

INTRODUCTION TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION

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Historically, sociologists have never paid a great deal of attention to consumption. When not considered the mere reflection of production it has been treated as a derivative of distribution, a matter of the availability of resources rather than of who consumes what. When attention was devoted to actual consumption behaviour, it was most often as a branch of social pathology, concerned with social problems of insufficient nutritious food, excess alcohol, inadequate health care, too many cigarettes. Only rarely did the sociological classics examine consumption for its own sake. But recently this has changed, hence the opportunity to compile a special edition containing articles that represent the range of new scholarship in the area.

There are many reasons for the developing interest in consumption, some social and political, some sociological. Class dealignment and low levels of working class electoral support for the Labour Party in Britain have prompted examination of alternative social divisions. Some political pundits have attributed changing working class behaviour to the absorption of consumerist motivations – facilitating the second coming of the embourgeoisement thesis. Another prominent vision has been of ‘the end of work’, of western societies in which the significance of labour, or at least paid work, is much reduced as a determinant of everyday life with consequently increased scope for leisure. The quite different scenario of the emergence of post-Fordism anticipates that flexible production will coincide with a shift from mass consumption to specialised niche consumer markets, a tendency fed by postmodernist sensibilities. Certainly an increasing number of products and services for sale expands opportunities for consumption. ‘Yuppies’, popularly characterised by their prodigious spending power and distinctive life-style, stand as a motif of a decade fascinated by consumer culture and sophisticated advertising. The same decade has, by contrast, seen the privatisation and re-commodification of public services, with potentially momentous effects. A crisis of the welfare state is also a crisis of consumption.

In response, sociological analysis of consumption has concentrated in two, as yet largely unconnected, fields. The first is a revival in the study of consumerism, which raises issues of the formation of taste, the pursuit of status and aspects of the experience of personal gratification. It lends itself to the analysis

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