to qualitative research methods, which distinguishes it primarily from others in the field of market research. It has contributed a significant amount of high-quality sociological work (e.g., Holt & Thompson 2004, Sandikci & Ger 2010, Thompson 1996, Thompson & Tambyah 1999, Üstüner & Holt 2010), using in-depth

interviews and ethnographies to disclose the nuanced complexity of people's engagement with consumer culture. For instance, in advocating adoption of poststructuralist lifestyle analysis, Holt (1997b) showed the complex and subtle ways in which people in different social positions have specific and typical orientations toward material objects and cultural activities and thereby different types of cultural experiences. He demonstrated, for example, that persons with high cultural capital apply critical judgment to all cultural forms, in light of cosmopolitan standards, and engage in leisure with a view to self-actualization, whereas those with low holdings of cultural capital apply referential criteria, in local context, and treat leisure as a form of autotelic sociality (Holt 1997a).

Recreation and Fun

Another rich vein of research on consumer culture targeted collective sources of identity. Studies of recreation, which have had a long-standing, if partly indirect, association with consumption, were especially prominent (Stebbins 2009). Leisure, conceived as the antithesis of work, involves the voluntary allocation of time to various pursuits, in private or in public, alone or with others. Some sections of the population have more spare time than others, the fruitfulness of which depends also on financial resources; the trade-off between time and money is a critical issue in understanding patterns of consumption (Schor 1991, Shove et al. 2009, Sullivan & Gershuny 2004), for the ability to pay for equipment, membership dues, admissions fees, coaching fees, or personal services is always a constraint. Participation in recreational activities is often coordinated to create communities, social networks, or social worlds. Many such worlds were explored, e.g., hot-rod racing (Moorhouse 1983), making collections of objects (Belk 1995), mushroom collecting (Fine 1998), wine tasting (Teil & Hennion 2004), and fitness training (Crossley 2006, Sassatelli 2010).

Communication among participants may be face-to-face or virtual. The intertwining of the commercial and the social is nowhere more evident than in brand communities, in which ordinary people come to feel sympathy and solidarity with others who also like the products of favorite manufacturers and distributors (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). The social organization of enthusiasms around consumption is equally apparent in online communities. Arsel & Bean (2013) examined the interactions on the website of Apartment Therapy, an enthusiast group committed to the aesthetics of soft modernism in interior design, and recounted how people exchanged information, sought and received advice, learned to evaluate products, and shared their plans for the redesign of the interiors of their dwellings. An online forum supported thousands of interested people. In another instance, Lehdonvirta et al. (2009) analyzed the phenomenon of a massive, multiplayer online role-playing game for teenagers, Habbo (previously known as Habbo Hotel), as an example of a virtual consumerism that mimics almost too perfectly the everyday operations of consumer culture. Ostensibly a form of play, it thematizes in a virtual context the central concerns of consumerism—the acquisition and tasteful display of appearances, clothing, and furniture within the context of membership of a social circle. Habbo operates as a site for virtual expression of personal identity, subculture membership, and taste; for discussion and negotiation about the quality and desirability of items represented inside the hotel; and for trading items that are perceived to have special aesthetic or status value. The initially surprising feature is that players are often prepared to purchase virtual items with real currency, but the more intriguing question is whether virtual commodities "are able to fulfil the same kinds of aesthetic and social roles as material commodities in their respective subcultures" (Lehdonvirta et al. 2009, p. 1,074). To what extent are the satisfactions derived from playing this game different from those emanating from engagement on Apartment Therapy?

Many of the multiple and ambivalent tendencies associated with consumer culture can be detected in the rapidly changing domain of food consumption, which exemplifies the intertwining of

the forces of globalization, commodification, and aestheticization. Research shows an association between what people eat and their personal and social identities (e.g., Diner 2001, Lupton 1996). Eating also exemplifies the manner in which consumption sustains, as it always has done, intimate social relationships of family and friendship (Counihan 2004, DeVault 1991, Julier 2013). Eating, though often a mundane if fundamental form of consumption, has gained huge media exposure and has been transmuted into aesthetic recreation. One of the most significant trends in the West has been the growth of eating out. The café, the tapas bar, the fast-food outlet, and the restaurant all serve more customers than ever before as the share of household food budgets devoted to eating away from home rises steadily (Warde & Martens 2000). The invention, consolidation, and circulation of national cuisines illustrate several contemporary tendencies: They are instruments of the tourist industries, suggesting formats for global export and commercial opportunities for migrant entrepreneurs; they offer symbolic comfort to migrants and travelers; and they supply subjects for discussion about authenticity and distinctions among food enthusiasts (DeSoucey 2010, Möhring 2008, Wilk 2006). The emergence of the figure of the foodie, whether embraced or despised, symbolizes the capacity for an ordinary activity to be elevated into a core interest of would-be connoisseurs and into a luxury industry (de Solier 2013, Johnston & Baumann 2010). Foodyism is a paradigm case of the role played by enthusiasms in consumer culture. It also demonstrates the foundational guidance provided by an intermediating literature of recipe books, restaurant guides, and newspaper review columns (Blank 2007, Ferguson 2004, Ray 2008), not to mention a vast amount of television broadcasting and weblogs (Ray 2007, Rousseau 2012). Eating involves searches for the exotic and the authentic, differentiation within markets, activation of consumer and social movements, and the creation of enthusiasm for a commonplace activity.

A last word on consumer culture might be given to Sassatelli's (2007) textbook, *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics*, which maps well with hindsight the intellectual progression of the initial phases of the sociology of consumption. The book's three sections capture its trajectory and diversity. The first section concerns "The Rise of Consumer Culture" and considers institutional change and historical studies. The second section, "The Theory of Consumer Agency," compares models of utility and social competition; needs, manipulation, and simulation; and taste, identity, and practices, which successively have accounted for the behavior of consumers. The third section, "Politics," with chapters on representations, commodities, and contexts, is something of a departure from the mainstream understanding of consumer culture and indicates shifts in the field toward new topics. Sassatelli's summary suggests that the problematic linking of globalization to consumer culture is near exhaustion and that the time has come to begin once again to ask questions about the relation between production and consumption, to emphasize the ambivalent nature of consumer culture and the limits of consumer agency, and to recognize the burgeoning political ramifications of consumption. Some of these considerations are developed in her comparative study of fitness gyms in Italy and the United Kingdom, which is notable for its careful examination of the interactions between clients and between clients and trainers, and for its depiction of ways to manage the gap between aspiration and achievement as exercise becomes regulated and routinized (Sassatelli 2010).

THE UNWINDING OF THE CULTURAL TURN

Arguably, the cultural turn is running out of steam and beginning to unwind, a consequence of internal inconsistencies, misplaced emphases, and the predictable cycle of generational succession in theory development in the social sciences (Warde 2014). It also had empirical blind spots.

For example, production-led understandings receded, although they were never eliminated. A continuing tradition of political economy supplied work of sociological significance. One example was Fine's (1997, Fine & Leopold 1993) approach to systems of provision. Another is Schor's (1991, 1998, 2010) continuing elaboration of her work-and-spend thesis, and its extension into considerations of debt, downshifting, and other experiments in improving the quality of life. Schor (2007) was one of many who continued to review and revise general critical overviews of a Western way of life characterized by new global (and gender) divisions of labor, identifying tensions arising from an apparent shortage of time and articulating concern about the fostering of social relationships and the high material and environmental impact of consumption patterns. In many ways critique has become less impressionistic and better supported as relevant empirical evidence has been accumulated; among the most trenchant are Schudson (1999), Wilk (2001), and Belk (2004).

Another example was the investigation of class and status, which had also become less common, with fewer studies of resource distribution and the influence of material inequalities. Nevertheless, analysis of levels, patterns, and social differentiation continued as national and international agencies increased the rate and scope of surveys of expenditure for purposes of monitoring population, industrial production, and standards of living. Sociologists continued to use these surveys to map the structure and change in distribution of material resources between socioeconomic and sociodemographic groups (e.g., Gronow & Southerton 2009). Recent empirical research programs build on these foundations.

A further contested feature of the cultural analysis of consumption was that it relied theoretically mostly on models of the voluntary action of individuals contextualized by webs of cultural meanings, which constitute symbolic resources for consumer choice motivated by concerns for personal identity and a fashioned lifestyle. The model of an active and reflexive agent predominated, implying that conscious and intentional decisions steer consumption behavior and explain its sense and direction. This was evident in very influential versions of the individualization thesis, rife within sociology in the 1990s (Beck 1992, Giddens 1991) and still the frame for much research. Routine, ordinary, and inconspicuous aspects of consumption were obscured by the focus on communication (Gronow & Warde 2001). Disquiet with the model spawned theoretical alternatives that decentered the reflexive individual.

One such alternative is actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour 2005). ANT offers intriguing possibilities because it considers things as well as people and organizations as actants within networks that generate coordinated activities. A particular way of handling the relationship between technologies and people, ANT accommodates a potential means to align the materiality of consumption processes with human connections. It provides a potential remedy for Reckwitz's (2002a, p. 202) complaint that in cultural theory "the material world exists only insofar as it becomes an object of interpretation within collective meaning structures," with the products of mass manufacturing and consumer culture treated as objects of knowledge and not as material sui generis. The role of sociotechnical devices in everyday life can be charted, as, for example, Cochoy (2007, 2008) did when focusing on the shopping cart to indicate the complex determinants and collective consequences of the routine calculations and procedures of shoppers. The derived methodological injunction to "follow the thing" (e.g., I. Cook 2004) also permits the placing of commodities rather than people at the center of analysis. The idea of exploring consumption through goods and other material objects spread rapidly, with the better product biographies taking into consideration how users were engaged (Dixon 2002, Harvey et al. 2002). At the same time, mostly arising from studies in anthropology, a rich vein of research on the topic of material culture developed. Miller (e.g., 1987, 1998, 2010) remains its most creative and prolific exponent, describing the experience of the use of goods, their role in making and maintaining social relationships, and their personal, practical, and political significance.

CULTURAL CONSUMPTION, CULTURAL CAPITAL, AND OMNIVOROUSNESS

As the sociology of consumption extricates itself from the grip of the cultural turn, one of the most central developments is the manner of its reengagement with Pierre Bourdieu. He is perhaps the most significant figure in the field, although his influence in the United States was limited until recently (Sallaz & Zavisca 2007). Bourdieu (1984) steadfastly flew the sociological flag throughout the final quarter of the twentieth century, and his book *Distinction* became a widely recognized landmark in studies of consumption, one with perhaps unique interdisciplinary appeal. Ironically, *Distinction* was intended as a contribution not to the study of consumption, but to processes involved in the judgment of taste. The argument focused on domination achieved through command of legitimate taste. His was not an economistic account, for he emphasized the importance not just of economic resources but also of cultural competence (cultural capital), social connections (social capital), and social reputation (symbolic capital).

However, his work was sufficiently attuned to the cultural turn, especially by virtue of the role attributed to cultural capital in the reproduction of class privilege in France, to avoid seeming anachronistic. The concept of cultural capital was especially important in linking together education, cultural industries, and stratification and in introducing culture to class. Bourdieu dissected the space of lifestyles in France, not only cultural domains such as fine art and literature, but also everyday domains such as clothing and eating, showing that tastes grouped together and corresponded to the societal distribution of capitals. This distribution was not a fortuitous and innocent accident but an aspect of the systemic exercise of power. Using the (highly contested) concept of habitus, he emphasized the role of embodied practical reasoning and entrenched dispositions (see also Bourdieu 1977), thus providing a sharp contrast with the accounts of individualization of lifestyle, whether in postmodern or sociological mode.

Bourdieu has often been copied and emulated and equally often taken as the protagonist for expositions of alternative theoretical and empirical interpretations of the distribution of taste (c.f. Chan 2010, Coulangeon & Duval 2013, Lahire 2004). His work is an anchor in the most systematic and vibrant contemporary sociological debate where cultural consumption continues to meet stratification analysis around the concept of cultural omnivorousness. A concept coined by Peterson (1992) to explain the decline in the United States of the association between high socioeconomic status and engagement with high culture, the search for cultural omnivores has occasioned empirical studies in many different countries. Typically, one objective has been to determine whether Bourdieu's position is disproved by, consistent with, or superior to others, as shown by the empirical evidence of participation and taste (Atkinson 2011, Bennett et al. 2009, Chan & Goldthorpe 2007, Lizardo 2008a).

National case studies have produced some fairly consistent results. As Fishman & Lizardo (2013, p. 214) put it, the spread of cultural omnivorousness, so defined, is "the most well-documented empirical generalization in the sociology of cultural taste." In most cases, since the 1980s, economically privileged and well-educated sections of all national populations have disproportionately exhibited tastes for and participated in many cultural and leisure activities, with their portfolios including both high and popular cultural forms. However, although the broad facts may be clear, there is no agreed theoretical interpretation. Sociological interest hangs on whether omnivorousness is an indication of greater tolerance and democratization in the realm of culture or just a new garb for distinction. That everywhere it is associated with higher socioeconomic status leads to the suspicion that it is a mark of distinction, but there is limited evidence of cultural hostility, of groups despising each other on the basis of their cultural tastes (Warde 2011). It also appears that there are several different types of omnivores, not all of whom are in the higher social classes (Ollivier

2008). The few emerging studies addressing the issue in contexts other than North America and Western Europe are especially interesting. They, like Cvetičanin (2012) in his study of Serbia, will probably find cultured omnivores among modernized professional and managerial middle classes, but in a cultural field that is very different, where social capital is often much more important than cultural capital in achieving reputation, and where ethnic-national cultural tastes sharply divide populations.

The debate about cultural consumption now has a long history. It is conducted primarily with respect to the realm of taste—concerning the appreciation of cultural products—but is at its best when addressing power and domination and the capacity of consumption, both as purchases and practices, to determine, reflect, and reproduce social divisions. Culture and consumption are not innocent; differences in cultural competence and practice map onto wider contours of structured inequality and social injustice.

ORDINARY CONSUMPTION AND MUNDANE PRACTICE

A second productive area of investigation during the past decade concerns the role of consumption in mundane and unglamorous activities necessary for surviving on a daily basis. Emphasis on the conspicuous and expressive acts of consumption meant that many of its ordinary features were missed (Gronow & Warde 2001). At the extreme, almost any daily activity can be elevated to a form of art. However, households mostly devote their financial resources, time, and effort to commonplace activities free from overtones of distinction and display, and in which no symbolic capital is invested, such as cleaning, watching television, eating everyday domestic meals, listening to the radio, and driving cars. Households also deploy environmentally problematic commodities such as electricity, oil, and water without much attention or reflection. Such considerations direct sociological attention to debates about sustainable consumption and behavior change and toward looking more closely at the relationship between consumption and everyday practices and routines.

One promising associated avenue of theoretical development resulted in sociological engagement with "the practice turn" (Schatzki et al. 2001). The roots of theories of practice are usually located in the theoretical issues of structure and agency in the works of authors such as Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens, and Sahlins (Ortner 1984), and more recently have drawn on ethnomethodology, science and technology studies, and ANT (Nicolini 2012). Practice theories have been invoked in part to redress some of the biases of hegemonic forms of cultural analysis because they emphasize different aspects of conduct. Although it is not easy to specify what exponents, proponents, and implementers of practice theories hold in common (Schatzki 2001), most would insist that explanations should give due credit to routine, know-how, shared understanding, the embodied, and the material (e.g., Reckwitz 2002a,b; Warde 2005). Early work in this vein emphasized habits and collective routines, the normalization of standards of competence in everyday practices, the acquisition of practical competence, and the processes of regulation. Later work has varyingly paid special and increasing attention to embodiment (Wilhite 2012), materials (Shove et al. 2012), and routines and their sequencing (Southerton 2013). Theories of practice promise an alternative to models of individual choice and uncover phenomena normally concealed in the cultural analysis of consumption. Against the model of the sovereign consumer, practice theories emphasize routine over actions, flow and sequence over discrete acts, dispositions over decisions, and practical consciousness over deliberation. In reaction to the cultural turn, emphasis is placed on doing over thinking, the material over the symbolic, and embodied practical competence over expressive virtuosity in the presentation of self (Warde 2014, p. 286). If Alfred Marshall's (1920) explanation of demand is correct, and activities generate wants rather than vice versa, the injunction of practice theories to view consumption as a moment in the performances of practices is cogent.

Practice theory is being deployed in a growing corpus of empirical works; witness the *Journal of Consumer Research* and the *Journal of Consumer Culture* each carrying several articles since 2005. The gradual filtering of theories of practice into empirical studies of consumption has come through particular research areas, including eating (Holm 2013), recreational enthusiasms (Arsel & Bean 2013), listening to music (Magaudda 2011), and perhaps most importantly, environmental degradation, climate change, and sustainability. Mundane activities such as washing bodies and clothes (Shove 2003), gardening (Hitchings 2007), heating and cooling (Shove et al. 2014), using electronic devices (Christensen & Ropke 2010), and disposing waste (Evans 2011) require generic commodities such as water and electricity that are invisible to paradigms concerned with symbolic display, communication, and presentation of self. Such accounts bring to attention the material and functional properties of things and identify practices in which the mitigation of environmental effects requires changed patterns of consumption (Shove & Spurling 2013, Spaargaren 2013, Warde & Southerton 2012, Wilhite 2012).

POLITICAL AND ETHICAL CONSUMPTION

Modern sociology typically allocates consumers and citizens to distinct spheres, parallel to distinctions between economy and politics, and the private and the public. The relative merits of the market and the state were central points of dispute in the early days of the sociology of consumption. An apparent implosion of this conceptual boundary has generated extensive reflection and research on the figure of the citizen-consumer. Cohen (2000, p. 204) made an effective distinction between citizen-consumers and customer-consumers: The former are "consumers who take on the political responsibility we usually associate with citizens to consider the general good of the nation through their consumption, and the latter being consumers who seek primarily to maximize their personal economic interests in the market place." She shows that in the United States the former orientation was fairly prominent until the mid-twentieth century but was subsequently replaced largely by the latter (see also Cohen 2003).

Purchase decisions may clearly be oriented to avowedly political ends. Historical research especially has shown that consumer politics is commonplace and has taken many forms, from cooperatives and cooperative parties; to consumer associations concerned with product quality; to specific campaigns of boycotts and buycotts to pressure companies to change policies, via campaigns for better working conditions for producers and fair trade; to demonstrations of the antiglobalization movements contesting the legitimacy of the capitalist economic order (Daunton & Hilton 2001, Gabriel & Lang 1995, Klein 2000, Micheletti 2003; for an overview see Trentmann 2012, pp. 399–550). Such activities fluctuate in their incidence. Periodization is difficult (Hilton 2012). Glickman (2012, p. 400) distinguishes "three core elements of consumer politics: [. . .] consumer activism, the consumer movement and consumer regimes. . .[as] distinct sites of politics." The first element, activism, which "refers to bottom-up protests by nonstate actors" (Glickman 2012), has been especially fertile ground for sociological research in the past decade, with fierce debates about what can be expected from such mobilization. Certainly, many consumer activists and consumer movements in the late twentieth century engaged in activities focused primarily on the terms of trade of specific products without concern for the wider ramifications of consumption. Nevertheless, sociological research has uncovered many instances of radical consumer politics, often related to the issue of sustainable consumption, with ambitious objectives regarding social and political change (Connolly & Prothero 2008, Sassatelli 2006).

Political mobilization in respect to consumption in the West—where the problem of unsustainable consumption is most severe—is beginning to be explored to good effect, although there has been more emphasis on activists than on regimes. The contentious issue of ethical consumption

is prominent. With illustrations from the fair trade movement, Barnett et al. (2011) offer an extended account of the limits of personal responsibility for the consequences of consumption. Environmental campaigners typically expect too much from personal ethical commitment, for circumstance, provisioning systems, and infrastructures are heavily constraining. Research on the very strategic matter of waste, for example, shows that people are often well intentioned, but the many competing commitments and obligations in their everyday lives produce distractions (Evans 2014). Barnett et al. (2011), however, account effectively for the aspects of personal engagement and reflection. Spaargaren & Oosterveer (2010) indicate the intricate interweaving of consumer and environmental concerns when making a distinction between ecological politics, consumer politics, and life(style) politics, in each of which consumption is heavily implicated.

It is difficult to imagine that the increasing concentration of greenhouse gasses in the earth's atmosphere can be slowed or halted without significant changes to the patterns of consumption prevailing in the West, including reduction in level (Jackson 2009, Schor 2010). The link between ways and styles of life and material and natural resources puts the consequences of the capitalist and neoliberal arrangement of global economic exchange firmly at the center of analysis (notwithstanding that many social scientists as well as corporations and politicians would rather look away). The indissoluble (if poorly theorized) connection between an almost-universal objective of governments to procure perpetual economic growth and innovation and a consequential increase in types and levels of consumption deserves better analysis. Economic growth in countries whose ecological footprints are currently comparatively light will create aspirations and expectations about enhanced standards of living and everyday consumption. This can be expected to compound the current predicament enormously. Future research, at the macro and micro levels, investigating how expansion is managed outside of Western Europe and North America will be very important. Crucial for sustainability will be the locally specific effects of several major processes, including industrialization and modernization, the impact of religious traditions, the localized bases of social solidarity and division, the position of the economy in the global division of labor and reward, and the efficacy of political institutions (Daloz 2010, Garon & Maclachlan 2006, Gerth 2010, Nützenadel & Trentmann 2008).

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

With systematic empirical research having emerged only in the 1980s and having an institutional presence as a subdiscipline in American sociology established as recently as 2013, sociological research on consumption is still in its infancy. A small player in a large field, sociology's contribution to date has been commensurately limited. One reason for restricted impact has been the difficulty in finding an effective research program within a developed and competitive interdisciplinary field tilted against many of sociology's core presuppositions. Nevertheless, sociology has some substantial achievements to its name. Consumption has been rescued from the taint of triviality and has been established as a bona fide field of study. A detailed knowledge of many domains of activity exhibiting both ordinary and glamorous consumption moments has been compiled. Recent work has enhanced our understanding of the connection between social divisions and consumption, charted social differentiation in experience, and increased awareness of issues of sustainability and alternative forms of political engagement. Overall, consumption has proved an instructive lens for exploring and analyzing a good many other institutions, among them, households, subcultures, social mobility, use of technology, social divisions, and belonging. The sociological analysis of consumption has contributed as much to understanding postindustrial societies as it has to the theory of consumption. Its integral relationship with other sociological subdisciplines, and its

contribution to middle-range theories in substantive areas of institutional analysis (rather than to theory more generally), is an abiding virtue.

Theoretically, identification of the limits of purely cognitivist approaches to explanation has inspired methodological innovation to encompass the embodied and material elements of explanations of commodity purchase and consumption. One consequence of the dominance of neoliberal ideologies is that the language of consumption, consumers, and consumerism has become a chronic feature of popular discourse, corporate activity, and state policy. So long as consumer choice operates to justify and legitimize political policies and economic transactions—a tendency that shows no sign of abating—consumption will remain in public focus and social science will constantly be required to confront the concept.

From a sociological point of view, it is much better to unseat the dominant model of the sovereign consumer and replace it with a conception of the socially conditioned actor, a social self, embedded in normative and institutional contexts and considered a bearer of practices. It may be even more important to incorporate the habitual and routine aspects of all conduct into accounts of consumption, to which end sociology might make a distinctive contribution. The practice turn especially unsettles the study of consumption by providing a rallying call for investigations that rebalance the previously predominant emphasis on culture. For it has exploited the idea that consumption is a process primarily of appropriation and appreciation of goods and services, for multifarious and often mundane use, and not merely acquisition through market exchange and communicative display. Rediscovery of materiality and the affordances of objects has also been consequential, not least because of the attention now paid to the environmental effects of current modes of consumption.

Upon examination of the claims and concerns of activists, associations, and social movements seeking to extend those partially forgotten, broader conceptions of citizen-consumer politics might enable sociology to renew its critical evaluation of consumption. A critique of consumerism is implicit in everyday ambivalence and popular reservations and is expressed explicitly through existing activist mobilization, radical and conservative. If articulated better, it might generate an evidence-based understanding of the neglected dynamics of consumer regimes. Sociology remains well equipped to address the unequal distribution of resources in the light of austerity and the ways in which consumption is connected to modes of provisioning. Research beyond the Global North will confront social and economic transitions that raise political issues dormant in countries complacent about extant modes of consumption.

The problem of the relationship between production and consumption, which was in a sense the starting point of empirical investigations of consumption, is returning to the agenda. Following the examples of early classic studies such as Becker's (1982) *Art Worlds* and Mintz's (1985) *Sweetness and Power* might integrate the examination of production and consumption. To separate out consumption for specialized attention was very valuable in reaction to the economistic climate of the 1980s, but other ways to reconnect with production and provision, and with capital and labor, are needed. Recent research programs have paid excessive attention to private consumption originating from market exchange; study is typically of shopping malls rather than the wholesale cash-and-carry warehouse, bedroom and kitchen furniture rather than office supplies, and the restaurant rather than the office cafeteria, reflecting a preoccupation with the microsociology of consumption by individuals (Trentmann 2012). Studies also typically have excluded end-consumption generated through work and employment; activities such as air travel, car leasing, clothing allowances, business lunches, and hotel visits do not appear in household accounts yet they make a significant contribution to the personal experience, expectations, and ecological footprint of a strategic fraction of the population. Perhaps most significant, however, research has retreated from the examination of the role of the state, a capitulation to the dominant ideology of

the neoliberal age, which measures all activities in terms of market efficiency and which undermines collective political decisions authorizing government and state regulation (Davies 2013). A realignment of research focus, putting key sociological themes higher on the agenda, could help reinstate public consideration of the relationship between consumption and welfare.

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