

# The Sociology of Consumption

P. J. REY AND GEORGE RITZER

Theorizing about consumption has been a part of the field of sociology since its earliest days, dating back, at least implicitly, to the work of Karl Marx in the mid-to late nineteenth century. However, Thorstein Veblen's (1899) *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is generally seen as the first major theoretical work to take consumption as its primary focus (although in the body of his work Veblen, like most other classic thinkers, focused on production – industry and business – not consumption). Despite these early roots, research on consumption began in earnest in the second half of the twentieth century in Europe, especially Great Britain. Interest in the topic among US sociologists was much slower to develop and it is still not a focal concern of many American sociologists. In fact, efforts have been underway for many years to form a Section in the American Sociological Association devoted to the study of consumption, but as yet those efforts have not succeeded. The irony of this is that the US is seen as the quintessential consumer society and has been a major exporter of its products, brands, and consumption sites (e.g., McDonald's, Wal-Mart) to the rest of the world. It may be that consumption is such a central part of American life that it seems unproblematic, not only to most Americans, but also to the majority of American sociologists. It also may be that the recipients of American consumption exports in other parts of the world are more troubled by them so that sociologists there are drawn more to the topic. American sociologists (and others) also continue to be locked into the productivist bias that dominated the discipline in its early years and, therefore, have been slow to recognize the importance of consumption.

While empirical sociological research on consumption has been slow to develop, it has been spurred in recent decades by the rise of consumerism, even "hyperconsumption." Beyond a number of important research monographs, several journals devoted to the topic have emerged including the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* and the *International Journal of Consumer Research*. While some sociologists have published in those journals, it was the (2001) founding of the *Journal of Consumer Culture* that created a home for sociologists interested in consumption (although those from many other fields have published in the journal). Several books and articles offer an overview of academic, especially sociological, work on consumption in great detail (see, for example, Campbell 1995; Corrigan 1997; Slater 1999; Ritzer, Goodman & Wiedenhof 2001; Sassatelli 2007). This chapter seeks to build on and update these texts by offering an overview of substantive and theoretical developments in the field over the last decade. However, we will go beyond such an overview to discuss the relevance of a sociological perspective on consumption to the rise, and continuation to this writing, of the Great Recession (or is it a more basic, structural change in the economy of the United States and other developed countries?). As with many other issues, those who have written on this recession have tended to have a productivist bias. Our aim in the final section of this chapter is to show the relevance of a sociology of consumption to this extremely important economic event.

## SUBSTANTIVE STUDIES OF CONSUMPTION

In order to make this discussion manageable, we limit ourselves, primarily, to research published in the *Journal of Consumer Culture (JCC)* since its founding in 2001. While this is not fully representative of work in the field, it will give the reader a sense of some of its dominant concerns. The discussion is organized under several topic headings: identity, cultural appropriation, value and consumption, and risk and the environment. This reflects rather specific concerns in the field over the last decade. In comparison, Ritzer, Goodman, and Wiedenhof (2001) argued that work in the field focused on consumers, the objects consumed, sites of consumption, and the processes of consumption. With these more general concerns in the back of our minds, we will focus in the remainder of this section on the four more specific topics mentioned above as dominant concerns in the *JCC*.

### Identity

Much research has been done on how consumption shapes identity. The enveloping theoretical assumption of this work on identity is that who you are cannot (fully) be separated from what you consume, particularly in contemporary consumer culture. Moreover, identity theorists tend to assume that modern individuals are liberated from the constraints of consuming for "instrumental" (i.e., life-sustaining) purposes and can use consumption for other purposes such as identity work (Bauman 2001). Individuals are often driven to purchase unusual commodity objects (e.g., the Hummer H2 or expensive lingerie) in order to distinguish themselves from others (Jantzen, Østergaard & Vieira 2006; Shulz 2006). This trend begins at an

early age. Consumption plays an important part in identity-formation processes for children socialized in contemporary society, so that who you are as an adult is linked to what you consumed as a child (Cook 2008; Tyler 2009).

Identity is not only linked to the content of what is consumed but also to the nature of the processes involved in producing and consuming that object. For example, Colin Campbell (2005) observed an increase in "craft consumption," where the same individual both designs and produces objects in order to consume them as a unique form of self-expression. Similarly, certain forms of ethical consumption (described further below) can be part of an individual's moral identity projects (Brace-Govan & Binay 2010). In fact, consumers may consciously or unconsciously engage in habitual consumption practices in order to maintain a consistent life-narrative regarding the type of person they are (Gaviria & Bluemelhuber 2010). More critical research has argued that the private processes of self-identity formation – "self-branding" – no longer have any meaningful distinction from broad public processes of capitalist production and consumption (Hearn 2008), or that consumers themselves are being manufactured as commodities (Zwick & Knott 2009).

Apart from the identity of individuals, consumption may produce, reinforce, or contradict collective identities. For example, contemporary young African Americans simultaneously convey racial distinctiveness and defy racist assumptions through consumption (Lamont & Molnár 2001; cf. Crockett 2008). Similarly, consumption became a means of maintaining social organization through identity politics as life rapidly changed in the early days of post-Soviet Russia (Shevchenko 2002; Caldwell 2004) and following the collapse of apartheid in South Africa (Laden 2003). Similarly, families use consumption habits such as homemade food to distinguish themselves and, simultaneously, to reinforce a collective family identity (Moisio, Arnould & Price 2004).

Consumption may also shape the dynamics between collective and group identities. Research demonstrates, for example, that consumption serves to refocus energy from collective identity or rebellion towards a more individualistic focus on lifestyle choices. Adam Arvidsson (2001) argues that this is precisely what occurred in the Italian youth market, as epitomized by the history of the Vespa scooter. Similarly, Jacqueline Botterill (2007) makes a broad historical argument that post-1950s consumption has largely been driven by a quest for freedom, autonomy, and individuality. The marketing of rebellion has had to become more sophisticated as traditionally iconic figures, such as the cowboy, the genius artist, and the outlaw, have become little more than parodied clichés. While much advertising is still driven by appeals to individualistic values, Botterill finds that a now popular alternative approach in advertising is to appeal to the ideology of athleticism (i.e., values such as hard work, achievement, discipline, and teamwork) and the still widely embraced image of the star athlete. In other cases, marketers have successfully fabricated new group identities (such as the "tween" [Cook & Kaiser 2004]) which serve as convenient new markets for their products.

However, some research calls into question the emphasis on consumption as a process of identity-formation, contending instead that group identification and social regulation still dominate identity-formation processes and mediate the effects of consumption practices (Warde 1994). Others argue that the net effect of the

proliferation of individual and collective identities through consumption is that, ultimately, the consumer has become such a diverse and multifaceted entity that it is no longer easy to define. Instead, we are left with several competing accounts of the consumer. These accounts are not necessarily compatible or generalizable to all consumers (Gabriel & Lang 2008).

### Cultural appropriation

The creation of a cultural identity may involve appropriation of, and playfulness with, other cultures. These appropriations might occur across class lines. A phenomenon labeled "Poor Chic" involves the appropriation of symbolically important lower-class commodity-objects (e.g., muscles, motorcycles, and tattoos) by the middle class (Halnon & Cohen 2006). Appropriated cultures may even be fictional, as illustrated by groups formed around the stories of H. P. Lovecraft, vampire tales, and various works of science fiction (Possamai 2002).

Cultural appropriation can have grave consequences when patterns of consumption behavior are adopted by groups that lack sufficient resources to engage in them. Restated, we can say that as consumption patterns trickle down from the upper and middle classes to the lower class, they cause "collateral damage" to those who cannot hope to economically sustain such behaviors (Bauman 2007).

### Value and consumption

Theorists of consumption (following in the footsteps of Pierre Bourdieu, who proposed the use of the concepts of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital) often expand the concept of value beyond the sphere of material economics. Aesthetic value, for example, describes the way culturally valued tastes are translated into monetary value through a network of institutions. Perhaps the most ubiquitous image in marketing is the thin, pale look of the female model's body (Entwistle 2002; Redmond 2003; Wissinger 2009), particularly if this body is presented as an object for male consumption (Amy-Chinn 2006). Holliday and Cairnie (2007) even propose the term "body capital" to explain the value that both men and women derive from labor (including surgery) to improve the state of their bodies relative to the prevailing social norms. Or, better yet, they can improve the state of future generations' bodies by purchasing Viking sperm for artificial insemination; these sperm are marketed with images centered on whiteness and purity (Kroløkke 2009). Other valued images that are widely used to promote products include youth and youthfulness (Langer 2004) and phallic symbols and masculinity (Thompson & Holt 2004). With respect to some hyper-rationalized industries, such as food service, consumers have gone so far as to assert aesthetic value as a right or cultural imperative (Sassatelli & Davolio 2010).

On the topic of brand value, Adam Arvidsson (2005, 2006) argues that consumers do much of the work involved in building brands and their value. The role played by companies, particularly marketing divisions, in contemporary consumer capitalism is to manage carefully the free and spontaneous activities of consumers so that they can be harnessed to create value for the companies. Because consumers are not compensated for this value they create through their

branding "work," they can be seen as being exploited in the technical Marxian sense of the term.

Theorists of consumer culture have long understood that consumption can produce certain forms of capital for the consumer and researchers continue to elaborate upon this phenomenon. For example, Wright (2005) demonstrated that bookshop managers tend to hire preferentially workers who convey the message that leisurely reading is a respectable and worthwhile activity. Thus, implicitly, these managers are marketing cultural capital as much as the content of the books themselves. Similarly, another study found that women with high indicators of cultural capital modulated their selection of greeting cards on several axes (e.g., originality, simplicity, or irony) in order to convey tastes appropriate to a wider range of circumstances, while women with lower indicators of cultural capital generally only selected cards based on sentiment (West 2010).

What all of these new conversations about value have in common is that they tend to examine "immaterial" aspects of commodities, their production, and their consumption (Coté & Pybus 2007). This focus on the immaterial is, in no small way, influenced by the emergence of the internet.

### Risk and the environment

Various forms of consumption are perceived as posing (sometimes unavoidable) risks to the individual and/or the environment. Under these circumstances, individual consumers are placed in the position of having to assess the potential risks and benefits and make decisions accordingly. Often the logic behind the cost-benefit analyses varies between cultural groups and is a source of profound ambivalence within them (Halkier 2001). The development of genetically modified foods is, for example, one field which poses new challenges for consumers. Such crops may be cheaper, fresher, or more nutritious, yet they come with the danger of unintended consequences for individuals and for the environment. Consumers report feeling capable of making the best decisions because they believe they are able to interpret various media sources and sort out the facts of the situation (Tulloch & Lupton 2002). However, they express doubts and insecurities regarding the efficacy of their actions in mediating environmental and personal risks (Connolly & Prothero 2008).

Within various cultures, the symbolic aspects of consumption are often tied to environmental factors. Often, environmentally-conscious consumption (whether primitive or modern) is coupled with discourses regarding purity or pollution. The symbolic value of the object of consumption is then derivative of such discourses (Neves 2004). The growth in sales of bottled water is one modern example of how the concept of purity is used to add value to a commodity (Wilk 2006). Similarly, consumption practices shape perception of the relationship between urban and natural environments (Wells 2002). The purity-pollution continuum is not, however, the only discourse that exists with respect to environmentally-conscious consumption.

Recently, there has been much discussion of "ethical consumption" (see Thompson & Coskuner-Balli 2007), one instantiation of which might involve consuming in such a way as to reduce one's overall impact on the environment (e.g., Schor

1999, 2010). Yet, consumers are now often compelled to consume more in order to maintain their "green subjectivities" (Connolly & Prothero 2008). Marketers have discovered a new sales base in these green consumers, and this, in turn, has led to accusations of corporate "greenwashing," whereby companies make a few very public gestures to give consumers the impression that they are being environmentally-friendly in order to add additional value to their product without necessarily incurring the cost of actually changing fundamental environmental practices (Laufer 2003).

The scope of ethical consumption is often larger than just the environment. It might also look at the social consequences of producing certain commodities. Images of child slaves and impoverished workers may dissuade consumers from purchasing commodities produced in certain regions of the world and may encourage them to seek more "just" alternatives (e.g., "fair trade" products) (Dolan 2005). Consumers use a variety of tactics to influence companies' decision-making, including boycotting (i.e., punishing business for unfavorable behavior) and "buycotting" (i.e., rewarding business for favorable behavior) (Neilson 2010). A prominent example of how discourses of social justice are increasingly being tied to consumption practices is the African diamond trade. Global outrage over the activities of violent militia groups funded by illegally produced diamonds led to a (voluntary) transnational accord on diamond verification standards called the Kimberley Process. The African diamond trade became such a public issue that it was made the subject of a 2006 Hollywood movie called *Blood Diamond*. Ethical consumption practices might even be characterized by an anti-consumption ethos that favors used or recycled products over new products (Brace-Govan & Binay 2010).

## THEORIES OF CONSUMPTION

As in the case of the previous overview of substantive work on consumption, this section on theory will also be selective (there is simply too much theory to deal with in such a brief space) and focused on a limited number of themes, or problematics: (1) the separation and/or (re)integration of the socio-economic spheres of production and consumption; (2) understanding why dissatisfaction persists in an era of hyper-abundance; (3) the loss/maintenance of agency in a milieu of almost infinite choices. While we make no claims that this is the only or the best way to interpret the vast literature dealing with consumption, we believe that this schema will be useful to both scholars and students of these theories and of consumption.

### The spheres of production and consumption

In many ways, the assumption that production and consumption exist as separate spheres, and, therefore, may be studied in isolation from one another, can be traced back to Marx's incalculable influence on the discipline of sociology. Marx observed a capitalist world where production and consumption occurred under a distinct set of conditions. Production was done mainly outside the home – in factories – because workers did not own the means of production and were forced to sell their labor

in return for wages. Under such conditions, workers were both exploited and alienated, so that work was something to be avoided as much as possible. Consumption generally occurred in the home where workers were free to control their own activities; however, since workers' wages were so meager, they tended to consume relatively little. For this reason, consumption and production were divided across class lines, with the working class doing the bulk of the production and the capitalists doing the bulk of the consumption.

While this class division in the spheres of production and consumption is salient in Marx's work, his theory is certainly more nuanced, particularly in the *Grundrisse* ([1857-8] 1973: 83-94), where he outlines three relationships between production and consumption:

- 1 Factory workers clearly need to consume raw materials (and sometimes other commodities) in the process of production. In fact, Marx later elaborates on this process, calling it "productive consumption," which is defined by the fact that it results in "a commodity of more value than that of the elements composing it" ([1885] 1907: 31).
- 2 Production and consumption are also interdependent at a macro level insofar as production is required in order for there to be goods to consume and as long as consumption drives demand for production.
- 3 Each process - production and consumption - completes the other. Consumption marks the end-point of production, while consumption can only be materialized through the object created by production.

While Marx elaborates the three relations, he does so in passing, and they seem to remain only tangential to the overall theoretical development reflected in the *Grundrisse*.

Marx's most systematic (if largely implicit) treatment of the relationship between production and consumption occurs in his discussion of the crisis of overproduction. He predicted that productivity would eventually increase enough to meet all of the consumer demands of the bourgeoisie. At this point, the constant growth in production that political economists assumed was required for capitalism's continued existence would be hindered by a consumer base that was too small to create sufficient demand. As Marx explains, "The epochs in which capitalist production exerts all its forces are always periods of overproduction, because [...] the sale of commodities [...] is limited, not by the consumptive demand of society in general, but by the consumptive demand of a society in which the majority are poor and must always remain poor" ([1885] 1907: 636n.). Put simply, production cannot be greater than what a particular society can consume, and capitalist production is limited by the fact that such a small proportion of its constituents can afford to consume more than the minimum necessary for survival. Marx asks us to take as evidence:

the commercial crises that by their periodical return put the existence of the entire bourgeois society on its trial, each time more threateningly. In these crises, a great part not only of the existing products, but also of the previously created productive forces, are periodically destroyed. In these crises, there breaks out an epidemic that, in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity - the epidemic of over-production. (Marx & Engels 1848: 14-15)

From this perspective, overproduction and its corollary, under-consumption, pose the greatest threat to capitalist production. Moreover, this demonstrates that even Marx, at least implicitly, understood that the separation under capitalism of the spheres of production and consumption was largely illusory and destined to be temporary.

Yet, despite these important insights into consumption, Marx's focus always remained firmly on production. Many theorists in the wake of Marx continue to wrestle with his characterization of consumption and production as separate spheres of activity – at least, insofar as Marx illustrated in his own work a belief that production could be studied largely separately from consumption.

Nevertheless, because Marx's theory of overproduction is so central to his conceptualization of the spheres of production and consumption, it is important to take a brief logical detour to consider how theorists of consumption have developed correctives to his theory of overproduction to account for why it never developed into the crisis that Marx had expected. We can organize these critiques into two categories: (1) those claiming that bourgeois (or any human) demand has never become saturated in the way that Marx expected; (2) those claiming that capitalism proved capable of adjusting for excess production by simply raising wages enough to create sufficient demand.

### Natural vs. fabricated demand

Marx's assumption that humans have generated finite levels of demand stems from an essentialist theory of human nature, whereby human needs are predetermined and hard-wired into our very being, as opposed to things we learn and develop through our interaction with our environment. Many late nineteenth-century thinkers (e.g., Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud) offered opposing views of human needs as being fluid and emerging based on social context; however, Veblen (1899) was the first thinker to clearly articulate a theory of how the fluidity of desire is linked to consumption behavior. This relationship is, most prominently, captured in his concept of "conspicuous consumption," which describes consumption that is not engaged in to satisfy any immediate instinctual need, but, instead, is undertaken to communicate one's social status. Veblen argues that this behavior is particularly important for people who have high status (and, of course, the resources to communicate this status). Often, the most conspicuous forms of consumption are those which demonstrate that an individual has such ample resources that many of them can be wasted. Veblen observes that conspicuous consumption is so valued that people actually sacrifice gratification of more primal needs in order to engage in it – for example: "people will undergo a very considerable degree of privation in the comforts or the necessities of life in order to afford what is considered a decent amount of wasteful consumption; so that it is by no means an uncommon occurrence, in an inclement climate, for people to go ill clad in order to appear well dressed" (1899: 168).

Similarly, Marcuse (1955) argued that capitalist society used marketing to fabricate demand amongst the masses, pacifying them and giving them a reason to continue working, even if they were perfectly capable of surviving without doing some or all of that work, and even if they hated the work they were doing. He explains:

We may distinguish both true and false needs. "False" needs are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice. [...] Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs. [...] The only needs that have an unqualified claim for satisfaction are the vital ones – nourishment, clothing, lodging at the attainable level of culture. (Marcuse 1964: 50)

At the center of Marcuse's revolutionary vision is a world where we abandon all the desires which capitalism has created and use resources in the sole pursuit of our natural desires. This vision resonated with the anti-consumerist counter-culture of the 1960s, but was short-lived.

Erich Fromm complicates (and famously criticizes) Marcuse's theory of human desire, by arguing that it is natural for us to develop more culturally sophisticated desires. This claim, of course, begins to blur the lines between naturalism and social constructionism. He explains:

It is true that as long as the living standard of the population is below a dignified level of subsistence, there is a natural need for more consumption. It is also true that there is a legitimate need for more consumption as man develops culturally and more refined needs for better food, objects of artistic pleasure, books, etc. (Fromm 1955: 134)

Fromm's position is reconcilable, because he assumes humans have a natural need to be social and that civilization (along with all the sophisticated needs that it carries with it) is an extension of the need to be social.

By the 1970s, theorists – most notably, Baudrillard – were arguing that all desires were socially constructed (or, at least, socially mediated) and that the concept of natural desires was a Western fantasy – a grand narrative that, at best, was naïve, and, at worst, served to reinforce various regimes of social control. Skepticism that modern consumption is driven by natural needs persists today. Bauman (2001), for example, argues that it is our freedom to consume for non-instrumental, immaterial purposes (and not, for example, an increase in the amount we consume) that, primarily, differentiates postmodern consumers from their ancestors.

While few contemporary theorists retain the kind of rather naïve essentialism found in Marx, theorists also seldom endorse the opposite extreme of total constructionism represented by Baudrillard. In fact, in many ways, the conversation is shifting away from where our needs originate to how our needs are satisfied. Juliet Schor's (2010) recent book, *Plenitude*, for example, argues that many of our needs can be better satisfied through means other than the market, so that the social trend towards working longer hours is actually counter-productive.

### Co-optation of the working class

Marx also assumed that capitalists would always pay the minimum possible wage to workers. As a result, workers could never be a significant part of the base for

consumer demand. This assumption has simply been proven, empirically, to be false. While there are periods of exceptions, real wages in developed economies have generally risen over the last century. This fact, along with developments in mass production, has meant that the working class has come to form a central component of consumer-driven economies. In fact, the importance of the worker qua consumer has long been recognized by the public, including Henry Ford's famous statement of intent to produce a car that his workers could afford.

The emergence of mass consumer markets aroused a wave of critical theory (e.g., Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse) that mourned the loss of the revolutionary moment in the West. That is, it marked the end of the moment when the working class could realize that the capitalist system had little to offer them and could overthrow it in favor of a system with a more equitable distribution of resources. These theorists believed that the working class had been co-opted by the capitalist system. That is, they had been given enough of a stake in the system so that, even though vast inequalities persisted, workers had a vested interest in keeping the system alive. In Marxian terms, workers now had something more to lose than their chains.

The consequence of co-optation is, as Adorno – the ardent pessimist – once eloquently stated, “[p]hilosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed” ([1966] 1973: 3). Consumption is, in fact, at the heart of much analysis of the passing of the revolutionary moment in the West. Marcuse (1964) argued that as the working class became enamored with consumer goods, capitalist ideology achieved unquestionable dominance, and society could be described as “one-dimensional.”

The co-optation of the working class has encouraged recent social theorists (Schutz 2004; Ritzer 2010b) to liken contemporary capitalism to a velvet cage (a direct spin-off of Max Weber's “iron cage” metaphor), where consumers may realize they are trapped in the system, but are content to remain that way. Still, other theorists (e.g., de Certeau [1980] 2002; Hall 1992) take a less pessimistic view, believing that workers qua consumers are the kings of the marketplace. We will explore this debate further in the third section.

Returning to the separation between the spheres of consumption and production, it should now be clear that the notion that these spheres are separated along class lines holds little sway in contemporary thought. Nevertheless, the two processes of production and consumption are still generally studied separately. Baudrillard, for example, criticizes Marx for having a productivist bias, yet, in *The Consumer Society*, turns all his attention in the other direction. One explanation is that researchers generally assume, like Marx, that the two spheres are largely separated spatially as well as temporally. While, perhaps, this separation was plausible in Marx's time, it is less so today. This is, in no small part, due to the fact that what is being produced and consumed has changed. Today, information and services constitute a much larger proportion of economic activity in developed countries.

Recent work argues for the need for a new concept that bridges production and consumption and represents them as interconnected processes. Several terms have been introduced to fill this gap, including “prosumption” (Toffler 1980; Kotler 1986; Humphreys & Grayson 2008; Ritzer 2010a; Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010), “co-creation” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004; Tapscott & Williams 2006; Humphreys

& Grayson 2008; Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody 2008), and "produsage" (Bruns 2008). While all these terms have slightly different connotations, we will lump them all under the umbrella of "prosumption." Theorists of prosumption tend to endorse postmodern assumptions that old categories should be imploded and exist in varying intensities on a continuum (Baudrillard [1981] 1995). Ritzer (2010a), for example, claims that prosumption has always existed and that the spheres of production and consumption, which were separated out to a significant extent by early capitalism, are, in many instances, imploding once again (if they were ever separate) in late capitalism. The collapse of these two spheres is particularly clear with respect to newly emerging technologies (Green 2001; Coté & Pybus 2007; Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010) – most notably, the recent proliferation of user-generated content on the internet known as Web 2.0 (O'Reilly 2005). On social media like Facebook, for example, users are nearly always producing and consuming their profiles simultaneously. The implications of the reintegration of production and consumption in contemporary capitalism remain largely unexplored and will likely be a fertile ground for future research.

That said, we would not want to overlook the fact that certain theorists of consumption have long ago observed certain types of activity that might aptly be described as prosumption. Georg Simmel ([1911–12] 2000), for example, argues in "the tragedy of culture" that we use the objective culture of consumable products to produce ourselves as individuals. On this model, we produce objects so that we can consume them to produce ourselves. Thus, production and consumption are two sides of the same self-individuating coin. However, as Simmel clearly recognized, this relationship has become problematic in modernity because the proliferation of material goods has outstripped the productive capacities of the subjective culture through which we express ourselves.

We can read arguments of the Birmingham School, including those of Richard Hoggart (1998), Stuart Hall (1992), Raymond Williams (1995), Dick Hebdige (1981), and Paul Willis (1978), as arguing that people constantly prosume themselves and their environment through their interaction with cultural products. For example, Hall argues that media viewers can meaningfully be said to consume what they are watching if, and only if, they simultaneously engage in the production of meanings that ultimately influence individual attitudes and practice. He explains that media products must "be translated – transformed [...] – into social practices if the circuit is to be both completed and effective. If no 'meaning' is taken, there can be no 'consumption'" (Hall 1992: 107). Consumers are never just consumers of the various cultural scripts they encounter; instead, consumers use and modify scripts for their own purposes. Thus, consumption becomes an active, even productive, process. Similarly, de Certeau argues that consumers are "unrecognized producers, poets of their own affairs" ([1980] 2002: 34).

A more critical description of the productive consumer might be derived from Foucault's ([1975] 1995) concept of disciplinary power. This form of power is distinguished from other forms of power in Foucault's genealogy by its productivity. If discipline is carried out through consumption and consumption-oriented institutions, then the process can be viewed as both productive of the individual subject and reproductive of the social system. In both cases, prosumption appears to be implied.

## DISSATISFACTION IN AN AGE OF ABUNDANCE

Related to the above conversation regarding natural versus socially constructed needs is the social-psychological question of how and why unhappiness persists in an age of abundance. Human happiness is related to the two theories of needs because happiness is generally considered to be the outcome of the satisfaction of needs. While it is possible to imagine nature as being so cruel as to have created humans with needs that are impossible to satisfy, theorists who affirm that needs are, at root, the product of human nature tend to assume that there are certain achievable conditions under which needs can be satisfied and happiness can be achieved.

Marx, for example, thought that human needs could be met in a society that created conditions under which all humans are able to labor freely without coercion or alienation. However, other essentialist thinkers were less optimistic. Freud thought that our natural needs – which fall into two categories, erotic and aggressive – are often in competition, both within ourselves and with the needs of others. This means that the best society can do is minimize conflict; however, there are better and worse ways of minimizing conflict. Freud saw repression as society's last resort. Repression occurs when society prevents its subjects from talking, or even thinking, about things that would otherwise produce conflict. Yet, implicit in Freud's ([1927] 1975) theory is the assumption that greater abundance would lead to a lessening of repression. For this reason, both Freudian (Adorno, Horkheimer, Fromm, and Marcuse) and post-Freudian (Foucault and Baudrillard) thinkers came to revise or reject Freud's theory of human needs in light of the post-World War II era of abundance.

Horkheimer and Adorno argued that Freud conflated true pleasure with mere gratification. The distinction they make between the two concepts is that while gratification is simply the fulfillment of basic erotic or aggressive needs, pleasure results from a struggle against certain obstacles to gratification. Or, in their words: "natural pleasure does not go beyond the appeasement of need. All pleasure is social. It originates in alienation" (Horkheimer & Adorno [1944] 1997: 105).

Pleasure cannot be given; it must be won. Because mass culture is essentially unidirectional, it can only produce gratification. In fact, pleasure is a threat to the capitalist system which relies on mass culture to breed passivity; this is because pleasure is a process and it must be active. Thus, to ensure its own flourishing, capitalism must restrict the pleasure process, thereby impinging on happiness. They explain: "Enjoyment becomes the object of manipulation, until, ultimately, it is entirely extinguished in fixed entertainments. The process has developed from the primitive festival to the modern vacation" (Horkheimer & Adorno [1944] 1997: 106). In this example, the festival – which interrupted the social order and always carried with it a risk that the order would never be re-established – is replaced by the vacation which no longer affords the experience of escaping frustrating social circumstances but, in fact, serves to strengthen the system.

Marcuse is similarly critical of consumer capitalism because he believes it uses the gratification of desire as a means of social control. Marketing has developed

as a system to channel desire in directions that reinforce capitalism and serve its need for perpetual expansion, even if such desires are contrary to the rational best interests of individual consumers. In order to maximize the productivity of workers, capitalism must convince them that it is worthwhile to continue to spend vast portions of their life working. It does so by constantly channeling their desire toward new commodities that can only be purchased by earning more wages. Marcuse believes, however, that if the influence of marketing over human desire could be broken, workers would realize that society has already developed the capacity to meet all their needs without major conflict arising. Thus, for Marcuse, unhappiness emerges because the needs of the capitalist system are no longer in sync with the best interests of most members of society.

Fromm also attributes unhappiness to the nature of the capitalist system, specifically, its ideology of individualism. Rather than questioning the social conditions in which we are never really satisfied, we are told – and believe – that happiness is just one purchase away. Other people, we are encouraged to believe, are in competition with us and serve as barriers to our own satisfaction. As such, our consumption patterns are no longer consistent with our subsistence-based, or social, needs. Fromm explains: “our craving for consumption has lost all connection with the real needs of man. Originally, the idea of consuming more and better things was meant to give man a happier, more satisfied life. Consumption was a means to an end, that of happiness. It has now become an aim in itself” (1955: 134). Consumption is now fundamentally anti-social, and, therefore, makes us unhappy.

Foucault ([1976] 1990) breaks with the basic tenets of Freudian thought by attacking the concept of repression (and, by implication, the concept of natural desires) and instead argues that virtually every aspect of human subjectivity is the outcome of social processes. Foucault argues that, ironically, we have learned to take perverse pleasure in our own repression. Thus, instead of repression and happiness being disproportionately related, they have a far more complex, non-linear relationship. While Foucault seldom addresses consumption directly, the implication of his work is that repression may actually encourage consumption by creating desire for those things we feel we should not, or cannot, have (e.g., pornography, drugs, gambling, violent entertainment, etc.).

Not only does Baudrillard reject the idea that certain needs are universal to human nature, but, more radically, he dismisses the longstanding philosophical assumption (dating, at least, back to Socrates) that humans seek to be happy. He argues:

The ideological force of the notion of happiness does not originate in a natural propensity on the part of each individual to realize that happiness for himself. It derives, socio-historically, from the fact that the myth of happiness is the one which, in modern societies, takes up and embodies *the myth of Equality*. All the political and sociological virulence with which that myth [i.e., the myth of Equality] has been charged since the industrial revolution and the revolutions of the nineteenth century has been transferred to Happiness. (Baudrillard [1970] 1998: 49)

Baudrillard goes on to explain that, in democratic society, material measures of inequality have been supplanted by measures of internal well-being as the founda-

tion for discourses regarding justice. That is to say, there has been an ideological shift in society away from the belief that justice describes a set of circumstances where everyone has equal access to material wealth to one where "all men are equal before need and before the principle of satisfaction" ([1970] 1998: 50). Under such logic, an unequal distribution of wealth should not matter as long as the supposed basic needs of all members of society are met. The result, as Baudrillard sees it, is that the ideology of happiness/well-being has become a mechanism to legitimate material inequality.

### CHOICE AND FREEDOM

The explosion of choices available to us is, of course, related, in no small part, to the great material wealth that emerged after World War II. While it is often assumed that happiness and freedom of choice are intimately related, it serves us well to remember the parable of the mule, who perished in indecision between which of two haystacks to eat first. Many social theorists are skeptical regarding the degree of freedom that emerges from all the ostensible choices brought about by great wealth. As a result, they are equally dubious about the relationship between those choices and happiness. So, while there may be implications for the previous discussion of happiness, let us shift our full attention to the issues of choice and freedom.

The debate over whether greater choice actually leads to greater freedom is, in many ways, an extension of the agency-structure debate, which has long been a major theme in the disciplinary discourse of (Continental) sociology. Of course, positions in such a complicated debate tend to be fairly sophisticated, so we can only loosely organize our discussion of various thinkers around this theme.

The thinkers associated with the Birmingham School are likely the best-known proponents of an agent-centered approach to understanding consumption and, as such, they tend to focus on individual experience. They conclude from this that individuals do, in fact, experience themselves as more free as a result of greater choice in the marketplace. As discussed above, the Birmingham School tends to view consumption as an active process of producing scripts for one's own experience. Thus, the more choices one has in the marketplace, the more tools one has in creating scripts for oneself. Or, as de Certeau puts it, these choices augment the consumer's freedom to become the "poets of their own affairs" ([1980] 2002: 34).

Structuralist thinkers, on the other hand, tend to examine the social forces which compel mass behavior. Marxists, for example, often argue that capitalism only provides the illusion of choice between various commodities, when the real and unthinkable choice is between the capitalist system and other systems of social organization. Brands, logos, and other features of a product just distract from the all-important question: through what set of social relations was this commodity produced? When we conceptualize choice only in terms of the qualities of a commodity, we fetishize it, forgetting that it is the labor that has gone into it which matters most. Taken to the extreme, the only relevant choice for a Marxist is the choice between alienated and unalienated labor.

Freudian theorists tend to focus on the manipulation of unconscious desire. A manipulated person might feel as though they are freely choosing to consume, while

their decision to purchase a particular product has been directly influenced by a set of factors of which the person is completely unaware. This is particularly of concern when these unconscious influences are the product of marketing tactics which seek to influence the behavior of a person in a way that benefits a company, regardless of whether this is in the best interest of the individual in question. For a psychoanalytic theorist, true freedom is only achieved when people are consciously aware of all their (often conflicting) motivations and, thus, can make rational choices.

Weber's work is also relevant here insofar as rationalization has penetrated into our patterns of consumption, so that, even if we have choices between various commodities, we do not have the freedom to escape the process of rationalization; in fact, rational systems control those choices. In *The McDonaldization of Society*, Ritzer (2011) describes four dimensions of rationalization (i.e., efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control) and observes that each has become increasingly characteristic of consumer culture. However, Ritzer (2010b) also notes that the rationalization of consumption can be counter-productive for capitalism because too much of it causes consumers to become disenchanted. As a result, those who control the "cathedrals of consumption" (e.g., retailers) have employed a number of strategies to re-enchant consumption, including the production of spectacles (see Debord [1967] 1983), including dazzling (if inefficient) arrays of choices. Thus, ironically, through this irrational range of choices, consumers are actually more tightly bound in the iron cage of rationality.

Ideas in Foucault's work on sexuality are also applicable to the question of consumer freedom. Foucault ([1976] 1990, 1981) contrasts sexuality (which is a social construct) with pleasure (which can only fully be derived from "limit experiences" that produce ruptures in the experience of otherwise well-disciplined bodies). He is skeptical of sexuality because it cannot be separated from power and acts as a mechanism to discipline bodies and to regulate society by perpetuating coercive norms that tend to reinforce the status quo. The relationship between power and sexuality is complex. Individuals almost invariably take pleasure in both exercising and resisting pleasure. Foucault explains that pleasure and power operate as a double spiral: "The pleasure that comes from exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it" ([1976] 1990: 45). Consumption exhibits a similar relationship to power: marketers continuously capitalize on consumers' conflicting desires to be both normal and rebellious. When consumers purchase and enjoy commodities, they may be achieving happiness, but they are simultaneously reinforcing a system of social norms that produces and controls them.

Baudrillard also sees consumer society as a sort of trap. Choice is not synonymous with freedom insofar as we are never free to escape constant imperatives to make choices as consumers or to escape consumer society altogether. He says: "The carefully sustained mystique [...] of individual satisfaction and choice [...] is the very ideology of the industrial system, justifying all its arbitrary power and all the collective nuisances it generates: dirt, pollution, deculturation. In fact, the consumer is sovereign in a jungle of ugliness where *freedom of choice has been thrust upon him*" (Baudrillard [1970] 1998: 72).

Moreover, Baudrillard believes that even those who resist the dominant forms of consumption are instrumental in producing new forms of consumption that ultimately serve to reinforce the overarching system (what he calls "the code"). For example, the green movement, which began by claiming that human consumption patterns were detrimental to the environment, has led to entire green industries which market eco-friendly or sustainable products to Earth-conscious consumers. However, this paradox of resistance serving to reinforce the system is, perhaps, clearest in the case of fashion. Traditionally, fashion has established a set of norms from which only those with the highest status can afford to deviate, yet those deviations carried out by elites form the basis of future fashions (Simmel [1904] 2000; Bourdieu [1979] 1984). More recently, it has been argued that contemporary fashion is championed as the primary method through which people individuate themselves from one another, yet they are simultaneously united by the common purpose of self-individuation (Lipovetsky [1987] 2002). In such postmodern conceptions, desire is a moving target; thus happiness is ephemeral at best.

Bourdieu, in his *magnum opus*, *Distinction* ([1979] 1984), develops a complex account of the relationship between agency and structure, and, as a result, produces a very nuanced view of human choice that merits significant attention. Rather than "choice," Bourdieu prefers the term "taste." Taste is neither a spontaneous impulse, nor a hard-wired instinctual response; instead, taste describes a series of habits that are the unique product of experiences in a particular social milieu. When these habits – what Bourdieu calls *habitus* – are carried into a new social field, they determine how an actor will respond to the field. For Bourdieu, choice has little to do with freedom. Instead, choice is a mechanism through which members of certain classes can demonstrate their status and, as such, distinguish themselves from members of other classes.

### THE SOCIOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION AND THE "GREAT RECESSION"

In our penultimate section, we now turn to a discussion of the continued relevance of consumption theory to current events, namely, the "Great Recession" that continues to unfold at the time of this chapter's writing. Consumers certainly bear some of the responsibility for the Great Recession that began in late 2007. However, to focus only on what we, the consumers, did is, at least to some degree, to "blame the victim" (Ryan 1976). We are not saying that consumers are innocent; that they did not play a significant role in creating their own economic problems (greed manifested in too much consumption and debt; naïveté about the problems they were creating for themselves). However, there *is* another side to this and that is what "they" did to consumers. They, in this case, are the financial wizards, the bankers, the loan officers, the real estate tycoons and brokers, marketers and advertisers, what is left of our "captains of industry" (Veblen 1899), and the "captains of commerce" (e.g., those who run the thriving Wal-Mart, as well as those who ran the defunct Circuit City). Of course, a focus on what "they" did is as one-sided as concerning ourselves only with what consumers did. However, there are good reasons to deal with what they did. After all, it was they who:

- created the shiny new financial tools (derivatives, credit default swaps);
- created the innovative new mortgages (interest-only payments – and even those payments could be waived from month to month and added to the principal – no down payments, adjustable loans, “liar loans” – encouraging people to lie about their financial status, especially their income);
- created the marketing and advertising campaigns designed to lead us to buy all sorts of things (the George Foreman grill, Viagra) we don’t need and often don’t use;
- managed great corporations (GM, Chrysler, AIG, Lehman Brothers) into the ground;
- designed cathedrals of consumption such as Wal-Mart, IKEA, and Carrefour to lead us into hyperconsumption by, for example, using loss leaders and the illusion of low price (“the high cost of low price,” of “cheap”);
- designed other cathedrals of consumption – Las Vegas casino-hotels, great cruise ships (the newest can handle 6,000 passengers), Disney Worlds, mega-malls – luring us to them (to spend large sums of money) by offering great spectacles;
- were, and are, integral parts of a capitalist system, especially the extremes of the American capitalist system, whose greed and rapaciousness very nearly led to its self-destruction.

Thus, we want to focus here on what “they” did to consumers, although it needs to be clear that consumers also bear a significant amount of responsibility for the Great Recession.

Even though the American economy is increasingly dominated by consumption (roughly 70 percent of the economy is accounted for by consumption), most popular, journalistic, and scholarly attention to it focuses on issues relating to production (productivity, factories, manual workers, labor unions, unemployment rates, and the like). Yet, consumers rather than factory workers are at the heart of the American economy. Thus, if we want to truly understand the Great Recession, or much else about the American economy, we cannot rely solely or even primarily on explanations that relate to production; we also need to look at the role of consumption in the near-total collapse of the economy.

What are some of the major consumer-related causes of the Great Recession?

For decades the US market has been inundated with cheap products (e.g., shiny electronic gadgets from Asia) that are often far more expensive in their countries of origin. These have proven hard, even foolish, to resist. As many have demonstrated, most recently Ellen Shell (2009) in *Cheap*, there is a high cost to low price (an idea most often associated with Wal-Mart) and one of those costs is its role in spurring hyperconsumption.

Then there is the seemingly low-priced (but nonetheless highly profitable) industrial food (see the documentary, *Food Inc.* [Kenner 2009]) that increasingly dominates our supermarket shelves and lies at the heart of the success of fast-food restaurants, as well as higher-end restaurant chains. Inexpensive industrial food (an orange likely costs more than a hamburger at McDonald’s) also has the same high costs, as well as its devastating effect on the health of consumers (obesity, diabetes, especially in children).

There are the billions, probably trillions, of dollars all sorts of companies have invested to make products alluring, even impossible to resist. Marketing and advertising are the obvious villains (see the TV series, *Mad Men*) here in leading consumers, usually unwittingly, in the direction of the consumption of the wrong products (e.g., cigarettes in the era of *Mad Men*) and hyperconsumption.

We must not forget the role played by the US government (and others) in inducing Americans, especially those in the middle class, to consume. There are, for example, the long-running tax breaks such as deductions for mortgage payments (interest, taxes) that help fuel home-building and -buying. Then, there are the post-9/11 pronouncements by New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani and President George Bush that we needed to get out and shop (and Robert Reich's response asking when it had become our public duty to consume – of course, it had and that responsibility continues). Pronouncements and policies after the onset of the Great Recession and to this day include:

- stimulus packages, tax rebates, as well as fears about the latter that people would save the money and not spend it on consumption;
- worry over the continuing unwillingness to consume and the *increase* in the savings rate (after decades worrying about our minuscule savings rate);
- the government sponsored vehicle trade-in program, “Cash for clunkers”; \$8,000 rebates for first-time home buyers, etc.

There is clearly a fundamental contradiction here: the government abhors and critiques the causes of the Great Recession (at least publicly) – especially hyperconsumption and hyperdebt – but it cannot countenance a slow-growing, let alone a smaller, economy and the lower tax revenues associated with less consumption. The government feels the need to stimulate the economy in general, and consumption in particular, leading to at least the eventual possibility of renewed hyperconsumption and hyperdebt.

Then there is the fact that great efforts are made to lure consumers to consume, often excessively. Our great “cathedrals of consumption” (Ritzer 2010b) – shopping malls, casino-hotels, theme parks, and cruise ships – are designed to do just that. However, this process can be seen in broader, more global terms.

The consumer represents a different challenge to the capitalist than the worker since consumers cannot be forced into behaving in desired ways; rather, they need to be cajoled into such behaviors. In this context, Walt Disney believed that what was needed was the construction of “weinies” in order to attract consumers and to lead them in the directions that you want them to go. In the context of Disney World, weinies are highly visible attractions (mountains, castles, and the like) to which virtually all visitors will find themselves drawn. Thus, they move in the way that Disney management wants them to move and they do so without anyone telling them where they should go and how they should get there. This allows for the efficient movement of large numbers of visitors who pay a high price of admission to the park. Furthermore, they are led to pass many kiosks, shops, restaurants, and the like, where they can spend even more money.

At a broader, more global level, we want to argue that cities, even countries, have long built weinies in order to draw people – people who, once they are there, are

likely to spend large sums of money consuming all sorts of goods and services. This is a key aspect of what Hannigan (1998) called the "fantasy city." People are drawn to geographic locales, even specific cathedrals of consumption, because of the fantasy that they seem to offer.

It could be argued that the Eiffel Tower, built for the 1889 World's Fair and just over 1,000 feet high, was such a weinie. (Of course, the fairs themselves are created to draw tourists and, as consumption sites, and are forerunners of today's theme parks and shopping malls. It is often the case, as was true of the Eiffel Tower, that the weinies remain after the fair ends and serve as continuing magnets for later tourists – another example is the Space Needle in Seattle built for the 1962 World's Fair.) The Eiffel Tower was the tallest structure in the world until it was surpassed in 1930 by the Chrysler Building in New York City and within a year by the Empire State Building (at 1,250 feet). The "arms race" to have the world's tallest building (and tourist and consumer magnet) heated up in the ensuing years, both in New York City (with the ill-fated World Trade Center being taller than the Empire State Building) and in other major cities – Taipei 101 in Taipei, Taiwan (1,441 feet), the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (1,482 feet), and the Shanghai World Financial Center (1,555 feet).

However, the weinie (to end all weinies? – probably not) has reached new heights in Dubai, the society that brought, or at least attempted to bring, consumer society as a whole to heights that exceeded even those of the home (and still the center) of consumer culture, the US. The tallest weinie of them all is now Burj Khalifa which is 2,717 feet tall, has 160 stories, and is taller than the Chrysler Building placed on top of the Empire State Building. (Burj Khalifa is modeled after Frank Lloyd Wright's proposed [fanciful, never built] pencil-thin Mile High Illinois which was to have been 528 stories.) Why was such a tall structure built in an area in which there was plenty of desert on which to build? It is not as if it was being squeezed into limited and costly space on the island of Manhattan. Dubai was asserting its arrival on the world stage in much the same way as other cities (Paris, New York, Seattle) had done in the past. This weinie was built to be a very visible and widely publicized symbol of the fact that Dubai had arrived as a fantasy city, and, more importantly, to help lure large numbers of visitors and consumers to Dubai.

Consumers lured into hyperconsumption in these and many other ways spent too much, went too far into debt (see below), and thereby contributed to the Great Recession. This was clear not only in the US, but globally. It was especially clear in Dubai. At the end of 2009, Dubai World, the state-owned company that was behind the development of many of Dubai's cathedrals of consumption, announced that it was unable to make payments due on its estimated \$60–\$100 billion debt and was negotiating with its creditors for at least a six-month extension. In fact, the Burj Dubai was quickly renamed the Burj Khalifa when the emir of nearby Abu Dhabi bailed out Dubai World, at least in the short run, with a loan of \$10 billion (later increased to \$20 billion).

Many, if not all, of Dubai's cathedrals of consumption are in trouble and their current value is likely much less than the amount owed on each of them; they are, in the parlance of the ongoing mortgage crisis in the US, "underwater." More generally, as the crisis in Dubai unfolds, it may be possible to think of it as an entire landscape of consumption that has acquired the dubious status of perhaps being

the largest “dinosaur of consumption” in a world of consumption increasingly characterized by them (Ritzer 2010b).

Dubai’s future is cloudy and depends, as do the futures of all the fantasy cities, on the ability of the global economy to emerge from the recession and boom once again. A specific factor in Dubai’s case is the willingness of oil-rich neighbors such as Abu Dhabi (Dubai has little oil) to continue to bankroll it, and, more generally, another (very likely) spike in oil prices.

Finally, the Great Recession was, to a large degree, brought about by excesses in the credit market (for example, for home mortgages), and those excesses are important not only economically but because of their social and cultural nature and impact. Furthermore, that recession (if that is what it is) and its impact are, as we write, not merely of historical interest, but they are likely to continue to affect the economic, social, and cultural world for decades to come.

As in most other areas related to consumption, the United States took the lead in many aspects of the credit industry (especially the invention of the modern credit card). Credit is an integral part of consumer culture. The latter, like credit, is an area in which the United States has been in the forefront globally. However, just as they have not done much work on credit, American sociologists have also not been major contributors to the literature on consumer culture and consumption.

Similar to the concept of behavior-manipulating ‘weinies’ discussed above with respect to architecture, the credit industry also created irresistible incentives to lure consumers into debt. This was clear, for example, in the provision of low-interest, or even no-interest, mortgage loans in order to lure consumers into buying homes that, in many cases, they could not afford. Millions of people who bought homes under such conditions are “underwater,” and in many cases they have walked away from their homes or lost them due to foreclosure.

In this context, the credit card is an especially important phenomenon (see, for example, Ritzer 1995; Klein 1999; Calder 2001; Manning 2001; Warren & Tyagi 2004). Various efforts have been made to lure people into acquiring and using credit cards. Those cards, in turn, have played a great role in what Simmel ([1907] 1978) in his analysis of money called the “temptation to imprudence” (see Ritzer 1995 for an application of this idea to credit cards).

Much insight into how the credit card industry controls its users, and leads them to be imprudent, is found in Doncha Marron’s (2009) *Consumer Credit in the United States: A Sociological Perspective from the 19th Century to the Present*. In this analysis Marron relies heavily on the theories of Michel Foucault, especially his notion of governmentality. This is how Marron defines this often elusive concept: “Governmentality emphasizes the continuous inventiveness and resourcefulness of authorities, whether individuals, institutions, or diverse actors acting under the power rubric of the state, toward understanding and framing the actions of others, economic processes, or the course of perceived problems and issues” (2009: 9).

Marron offers a “grand narrative” (contra Foucault’s idea of a genealogy) which deals with a transition from government of credit by external forces (especially the state) to self-government; to the government of the self as far as credit is concerned. This, too, connects with Foucault’s thinking, especially his later work on the “care of the self.” It is also tied to the work of a number of other contemporary European theorists – Giddens, Beck, and Bauman. They argue that people are increasingly

required to create and re-create themselves. In recent years the burden for much of life has shifted away from the state and other larger social structures and now falls increasingly on individuals; this is, or at least was, as true in the realm of credit as anywhere else.

Consistent with the Foucauldian roots of his work, Marron argues that this process of self-control has a much more pernicious effect than external forms of control (such as through the Panopticon in the prisons analyzed by Foucault); it penetrates deep into the individual: "formal mechanisms of government are embedded in the very 'soul' of the consumer. Such control over credit use *penetrates deep into the subjective state* of the individual; individualized and internalized, it embodies not only the individual's generalized injunction to self-government but an increasing reflexivity over the means by which they are assessed and judged by lenders" (Marron 2009: 216–17).

Marron connects this argument to another grand narrative of the shift from "welfare-interventionism" to "neoliberalism." In the former, the state intervened in many sectors of society, including credit, through the creation and enforcement of various laws and agencies. The goal, at least ostensibly, was to help individuals by controlling forces and structures that might do them harm. Of course, in the process, and also often directly, the state exerted control over individuals as well. However, in recent years, and very much related to the conditions that gave rise to the Great Recession, we have seen the decline of the welfare state and the hegemony of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005). In this context, issues that relate to credit are increasingly the responsibility of those who receive the credit. They are to manage their credit, as well as the agencies that offer it, on their own with little or no help from the state. Marron calls this the "*new prudentialism*" and links it directly to neoliberalism. The new prudentialism "emphasizes the responsibility of individuals, households, and communities for their own risks" (Marron 2009: 175).

In the process, and in line with neoliberalism, control over the structures that dominate the credit business (e.g., the banks) was loosened or eliminated. This, of course, was another huge factor in the Great Recession since these businesses were free to do pretty much as they wanted; to take risks that very nearly sank the global economy. In terms of the issue of credit, neoliberalism freed up financial institutions to use all sorts of questionable methods in order to lure people into debt – into levels of debt many clearly could not handle and would never be able to repay. Thus, individuals were "made to be free" and as such were free to be lured into – and in fact rushed out to gobble up – huge amounts of credit. They were, in effect, both allowed and eager to ruin their own lives in much the same way that the national and global economies were wrecked by, among other things, excessive borrowing by many countries, including the United States. This reminds us of C. Wright Mills's thinking on "private troubles" (here, personal debt) and "public issues" (the recklessness of American – and other – financial institutions and of national governments), as well as their relationship to one another (in this case the way they worked in tandem to produce disastrous economic consequences for almost everyone in many places throughout the world).

What mattered most in the credit industry in earlier epochs was the "character" of the individual seeking credit. Over time, however, individuals increasingly became more abstract entities. They were eventually reduced to a series of numbers (espe-

cially their credit, or FICO, score), which determined their risk level, their credit-worthiness, and eventually whether or not they received credit, as well as how much credit they received. For their part, the financial institutions also created all sorts of abstract financial instruments (e.g., derivatives). More specifically, banks no longer created mortgage loans that they held themselves, but rather immediately sold them off to other financial institutions to be sliced and diced, combined with many other mortgages, and sold off as financial instruments that had little relationship to any concrete piece of real estate. It was the abstraction of this system, the fact that it was so detached from real consumers and real estate properties, that made it so easy for the entire system to spin out of control with so many wide-ranging and devastating consequences.

### CONCLUSION

We have organized this overview of the sociology of consumption under three broad headings. First, we discussed recent substantive developments in the sociology of consumption as they relate to identity, cultural appropriation, value, and risk and the environment. Second, we laid out three central issues in the history of social theory pertaining to consumption – the relation between production and consumption, whether happiness is the product of desires that are natural or whether it is the result of desires that are socially constructed, and whether choice is agentic or structured. Third, we discussed the applicability of a consumption-oriented perspective to the development and continuation of the Great Recession. The motivation behind this last section is to dispel the view that the sociology of consumption deals, in the main, with trivial issues. The fact that it can be related in such a meaningful way to such a monumentally important issue as the recession demonstrates, we think, the power of this often underestimated and under-utilized type of sociology.

Whether or not the reader is convinced by the application to the Great Recession, the fact remains that the sociology of consumption is destined to become increasingly important because consumption can only grow in importance. The US may become a smaller player in this area in the future, but the emerging global economic powerhouses – China and India – are likely to shift, and to some degree already are shifting, at least some attention from production to how to spend some of their new-found wealth on consumption.

### References

- Adorno, T. W. ([1966] 1973) *Negative Dialectics*. New York: Continuum.
- Amy-Chinn, D. (2006) "This Is Just for Me(n)." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6(2): 155–75.
- Arvidsson, A. (2001) "From Counterculture to Consumer Culture." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1(1): 47–71.
- Arvidsson, A. (2005) "Brands." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5(2): 235.
- Arvidsson, A. (2006) *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Baudrillard, J. ([1970] 1998) *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage.

- Baudrillard, J. ([1981] 1995) *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2001) "Consuming Life." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1(1): 9-29.
- Bauman, Z. (2007) "Collateral Casualties of Consumerism." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7(1): 25-56.
- Botterill, J. (2007) "Cowboys, Outlaws and Artists." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7(1): 105.
- Bourdieu, P. ([1979] 1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Brace-Govan, J. and I. Binay (2010) "Consumption of Disposed Goods for Moral Identities: A Nexus of Organization, Place, Things and Consumers." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 9(1): 69-82.
- Bruns, A. (2008) *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Producers*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Calder, L. (2001) *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Caldwell, M. L. (2004) "Domesticating the French Fry." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4(1): 5-26.
- Campbell, C. (1995) "The Sociology of Consumption." In D. Miller (ed.), *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies*. London: Psychology Press, pp. 95-124.
- Campbell, C. (2005) "The Craft Consumer." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5(1): 23-42.
- Chen, K. and D. Morley (1996) *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Connolly, J. and A. Prothero (2008) "Green Consumption." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(1): 117-45.
- Cook, D. T. (2008) "The Missing Child in Consumption Theory." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(2): 219-43.
- Cook, D. T. and S. B. Kaiser (2004) "Betwixt and Be Tween." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4(2): 203-27.
- Corrigan, P. (1997) *The Sociology of Consumption: An Introduction*. London: Sage.
- Coté, M. and J. Pybus (2007) "Learning to Immaterial Labour 2.0: MySpace and Social Networks." *Ephemera Theory and Politics in Organizations* 7(1): 88-106.
- Crockett, D. (2008) "Marketing Blackness." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(2): 245-68.
- Debord, G. ([1967] 1983) *Society of the Spectacle*. London: Rebel Press.
- De Certeau, M. ([1980] 2002) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Dolan, C. S. (2005) "Fields of Obligation." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5(3): 365-89.
- Entwistle, J. (2002) "The Aesthetic Economy." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2(3): 317-39.
- Foucault, M. ([1975] 1995) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, M. ([1976] 1990) *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, An Introduction*. New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (1981) "How an 'Experience-Book' Is Born." In *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*. Trans. R. J. Goldstein and J. Cascaito. New York: Semiotext(e), pp. 25-42.
- Freud, S. ([1927] 1975) *The Future of an Illusion*, Standard edn. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Fromm, E. (1955) *The Sane Society*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications.
- Gabriel, Y. and T. Lang (2008) "New Faces and New Masks of Today's Consumer." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(3): 321-40.

- Gaviria, P. R. and C. Bluemelhuber (2010) "Consumers' Transformations in a Liquid Society: Introducing the Concepts of Autobiographical-Concern and Desire-Assemblage." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 9(2): 126–38.
- Green, N. (2001) "How Everyday Life Became Virtual." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1(1): 73–92.
- Halkier, B. (2001) "Consuming Ambivalences." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1(2): 205–24.
- Hall, S. (1992) "Encoding/Decoding." In S. Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 1972–79. London: Routledge, pp. 128–38.
- Halnon, K. B. and S. Cohen. (2006) "Muscles, Motorcycles and Tattoos." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6(1): 33–56.
- Hannigan, J. (1998) *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis*. London: Routledge.
- Harvey, D. (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hearn, A. (2008) "Meat, Mask, Burden." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(2): 197–217.
- Hebdige, D. (1981) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge.
- Hoggart, R. (1998) *The Uses of Literacy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Holliday, R. and A. Cairnie (2007) "Man Made Plastic." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7(1): 57–78.
- Horkheimer, M. and T. W. Adorno ([1944] 1997) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso.
- Humphreys, A. and K. Grayson (2008) "The Intersecting Roles of Consumer and Producer: A Critical Perspective on Co-Production, Co-Creation and Prosumption." *Sociology Compass* 2(3): 963–80.
- Jantzen, C., P. Østergaard, and C. M. S. Vieira (2006) "Becoming a 'Woman to the Backbone'." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6(2): 177–202.
- Kenner, R. (2009) *Food, Inc.* Magnolia Home Entertainment.
- Klein, L. (1999) *It's in the Cards: Consumer Credit and the American Experience*. New York: Praeger.
- Kotler, P. (1986) "Prosumers: A New Type of Consumer." *Futurist* 20(5): 24–8.
- Kroløkke, C. (2009) "Click a Donor." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9(1): 7–30.
- Laden, S. (2003) "Who's Afraid of a Black Bourgeoisie?" *Journal of Consumer Culture* 3(2): 191–216.
- Lamont, M. and V. Molnár (2001) "How Blacks Use Consumption to Shape Their Collective Identity." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1(1): 31–45.
- Langer, B. (2004) "The Business of Branded Enchantment." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4(2): 251–77.
- Laufer, W. S. (2003) "Social Accountability and Corporate Greenwashing." *Journal of Business Ethics* 43(3): 253–61.
- Lipovetsky, G. ([1987] 2002) *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Manning, R. D. (2001) *Credit Card Nation: The Consequences of America's Addiction to Debt*. New York: Basic Books.
- Marcuse, H. (1955) *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 8th edn. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1964) *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Marron, D. (2009) *Consumer Credit in the United States: A Sociological Perspective from the 19th Century to the Present*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marx, K. ([1857–8] 1973) *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. New York: Random House.

- Marx, K. ([1885] 1907) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Chicago: C. H. Kerr and Company.
- Marx, K. and F. Engels (1948) *The Communist Manifesto*, new edn. New York: International Publishers.
- Moisio, R., E. J. Arnould, and L. L. Price (2004) "Between Mothers and Markets." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4(3): 361-84.
- Neilson, L. A. (2010) "Boycott or Buycott? Understanding Political Consumerism." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 9(3): 214-27.
- Neves, L. M. P. (2004) "Cleanness, Pollution and Disgust in Modern Industrial Societies." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4(3): 385-405.
- O'Reilly, T. (2005) "What is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software." September 30. <http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>
- Possamai, A. (2002) "Cultural Consumption of History and Popular Culture in Alternative Spiritualities." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2(2): 197-218.
- Prahalad, C. and V. Ramaswamy (2004) "Co-creation Experiences: The Next Practice in Value Creation." *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 18(3): 5-14.
- Redmond, S. (2003) "Thin White Women in Advertising." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 3(2): 170-90.
- Ritzer, G. (1995) *Expressing America: A Critique of the Global Credit Card Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Ritzer, G. (2010a) "Focusing on the Prosumer: On Correcting an Error in the History of Social Theory." In *Prosumer Revisited*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, pp. 61-79.
- Ritzer, G. (2010b) *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Continuity and Change in the Cathedrals of Consumption*, 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Ritzer, G. (2011) *The McDonaldization of Society*, 6th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Ritzer, G. and N. Jurgenson (2010) "Production, Consumption, Prosumption: The Nature of Capitalism in the Age of the Digital 'Prosumer'." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10(1): 13-36.
- Ritzer, G., D. Goodman, and W. Wiedenhof (2001) "Theories of Consumption." In G. Ritzer and B. Smart (eds.), *Handbook of Social Theory*. London: Sage, pp. 410-27.
- Ryan, W. (1976) *Blaming the Victim*. New York: Vintage.
- Sassatelli, R. (2007) *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics*. London: Sage.
- Sassatelli, R. and F. Davolio (2010) "Consumption, Pleasure and Politics." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10(2): 202-32.
- Schor, J. B. (1999) *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Schor, J. B. (2010) *Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth*. New York: Penguin.
- Schulz, J. (2006) "Vehicle of the Self." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6(1): 57-86.
- Schutz, A. (2004) "Rethinking Domination and Resistance: Challenging Postmodernism." *Educational Researcher* 33(1): 15-23.
- Shell, E. R. (2009) *Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture*. New York: Penguin.
- Shevchenko, O. (2002) "In Case of Fire Emergency." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2(2): 147-70.
- Simmel, G. ([1904] 2000) "The Philosophy of Fashion." In D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (eds.), *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*. London: Sage, pp. 187-218.
- Simmel, G. ([1907] 1978) *The Philosophy of Money*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

- Simmel, G. ([1911-12] 2000) "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture." In D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (eds.), *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*. London: Sage, pp. 55-74.
- Slater, D. (1999) *Consumer Culture and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Tapscott, D. and A. D. Williams (2006) *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*. New York: Portfolio.
- Thompson, C. J. and G. Coskuner-Balli (2007) "Enchanting Ethical Consumerism." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7(3): 275-303.
- Thompson, C. J. and D. B. Holt (2004) "How Do Men Grab the Phallus?" *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4(3): 313-38.
- Toffler, A. (1980) *The Third Wave*. New York: Bantam.
- Tulloch, J. and D. Lupton (2002) "Consuming Risk, Consuming Science." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2(3): 363-83.
- Tyler, M. (2009) "Growing Customers." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9(1): 55-77.
- Veblen, T. (1899) *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Reissue. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Warde, A. (1994) "Consumption, Identity-Formation and Uncertainty." *Sociology* 28(4): 877-98.
- Warren, E. and A. W. Tyagi (2004) *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Parents Are Going Broke*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wells, K. (2002) "Reconfiguring the Radical Other." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2(3): 291-315.
- West, E. (2010) "Expressing the Self through Greeting Card Sentiment." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13(5): 451.
- Wilk, R. (2006) "Bottled Water." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6(3): 303-25.
- Williams, R. (1995) *The Sociology of Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Willis, P. E. (1978) *Profane Culture*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Wissinger, E. (2009) "Modeling Consumption." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9(2): 273-96.
- Wright, D. (2005) "Commodifying Respectability." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5(3): 295-314.
- Zwick, D. and J. D. Knott (2009) "Manufacturing Customers: The Database as New Means of Production." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9(2): 221-47.
- Zwick, D., S. K. Bonsu, and A. Darmody, (2008) "Putting Consumers to Work." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(2): 163.