CONSUMPTIO

A Sociological Analysis

ALAN WARDE

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Introduction

Consumption is a topic not far from mind when trying to understand the key features of our age. It is of popular public interest. It is of political significance because of its economic role and its impact on the environment. It is also of social significance because it is a way of marking social position. It is an issue of global reach with theoretical resonance in several disciplines internationally. It is a controversial topic with moral overtones, having many critics and many apologists.

As the magisterial account by Frank Trentmann (2016) shows, consumption has been a major preoccupation of populations and civilisations across the world since the mid fifteenth century. Nevertheless, the scope, scale and span of consumption grew precipitately in the second half of the twentieth century and has commanded increasing popular and political attention in the process. As incomes increased and the ability to mass-produce relatively cheap goods for private households became available—in the USA by 1950 and in Western Europe by the end of the 1960s—new levels and standards of consumption emerged. Thereupon, American and European social scientists turned their attention increasingly to the topic. Most of the early empirical research was conducted within the disciplines of economics, psychology and

marketing. Consumption, viewed primarily as purchase in economics, was examined through the statistical records of household expenditure, which revealed something about patterns of behaviour. Psychology was more concerned with identifiable motivations behind individual behaviour, exploring typically how values and attitudes affected preferences and behaviour. The emerging subject area of consumer behaviour pulled these studies together, often for commercial purposes. Topics of investigation included advertising and its effects, patterns of market segmentation, and the intersection of values, attitudes and purchases. More or less without exception, theoretical foundations lay in the freedom of choice and personal behaviour of 'the consumer', sometimes inflected by examining the influence of techniques of commercial persuasion and social and group contexts.

Consumption is a grand topic and it is not quite clear exactly where social scientific study should focus. It engages many disciplines. One of the big problems for studies of consumption has been the difficulty of multidisciplinary involvement and of finding a definition which might be suitable for the different disciplines. For years, Sociology had no better recourse than to Colin Campbell's (1995: 102) orienting 'simple working definition, one that identifies consumption as involving the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service'. This covers a lot of ground and makes studies of many different kinds relevant to understanding the phenomenon of consumption, including formal economic exchange, retailing, household management, public provision of waste services, and so on. Trentmann (2016: 1) adopts an equally broad and imprecise definition when he refers to consumption as 'the acquisition, flow and use of things'.

Consumption holds a morally ambivalent status and has often met with moral censure. It is thus controversial. Although omnipresent and ineradicable, consumption often seemed a rather frivolous topic for social scientific analysis. It touches on shopping, recreation, fashion, mass entertainment, pleasures, even popular pleasures, which may be seen to be less than serious matters for scientific investigation. However, it became much more visible in the second half of the twentieth century and many observers began to see affluent Western societies as driven by a logic of consumption. As Zygmunt Bauman (1988) put it, the ethos of consumer

society is the epitome of freedom, a region of choice and self-direction in a world largely otherwise experienced as duty and constraint. The tensions between this image and the fundamental mechanics of the social processes that underpin consumption are the core of this book. I argue that the image is distorted, the freedoms are partly illusion, and that the substance involves as much routine work as leisure, and needs as much as wants.

A record of a long intellectual journey of engagement with explanations of the nature of consumption in contemporary (Western) societies, this work is mostly driven by discontent with the dominant ways of explaining consumption. It consists of a series of closely related essays about the social scientific analysis of consumption. It deals with a set of intersecting themes which have been important in studies of consumption over the last 30 years. The topic came to have greater sociological prominence in a particular conjuncture in the development of European societies, towards the end of the Cold War, when East and West began different processes of greater marketisation.

From the vantage point of the UK during the 1980s a social earthquake appeared to be occurring. Sociology in Britain was animated by the policies of the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher, which in the realms of industrial production and provision of welfare services sought to reduce the role of the state by transferring activities to the sphere of markets. Nationalised industries were sold into the private sector, market incentives were introduced into public bureaucratic organisations, welfare payments and quality of services were reduced, and public sector (social) houses were offered for sale to their tenants at a fraction of their market value. In a discipline like sociology where inequality, standards of living, employment conditions and the resolution of social problems through government policy were central issues, and were typically understood through the lenses of Fabian social arithmetic, Keynesian welfare economics, and Weberian and neo-Marxist theory, the Thatcherite programme was very provocative.

Sociology had never considered state welfare provision in its post-Second World War form an unalloyed good. It was considered a means of policing the poor to maintain social control (Piven and Cloward 1977), preventing a fiscal crisis of the state (O'Connor 1973), averting crises

of legitimation (Habermas 1976), and for the effective reproduction of labour power (Castells 1977). Castells (1977) coined the concept of 'collective consumption' to refer to a wide range of state-provided services and insurance payments—free health care, universal and extended education, adequate housing, social security payments, unemployment benefits, pensions—which were designed to pacify the population and reproduce adequately a healthy, educated, technically skilled, acquiescent and committed labour force. It remains the case that European states provide many of these services, if now in a more truncated and less generous form than in the 1970s and 1980s. A substantial part of the costs of household consumption and provision of public services is still met by the state. However, the Thatcherite determination to dismantle significant parts of the edifice of social security through collectivised consumption was a turning point in the understanding and explanation of social integration and social cohesion in societies like Britain. It was also a source of new intellectual interest in consumption. It raised the question of how public and private sources of consumption were related and what the social consequences were.

When I first began to probe these questions in the late 1980s I found little that provided a satisfactory theoretical explanation of the nature of private consumption. I also found the political and ideological arguments unedifying. Since then, I have been looking for ways to achieve a synthesis that would be theoretically appropriate and empirically fruitful. Information about consumption and consumption behaviour piles up in handbooks and encyclopaedias but without inspiring much by way of sociological theory. This book is a testament to my theoretical disappointment and to a conviction that a sociological analysis of the conditions of consumption might add a vital dimension to understanding beyond that available in studies of the individual in psychology and economics.

The task, as I saw it in 1990, was to develop a set of concepts to support a sociological understanding of production and the processes and experience of consumption in all sectors (Warde 1992). This book records some ways of approaching that task. In doing so it summarises some of my own work, in critical disputation with the works of others, with a view to advancing a general sociological understanding of consumption.

Chapter 5 has been published elsewhere and is included with only minor alterations because it plays a pivotal role in presenting my general argument about how best to analyse consumption sociologically. A couple of other chapters have been available as long, and provisional, working papers which are not necessarily easy to access. I have also included short passages in several chapters which have previously seen the light of day in a variety of journal articles. Hopefully there is not too much repetition, although some of the premises of the main argument of the book are reiterated as required in more than one of the chapters.

I take up some key issues. What might be a proper definition of consumption? What is missing from current sociologies of consumption? What was the effect of the cultural turn on studies of consumption? What role does cultural consumption play in the ordering of contemporary societies? What is the relationship between taste and cultural consumption? What is the future of the political critique of consumption and consumerism? What kinds of social theory can be exploited in order to understand consumption better?

I argue for an approach to consumption that abstracts from selected schools of sociological thought. At root, I challenge the many illusions surrounding the notion of the sovereignty of the consumer. Dominant understandings of 'the consumer' continue to operate, with a model of a (partly) rational individual making endless independent decisions about what to purchase in the marketplace. For a proper understanding of consumption much more is required. I propose that consumption be seen as a moment in the many practices of everyday life which shifts attention to the appropriation and appreciation, as well as the acquisition, of goods and services. This extends consumption beyond the economic realm, helping to grasp why it is so important to people, how it is aligned with other aspects of everyday life, and how it is a fundamentally *social* activity. I focus on normalised, ordinary and routine aspects of consumption in everyday practice, as well as its spectacular and conspicuous elements. This can be used to throw light on activities in the market, rationales behind patterns of consumption, social distinction in cultural taste, and issues of environmental sustainability. I develop a framework for analysis which draws upon theories of practice and explores their application to topics of consumption.

It would no longer be feasible to review comprehensively the totality of scholarship across all disciplines dealing with consumption, for the body of writing is now vast. The arguments in this book are therefore centred on sociology, my own main discipline of expertise, but always in the awareness that it is difficult to isolate a terrain, or an approach, that is purely sociological. Studies of consumption, consumerism and the consumer in the last couple of decades have relied upon models of the voluntary action of individuals contextualised by webs of cultural meanings conceptualised as symbolic resources for individual choice. Previously consumption was primarily considered an aggregate outcome of market exchanges which had an economic, rather than cultural, function and rationale. The exploration by different disciplines of the intersection of individual choice and symbolic meanings produced a sometimes bewildering array of expositions. These have latterly generated a great deal of empirical research, driven by the precepts and methods of 'the cultural turn', which has much enhanced understanding of contemporary (and historical) consumption. Nevertheless, there has always been criticism of excessive reliance upon, and exaggerated respect for, choice and culture. Recent scholarship is reinforcing the criticism as the cultural turn wanes. The role of material factors and forces, the imperatives of practical action, and the presence of symbolically inert phenomena leave a space for reaction against the imperialism of cultural theory. As a consequence, axioms about the role of self and self-identity, associated with expansive consumer choice in markets, are reassessed. In particular, theories of practice have begun to penetrate the vacuum caused by the entropy of the scholarly platform based on individual choice and cultural expressivism.

A subtext of this book is to examine whether theories of practice can provide a coherent alternative conceptual framework and programme for research and analysis of consumption. My primary aim is to use theories of practice as a lens for looking at consumption, magnifying some things by bringing them into sharp focus, while allowing other entities to recede into the background, blurred or bracketed. This is a particular sense of theory in the social sciences. Drawing on Andrew Abbott's imaginative application of the model of fractal divisions, imported from chaos theory, to depict intellectual disputes within the

social sciences, I suggest that theoretical disputes are primarily a matter of shifting emphases between core, irreducible, conceptual oppositions. Practice theories, because of their particular emphases, do not eliminate culture and choice, but give them much less prominence in the description and explanation of actions constitutive of patterns of consumption.

Part I: The Development of the Sociology of Consumption: The first part of the book reviews the development of the social scientific study of consumption with particular emphasis on sociology. A distinctive and flourishing sociological approach requires some accommodation with surrounding disciplines that also have special interests in the subject. Sociology has had its terms of reference strongly shaped by economic and cultural theory. I give an account of the development of a sociology which inhabits a space between economics and cultural studies.

Chapter 2 reviews the role of sociology in research on the topic of consumption and seeks to explain some of the difficulties the discipline has faced and how they have been addressed. This topic area is one in which sociology has considerable unrealised potential. However, there are obstacles, one being the very definition of consumption, a matter of the construction of a scientific object to which sociology can orient successfully. Can consumption be defined and addressed in a manner which would consolidate a dedicated subdiscipline? Perhaps leaving the topic to specialists in areas like family, class, gender and popular culture is the optimal solution? The chapter assesses the possibilities of theoretical synthesis. It reviews the approaches of different disciplines and their respective emphases on individuals, collectivities, decisions and institutions. It asks what sort of a theory would be suitable for a sociology of consumption.

The third chapter reviews the major trends in the analysis of consumption since the 1960s, putting key arguments into historical and intellectual context. Influential general social theories—of mass society, neo-Marxism, neo-classical economics, postmodernism and globalisation—have all left their imprint, testimony to the co-evolution of economic thought, cultural analysis and social and anthropological

theory. I offer another somewhat formalised characterisation of the evolutionary process. I describe a period of dominance of economistic explanations in the third quarter of the twentieth century and their subsequent replacement with cultural explanations. I examine the development of threads in the sociology of consumption on both sides of the Atlantic. Three periods of development are identified: distant origins prior to the 1980s; the years between the early 1980s and mid 2000s when the influence of the cultural turn was paramount; and a third phase during the last decade where I see the cultural turn unwinding. The chapter then returns to the question of the overall viability or advisability of cultivating a specific sociology of consumption.

Part II: Consumption and Practice: The second part of the book outlines some of the fundamental features of an approach to consumption which is less beholden to the cultural turn in the social sciences and humanities. Chapter 4 is a rather technical discussion, probably only to be enjoyed by enthusiasts, to establish a definition of consumption which does not commence from individuals making choices under market mechanisms. It focuses on processes of appropriation, use and demolition. It pursues a chain of reasoning that derives from a concern with capturing the collective and social aspects of consumption, and how consumption is incorporated into everyday life. For much consumption is neither conspicuous nor glorious, occurring mostly as a secondary derivative of other activities which have greater significance for social organisation and personal experience.

Chapter 5 considers the potential of a revival of interest in theories of practice for the study of consumption. It presents an abridged account of the basic precepts of a theory of practice and extracts some broad principles for its application to the analysis of final consumption. The basic assumption is that consumption occurs as items are appropriated in the course of engaging in particular practices and that being a competent practitioner requires appropriation of the requisite services, possession of appropriate tools, and devotion of a suitable level of attention to the conduct of the practice. Such a view stresses the routine, collective and

conventional nature of much consumption but also emphasises that practices are internally differentiated and dynamic. Distinctive features of the account include its understanding of the way wants emanate from practices, of the processes whereby practices emerge, develop and change, of the consequences of extensive personal involvements in many practices, and of the manner of recruitment to practices.

Part III: Consumption, Taste and Power: Bourdieu potentially stands at the point of intersection between theories of practice and consumption. Probably the most distinguished sociologist of the second half of the twentieth century, he is an obligatory point of passage for those studying consumption from many disciplines (Miller 1995). His reputation was, however, fairly slow to become established in the USA, perhaps partly because of the lack of attention paid by American sociology to consumption until very recently. Bourdieu provides a weathervane for perturbations in the sociological atmosphere, inviting perpetual reconsideration and constant re-evaluation (Coulangeon and Lemel 2007; Hanquinet and Savage 2016; Silva and Warde 2010).

Distinction (Bourdieu 1984) was a magnificent, pioneering and powerful book, despite its many flaws. Bourdieu aimed to show how social groups, primarily social classes, used their cultural preferences to make judgements about the social worthiness of other groups, by means of their adherence to a system of high culture defined and imposed as legitimate by a dominant class. This proved enormously important in generating a progressive, and highly controversial, research programme for cultural sociology (Santoro and Solaroli 2016). It became also a major source of hypotheses about the social meaning of the consumption of goods and services, on which subject many academic disciplines based accounts of the social differentiation of the acquisition of commodities. In this guise some of its edge as a study of social power was lost, it being widely adopted by proponents of models of the expressive individual to address empirical questions about the subjective meaning of consumption behaviour.

Chapter 6 seeks to clarify for purposes of sociological analysis two overlapping concepts, field and practice. Its point of departure is an

observation about changes in direction in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. The concept of practice, upon which he worked extensively in the first half of his career, was demoted, replaced by the concept of field, previously a minor thematic concern. The initial focus of the paper is the relationship between the two concepts in *Distinction* where, uniquely, practice and field are given equal and explicit treatment, but where neither concept is very effectively applied and their relationship is obscure. His subsequent development of the concept of field, though very impressive, resulted in its becoming overstretched. The central claim of the chapter is that the remedy lies in the introduction of some elements of a reconfigured theory of practice. This permits consideration of aspects of conduct ignored or marginalised by Bourdieu in his depiction of the logic of fields, among which are non-strategic action, purposeful behaviour in non-competitive circumstances, internal goods arising from participation in practice, and discrepancies between competence and social position. The distinctive remits of the two concepts are specified and illustrated through a discussion of the practice of eating out and the culinary field. Some theoretical implications are discussed in conclusion.

Chapter 7 reflects on the use and abuse of the concept of cultural capital. The argument runs as follows. The concept of cultural capital has been widely used but in an ill-disciplined and unsystematic manner. This is partly the result of its imprecise formulation by Bourdieu. The concept has been employed usefully to examine education, the culture industries and social stratification, where it describes differential patterns of cultural taste and their association with particular social groups. It is, however, more important to attend to the way in which it operates as an asset for the transmission of privilege. That requires attention to its convertibility into other assets. Conversion depends more upon the institutional framework or environment than is commonly acknowledged—scholarly attention has been paid primarily to the strategies of individuals, with or without reference to the maximisation of 'capitals'. Attention should be paid to the processes which establish that some cultural capacities are virtuous and worthy of exceptional reward. The high culture system has done that in the past. However, times are a-changing and sociology is not yet certain how.

It is possible that cultural capital has come to have much diminished value in the contemporary world. It is also possible that it operates in a similar fashion to the past but with a different content. Or it may be that change in content has engaged new mechanisms of conversion and transmission. The sociological enterprise should be to examine institutional change in order to estimate how goods, activities and orientations in the cultural sphere contribute to the perpetuation of intergenerational privilege.

Part IV: Consumption, Critique and Politics: Consumption, as has been noted, is a morally ambivalent and politically contested notion. Sociology for a long time primarily saw it as an object for critique, finding in it many of the failings of life in Western societies. The problems generally held to characterise consumer society were neatly summed up by Schudson (1993) as being detrimental effects on character, waste, privatism, disregard for the people whose labour is embodied in commodities, and the deficient quality of mass-produced items. Chapter 8 reviews critiques of consumption and the consumer society in light of the precepts of theories of practice which posit an alternative approach to the understanding of social process, taking discrete practices to be the fundamental elements of social organisation. If we consider consumption to arise from the requirements of practices, rather than from the sovereign will of a consumer or from the logic of the social system as a whole, the cogency of some aspects of traditional critique is called into question. The grounds for mounting alternative types of critique are considered.

Sustainable consumption is a topic high on the political agenda. Chapter 9 begins by noting the challenge that contemporary patterns of personal and household consumption pose for mitigation of the effects of climate change. I argue that individualistic models of the consumer—both the sovereign consumer of economics and the expressive individual of cultural analysis—have left us with a limited and skewed understanding of the habits and routines underpinning consumption patterns. Moreover, the possible strategies for counteracting some of the alleged damaging consequences of mass consumption also look different, since predominant ones, like passing on information in 'educational' campaigns and trying to alter the values of individuals by political conversion, which

are generally rather ineffective in changing behaviour, appear to have limited relevance. The chapter then reviews some competing approaches to habit currently circulating in cognitive science, behavioural economics and the sociology of culture. It does this by way of an extended critique of the notion of 'nudging' as a technique for behaviour change. Although the idea of nudging has been heavily criticised, it does have some merits deserving of incorporation into a practice-theoretical account. It provides some intimations of an alternative model of action that, drawing upon insights derived from practice theory and pragmatism, emphasises repetition and routine. Some implications are drawn for the social scientific analysis of consumption and for policies for sustainability.

The final chapter consolidates the sociological critique of individualist explanations which, I have suggested, are both scientifically and politically problematic. Scientifically, such explanations obscure important substantive features of the process of consumption that are revealed through the lens of practice theory. The chapter reviews arguments against modelling choices, considers constraints on voluntary action, and assesses the strengths of a practice-theoretical alternative. I contend that the insights of practice theory could be the source of a new wave of sociological theory and explanation with the capacity to make a greater contribution to multidisciplinary approaches to consumption. After reflecting in addition on some possible limitations of theories of practice, the chapter concludes with some speculation about future lines of advance in the analysis of consumption.

Part I

The Development of the Sociology of Consumption

2

Sociology and Consumption

This chapter proceeds with brief sections on why consumption matters and how sociology might sit in an interdisciplinary field of scholarship. I then outline the reasoning behind fractal analysis. Thereafter I point to some features of the analysis of consumption which are distinctively canvassed by sociology. In particular, I discuss the challenge posed by some branches of sociology to the prevalent tendency to put the autonomous individual choice at the centre of analysis. That is a theme which runs throughout the book, drawing on traditions within sociology which give explanatory priority to social situations, social groups, social positioning and configurations of institutional arrangements.

1 Why Consumption Matters

Production of enough of the right kind of stuff has been an important preoccupation throughout most of human history. That such products—collected, crafted or bought—would get used, would be 'consumed', was never much in doubt. The problems associated with supporting human life have mostly been ones of the scarcity or interrupted availability of necessary goods and services, always subject to the qualification of

their unequal distribution. Susan Strasser (1999) indicates the lengths Americans went to in the late nineteenth century to avoid waste, by repairing and recycling objects to an extent unimaginable in advanced capitalist societies in the early twenty-first century. There was a recycling industry (and an informal sector, too) throughout the nineteenth century in the USA, fascinating in its organisation of the delivery of items and collecting of rags and pots, so that it was not the frugality of the consumer that accounted for the outcome, although in poorer times the small economic incentives involved may have encouraged participation, but the existence of an infrastructure for making recycling plausible, simple and costless. People also cultivated skills to reuse and repair things, but competences disappeared during the twentieth century. Thus, during World War II, when saving things, giving things back to be turned into war materials, and recycling and repair became a patriotic duty, some potential resources could no longer be made use of. Stories of the erratic availability of consumer goods in the USSR remind us that aligning production to consumption may be hard, such that not everything that is produced can be made use of, but in general people have found little difficulty in consuming whatever their mode of economic organisation could supply (Gronow 2003). Today, moral panics about the extent of 'waste' suggest a different scenario. People put things in the cupboard, the loft, or indeed commercial repositories devoted to storage of excess possessions surplus to current requirements. Wilhite and Lutzenhiser (1999) coined a nice phrase, the 'just-in-case' mode, which captures how people overstock, keeping extra bedrooms and large cars to use should all the family return at once, an eventuality so rare as to be nugatory. Even this simple example suggests reasons why consumption might come to seem a more important topic for analysis than before. It is merely compounded by concerns about sustainability in the light of climate change. So whereas in the past consumption became a topic of social science only in the light of shortages—poverty was overwhelmingly the main inspiration for studying consumption before the late twentieth century—affluence and abundance thrust it into the limelight as a normative matter of how to live a good life without excess under global capitalism.

Consequently, social sciences paid limited attention until very recently to consumption. And when they did, because the important question

appeared to be 'how do goods get produced and distributed?' and not 'how do they get used?', what was consumed was often considered simply a reflex of the process of production. The conceptual linkage between production and consumption was a product of political economy, a side-effect of analysing the nature of markets which had become so much more important as a medium of exchange in the modern world. Economic considerations mostly led the way. For economists, acquisition is more important than use. This is axiomatic in the light of the fiction of consumer sovereignty in neo-classical economics. Economistic accounts used to dominate mostly in sociology, too, as in Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture under capitalism and Veblen's account of conspicuous consumption.

This meaning signals interest in the changing values of items in exchange, rather than the purposes to which goods and services might be put. Economics typically dismisses the detail of consumption by presuming that markets ensure equilibrium of supply and demand. It is assumed that individuals are best placed to decide what they want and that what they want is a private matter. Postulating consumer sovereignty circumvents investigation of substantive preferences or reasoning about purchase (which might include purposes), and focuses instead on the necessary elements for national accounting—prices, incomes, savings. However, a subsidiary discipline with a practical purpose, marketing, developed in the space left by neo-classical economics (and has worked in an interdisciplinary space since its foundation), exploiting or building upon the otherwise unfulfilled need for producers to estimate who would want what quantities of the stuff they might have the capacity to supply.

As a specific topic of the social sciences, consumption received increasing attention over the last half century. It has been addressed principally through the related concept of 'the consumer', especially in economics, psychology and marketing, and has made an increasing showing in political discourse. The consumer has been contrasted with the role of the citizen, and as the difference between the two became smudged, terms like citizen-consumers and consumer-citizens were coined to capture the hybrid status of the relationship of individuals to states and markets (Cohen 2003). In addition, terms like consumer culture and consumer society have come to play an important role in characterisations

of contemporary social arrangements. Though ill-defined terms, they gesture towards the enhanced societal importance of the purchase of commodities and their cultural meanings and significance. They imply a comparatively greater role for consumption—in contrast with work, religion, family, investment or politics—in determining economic organisation, cultural institutions and personal motivations and experience. Some accounts suggest that central features of industrial capitalism—a world where disciplined labour in manufacturing goods was the key axis of social order in the face of material scarcity—are receding, replaced in affluent societies by leisure and shopping as foci of everyday life (e.g. Bauman 1998).

2   Consumption and Disciplines

Consumption has been treated in different ways by different disciplines. Twenty years ago those different disciplines worked largely in isolation from one another and there was very little common ground. The collection of review articles edited by Daniel Miller (1995) cited a vast amount of literature on the topic within the social sciences—consumer behaviour, political economy, geography and psychology, as well as sociology and anthropology. By that time, it was no longer remotely justifiable to claim that consumption was a subject neglected by social science. But the survey of literature did serve to demonstrate that the field of consumption was highly fragmented, with very little overlap among the sources identified by practitioners in different disciplinary areas. Since then, a huge volume of scholarly work, both theoretical and empirical, has been added on the topic, with greater contact and exchange across disciplines, but it seems no further forward in terms of theoretical consolidation. Nothing resembling a cross-disciplinary synthesis of approaches exists. Production and consumption, acquisition and use, culture and structure, individual and network remain opposed and opposing analytic coordinates.

Whether the disciplinary organisation of scholarly knowledge is a blessing or curse remains in dispute. The modern university system structures knowledge in terms of disciplines, all of which lay claim to specialised expertise upon which depend professional and occupational

security, organisational survival through time and intellectual credibility. Subject matters that fall across disciplinary boundaries—there is no space in-between, the space is full—regularly generate interdisciplinary research programmes; currently policy-makers favour these in the hope that several forms of normally exclusive expertise brought to bear on a practical problem will have a greater chance of success.[1] Nevertheless, established disciplines retain power and resources, continuing to police their specialised knowledge, enhance their collective reputations and fend off predators who seek to invade their turf. The effect is less conservative than it might appear, since scholarly knowledge develops through controversy, with disciplines acting as sites of rivalry and competition, usually internally divided both in relation to theoretical position and substantive areas of study. In many cases the lines of division are paralleled in other disciplines, such that, while usually expressed in a different idiom, similar arguments are made by scholars professing allegiance to, say, social psychology, cultural studies, sociology, consumer behaviour and anthropology. This is the position in consumption studies. For several disciplines have a just claim to centrality when explaining consumption. This is not simply because the historical circumstances surrounding intellectual inquiry made this so, nor only because discipline associations set out strategically to stake a claim to a space in the academic field, but also because the subject matter falls into terrains of social life which have distinctive rationales. Recently, I claimed that it makes sense to distinguish three processes—acquisition, appropriation and appreciation—to capture the fundamental aspects of consumption (Warde 2010: xxx):

> Schematically, *acquisition* involves exchange (by market and other mechanisms) which supplies the means for personal and household provisioning. *Appropriation* involves practical activities entailing the use of goods and services for personal and social purposes. *Appreciation* covers the myriad of processes giving meaning to provision and use.

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[1] The evidence for the greater purchase of interdisciplinary approaches is not clear one way or the other: 'the literature does not clearly establish the dual propositions that disciplines impede the development of knowledge and that inter-disciplinary knowledge is more valuable than that emerging from within disciplines' (Jacobs and Frickel 2009: 48).

These framing concepts can be employed to structure empirical observations and the analysis of mechanisms generating behaviour. While other disciplines may have conducted more studies of one or other of these processes than has sociology, disciplines do not straightforwardly map onto these processes. Economics no doubt concentrates almost exclusively on acquisition, and cultural studies is especially concerned with appreciation, but psychology and sociology address aspects of all three. Indeed, sociology has made significant contributions to each and offers some promise to drawing them together. But what might be specifically sociological about explanations or accounts of these processes?

3   Why the *Sociology* of Consumption Matters

When disciplines stake out their special areas of interest, this is not just disciplinary aggrandisement and conceit, but a matter of paying attention to different aspects of a complex social world. Psychology, economics and sociology all confront the same empirical world. But they find different aspects of that world puzzling. Disciplines have distinctive approaches and explanatory strategies. Their foci are largely embedded in their theories—or perhaps it is in their theories that their distinctiveness is most apparent. This does not preclude the sharing of methods, nor trying to account for some of the same phenomena; both economics and sociology analyse national expenditure accounts in order to explain patterns of consumption. However, economic theory and sociological theory are very different creatures. Their differences of perspective arise from trying to solve different general problems over the course of their historical development. Aware of the difference in their explanations, they jockey for legitimacy.[2] Also, mutual awareness allows them to borrow and incorporate knowledge and expertise from each other. One of the more significant manoeuvres of recent times is the way in which economics, under

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[2] One of the reasons why Abbott is so interesting in his analysis of scholarly disciplines is that they operate in very similar ways to professions in the wider labour market, whose strategies and positionings he explained so well in terms of the system of professions (Abbott 1989).

the branch known as behavioural economics, has poached psychological knowledge (and to a much lesser extent sociological mechanisms) to bolster the flagging credibility of neo-classical theory. As a consequence of such trespassing, disciplines move in similar directions, creating the impression of widespread historical shifts in the intellectual climate. For instance, the cultural turn had consequences for all social science and humanities disciplines with the exception of economics. As a result, most disciplines saw a move from macro to micro concern, from a focus on aggregate and social activity to individual behaviour. The system of disciplines assists contagion.[3] Thus, recently, notions of individualisation, marketisation, commodification and postmodernism have affected sociology, alongside other disciplines.

Consumption is undeniably in significant part an economic phenomenon. Exchange value, or economically calculated value, must be important to studies of consumption because consumption is at the core of any economic system. Consumption is integral to, and the primary raison d'être for, there being an economy in the first place. Economies exist to provide a means of survival for populations of the world. Or so a reasonably reflective person might think. However, economies have developed a momentum of their own. The expansion of the economy has become a goal in its own right (as media and political discussion of economic growth targets show). Modern economies are directed to provide and reproduce private wealth, they are a source of financial gain and hoarding, and they are a source of private property which can be variously manipulated for the purpose of social domination and the perpetuation of minority privilege. Normal politics serves this social bloc. However, although consumption is economically relevant it is not a purely economic activity. Consumption needs to be considered in relation to economic agents, but in a more complex fashion than merely the process of exchange in the simple, narrowly analytic manner of its treatment in economics.

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[3] Practically, for purposes of intervention and policy, disciplines offer very different or contrasting solutions, but they do not find it totally impossible to unite in prescriptions for solutions to problems when brought together in interdisciplinary projects (although the reporting of the difficulties, misunderstandings and incomprehension involved in the experience of interdisciplinary collaborative projects should give some pause for thought).

Since disciplines are relationally positioned in the academic field, the coverage of each is restricted, and is partly defined, by the scope and scale of the others. In the contemporary period there can be little doubt that economics has been the most prominent, best rewarded and best regarded discipline by governments in Western societies and that this poses a problem for other disciplines. Economics won the turf war among the social sciences as laissez-faire doctrines, associated with markets, won once again the ideological battle for a preferred solution to political coordination. With its victory came a renewed and strengthened model of the sovereign individual exercising choices.

4   After Choice: Beyond the Sovereign Consumer

There are, however, many alternative formulations in philosophy and the social sciences of how best to explain human action. In recent times models of individual voluntaristic action have been dominant in most social sciences—in sociology, cultural studies and economics, as well as in psychology—and they have been especially prevalent in studies of consumption. Of the two most influential accounts, one, deriving from economics, is based on the model of the sovereign individual in the marketplace, an autonomous actor selecting in the light of personal preferences which maximise utility. The other, developed in association with cultural studies, emphasises the role of consumption in personal expression, particularly in relation to the formation of self-identity through choice of lifestyle. In both cases the figure of 'the consumer' serves as the principal agent driving the purchase and arraignment of goods and services. The dominance of these accounts is much enhanced by the general circulation and acceptability of an ideology of consumerism which is constitutive of common sense in relation to material and symbolic provisioning and has become ever more prominent in the political discourse of the twenty-first century

When scholars consider closely and catalogue different representations of the consumer many different faces are revealed (Gabriel and Lang 1995). However, for political purposes there is a hegemonic model,

which looks like the sovereign actor in the marketplace espoused by the idealised models of economics, an agent whose freedom consists in making individual decisions about what kinds of products he or she most wants among the available array. This model of the consumer is now a key figure in contemporary political and economic life, in whose name parties govern and businesses produce. Some of the characteristics of the current predicament are grasped by Zygmunt Bauman's (1990) concept of the consumer attitude, which is the expectation that markets will provide for all wants and solve all problems. This orientation is accentuated by widespread adoption in the political realm of anti-state, right-wing rhetoric that perceives market competition among individuals to be the most efficacious mechanism of not only economic but also social organisation. The focus of attention is individuals who know what they want and who believe that self-regarding conduct is always an efficient and admissible means to their satisfaction. This dominant mode of conceptualising consumer behaviour obscures and largely ignores forms of conduct which are neither selfish nor self-regarding, and forms of action which are automatic, expressive and without calculation. Formerly prevalent ideas that most human action is habitual—that habits provide for economical conduct, a sense of security, and predictability in everyday life—have been almost entirely eclipsed.

One principal objective of this book is to employ sociological analysis to redress this overemphasis on the voluntary acts of the individual as the basis for understanding consumption. Many forms of sociological theory vie for support in professional circles. Attempts to pin down what might decisively and unequivocally distinguish sociology from the rest have so far failed. Competing sociologies apparently have no positively identifiable generic features which differentiate the species—although most sociologists seem able to say what is *not* a sociological explanation. It brings to the joint enterprise of the social sciences a distinctive perspective and some conceptual tools, methodologies and explanatory mechanisms which would otherwise be unavailable. More than most disciplines of the social sciences, sociology emphasises, though it does not exclusively demand, explanations which prioritise the relations between individuals—interaction, interdependence, intersubjective understanding, group solidarity and collective projects. Making the case for the alternative

understanding of consumption, in terms other than individual choice, is an uphill battle. The origins of individualism as a political doctrine and political project lie far back in the last millennium. The social and political ideology of individualism—the priority placed upon individual autonomy as the bedrock of a good human life—has a long and privileged history in the West. Enlightenment reason, classical economics and modern law, among others, entrench the sense of the responsible individual as the primary source of being and action. However, it gathered renewed strength towards the end of the twentieth century, abetted by a celebration of the role of individual choice in market exchange. More recently, individualisation, a process to which most aspire and welcome, has been at the centre of diagnoses of the contemporary Western condition. There is thus much resistance to the framing of the social condition which claims that *other people* are the fundamental source and explanation of a given individual's conduct. Yet that is what a good deal of sociological analysis contends.

Some objections to the notion of choice can be founded in empirical studies and observations which indicate that much everyday conduct around consumption matters is heavily influenced, if not entirely determined, by habituation, by unquestioning adherence to social norms and conventions, by friendly pressure and advice from other people, by adaptation to social and practical situations as they unfold sequentially, as well as by mild coercion and commercial persuasion. Such objections can often be detected in empirical studies of the meanings of consumption elicited from interviewees and witnesses who are inarticulate, unreflective and ambivalent. The revival of pragmatism and reflection on the findings of cognitive neuroscience lead to reconsideration of the role of impulse, automaticity and habit. As a consequence, the conviction that adequate, never mind optimal, explanations can be derived from identifying values and attitudes invoked by individuals prior to their making decisions about what to do or what to buy is wavering. The underlying assumptions of such explanations of behaviour, like for instance the theory of planned behaviour in psychology or the voluntaristic model of action in mainstream sociology, are currently increasingly contested. Understanding the implications for the analysis of consumption could be profound.

5   The Purpose of Theory

I seek to expand the range and credibility of sociological accounts of consumption, because I find most others partial and politically problematic, by establishing the bases of a sociological theory of consumption. Social scientists do not agree about what theories should be expected to do. The prevalence of different views is to some degree a function of disciplinary preferences and traditions, but all disciplines exhibit internal disagreements. One role for theory is to provide a counterbalance to what would otherwise be an endless series of unconnected descriptive sociological case studies; sociology without theory is dull and hard to use. Another is to make explicit and render consistent assumptions about the connections (causes, co-emergence, mechanisms, elective affinities, contingent or necessary co-presence) between observed phenomena (entities), which can then serve as the foundations of analysis and interpretation (narratives, analytical explanations) of specific events and processes. A third is to support causal models which predict outcomes.

In this book I consider theories as conjectural, and as logically consistent, integrated, core propositions, connecting concepts referring to a real world, and serving as lenses to aid practical understanding of complex empirical reality. Theory should be useful for making sense of activities and problems in a real world such that we can gain greater insight into contemporary social change. Sociological or socio-cultural theories are most often conjectures with analytic aspiration. They offer a framework of concepts, mechanisms and associations to capture social interdependence and the logic of multiple situations. Formalisation is not, at present, on the agenda. Models based upon atomistic individual action lend themselves to a-contextual generalisation, which may be subjected to formalisation in accordance with axioms of rational action. By contrast, socio-cultural explanation (more typical of history, sociology, cultural anthropology and cultural psychology) considers as the primary object of analysis the effects of interdependence and context where formalisation has proved intractable. There are few accepted ground rules for selecting between theories. Sociology, for instance, rarely generates formal models with discrete predictions for behaviour, although its probabilistic generalisations are no worse than those of any other discipline. Its theories

at higher levels of abstraction, its meta-theories, are often impossible to apply in empirical analysis, perhaps because they bracket out too little.

Theories are instruments of selective attention which necessarily bracket off most parts of complex reality to give a parsimonious account of how something works. Some disciplines seek more parsimonious or reductive theories than others. Abbott (2004: 29) distinguishes three types of analytic programme: the syntactic, the semantic and the pragmatic.[4] Formal modelling, pattern searching and experimentation provide the bases for theories of different kinds and typical of different disciplines. A principal effect of any theory is that it emphasises some features of the world and not others.

If theories differ by virtue of their emphases, then different theories may be complementary; to the extent that they are focusing on different entities or aspects of such entities then they might be added together.[5] On the other hand, they may, as Abbott (2001) suggests, accord precedence and priority to one side of fundamental oppositions that transcend disciplinary boundaries, thereby representing real and incommensurable differences of position. In this latter view, social science operates around basic antinomies, the elements of which are talked up, worked up and worked through, to produce more or less coherent, but distinctive and competing, perspectives or lenses for empirical analysis. According to Abbott, competing theories are built by episodic realignment of the same constituent analytic parts.

6   Abbott and Fractals as Heuristics

Andrew Abbott, in *Chaos of Disciplines* (2001), offered a schematic account of developments in the social sciences by applying a model of fractal division to chart the evolution of theoretical understanding in the

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[4] 'The syntactic program explains the social world by more and more abstractly modelling its particular action and interrelationships. The semantic program explains the world of social particulars by assimilating it to more and more general patterns, searching for regularities over time or across social space. Finally, the purely pragmatic program tries to separate more and more clearly the effects of different potential interventions of causes from one another' (Abbott 2004: 29).

[5] This is one of the reasons why, when addressing practical political or policy intervention research, interdisciplinary cooperation proves comparatively easy. Different perspectives can be summed. Achieving compatibility between theoretical endeavours is much less attainable.

social sciences. The essence of fractals lies in the process of subdivision of a whole into its parts. Their key property is that the units which comprise them are repeated identically, more or less, at every scale or level of their structure. Component parts exhibit 'self-similarity'. For example, in the natural world ferns and snowflakes have component parts with the same structure as the whole. The whole 'repeats a pattern within itself'. Abbott argued that this pattern can be found within many social institutions, including those framing academic disputes within and between disciplines in the social sciences. He used this model to characterise the development of sociological theory in the USA. This he deemed primarily to revolve around competing commitments to quantitative and qualitative approaches. He illustrated the principle of self-similarity in sociology thus:

> if we take any group of sociologists and lock them in a room they will argue and at once differentiate themselves into positivists and interpretivists. But if we separate those two groups and lock them in separate rooms, *those* two groups will each in turn divide over exactly the same issue. (2001: xvi)

That generates a fractal structure, a division made at the highest level of abstraction being repeated at the next level. So at the highest level there is a division between quantitative and qualitative research programmes. But within each, the same division will occur as some of those with numeric priorities seek meanings, or some with primary interpretive techniques look for estimates of quantity (see Abbott 2004: 11).

As the argument unfolds, several other oppositions are elaborated upon as mechanisms generative of competing positions in basic social scientific controversies. Upon that fundamental division other key oppositions tend to map, namely positivism versus interpretation, analysis versus narrative, realism versus constructionism, social structure versus culture, individual level versus emergent level, and transcendent knowledge versus situated knowledge (2001: 28; and see 2004: 41–54). Advocates of quantitative approaches typically prefer the former elements, but there is no necessary correspondence and indeed innovation often occurs by evading and rearranging any simple correspondence. Distinctive positions across the social sciences arise from different combinations and configurations of the

component parts, as Abbott (2001) shows in relation to constructionism and to trends at the borders of history and sociology.

Despite being at first sight an apparently arbitrary procedure, and one unlikely to explain intellectual development, Abbott makes a good case for its general heuristic value. He elaborates his analysis with reference to disputes within subdisciplines, using examples of studies of stress, deviance and historical explanation, effectively proposing a cyclical history of theory. His examples explain the prevalence of 'rediscovery' in social science; hence the scholarly vernacular frequently announces 'Bringing the Something or Other Back in' (2001: 16), for example the state or the economy, or makes reference to linguistic, cultural or practice 'turns', all of which periodically reorient investigation towards recently neglected matters. Abbott argues that in the social sciences, and sociology especially, the same fundamental disputes recur because their basic puzzles revolve around ineradicable oppositions. The fractal principle of division and subdivision, when applied to intellectual life, captures processes of change which are neither simple differentiation nor linear progress. In the process of disputation, some positions become discredited or fall from fashion; but only temporarily. For, to embrace one side of a core opposition makes it impossible to give a sufficiently comprehensive or balanced account. There can, for example, be no decisive and permanent solution to questions posed in terms of *either* quantitative *or* qualitative methods, *either* a cognitive *or* a conative focus. Rather, there is perpetual oscillation between emphases on the alternate poles of fractal oppositions. Victory for one generic view at any one point in time will later be redefined in a more accommodating fashion, circumvented or reversed. A partial victory—for culture rather than social structure, for example— will, in due course, stimulate reaction, as the claims of the social are reasserted or reassembled; while total victory will always require the victors to incorporate the genuine and ineradicable elements of the losers' position by itself splitting along the same fractal fissure. The mechanism involved—split, conflict and ingestion (2001: 21)—produces predictable cycles of theoretical conjecture, innovative research, and then normal science, facilitated by scholarly rivalry and generational succession. Theory is thus recursive rather than progressive. Nevertheless, despite returning to common conceptual starting points, we become better informed,

having mapped more of the empirical terrain of the social world. We also know more about the mechanisms involved, and can see professional, career and evolutionary processes within the story of the unfolding of the fractal dynamic.

These basic models serve Abbott well in accounting for episodes of change in different domains of social scientific analysis. His cyclical history of theories is at once plausible and generative of fresh insights.[6] It is therefore puzzling that its generative principle of fractal division is not used more often.[7] It invokes social mechanisms widely acknowledged as accounting for developments within academic disciplines, as for instance Bourdieu's (1988) account of generalised competition in the academic field. Abbott helpfully adds some hypotheses about the dynamics of knowledge accumulation internal to particular disciplines. Thus he can anticipate, as well as explain post hoc, changing intellectual tendencies. This seems a useful analytic tool or heuristic device to frame plausible stories about the history and development of theory and to supply an underlying mechanism behind theory change in social science. It is a heuristic for thinking about theory building—one which emphasises the logic of repair and reconciliation rather than supersession and eradication of earlier ideas.[8]

The fractals model is ultimately, like other abstract or 'syntactic' models (Abbott 2004: 29), no more than a heuristic device. Identifying relevant principles of fractal division is an inductive exercise. There is no demonstrably single, correct derivation to be obtained. Rather it is a matter of showing that a particular set of fractal divisions illuminates the positions adopted over time in the scholarly debates which propel the history of ideas. For my purposes, Abbott's ideas seem useful both for analysing the development of the studies of consumption and for charting the reordering of fractal oppositions currently in play. As an example, consider how

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[6] Abbott extrapolates his analysis of fractal division and 'the centrality of rediscovery' to an understanding of the relationship between disciplines and to speculation about the relevance of the principle of self-similarity to other issues in social sciences. An important proviso would be that perfect self-similarity is rarely to be found in social or intellectual matters, suggesting that fractal division is an imperfect analogy. But it can still be useful.

[7] The only example I am aware of is a very recent application by Santoro and Solaroli (2016).

[8] See his argument further developed in Abbott (2004).

approaches to social and economic reproduction, the principal object of analysis in the 1970s, might be represented in fractal form (see Fig. 2.1).

In modern capitalism economic production is unsupportable in the absence of consumer demand, and the material consumption which sustains people physically and socially is heavily dependent upon commodities. Social and economic reproduction, to the extent that it is successfully accomplished, is a composite effect of production and consumption. The scholarly division of labour has resulted in a distribution across disciplines of different problematics thrown up by political imperatives to understand and steer this process. At the broadest level it fell to economic studies to account for the arrangements surrounding production and to social studies the circumstances of consumption. Economics, in its professional guises, as classical and Marxist political economy, neoclassical economics and institutional economics, focused upon topics of capital investment, prices as they related to incomes, profit and the terms of market exchange. In the extreme, no other consideration was permitted to enter the analysis: the qualities of items produced, their relation to human need, and social consequences might all be ignored by a specialised science specifically of economic activity. However, for practical if no other reasons, even the economic aspect of reproduction was hard to understand or operate in the absence of consideration of the social relations underlying purchasing behaviour. If the primary rationale of marketing as a branch of business studies is the practical matter of understanding who is prepared to buy what, the answer is more or less unfathomable without reference to social, psychological and cultural processes. Hence the economic analysis of production entailed some explicit attention to a social dimension of the meanings and purposes that govern acquisition (and hence shopping).
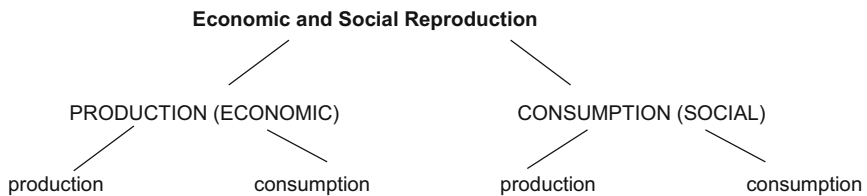
Fig. 2.1   A fractal analysis of economic and social reproduction

Other disciplines began from a concern with social reproduction, with the organisation of consumption and its consequences. Consumption was a matter of how households organised themselves to ensure the physical and social reproduction of their members, subject to the constraints of available material resources and social norms regarding well-being and respectability. Social sciences studied poverty in terms of the economic circumstances of households. Remedial social policies oscillated between psychological and sociological diagnoses, between attribution of cause to personal characteristics or social conditions, but always mindful that poverty is a form of economic inequality. Against such exponents of resource allocation and the imperatives of household management and provision, a substantial body of scholarship insisted that 'man shall not live by bread alone' (King James Bible, Matthew 4:4). The misery of poverty arises as much from experiences of indignity, condescension by others, shame, and lack of respectability as from material deprivation. In the history of the social sciences the failure of those who considered poverty an absolute rather than a socially relative matter, such that a fixed threshold for material survival could be established, showed a lack of imagination and empathy by ignoring the social symbolic dimensions of consumption. Increasingly in recent times, the social and symbolic significance of the means of social reproduction have come to the fore. Contemplation through a cultural lens tempers the importance of the economic dimension of reproduction in the domestic arena and as a consequence social inequality is less frequently addressed. The interplay and compensatory effects of the self-similar analytic divisions can be employed to pinpoint the branches of the study of consumption.

This sketch is clearly an artifice, a schematic way to represent complex processes of intellectual and institutional development over a long period in a stylised manner. The history could have been otherwise; knowledge of economic and social reproduction is constructed in the face of practical problems of survival and management. But it also reflects in part the particular consequences of the institutional trajectory of modern societies, which is to say that these are solutions to problems arising in specific historical circumstances. The fractal diagram is a device for classification of ideal typical entities. No individual scholar fits cleanly

into any branch for the simple reason that each gives a partial and stylised representation. Nevertheless, something of the dynamic behind analytic approaches to reproduction is revealed in a concise manner, reduced helpfully rather than arbitrarily for the purpose of mapping the genealogy of ideas.

3

The Development of the Sociology of Consumption

This chapter reviews the major trends in the sociology of consumption, putting key arguments into historical and intellectual context. I identify some gaps and neglected episodes in stories of the emergence of the sociology of consumption. I describe a history which proceeds by way of changing the central foci of analytic concern. The series begins with aspects of social pathology. Under the guise of 'The Social Question', sociology from its earliest days examined one particular pattern of consumption, that of the urban poor. My story proceeds by way of partial accounts in the sociological classics via the Frankfurt School to mass consumption, neo-Marxian economism where consumption was a matter of reproduction, consumption as distinction, the cultural turn, and finally a pragmatic and anthropological concern with appropriation. In the later twentieth century the main shift saw economistic accounts giving way to cultural analysis of symbolism and communication. As a

consequence, the understanding of consumption improved significantly but the emphases of the cultural turn shrouded other important sociological aspects of the topic. The practical role of consumption in everyday life—its use-value—and its institutional embeddedness re-engaged attention. The early twenty-first century saw development around approaches to appropriation through practice, which promises transcendence of the cultural turn. I identify three processes, acquisition, appreciation and appropriation,[1] as key dimensions for the explanation of consumption. I present this story as, first, a narrative account, and then as a schematic and formalised characterisation of the evolution.

1   The Sociology of Consumption and Welfare: Consumption Before Culture

Sociology in the later nineteenth century indirectly examined aspects of consumption. The social question was a matter of the resources available to households to meet the needs of health and security, linked with the political exigencies of pacifying or placating less-privileged social strata. Social problems like insufficient income, limited availability of food and bad housing conditions, and also pathological states of excessive drinking of alcohol, debt and unaffordable extravagance, were studied in some depth. Swinny, surveying the prospects of British sociology in the early twentieth century, summed it up as having a tendency to be 'occupied only with the three D's, "Drink, Drains and Divorce"' (1919: 9). As histories of UK social policy note, some of the beginnings of the welfare state lie with the discovery that significant proportions of the men volunteering to fight in the Boer War were pronounced unfit for military service. Only later, but also in the light of war, was it proposed that a minimum acceptable standard of living, which is to say an acceptable level of consumption for all deserving citizens, was a prerequisite of a democratic political order. One fundamental leg of the sociology of consumption has been

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[1] Alternatively, we could say 'purchasing, posing and practising'.

the provision and delivery of welfare services, that is, the allocation of material and financial resources and their outcomes in terms of physical reproduction. Until very recently the problem with consumption was perceived as the maldistribution of resources, the fact that the poor did not have enough money to live a decent life. Sociology only very lately became interested in the experience associated with other aspects of consumption, although issues of social reproduction were never far away.

Classical sociologists like Simmel, Weber and Sombart all had something to say indirectly about consumption when trying to capture the nature of the modern industrial social order and the role of status and reputation. However, as Jean-Pascal Daloz (2007, 2010) cautioned, they were interested in consumption only incidentally, in order to illustrate and further their own central theoretical arguments, and hence they produced one-sided and somewhat distorted analyses of the topic. They noted symbolic and reputational aspects of consumption, as for example did Veblen who saw social position and hierarchy symbolised in consumption. Sociology to a degree commandeered Veblen, from his discipline of institutional economics, to give an account of conspicuous consumption. The first accounts of consumer society may be found in the USA. Sociologists like Helen and Robert Lynd, Marie Jahoda and others were collecting relevant data in the interwar years, but as subsidiary parts of studies of community, family life and unemployment (Trentmann 2016: 274–82). The USA was already on its way to becoming a consumer republic (Cohen 2003). In the 1930s, planned obsolescence was encouraged as a strategy for keeping up aggregate levels of economic demand. Maybe because less devastated by war, the USA was quick to recover in the 1940s such that Galbraith (1958) could by the 1950s diagnose the problematic concurrence of private wealth and public squalor.

Social scientific interest intensified as mass industrial production of consumer goods accelerated, at first in the USA in the 1930s, becoming well embedded by the 1950s, and then in Western Europe by the end of the 1960s. Speculative inquiry concerned the implications or consequences of unprecedented material abundance, which made relatively cheap goods available to private households. They generated some of the normative critique regarding how personality, household management and political affiliation might be adversely affected by a sharply increasing

standard of living. They also inspired the beginnings of empirical research that came to underpin the academic and commercial study of marketing. In that development sociology might surely have had a greater role, but, arguably, the pattern of evolution of sociology in the USA was not conducive.

1.1   Sociology of Consumption in the USA

The USA was late to develop the sociology of consumption. The analysis of consumption was more inspired by economic psychology (e.g. Scitovsky 1976) than cultural studies. It remains more concerned with shopping, marketing and advertising than with other aspects of consumption, and is generally much less critical of contemporary consumption than its European counterparts. This transpired because of a distinctive accommodation with economics, a better developed academic discipline of consumer behaviour, a less developed political tradition of welfare provision, and a greater normative acceptance of the market mechanism. Americans were much less critical of capitalism, and had a much more benign public and intellectual appreciation of mass consumption (Cohen 2003; Lebergott 1993). As a result, social research was conducted primarily in relation to marketing and business—spawning the tradition of consumer behaviour (Belk 1995b), an applied discipline whose point of reference was not mainstream sociology or anthropology.

Consumption has had low visibility and priority within sociology in the USA. In the context of international scholarship, where the USA continues to play a primary role in delivering and legitimating sociological research, the absence of an institutional niche for the subdiscipline of consumption has hindered progress. That is not to say that there are not major sociological contributions from the USA but, as Zelizer (2005a) noted in one of the relatively few general reviews of research in the area, they have arisen as by-products of other concerns:

> Within North American sociology we find extensive consumption studies, but they remain remarkably fragmented, with various specialists taking them up as part of other inquiries (see e.g. Gottdiener 2000). Various dimensions of consumption have become mainly the province of specialists

in family, class, gender, childhood, ethnicity, race, religion, community, the arts, and popular culture. (Zelizer 2005a: 335)

She continued by listing a number of excellent and influential sociological studies published in the USA in the last two decades of the twentieth century[2] but concluded that sociological research on consumption 'remains segmented both within sociology and in terms of connections with consumption studies outside of sociology' (ibid.: 335). Three points are worth making. One is that this is a view of the trajectory of research in the USA. The situation was different in European sociology, some of the reasons for which will be addressed below. Second, Zelizer correctly points to a problematic lack of communication between sociology and other disciplines, suggesting that sociology may find it difficult to integrate its approach to the subject matter of a highly interdisciplinary field of research. Third, although Zelizer sounds notes of regret that the sociology of consumption is poorly integrated in the USA, it is possible that this may, even if inadvertently, be a blessing in disguise. One issue worthy of debate is whether consumption can be defined and addressed in a manner which would consolidate a dedicated subdiscipline. Perhaps leaving the topic to specialists in areas like family, class, gender and popular culture might be the optimal solution.

A sustained programme of research might have emerged in the later 1970s when Nicosia and Mayer (1976: 66) proposed a programme for a sociology of consumption, admittedly from within consumer research, which would 'focus on society rather than on the individual consumer (or types of consumer)'. An essentially structural-functionalist project, concerned primarily with norms of consumption and their derivation from cultural values, it was a creature of its time. Nevertheless, it distinguished buying, use and disposal as elements of the 'institutional arrangements of consumption activities in affluent societies' and sought to explain the 'social organization' of such activities.

Mayer's blandishments had apparently very little effect either on the consumer behaviour tradition or on sociology in the USA. America has

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[2] The list included Cook (2000), Halle (1993), Mukerji (1983), Schudson (1984), Wuthnow (1996), Zukin (1991).

had relatively little use for the idea of a sociology of consumption to judge by citations of books and articles which employ it as a keyword to identify their subject matter. The American Sociological Association (ASA) only very belatedly, in 2012, set up a section called 'Consumers and Consumption' to give explicit focus to the subject area. The European Sociological Association, by contrast, inaugurated a research network, 'RN05 Sociology of Consumption', in 1993, its second year of existence, and the British Sociological Association formed a study group in the 1990s, although it subsequently lapsed. George Ritzer advocated more explicit attention within the ASA to consumption and published two books on the topic (1999, 2001), which might have been expected to have some influence in the light of the enormous success of his *McDonaldization of Society* (1993). In 2001 he also became founding joint editor of the successful *Journal of Consumer Culture*, the mainstay discipline of which has been sociology. Yet this seemingly failed to capture the sociological imagination in the USA. For example, the only review of the area appearing in the *Annual Review of Sociology* before 2015 was published in 2004. In that article Sharon Zukin and Jennifer Smith Maguire (2004), like Zelizer, mostly drew evidence from historical and institutional rather than fieldwork-based studies.

It is interesting to speculate on the reasons for the tardy development of the sociology of consumption in the USA. It may partly be because of the prior success of consumer behaviour as a field of research. The *Journal of Consumer Research* publishes material deriving from several disciplines but has included a significant amount of recognisably high-quality sociological work (e.g. Holt 1997a; Sandikci and Ger 2010; Thompson 1996; Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Ustuner and Holt 2010). Such work has latterly been strategically grouped under the label of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007, reflect on the politics of promoting a new school of theory). CCT probably owes more to anthropology than sociology, and finds its shared focus in cues taken from the cultural turn and a commitment to qualitative research methods, which distinguished it primarily from others in the field of market research. It appears an outpost of the field of consumer research whose mainstream is overwhelmingly dominated by economic modelling and experimental psychology. This body of work has seen little reciprocal influence with the

major sociological journals, which themselves have published few articles about consumption. Other disciplines may also have squeezed the space for sociological projects. Much pioneering work was done under the auspices of economics and, from the 1980s, anthropology and history.

There are also probably some wider contextual reasons, which come to light when comparison is made with developments in Europe. The USA was generally more tolerant of capitalism and free markets, critical political economy was initially much less prevalent, and macro-sociology less challenged by neo-Marxism. In Europe economistic explanations were almost universal, by which I mean consumption was accorded very little autonomy, being deemed the corollary of arrangements for production and provision.

1.2   Consumption, Class and Welfare: Sociology in Europe

Much of the literature on consumption in mid twentieth century Europe was driven by macro-economic considerations. Keynesian macro-economic theory coexisted with the neo-classical tradition. Keynesian intervention, market regulation and welfare provision emphasised the relevance of aggregate consumption to economic stability. The years of the Long Boom after 1945 saw steady economic growth, low unemployment and social policies designed to make public provision for a minimum level of consumption for all. In the UK, for example, an era of so-called consensus politics was founded on agreement about the role of state-provided social security, sound housing and healthcare for its citizens. For a period, countries experienced decommodification, as the state-provided services at the point of need without the intervention of market exchange. The state effectively intervened, partly because of the power of the labour movement, to moderate the effects of class inequality on patterns of consumption through welfare services funded by national, progressive taxation. At this point, it was mainly the political left in the guise of neo-Marxism that found the arrangements problematic. Neo-Marxist analysis of macro-economic shifts, for instance the influential Regulation School (e.g. Aglietta 1979), argued that mass consumption was a necessary condition of the existence of the Long Boom after the Second

World War and was functional to the continued accumulation of capital. Neo-Marxism also emphasised the role that consumption played in the reproduction of labour power. Theoretically, the role of social reproduction became critical and the concept of collective consumption became a major plank of the 'new urban sociology' associated with Manuel Castells (1977). The centrality of the operation of the welfare state in Western Europe put patterns of consumption at the core of public policy, yet interest in the minutiae of consumption or its experience was limited.

In general, then, symbolic matters were muted, and consumption was a matter of the distribution of material resources, a matter of social policy. Much of sociology, in line with its classical texts, in which industrialisation and the transformation from traditional to modern societies supplied the raison d'être for the discipline's existence, saw economic production, the accumulation of capital, and especially the occupational order as the primary determinants of social organisation and social inequality. Hence, sociology also saw consumption as the corollary of production processes, according it little autonomy or existence in its own right. Even Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984 [1979]), which was widely celebrated and turned out to be pivotal across disciplinary boundaries, could be read as a form of economism. While grasping the importance of culture as an autonomous field, and cultural capital as a distinct resource, he tended to see economic capital as a more fundamental asset and, by building his analysis of taste in France around class position and habitus, became a target for criticism because of sociologism. (By sociologism I mean the founding of explanations of conduct in social group membership, which is not necessarily unjustified, but often truncates the explanation of individual behaviour by not giving an explicit account of the intermediating processes, mechanisms and filters.) Nevertheless, he was also in the vanguard of examining dimensions of cultural practice in the generation and perpetuation of social inequality.

2   The Sociology of Consumption and the Cultural Turn

During the late 1970s the intellectual landscape was rather rapidly transformed. The decline of neo-Marxism, critique of economism, and the resurgence of neo-liberal market economics coincided with the

maturation of linguistic and semiotic-inspired studies and a reappraisal of the role of culture. The so-called 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, later feeding on the explosion of postmodernist ideas in the humanities, had enormous ramifications for the analysis of consumption. If culture had previously been associated primarily with High Culture (Williams 1958), making it primarily a topic of relevance mostly to intellectuals and artists, the cultural turn for social scientists brought into focus many other kinds of cultural forms and processes. Culture was redesignated as an integral part of everyday life, wherein could be found meaning, personal expression and identity. Everyday life had a larger aesthetic component than before as a result of commercial uses of aesthetic design (Haug 1986; Jameson 1998) which in turn required analytic techniques fitting to the interpretation and decoding of cultural artefacts.

Important for the understanding of consumption was the new body of work, initially associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, designated 'cultural studies'. Initially an extension of sociological analysis (Chaney 1996), it soon abandoned those moorings and drew more extensively on the literary and philosophical traditions, particularly elements of postmodernist theory. Under the direction of Stuart Hall, it was neo-Marxist in orientation, with a special interest in subcultures and social divisions, and it trained some and strongly influenced other scholars who subsequently contributed to the study of consumption. Cultural studies, as Santoro (2012) noted, was a peculiarly British creature, nurtured for several decades before being exported to an international audience at the end of the twentieth century. An ambitious interdisciplinary venture, cultural studies in operation drew rather indiscriminately on a diverse and eclectic set of favoured authors whose views are more easily defined by their antipathies than their positive propositions. It has never established a core theoretical or methodological programme, instead finding what coherence it might have from a loosely shared, radical, political ethos. Broadly speaking, cultural studies is sceptical of claims to scientificity and objectivity, quantitative methodologies and positivistic epistemology, economism and sociologism, and knowledge production for (and through the lenses of) powerful groups and organisations. Distinguishing emphases include concerns with meaning, identity, aesthetic expression, communication, globalisation and individualisation. Cultural studies was notable for contesting

both formerly dominant economistic explanations and the widespread moral condemnation of consumer behaviour. In its hands, consumption was transformed from an epiphenomenon of capitalist production, where the consumer was, if not a dupe, at least passive, into a central principle of social order and a realm for individual agency and choice. Consumption became a raison d'être rather than a means to survival. Consumption was understood as not simply instrumental; non-rational elements, emotions and desires, were recognised.

The tension between cultural studies and the then British sociological orthodoxy, which derived its theoretical tools and substantive preoccupations with modern societies largely from Marx, Weber and Durkheim, was one important spur to the formulation of the sociology of consumption in the UK. The contrast might be epitomised by comparing two major contributors to consumption sociology in the UK, Colin Campbell and Mike Featherstone. Campbell was the author of the very influential book *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987), the most frequently cited item in a citation database search in 2014 for the (comparatively rare) term 'sociology of consumption'. He was an orthodox Weberian scholar who also made important interventions on topics of explanation, theory and substantive analysis (see e.g. 1996, 1997; Falk and Campbell 1997). Campbell also wrote the report about sociology in Miller's (1995) influential edited collection of essays on disciplinary approaches to consumption. Observing the difficulty of arriving at a satisfactory definition of consumption, the works he cited came from a wide diversity of disciplines with very few bespoke sociological investigations among them. Those cited came from sociologies of family, food and household, urban sociology and housing studies, and the sociology of leisure and tourism.

Featherstone, who was much more strongly influenced by cultural studies, defined the boundaries of the subdisciplinary field in the 1990s. He was a founder of the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*, which revolved around the meeting of European, and particularly French, social theory and cultural studies. His book of essays, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (1991), is the most heavily cited work by a sociologist in the area of consumer culture, consumerism and the sociology of consumption. It drew on the cultural turn and the widespread preoccupation

across the humanities and social sciences with postmodernism, against which he juxtaposed Bourdieu and the Frankfurt School. These were presented as three complementary approaches for a sociology of life-styles and consumption (1987, 1990). He also engaged seriously with another propitious focal interest of *Theory, Culture & Society*, globalisation. Investigations into the interrelationship of globalisation and consumer culture proved the main inducement to the study of consumption. However, most of the best work was historical in orientation, studying institutional arrangements to evaluate the character and extent of change. Processes of globalisation, or Americanisation, attributed with the effect of creating a homogeneous consumer culture, were key objects of critical evaluation.

The topics of analysis of cultural studies—popular culture of diverse types, subcultures, mass media communication, television watching, systems of aesthetic and commercial symbols—entailed reading texts of many kinds to reveal meaning and significance in symbolic representations. Culture, it transpired, was everywhere, and its multiple manifestations were eagerly identified in many disciplines, with cultural psychology, cultural geography, cultural sociology and 'cultural political economy'—which would previously have been considered an oxymoron.

The theoretical ferment of the cultural turn had a significant impact on research on consumption. With the possible exception of economics, all disciplines with an interest in consumption were significantly affected. Of course, its most radical version was espoused by only a small minority; most researchers were obviously hesitant about the strong claims of postmodernism and combined its insights with those from previous traditions. Nevertheless, the effect was palpable. The rapidly growing volume of empirical studies was influenced by the imperative to understand what consumption meant to people, how and why they bought what they did buy, what sets of ideas lay behind 'consumer culture' and how influential it was, and what the characteristics of 'the consumer' were. Investigations of how choices were made became de rigueur among sociologists who previously might have found that an irrelevant or unprofessional question. For answers they turned to cultural explanations of cultural phenomena.

2.1   Achievements of the Cultural Turn

The headline concepts of the cultural turn with respect to consumption were globalisation, aestheticisation and individualisation, major themes about macro-social change constitutive of consumer culture. These were mostly explicated through micro-level studies about the meaningfulness of consumption, its role in identity formation, aesthetic expression in everyday life, and the experience of being a 'consumer' in the face of a profusion of commodities. In the process yet more was discovered about patterns of consumption of individuals and groups, the imperative to communicate, the significance of shopping, and the ideologies of consumerism.

The cultural turn commuted consumption from a by-product of capitalist accumulation to a central principle of social order. Consumption became a raison d'être rather than a means to survival. Consumption was understood as appealing, engaging and purposive—but not simply instrumental purpose—and as consequential for personal flourishing and social organisation. Sociologists of culture learned, and subsequently developed, appreciation of the virtues of mass consumption. Warde (2002) enumerates benefits which include that it is enjoyable and pleasurable, supplies intellectual stimulation, provides refreshing entertainment, sustains comfort, facilitates social innovation and meaningful informal work, promotes an aesthetic attitude, expresses personal and social identity, supports socially meaningful practices and helps maintain social relationships. Multiple pleasures and satisfactions are obtained from consumption (Swidler 2010). Enthusiasms, aka pastimes and hobbies, of many kinds, from collecting stamps to macramé, from fandom to aerobics, appear at least as significant as family, work or religion. For people are attached and committed to their consumption patterns, and express conviction in their tastes and preferences. The concept of lifestyle, ubiquitous in mass media output, assumes that consumption underpins a sense of self, ways of life, and even the meaning of life. In such accounts, taste in clothes, music and food are expressive of individuality. People's conceptions of their needs and desires are illuminated through their location in broad frameworks of symbolic value. Associated moral, social and aesthetic judgement, key elements of the process of *appreciation* of goods

and services, are intimately related to the meanings attached to different activities, possessions and their aesthetic representation. Consumption is profoundly meaningful, and also multivocal.

A great deal of emphasis was placed on the use of consumption as a means of expressing and communicating identity. Collective identity, conferred by membership of youth subcultures, neo-tribal insignia and elective lifestyles, was well documented. But while inextricably inter-linked (Jenkins 1992), contemporary consumption was observed during the 1990s increasingly through the lens of individual identity. Viewing the consumer as an 'identity-seeker' (Gabriel and Lang 1995) gener-ated very influential accounts of individualisation which claimed that free choice among commodities was an inescapable element of the com-munication of self-identity (Bauman 1988; Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Giddens 1991). The attention paid to individuals was partly due to the prevalence of the view that social structural divisions were losing their hold. Cultural analysis tended to see individualisation in the sphere of consumption not as a residual result of cultural fragmenta-tion but as an example of empowered agency. An actor with 'agency' to present self through consumption stalked the sociological stage, remind-ing us that sociology frequently produces individualistic explanations. It was implied that everyone, except those on the very lowest of incomes, participates in a similar way in consumer culture, each pursuing his or her own preferences in a self-conscious and self-regarding fashion. The consumer chooses, individually, in the light of who s/he thinks s/he is. Lifestyle is thus not a function of social position, but an elective conse-quence of considered consumer choices. This suggests that people going about their daily lives operate with heightened aesthetic sensibility and enhanced attention to taste. No doubt, indeed, some individuals and groups become seriously absorbed by matters of style. Companies mak-ing and selling mass-produced consumer goods offer them plenty of encouragement.

It has often been imagined that globalisation would entail all other countries eventually replicating the experience of the USA, the country with the earliest claim to have developed a consumer society or consumer culture, because the motivations, pleasures and satisfactions valued by Americans are assumed to be irresistible and ultimately universal (Cohen

2003; De Grazia 2005). The emergence of a homogeneous global culture of consumption has been anticipated. However, micro-level ethnographic studies of particular cases of cultural change provide contrary evidence. So, too, do comparative and historical studies into the continuities and disjunctures with the past and the origin of current attitudes and practices. Such studies have flourished lately, contesting convergent national trends and showing how institutions matter (Cheng et al. 2007; Daloz 2007; Trentmann 2012, 2016). Post-war USA, confident in the inevitability and superiority of individualism, negative liberty, market freedom, low taxes and a small state, will probably prove exceptional in its trajectory because countries start from different positions. National histories of war and revolution, state-building, religious settlement, economic transformation, urban transition and family formations continue to influence consumption patterns, such that many populations share norms and values suspicious of free markets and commercial culture. The debate was subsequently resolved by acknowledging globalisation and localisation as counteracting tendencies (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Robertson 1992), 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. Moreover, a fear of imposed uniformity led to stronger expressions of local distinctiveness with, for example, the attempt to reassert local or national traditions, an instrumental economic process in the face of the symbolic role for international tourists of 'authentic' culture (MacCannell 1989).

Finally, the cultural turn shifted focus onto 'the consumer'. 'The' consumer is a strange abstract figure, but almost always construed as an individual. In their endeavour to contest the economists' model of the consumer as a rational, utility-maximising individual, proponents of the cultural turn too easily fell upon a model which was equally thoroughly based on individual characteristics, motives and projects. The pre-eminent image was of the expressive individual, aesthetically primed, conscious of the imperative to communicate identity, agentic and reflexive, and aware of the opportunities the market supplies. This model encouraged study of commercial and market processes whereby individuals were engaged in selecting among and purchasing commodities. Shopping was examined as an institutional form from the point of view of the retail industries and individual competence.

To summarise, the cultural turn produced a vast amount of new research offering new theoretical perspectives and empirical knowledge about consumption. Two decades of research within socio-cultural studies of consumption have produced some substantial intellectual achievements. We have a set of sound empirical studies of shopping, clothing, leisure, music, possessions, fun, and so on. We also have a more sophisticated and better consolidated account of how social divisions impact upon consumption, with a raft of studies showing variation across countries in the relative importance of class, age and gender differences, with age increasingly important. The groups of actors subject to analysis as case studies were typically not whole populations but smaller social entities, particular fractions of classes, especially middle classes outside of Europe, enthusiasts, children, artists, subcultural groupings, migrants and cultural intermediaries. Subculture studies showed that horizontal differentiation is socially significant, perhaps to a greater extent than vertical divisions. Speculative critique of the consequences of consumption in an era of material abundance was replaced by a much better grasp of what channels consumer aspirations and the issues of social justice are raised. However, the star of cultural theory is fading, its influence waning as the wave of postmodern sentiment has diminished and the individualisation thesis finds less support.

3 The Unwinding of the Cultural Turn: Consumption After Culture

One of the more remarkable effects of the cultural turn was the extent to which it generated a high level of support for purely cultural explanation: that is to say, cultural phenomena were always to be accounted for in terms of other cultural phenomena. In so doing it rejected two previously widely employed modes of explanation, whereby cultural forms were attributed either to economic forces or to social relations and social structure. Not only did the cultural turn condemn economistic variants, but also got close to eliminating the social variants. Jason Kaufman (2004), surveying some of the positions taken up by influential US sociologists of culture in the last decade, argues that what is distinctive about

contemporary approaches is that they all offer endogenous accounts of cultural activity and change. That is to say, they explain changes in cultural form and content by dynamics internal to cultural activity itself. This contrasts with earlier accounts which located the cause of cultural development in economic forces, social structure and social divisions, manipulation, or the exercise of political power. For example, classical sociology of knowledge saw cultural meaning as determined by forces entirely beyond the cultural realm. Likewise, some sociologists of the period 1975–2000 were invested in the project of 'refocusing cultural analysis on the causal efficacy of structural boundaries, institutional limits, and market organization in the cultural domain' (Kaufman 2004: 336). Cultural analysis, however, besides rejecting exogenous factors, also shied away from hermeneutic traditions previously employed by sociologists to understand and explain cultural dynamics; the analysis of meaning, which was central to the European cultural studies tradition, for instance, is replaced by other foci. For Kaufman, the direction of travel meant tilting the balance away from social structural accounts and restoring ideas from traditional art history of creative individuals, but without hermeneutic presumptions.

Kaufman distinguishes three major versions of endogenous explanation. The first, an outgrowth of reception studies, focuses on 'subjects' search for meaning' within cultural phenomena (Kaufman 2004: 337). The second, of Durkheimian lineage, addresses the 'semiotic patterns embedded in products', asking 'not *why* a specific genre of art appears at a particular time and place, but *what* the signs and symbols embedded in that genre say about that time and place' (ibid.: 337). The third approach—cultural ecology—'focuses on how ecological constraints shape and enable cultural production and change' (ibid.: 337). This approach, associated with Lieberson, Abbott and Collins, is said to be inspired by, but then to set aside, Bourdieu's analysis of cultural fields. Formal modelling of internal processes replaces analysis of 'the social structural dynamics underlying cultural fields', which was Bourdieu's main concern. Instead, internal processes of emulation and innovation, driven by a search for distinction and differentiation, entail that thresholds operate in relation to a system-wide distribution of tastes or preferences to spark change. A pertinent example is Abbott's analysis of fractal divisions in scholarly fields, addressed in

Chapter 2, where the distinguishing of one position from another 'creates self-perpetuating cycles of cultural change over time' (ibid.: 350). If these are the main developments, then they indicate the power of the cultural turn to draw sociologists to cultural explanation at the expense of social or other types of exogenous account.[3]

As would be expected, the cultural turn diverted attention away from some empirical phenomena relevant to the analysis of consumption. First, much of the work on the culture of consumption focused on the display for others of symbols of identity. But as Campbell (1995, 1997) argued, viewing consumption primarily as a mode of communication seriously neglects the fact that most action is directed towards the fulfilment of self-regarding, purposive projects requiring routine application of items in pursuit of use values. Moreover, it obscures the fact that most consumption is ordinary or inconspicuous. Those actions which require little reflection, which communicate few social messages, which play no role in distinction, and which do not excite much passion or emotion were typically ignored. As Gronow and Warde (2001) argued, social scientific investigations have concentrated on musical taste, clothing fashions, private purchase of houses and vehicles, and attendance at 'high' cultural performances like orchestral concerts and museums, to the exclusion of everyday food consumption, use of water and electricity, organisation of domestic interiors and listening to the radio. Such activities require a different approach and a different set of concepts to understand their social uses, for these are the activities of mundane, everyday life, tools for survival and getting by, rather than a means of personal expression. Partly in response to the urgency of the issue, emerging at the end of the twentieth century, of the sustainability of contemporary patterns of consumption in the face of environmental depletion and climate change, the balance began to be redressed.

Second, the core business of the sociology of consumption went into relative decline as earlier accounts of conspicuous consumption directed towards an understanding of class and status became less common. Pronouncements about the end of class, serious questioning of the methodological strategy of seeking statistical associations between social

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[3] Reckwitz (2002b) made a similar diagnosis.

position and hierarchically distributed cultural forms, even a preference for examining acts rather than groups of actors, meant fewer studies of resource distribution and the influence of material inequalities. The social structuring of consumption was paid less attention and the relationship of culture, inequality and power was viewed more narrowly. Strategic and competitive consumption, and consumption for the sake of survival, were less in keeping with the temper of cultural analysis concerned with personal identity and aesthetic expression. For while symbolic differences can be just as socially divisive as unequal distribution of wealth, income or property, those which distinguish *homo sociologicus* from *homo aestheticus* easily get overlooked. If Abbott is correct when suggesting that to emphasise culture will have the effect of de-emphasising social structure, then sociological inquiries like those of Bourdieu, which are concerned with the correspondences between the social space and the space of lifestyle, will be pre-empted.

So while prototypical sociological explorations of how social class position was associated with household management of scarcity continued, they operated in a minor key in the period after 1975. Empirical analysis of purchasing patterns, explaining how households spend their income in terms of utilitarian, or instrumentalist, calculation, persisted but the emphasis within the fractal balance promoted aesthetic appreciation over acquisition, communication over exchange and communicative over instrumental action. The dominant interpretation of Bourdieu's account in *Distinction* viewed cultural engagement, through possessions, social participation and cultural consumption, as primarily instrumental, part of a struggle for resources and for acknowledgement of the legitimacy of resource distribution.[4] This stylised sociologistic account, which gives an exogenous explanation of cultural preferences in terms of social position, most typically of class position, was a viewpoint against which forms of cultural theory and analysis sought to establish (if with some ambivalence) their own autonomy or distinctiveness. Social position was a relatively minor consideration when explaining the consumption behaviour of individuals released from the brakes of social group solidarity.

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[4] For Bourdieu, possessions are indicators of 'objective' cultural capital as well as of economic capital.

Third, objects and technologies as material forces were occluded in cultural analysis. As Andreas Reckwitz (2002a: 202) charged, the main problem of the cultural turn was that material entities are treated as objects of knowledge and not as material sui generis. He envisages correction by way of 'praxeological thinking', which asserts that:

> certain things or artefacts provide more than just objects of knowledge, but necessary, irreplaceable components of certain social practices, that their significance does not only consist in their being 'interpreted' in certain ways, but also in their being 'handled' in certain ways and in being constitutive, effective elements of social practices.

Reckwitz suggests that the analyses of Bruno Latour especially make possible a suitable break from purely cultural explanation.

Generally, inattention to particular empirical phenomena is not fatal to theoretically grounded research programmes in the social sciences. Exclusions determined by the theoretical suppositions of a new programme are generally more significant when examining the weaknesses and lines of fracture which threaten the subsequent demise of the new paradigm. Arguably, the three empirical absences discussed above were overlain upon some unfortunate theoretical decisions. For cultural analysis arguably contains a deeper set of theoretical weaknesses regarding its general theory of action. Despite its internal diversity, its primary recourse is to a voluntaristic theory of action, upholding models of the sovereign consumer, the active, expressive, choosing consumer motivated by concerns for personal identity and fashioned lifestyle. The model of an active and reflexive agent predominates, implying that conscious and intentional decisions steer consumption behaviour and explain its sense and direction. This model is contestable on several grounds. First, the active agent model of consumption has severe limitations. It is not just that some individuals can exercise more agency than others by way of their social position and the associated resources, but that it would be difficult to account for patterns of consumption based upon such an unconstrained conception of individual choice. The postulate of the autonomy of the individual and freedom of individual choice has been subjected to extended critique (Levett et al. 2003; Sassatelli 2007;

Southerton et al. 2004a, b). So, too, has the model of the sovereign rational consumer and psychological theories based on values, attitudes and choices (Gronow and Holm 2015; Shove 2010). Emotion, dreaming, fashion, addiction, emulation, insignia of membership and belonging, and gift-giving are among the personal and social mechanisms which configure consumer behaviour.[5] Moreover, the model makes a set of assumptions about the nature of human action which eliminates the habitual, automatic, reactive aspects of most normal human conduct. Critical accounts deriving from philosophy, cognitive neuroscience, psychology and sociology have all raised strong objections to the notion that we typically plan our acts, select goals in the light of our values and norms, and then adduce optimal means to their attainment. Controversy rages about the best alternative frameworks and explanations, but consensus exists regarding the importance of the problem (Cerulo 2010; Lizardo 2012a; Martin 2010).

4   Beyond Culture: Appropriation Between Acquisition and Appreciation

Theoretical emphasis on the symbolic and communicative aspects of consumption tended to push aside the material world, mundane social activities, practice, socio-economic processes and the distribution of resources. Reading objects as texts, rather than considering them as instruments for conducting mechanical operations, gives a peculiar slant to the copious world of things presented by mass manufacture and consumer culture. Perhaps then we should anticipate fresh concern with the practical-mechanical rather than either the instrumental-calculative or the aesthetic-expressive aspects of consumption. Perhaps the time has come again for socio-cultural analysis focusing on production of culture and instrumental use. Fractal analysis might suggest so, if indeed cultural analysis has had its day. As Abbott might put it, topics marginalised at an

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[5] This is not to suggest that the economic dimension of understanding consumption can be dismissed, rather that it requires reformulation, as does the sociologistic approach, to capture the fact that more is going on than conspicuous consumption and the marking of social position.

earlier stage of historical development of a research area usually reappear, if in a different guise. The phenomena identified by Campbell when he pointed to the importance of self-regarding practical projects or purposes may finally return. But these are not the purposes of the reflective or reflexive individual (such as is implied in conceptualisations of both the sovereign individual and the expressive individual consumer), but of collectively positioned and practically situated actors.

Some sociological and socio-cultural studies of consumption adopted the notion of appropriation from anthropologists who, in the mid 1980s, applied their discipline's insights about non-market exchange and material culture to modern consumption (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Kopytoff 1986; McCracken 1990; Miller 1987). They capture the importance of people 'domesticating' mass-produced items, endowing them with particular personal meanings and converting them into items to be made use of and enjoyed for their own practical purposes. The idea of appropriation emphasises use, referring to the incorporation, adaptation and using up of items to serve practical purposes. Consumption serves the practical activities of everyday life. The journey pursued by Baudrillard (1981) from use-value to sign-value is reversed.

Anthropological studies of material culture, perhaps developed most persuasively by Daniel Miller from the early 1990s, showed that objects were valued for reasons other than their aesthetic or communicative properties. His anthropological understanding of culture, which actually owed little to the cultural turn, allowed him to emphasise the role of things, or 'stuff' (Miller 2010), in lubricating social life. The upshot was a vibrant and diverse set of studies which document the pervasive impact of complex material culture on social arrangements (e.g. Miller 1998b; *Journal of Material Culture*). This angle has been long in gestation and it is apparent that personal possessions hold many values, and that material objects are a critical part of both practical capacity and feeling at home in the world (Belk 1988; Cziksentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1983; Lunt and Livingstone 1992). Miller was just one, if very prominent, figure showing what people can do with things. Consumption activities conceal meanings and motives different to those associated with the sovereign or expressive individual. People cherish possessions not because infected by materialism or hoarding tendencies, but because they spark memories,

facilitate social relationships and supply comfort and convenience. As Belk (1995a) showed, even collecting is usually an innocent and harmless enthusiasm. Arsel and Bean (2013), introducing theories of practice to analyse the collective social importance of aesthetically primed activities, offer a powerful analysis of a collective and shared commitment to an aesthetic style in interior design—'soft modernism'—by means of a study of an online exchange of opinion and advice. The website of Apartment Therapy hosts groups of people, self-organised around an activity which has both a practical and aesthetic dimension, involving manual work and social organisation as well as appreciation. Analysis is framed sympathetically by practice theory by virtue of its emphases on the way things are used, possibly especially how they are *valued*, for the purpose of the practice, on doing things together as a group rather than isolated individual engagement, and where shared standards of performance, a view of what is good, is a primary raison d'être for membership, and indeed for the very existence of the group.

Some of these developments make additional space for sociological analysis. Matters of welfare (of provision of the basic requirements—of money, goods and services—to allow all citizens to flourish in accordance with the standards of the day) which were sidelined analytically may expect renewed attention. In the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, austerity policies of governments generated greater hardship and inequality. The manner in which state and market provision interact becomes once again critical, although they are typically framed politically through an ideological lens of liberty, deservedness and fair opportunity rather than collective solidarity and shared risks. It might be hoped that neglect of macro-level analysis of social structure and institutions of production and exchange might be overcome. Also, the concept of appropriation, with its overtones of manners of deployment of material objects and devices, embodiment of skill and procedures, and the practical command of activities in everyday life, may engross and synthesise key concerns of diminished lineages of socio-economic and socio-cultural analysis. The space between, on the one hand, thrift, prudence and rational calculation and, on the other hand, exuberant personal de-control might be populated by consideration of processes of appropriation and practical purpose. Using appropriation as a core analytic concept for the study of

consumption theories of practice looks set to become a prime candidate for filling this gap. But first it would help to establish a suitable sociological definition of consumption. The next chapter discusses what sort of scientific object consumption might be, and the subsequent one suggests how a particular definition of consumption might guide empirical studies from the perspective of a theory of practice.

Part II

Consumption and Practice

4

Consumption as Appropriation: On the Use of 'Consumption' and Consumption as Use

In this chapter I try to formulate a generally viable definition of consumption as a way to escape theoretically from the contrasting and opposed models of the expressive and sovereign individual which for a couple of decades squeezed sociological analysis. An effective synthetic theory requires other concepts and definitions.

If until the 1980s normative arguments were advanced largely independently of empirical research, one reason was the difficulty of getting a definition of consumption that would serve the purpose of *empirical* analysis of its socio-cultural features. Campbell (1995: 101–2), noted that 'no one formulation has succeeded in gaining widespread acceptance' and offered rather hesitantly 'a simple working definition, one that identifies consumption as involving the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service'. He anticipated

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The argument developed in this chapter was initially formulated, though never previously published, at the end of the 1990s. It reflects remnants of some of the specific debates current at the time. The context was one where the concept of the 'active consumer' was canvassed as a riposte to models of the consumer as dupe. It seemed important to conceptualise the restrictions on the freedom of manoeuvre of the active consumer. It subsequently became apparent that a nuanced understanding of attentiveness and distraction is crucial to an account of consumption.

difficulties in this broader definition gaining acceptance because it had been pre-empted in everyday language by the economists' preoccupation with acts of purchase. Put another way, it was difficult to construct a scientific object for a sociological analysis because of the prior and dominant definition espoused in economics.[1] If consumption covers purchase, use and disposal of goods and services, then it denotes a very wide range of activities. I, too, advocate adoption of a broad definition, one which includes functional equivalents of provision through the market, which repudiates a model of consumption based on the process of an individual going shopping, and which focuses instead in detail on the social processes involved in the utilisation of goods, services and experiences. The analysis of consumption is characterised by permanent tension between understandings based on competing models of *homo economicus*, *homo sociologicus* and *homo aestheticus*. The first emphasises individuals making autonomous decisions in the light of their personal self-interest or utility, the second stresses the interdependence of individuals, their responses to prevailing norms of behaviour, shared with others and patrolled by social or cultural institutions, and the third gives primacy to the role of aesthetic judgement. Put another way, for the field of consumption studies, the first emphasises acquisition of goods, the second their appropriation, and the third their appreciation.

At some risk of simplification, we might say that social sciences have concentrated on developing theories of the consumer rather than theories of consumption (Warde 2015). Were this not the case, it would have been impossible for Gabriel and Lang (1995) to have compiled an

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[1] 'The notion of a scientific object arises from a tradition in the philosophy of social science which finds the foundations of social science in the manner of concept formulation. It finds unsatisfactory both a simple correspondence model, which says that concepts refer directly to real objects in the world, and social constructionism, which says that concepts are simply parts of a system of concepts which is ultimately arbitrary in relation to the properties in the world to which they refer (ie they could be completely otherwise if scientific communities had developed in different ways and promoted different ideas). Instead, scientific concepts are seen as refinements of ordinary language concepts, fashioned, sharpened, developed in order to address particular questions which are useful to the scientific community for the purpose of specifically scientific analysis. This may re-conceptualise the lay practical problem in such a way that it is more tractable and understandable. It is to juxtapose new and old concepts, and to re-define them in relation to some model of conceptual coherence, but with reference to an external empirical world which in some degree constrains the propositions that one may make using scientific language' (Warde 2016: 52–3).

account of current theories that revolved around competing models of 'the' consumer. In this chapter I argue for an approach which revolves around the process of consumption rather than the figure of the consumer. I advance a definition of the key elements of the process of consumption which hangs upon concepts of appropriation and utilisation. I argue that consumption transpires as moments within, and integral to, social practices. This raises questions about the purposes of consumption and the sites where it can be observed and understood. Locating consumption as appropriation through practice provides many insights for understanding consumption and suggests some distinctive methodological ploys for investigating its social significance.

1   The Concept of Consumption: Technical and Common-sense Meanings

Most commentators refrain from the task of defining the boundaries of the field of consumption, implying either that there is no single answer or that a lay understanding will suffice. A dual danger then goes unremarked: on the one hand, consumption becomes so extensive that it is everything other than employment and sleep (Graeber 2011); and on the other hand, it is reduced to the purchasing of commodities by private individuals, rendering it no more than a series of shopping expeditions.

A more secure and useful definition might begin from everyday language, which suggests two senses for the term, as identified by Raymond Williams (1976): commodity exchange and demolition. These usages arise from the two main post-eighteenth-century sources of the verb to consume. One sense derives from economics, which postulates the consumer as the source of demand for commodities and refers essentially to recipients in acts of market exchange. The other meaning—to destroy, demolish, waste or use up, which became the subsidiary usage in the twentieth century—corresponds to the point of view of actors in everyday life who eat ice creams and listen to music. It is about making *use* of products. For economists and allied professions, the monetary value of what is exchanged matters most. However, for purchasers, in most instances it is the use to which a product is put, how it is used up, which

is the source of gratification and the purpose of purchase.[2] These two senses of purchase and use render the term consumption in some ways ambivalent, and the tension between them has had considerable theoretical and political significance.

Is it an accident that the two different senses of the term consumption (exchange and demolition) get conflated and that the same word describes these two analytically separate processes? If the answer were yes, then we might try to use two separate words to analyse the associated processes independently of one another. In a sense, this is what has been recommended and implemented in the past. Economics has eschewed consideration of the use of items which are sold—revealed preferences are sufficient for theoretical purposes; if other social sciences can explain the origins of preferences, then so much the better, but it doesn't really matter. Other social sciences and cultural studies often presume the opposite and examine in great detail how products get represented, what they symbolise, and how the meanings of commodities are bound up with personal identities and expression. However, they take scant notice of how such items were initially provided, the assumption being that provision has little relevance for meaningfulness. Even if the separation could be clearly maintained, such a division of attention would be unfortunate.

Arguably it is more difficult than previously to separate exchange and use because they have become intricately intertwined. In pre-capitalist times, production was determined primarily by the demands and logic of use. Most of the necessities of life were not exchanged in open markets, because items were domestically produced for household use, or were custom-made for known neighbours and associates. The luxury trades always provided exceptions (trade and intercommunity exchange have long histories [Trentmann 2016]), but production was largely for use by known persons. Industrialisation and urbanisation radically separated exchange and use. Commodity production and impersonal markets place exchange and exchange-value at the centre of economic arrangements. Producers showed comparatively little interest in practical use. Manufacturers were satisfied with knowing aggregate levels of sales and

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[2] There are exceptions, for example where telling someone else how much you paid for it is part of the gratification.

the state with national expenditure accounting. Subsequently, production standards were regulated, trade in faulty goods and adulterated food was restricted, and the use of items considered dangerous like guns and drugs was policed. A process of reintegration of production and consumption occurred as producers sought to know more about their (potential) customers, and consumers became better informed and more concerned about what was coming to the market. Hence, whereas for Marx a striking feature of the capitalist economy was the separation of exchange-value from use-value, now, increasingly, producers delve into use, and users hold producers to account. This intertwining has institutional sources.

First, it is a consequence of more sophisticated marketing techniques. Producers have invested increasing effort in investigation of consumer behaviour, as for instance in market research. Like advertising (Williams 1976), market research originates in the depersonalisation of demand for mass-produced products. Producers of goods and services located in particular markets at any given point in time need to be able to estimate demand for their own products, hence they seek to know why people purchase particular items. This requires knowledge not only of the meanings customers attribute to products but also about the uses to which they are likely to be put. Thus manufacturers undertake product-testing experiments and conduct focus groups and surveys among potential consumers. The advertising industry needs the same intelligence to target its messages effectively, tapping into the meaning that its audience and potential customers attribute to a brand, an image or a celebrity.

Second, most people have learned the consumer attitude, positioning themselves for certain purposes in the role of consumer, with associated expectations and rights. In the light of potential use, questions are asked about production, prices and standards, so that for ordinary people there is a closer consideration of the qualities of what is produced. Also, although to a lesser extent, concern is articulated about how things are produced, as consumer movements ask questions about not only efficiency but also moral probity and environmental sustainability.

Third, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed extensive political dispute about the credibility and proper scope of market exchange. Advocacy, first for collective, public welfare provision in many fields, and then for the privatisation of such services, brought into focus

the question of what shall be produced (and of what quality and at what, if any, price) when the profit motive guides investment decisions. What are the consequences for, for instance, medical provision, housing, social care or rail services? This suggests an intricate tie between the nature of economic exchange and the opportunities for use to satisfy needs and wants. As exchange and use have grown together, so production and consumption have become intertwined; exchange and utilisation have become mutually conditioning, and selling and use appear as part of the same chain.

These historical processes have ensured that the concept of consumption has complex connotations. As Williams (1976) noted, a connection or association with the concept of production is foundational to the meaning of consumption. Without its economic significance we would usually not talk about consumption at all. Economic production, and thus work, is centrally implicated. There is a rather ill-defined sense, in everyday language, and also in most social science, that if an item is not 'provided', then it is not an item of consumption. If there is no economic activity of any kind entailed in the item's preparation, then consumption may not be a correct designation. It is difficult to decide whether many intangible phenomena—meanings, ideas, dreams, atmospheres—can be said to be consumed.

Ordinary language also attributes to consumption an element of choice. It suggests intentional acquisition, of tangible and some intangible items, towards goals of survival and flourishing. Arguably this element is greatly exaggerated, but it is through notions of consumer freedom and consumer sovereignty that the dominant view asserts that the consumer has control. From this perspective, consumers make decisions about what they want and, providing they have the material resources or social entitlements required to possess them, they are absolutely free to choose. Cultural studies taught that consumption is in important degree an active process, a valuable correction given the model of consumers as passive dupes in early critical theory. The impression of freedom of choice is magnified by informalisation processes which make rules and disciplines of consumption less rigid, implying greater discretion in circumstances of perhaps greater risk, anxiety and uncertainty (Bauman 1990: 195–213; but see Warde 1994a). However, many constraints exist, including the givens of

material environment, resource endowments, entitlement, institutions of provision, norms, and infrastructures which constitute social and technical interdependencies. Hence the level of *discretion* involved may in reality be slight, the degree of control so minimal that it is better not described as choice. Many things cannot reasonably be refused, for example my host's food or domestic decor, where conventions and obligations govern a social relationship. We surely consume things that we do not want—and not simply in Hirschman's (1982) sense that we have meta-preferences which might come to override our actual ones, like a desire both to give up smoking and have a cigarette now. Sometimes this occurs because we are ignorant of the consequences, as with allergic reactions to new foods, drugs or cosmetics. Often the qualities of goods and services are non-negotiable. Frequently items cannot be refused because they come in a package with others: the atmosphere may be inseparable from the performance; or the customer may lack the authority to subdivide already combined components, as when, for example, desired products are presented in overly elaborate packaging or many complex functions destined never to be used are built into IT equipment.

To prioritise choice analytically gives the impression that the consumer is essentially a decision-maker, an independent individual with a choice to make. This, the preferred figure of contemporary politics, is indicated by the increased use of the term 'the consumer'. If disciplines of the cultural turn made a strenuous attempt to rescue the consumer from economics, they nevertheless often implicitly accepted the notion that the individual is the primary unit of analysis as well as that consumption is a matter of communication and symbolic expression. Yet it necessarily involves destruction as items under purview are put to many and complicated uses.

A final point: many acts and processes are *not* consumption. Arson, voting, singing, and paying taxes are not instances of consuming. Work, people, dreams, civic duties and social practices are not 'consumed'. Beware presuming consumption to be more prevalent than it is, a tendency embossed upon concepts like consumer culture or the consumer society. Those latter terms bear witness to the enormous ideological impact and significance of commodity purchase as a foundational feature of contemporary everyday life. Yet the sphere of consumption may be quite limited—a reason for seeking a more precise definition of its scope.

2   Towards a Formal Definition of Consumption

I propose initially to define consumption as (1) a process, (2) whereby agents engage in appropriation, (3) of a good, service, performance, information or ambience, and (4) which is a product of human work.

Process: To say that consumption is a process is to contrast it with, and avoid having it reduced to, an instantaneous act of exchange. Consumption is more than simply making a purchase.[3] It involves a process of appropriation. Neither in its enactment nor in its effect on the objects being used up is the impact of consumption instantaneous. Much time passes between the point of acquisition and final consumption. For a sandwich it may be ten minutes, for a holiday ten days, for a washing machine ten years. What happens in the period over which an item is possessed and utilised is critical to understanding the rationale of consumption. Time is both a resource and a medium of consumption.

Appropriation: By appropriation I mean making use, for myself, of a product, whether that use be exhibited as ingestion, display, receipt of treatment, hoarding or operating a tool. So I may eat food at dinner, wear clothes that transmit to others messages about myself, follow therapeutic advice, invest in a house in order to profit financially when I subsequently dispose of it, or play the piano. All these are acts of appropriation through my making some use of objects or services. There are many modalities of appropriation and use. However, a very important point is that appropriation is always self-directed or self-regarding. It is of use to me. Only I appropriate. I may not necessarily appropriate the entire item, but I at least take a share for myself. It makes no sense to say that I consume for somebody else. I might buy something for somebody else, with the

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[3] In this I partly follow Douglas and Isherwood (1979), but for further elaboration see Harvey et al. (2001).

intention of making them a gift, but then my part in the process would have been in the work of provisioning, not consumption. I cannot get someone else to appropriate for me—to eat for me, to look at pictures for me, or to own my property. I think this is one reason why consumption has been looked upon as morally suspect. It always has an irreducible self-regarding aspect. Consequently, there has been a tendency to assume that more consumption means more self-regarding behaviour and more opportunity for subjective orientation in posing the question 'what do I want?' Though it may be considerate or shared, consumption is only exceptionally altruistic, as for instance eating my aunt's dreadful home-made scones and wearing a displeasing new sweater on my birthday. There is, therefore, a direct contrast to be made with labour, which can, indeed, be done for others. Work is potentially altruistic: as Miller's *A Theory of Shopping* (1998b) demonstrates, shopping is sacrifice. Women in North London are not shopping for themselves, with their own preferences and interests at the heart of the activity; rather they are shopping for their families, a form of emotional and practical labour. However, this is a process of provisioning, not of consuming per se.

Appropriation requires some, although often small, level of purposeful engagement and some process of conversion. Something becoming mine may not necessarily entail my activity. If I receive an inheritance, get wet in the rain, breathe air, or absorb nutrients—all of which entails some degree of conversion—I am richer, wetter, or refreshed, but the processes are not obviously appropriation because they lack active engagement. Not all acquisition is therefore necessarily consumption; not everything which is acquired is consumed. Nor can all those things to which I have been exposed—and which, if I had paid them attention, might be considered appropriation—be considered consumption. The radio programme being broadcast in my hearing but to which I pay no heed, and the muzak that fails to register in a shopping mall, are items which I have not appropriated, though I have been exposed to them. Many items are imposed upon me as part of a package which I am powerless to separate out (muzak, plastic food packaging). Sometimes I engage and appropriate them; sometimes I ignore them and they make no impact.

The implication is that because I modify, interpret or singularise an item or message, by taking some control over it, I can be said to appropriate. So, I might have varying degrees of engagement, ranging from listening passively to a piece of music, but listening nevertheless, to working hard on studying and criticising that same recording. Without engagement there can be no appropriation.

Appropriation is not a socially uniform process. People do different things with the same items, dependent *inter alia* upon their levels of social and cultural capital, the array of items they already have, their socialisation, learned tastes, prior experience, and so on. Working with a product to more or less actively appropriate it will result in different meanings and understandings for different people and will therefore also deliver a different kind of experience.

Degrees of control over the process of appropriation differ greatly. My capacity for control depends on what I can do with an item, which depends in turn on my other resources, including finance, imagination and know-how.

Other types of appropriation entail only very weak forms of control. Appropriation often entails some degree of discretion. Discretion implies some element of selectivity. Discretion may be exercised in relation to the acquisition of an item or its deployment. Often discretion is highly circumscribed and therefore responsibility marginal. As argued above, I may absorb things that I do not control, which differs from situations in which I have some responsibility for appropriation. As a child I had no control over what items were acquired for the purpose of feeding and clothing me. I appropriated the food, the shoes and the toys that were presented to me. Eating the dinner put on my plate in the school canteen was mandatory. In many instances the possibility of refusal is probably a greater vehicle for autonomy in the realm of modern consumption than the availability of choice. In the course of time I learned to refuse things that I did not like. To refuse is to exercise discretion. Yet as an adult there are many things I cannot refuse. I cannot refuse to inhale (polluted) air; neither can I refuse to occupy the office allocated to me by my employer because of my dislike of its decoration, the manner of its heating, or the modes of business travel. There is no opportunity for discretion in many institutional settings. However, appropriation always

implies acquiescence. To acquiesce without enthusiasm to engagement with items is a chronic feature of modern consumption and probably a very common occurrence. Some forms of appropriation, and also consumption therefore, are effectively compulsory.

Another type of control altogether seems to be involved in the intellectual activity of reading a book, learning its story or appreciating its argument. If I read *Pride and Prejudice* I have rather less control; my appropriation (and in this case my interpretation of its meaning) is unlikely to be personal and entirely at my own discretion. If I produce a sufficiently idiosyncratic interpretation of the story you will probably classify me as illiterate or eccentric. While I exclude no one from *Pride and Prejudice*, I have exercised a form of control nevertheless. Some types of appropriation give us considerable and exclusive control over an item. Consumption often implies exclusion of other people, from my property, my club or my party. Exclusion can be a function of possession, though there are different forms of ownership, and also of utilisation.

Consumption serves plural and multiple goals. The manner of utilisation is not directly, or sometimes even distantly, prescribed by the fact of acquisition. Most items consumed are vehicles for types of gratification and purposes beyond mere possession. Whether it makes sense to speak of needs, and how to distinguish between needs and wants, issues which are in turn tied up with disputes about deserts, fairness and the unequal distribution of resources continue to pose knotty analytic problems. The strategies of agents, especially commercial organisations, steer recipients towards particular items and set out to change, redefine and expand needs and wants, and to make them subtler, varied and differentiated. The multiple ends and gratifications delivered by consumption and their change over time should be topics of empirical and theoretical inquiry.

Items: The products available to be consumed are various and we might want to distinguish between them in terms of notions like their being tangible or not, durable or not, events or services. These products may be consumed partially or totally. I eat my dinner and it is gone. I may be one of 100,000 people watching the English FA Cup Final live, thus I take a

share in its consumption. I may be one of 18 million viewers watching *EastEnders*, and I can watch it again (or for the first time) by viewing a recording when no one else is. Appropriation is then sometimes final or end consumption, in the sense of entailing the demolition of a product. On other occasions, it is only partial, involving temporary or shared use, as with durable goods and tools, or being part of an audience, hiring a car or borrowing a library book.

The spread of consumption into the field of watching performances and experiencing ambiences (of places, sites and landscapes) is a significant aspect of contemporary commodification of provision and one which, because such items are largely intangible, problematises the definition of consumption. The issue arises when the product being 'consumed' is a set of ideas, feelings or affects. Sensory, cognitive and emotional appropriation is difficult to understand simply as consumption. Take, for example, reading the library's copy of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. I do not own the book but rather I borrow it, a form of temporary acquisition and appropriation. When I return the book I still hold the story in my head; I have learned from it, I can recall it, and I can talk about it. I will also have experienced some, lesser or greater, empathy with the characters. I am somehow changed by it, a consequence of my engagement with it. But my having appropriated the story does not prevent anyone else from doing the same. The story is inexhaustible. The book itself, by contrast, will eventually disintegrate. I have contributed to the destruction of the object, but not to the diminution (arguably, in fact, the opposite) of the story.

One possible deduction from this example is that if an item is not in any way diminished, used up or destroyed in the course of an activity, the process involved is not consumption. Some element of being used up is a defining feature of a consumption process. The eclipse in the west of England in September 1999 was an occurrence around which many opportunities for commercial consumption were constructed, but the eclipse was not destroyed in any part. Similarly, nor is the view from my window depleted when I look at it. All I do is observe and contemplate. I did not in any sense appropriate the eclipse, and nor did anyone else. Therefore, I had some other relationship to it. I will say I

experienced it. Sitting in my friend's back garden I primarily experience, rather than consume, the garden and the conversation, because nothing is diminished or demolished in the process. That is to say that whatever is consumed shall perish in some degree as a consequence of the engagement. This raises an associated question about whether the intangible can be destroyed. It seems to me that some intangibles can perish in this sense—for example, the atmosphere at the table in the restaurant (Warde and Martens 2000) or the ambience of a beach if it is too empty or too full (Urry 1990)—while others do not, including natural phenomena like moonlight or deciduous leaves.

Experience, then, need not necessarily involve consumption. Nevertheless, some types of experience can be, more or less, appropriated, as for instance is the intention of many encounters organised through the service industries. Judgements about those encounters, the sources of appreciation, are part of the constitution of experience. Through reflection, my experiences, if remembered and recalled, are made my own and perhaps built into meaningful biographical stories. However, regardless of the advertising clichés which offer to sell the 'X' experience, experience cannot simply be purchased. Exposure, of course, can be. Indeed, trips to the Himalayas, taking drugs and reading books deliver experiential fruit, but all involve moments of consumption in addition. It is important to distinguish between acts which involve a moment of consumption and those which do not.

Products: While depletion, a rather unlikely feature, is an essential aspect of consumption, it is equally necessary to retain the sense that consumption is associated with some form of economic production or provision. However, to assert that value is determined by an act of exchange would be to capitulate to unwelcome consequences of the economists' definition, and to reduce consumption to demand. The connection between production and consumption is more complicated.

One solution is to claim that consumption occurs *only* if items are the product of work. Only when human intervention involving work with a view to the satisfaction of needs or wants leads to purposive provision should we talk of consumption. So, were I to say that I had consumed

the stars last night, when reporting that I had gazed at the heavens, I would be using the term inappropriately, or metaphorically rather than precisely. Types of work and modes of provision are various. Much the greatest attention is paid to provision through markets, where exchange involves transfer of money from recipient to provider. Typically, this involves labour paid for as wages. However, there are many other modes of exchange which involve either no payment, or payment not calculated at market rates. Household members, states, community networks and charities also provide. The rules and conventions associated with work in these sectors prescribe social relations other than wage labour. Domestic labour, public services, reciprocal obligation and gifts are principal sources of provision to which people have differential access. The social consequences of different modes of provision matter. The channels through which an item is obtained affect the experience of its enjoyment. Whether one deserves to enjoy the moment of consumption is influenced by prior processes of provision and exchange as well as the nature of the social relationships in which the moment of consumption is embedded. The nature of the work involved and the terms of exchange and delivery affect the process of consumption. Some of the political implications of the view will be taken up later.

There is a complex relationship between the way something is produced or materialised and the character of the moment of its consumption. This is not a determinant relationship (Harvey et al. 2001; Warde 1992). As cultural analysis has shown, people improvise imaginatively, deploying goods in ways neither intended nor anticipated by their designers—as with mopeds, video-games and 'legal highs'. Consumption can be detached from the particular conditions of access and acquisition. Theft is a case of acquisition and utilisation without entitlement, and credit means you can consume things before you have paid for them. In neither case is the mode of use necessarily altered as a result of the particular means of acquisition. This suggests that one feature of the distinct process of appropriation is taking delivery and deriving enjoyment. It occurs at some point after the transfer of entitlement to use, and continues, in active spells or through decay, until the item is exhausted or disposed of.

People usually overestimate the extent of their discretion as they try to live up to the model of the sovereign consumer. Most also probably fail

to register that they require cultural capital, learning processes, perhaps a certain habitus, to make a purchase plausible. People disregard items which they say 'aren't me', and they refrain from buying things for which they have no use. While some people may occasionally find using their discretion troubling, and some, like reflexive green consumers, may take their responsibilities particularly seriously, most consumption is habitual and non-reflective (Gronow and Warde 2001). Even choice at the point of purchase, which is in principle vast, is in practice highly restricted. Even more constrained is discretion in the use of an item. Technical capability and social convention create severe barriers, a reason why people have in their wardrobes and cupboards clothes they never wear, tools they never use and toys they never play with (Sullivan and Gershuny 2004; Wilhite and Lutzenhiser 1999; Woodward 2007).

3   The Definition and Its Implications

I consume when I appropriate and make some use of an item. Thus, even if I possess or have been exposed to an item, it is not consumption: (1) if it has had no impact upon me (for example, a radio programme that I cannot recall because I was asleep); (2) if I have not made it mine (for instance, if I give it away as a gift); (3) if no work has been involved in providing the item (as in the example of watching the eclipse); and (4) if it has not in part been depleted (e.g. the garden).

   The corollaries of these claims are several. First, because consumption involves 'appropriation' it is inherently self-regarding, which might explain why consumption has always been morally ambivalent. Second, appropriation is purposeful engagement with a view to use. Some minimal participation is necessary; to turn my lesson into an education, for instance, probably requires some intention to appropriate its content. An active conversion process is necessary to turn an item into enjoyment; it is not the selecting but the engagement with the item that secures appropriation. One can own something without having appropriated or appreciated it. Third, utilisation occurs in the pursuit of many purposes and goals. Fourth, not everything that is useful to us can be said to be consumed; but everything that is consumed

is utilised. Fifth, the account distinguishes between consumption and experience, suggesting a specific relation to natural phenomena and mental contemplation. Appropriation produces experiences, most intense when worked upon and reflected upon. However, there are many other sources of experience.

Another implication of the reasoning is that it is neither the item per se, nor the item alone, but also my orientation (which might be cognitive, practical or emotional) towards it which determines whether an act is, or is not, consumption. That is to say, the manner of appropriation affects the satisfaction derived. As studies of cultural consumption insist, the rewards obtained from texts, things or events are in part a matter of the orientations and dispositions of the participant. The orientation of the individual affects attention, discretion and purpose. Engagement requires at least acquiescence to make use of an item and some anticipation of gratification.

Acts of final consumption are often not the central aspect of a particular activity, but a subsidiary prop to more meaningful and purposeful activity. Moments of consumption coincide. For instance, and despite its banality this is perhaps my main proposition, people consume constantly, in the sense of using up those material products and services which they have acquired and appropriated. When I give a lecture at the university, that which apparently is being consumed is an educational service, the content of a scholarly lecture, of which I am the provider. Yet I am simultaneously consuming many other items: the suit which I purchased some time ago, shoes, and divots of cultural capital gleaned from watching TV. Everyone else in the room will be consuming, too, for most of the audience will also be dressed, using electronic devices and sheets of paper. Also, although often little noticed, electricity illuminates and heats the lecture theatre, and the decor supplies an ambience of scholarliness (or maybe not). So, when lecturing, my clothes, my haircut, my mode of transport and the water I drink, while incidental to the disbursement of a professional obligation, are moments of consumption subsidiary to the core activity. *Subsidiary* consumption may reveal more than the fact that a person has turned up to a particular event, for instance to hear a particular sort of music. Hence, methodologically, several layers of meaning can be read off from observation of the same event.

One key implication is that we consume while producing, while entertaining, while working, while travelling and while experiencing. To register and examine plural and simultaneous activities is often technically difficult, as is recognised in time-budget studies, for instance, but it resolves abstractly some substantive analytic problems. Several items may be consumed simultaneously and several pleasures taken at once, as the experience of eating out demonstrates (Warde and Martens 2000). However, it is often necessary analytically to decide which of a set of simultaneous activities is primary.[4] Social science cannot examine everything occurring at any point in time, so, for the purpose of analysis, it brackets some and focuses on other elements of the total range of activities. In some ways misleading, most analysis assumes that the actor is concentrating on one thing in particular rather than on several things, and, moreover, usually on the thing that interests the researcher! There may thus be a disjuncture between what the observer thinks is important and what the actor thinks (as, for example, in the often cited case of people who have a TV but no supply of electricity). In this regard, the actor's view is not authoritative; and indeed many people would be unaware of the messages transmitted when doing something else, like watching football or attending a voluntary association meeting. In addition, agents produce and consume at the same time as part of the same activity; shopping is both provision and enjoyment, involving both a moment of consumption and a moment of production. The wider theoretical ramifications include understanding the circuits of production and consumption as phased and sequential. It is not generally helpful to conflate production and consumption, as for instance in the concept of 'productive consumption'. A sharp distinction between production and consumption was critical in the later twentieth century to establishing autonomous study of the latter, and it remains for analytic purposes worth defending, not least because of the political importance of examining their relationship.

This type of definition of consumption makes it amenable to incorporation within theories of practice. It locates consumption in many fields of activity in everyday life. Most practices require the appropriation of goods

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[4] Breathing is constant, essential, but not primary in most analyses of consumption!

and services and some are heavily loaded towards final consumption. In those cases, depletion looms particularly large in the consumption moment. Yet, while at the point of final consumption materials are depleted, destruction rarely occurs purely for its own sake, but has additional teleological, physiological, psychological and social properties. For example, studies of the family meal have pointed to its multiple meanings and effects of eating together, including education, emotional comfort, domestic negotiation and nourishment (DeVault 1991).

Moreover, we rarely demolish things in their entirety at the point of purchase, and where we do (for example, a meal in a restaurant) we have to give over time for the purpose. To talk of consumption in general is to refer to the plenitude of moments of consumption. The notion of a 'moment' of consumption hints at the relevance of issues of time and timing which are not yet thoroughly understood. Reflection suggests that some moments are longer than others, drawn out over an extended period of time. Also, much might be learned from sequences, from consecutive moments and from simultaneous or concurrent moments. Applications of time-budget techniques, from Linder (1970) to more recent analyses of hurriedness and harriedness (Gershuny 2000; Schor 1991; Southerton 2003, 2006) hold out some promise. In such studies the problem of interpersonal coordination becomes central as the number of moments of consumption increases apace, drawing on two sources of greater diversity: diversification within practices and the multiplication of practices.

Moments of consumption may be considered independently of the practices in which they are embedded in order to generate a scientific description of aggregate patterns. Equally, an account of an individual's consumption behaviour can be conceived theoretically as the sum of the moments of consumption in which they engage over some specified period of time. Taking as a starting point the multiple moments of consumption underlines their ubiquity. Scarcely any practices in the contemporary (or any) world do not entail consumption. Perhaps what is most distinctive about contemporary capitalism is that so few practices occur without consumption of commodities. The commodity has colonised practices, as the impact of the supermarket and the restaurant on the practice of eating attests. Nevertheless, even though producers attempt to mould practices

in line with their commercial interests, the practices are not dictated by producers of goods and services but rather directed by the symbolic and practical purposes that people pursue while going about their daily lives.

4   Conclusions: Consumption in Practice

In one sense, this elaborate redefinition does not solve much. Definitions rarely do. However, they direct attention to particular features of the phenomenon under scrutiny and imply better and worse approaches to understanding and explanation. If we think about consumption in this manner, we are thrown back onto an investigation of engagements and participation, a concern with the use that people make of the items they appropriate and thereby thereafter consume. Minimal purposive engagement, which I will call utilisation, is a precondition of consumption. Engagement occurs within practices.

Consumption may then be considered as embedded in practices. Almost all practices entail consumption, some more than others. In addition, some are more prone than others to highlight the moment of consumption. Indeed, some are designed commercially to increase the cost of embarking upon consumption as effort is applied to inserting new, more costly items into the frame or the practice. For instance, places may be fashioned as sites for enhancing the moments of consumption, as for example with tourist destinations or shopping malls. Consumption is therefore itself not a practice. Rather it may be considered as a moment in practices, and occurring in almost every practice.[5] It is appropriation, rather than its purchasing, which delivers the holiday experience. The purchasing and in particular the anticipation of the holiday in the period between booking and travelling are clearly capable of producing positive gratification; indeed, a holiday may deliver less reward in the event than in its anticipation or its later recollection. However, these are not the same things. The taking of vacations is surely a practice, as is shopping for tickets and accommodation in advance, but it is the appropriation of

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[5] Mark that this raises questions about the appropriateness of seeking a synthetic theory of consumption.

the practical opportunities afforded over the period of its duration which generate associated moments of consumption.

Considering consumption as a mode of engagement for the purposes of pursuing the activities of everyday life presents a particular perspective. First and foremost, consumption is more than the demand for goods and services (Harvey et al. 2001). Investigating demand, especially if it is exclusively demand expressed in market exchange, is an inadequate shortcut to understanding consumption. Shopping should not be confused with consumption. If consumption exists in the service of practice, things get used up in the process of *doing* something. Therefore, sustainable consumption, a major emergent topic in global politics and in the social science of the twenty-first century, means sustainable practices. Consumption is a second-order activity; many motivations are involved in the purchase-use cycle, including status, convenience, internal goods of an enthusiasm whose extraction of value is specific to the practice of which it is a part. The importance of acquisition and appreciation as well as appropriation requires acknowledgement. However, rendering appropriation central shows consumption to be serving purposes for life conduct, for being a decent person who is competent in the management of everyday life. The difference this makes to rebalancing accounts of consumption and the scientific explanation of its patterns is examined in the next chapter.

5

Consumption and Theories of Practice

The huge corpus of work on consumption still lacks theoretical consolidation. This is most obvious when contemplating the situations of different disciplines, where there is very little common ground (see, for example, the review in Miller 1995). But the problem is no less great in individual disciplines like sociology, for example, where output seems to me to have been bipolar, generating either abstract and speculative social theory or detailed case studies. Moreover, case studies have been skewed towards favourite, but restricted, topics—fashion, advertising and some forms of popular recreational activity—with particular attention paid to their symbolic meanings and role in the formation of self-identity. These case studies, perhaps encouraged by prominent versions of the abstract theories which say that the consumer has no choice but to choose and will

be judged in terms of the symbolic adequacy of that choice (e.g. Bauman 1988; Giddens 1991), very often operated with models of highly autonomous individuals preoccupied with symbolic communication. Believing that these approaches give a partial understanding of consumption, this chapter sketches an alternative, avoiding methodological individualist accounts of 'the consumer', and showing as much concern for what people do and feel as for what they mean.

My purpose is modest: to show that application of some rudimentary concepts and propositions derived from a rather fragmentary body of theory—for theories of practice are very heterogeneous, as even their most ardent exponents admit (Schatzki et al. 2001)—provides valuable insights into how consumption is organised and how it might best be analysed. The next section presents a brief summary of some of the themes associated with theories of practice and notes some potential difficulties in the application of philosophical accounts in empirical analysis. Thereafter, I consider some substantive aspects of processes of consumption and the distinctive features of an approach via a theory of practice. The conclusion looks forward to further developments, theoretical and empirical, resulting from looking through a lens of practices.

1   An Abridged Account of a Theory of Practice[1]

Reckwitz (2002b: 243) detects a renewal of interest in theories of practice. He also finds, however, many varieties: he and Schatzki (1996: 11) list Giddens, Bourdieu, Lyotard and Charles Taylor among the key exponents. Given their differences, no authoritative or synthetic version is available. Hence, attempts to isolate features common to all produces a comparatively sparse and abstract list of distinctive characteristics (for attempts, see Reckwitz 2002b; Schatzki et al. 2001: 1–5). Among the attractions of theories of practice for Schatzki is that they are neither individualist nor holist. Instead they 'present pluralistic and flexible pictures of the constitution of social life that generally oppose hypostatized unities,

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[1] A more extended version of my views of theories of practice can be found in Warde (2016).

root order in local contexts, and/or successfully accommodate complexities, differences and particularities' (1996: 12). They are thus consistent with many of the claims of critical contemporary social theories and provide a means to recognise ontological features of the postmodern without succumbing to epistemological relativism. His basic insight is that 'both social order and individuality ... result from practices' (1996: 13). For Reckwitz (2002b: 245–6), the appeal is that they incorporate an appreciation of cultural phenomena which justifies rejection of analyses based on models of either *homo economicus* or *homo sociologicus*. Acting rationally and following norms presuppose in addition understanding and intelligibility, which are necessary cultural bases for the existence of practices and which are highlighted through attention to practices.

In lieu of a fully integrated theory of practice I present here a minimal set of concepts and precepts to be drawn upon to explore implications for the analysis of consumption. My abridgement is indebted to Bourdieu (especially 1990b), Schatzki (1996), Giddens (1984), and to a much lesser extent MacIntyre (1985), and is oriented by the very useful overview of Reckwitz (2002b). A summary version of the core concepts and key minimal propositions involved in a theory of practice selected partly for their relevance to a sociology of consumption follows.

There is a distinction to be made between practice and practices. This is summed up concisely by Reckwitz (2002b: 249):

> Practice (*Praxis*) in the singular represents merely an emphatic term to describe the whole of human action (in contrast to 'theory' and mere thinking). 'Practices' in the sense of the theory of social practices, however, is something else. A 'practice' (*Praktik*) is a routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.

Sociologists of practice have shown interest in both. Bourdieu, for example, while interested in many of the elements defining Praktik, does not conceive of a practice as a coherent entity and is especially intent on emphasising the importance of praxis. Yet the notion of practices is particularly instructive for the sociology of consumption.

Schatzki identifies two central notions of practice: practice as a coordinated entity and practice as performance. The first notion is of

> practice as a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings. Examples are cooking practices, voting practices, industrial practices, recreational practices, and correctional practices. To say that the doings and sayings forming a practice constitute a nexus is to say that they are linked in certain ways. Three major avenues of linkage are involved: (1) through understandings, for example, of what to say and do; (2) through explicit rules, principles, precepts and instructions; and (3) through what I will call 'teleoaffective' structures embracing ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions and moods. (1996: 89)

Important to note here is that practices consist of both doings and sayings, suggesting that analysis must be concerned with both practical activity and its representations. Moreover we are given a helpful depiction of the components which form a 'nexus', the means through which doings and sayings hang together and can be said to be coordinated. For a variety of reasons, including ease of reference, I refer to these three components as (1) understandings (2) procedures and (3) engagements.

The second sense, practice as performance, refers to the carrying out of practices, the performing of the doings and sayings which 'actualizes and sustains practices in the sense of nexuses' (Schatzki 1996: 90). The reproduction of the nexus requires regular enactment. As Reckwitz (2002b: 249–50) puts it:

> a practice represents a pattern which can be filled out by a multitude of single and often unique actions reproducing the practice .... The single individual—as a bodily and mental agent—then acts as the 'carrier' (Trager) of a practice—and, in fact, of many different practices which need not be coordinated with one another. Thus, she or he is not only a carrier of patterns of bodily behaviour, but also of certain routinized ways of understanding, knowing how and desiring. These conventionalized 'mental' activities of understanding, knowing how and desiring are necessary elements and qualities of a practice in which the single individual participates, not qualities of the individual.

Practices are thus coordinated entities but also require performance for their existence. A performance presupposes a practice. This is at the core, also, of Anthony Giddens's rather better known theory of structuration, according to which the domain of study of the social sciences 'is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across space and time. Human social activities … are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves *as* actors' (1984: 2).

Schatzki indicates the broad scope of the concept when drawing a distinction between dispersed practices and integrative practices. 'Dispersed practices' (1996: 91–2) appear in many sectors of social life, examples being describing, following rules, explaining and imagining. Their performance primarily requires understanding; an explanation, for instance, entails understanding of how to carry out an appropriate act of 'explaining', an ability to identify explaining when doing it oneself or when someone else does it, and an ability to prompt or respond to an explanation. This is about 'knowing how to' do something, a capacity which presupposes a shared and collective practice involving performance in appropriate contexts and mastery of common understandings, which are the grounds for a particular act being recognisable as explaining.

'Integrative practices' are 'the more complex practices found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life' (1996: 98). Examples include farming practices, cooking practices and business practices. These include, sometimes in specialised forms, dispersed practices, which are part of the components of saying and doing that allow the understanding of, say, cooking practice, along with the ability to follow the rules governing the practice and its particular 'teleoaffective structure'. These are ones which are generally of more interest to sociologists and particularly for a sociology of consumption.

In summary, in the words of Reckwitz (2002b: 250):

A practice is thus a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood. To say that practices are 'social practices' is indeed a tautology: A practice is social, as it is a 'type' of behaving and understanding that appears

at different locales and at different points of time and is carried out by different body/minds.

These elements of a philosophical account of practice cannot be simply transposed into empirical analysis. As general theories of practice they tend to be idealised, abstract and insufficiently attentive to the social processes involved in the creation and reproduction of practices. Understandably so, for their preoccupations are different, metatheoretical rather than empirical.[2] Philosophical descriptions of practices often seem to presume an unlikely degree of shared understanding and common conventions, a degree of consensus which implies processes of effective uniform transmission of understandings, procedures and engagements. It is almost inconceivable that such conditions be met.[3] And if they were to be, the often voiced criticism that the concept of practice makes it difficult to account for change would appear to gain additional force.[4] But none of this is necessarily the case, as will be argued below. Sociological applications of the concept may deal equally with persistence and change in the forms of practices and their adherents, with manifest differences in the ways in which individuals and groups engage in the same practice, and with the social conflicts and political alliances involved in the performance and reorganisation of practices. Substantive research on consumption might thus exploit some of the potential merits of a theory of

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[2] Thus Schatzki primarily wants an account of action which does not rest on insupportable assumptions about atomistic and sovereign individuals. MacIntyre (1985) wants to find a means to restore recognition of the universal moral dimension to human conduct, which consists among other things in consideration of the public or common good, via recognition of the routine application of standards of excellence to ordinary activities. As he puts it, to call someone 'a good farmer' is to have recourse to commonly held criteria of a good performance in the specific domain of farming.

[3] This is the core of one of the most scathing critiques of theories of practice, that of Turner (1994). Turner's main objection is, however, towards imputing causal powers to collective mental constructs, like tradition or 'conscience collective', and the greater part of the book is making the argument that these are incapable of being empirically identified except insofar as they are manifest in the habituations and public performances of individuals. Besides his methodological individualist assumption being uncompelling, it is not clear that such mental constructs are characteristic components of all theories of practice. Schatzki, for instance, does not call on such concepts, nor does Giddens. Moreover, Schatzki points out (1996: 106–7), the main thrust of Turner's critique is neutralised when it is realised that practices are not themselves causes.

[4] Exceptions among positions sympathetic to theories of practice tend to fall back on technological innovation as a motor of change.

practice, including that it is not dependent on presumptions about the primacy of individual choice or action, whether of the rational action type or as the expression of personal identity. As Schatzki insists, practice theories are neither individualist nor holist; they portray social organisation as something other than individuals making contracts, yet are not dependent on a holistic notion of culture or societal totality. Practice theories comprehend non-instrumentalist notions of conduct, both observing the role of routine on the one hand, and emotion, embodiment and desire on the other.

2   Implications for the Analysis of Consumption

Given their promise, it is strange that theories of practice have only very recently been applied systematically to the area of consumption.[5] Two prominent practice theorists—Giddens and Bourdieu—made contributions, although neither seem completely adequate. Giddens appeared to lay aside the arguments of *The Constitution of Society* (1984) when discussing lifestyles (1991: 80–7), where he offered a thoroughly voluntaristic analysis of individual action. Bourdieu, I would contend, had he pursued the injunctions of the *Logic of Practice*, would not have arrived at the account of taste he offered in *Distinction*. For he did not employ his theory of practice much in *Distinction*, being more concerned with the relationship between habitus and capital. Hence, he oscillates between the two senses of *Praktik* and *Praxis*, appearing to use his concept of field as a weakly explicated substitute for the former.[6] In what follows I therefore try to emphasise the implications of explicitly and determinedly using practices as a theoretical avenue for analysing consumption. I illustrate my points with reference to the integrative practice of motoring,

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[5] Of course, the term practice gets used frequently, particularly in the anthropological literature, but this is mostly done in an ad hoc and descriptive fashion rather than as a thorough and purposeful application of theory.

[6] Swartz (1997: 141, fn50) observes that the concept of field came to play an important and systematic role only in Bourdieu's later work, before which, as in *Distinction*, field and practice are conceptually conflated.

travelling privately by automobile, a predominant mode of experience since the mid twentieth century (Dant 2004: 74; Urry 2004: 26), which entails equipment and skills, and also shared, yet differentiated, understandings, procedures and engagement.

2.1   Consumption and Practices

Most practices, and probably all integrative practices, require and entail consumption. As currently used, the term 'consumption' is a syncretic concept (Abbott 2001), displaying a chronic ambivalence between two contrasting senses, of purchase and of using-up, both of which are equally inscribed in everyday language and scholarly analysis. Despite the significance of purchasing commodities in furnishing the conditions of daily life in contemporary Western societies, consumption cannot be restricted to, nor defined by, market exchange. While economics is overwhelmingly concerned with the terms of exchange, other social sciences properly pay more attention to the symbolic significance and the use of items. Consumption cannot be reduced to demand, requiring instead its examination as an integral part of most spheres of daily life (see Harvey et al. 2001). With this in mind, I understand consumption as a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion.

In this view, consumption is not itself a practice but is, rather, a moment in almost every practice.[7] Appropriation occurs within practices: cars are worn out and petrol is burned in the process of motoring. Items

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[7] Consumption might perhaps be considered a dispersed practice, one that occurs often and on many different sites, but is not an integrated practice. People mostly consume without registering or reflecting that this is what they are doing because they are, from their point of view, actually doing things like driving, eating or playing. They only rarely understand their behaviour as 'consuming'; although, the more the notion and discourse of 'the consumer' penetrates, the more often people do speak of themselves as consuming. However, such utterances are usually references to purchasing and shopping. Shopping, by contrast, is an integrated practice, with understandings, know-how and teleoaffective structures. People say they like or hate shopping (and those of the latter disposition often take steps to avoid it). But consumption is inescapable, momentary and occurs often entirely without mind.

appropriated and the manner of their deployment are governed by the conventions of the practice; touring, commuting and off-road sports are forms of motoring following different scripts for performers and functions for vehicles. The patterns of similarity and difference in possessions and use within and between groups of people, often demonstrated by studies of consumption, may thus be seen as the corollary of the way the practice is organised, rather than as the outcome of personal choice, whether unconstrained or bounded. The conventions and the standards of the practice steer behaviour. This is consistent with Alfred Marshall's claim (see Swann 2002: 30) that activity generates wants, rather than vice versa. Practices, rather than individual desires, we might say, create wants. For example, the paraphernalia of the hot rod enthusiast—modified vehicles, manuals and magazines, memorabilia, 'records of auto-racing sounds', etc. (Moorhouse 1991: 82)—are more directly the consequence of engagement in the practice of a particular motor sport than they are of individual taste or choice. It is the fact of engagement in the practice, rather than any personal decision about a course of conduct, that explains the nature and process of consumption. In addition, we can see that particular items deployed and consumed are intricately intertwined, and often defining, elements of a practice and a conduit for its performances.[8]

2.2   The Social Differentiation of Practices and Their Performance

Social practices do not present uniform planes upon which agents participate in identical ways but are instead internally differentiated on many dimensions. Considered simply, from the point of view of the individual person, the performance of driving will depend on past experience, technical knowledge, learning, opportunities, available resources, previous encouragement by others, etc. (see, for example, O'Connell 1998: 43ff,

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[8] Some theories of practice, particularly ones drawing from studies of science and technology or actor network theory, emphasise the 'founding presence of nonhumans in human life' (Schatzki 2001: 10) and insist on the determinant role of material objects (e.g. Pickering 2001). Such versions contribute to understanding the consumption of goods through their functions in constituting practices, potentially enhancing material culture approaches, for instance.

on the historical development in Britain of access to cars by gender). From the point of view of a practice as a whole, we can think of a dedicated and specialised domain comprising many different competencies and capabilities. Considering agents' capacities we might differentiate between long-standing participants and novitiates, theorists and technicians, generalists and specialists, conservatives and radicals, visionaries and followers, the highly knowledgeable and the relatively ignorant, and the professional and the amateur. All are differences which may be relevant for different purposes in analysing either the role of participants or the structure of their positions in the practice. Hence, we can differentiate on the basis of the potential contribution of agents to the reproduction and development of the practice. As advocates of the 'social worlds' tradition of thought remind us, differentiation within a practice is partly a matter of commitment to it: the analytic distinction between enthusiasts, regulars, marginals and strangers with different levels of investment in any particular world has proved valuable (see Gronow 2004; Unruh 1979).[9]

Bourdieu (1984), also concerned with the internal differentiation of practices, focused by contrast on their social classification, the processes of access and assimilation to them, and the external rewards going to different positions in fields. Attributing extensive causal powers to habitus, which is 'converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions' (1984: 170), his account centres on the effects of general and transposable dispositions rather than on the organisation of practices. The distinction between understanding, procedures and engagement was, therefore, blurred because disputes about taste have their dynamics outside the practices in question. For Bourdieu, the social differentiation of practices arose from class-structured classifications and perceptions rather than recruitment to, and activity within, particular practices. But it is because practices are internally differentiated that they are able to generate disputes about taste.

Empirical evidence indicates differences between groups of people with regard to their understandings of a practice, the procedures they

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[9] A consummate example of the social worlds approach is Becker's *Art Worlds* (1982), where he lucidly depicted the coordination of the components of the practice of creating and selling art, a story of intersecting careers and cooperative networks, within which analysis he seamlessly united processes of production and consumption.

adopt and the values to which they aspire. Disposition towards cars and motoring, for example, varies by group and place. Edensor (2004: 114) observes differences across countries in 'the embodied competencies and conventions of driving' (see also Sheller 2004: 233ff). The history of motoring in Britain is in part a story of social class differentiation, emerging as an upper-class amusement which diffused to sections of the middle class between the two world wars (O'Connell 1998: 11–32). However, its incorporation into everyday life did not entail uniformity of understanding; consider, for instance, the role of joyriding (O'Connell 1998: 102–6). The development of car travel in the USA is sketched by Gartman (2004) as a case of an initially exclusive activity, becoming increasingly popular and plural, and now driven more by subcultural or lifestyle variation than by the logic of class (see also O'Dell 2001). Thus, he argues, motoring retains a capacity to mark social distinctions, but not as a function of social hierarchy. The belated, and still restricted, access of women to the driving of cars, as well as the rationalisations for such exclusion, demonstrates again, and very clearly, that practices are differentiated (Gartman 2004; O'Connell 1998: 43–71; Scharff 1991).

It is worth considering that the three key components of the nexus identified by Schatzki as linking doings and sayings in order to constitute a practice (understandings, procedures and engagements) may vary independently of one another between groups of participants. For it is highly likely that—without flouting the condition that the elements constitute a linked nexus—agents vary in their understandings, skills and goals and that the relationship between these three components also varies. It is probable that people learn each in different ways, suggesting that we might profitably examine in detail how understandings, procedures and values of engagement are each acquired and then adapted to performances.

2.3   The Trajectory of Practices

Practices have a trajectory or path of development, a history. Moreover, that history will be differentiated, for the substantive forms that practices take will always be conditional upon the institutional arrangements characteristic of time, space and social context, for example of household

organisation, dominant modes of economic exchange and cultural traditions. 'Why do people do what they do' and 'how do they do those things in the way that they do?' are perhaps the key sociological questions concerning practices, the answers to which will necessarily be historical and institutional. This is to acknowledge the social construction of practices, the role of collective learning in the construal of competence, and the importance of the exercise of power in the shaping of definitions of justifiable conduct. Consumption has a role in such trajectories, since the modes and contents of appropriation of goods and services are integral elements of a practice. For instance, O'Connell (1998: 123–36) argues that the establishment of motoring as a dominating mode of transport in Britain was a conjunctural effect of the class composition of early owners of cars who, through the motoring organisations they patronised, had the capacity to exercise political influence over the shape of traffic regulation and infrastructural provision.

The principal implication of a theory of practice is that the sources of changed behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves. The concept of practice inherently combines a capacity to account for both reproduction and innovation. At any given point in time a practice has a set of established understandings, procedures and objectives. Such formal and informal codifications govern conduct within that practice, though often without much reflection or conscious awareness on the part of the bearers. This has the potential for the reproduction of that practice, which indeed transpires much of the time, for practices have some considerable inertia. Thus, theories of practice emphasise processes like habituation, routine, practical consciousness, tacit knowledge, tradition, and so forth. Performance in a familiar practice is often neither fully conscious nor reflective. As Giddens (1984: 60) appreciates, routines are central, notwithstanding a capacity for reflective monitoring of performance. The dispositions of agents to act within a practice are deeply entrenched *and* embodied; there are emotional and corporeal as well as cognitive bases of behaviour (on car travel, see Dant and Martin 2001; Dant 2004; Sheller 2004). Bourdieu's concept of habitus, through its sense of embodied and structured dispositions, is one notion which grasps the orderliness and predictability of people's actions when faced with apparent free choices, both within a particular practice and across

different practices. The patterning of social life is a consequence of the established understandings of what courses of action are not inappropriate. Convention in this sense is central to the whole understanding of what it means to be engaged in a practice.

However, performances in the same practice are not always the same. Conventions will usually be to some degree contested, with some practitioners typically still attached to prior codes of conduct, while others, perhaps of a new generation, seek to replace current orthodoxies with new prescriptions. Understandings, conventions and aspirations will normally be differentially distributed among and observed by its practitioners, representing a mix of the satisficing and the optimal, or adequate and best practice. However, practices also contain the seeds of constant change. They are dynamic by virtue of their own internal logic of operation, as people in myriad situations adapt, improvise and experiment. For enthusiasts, most practices entail pursuit of excellence and a degree of competition, but for others the need to keep up and maintain relative standards of performance leads them to want acceptable, if not always state-of-the-art, equipment, experience and provision. Then, of course, there is the push of capital accumulation wherein economic growth depends in part on persuading people to adopt new things, both raising the volume of consumption but also diffusing new expectations. In addition, practices are not hermetically sealed off from other adjacent and parallel practices, from which lessons are learned, innovations borrowed, procedures copied. The contemporary mass-produced car has been much enhanced by technical innovation in motor sports, and the idea of going for a drive at the weekend draws upon conventions of independent holiday travel.

This suggests nuances to accounts of the way that economic production affects consumption, and vice versa. Because practices have their own distinct, institutionalised and collectively regulated conventions, they partly insulate people, qua consumers, from the blandishments of producers and promotional agencies. Customers cannot usually be dictated to by producers of goods and services; most innovations fail, more new functions and designs are rejected than adopted. Yet, nor are producers bystanders in the process. Producers attempt to mould practices in line with their commercial interests. Firms learned to introduce rapid changes of styling to encourage customers to change their cars regularly

and to discard them long before obsolescence (Gartman 2002). They also suggest that their own products will enhance performance: we are persuaded that some cars are faster, smoother, safer, or more exciting to drive, all of which are means to enhance or improve our practice. The effect of production on consumption is mediated through the nexus of practices.

2.4   The Multiplicity of Practices

There are many practices in the world, and most people engage in a considerable number of them. That number increases; according to Miller (1987: 8), the multiplication of enthusiasms and interests is one of the marvels of our era. Pursuit of variety, a current trend identified as cultural omnivorousness (e.g. Peterson and Kern 1996), results in continual expansion of the set of items conventionally defined as part of a decent and normal life. Increased diversity of engagement has potentially enormous economic consequences; getting people to dabble in everything offers splendid commercial opportunities, particularly when it is the affluent who are the most prone to dabble. This increase is attributable in part to the multiplication and diversification of practices. Explicit examination of the interconnections between changes in practice and demand for commodities reveals a tangled web of forces. Demand will often be generated indirectly, as when new tools or techniques require complementary products for their effective adoption; fast cars beg for motorways, hot rods for drag strips. The suggestion that one might wish to drive a vehicle off normal roads sells sports utility vehicles and also encourages the belief that one might require more than one car, different ones for different purposes. Another process sees the insertion of old or established products into practices which previously had no place for them, as the installation of radios, cassette players and CDs into automobiles incorporated cultural consumption into the practice of motoring (Bull 2004). This in turn is part of a more general intensification of simultaneous and multiple consumption, an inescapably normal process because people typically engage in several practices at the same time, each with its own required paraphernalia.

Wants are fulfilled only in practice, their satisfaction attributable to effective practical performances. The capacity for a practice to deliver fulfilments of different types is well established (e.g. Warde and Martens 2000). Studies of motoring point to its multiple meanings and effects, including symbolising 'personal identity, family relationships and sociability' and 'liberation, empowerment and social inclusion' (Sheller 2004: 230). They also suggest that several pleasures may be taken at once, conspicuous display, excitement, sociability and opportunity for aesthetic judgement being just as important as getting from A to B (Carrabine and Longhurst 2002; Miller 2001). The practice is the conduit and raison d'être for the gratifications which arise from its component moments of consumption. Consumption rarely occurs purely for its own sake, but contributes to the delivery of a range of varied rewards.

Observing the multiplicity of practices raises again an important old question, often now thought impolite or impolitic, of whether practices have differential value. Is there still cultural hierarchy? It is hard to escape the conclusion that practices do offer different rewards and that the effects of consumption, given meaning through performances, can be evaluated systematically. Aversion to cultural snobbery has obscured two general points: first, that rewards internal to practices are partly a function of the complexity of the particular practice; and second, that the external rewards to be gained by any individual are a function of the prestige of the practice. The first point is established by the tradition in psychology which shows that if tasks are too simple boredom ensues, and if they are too difficult then anxiety is aroused. Best to have activities which fall between, where challenge and competence are in balance, when, according to Cziksentmihalyi (1992), people achieve a highly positive sense of 'flow'. This implies, first, that level of proficiency in a practice is a major determinant of psychic reward. It also follows that some practices can be seen as more complex than others because they offer more levels at which opportunities to experience flow can be found. The greater the range of challenges, the more a practice can deliver internal goods to a larger number of people (see also Benedikt 1996). The second point acknowledges the arbitrariness of the cultural content of practices—there is no standard by which to establish that one type of music or sport is superior to any other—yet insists that some provide their participants with access

to privileged social networks, attribution of cultural honour and, often, economic advantage. This happens as an effect of the operation of the general field of social power wherein dominant groups exclude others from involvement in activities which they represent as especially worthwhile and where expertise is, hence, socially and personally prestigious. It remains the case, as Bourdieu (1984) demonstrated, that some practices offer greater external social rewards than others.

2.5   The Individual at the Intersection of Practices

Reckwitz (2002b: 256) notes that in theories of practice 'the social world is first and foremost populated by diverse social practices which are carried by agents'. He continues,

> As carriers of practices, they [agents] are neither autonomous nor the judgmental dopes who conform to norms: They understand the world and themselves, and use know-how and motivational knowledge, according to the particular practice. There is a very precise place for the 'individual'—as distinguished from the agent …: As there are diverse social practices and as every agent carries out a multitude of different social practices, the individual is the unique crossing point of practices, of bodily-mental routines.

This view, while minimising the analytic importance of individuality, does not prohibit the description and characterisation of the consumption behaviour of a single individual. An individual's pattern of consumption is the sum of the moments of consumption which occur in the totality of his or her practices. If the individual is merely the intersection point of many practices, and practices are the bedrock of consumption, then a new perspective on consumer behaviour emerges. New explanations of contemporary identities and the role of consumption in identity formation suggest themselves.

Every individual acquires items from different practices. Patterns of consumption—of expenditures, possessions, portfolios of cultural activities—can therefore be explained and accounted for partly by volume of practices and commitment to practices. Sequential and simultaneous engagement in diverse practices, especially when involving people

belonging to disparate and heterogeneous social networks, might be a source of the much-discussed tendency towards fragmentation of the self.[10] Much depends on the extent to which networks overlap and whether the norms of different practices are consistent with each other. But, arguably, this is not the dissolution, fracturing or saturating of the self, as is suggested in postmodern accounts. Neither is it simply a form of psychological adaptation to the postmodern world, nor a problem of identity per se, but rather a consequence of the nature of the social organisation of practices. An adequate account of the apparently fragmentary personal lifestyles of the contemporary period would be one founded on the outcomes of multiple social engagements and differential locations in a plurality of practices.

One issue that arises is how, for an individual, moments of consumption occurring in different positions map onto one another and how coherent are the patterns resulting from mixing and matching different forms. Certainly the marketing of cars, like many other products, revolves around the suggestion that certain marques or models fit particular personalities or lifestyles (e.g. Jain 2002: 398). Some people probably achieve a degree of coherence. A person of good taste is often represented as someone who can demonstrate consistent aesthetic judgement across a number of cultural practices—even if this is nothing more than the capacity to *discuss* preferences in a particular critical manner (see Holt 1997a). Yet what might be judged as consistent, or going together well, is itself contested and subject to social struggle. Moreover, whether such combinations are cumulative and structured class dispositions, as proposed by Bourdieu, or more contingent effects of practical engagements, is an empirical question.

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[10] Gergen (1992) deduced as much. Gergen claimed that a postmodern self has emerged as a consequence of a process of 'social saturation', which, though not formally defined, is claimed to be a result of new communication technologies which 'make it possible to sustain relationships—either directly or indirectly—with an ever-expanding range of other persons' (p. 3). These technologies 'saturate us with the voices of humankind' (p. 6), which furnish us 'with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self' (p. 6), which in turn 'corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships' (p. 7). This profound social change 'is essentially one that immerses us ever more deeply in the social world, and exposes us more and more to the opinions, values and life-styles of others' (p. 49). A theory of practice would focus on differential exposure to an interdependence arising not from technological change but from extended social connections arising from engagement in multiple practices.

These considerations are also relevant to a paradox of recognition. As the number of practices grows and many become more varied internally it becomes increasingly difficult to interpret those signs and symbols supposed to communicate personal identity to others. As Campbell (1995: 115–17) indicated, people may believe that they are conveying a message through their comportment and adornment, yet this may be incomprehensible to a large part of the audience which observes the performance. For instance, it is likely that someone with some investment in motoring or an attachment to a car subculture will be able to read vehicles and driving in such a way as to recognise another's position and disposition, but others who are marginal or strangers to the relevant segment of the practice will remain oblivious to the intended meaning. It is thus important to recognise the variability in the extent to which practices are shared and understood among a broad public, for preferences are often learned within a particular sphere of a practice and their justification has localised jurisdiction.

It follows from this, and from the proposition that practices are the principal steering device of consumption because the primary source of desire, knowledge and judgement, that recruitment to a practice is a foremost matter for explanation. Processes of enrolment into practices will range from introduction to domestic ones during infancy to joining of formal associations for the pursuit of social and recreational activities. Individuals then have personal trajectories within practices and, once enrolled, subsequent immersion in a practice often has the features of a career.[11] Changing positions within practices may be narrated in terms of changing forms of consumption, whether of objects or experiences. Equally important as a topic of investigation is the gradual withdrawal from or abandoning of a practice, or indeed resistance to being recruited in the first place.

3   Conclusions

To sum up, from the point of view of a theory of practice, consumption occurs within and for the sake of practices. Items consumed are put to use in the course of engaging in particular practices like motoring and being

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[11] From the point of view of an individual, this career need not be continuous, progressive or successful.

a competent practitioner requires appropriate consumption of goods and services. The practice, so to speak, requires that competent practitioners will avail themselves of the requisite services, possess and command the capability to manipulate the appropriate tools, and devote a suitable level of attention to the conduct of the practice. This is, of course, in addition to exhibiting common understanding, know-how and commitment to the value of the practice. Such a view is consistent with an approach to consumption which stresses the routine, ordinary, collective, conventional nature of much consumption. It is also consistent with the view that practices are internally differentiated such that persons in different situations do the same activity differently. The implications for pursuing a sociology of consumption are many, but here I will restrict myself to a few summary and programmatic observations.

Let me first say that this chapter ignores many important matters. The argument remains to be made that theories of practice perform better than, or at least as well as, other approaches claiming similar merits, for example, theories of culture and subculture or the theory of social worlds. Also, my account of theories of practice is a schematic composite ignoring the very substantial differences among them. The refinement and closer specification of a particular theory of practice is essential. Nor have I presented a set of procedural rules for determining where the boundaries of a practice lie, what separates one practice from an adjacent practice. What is it that allows one to say that many performances which are not identical are all part of the same practice? The answer to that question would go some way to specifying how new practices emerge, an equally pressing issue. These are, however, mostly problems of the theory of practice, and my present purpose is not to advance that theory but rather to anticipate how it might affect the analysis of consumption.

The approach offers a distinctive perspective, attending less to individual choices and more to the collective development of modes of appropriate conduct in everyday life. The analytic focus shifts from the insatiable wants of the human animal to the instituted conventions of collective culture, from personal expression to social competence, from mildly constrained choice to disciplined participation. From this angle the concept of 'the consumer' evaporates. Instead the key focal points become the organisation of the practice and the moments of consumption enjoined.

Persons confront moments of consumption neither as sovereign choosers nor as dupes.

Theories of practice comprehend some of the local, disarticulated and compartmentalised features of the contemporary social world identified in diagnoses of the postmodern condition, but without relinquishing analytic ambition. Consumption is not a unified and coherent activity, nor is it per se an integrated practice. Rather it is partitioned through its boundedness within practices. Social differentiation is portrayed in new ways. Variation in behaviour is not solely a function of stratification by socio-demographic factors, relevant though that remains, nor simply a matter of the differential distribution of attitudes, interpretations and motivations. Contrasting understandings, levels of practical competence, and degrees of involvement generate behavioural variation. The question of hierarchies of practices, previously debated in terms of whether some activities are intrinsically superior to others, becomes an empirical question of what specific internal and external benefits accrue to people in particular positions within identified practices.

Theories of practice also provide a powerful counterpoint to expressivist accounts of consumption. Ever since Baudrillard's (1998 [1970]) incisive critique of positions, which attended only to use-values of goods and services, thus obscuring their sign-value in consumer society, we have become highly aware of the communicative properties of such items, their capacities to convey meanings and transmit messages. Of course consumption *is* often a form of communication but, as Campbell (1995, 1998) pointed out, there are strong reasons for resisting the temptation to view it only in such terms. This is partly because consumption display has limited capacity for communication, for, as he argues, consumption as the passing of messages to strangers falls foul of three conflations: an action can be intelligible without it having an agreed meaning; possessing meaning is not the same as constituting a message; and receiving a message does not entail that there was an intention to send that message. But it is also in danger of seriously neglecting the fact that most action is not directed towards communicating with others but towards the fulfilment of self-regarding purposive projects. Hence, much consumption remains governed by considerations of efficiency and effectiveness in relation to the accomplishment of routine purposive tasks, that is to say,

the pursuit of use-values. The appeal of theories of practice is that they can accommodate these points comfortably without any divorce from appreciation of the role of meaning and understanding, know-how and judgement. The practice approach does not give 'culture' *more* than its due—the embodied, socially structured institutions which provide the parameters of the domains of action, and the location of social groups in social space, keep the social and the cultural in the frame together.[12]

Attention to practices also makes good sense of the existence of both internal and extrinsic rewards from conduct. Practices have their own integrity, which is the source of internal goods, that is to say internally generated rewards, as is made most clear by MacIntyre (1985: 187–96). Judgements of performance are made internally with respect to the goals and aspirations of the practice itself, and proficiency and commitment deliver satisfaction and self-esteem. But proficiency may also deliver extrinsic rewards, the almost exclusive preoccupation of Bourdieu (e.g. 1984, 1988, 1996a) in his analyses of fields; those in the most advantageous positions within a field are those who have greatest opportunities to increase their economic, cultural and social capital. Hence, the question of which practices people become involved in rises to greater prominence, for practices convey different levels of internal and external rewards. This in turn might lead to further reflection on the effects of consumption on well-being.

Critics of current levels of consumption have often pointed out that above a certain level of material provision further increments of money, goods and services make very little difference to the sense of well-being or degree of happiness (e.g. Lane 2000). The paradox is that people continue to strive for further material gain, yet those who are apparently comparatively unsuccessful exhibit no loss of well-being. The paradox may be partially explained by noticing that it is not so much things in themselves, but rather the place within different practices that is afforded by the possession or control of goods and services, which is the basis of contentment, social acceptability and recognition. Bearing in mind

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[12] For Reckwitz (2002b: 245–6), it is the appreciation of the importance of understanding as a foundation of practice that is the reason for deeming these theories 'culturalist' and thereby superior to models of *homo economicus* or *homo sociologicus*.

the multiplicity of practices available to people, it becomes a little more clear why many people are not fundamentally discontented despite their lack of access to the most expensive or status-enhancing practices. The metaphor of big fish in small ponds perhaps best conveys the sense that each person can derive self-satisfaction and self-esteem from relative measures of social success in at least some of the practices in which they engage. Stock car racing may not have the same aura as vintage car collecting, but it is unlikely that the experience of improving and becoming expert is very much different in the two separate practices. Someone who values the practice of stock car racing, and has the possibility of engaging in it as a competent or excellent practitioner, probably has access to the psychic rewards that psychologists attribute to the process of self-development. In other words, no matter where a practice fits in a hierarchy of prestige, there are internal goods to be derived from it for individual practitioners. So, though the external rewards may be different—by meeting a different sort of person at a vintage car rally, or being able to profit economically by reselling rare or historic vehicles—there are internal rewards irrespective. Invidious comparison does not in any simple manner reduce the benefits acquired from practices conventionally deemed socially inferior.

Finally, a turn to practice alters the importance of the type of research questions to be asked. It becomes more important to inquire about what types of practice are prevalent, and what range of the available practices different individuals engage in, as well as what are the typical combinations of practices. It remains as vital as ever to ask how individuals are positioned in the practices in which they are engaged, and especially how homologous are their positions across the range of their practices. But, more than ever before, the question 'what level of commitment is displayed to different practices?' becomes focal, and with it a grasp of how 'careers' within practices take off, develop and end; of how people come to an understanding of what is required by the practice and their role within it. A thorough analysis will also ask how practices develop, considering both their internal dynamics and the external conditions of their existence, especially with regard to changing criteria of effectiveness and excellence. Finally, there is a question, much avoided in theoretical expositions, of how different practices affect one another, for

surely understandings, knowledge and orientations transmigrate across boundaries. This range of research questions suggests a parallel need for breadth in method and techniques of interpretation which are equally conditions for the development of a programme of research inspired by theories of practice.

Part III

Consumption, Taste and Power

6

Practice and Field: Revising Bourdieu's Concepts

Pierre Bourdieu is universally acknowledged as a founding figure in the revival of interest in theories of practice. He is equally widely recognised for his contribution to the study of modern consumption. Although his analysis of the social distribution of taste remains highly controversial it can rarely be bypassed by scholars seeking to give explanations of patterns of consumption. *Distinction* is Bourdieu's best-known and most celebrated work among scholars of consumption. The fact that it is a convoluted, fragmentary and theoretically inconsistent book is compensated for by its originality, verve, critical purpose and sociological relevance. In this chapter I discuss the relationship between its key concepts, with the specific purpose of trying to isolate a usable concept of practice to deal with issues of consumption. This involves an extended discussion of the relationship between his uses of the concepts of practice and field. Bearing in mind that the scientific object of *Distinction* is not consumption, but social judgements of taste, the relationship between consumption and practice deserves unpacking. I address that by asking why and

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with what consequences Bourdieu withdrew from extended reflection on the concept of practice and argue that its reincorporation into the contemporary analysis of consumption might resolve some theoretical and empirical problems. Clarification of Bourdieu's controversial concepts might improve accounts of consumption, particularly so that they might deal with ordinary consumption.

If Abbott's thesis of the cyclical history of theory is even roughly correct it makes little sense when trying to build or refine sociological theories to start again from the beginning, though reasons including purity, vanity and immortality do tempt many scholars. Instead, it is usually better to rework existing materials recognising that at any point in time current emphases and tendencies will have eliminated insights deriving from the disfavoured side of a fractal opposition. Of course, one should choose carefully which existing theoretical edifice to begin from. There are those who contend that Bourdieu is simply irreparable; his approach would be totally unsuitable for the foundations of an alternative (e.g. Hennion 2010). Others have apparently honoured Bourdieu by drawing upon one or more of his concepts and making them play an analytic role in a different type of venture (e.g. cultural capital and social capital most obviously). Yet others accept his work more or less in its entirety. I prefer the second of these modes of reception and will review Bourdieu's use of concepts, starting from *Distinction*, to refine concepts for the type of practice-theoretical approach to consumption briefly sketched in Chapter 5. I suggest that Bourdieu reduced significantly his use of the concept of practice as he made increasing use of the concept of field. While I see virtue in the concept of field, I argue that it needs to be complemented by a better or more explicitly elaborated concept of practice for best effect in the analysis of consumption.

1   From Practice to Field

Bourdieu worked extensively on the concept of practice in the first half of his career, resulting in significant theoretical formalisation in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* and *Logic of Practice* (1977 [1972], 1990b [1980]). He never subsequently disclaims his attachment to the theory of practice

developed in those works. Yet, apart from constant reiteration of the epistemological position which contrasts practical sense with scholastic reason, he allows most other aspects of the theory of practice to fall into desuetude. Its place was taken by the concept of field, the primary analytic tool for his major empirical studies in the 1980s. Only in *Distinction*, which constitutes a crossroads in Bourdieu's conceptual progress, are the two concepts dealt with in tandem. The resulting meeting was far from satisfactory.

The formula presented in *Distinction*: [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice (Bourdieu 1984: 101) has caused a good deal of puzzlement among commentators (e.g. Crossley 2001). It is not unreasonable to read this as Bourdieu's attempt to encapsulate the fundamental theoretical thrust of the analysis, one which, as Bourdieu continues (1984: 101), would reveal

> the structure of the life-style characteristic of an agent or class of agents, that is, the unity hidden under the diversity and multiplicity of the set of practices performed in fields governed by different logics and therefore inducing different forms of realization.

It is not clear whether this passage is suggesting that there are many practices in each field, or one practice to each field. Neither is it clear whether it is practices or fields, or both, which have logics. And if both do indeed have logics, are they similar or different logics? What it does say is that practices are performed in fields and that many diverse practices and fields are parts of a process whereby social profits are realised. The formula is impenetrable; maybe that should not matter since it may have been intended merely as a literary flourish. But in fact the rest of the book fails to make the relations between these concepts much clearer. The formula is testimony to the general theoretical inadequacies of *Distinction*, which lie in the way these four concepts, and particularly the last two, are articulated. For *Distinction*, though a wonderful book in almost every respect, sits uneasily at a crossroads in the theoretical development of its author. Arguably, it was written without being entirely clear how the concept of practice could be applied to contemporary France and before a theory of field had been adequately developed.

Distinction was written at about the same time as the commitment to a theory of practice was reaffirmed with the publication of *Logic of Practice*, which laid out the principal concepts of Bourdieu's theory—habitus, structures, embodiment, *doxa*, symbolic capital, domination and practices. *Logic of Practice* makes very few references to field.[1] *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, published eight years earlier, which has substantially the same content though organised differently, makes none at all. *Distinction*, by contrast, uses the term field fairly extensively, referring to it almost as frequently as to the concept of practice. My contention is that neither concept is very clearly or effectively applied in *Distinction*. Neither do very much analytic work. And nowhere is it shown how they relate to one another.

The formula appears in Part 2 of the book entitled 'The Economy of Practices', at the beginning of its first chapter, 'The Social Space and Its Transformations', which discusses understandings of social class, the construction of classifications, the foundation of classes in different types of capital, the structuring of social space by principles of domination, and the conditions and strategies behind the accumulation and reconversion of capitals. The formula promises to establish 'the systematic nature of lifestyles', which is to be done through a 'return to the practice-unifying and practice-generating principle, ie class habitus, the internalized form of class condition and the class conditionings it entails' (1984: 101). The formula is then quickly left aside. The remaining two principal theoretical chapters deal with 'The Habitus and the Space of Lifestyles' (extensively in Chapter 3 of *Distinction*), in which the concept of practice is often deployed, and 'The Dynamics of Fields' (Chapter 4). *Distinction* is remarkable for having extended treatments of both the concepts of practice and field, for it is a feature of Bourdieu's work generally that discussions and analyses of each are kept resolutely apart. Yet, even here, he deals with them in separate chapters.

Distinction says comparatively little *theoretically* about practice or practices. It is discussed briefly in relation to the formula, extensively in its third chapter, and occasionally in passing thereafter. That chapter is, however, primarily a discursus on habitus. The properties of habitus are expressed in terms of how it generates, with respect to many varied areas

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[1] The concept appears in *Logic of Practice*, only on pp. 51, 58, 66–8.

of practice, schemes of action and the dispositions that generate meaningful practices and meaningful perceptions.

Bourdieu's most elaborate formulation of the theory of practice is offered in *Logic of Practice*. There one can find at least six senses of the term:

(1) The practical orientation is contrasted with the theoretical and the contemplative. This appears in the notion of practical sense, and in the idea of a logic of practice which is not that of the logician.
(2) The practical is contrasted with the discursive, as practical action rather than the making and circulating of meaning.
(3) The practical is contrasted with the impractical, with the imputation to (apparently all) agents that they have a degree of practical mastery over the activities in which they engage.
(4) Practice is referred to as a domain, or system.
(5) Practice may refer to any behaviour, performance or occurrence, whether strategic or habitual.
(6) Practice is that which emanates from habitus.

In *Distinction*, practice is used in three of those senses. First it is used, as it was consistently throughout Bourdieu's work, in contrast to theory; the argument that science and scholastic reason operate with a different form of logic and reasoning to that characterising everyday life is a basis of Bourdieu's epistemological position. Practical conduct neither requires nor exhibits the level of conscious reflexive thought characteristic of theoretical reason. Second, the term is used to identify some kind of more or less coherent entity formed around a particular activity, for instance golf or clothing. This usage has intimations of the notion of *Praktik*, a coordinated, recognisable and institutionally supported practice. Bourdieu (1984: 170) observes that the generative schemes of habitus apply 'to the most varied areas of practice'. He uses the term 'areas of practice' elsewhere.[2] He also occasionally names practices—e.g. 'sports, games, entertainments', 'sporting practices', 'tennis'[3]—as part of an analysis of

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[2] Bourdieu (1984: 175, 208 and 223).
[3] Bourdieu (1984: 173, 218, and 212, respectively).

their symbolic significance. In these instances, he is surely referring to some sort of coordinated entity, a recognisable domain of activity with a history and a reputation. Third, Bourdieu uses the term simply to mean performance, the carrying out of some action or other. Thus he says that habitus is defined by two capacities: 'to produce classifiable practices and works … and … to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products'. He also says that habitus 'generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions' (1984: 170). In both instances he can mean only that practices are manifest behaviours, for habitus per se would not generate a coherent entity since some set of institutional processes would inevitably also be required to that end.

Bourdieu (1984: 208) introduces the concept of field in making a methodological point in the chapter on habitus, where he lists fields 'of sport, or music, or food, decoration, politics, language' and suggests each has affinities to 'the major areas of practice'. Those affinities remain obscure in *Distinction* because the use of the term field is imprecise at this point in his career. He refers to general and specialised fields. But he says very little about how fields operate, the substantive analysis in *Distinction* being devoted to the main thematic oppositions which provide the axes for class division within fields, for example luxury and necessity. Many of its inadequacies were subsequently cleared up as the concept was gradually refined into a very coherent and analytically powerful notion, as for instance in *Rules of Art*. But that was not achieved in *Distinction*.

Practice and field, though central and essential to the theoretical foundation of the analysis, play little substantive role. Habitus and economic and cultural capital do all the interpretative work. All explanation is calibrated by types of capital, as in the key correspondence analysis diagrams placing agents, artefacts and activities in social and lifestyle spaces. Thus the demonstration in Part 3 concerns the correspondence between social space and the symbolic space of lifestyles. The correspondence diagrams are not interpreted as fields per se; though the interpretation assumes basic parameters of conflict between the class agents, it is the description of differences between groups which predominates. The analysis is thus a rather mechanical one, as Bourdieu (1998 [1994]: 1–13) almost admits

in his resumé of the study for a Japanese audience in the late 1980s. The story is coordinated through the structuring and generative capacities of class habitus, although ultimately *Distinction* gets much of its authority from the juxtaposition of many sources rather than from any theoretical systematicity.

2   The Eclipse of Practice in Bourdieu's Work?

Subsequent to *Distinction*, despite it appearing that Bourdieu would like his overall theoretical contribution to be 'a general theory of the economy of practices', reference to practices diminished. The conceptual machinery which is the focus of elaborate and formalised theory in *Logic of Practice* apparently disappears—except in the intermittent, but surprisingly frequent, revisits to the Algerian fieldwork. This is sufficiently puzzling to justify speculation as to why Bourdieu apparently lost interest in examining practices empirically and, effectively, abandoned the use of the term. There are several possible explanations.

Bourdieu Tacitly Abandoned Practice Theory: Given Bourdieu's disavowal of a conscious theory-building project and his indifference towards auto-critique, it is possible that practice theory was laid quietly to one side. The multiple uses of the term having resulted in its failing to fulfil any effective function in empirical analysis, the term may have become theoretically redundant, except to found his critique of scholastic reason. He clearly retained throughout his career the first use of the term in discussions of epistemological and methodological issues as a contrast to scholastic and theoretical reason (Bourdieu 2000 [1996]). Perhaps the other main senses ceased to have any significant explanatory role.

Practices were Considered Isomorphic with Fields: Alternatively, it is possible to conceive that practices are the activities which provide the content of fields. Practices happen in fields. If so, it might be maintained

that practices are, for most empirical purposes, the same as fields, having the same content (for instance, with political practice constituting the political field, literary practice the literary field) and the same logic (i.e. a search for 'profit'). As we have seen, this is implied in at least one passage in *Distinction*. But its relation to practice was never really confronted; the 'affinities' between fields and 'the major sources of practice' were never elucidated. In passing, Bourdieu (1984: 209–11) implied that any differentiated practice can be understood as a field, and presumably the converse, that a field can be constructed upon any differentiated practice. If this were the case, then the logic of practice would be the same as the logic of the field. This does not seem to be a position which Bourdieu explicitly reiterated elsewhere; and it would make patent nonsense of his formula. The refinement of the concept of field makes it unlikely that this was his view. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine a definition which would render them identical. As the discussion below seeks to establish, fields and practices are not isomorphic.

The Concept of Practice Did Useful Work in the Analysis of Kabylia but Proved Ineffective when Applied to Twentieth Century France: Craig Calhoun (1995) sees practice and field as relevant to different types of society. According to Calhoun, the concept of practice gives a sound account of the operation of social affairs in a traditional, comparatively undifferentiated society where understandings of appropriate conduct are widely shared. However, in the more complex setting of an industrialised and highly differentiated society the relational and structural features of fields gives better purchase. In support of Calhoun, it is noticeable that *Logic of Practice* is addressed to the application and clarification of theories of rites, rituals, gifts and honour, typical topics of concern to anthropologists, and to institutional arrangements central to traditional societies but much less prominent in understandings of rationalised, formal, socially engineered arrangements. *Homo Academicus, The State Nobility* and *Rules of Art* (Bourdieu 1988 [1984], 1996a [1989], 1996b [1992]), by contrast, are examinations of positions, dispositions and position-taking in specialised fields of activity, designed to uncover

structural and relational features of positions homologous with other key fields. Calhoun's claim seems highly pertinent and a reasonable explanation of how Bourdieu can continue to use both terms, but rarely use them as part of the same analysis. Thus, for instance, in *Practical Reason*, published in French in 1994, some essays refer to practice but not at all to fields, a significant example being the reflection on *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1998: 1–13), while others, like that on the state, talk of fields but not practice.[4]

The strong implication is that the elements of a theory of practice have no role in the analysis of modern societies. It is unlikely that Bourdieu would assent to this, and nor would other contemporary theorists of practice. De Certeau's (1984: 50–2, 59–60) critique of Bourdieu rues his unwillingness, or conceptual inability, to identify any parallels in modern France to the strategic and tactical manoeuvring which, in its detail, makes his analysis of social relations in Kabylia so persuasive— for example in the use of timing in gift exchange or the concealment of self-interest in economic transactions. For De Certeau, the theory of practice is as essential to understanding France as it is to Algeria. While such a resolution might solve the puzzle about Bourdieu's usage, it seems to have the consequence of abandoning some of the fundamentals of his sociological theory and of reducing radically at a stroke a quarter of the conceptual tools available for analysis.

The Essential Features of the Notion of Practice Were Incorporated into the Concept of Habitus for Purposes of Empirical Analysis: Another option is that practice theory is the foundation to the concept of habitus but thereafter is no longer required for the purpose of empirical analysis. Over time, habitus and field become largely self-sufficient and mutually supporting primary concepts. This is a particularly compelling explanation. Bourdieu's successors, and those seeking to apply his concepts in

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[4] If Robbins (2000) was correct that all Bourdieu's analysis is situational, choosing the concepts for the explanatory task in hand rather than for grand theory-building, then the fact that Bourdieu talks of practice among the Kabyle, and fields when faced with the French bureaucracy and the art world, would be additional corroborating evidence for such an interpretation.

other empirical contexts (Benson 2000), very often use habitus, capital and field as their major tools, but without a specific technical reference to practice or practices. Clearly the concept of habitus is founded in the theory of practice originally formulated in the analysis of the Kabyle; and the concept would be even more contentious were it without such thorough grounding. And it surely is contentious.

3   The Fuss About Habitus

This is not the place to give a comprehensive review of the debate about the concept of habitus. Suffice it to note: (1) that the earlier condemnations of the concept have excited plausible defences from Bourdieu, his collaborators and other commentators, suggesting the concept's applicability to modern contexts (e.g. Bourdieu 2000: 60–5; Crossley 2001; Fuchs 2003: 394–401); (2) that habitus might do most of what sociologists need in the connection between actors and acts in the light of recent developments in cognitive science; (3) that if the generative power of habitus were to operate effectively only in undifferentiated societies then the concept of field would have to bear even more weight in analysis of modern societies; (4) that the elements of a theory of practice in their entirety can hardly be summed up or condensed in the concept of habitus. Yet that would appear to be what Bourdieu does, placing the theory of practice at one remove from the theory of field through its inscription in analysis via the concept of habitus. This manouevre occurs in *Distinction* and arguably is subsequently redeployed, for in *Rules of Art*, probably the most sustained and reflective formulation and application of the concept of field in the works of Bourdieu, there is barely a mention of practice.[5] Habitus, though, features prominently, promoted as a means of counteracting the undue emphasis put on consciousness in social science, while field is applauded for its capacity to represent the relational nature of social organisation, to found comparative analysis around a general mechanism, and for having an associated systematic set of concepts—'capital, investment, interest, etc.' (1996a: 183). In one of

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[5] Practice appears only 227ff, in an attempt to elucidate the notion of the *illusio*.

only two references to the concept of practice, after elaborating on his development of the concept of field, he remarks that 'The general theory of the economy of practices as it is progressively disentangled from the analysis of different fields ought thus to escape all forms of reductionism' (1996a: 183). The phrase 'the general theory of the economy of practices' echoes the usage in *Distinction* and perhaps implies that a theory of practices is somehow a backbone of his theoretical project at its highest level of abstraction. But there is little more said about this in later works, leaving the same problem of how the specific precepts and propositions adumbrated in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* or *Logic of Practice* (where there is virtually no discussion of fields) are to be reconciled with the concept of field in substantive analysis.

Habitus plays a critical role in the works of Bourdieu, and unsurprisingly it is controversial. A device for circumventing functionalist accounts of the relationship between structure and agency, the claim is that it simultaneously originates in specific collective social positions but also has fundamental generative capacities. Critics often construe it as a source of (class) determinism; if an individual possesses a coherent habitus, a set of shared dispositions that are generative and called upon in every situation, then individual behaviour would be very predictable, much more predictable than social scientists have ever been able to demonstrate. Bourdieu protested on many occasions that this was a misreading of his view, and some exegeses from sympathetic scholars agree (Crossley 2001; Lizardo 2004). An explanation of why such disagreement persists would be interesting. Some is probably to do with objection to it being the classed nature of habitus as implied by Bourdieu, but it may also be because criticism is based on a deliberative model of action (a 'portfolio' model), where the actor is presumed always to think about what they are doing, and thus action will be generated by individual will rather than socially structured dispositions. Thus, the criticism of determinism makes sense on the basis of one specific ontology and methodology, but is not ultimately convincing from a practice-theoretical or pragmatist perspective.

In its application in *Distinction*, habitus is too tightly connected to class position. *Distinction* is primarily a study of the class habitus and there is very strong typification of the differences between people of different

classes on the strength simply of probabilities (and often not very strong probabilities) that people from particular occupational groups will eat, dress, etc. in similar ways (and also bring similar orientations or dispositions to those activities) and express similar tastes (i.e. pass judgement on matters of aesthetics and morality which vary systematically by position). We now know that there are other social divisions which are as important, if not more important, influencing activity and judgement. The class frame is certainly insufficient on its own. In addition, we should be very cautious about accepting claims about habitus or lifestyle being unified or unifying. Although in some historical circumstances class cultures may well have had the coherence and bindingness that sociology normally attributes to subcultures, the twenty-first century West exhibits significant fragmentation of orientation and performance within practices and within major social groups. This militates strongly against unified class lifestyles. Nevertheless, probabilities associated with consumption patterns allow identification of group membership and generate meaningful distinction around reputations for good or bad taste. For it does not require another person or group under scrutiny to behave consistently and uniformly for it to be possible to make judgements about their social standing or cultural worthiness because, in general, the observer needs only a few clues from the many redundant symbolic messages conveyed by the other.

This is not the place to engage in a debate about the importance of class and whether, or to what degree, it has diminished in recent decades, but it is worth noting the effect of social and geographical mobility on habitus. To the extent that we are using habitus to explain the behaviour of agents, when an individual actor changes social position, aspects or elements of their habitus are likely to change also. People adapt to their new positions. Looking at the full range of his works, Bourdieu appears to want to have his cake and eat it: that habitus is firmly established, primarily in childhood as parents transmit cultural capital to their offspring, but that habitus is adapted in the face of new locations. The latter is bound to occur if and when habitus is attached to parts of particular fields; if people lacked the habitus appropriate to their place in this social space they would acquire it in the course of abiding there. That is to say, they would adapt their basic dispositions and predispositions to their

new location through position-taking. It seems to me, then, that habitus is doing too many things at once; we lose the possibility of describing fish out of water—having the wrong habitus for a particular position; and that is terribly important in relation not only to personal transformation (and discomfort and stress caused) but also to the norms associated with the position. An example might be the arrival of women directors in the boardroom, said to alter its culture and dynamics. Another would be children from working-class backgrounds taking advantage of changes in educational opportunities after the Second World War and filling university lecturing positions during university expansion with people of less elevated backgrounds. Of course, the situation is usually one of adaptation and adjustment—a point demonstrated empirically by Li et al. (2015) who show that intergenerational mobility trajectories make measurable differences to cultural tastes. Tastes and cultural participation vary depending on whether an individual is stable in the class structure relative to their parents, or upwardly or downwardly mobile. This poses some problems for the concept of habitus.

The effect in recent years is compounded by the facts of geographical mobility. The model of class reproduction in *Distinction* would be easier to demonstrate were there no globalisation or transnational mobility, if people lived their whole lives in the same neighbourhood and retained the same friends and networks throughout their lives. Basically Bourdieu's substantive accounts of habitus in post-war France are problematic because groups and networks are not as stable as they used to be, and the logic of his position is founded, in good sociological style, upon social group formation. Habitus is expressed by and through social groups rather than individuals. Yet, to the extent that social groups are unstable, because people join and leave, conditions and conditioning are not uniform but rather vary in accordance with their experiences. Thus, the attribution of habitus to groups, either of individuals or of agents located in particular positions in a field, becomes difficult. The sharedness of the dispositions, and the possibility for the dispositions to be endlessly reinforced is compromised, though far from eliminated.

These weaknesses of habitus—weaknesses of applications as much as of the concept itself—do not necessarily pose a problem for theories of practice per se. If Bourdieu had started from practices, and made practices

the fundamental unit of his sociological analysis, he would not have the same problem. He would have an explanation of why there was rather less continuity and homology in habitus among groups. Unity cannot be guaranteed. If people engage in more practices, and are not equally competent at them all (as when the working-class child is introduced into the cultural milieu of peers with a second-generation professional habitus), there will be a tendency to give a more fragmentary presentation of self, as was argued by Gergen (1992, and also Chapter 5, pp. 94–96). Changing experience as people's engagements with different practices evolve, through stages of recruitment, maturation and defection, will also cause fragmentation and instability. Fragmentation, however, does not eliminate the effects of the mechanisms of learning to share dispositions that underpin Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Habitus connects actors with acts and with other actors and is a mechanism for generation of habitual and routine action. Such habituation primes people to respond to circumstances rather predictably and regularly in ways that they themselves have in the past and which others around them tend to adopt (Warde 2016).

I therefore interpret habitus as applying to dispositions and predispositions, more or less always available and to hand, more or less automatically invoked, arising from learning and experience, operative within fields according to position (that is in situ, in the face of situations). This avoids conceptualisations of habit that depend upon uniform repetition in response to stimuli. It is consistent with cognitive psychology. It makes sociological sense of how individuals behave in a more or less consistent way according to type. We constantly anticipate what other people are doing and trying to do, and even if we occasionally get it wrong we are mostly close to right; otherwise navigating the social world would be distressing and anxiety-making, if not nigh on impossible. So it is unwise to maintain that habitus is solely class habitus or that habitus are unified. Perhaps more importantly, nor is habitus as internalised experience sufficient alone to account for performances. External cues, everchanging situations, and the reformulation and formalisation of practices are processes germane to behaviour which should not be reduced to, or encapsulated in, position in the field. To do so would be to be in danger of overextending the utilitarian and strategic aspects of conduct to which critics have raised justifiable objections.

4   Field and Its Limitations

The concept of field is one designed to capture in an abstract manner strategic and instrumental action, and it does so by showing how agents in different positions in a relational structure (field) orient their competitive action towards achievement of rewards (more capital) on the basis of the capital they currently hold. This works remarkably well as a metaphor or model for jockeying for position in government, academia and the arts. Field theory joins structures to strategems in often persuasive ways (e.g. Fantasia 2010). The concept of field is almost entirely energised by strategic and instrumental action—though this may not always be immediately apparent to all the actors involved and certainly is not all that can be said about the activity that occurs in the field. However, it would seem to me as a further form of explanation of Bourdieu's career shift in use of concepts of field and practice, that we could easily accept that it was the former purpose that was served by the concept, and that other aspects of the activity might be described as Practice.

Despite discrepant usage of the concept during his career, by the time he wrote *Rules of Art* Bourdieu possessed a thoroughly worked-out theory of field, one which in general is coherent and persuasive. It is complex and nuanced, and is the basis of an impressive analysis of the changing world of French culture in the second half of the nineteenth century.[6] The key properties of the field according to *Rules of Art* are as follows.

A field is a relatively autonomous structured domain or space, which has been socially instituted, thus having a definable but contingent history of development. One condition of the emergence of a field is that agents recognise and refer to its history. Some fields have more autonomy than others and some parts of fields more than other parts.[7]

A field is an arena of constant struggle for 'stakes', particular types of field-specific and generic *capitals*. Struggles involve legitimising the stakes themselves, thereby establishing what sorts of capital holdings have

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[6] The application in *The State Nobility* is equally impressive if slightly less conceptually self-conscious.

[7] Autonomy increases the further away from the heteronomous end of the field or other more heteronomous fields—like the economy or the field of power.

what degree of value. The dynamics of a field, it is said, arise from the positions, dispositions and position-taking of agents. That is to say, a field has structured positions, whose occupants typically have different resources and dispositions. These resources and dispositions are partly brought from without the field—a matter of their generic capital holdings and habitus of origin. These features also alter in accordance with experience within the field itself. Agents orient themselves towards the field, or take their positions, in light of their resources and dispositions. Participation implies a shared commitment to the value of the activities of the field, of field-specific capital, and thus of the *illusio*.

The field operates like a game wherein agents adopt strategies in competition with others to gain the stakes. All play the same game. Conduct is always strategic, though not necessarily consciously so. Strategies may involve redefining the value of the game and its rules. The boundaries of the field, and the definition of its population, are matters of constant struggle, specifically a by-product of attempts to establish legitimate domination within the field. Hence boundaries are fluid and subject to periodic adjustment. Key strategies include conservation, succession and subversion. There are many fields, and thus many field-specific capitals, which have similar properties, logics and even 'laws'. Fields are interdependent and are characterised by homology of structure and positions.

The concept of field has met with a mixed, but largely positive, reception from critics. Apart from Jenkins,[8] most find it with merit. Swartz (1997), in probably the best book on Bourdieu's oeuvre, saw it as under-regarded and excellent.[9] Robbins (2000: 37–40) sees it as exemplary of Bourdieu's admirably flexible use of concepts for empirical analysis. Nick Crossley (2002: 168, 178–82) makes the claim that, through the concept of field, Bourdieu more effectively than anyone

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[8] See Jenkins (1992), who gives a sound outline of Bourdieu's notion of field (pp. 84–6) then offers a range of ungenerous critical observations which lead him to dismiss the value of the concept as economistic, deterministic, unoriginal, ontologically unsound, lacking an adequate conception of institutions, ill-defined and functionalist (pp. 86–91). (Jenkins makes these points as part of a more general and interrelated critique of concepts of practice and habitus.)

[9] Swartz (1997) noted that field 'has become a central pillar of [Bourdieu's] conceptual edifice' (p. 9) and that it is 'the most promising for future sociological work' (p. 291).

else solved (or at least provided a working and workable solution to) the structure–agency problem. Bernard Lahire (1999: 23), though critical of its application, considers it heuristically very valuable. Martin's (2003, see also 2011) review of the development of the concept across the social sciences commends Bourdieu for having made a major contribution which supports an alternative to American sociological orthodoxy.

Thus, the concept of field itself is accorded great promise. However, there are several reasons why Bourdieu's increasing emphasis on the use of the concept of field has limited the power of his work to provide the kind of theoretical tools that a more adequate theory of practice would require for the analysis of consumption. The only role for practice is in the achieving of commitment to the value of stakes, for without an *illusio* there would be no link between the particular type of activity and the readiness of participants to allocate rewards in accordance with quality of performance.

First, Bourdieu's use of field conflates competence and power. In field analysis he implies that all agents are competent, though some may be more accomplished than others, in relation to the demands of their position; agents are always seen as fitted for their role and always have the strategic orientations appropriate to their position. He does this through the use of the concept of habitus, which incumbents of a position in a field bring with them as their dispositions. Notwithstanding his suggestion that people may add dispositions as a result of their experience of activity in a field—they assume features of the habitus of the field through position-taking—it is implausible to imagine that all are equally prepared or equally able to adapt.[10] Agents arriving in positions via different trajectories almost certainly bring with them features of their distinct habitus, which might be expected to generate different strategic responses and different levels of success. Indeed, one of the key arguments concerning the fairness of highly differentiated societies is that positions are not

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[10] I tend to agree with Jenkins that it is theoretically confusing to attribute habitus to a field. Conflating the versatile and generative dispositions which an agent brings to a field with the requirements for effective action in that field makes it difficult to contemplate any possibility that agents might be ill-fitted to their positions in a field.

always distributed according to merit.[11] A perfect fit between position and competence cannot be presumed.

Second, for the purpose of the analysis of fields, Bourdieu tends to suggest that all conduct worthy of sociological investigation is strategic and competitive.[12] The demystifying insights obtained from such a presumption are considerable when considering the field of art, where the grounding of judgement in terms of Kantian universalism and disinterestedness is to collude in the distribution of cultural and social power. By such means Bourdieu can reveal symbolic violence and pursuit of self-interest which is otherwise masked as dispassionate and disinterested judgement. However, there is much conduct within the field of art which has not the same competitive logic. This is even more the case in other fields like cooking or caring.

Third, the emphasis on continual strategic manoeuvring within the field, and the drive for profit, means that there is no way to appreciate the internal goods (in Alasdair MacIntyre's 1985 sense) arising from practice. Besides producing a variety of external goods, activity occurring within a field often provides moral satisfaction, self-esteem, personal development and social interaction. The specificity and the value of such internal benefits are obscured if reduced to self-interested posturing. On this point Bourdieu has been taken to task by a number of critics, not least by proponents of conventions theory (Benatouil 1999; see also Sayer 2005). As Lahire (1999: 35) notes, the logic of the field applies more readily to professional and productive activities, where competition for defined stakes is mostly transparent, than to the orientations of amateurs and consumers.

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[11] Bourdieu is not without any explanation of this, for this is one basis of the power of social capital, but apart from the fact that he rarely uses the concept, he assumes a fit between personal habitus and position without reference to competence. Thus, in *The State Nobility* (pp. 116–23) he explicitly discusses discrepancies between educational qualification and occupational recruitment, but only at an abstract and functional level, in terms of the consecrating effect of titles conferred through the system of qualifications, but without consideration of any differential effective competence among agents.

[12] Martin (2003), in arguing for the potential of field theory, dubs Bourdieu's contribution an account of 'fields of organised striving' and commends this for its demonstration of the role of social fate and a sociologically powerful version of reflexivity. But he sees no compelling reason for focusing solely on competitive and strategic phenomena.

Fourth, Bourdieu's explanatory accounts of the dynamics of field depend heavily on the plausibility of the analogy of games,[13] increasingly used in association with the concept of habitus. Several other metaphors were used earlier—market, force field and military field.[14] However, as time passed, Bourdieu became ever more likely to use the analogy of the game to explain the dynamic processes occurring in fields.[15] Many of his demonstrations are based upon the analysis of actual sports.[16] But sports, while manifesting particularly well most of the features attributed to a field, have very particular characteristics, making it potentially highly misleading to think of the whole world, or all practices, in such terms. The analogy is flawed if applied universally.

Field must be built in some way upon practices. Field says something about Praktik, in that there is some relationship between success in the field and a capacity to do things well, to achieve success or victory in a competitive arena. Fields institutionalise strategies, for example through the mechanism which DiMaggio and Powell (1983) call institutional isomorphism, which they use to explain how it comes about that market actors, and others in competition, tend to end up with the same types of solution to the problem of battling over capitals or rewards. Fields tend to produce winners whether in economic tournaments between firms or occupational preferment.

Consequently, field is not very useful for understanding several important phenomena. The concept does not grasp the mechanics and operations

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[13] Martin (2003: 32–3) notes that field theory's general focus on contestation, which he thinks is most plausibly founded on a model of agonistic games, is contentious, but offers no solution other than to affirm that 'not all human action takes place "in the field"'.

[14] See respectively: Bourdieu (1984: 244–5, 1990a, b: 143, 1996a: 58ff, 249–52).

[15] Swartz (1997: 117–42) offers an extensive and appreciative secondary treatment of the concept of field, understanding fields essentially in terms of systems (as does Jenkins 1992: 85 and Robbins 2000: 39). Crossley (2002: 178ff) shows to maximum effect the potential of seeing fields in terms of their game-like features. Both Swartz and Crossley agree that although Bourdieu sometimes uses the term market as synonymous with field, and there is an obvious connection to concepts of capital, this is not a very good analogy for understanding the features of fields—as demonstrated by an application of the concept of field to the analysis of markets by Fligstein (2001).

It would be a mistake to imagine that Bourdieu used the concept of field in identical fashion throughout his career. The concept evolves over time, growing in coherence as it is more precisely formulated. Consequently, it would seem that early formulations are better referred to only for exegetical purposes, for example Bourdieu (1991 [1971]).

[16] e.g. Bourdieu (1984: 208) and (1998: 61).

of those practices which are not primarily instrumental. Second, it has no means of appreciating the phenomenological aspects of internal goods. Finally, it is not very effective at explaining consumption and consumers. It is actually much better fitted to producers and production where there are clear projects and programmes of action, where the achievement of greater volume of capital is an explicit (if not overwhelming) goal.

Nevertheless, even if the concept of field deflates the role of practice, it remains very good for other purposes, especially in setting up a formidable apparatus for examining, so to speak, 'interested acts'. One solution to the initial paradox about the declining use of practice in Bourdieu's oeuvre (alternative [1] above—that the concept of practice simply falls into disuse) may be biographical. As his career progressed and he shifted from purist sociologist to public sociologist he found fields, with their focus on strategic and instrumental action, more conducive to critical political analysis of contemporary institutions. The emphasis of his work shifted to a focus on the field-theoretic aspects. Arguably, though, sociology still needs an elaborate concept of practice, as does a thorough account of consumption.

5   Conclusions

I have argued that the concepts of field and practice are neither synonymous nor isomorphic. Each concept refers to domains of activity, but each identifies different attributes of activity. Most simply, if practices were the content of the activities occurring in fields, then all practices would be game-like. But they are not. Bourdieu, at least latterly, overlooked the possibility that practice and field are useful complementary concepts for analysis. One reason was his entirely worthy objective of revealing the social structure of power nestled beneath the seemingly innocuous carapace of cultural taste and preference. Another reason, perhaps, was his lack of clarity about the application of a concept of practice in complex and highly differentiated societies.

The institutionalisation of practices, the processes through which they become identifiable coordinated entities, seems particularly important for advancing theories of practice. Formalisation and rationalisation of

a domain of activity is a prerequisite of its becoming ripe for absorption into a field or fields. But institutionalisation does not, per se, create a field. Nor does the incorporation of a practice into a field eliminate its other features. Practices are a complex of understandings, know-how and commitment, their purpose and function not reducible to the pursuit of 'capital'. From this perspective, some features of conduct which cannot easily be subsumed under a metaphor of sporting contest are made transparent: competence; internal goods; purpose without a search for profit; the interdependence of semi-autonomous practices; and the limited possibilities of exit—one can stop playing a game but not every practice can be avoided. Most theoretical accounts of practice, notwithstanding the real disagreements about the proper formulation of such a notion, acknowledge the importance of these features and are able to encompass at least some of these.

Hence, with respect to the analysis of domains of activity, we can identify the characteristics of a field—competitive, strategic and oriented to external goods—and the characteristics of practice—cooperative, pluralistic and oriented towards internal goods. The concepts are not mutually incompatible, but they have rather different logics. One consequence is that we might expect to identify tensions between the logics of field and the logics of practice which might potentially help understand social change. Competition within a field often contributes to the transformation of practices. Conversely, the logic of the field might be disrupted by the evolution of contributing practices.[17] The concept of practice complements the concept of field by reducing its span, compensating for some of its specific weaknesses, emphasising the phenomenological understanding of activity, and having purchase upon activity where the accumulation of capitals and the gaining of symbolic profit is not of primary importance. To pursue such a mode of analysis would be to reintegrate two concepts which Bourdieu, unproductively, held apart throughout his work.

Bourdieu was more a sociologist of groups than of situations. He saw the paradigmatic social condition as one wherein individuals in

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[17] In addition, potentially, we can envisage explanations of the ways in which new fields emerge, besides through internal differentiation and specialisation.

similar positions routinely encountered the same (or at least very similar) situations, with practical sense leading them to behave in like manner. His first consideration was the concentration of resources and assets and the way in which they produced persistent social hierarchy and systematic relationships of power. He emphasised intergroup rather than intragroup differentiation. A correspondence was assumed between position and capability such that knowledge of the distribution of the capitals available was sufficient to describe an agent's possibilities for action. Consequently, the inclination was to sketch class differences in consumption-type behaviour. Reconsideration of practices adds complexity to this picture. Important aspects of intragroup difference can be explained by unequal levels of competence; capital distribution matters but not exclusively. If, then, consumption occurs not only as a means for signalling and estimating social position but also for the sake of practice, it will be much affected by the specific social situations in which performances are delivered. Declarations of taste are a complex product of position, trajectory and situation.

7

Reassessing Cultural Capital

This chapter reflects on cultural capital. I argue that while the concept has proved especially effective in describing differential patterns of cultural taste and their association with particular social groups, it is ultimately more important to attend to the way in which it operates as an asset for the transmission of privilege. This depends more than is commonly acknowledged upon the institutional framework or environment rather than the strategies of individuals. Sociological analysis should therefore carefully examine institutional change in order to estimate how goods, activities and orientations in the cultural sphere contribute to the perpetuation of intergenerational privilege. The chapter proceeds in four steps. First, I comment on the evolution of the applications of the concept. Second, I review Bourdieu's account of the forms of capital and types of cultural capital. Third, I address themes of legitimate culture, the omnivorous orientation and new or 'emerging' content of cultural capital. And, finally, I explore tentatively the mechanics of the transmission of privilege through cultural competence.

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1   Cultural Capital: Comments on the Concept's Evolution

Cultural capital is a concept with an unusually clear pedigree, being first coined in 1965 by Pierre Bourdieu (Gripsrud et al. 2011). It has proved most fecund. It is now all over the place—in more than one sense of that phrase.[1] A wide range of objects has been brought within its compass. For Bourdieu, it served prominently in the sociology of education and education policy, in analyses of the culture industries and cultural policy, and in the sociological area of stratification. This triple application has resulted in some conceptual confusion, for it operates differently in each (Warde and Savage 2009). It is used mostly as a descriptive category to draw together empirical manifestations of cultural taste, knowledge and competence—of which people have different types and quantities—and social institutions which validate different cultural forms. Adopted in this fashion it lacks the critical, theoretical intent initially inscribed within it. It is, for instance, widely used by scholars who are hostile to the original Bourdieusian framework of concepts.

Bourdieu is a highly controversial figure and a good deal of the confusion around the use of the concept of cultural capital is inspired by theoretical tribalism. I should say that I am not wanting to insist on theoretical purism; I am inclined to endorse one of Passeron's (2013) central insights, that the principal value of concepts in sociology is that they allow one to see things that would otherwise be obscure, and that usually several different paradigms are capable of delivering adequate interpretations of the same social phenomenon. Rather, I want to side-step theoretical disputes about the role of paradigms and the criteria for their evaluation and instead explore the application of the concept in the field of stratification.

The resonance and intuitive plausibility of the concept of cultural capital arises from one of the principal contradictions of modern societies between the principle of equal opportunity and the principle of family loyalty. It was not so long ago that state offices in Britain could

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[1] Sallaz and Zavisca (2007) record its penetration finally into American sociology in the later 1990s and the subsequent breadth of its application.

be bought and sold and could be inherited. The laws and conventions of inheritance of family property remain much the more fundamental even now, but their effects are tempered by a critique (originating and strongest in Protestant northern Europe?) that many of life's pleasures and rewards should be received as a reward for talent or hard work rather than social connection.[2] Looking after one's family members and those in one's extended network is considered a moral imperative, although stronger in some contexts and countries than others. The transfer of resources, aid and support within family networks is, however, a form of social closure, a strategy for rigging social competition to transmit privilege across generations by excluding other competitors with greater aptitude, but less social support, from attaining the most lucrative or intrinsically rewarding positions.[3]

Cultural capital, as conceived generally by Bourdieu, was one form in which (extended) family interests were exercised and advanced at the expense of other social groups. It is readily recognised, by scholars and the lay public, that in some circumstances forms of cultural competence receive respect, and may be a source of gain, as, for example, within social circles (where cultural items are talked about or known about or displayed) where people are admired, rewarded, singled out for praise and attention (or vilified) because of the tastes they display. People judge others, and are in turn themselves judged, through estimations of good or bad taste which are projected onto positions in the hierarchical social order. Such judgements about taste, aesthetic and moral, have often been sources of cultural hostility, as when, for example, groups are deemed Chavs or snobs with all the symbolic, reputational and material disbenefits that such identification confers. The sociological understanding of taste was much enhanced by such an observation, and cultural capital captures the intimation that judgements of the tastes of others provide a basis for hierarchical social ranking and thereby inclusion into and exclusion from social networks. I noted in an earlier article that scholarship

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[2] If the family remains the basic social unit, classes can be considered as an aggregate or network of families with similar assets and experiences.

[3] Note that there seems to be no greater moral value than that which impels parents to seek to ensure the worldly success and comparative advantage of their own children (in the UK, Labour cabinet ministers set an example).

about taste focused on three different types of phenomena: formation of taste, justification of taste, and judgement of taste (Warde 2008b).[4] Each is significant in its own right and typically each brings forth a different type of explanation. However, the judgement of taste, the critique of which was the primary objective of *Distinction*, has an especially critical edge because it subtends claims that good taste is an indicator of social superiority.

In the France of *Distinction*, a certain manner of dealing with cultural products (their selection, mode of appreciation, evaluation and mastery) carried with it personal and social prestige which might be rewarded both for its own sake, a condition with which Bourdieu as a sociologist was not especially concerned, or by other people according friendship, assistance and remuneration to those with a suitably cultivated endowment. In other words, cultural assets and competences could be used to obtain entry to social networks and for economic advancement beyond that due to having practical competence certified by courses of training.

1.1   The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Bourdieusian Approach to Cultural Capital

The merits of the concept and its application within a Bourdieusian theoretical framework include the following:

(1) It has relevance across several subdomains of social life—education, consumption and the arts, stratification, and politics—and shows how qualifications, taste and power are entangled.

(2) It was very appealing theoretically at a juncture when the dominance of political economy and class analysis in the social sciences was challenged by postmodernism and the cultural turn. It helped retain oversight of status, privilege and power without apparently succumbing to the economistic fallacy attributed to neo-Marxism.

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[4] The second half of Warde (2008a, b) elaborates in this tripartite distinction. Unfortunately, copyright restrictions have prevented the revised version of that article being included in this book.

(3) It should be taken for granted that the content of useful or productive cultural capital changes over time. To discover that younger generations develop tastes different from their parents is unsurprising in the twenty-first century, although it might have been more unexpected in the eighteenth century. Today, the sources of cultural capital change over time for several reasons: because it is cultivated and partly defined by a culture industry in continual evolution; because of generational and positional field struggles; and because other fields evolve and impinge. The question, however, is which of the new forms will deliver surplus value. We should then give pause for thought as to why 'high culture' has persisted for so long. The generic content of high culture has remained fairly constant, and some of the items that figure prominently have been present for more than a century. Elements of the canonical traditions that are to some extent common across Europe, of classical music, modern literature, fine arts, etc., have had sustained value as markers of high socio-economic status, education and cultivated good taste.

(4) It captured aspects of the phenomenology of class lost in earlier definitions centred purely on property ownership and occupation. The experience of class was always filtered through differences in unequally valued cultural practices which forged class identities and sometimes generated overt cultural hostility.

(5) Bourdieu contested idealist aesthetics and the idea that there might be universal standards of value. He espoused as the sociological null hypothesis that all cultural items are aesthetically equivalent, but that some carry greater social benefit and prestige. That is the nub. If young and educated people have developed tastes for video games, rap and the gym, as elements of 'emergent culture', are they deriving benefit beyond intrinsic pleasure and satisfaction from their participation? To show that there are taste communities (Gans 1999) is interesting but not critical: that some people like apples and others like pears is no reason for complaint. Even a statistical association between taste and social position is unsurprising, it being the corollary of differential association (Bottero 2005). It is unobjectionable for so long as it has no effect upon the distribution of other assets which it is considered ought to be distributed, in a given society at a

given point in time, according to some moral or political principle like equality of opportunity or equality of respect.

(6) The concept has been scientifically fruitful, inspiring good empirical studies and advancing methodological capacity through the generation of controversy about its operationalisation.

(7) It also retained connotations of the role of social collectivities having shared properties in an era when attention was paid increasingly to individuals and their choices, suggesting that social structure remained relevant. Most importantly, it connects culture to power, suggesting that culture can be a weapon in social struggles for domination (Warde 2008a, b; Zelizer 2005a).

There are, at the same time, many aspects of the Bourdieusian position which have justifiably been criticised:

(1) The concept is not very precisely defined (Bennett and Silva 2011). As the second part of this chapter shows, Bourdieu's attempts at definition are not convincing.

(2) It is metaphorical, trading on understandings of economic capital, without specifying differences in the characteristics and mechanisms involved. (Though note that many social scientific concepts are at core metaphors, necessarily so according to Lakoff and Johnson (1999). The latent construct that is cultural capital might be favourably assessed in relation to its fecundity.)

(3) There is no agreement on the number of its types. Bourdieu (1986) distinguished three subtypes: objective, embodied and institutional cultural capital. Whether or not these are sufficient is debatable. It is not clear whether they are independent dimensions—probably not, in the opinion of Bourdieu—although they have been interpreted fruitfully to be so in subsequent empirical research (e.g. Bridge 2006). Problems include that many observable aspects of cultural capital apparently overlap the three subcategories, which are not mutually exclusive or closely bounded; there is no formula for weighing their relative importance; the objectified form is currently better described and understood than embodied; there is no specification of their changing value in relation to one another, or in relation to the other main types of capital (i.e. economic, social and symbolic).

(4) Regarding the previous point, cultural capital is difficult to isolate in situ from social capital because, although each is in principle a very different type of asset, they are often symbiotic. Isolating a causal relationship between cultural capital and social capital is difficult.

(5) Bourdieusian analysis is often criticised for overemphasising the collective and ranked nature of cultural activity. Or perhaps better, Bourdieusian analysis cannot be *effective* if there is no ranking. Pressures, including individualisation, cultural fragmentation, burgeoning cultural production, and privatisation of cultural consumption, make it increasingly difficult to draw widely recognisable boundaries around taste cultures and to have confidence that judgements of the value of cultural items within them are shared. More a set of capabilities or competences than a currency, there are no agreed or obvious accounting units by means of which to estimate cultural capital's distribution within a population.

(6) Cultural capital is particularly difficult to measure, even when compared to social or economic capital. Declared preferences, knowledge and participation are three rather different dimensions which are not necessarily aligned. Moreover, some would say that dispositions and orientations towards culture are more revealing than engagement with specific substantive objects or activities (Holt 1997a). Such problems are compounded because the substantive features of cultural capital which carry value are often situationally specific—by era, country and social circle.

(7) Cultural capital is often operationalised as educational qualifications, which is a manifestation of one of its subtypes (institutional cultural capital), without attention being paid to *how* the obtaining or possession of any given examination certificate generates or validates common cultural preferences or practices (but see Lizardo and Skiles 2013).

(8) The fact that cultural capital can in principle be manifested through a wide range of cultural content (even if not a combination of any and every item of symbolic significance in circulation) suggests that we need to look elsewhere for its modus operandi. Content will not supply the scientific solution. One of the paradoxes of Bourdieu's sociology of culture is that although cultural

content should be treated as ranked in an aesthetically arbitrary manner, the principal way to examine the mechanics of cultural capital and its connections with a system of exchange with other types of capital is to examine which groups prefer what. There is no agreement as to whether forms of content with particular attributes are especially effective as repositories of cultural capital, but contenders include: rare; rarified, as might be the case with avant-garde art; being obtainable only through special or exclusive institutions; being readily recognisable to a broad public as markers of high social status; being able to offset any challenge from expertise per se;[5] and legitimised or legitimated by authorities, usually the state, and often encrusted in the most prestigious of educational institutions.

(9) It is hard to detach the concept from its association by Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1984) with class habitus and with the role of high culture in Europe, and more especially France. There have been in the past, and no doubt will be in the future, other cultural forms, the mastery of whose codes will prove profitable. The debates about omnivorousness, cosmopolitanism and niche specialisation, whether or not sympathetic to Bourdieu, suggest both that other social divisions are important and that other types of cultural portfolio may be desirable and profitable.

(10) Legitimation and consecration of particular cultural repertoires and suites of activity was critical for Bourdieu's account; the preferred culture of the dominant classes was presented as aesthetically superior and was supported and sponsored by key institutions of state. Some doubt now exists about whether that process of legitimation still operates, and if so what exactly is now subject to consecration. Undoubtedly the growth of commercial culture and mass media, operating in accord with the logic of the culture industries, in part

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[5] This may be very important. Ethnic minorities often get qualifications but fail to achieve social positions commensurate with their expertise. In Britain scientists and engineers have lacked some of the cultural qualifications for entry into the Establishment. Aristocracies tried to maintain exclusion in relation to an ascendant bourgeoisie, exploiting the great benefit of free time for those sufficiently privileged not to have to take paid employment.

undermines the monopoly of institutions associated with the professions, the universities, churches and the state, which in the past conferred legitimacy on particular forms and genres of cultural practice. Commercial intermediation almost certainly has a pluralising effect.

(11) Understanding of the modus operandi of cultural capital has Eurocentric overtones. The forms and functions of cultural expression which have conferred privilege in western Europe are not the same, and not so effective elsewhere (see Cveticanin et al 2014; Gayo 2016).

(12) It is debatable whether enough research has been devoted to the social groups which would be most revealing in relation to the operation of cultural capital—elites, minority communities, the downwardly mobile and students in tertiary education have yet much to reveal.

This is a formidable list of objections, sufficient to persuade some that the concept should be abandoned. However, not all objections are cogent and others might be circumvented. Personally I would be averse to abandoning the concept in the absence of a superior alternative.[6] However, it surely would become less attractive if it completely lost its critical edge. Its critical role has diminished as it has been drawn into empirical discussions and investigations and focus has shifted from social structure and power to choice, personal taste and lifestyle. The more it is used to explain preferences, the greater the chances that its connection to structural social inequality will attenuate. Also, it would have much less analytic value if cultural capacities cease to deliver or be convertible into other valuable social assets. Correspondence of position with taste is relatively harmless except when it leads to unequal preferment to social and economic position, or social exclusion, or cultural hostility, or intergenerational class reproduction. However, precisely

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[6] Generally, I agree with Will Atkinson (2011) that the Bourdieusian framework is the best general framework currently to hand—it is at least good enough—and that it is therefore worth working through its deficiencies or limitations to clarify the elements of the concept which make it useful for an understanding of social inequality and social justice.

these effects have been detected as corollaries of the association between taste and position.

2   'The Forms of Capital'

Bourdieu's much cited essay, 'The Forms of Capital' (1986), is full of insight, inspired connections and intriguing speculation about how one might examine capitals. Bourdieu did not attempt to systematise them.[7] Whether this was because he found it impossible or because he saw no point in trying (a reason he advanced on many occasions) is a moot point. While never repudiating the concept, he mostly ceased to use it in his later work. It received no further formal treatment, and indeed is barely mentioned in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992) or in *Pascalian Meditations* (2000).

Defining cultural capital in 'The Forms of Capital', he says:

> Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the *embodied* state, i.e. in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the *institutionalized* state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee. (1986: 47)

The three forms or states of cultural capital described are introduced as problem-specific to his early research on education. They are presented as a result of inductive reasoning, to make sense of the evidence collected in the empirical work, and no theoretical rationale is offered. Bourdieu uses the term cultural capital differently when studying education and studying taste and distinction and does not have a definition which allows for both. Also, he is as imprecise about the term culture as everyone else,

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[7] Nor did he explore many of the opportunities or options himself.

sometimes, or perhaps mostly, seeming to mean Culture as Art, rather than the anthropologists' culture, although he also often makes reference to cultivated manners.

The three types are not versatile, either in relation to cultural capital domains other than education, or in respect of the other types of capital (economic, social and symbolic). In this essay objectified cultural capital is subordinate and dependent upon embodied cultural capital. Embodied cultural capital seems to be very much the area of habitus—'long lasting dispositions of the mind and body'. Bourdieu makes the point that instituted cultural capital is special because it may lead to misrecognition; the certificate is not the competence, but it is a way of claiming and permanently documenting honour and reward through its being instituted and certified. It has, he suggests, a durability and substance. Institutionalisation is a separate process to be looked at in a different manner.

It is difficult to know how to allocate cultural practices to these three categories. Bourdieu (p. 57, fn13) explicitly attributes manners ('bearing, pronunciation, etc.') to the realm of social capital, which implies that he thinks that there are both embodied and objectified types of social capital. There is a strong hint that embodied and objectified types may be applicable to other types of capital. In 1986 he seems to organise his concepts in the light of a theoretical desire to overcome the internal–external distinction (and to break down the body–mind distinction) rather than to refer separately to the body and material objects.[8]

Bourdieu chose to use an economic metaphor (or perhaps a set of mixed metaphors) to describe the exchange between capitals. Those metaphors have had wide appeal. However, the metaphors have rarely been rendered more precise or been more carefully defined (though see Savage et al. 2005), remaining loose, rough-and-ready, adaptable, informal terms for indicating a topic of concern which lies in the cleft between social justice and family loyalty.

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[8] However, social networks might perhaps be considered as the objectified forms of social capital and perhaps one might say that they are instituted (through association membership, clubs, informal coordination of friendship networks). One supposes that symbolic capital might usefully be registered in such terms, but the distinction seems to have no relevance to economic capital.

While the concept is poorly articulated and presented in a less than disciplined manner, a rough sense of how it relates to social life is widely acknowledged. It even entered everyday media discourse in the aftermath of the much-publicised Great British Class Survey (Savage 2016). The ingenuity of Bourdieu's successors has ensured that these terms are widely deployed, often to good effect, but without their having much concern for theoretical coherence. Bourdieu might not have minded its haphazard use; he might even have celebrated the fact. At least in the period before he was tempted to do some degree of formalisation of his concepts (e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), he encouraged scholars to use terms pragmatically and opportunistically. The 1986 definition of embodied cultural capital is more or less equivalent to the complete habitus, and has nothing specifically to do with, say, body maintenance and presentation. So while conformity to conventions of bodily discipline is surely one of the most widely shared, publicly observable, evaluated and rewarded assets, the cultivation of appearance is an asset capable of being recognised, classified and responded to in a way that results in differential reward. Cultural in the wider sense, it has no purchase on the narrow 'fluency in and ease with high culture' which Bourdieu thought was valuable to educational success. In *Distinction*, by contrast, he calls attention to bodily hexis, posture, comportment and accent.[9]

3   Legitimate Culture, the Omnivorous Orientation and 'Emerging Cultural Capital'

One omission in much of the work on cultural capital is extended and systematic research into the changing institutional context which confers value recognisable as symbolic capital. To shift focus from the strategies of individuals (appealing and intriguing as that might be when armed with a Bourdieusian conception of calculative agency) to institutional

[9] One question is whether accent is a modality of cultural (or a linguistic, but not an informational, not a social, embodied or objectified) capital. Another might be whether comportment would normally be considered embodied, and clothing objectified.

structures, even while recognising that there is a recursive relationship between agency (individual and collective) and structure would be advantageous. It is too easy to become obsessed by the contents and the patterns, the symptoms of differentiation, and to ignore the institutional processes that make it seem obvious and right that some cultural tastes are universally superior; or that the bearers of such tastes are due deference and to be treated as if they were more cultivated or worthy of honour. Cultural capital has to be *recognisable* and accorded worth by relevant groups[10] in order for it to have the symbolic effect of enhancing the reputation of its bearer. The notion of legitimate culture is critical to that end.

3.1   Legitimate Culture and the High Culture System

Without a notion of legitimate culture, Bourdieu's account does not work well. He operated on the assumption of a clear hierarchy of cultural forms—although some were parallel and equivalent. He offered a strong and coherent model of the organisation of culture; the preferences of persons with high social status, class habitus, a set of accrediting cultural institutions, and the educational system all converged upon a particular taste culture which was consecrated and accorded legitimacy. Persons at the apex of the social space subscribed to those superior forms and defined them as good taste. There was a powerful consensus about the aesthetic and symbolic value of cultural items. Command of high culture was one of its principal motifs.

The key question today is whether there is still a legitimate culture and, if so, what are its defining characteristics. One way to approach that question is to consider the longevity and the fate of the high culture system. For it is plausible to assume that there was, in Bourdieu's France and in post-war Britain, a legitimate culture. A dominant, consecrated high culture, with roots in the eighteenth century, was reinforced by state institutions, which sponsored, supported, celebrated, diffused and subsidised particular cultural goods and activities. There was some overlap of

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[10] Lamont (1992) is a fine example of how this can be done methodologically.

content between the school curriculum, state broadcasting, museums, art galleries, classical music concerts and the curricula of universities, which attributed particular aesthetic value to some products, genres and spectacles, and which left other popular cultural activities to look after themselves. Parents with aspirations for the worldly success of their children made knowledge of these consecrated cultural genres, and if possible experience of performing or attending performances, an element of their socialisation strategy with a view to both educational success and social respectability. An ideology justified consecration and superiority in terms of their being the best exemplars of world cultural heritage, serious, difficult or challenging, worthy of appreciation.

The evidence about what people claim to do, know or prefer—much of which has arisen from the cultural omnivore debate—suggests that command of high culture is of less value in the early twenty-first century than it was fifty years previously.[11] Nevertheless, the omnivore thesis maintains that high culture items remain part of the portfolio of many persons of high socio-economic status (and mostly *only* those with high socio-economic status), but now mixed with other types and genres of popular culture.

There are effectively two versions of the omnivore thesis. The Petersonian omnivore is a person of high socio-economic status who has incorporated the dubious and previously demeaned products of mass culture into her or his portfolio. The Bourdieusian omnivore is one who stubbornly insists on maintaining products previously identified as high culture within a more mixed portfolio. The empirical evidence required to identify the omnivore may be identical in both cases, but the theoretical significance, imputed experience and normative implication are quite different. For the Petersonian, the contemporary upper middle class are exhibiting an openness to the popular culture of the mass of the population; American scholars tend to see it this way and to commend it.[12]

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[11] Support for this observation hangs heavily on the changing role of classical music in elite portfolios, not immediately unreasonable given Peterson and Kern's (1996) initial operationalisation of the omnivore syndrome.

[12] Peterson is not especially interested in social justice, and certainly not in the transmissibility of taste. He is examining the current distribution of tastes and acknowledges the association of taste with social prestige. But he is not politically critical of the consequences.

For the Bourdieusian, the upper middle class is exerting social closure around a set of marked practices which are difficult to acquire for other sections of the population. For the Bourdieusian, omnivores are ethically dubious characters; European sociologists detect subtle forms of the injuries caused by class. Two points might be made. The first concerns Will Atkinson's (2011) claim that Bourdieu is vindicated *against* an omnivore interpretation, because it can be demonstrated that middle-class Bristolians have tastes for 'high culture' which their working-class counterparts do not. However, omnivorousness and distinction are not mutually exclusive (Holbrook et al. 2002; Roose et al. 2012). It seems to me that a person may be omnivorous, in the sense of loving jazz and curry and horse racing, and by being disposed to openness (Ollivier 2008a, b), while still disproportionately commanding valuable legitimate cultural competences which may be deployed profitably in the stakes for distinction. The case for the original Bourdieusian orthodox position required that classes with high volumes of cultural capital reject other, less elevated cultural forms. However, Warde (2011a) finds scant evidence of such a marker of cultural hostility in the UK across several broad cultural domains, although comedy may be an exception (Friedman 2015).

The second point is that the cultural field requires mechanisms which establish agreement and widespread recognition of items of superior value (whether legitimate or otherwise) which accord symbolic credit. That process typically still works through the apparatus of the nation-states.[13] Schooling does not only generate institutional cultural capital by awarding certificates; the content of the cultural material worked upon when developing abilities and testing achievement is presented as valuable. The more that education curriculum is common to all citizens (which I understand to be the case in France but not in the UK, for example), the greater the likelihood that there will be consensus on the value of cultural artefacts. States also sponsor culture in very different degrees (Katz-Gerro 2011). The more the state intervenes in provision, the more likely it is that an environment will be created in which particular cultural forms are

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[13] Only at Baccalaureate, further, and higher education levels is the formal educational curriculum international.

ascribed exceptional value.[14] Lizardo and Skiles (2009) make a good case that variation in the national institutional structure of the TV industry is the key determinant of whether TV programmes are incorporated as part of the high-culture portion of portfolios in Europe. The market does not have the same authority, because it relies more on the plebiscitarian technique—do people buy it, is it popular? For the market is essentially populist with the rate of adoption of the goods made available providing the estimate of value.

One useful way to take the debate forward would be to analyse explicitly the processes behind changes in the value of high cultural capital, inquiring into the conditions of existence of the previous cultural regime (the high culture system), which conferred legitimacy on a particular and narrow range of cultural items. Another step would be to examine contemporary taste among elites.

3.2   Omnivorousness, Legitimacy and the British Elite: A Case Study

Evidence of the contemporary British elite nicely demonstrates that elements of high culture have a place within a form of omnivorousness. In-depth interviews in 2004 with a small number of individuals occupying prestigious positions in British business, politics and administration, under the auspices of the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion project (Bennett et al. 2009), showed that the administrative elite exhibits a significant degree of homogeneity of cultural attachment and invests heavily in participation in many cultural activities. Intensive and selective cultural consumption is routine and culture is embedded in social life through social connections.

Elite portfolios exhibit some strong shared commitments to particular cultural forms, some additional engagements in practices which are locally specific rather than generally symbolically significant, and some predictable common absences (Warde and Bennett 2008). Visiting art

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[14] Although it is difficult to imagine why the state would subsidise or sponsor cultural activities which were other than precious, this may still be an instance of the state apparatus operating in the interests of the dominant class.

galleries, following 'authoritative' sources of news, reading, and listening to classical music were almost universal. Relatively frequently mentioned optional but unremarkable items included having played sport during youth, listening to Classic FM and Radio 4. Also, everyone watched some TV, with documentaries and television dramas featuring alongside news programmes as favourite genres. Other optional items performed a differentiating function, tempered seemingly towards personal inclinations and local social circles; so a rural landowner mentioned shooting, several individuals disclosed membership of a local church, and one couple engaged in performance (of singing and acting).

All bar one interviewee expressed a liking for some forms of popular culture. Sport was prominent, as was popular music for almost everyone at some time in their past. Gardening, soap operas, Hollywood classics and blockbuster films each got a mention, but only jazz and rock music were mentioned several times. Occasionally, specific strong expressions of dislike were directed towards popular items including country and western music, Harry Potter books, soap operas, chat shows and reality TV. Yet overt hostility was infrequent and rejection involved more the quiet and tacit avoidance of a range of available cultural options: popular working-class pursuits like playing bingo, watching a boxing match or Formula 1 motor racing were never referred to, nor was listening to rap music or playing video games.

The elite's pattern of cultural consumption can be described in terms of three principles—proficiency, plenitude and capability (Warde 2011b). Interviewees were generally very confident and socially skilled but their occasional hesitations, excuses and apologies[15] served to reveal an ideal of cultivation, an acknowledgement that a certain kind of cultural competence or *proficiency*, is expected of a person in an elevated position. A second key feature of their cultural practice was their busyness. They combine activities into a distinctive way of life, one with many common features, none of which individually is denied to the rest of the population, but where distinctiveness lies partly in the breadth and intensity of forms of cultural participation. Particularly significant is

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[15] In relation to particular topics or items they felt forced, reluctantly, to admit to lack of knowledge or competence.

the commitment to attending live performances of the fine arts. They visited galleries, concert halls and theatres, even when it might be possible to have media access to the same events. The elite are distinctive in their widespread and voracious engagement, in the company of clients, contacts and peers, in visits to public events—theatre, opera, sport and restaurants. Thus the elite conform to a principle of *plenitude*, involving filling their personal and collective cultural universes with valued activities and experiences. A third striking feature of this group is the extent to which social connections generate cultural capital and cultural practices sustain social networks. Their extensive social contact presents many more than average opportunities for cultural learning; in Amartya Sen's sense, they have greater *capabilities*. As a stratum, they are likely to have many more opportunities to learn than most of the rest of the population. Career progression and life-course experience ensure constant exposure to relevant cultural forms, and thereby the opportunity to adopt and refine their cultural repertoires and aptitudes. To a woman, they end up highly endowed with economic, cultural and social capital.

Cultural participation is an insignia of belonging for this generation of elite personnel for whom it would be difficult to live an acceptable life bereft of connections with art, classical music, theatre and reading. Born between the mid-1930s and mid-1950s, they have lived in a context where high culture was mostly venerated, and where major institutions operated to emphasise the fact. They grew up in a context of a patrician BBC, very selective state sponsorship of culture, and an educational curriculum which selected some types of literature and music and not others for transmission for educational purposes. Their behaviour is oriented towards a set of consecrated cultural activities with which they, and others like them in the highest social positions, have familiarised themselves. But that rarely precluded other tastes for more popular genres.

The value of considering this group is that they constitute a benchmark against which to review recent change; they are 'proof' of the connection in the late twentieth century between high social status and an orientation of omnivorousness (by composition, i.e. appreciation and appropriation of a range of both legitimate and popular cultural forms). Their cultural profiles have many similar features to the larger professional-executive class beyond the elite. Nevertheless, despite many similarities across the

whole group, some differences exist between the oldest and the youngest within this elite sample. Moreover, the elite have some tastes which are not shared by the young professionals and managers from whom their successors will be drawn. One question therefore is whether the heavy smattering of high culture items in the current elite portfolio will be further depleted in the successor generation. This might be anticipated were 'emerging cultural capital' to take root and become decisive.

3.3   Some Remarks on 'Emerging Cultural Capital'

The coining of the term 'emerging cultural capital' is one instance of an apparent impatience towards the regularity with which the prevalence of cultural omnivorousness has been reported by empirical research.[16] The portrayal of 'emerging cultural capital' by Annick Prieur and Mike Savage (2013) identifies some important distinctive features of the contemporary cultural landscape which are presented as transformational. Among these are the way in which an ironic and knowing attitude towards popular culture is fostered by the educated middle class;[17] that national cultures are increasingly repudiated, with prestigious cultural knowledge or taste being associated with international, and increasingly global, products;[18] and that sections of the population are unimpressed by arts culture *tout court*, and attend to science and technology instead.[19] However, even if widespread, the significance of these features may be exaggerated. First, they do not seem to amount to a new systemic template from which to deduce the rules for extracting profit from cultural engagement. It is hard

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[16] I would caution against the replacement rather than the refinement of the omnivore thesis on the basis of the current state of knowledge; better to try to explain the institutional conditions for the rise of omnivorousness than to try to deny the fact, which Fishman and Lizardo (2013: 214) describe as 'the most well-documented empirical generalization in the sociology of cultural taste'.

[17] There is no claim that this is not also applied to high culture.

[18] However, High Culture was not nation-centric but rather pan-European in origin. Perhaps cosmopolitanism might be a move for greater distinction of an elite within the category of omnivores, a label signifying disputes between fractions of the dominant class, although whether that would be the move of a younger generation belonging to the high cultural capital wing or the high economic capital group within the dominant class I could not be sure.

[19] The retreat of arts and humanities does not necessarily entail that a substitute will be forthcoming.

to see that examples of emerging cultural capital like video gaming, rap music and gym membership constitute either symbolic coherence or a reliable means for obtaining profit.[20] Second, they do not appear to be fundamentally at odds with the omnivore thesis. That the current cohort of young adults has different tastes to its predecessor has been normal since at least the 1950s, so it would only be if they eliminated without replacement all vestiges of high culture in all fields that the introduction of new items would be crucial.[21] Third, the specific content identified does not seem likely to be able to serve effectively as cultural capital convertible to anything other than limited social connection, to friendship of the peer or enthusiast group. Were emerging cultural capital to have little value in conversion, it would be neutralised as an asset. That possibility is well worth considering carefully as it may be equally applicable to the omnivorous orientation which has delivered profit recently but may be difficult to reproduce over time. In both those scenarios cultural capital itself might be expected to become increasingly worthless. Cultural capital may not remain the lucrative source of intergenerational privilege that it once was. Its changing rates of exchange with social and economic capital since the 1980s permits of just such an interpretation. However, I do not think we have the evidence (and we probably will not have it until 2030 and beyond) to decide.

3.4   The Fate of the Cultural Omnivore

There is no room for complacency about the omnivore thesis. Its proponents have neglected: (1) the mechanisms for the production of an omnivorous orientation (although Lizardo and Skiles [2013] have done a fine job on mechanisms for its transmissibility from parents to

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[20] It proves difficult to give examples of the specific content of emerging cultural capital, i.e. beyond orientations or attitudes like 'distanced and ironic attitude' or 'so-called cosmopolitan attitudes and preferences' (Prieur and Savage 2013: 257, 263). Among the rather few specific examples cited are: '"hip" or hipster' culture; perhaps 'world music, jazz, bhangra and reggae' (Savage 2016: 102, 113); Normcore clothing, access to attractive women, Western brands, visual items (Friedman et al. 2015); 'a "good" sense of humour' (Friedman 2015: 167).

[21] Of course this generation might create new forms of consecrated markers, but the institutional mechanisms that might be likely to promote rap and video games as universal circulating medium of cultural value seem far from clear.

children); (2) the institutional arrangements which produce validation for the orientation (it shares with emergent cultural capital thesis this problem); and (3) specification of the social conditions and forces which shifted gainfulness from possession of high culture to omnivorousness. However, it has merits, which include the widespread replication of research findings; its being amenable to incorporation within several theoretical traditions (Bourdieusian, Peterson, Weberian); its connection to the education system and institutions of consecration, because high-culture elements are defined as part of the syndrome; its recognition of the influence of the commercialisation of cultural production; and, last but not least, its prominence among British elites. I would also contend that the omnivore debate has been carried out at a relatively high level of methodological sophistication when compared with other debates in the area of the sociology of art and culture. It has been refined in many respects since its initial formulation by Peterson and Kern (1996) but it remains largely an inductive observation with no strong theoretical underpinning. Originally formulated in the context of the mass culture debate (the elaborated by Frankfurt School and American empiricism), it has been accommodated within Bourdieusian and Weberian frameworks. It therefore has only in part been entertained in relation to the concept of cultural capital. However, it seems entirely possible to interpret an omnivorous disposition as exactly the form of cultural capital which delivered social and symbolic capital in the late twentieth century in Western Europe and North America. It seems to have been for a couple of decades the prevalent form of cultural orientation among those in positions of greatest privilege. A problem does arise, though; because the literature is mostly based on cross-sectional research design, omnivorousness tends to be regarded as the highest or last, rather than just the latest, point of cultural development. A better argument might be that it is a phase occurring in the development of post-industrial mature capitalist societies when an omnivorous orientation proved to be the most profitable dressing for cultural capital. Three questions would follow: How was an omnivorous disposition formed? How successful was it in achieving conversion into other forms of capital? Is it being transmitted? Part of the answer to the first question can be found in discussions by DiMaggio and Mukhtar (2004) and Peterson and Kern (1996). Regarding the second, the British elite provides evidence that an

omnivorous orientation has certainly not been injurious to a project of attaining high position, making money and making friends. The third question deserves investigation.

3.5   Institutional Props of the Omnivorous Disposition: The Case of Britain

A shift towards an omnivorous disposition with a capacity to deliver convertible cultural capital requires significant institutional support. It is possible to hypothesise about some of the props which, in the case of Britain, allow omnivorousness to replace competence in high culture as a mark of cultural distinction. Professional groups involved in commercial cultural intermediation explicitly try to establish the value of new cultural forms. The new cultural intermediaries become—out of not only professional interest but also personal enthusiasm for less well-consecrated cultural forms—carriers of more eclectic and non-judgemental disposition towards the genres where cultural value might be found, although they are of course paid to be highly judgemental within genres. Increased variety of accessible cultural products, latterly as a function of new information technologies, permits diversity. With the current elite and a substantial proportion of the educated middle class exhibiting the characteristics of omnivorousness by composition, the orientation has become the argot of broadsheet newspapers, people in positions of administrative and economic power, and the chattering class. A wider range of 'serious' critical commentary on activities that fall outside the old boundaries of high culture, for example science fiction, restaurants and rock music, increases the respectability and the awareness of less consecrated forms. New social media also erode the monopoly of professional and expert authority in the arena of cultural criticism. Likewise, the state has lost some of its authority to determine what is good for its public or population in the cultural arena. The ideology of consumer choice suffuses political rhetoric, implying that people should have what they like and no one should tell them what not to want. The demise of a paternalist state accompanied an official attitude and set of policies directed to acknowledging the worth of cultures other than the national, British and white orthodoxy. In Britain, New

Labour at the turn of the century made concerted attempts to promote multiculturalism, including to sell UK PLC by making London cool, as part of a strategy for handling ethnic relations and defusing racial hostility. The discourses of racial tolerance, political and civic tolerance among the liberal middle class, and laws against discrimination accord cultural respect to other cultures. Although an important mode of intervention by the state, it is in other ways and at other times more than counterbalanced by affirmations of British culture, patriotism and nationalism. An extended period of informalisation of manners affected British politics: the Establishment subsided, Oxford accents lost their monopoly of serious media, comedy about class deflated pretentiousness and pomposity, and mobilisation around class injustice by an influential labour movement attempting to rectify aspects of class inequality pushed towards a popular democratic atmosphere. Changes to the university curriculum, perhaps with the spread of culture and media studies in the vanguard, served to validate popular culture. This took a much more general and public form in postmodernism as a social and intellectual movement which undermined previously sanctified hierarchies and defences of universal cultural value. A wider range of museums and galleries celebrate popular culture—football, popular music, and so on. And finally, it is just possible that the work of Bourdieu, which exposed the sham of legitimate culture by showing that it operated to the detriment of the lower classes, was also a contributory force for the revaluation of cultural products in Britain.

4   Capitals and the Mechanics of the Transmission of Privilege

Transmission may be considered the passing from one generation to the next of any or all types of capital. In Bourdieusian terms, the transmission of the total and combined forms of capital involves a transfer of assets which ensures intergenerational reproduction of privilege. The mechanisms operate differently with economic, cultural and social capital.

Economic capital can be directly transferred through gift and inheritance. A previous owner transfers the self-same property or money

to a new one. Such transfers always undermine principles of equality of opportunity in the wider society.

Social capital can also be transmitted, often directly. Large extended families are one important element of social capital: aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents often provide strong ties that can be accessed when seeking a job, needing a loan, or finding a partner. Parents' wider social networks may also, through strong or weak ties, give access to other people who hold gatekeeper roles, who provide social and psychological support, who find jobs, and who throw parties. The operation of the British upper class, with its patterns of institutionalised social interaction (the London Season and the coming-out of debutantes, events like Ascot, etc.), intermarriage (a source of maintaining family wealth, cultural homogeneity and economic preferment) and 'Old Boys' Networks' formed at prestigious schools and universities, which may revolve around membership of elite social and sports clubs, provide economic opportunities mediated not by markets but by interpersonal connection (Scott 1982). However, parents are not necessarily dominant in the formation of the social capital of their children after early childhood. Countries differ markedly in the extent to which parents veto juvenile choices of friends and pastimes. From adolescence onwards, social connections are partly functions of personally managed differential association and therefore interpersonal experience. Nevertheless, the connections of childhood, school or university remain potential assets in new situations, alongside subsequently and independently formed friendships. Parents thus impart some social capital, which may—particularly perhaps because social circles have shared cultural tastes, knowledge and engagements (few miners' daughters learned to ride horses or enjoy opera)—have value in subsequent episodes in the life course.

These two forms of capital will almost certainly continue to operate to transmit privilege over generations. It would require decisive political intervention with transformatory intent to reduce the effects of inheritance through those channels. It is less obvious that cultural capital will necessarily support the inheritance of advantage after the decline of the high culture system. For most, cultural capital cannot be gifted, because some embodied and inalienable aspects of cultural capital prevent its being directly transferred. Qualifications have to be earned by individuals and they cannot be bought; an expensive, exclusive or specialised schooling

enhances the chances of better examination results, but they cannot be guaranteed. The imparting of cultural capital requires the active involvement of the recipient as well as tacit acquiescence. The most obvious means of transmitting parental cultural capital is through primary socialisation, training and education. Parents transmit attitudes, orientations and interests to their young children, and cultivate in them their own interests and others that they consider might be subsequently profitable to the child. The essence of Bourdieu's position was that this, the transmission of a class habitus, prepared middle-class children much better for the educational system than their working-class counterparts. Thereby the relative advantages of the parents were bestowed upon their offspring, thus enhancing class reproduction. In a period of mass public secondary education where schools perform unevenly, whether by design or default, obtaining access to preferred schools has been a critical part of parental strategies for the promotion of their children. British parents move house in order to reside in the catchment areas of more successful secondary schools. Private coaching in accomplishments like playing musical instruments, ballet dancing and horse riding,[22] as well as additional instruction in school subjects, are supplementary forms of support. Middle-class parents take the greatest of care over the schooling of their children with a clear, strategic eye to success in obtaining and preserving all the types of capital. Bourdieusian analysis understands this well and the language of trading in capitals is powerful.

Now, as in the past, the economic capital of parents is converted into social and cultural capital for their children. It is debatable whether it is orientations or substance that is transmitted. It is probably a bit of both. The prolonged life of high culture as cultural currency among European elites implies that substantive tastes and competences have been transmitted from parents to children. Most studies will show that having parents interested in high culture results in distinctive profiles among their children, including interest in classical and avant-garde forms of art and music (e.g. Gripsrud

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[22] But I'm not so sure about elocution. One of the most telling means to distinguish continuity and disruption is to examine the strategies of parents and their investments in out-of-school activities. My expectation, unsupported by any evidence, would be that they are not doing much that is different in 2013 than in 1973, although a greater awareness of the uneven performance of different schools and universities in relation to lifetime economic prospects may be consequential, and perhaps the out-of-school activities supported may, as well as being more varied, carry a different emphasis.

et al. 2011). Li et al. (2015) show that in Britain in 2003 both parents' education and cultural pastimes impact upon subjects' cultural consumption, even after having controlled for personal characteristics including education, income, age and gender. They also show that second-generation members of the professional-executive class are the most omnivorous by volume and exhibit the appropriate compositional mix of legitimate and commercial engagement. Furthermore, intergenerational class mobility, class position, endowment of social capital (measured as the occupational status of friends), parental education and parental pastimes all independently contribute to differentiation in patterns of cultural consumption. Nevertheless, it seems now equally, or perhaps more, important that parents convey to their children skills and competences for the handling also of new forms of culture. Lizardo and Skiles (2013) are very persuasive regarding the circumstances of parental inculcation of orientations towards *new* cultural forms. This includes, as Holt (1997a) suggested, skill in the critical appreciation of cultural forms which is transferable from domain to domain, or genre to genre, so that educated audiences often apply the critical apparatus typically used to evaluate high culture to soap operas, romantic fiction, comics or video games. Teaching children how to consume and appreciate many different forms of culture, the long-term value of which is uncertain, presents to parents a distinct and difficult problem regarding the transmission of capital. For parents, some assurances about the future trading value of emergent cultural capital would be very welcome.

5   Conclusions

The concept of cultural capital is messy. It has inspired some very interesting and valuable research on cultural production, cultural consumption, taste and cultural inequality. However, it is sociologically most interesting when directed towards understanding structural inequality and the transmission of privilege from generation to generation. For this latter task, Bourdieu's framework is perhaps good enough, particularly useful because it directs attention to the uses of culture. While key features of Bourdieu's account—the content of culture, the operation of mechanisms in context, and the conceptual apparatus—may need adjustment, the

programme of research he inspired remains robust and worthwhile. Some essential tools for understanding the changing role of culture in generating and perpetuating inequality can be further developed. The most important question, which I have not answered in any detail, is how the pattern of cultural taste and participation has changed in the period since World War II and with what consequences for social inequality. Answers would be improved if we had a better understanding of how a high culture system was entrenched and maintained in the mid-twentieth century and what mechanisms orchestrated its retreat. Among the pressures for modification are changes in manners; changes in the production of culture; changes in the role of the state, including state cultural policy and the organisation of universities; and changes in cultural intermediation.

Available evidence suggests that the best characterisation of the current situation is one where distinction is conferred by an omnivorous orientation towards culture. However, omnivorousness may not deliver the same level of other rewards as did command of high culture in an earlier period. It is perhaps not so flexibly convertible and probably not as rare or defended as was command of high culture. It serves to integrate the administrative elite and to link them to a professional and managerial class, but there its rewards are primarily a function of its fostering social capital. It is a moot question whether the omnivorous disposition has the institutional props necessary to secure its continuation. One plausible hypothesis is that as the balance of power within the dominant class has tipped towards its economic fraction the value of cultural capital has diminished commensurately.

The metaphorical concepts of capital remain imprecise and ill-defined but they are incisive with respect to the tension between social justice and family loyalty. In the context of this political problematic the concept of cultural capital remains valuable. Its widespread use merely to describe the variety and patterns of taste is, even if utterly fascinating, by comparison trivial and scholastic. Every adult is endowed with a formidable range of cultural competences, but only some of those competences can be used for social or economic profit. For that reason, future research should pay greater attention to its convertibility and transmissibility.

Part IV

Consumption, Critique and Politics

8

Consumption and the Critique
of Society

In the task of critique[1] the interpretive social sciences have grown timid. Attempts by professional social scientists to capture the Zeitgeist, or to measure the social world as it is against how it might be, have become fewer. Nevertheless, there is a continuing concern with improving the quality of life for many different populations and groups. Social coexistence is recognised as a matter of institutional arrangement, and it therefore makes sense to discuss how best to organise essential and discretionary activities in ways which do the minimum of harm. Critique is an inescapable part of that process, for any project for amelioration must understand both current arrangements and the likely consequences of ways of intervening to introduce improvement. Diagnoses of current malfunctioning are the principal substance of critical analysis. Confidence that such an analysis is correct, sufficient and apposite makes critique controversial. To mount a critique involves exposing to scrutiny arguments on the grounds of consistency, adequacy, disinterestedness, coherence, justice and fairness, and promotion of the public good. Critique therefore is a rather specialised

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[1] Dictionaries define critique variously as 'critical evaluation or analysis' (*The Free Dictionary*), 'to evaluate in a detailed or analytical way' (*Oxford Dictionary*), 'critical estimate or discussion' (*Oxford Dictionary*).

type of activity and not an ordinary state of being in the world. Scholars are in a better position to observe such standards than are most other actors. Training, working conditions and professional ethics provide tools for meeting the special obligations of social scientists. Social scientific understanding requires that those standards be rigorously observed and policed. So, while much of the impetus behind social scientific investigation is intervention to improve the public lot, the status of proposals emanating from social research is not of the same type as that of people whose first-order task is practical intervention. The difference between the changing of the world and the monitoring of projects to change the world makes the defining of the proper way to mount a critique consequential for social science.

1   The Career of Critique

Michael Schudson (1993) identified, in a schematic way, five frequently invoked critical themes circulating in social commentary during the twentieth century which advanced specific objections to consumption. The Puritan critique finds consumer culture suspect because it promotes hedonistic materialism, condoning luxury and pleasure at the expense of duty and character. The Quaker critique rails at the waste created in consumer societies. The Republican critique complains that consumption leads to privatisation, a withdrawal from collective engagement in political life. The Socialist critique points to the tendency for consumption routed through impersonal markets to obscure adverse conditions endured by labour involved in bringing those commodities to market. Finally, the Aristocratic critique decries the tendency of popular forms of consumption to induce cultural mediocrity. Insofar as consumption constituted a discrete and identifiable phenomenon, critical opinion viewed its development as generally rather deplorable.

These early critiques now strike me as bold, expansive and overconfident. What they offered were reflections on the implications of material and cultural transformations for other aspects of personal experience and the political organisation of everyday life. However, they are inherently suspect as accurate portrayals of the conditions appraised because not

based on empirical studies of those experiences and mundane practices. Nevertheless, they undoubtedly captured some aspects of the problematic entanglements of industrial production, market exchange and consumer culture. So, when appraising the earlier critical analyses, Schudson (1993, 1999) finds some element of truth in all of them but deems them overall unsatisfactory and does not know quite what to do about it. His uncertainty is shared by many of his scholarly contemporaries who have become less confident about mounting societal-level, general critiques.

Remarkably, mid-twentieth century discussions of consumption rarely had anything positive to say about the activity, although they did mostly welcome increased standards of living for large sections of the population. The countermanding of the negative evaluation of mass consumption awaited the arrival in the 1970s of cultural studies and the programme of empirical research which identified many positive features of the new cultural conditions. The goods and services available supplied people with new foci for enthusiasms and subcultural communion, relaxing and engaging recreational activity, greater material comfort, means to forge self-identities and tools for expressing political commitment. Some accounts aligned with radical forms of postmodern theory made strong claims for social change, including 'the end of the social', and for a transformation in the conditions of knowledge. Susen (2014) offers a general assessment of the effect of postmodernism on the social science at the turn of the twenty-first century. He notes five corollaries of postmodern thought: (1) the 'relativist turn' in epistemology; (2) the 'interpretive turn' in social research methodology; (3) the 'cultural turn' in sociology; (4) the 'contingent turn' in historiography; and (5) the 'autonomous turn' in politics. The most important for reflections upon critique is probably the relativist epistemology, which, along with the decline of the residual positivist programme for social science, unhinged the platform for critique mounted on universal values and scientific truth. Contingently, postmodern theory became less critical of the effects of capitalism, and by rejecting grand narratives and structuralist analysis, made earlier critiques appear flaky and overblown. The substantive claims of postmodern accounts of consumption went far beyond what was empirically justified by research conducted. Nevertheless, it became a defining pole in intellectual debate and stamped its mark on the intellectual climate.

Sociologists and other exponents of the interpretive social sciences became hesitant about advancing positions which might carry overtones of grand narrative and became generally less confident about the ethical and epistemological foundations upon which to criticise social arrangements and propose alternatives.

Cultural studies was concerned with a much wider set of issues than consumer culture. However, its effect on studies of consumption in other parts of the academy was considerable. Anthropology and sociology much tempered their judgements of consumption. The virtues of consumption were readily admitted. For example, Wilk (2001) pointed out that consumption was a source of innocent fun and pleasure, and Miller (1998b) that shopping was an act of sacrifice on the part of women who bought for their families and households rather than an episode of selfish self-regard. Consumption was no longer a dubious realm of activity. The defects of earlier critiques came to be appreciated. Common failings included partiality and prejudice; over-generalisation, by mistaking parts for the whole and failing to appreciate local context; application to all people equally without recognising the importance of group differentiation, hence ignoring systematic conflicts of interest between groups and/or persons in different social positions; a tendency to see little alternative to current social and economic arrangements without change of utopian proportions; lack of understanding of consumption in the everyday context; and, of course, failure to appreciate the many benefits of modern consumption. Yet, still, a niggling sense that much was imperfect about consumption and that to abandon general critique would be wrong remained. Thus, Schudson (1999), Cross (2000), Horowitz (1985) and Wilk (2001), after having given positive exposure and due credit to the counter-critique, continued to express, although now slightly apologetically, what might perhaps best be described as 'unease'. Intuitively, or emotionally, they still sided with some of the claims from the original critical standpoints as well as uncovering others.

2   Ways to Revive Critique

With the legitimacy of critique in question, current literature on consumption largely desists from offering a general and totalising critique of consumerism and consumer culture. The reasons are several. It is clearly

hard now to find solid foundations for general critique. Suspicion of Reason, loss of faith in science, the awareness of culturally diverse value positions, scepticism of centralised political programmes and planning, all tell against the kind of critical theory that was once considered epistemologically sound and was a basis for radical social thought. Bauman (1987) tolled the death knell of social scientists as legislators, as authorities; all that we may now do is interpret and translate between ineradicably different perspectives and interests.

Nevertheless, general critique has not disappeared. It persists not just in social theory and political movements, but in journalism, everyday resistance in daily life, in conversations and in practical activities where conventions and orthodoxies are overturned. The interpreters' lack of confidence has not extended to all other parties. The foundations for critique continue to be multiple: revelation, the authenticity or sincerity of the author, considered systems of ethics, analysis of the contradictory immanent features of institutions, as well as more modest social scientific recipes for empirical investigation in the light of interim value commitments. The appeal of evidence-based policy is a version of this last approach in which social science has preserved and developed some of its earlier expertise in diagnosis and projection. To take the view that institutions are human (political and collective) constructions, which could always be different, and that institutional arrangements have personal and social effects, provides reasonable grounds for recommendations for social improvements.

There are many outstanding matters for concern associated with consumption. Those identified by Schudson remain unresolved; critique and counter-critique of puritanism, republicanism, socialism and aristocracy persist. It is sometimes said that sociologists never resolve their disputes but merely lay them aside out of ennui. Yet there are now additional issues: growing global and local inequalities, greater appreciation of the effects of market externalities and the unintended consequences of free trade, a reawakening to the employment of conspicuous consumption for status demarcation, a perception that consumption makes a limited contribution to well-being and happiness, the cost in working time to sustain an agreeable and admired style of life, and above all environmental degradation. On the topic of sustainable consumption, many sociologists feel not only justified but even compelled to pronounce judgement.

Andrew Sayer concludes his book, *Why We Cannot Afford the Rich* (2015), with a chapter entitled, 'The Twist in the Tail: Global Warming Trumps Everything'. What steps might sociology then take to secure a role in addressing credibly such pressing social and political issues. How can sociology recover sufficient confidence to make justifiable recommendations for social amelioration? What might be done? Indeed, what have we been doing?

2.1   Restore Business as Usual

One solution is to carry on as if the postmodern turn had never happened, or rather had never had any true purchase on the definition of a proper role of social science. This avenue is followed by exponents from disciplines, like economics, which are much less troubled by epistemological issues of truth and perspective. We might return to recompile and re-evaluate, with evidence, the major dimensions of critique as identified by the likes of Galbraith (1958) or Scitovsky (1976). Some robust and striking current commentaries on consumption seem to have few qualms about the possibility of critique. For instance, Juliet Schor has been a steadfast proponent of macro-level critiques of the system of consumption in Western societies (1991, 1998, 2007, 2010); in an essay from 2007 she suggests revisiting older critiques to provide good food for contemporary criticism. She endorses some objections to the older critical accounts of Veblen, Adorno, Galbraith, Baudrillard and Marcuse, saying that they

> were overly totalized; that they failed to give the consumer sufficient credit for acting intentionally and with consequence; that they portrayed too unitary a consumer marketplace; and that they were elitist, indeed reactionary, in their privileging of high rather than popular culture. (Schor 2007: 259)

> However, she adds that the legacy of these important objections

> has become constraining by ruling out more sophisticated and less problematic versions of the critics' arguments and by putting macro-level or systemic critiques of consumer culture off limits. (ibid.)

This, she remarks, results in depoliticisation and a tendency to take consumers' accounts of themselves uncritically, as, it might be contended, the interpretive social sciences tend to do now.

In response, she takes three renowned social commentators (Veblen, Adorno and Galbraith), whose ideas were taken seriously and debated in political circles, and who gave a diagnosis of social problems around consumption characteristic of the age, and shows on the basis of more recent social science that parts of their critique still stand. Thus, she accepts some subsequent criticisms of their positions, but retains those elements current evidence supports as still characterising social arrangements of Western societies. Adorno was right about the link between production and consumption—and that the consumer is not sovereign. Galbraith was right that consumption doesn't produce happiness. And Veblen was right about competitive status consumption, the status-seeking motives having been demonstrated in experiments of behavioural economics. On such a basis she offers a general critique of consumption in America, a society neither more egalitarian nor more mobile than before, where luxury goods proliferate and private consumption is excessive. Sociologists have not yet, it seems to me, recovered the confidence to present such bold overviews. Despite the capacity to pronounce on the mutually interacting effects of institutions being central to the sociological enterprise, sociologists unfortunately mostly remain reluctant to present extended treatises which say, for example, that commodity exchange has specific and general effects on sociality, that increasing levels of inequality affect social divisions and social order, or that some types of consumption activity are more rewarding than others.

2.2   Demasking Ideology

Sociology could instead apply the basic insights of the critique of ideology. We could locate existing justifications and apologies for current consumption patterns in their social context by asking the question 'who would say that, and why?' This would neither invalidate them nor give a full explanation of their appearance. The reservations expressed about the classical versions of the sociology of knowledge pertain. It is no longer

credible to reduce the meaning of texts entirely to the social interests of their authors and adherents. Nevertheless, there is a powerful and persuasive new tradition of contestation of the value of high culture which relies very much on the argument that people in powerful social positions are likely to succeed in defining their own cultural tastes as especially valuable and thereby, as Bourdieu would say, enacting symbolic violence over other groups. Thus, the fate of what Schudson calls the Aristocratic critique of mass consumption—that it is characterised by uniform and inferior cultural products—is instructive. What once masqueraded as disinterested argument from transcendental aesthetic criteria was unfrocked for its partiality, not only in support of the economic self-interest of a section of the population but also because of its role in exerting symbolic domination by a self-proclaimed cultural elite. Such analytic procedures might be extended to new circumstances.

2.3   Confession: Locating the Author

A yet other response could be for sociologists simply to own up, so to speak, to having particular political values and then to proceed to critical commentary with their value-orientations fully transparent. A proclamation of moral position and political belief might precede exploration of the issue under examination. Clearly, then, an audience would not be deceived by claims to spurious objectivity if forewarned about the prejudices inscribed in the text. This solution, to my mind, is, while perhaps unusually honest, also somewhat naïve. For it subscribes to a very simple view of the place of values in social science and social life. It obscures the very complex aspects of the relationship between facts and values revealed by the philosophy of social science, and potentially transmits a misleading impression to the general public that nothing of substance or relevance matters except individual sincerity. In addition, psychologists increasingly observe that we understand ourselves rather less well than other people do. Moreover, it undersells the conventions of social scientific work because even those who would deny the possibility of pure objectivity are constantly subject to scrutiny by other social scientists, in dialogue and in print, for their assumptions and their stance. The beam

of the scientific *illusio* of objectivity is never totally eclipsed. Scholars have a duty of reflexivity which is greater than that required by most people in ordinary daily life.

2.4   Seeking New Grounds for Critique

Perhaps, then, new grounds for social critique might be established. Older forms of critique tended to work back from bad consequences to the identification of specific causes, and then to recommend intervention to eliminate or modify the causes. This rather simple positivist chain of reasoning towards effective intervention has had little practical success. The reasons include value dissensus, unintended consequences, institutional interdependencies, as well as the many uncertainties involved in establishing a causal explanation in complex collective contexts. An inevitably unpredictable future, a consequence of the openness of social systems to innovation and adaptations of conduct, renders social engineering hazardous. Nevertheless, even if our interventions are not entirely predictable in their consequences, we can identify means to distinguish good from bad institutions, and the tendencies for different types of institutional arrangement to encourage virtuous rather than evil conduct. Towards this end, I will consider whether theories of practice can offer a fresh perspective. I will suggest first that we might locate implicit, tacit or immanent critique in everyday practical activities. People who are not tasked with the duties of academics or intellectuals often behave in the course of their everyday lives as if they were disappointed or discontented with their patterns of consumption and we might listen to them more attentively (see Section 3). Second, we may mine the specific and distinctive explanatory qualities of theories of practice for engaging in critique of consumption (Section 4).

3   Everyday Practice as a Locus of Critique

A modest, initial, potentially convincing strategy might be to examine reservations about consumer culture held by the population at large. Our knowledge of how ordinary people feel about the merits and

disadvantages of consumer culture is insufficient. I suspect that discontent and dissatisfaction is more widespread among the public than is usually imagined. Cross (2000) suggests so. Nevertheless, most people would be reluctant to give up the level of comfort that is routinely supplied and guaranteed through the economic arrangements and technological capacities of late modern societies (Lebergott 1993). Also, they probably appreciate some of the psychological benefits which Lane (2000) describes as arising from the activity of purchasing in relatively unconstrained ways through the market mechanisms. In the absence of sufficient systematic data, we might consider how people currently orient themselves towards matters of consumption.

Consumption behaviour comes to critical attention in practical contexts in the course of grumbling, complaining and organising. Grumbling is a form of personal and private activity through which people, in an individual capacity, assess and act upon the quality of their experience as consumers. They reflect on goods and services, compare stories with friends, moan, reject items and repudiate suppliers by vowing 'never again'. This mix favours exit over voice and individual over collective response. However, sometimes this extends to making formal complaints, to commercial actors—producers, retailers, service agencies—or to state regulatory agencies. This, too, remains a largely private function, although because regulatory bodies and companies count and classify complaints, evidence of discontent may enter public discussion. More impactful is organisation through parties, movements, associations and campaigns which involve the collective identification of a set of problems and a collective response using a wide range of strategies and tactics to influence the consumption and exchange of commodities.

Everyday critique of consumer experience can be found in the common grumblings of people about various episodes and experiences associated with living through a consumer culture. It is often said, variously, that Christmas is a materialist ritual; children have far too many things and too many material aspirations for their own good; fast food is disgusting; companies are greedy; there is too much choice in this world; in simpler times we made our own entertainment and we were happy; supermarkets and shopping malls are soul-destroying and to be avoided whenever possible; and so on. Evidence for such views can be found in qualitative

interviews and in surveys suggesting that many dimensions of managing markets—the procedures and arrangements surrounding purchase, service delivery and material possessions—are troublesome for ordinary people. People often grumble from the point of view of seeing themselves in the role of 'the consumer'. Some may be aware that that cooperation, gift relationships and self-provisioning offer gratifications denied them in episodes of market exchange, even though such exchanges less easily permit exit.

The incoherent grumblings about the inadequacies of market exchange are elaborated in the widespread process of complaining. Sociology might fruitfully pay greater attention to acts of complaining because it can be a tactic in collective consumer mobilisation. It might also better exploit the potential of complaining behaviour, not for purposes of practical business management, for which there is already plenty of advice, but rather to improve understanding of codes of everyday conduct. For the content of complaints reveals the norms and standards the complainant believes appropriate to the circumstance. Expectations of appropriate conduct are made manifest when people express disappointment or claim redress. The potential for a dispute between producer and consumer over whether aspects of, for example, a particular meal—the dishes, service or atmosphere—are acceptable is an ideal source of evidence about what is expected (Warde 2015). The use of common and differential languages and rationales by restaurateurs and customers when conducting their negotiations (about, for example, whether the wine is corked or the meat cooked) makes explicit the values, conventions and standards around which they may agree or disagree.

Complaints formalise grumbling. However, when orchestrated as a collective venture aimed at changing practices, complaining may constitute a proto-political act. It may or may not engender collective mobilisation, and it may or may not be diverted into institutions for dealing with individual cases of maltreatment, but it has a role in political life which constantly challenges the neo-liberal insistence that markets can look after themselves and that politics therefore can be limited to ensuring the legal preconditions for making and enforcing private contracts in economic exchange.

A third, more general, explicit, effective and empowering form of everyday expression of dissatisfaction with consumption arises through social movements. Some have been specifically directed at consumption, and

the terms on which goods and services are sold in markets. Gabriel and Lang (1995: 153) usefully remind us of the evolution of consumer and cooperative movements since the mid-nineteenth century. They identified 'four waves of Western consumer activism'. The first took the form of the cooperative movement, a nineteenth-century 'working-class reaction to excessive prices and poor quality goods' (ibid.). The second wave was concerned with 'enabling consumers to take best advantage of the market, rather than trying to undermine the market through co-operative action or political agitation and lobbying' (1995: 158): value-for-money was a key slogan, and informing and educating the individual consumer was the principal strategy. The third, of which Naderism was emblematic, was founded on more general and sustained critique of the corporations and their behaviour, and the fourth involved the search for radical alternative forms of consumption consistent with environmental objectives. In the twenty-first century these impulses are manifest in movements for political consumerism and environmental protection. Many other movements, not specifically focused on consumption, also contain incidental elements of critique of the patterns and organisation of consumption. Disputes over what should be freely sold on the market (body organs, sexual services, wives, guns) are among the concerns of feminist, humanitarian and religious movements, and anti-globalisation protests target social inequality and injustices associated with the operation of labour markets, global poverty and sustainable development. The critiques upon which the strategy and tactics of social movements are founded are likely to be more general, intensive and passionate, more confident, less negotiable, less open to compromise, and less divisible than those which pass muster in the academy. Social movements do not need social scientists to speak for them, though this might sometimes be the case for groups of individuals who lack resources, a voice, or the respectability which would permit others to take their case seriously. The critical, imaginative, mobilising and prefigurative roles of social movement actors supply an essential momentum for social change (Yates 2015).

Sociology might, then, give exposure to the views of the good life which are present in grumbling, complaining and organising, without either endorsing or condemning the actors involved. It might formulate more coherent and rational critiques of social arrangements than are possible for social movements in the heat of battle. Sociological analysis

already includes describing, clarifying, explaining origins, and evaluating movement activity. Sociology might show the extent to which different movements share critical understandings of social arrangements; might extract from the propaganda of movements a core of 'truth' or rational diagnosis whose accuracy might be evaluated. This is the role that Bauman (1987) named 'the interpreter'. To give publicity without taking sides; and to pay special attention to giving publicity to those actors who are least able to speak clearly for themselves to relevant audiences. Thus, social science might probe the ambivalence of consumer culture in ways neither arbitrary nor motivated by political partisanship. The task is to express the concerns of sections of the population and through their analysis help ordinary people to understand better their predicament and articulate strategies for social improvement.

4 Mining the Distinctive Qualities of Theories of Practice

If theories are alternative lenses on the social world, we might expect to see some distinctive properties of that world by applying theories of practice. Five of their features are relevant and worthy of remark. First, theories of practice avoid holistic analysis and therefore general condemnation of consumption. But they do imply alternative foundational options for evaluating consumption. Second, they accord values a much-reduced role in the understanding of consumption. Third, they offer a particular explanation of sources of happiness and contentment. Fourth, they suggest different ways to change behaviour, by allocating *social* responsibility for consumption patterns. Finally, although I lack the space to develop the idea fully, critique might be analysed as itself a practice, involving the examination of how critiques are composed, and on the basis of which understandings, procedures and engagements specific performances are successfully mounted.

4.1 Critique Without Holism

A first distinctive feature of theories of practice is that they are fundamentally sceptical of attempts to mount macro-level or holistic

accounts of social organisation. The rejection of both individualistic and holistic analyses of social order was critical to both first- and second-generation sociological approaches to practice. The enduring mainstream critiques of the nature of consumption (as listed by Schudson) accept and operate with a flawed view of the relationship between society and the individual that practice theory seeks to dispel. The typical strategy of the traditional critic is to identify some deleterious features of the institutional arrangements of society and suggest that these are directly and faithfully reflected in the mind, orientations and actions of individuals. Thus, in competitive market societies, individuals learn to be selfish and to act in a self-regarding manner. In a consumer society, individuals adopt the consumer attitude. In a materially affluent economy, individuals become materialist and profligate. Economic institutions in capitalist consumer cultures result in individuals adopting the standpoint of the consumer when evaluating options for action. In this way, orientations to action are ascribed to individuals whose behaviour can then be blamed or deprecated for providing support for such institutions and their consequences.

Practice theory, by contrast, has a predisposition to reject the descriptive and explanatory role of concepts like consumerism, consumer society and consumer culture in favour of explanation at the level of specific practices. This implies that critique should be directed towards particular practices or elements of specific practices. To do so persuasively requires intricate judgement, in part because practices have many dimensions, multiple meanings for practitioners, and multiple functions or objectives. However, insofar as practice theories reject the view of society as a totality with a set of unified driving forces across the whole of the institutional complex—because practices are seen as having their own autonomy and logic—it may follow that no general critique of consumption per se is possible.[2]

A common and effective step in critique is to observe that many performances fail to satisfy the standards of the practice to which they belong. It is a classic technique of social scientific analysis to hold up a mirror to actors who espouse particular valued outcomes—like democratic control or truth-telling—and show that they recurrently fail to

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[2] There is also a dilemma internal to the theoretical tradition of whether the object of critique should be performances or practices.

achieve them. Pointing out an agent's failure in relation to self-attributed objectives circumvents the problem of grounding evaluative assessments in situations where the critic and the criticised hold, equally committedly, contrary objectives, standards of excellence or overarching values. Many technical steps to this end can be envisaged to examine how a practice is organised. Practices or performances might be reprimanded for harbouring inferior or harmful material elements or products. Better equipment would eliminate waste, exploitation, side-effects or climate change. Procedures may be shown to be suboptimal, or to have unfortunate side-effects. Understandings may be demonstrated false, misleading or partial. It might be argued that the organisation of a practice systematically undermines the *illusio* of the activity, for example drug-taking in sports or the instrumentalisation of university education. Finally, contradictions might be identified between sayings and doings which render performances incoherent. All these are forms where performances are not in accord with the agreed good standards of the practice. Here, critique is straightforward because there is no disagreement about ultimate ends. Nevertheless, it may not deal very well with situations where hegemony prevails and no one is currently exposing common sense, established understandings and ends to critical scrutiny. In such circumstances, critique may appear unduly technocratic, with dispute being conducted over means rather than ends.

The more complex situation occurs when there is overt dispute about whether performances should be directed towards one of a number of competing ends or values. Whether consumption should be governed by hedonistic or puritan values has had a long history. Indeed, there are enduring controversies, arenas of critique and counter-critique, which might be attributed to the existence of competing values or standards of conduct. Thus, there can be:

- A puritan critique of hedonism and a hedonistic critique of puritanism
- A democratic critique of privatism and a private citizen critique of collective democratic rule
- A workers' rights critique of free markets and a neo-liberal critique of restraint of market mechanisms

- An elitist and aesthetic critique of popular culture and a populist critique of high Culture
- A localist critique of global consumer culture and a cosmopolitan critique of sectional/local/nativist prejudice
- A socialist critique of commodity exchange and a free market critique of collectivist production systems

Interestingly, there is no waster's critique of the Quaker position! In all these instances, however, the proper ends or goals of the practices being examined are brought into question. Theories of practice would generally observe that it is through resultant contestation over standards that practices evolve. The implication is that it is possible to contend that prevalent standards are unjustifiable, and perhaps to claim that they fail to serve more general virtues of justice, courage or honesty, as MacIntyre (1985) might require. The appeal of theories of practice in this context is that they are evaluating specific practices for their moments of consumption, with context and the enjoinment of practitioners more or less inevitably associated.

4.2   Against Values: Critique Without Moralism?

A second relevant and promising feature of theories of practice is their scepticism about the causal primacy and motivating role of values. In line with much pragmatist philosophy, theories of practice reject a strong separation or implied causal direction in the connection between means and ends (Whitford 2002). Commensurately, they also consider explicit and implicit values held by individuals to be first and foremost rationalisations of their practice rather than instigating forces for action. Practice theory emerged in reaction to Parsonian normative functionalism, rejecting the latter's reliance on the propositions that values shared within societies are the basis of social order. This stance makes possible critique of general understandings of the social organisation of consumption at a rather abstract and theoretical level. It suggests rejection, or at least revision, of orthodox theories of action common across the disciplines of the social sciences and routinely applied to the analysis of consumption. It is the basis for critique of hegemonic common sense about the role and

activity of personal choice, the primacy of hedonic values, and models of decision-making which rely on values as a substratum or trigger to making purchases and crafting performances. It also allows reconsideration of the operation of the much-noted value–action gap which has appeared as a major obstacle to many agents who seek to intervene to change behaviour (see the discussion in Chapter 9). If values are post hoc justifications rather than sources of action, the manner in which personal standards are incorporated into sociological analysis of consumption is problematised.

Much critique in the past has been based upon propositions that individuals are insufficiently moral (or thoughtful or reflexive) in their daily conduct. One extension to practice theories might be derived from the arguments of Haidt (2007, 2012) who notes that moral intuition almost always trumps moral reasoning. In line with the burgeoning school of thought based in cognitive neuroscience, extrapolated in social psychology and behavioural economics, emphasis is put on the automatic and unreflective character of most everyday actions at the expense of rational reflection or calculation. In such an approach, values, being neither explicit nor generative, have a limited role to play. Individuals with personal sets of values are not a key focus for attention. Criticising bodies of values—like materialism, hedonism or privatism—becomes a much less promising line of approach. Embodied, emotional and unreflective action comes into the foreground. Thus the injunction discussed above, to find critique within everyday practice, seems a potential and consistent avenue. At the same time, it suggests that the key to identifying sources of malfunctioning elements of contemporary consumption will be found in the arrangements and operations of social institutions of state, economy and civil society.

4.3   Does Affluence Make People Happy?

Whether affluence makes people happy is a very suitable topic for a critical sociology of consumption. In chapter 5 I suggested that one distinctive implication of theories of practice was its solution to the apparent contradiction between increasing material opulence and stable measures of well-being. The paradox may be partially resolved by recognising that the bases of contentment are not so much things in themselves, but rather

the place within different practices that is afforded to a person through the possession or control of goods and services. Internal goods may be obtained from competent or excellent performances of practices, wherever such practices might fall in a hierarchy of prestige. Line dancing may not have the social prestige of ballet, but the *experience* of improving and becoming expert is likely to deliver similar psychic rewards. Moreover, practices are mostly pursued within social networks where differences of social status or wealth are limited and where inequalities are accorded little significance (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). This is important as part of a response to Schor's (1998) observation that mass media add a fresh dimension to senses of relative deprivation. Mass media permit perceptions of inequality of possession no longer local to my neighbourhood and social circles. Most people who watch television know of and have been encouraged to desire a massive range of goods and services, so they are therefore conversant with the material correlates of extremes of wealth and poverty. It may then seem puzzling why, in their political practice, the poor in democratic societies put up so patiently with the rich. One reason may be that the poor have a very inaccurate sense of the distances involved (Dorling 2014; Sayer 2015). But another may be that because their day by day social activities are so thoroughly absorbing they have neither time for reflection nor need for politically engineered remedies. A sufficient means to engage competently in personally valued practices in a local context may be enough.

4.4   Intervention in Practice

An especially important aspect of a practice-theoretical critique is its understanding of potential strategies for intervention to change patterns of consumption. One implication of abandoning the holism–individualism pair is to discourage generalisation about consumption in terms of a model of the consumer. The principal implication of a theory of practice is that the sources of changed behaviour lie not with individual choices but in the processes whereby practices themselves change. On this reasoning, different strategies for changing behaviour are required, for example to counteract the alleged damaging consequences of mass consumption or to sell new and superior products. Interventions to change people's

behaviour will place less emphasis on personal education or ethical conversion and more on reviewing the conditions and infrastructures of particular practices. This issue is addressed in detail in the next chapter.

4.5   Analysing the Practice of Critique

One final prospect from practice theory is to suggest that its concepts, tools and approach be directed towards analysing critique as itself a practice. The critiques presented by social and political commentators, and by social scientists, operate with shared understandings, follow a body of rules, and aspire to a certain level of achievement in persuading audiences of their cogency. Explicit formalisation of rules of critique would be a step towards eliminating partisanship, sloppiness, rhetoric, and improper appeal to value-orientations like sincerity or authenticity. Just as social scientists share explicit rules of statistical procedure, of logic and of techniques for interpreting qualitative data, why might they not agree on the optimum way to undertake and validate critique? Why not an instruction manual on 'how to do critique'? That would not lead to the expectation that all would agree. Haidt (2007, 2012) convincingly dispels any anticipation that critique will ever quell counter-critique. Expect permanent controversy over the best ways to organise societies and practices. However, greater transparency and clarity would be beneficial. Rules might be formulated for judging when critique has been done well, and what are the typical pitfalls which result in a likelihood of dissimulation, rhetorical trickery and the promotion of hidden interests. It might be possible then to maintain that some types of consumption are more detrimental than others for great numbers of people because of agreement that the rules and procedures of critique had been properly followed in the making of the argument. This could provide an alternative to, or at least a strong constraint upon, individual convictions or values being the ultimate touchstone for drawing normative conclusions. For, if practices are the units of analysis, ends are the standards of excellence of practices. The critical analytic stance is to argue not on the basis of personal conviction but on the grounds of what would be best for improving the excellence of practices and performances.

Rules for sociological critique might therefore include:

- check the facts of the matter at hand, against lies and falsification
- scrutinise the claims or assumptions made about conditions in adjacent, connected and relevant practices which may affect the phenomena
- compare performances against the explicit ends, objectives and justifications of the practice
- determine who benefits most from the existing manner of organising important practices
- examine the structuring of power around the communication channel

5   Conclusions

It is important to acknowledge that there is nothing bad per se about consumption. We cannot but consume. Diagnosis of problems has to be at a more detailed level, in the context of particular considerations about how consumption is organised within everyday practices. Some forms of consumption may be more propitious for the public good than others and less harm may arise from the organisation of consumption within some practices than others. It is equally likely that within each practice there are some ways of operating that are more harmful than others, raising questions about which positions in a field tend to be better and which worse. The implication of looking through the lens of theories of practice is that one cannot have an overarching critique of consumption but only a critique of the particular ways in which consumption is instituted within particular practices. Or rather, this would be a much more precise and discriminating way to develop a critique of contemporary forms of consumption. Practice theory recommends modesty in relation to societal critique, despite grand visions of the good life remaining an essential part of the political arsenal of democratic societies.

Reflection on the nature of critique suggests that one of its foundations is in practical activities, in the organisings and the petty grumblings within everyday life. In this respect an eclipsed, largely forgotten, but broader conception of consumer politics provides resources for renewal in the critique of consumption. The long run and widespread ambivalence

within Western societies towards consumption is a fact to be explained. The condition is clearly illustrated analytically in the work of, for instance, Zygmunt Bauman (1988, 1990, 2002) where consumption is presented as enigmatic and ambivalent. For him, consumption is harmless competition *and* a source of profound political polarisation; it is a source of anxiety *and* a means to allay anxiety; it is a source of individual freedom *and* the basis of a political system over which citizens have no control; it is both seduction *and* repression. Like many others, Bauman both praises and condemns the consumer society, apparently in an inconsistent fashion. Perhaps theories of practice can better understand the ambivalence by locating its roots in and across many different practices.

Theories of practice do offer some new orientations towards critique, as described in Section 4. While it is impossible to provide a hierarchically ordered list of those practices which should be preferred for their importance and intrinsic value, we do know that some practices should be valued more than others. Some practices are socially harmful, or even evil. The existence of a practice does not guarantee a positive contribution to human well-being. The making of bombs, theft, domestic violence, commercial fraud and tax evasion have the same structural properties and modes of operation as benevolent practices. Indeed, each of these can be performed in different ways, based on common understandings, well-known and formalised procedures, with a view to defined ends in accordance with standards of worth inscribed in the *illusio* of the practice. Safe crackers, investment bankers, conmen, drug peddlers and human traffickers have reputations for level of performance in their metiers for which they are differentially regarded and rewarded. In just this way it can safely be claimed that some forms of consumption are more damaging than others, without necessarily being able to say by how much or in exactly which ways. This is a consideration of great significance in, for example, debates about sustainable consumption.

However, it is possible that practice theories might supply some foundational basis, presumably ethical but perhaps structural, for reconstituting a critique of social arrangements. The approach advocated by Alasdair MacIntyre (1985) has potential. He maintains that some virtues are universal, and most people would, if required, subscribe to them. These virtues (justice, courage and truthfulness) are mostly carried

within 'noble' practices. Their manifestations—of content, form and appearance—are culturally and historically variable. The virtues are in some degree in competition, such that we need to optimise across them rather than maximise any single one. But it is hard to institutionalise these virtues by planning or direction. Rather they emanate from, and take their shape in, the individual practices which comprise the vehicles for their expression.[3] If this is the case, then we might imagine that we could found social critique (not without contention, of course) upon the prevalence of those virtues when sustained by particular institutional arrangements for the performances of the consumption moment of different practices. This would not produce a general critique of consumption, but rather a means to produce, practice by practice, a basis for evaluating different modes of pursuing each.[4]

An alternative solution might be to introduce some of the conceptions of the conventions theory of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006). Analysis using abstract and generic categories within which *justifications* for actions are framed across a great many different domains or practices has had significant recent appeal. Practice theories are not explicitly averse to using the concept of discourse, and Foucauldian versions place it at the core of analysis, although concern lingers that many uses of discourse appear to renege on the sharp separation between doing and thinking which characterises the strong versions of practice theory. However, if conceived of as a language of justification, rather than motivation, there is much to be gained from considering the common properties of categories which proclaim standards against which performances, and indeed entire practices, might be compared and evaluated. The worlds of worth of conventions theory—of efficiency, effectiveness, civicness, familiarity, fame and

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[3] MacIntyre (1985: 187) offers the following definition: 'By a "practice" I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.'

[4] Note that MacIntyre's panoply of virtues has relatively little purchase on the everyday practices that concern the sociologist of consumption. It would rather be at a level of abstraction equivalent to the society that any relevance of the mode of organising consumption (the economy) could be felt.

beauty (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006)—are the most widely discussed candidates. Haidt (2012), however, provides an alternative set—though expressed as moral foundations—of care, liberty, fairness, loyalty, authority and sanctity. Analysis might then involve evaluating practices for their contribution to such standards of worthiness. It might, for example, be said that family practices at their best generate loyalty, sympathy and sacrifice, that democratic public practices generate and sustain justice, tolerance and compromise, while culinary practices promote solidarity, sociability and beauty.

One purpose of the social sciences is to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life. To that end sociology has a legitimate and distinctive role in the critical analysis of social institutions but recently it has proved reluctant to play its part. Social sciences cannot but evaluate, and they have a duty to evaluate. However, evaluation remains difficult where values clash. Because practice theory depends on them less, it avoids appealing to incompatible values being the point at which discussion stops. Refusal to accept that personal values and individual convictions are primary and sacrosanct might make for better navigation of the obstacles posed by fundamentally different ethical standpoints. Values might be dealt with not as universal criteria applicable everywhere and equally to all practices in the social world. Instead, the aim might be to purify and perfect practices one by one, in light of the standards of excellence of their particular domain, measured against goals of enhancing well-being, improving skill and honing the practice, so that each serves better those who engage with it.

9

Sustainable Consumption: Practices, Habits and Politics

1 The Issue of Sustainable Consumption

The impact, character and consequences of human activity on the natural environment provide one of today's most urgent topics for analysis. Sustainable consumption rose rapidly up the political agenda at the end of the twentieth century because of environmental concerns (Cohen 2001; Rumpala 2011). Contemporary patterns of personal and household consumption pose an enormous challenge for the mitigation of the effects of climate change. While no overall definition of sustainability commands scientific consensus, and no unconditional or universal recipe for the design of sustainable lifestyles exists, the literature repeatedly identifies a list of problematic activities which provide a pragmatic focus of attention. Tukker et al. (2010: 13) point out that 'food and beverages, mobility, housing and energy-using products are the most critical domains from the point of view of sustainability'. The water required for rearing beef cattle, the burning of dirty fossil fuels for purposes of travel, and the energy required to keep dwellings, workplaces and public buildings at a constant temperature of approximately 22 degrees Celsius make major contributions to global warming (Fairlie 2010; Shove et al. 2012, 2014; Urry 2011).

Tukker et al. document clearly the parameters of the problem of unsustainable household consumption activity, although in adopting the perspective of industrial ecology they lay as much emphasis on production as on consumption; indeed, they sail under the banner of Sustainable Consumption and Production. Summarising a vast number of studies, many of them based on Life Cycle Analysis of products, from which the domestic component of the activity can be isolated, they identify the variables which explain differences in the environmental impacts of individuals and households. The key factors include income (the rich consume more), household size, location (urban is cleaner), automobile ownership, food consumption patterns (although there are no clear heuristics—are local, greenhouse-grown products superior to those from a distance heated by the sun?), international and interregional trade (where low-wage countries often have less efficient production methods), social and cultural differences between countries, and housing type (modern city flats do least damage).

If left alone, the scale of the problems associated with domestic consumption across the world can only escalate. The pressures for enhanced consumption in the expanding economies of Asia, Africa and Latin America cannot possibly be contained. And the prospect is daunting. Gerth's (2010) synoptic overview of the astonishingly rapid growth of consumer culture in China concludes with a final chapter on the local and global environmental implications of the marketisation of the Chinese economy. The size of the Chinese population means that changes in everyday behaviours have huge overall impact on the global environment. Gerth records that in the 1980s almost nothing was wasted, there were almost no automobiles, and protein came from beans rather than farmed animals. Now much is discarded; Gerth's example is chopsticks and disposable plates. On the roads, in 1993 there were only 37,000 private cars in the whole of China. In 2009, 12 million cars were purchased and the total in use was 35 million. It is estimated that by 2020 the number will be 150 million. The consequences for use of fossil fuels and air pollution are obvious, but the car is also a key instance of the processes of social emulation through conspicuous consumption which is a powerful force in China in relation to very many goods. A new taste for meat, especially beef, has predictable consequences for land use and water supply, as other types of foodstuffs more economical of natural resources

are replaced. The quantities of water needed to grow the cereals to feed the cattle are gargantuan. Gerth describes desertification and the polluted water supplies as catastrophic. He notes how the system of political authority made it possible to achieve an astoundingly high rate of industrial growth during the last two decades; the state's pursuit of economic growth was the principal impetus to changed consumer behaviour, as his case study of the new Chinese car culture shows. Perhaps, though, being well aware of the hazardous environmental consequences of a period of rapid growth, the Chinese government may be better placed than its neoliberal Western counterparts to introduce and enforce policies which will mitigate the effects of climate change.

No imaginable ethical case can be made from the West against such expansion of consumption. The problem of excess carbon in the atmosphere was caused initially by the industrialised societies of North America and Europe who remain the principal beneficiaries and still the principal polluters. The current proportion of greenhouse gas emitted from the USA is obscene. As campaigners are prone to point out, if the whole world consumed after the fashion of the USA then four or five earths would be required to provide the materials and absorb the detritus (World Watch Institute 2016).[1] Only political intervention on both national and international levels can possibly make the necessary difference. In that respect the prospects look exceedingly bleak, despite the guarded optimism about international cooperation as a result of the climate change conference in Paris in November 2015.

The preferred response of incumbent political elites is technological innovation and continued economic growth. This is very unlikely to be adequate; governments implicitly admit as much by deeming it necessary to address sustainability by way of changing personal and collective behaviour. The current political fashion, at least in the UK and USA, is for 'behavioural change' initiatives which encourage citizens to assume greater 'personal responsibility' for their lifestyles and their 'choices' in the marketplace. Such solutions relieve governments of responsibility and

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[1] According to World Watch Institute, 'Calculations show that the planet has available 1.9 hectares of biologically productive land per person to supply resources and absorb wastes—yet the average person on Earth already uses 2.3 hectares worth. These "ecological footprints" range from the 9.7 hectares claimed by the average American to the 0.47 hectares used by the average Mozambican.'

appeal to a common-sense Western understanding of consumption—that it is a matter of consumer sovereignty. Political 'solutions' are strongly rooted in a perception that the figure to be dealt with (arguably an ideological and imaginary figure) is the 'sovereign consumer', who, relatively autonomously, reflects on his/her lifestyle, in light of available money and time, and selects goods and services entirely voluntarily to match preferences and values. Most would say that these policy approaches have been ineffective.

2   On the Limits to Correcting Individual Behaviour

2.1   Strategies for Correcting Individual Behaviour

Broadly speaking, four approaches to changing the behaviour of individuals in the sphere of consumption have been employed in the past. On the assumption that people are rational and calculating individuals it has seemed opportune either to inform them about the effects of their actions so that they might act in their best interest, or to construct a set of primarily financial incentives to encourage beneficial and discourage damaging choices. Both these types of intervention assume that patterns of consumption are primarily driven by simple self-interest and that politics and values are not points of manipulation. A second pair of strategies takes into account the role of norms and values in social life. They seek either to persuade people to adopt more congenial values such that bad behaviour is minimised for ethical or moral reasons, or to eliminate the possibility of misdemeanour through legal restriction. Note that these strategies are as likely to be advocated, deployed or prescribed by campaigning social movements as by governments. Figure 9.1 charts the basis of the alternatives, noting that strategies make different assumptions about what drives individual behaviour generally, and in particular in the field of consumption. These are four ways of addressing the problem of change when it is posited that consumption is a matter of individuals, whether rational or expressive (see Chapter 3), making choices and decisions in circumstances where they exercise substantial control over their own personal fates and destinies.

Lever for change

	authoritative direction	personal education
homo economicus (rational action)	*financial subsidy and taxation*	*information*
Homo sociologicus (normative action)	*prohibition*	*conversion*

Mode of individual action

Fig. 9.1   Four commonly employed strategies for changing behaviour

None of these strategies pursued in isolation has proven very effective in the context of the contemporary politics of sustainability. While each would have some part to play in any overall programme for change, even all combined together would be very unlikely to cope given the scale of the problem. Diagnoses differ as to how and why these strategies fail, but I maintain that all retain a dependence upon a mistaken view of consumption and the consumer, exhibiting a fundamental theoretical flaw which theories of practice promise to correct. Explaining consumer behaviour on the basis of models of individual choice and decision is suboptimal, and when trying to design ways to change consumption patterns probably counterproductive. I will formulate my argument in the light of the now well-known yet still controversial book by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness*, which, despite its defects, provides convincing critique of these dominant strategies.

2.2   Problems with Information and Prohibition

Almost everyone now accepts that simply giving information to people about the consequences of their actions has little effect on their behaviour

(e.g. Barr and Prillwitz 2014; Darnton et al. 2011).[2] In many areas of consumption—eating, exercise, use of energy and water, etc.—people know about the recommendations of science, government and cultural intermediaries for good behaviour but nevertheless fail to comply. It would suit governments, experts, academics and campaigning movements well if this were not the case because information can spread swiftly, pervasively and cheaply. For governments it is especially appealing because it conveniently transfers responsibility to individual citizens. For other agents, it provides easy access to potential supporters. However, most policy analysis finds it ineffective.

One set of reasons, now widely acknowledged, concerns the ways in which individuals access information. One reason why information does not cut mustard is the existence of many competing and inconsistent messages, and also a lack of trust in the source of the messages and veracity of their content; different actors place different information in front of the public. Currently the enhanced techniques of social marketing, which aim to direct and target information more precisely, are finding favour. However, although more economical to circulate because more focused, they are unlikely to be significantly more effective given the nature of the reception of the impersonal messages of mass communication. Propaganda messages in plural media contexts are little different in principle from advertising, which, it seems to me, (1) works part of the time, although even the professionals cannot predict which part, and (2) serves to exonerate the economic system more than it dictates purchases of particular items (Schudson 1993). Wider media communication about goods and services surely fosters some emulation and thereby promotes general demand for categories of product (Schor 1998). Certain categories of possessions have become defined as a necessary part of a decent and modern way of life.[3] The almost universal diffusion in the West of automobiles, televisions, mobile phones and a range of white goods for the kitchen are evidence of collective definition of normal domestic standards of living. Importantly, such goods come in many qualities and

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[2] The exceptions are probably those organisations whose existence depends upon dissemination of information!

[3] Note that the diffusion varies by country (Nolan 2015).

at many prices, such that those with modest incomes want them and acquire them, because practical performance is improved. Then, because infrastructures change to accommodate their innovation, they become indispensable. In addition, their enforced absence as a result of poverty or ignorance may taint a person's reputation and even damage the sense of self. Imagine, for example, the poor teenager who had to write letters rather than use messaging apps; not only are letters slow and considered unfashionable but also, as a consequence of reduced usage, the infrastructure of postal services and deliveries has become less effective, more expensive and less frequent than previously.

Another reason why information is an ineffective spur to better behaviour is that individuals do not engage much in rational deliberation and reflection. So, even when in possession of perfect information, people may not draw the intended or appropriate conclusions about ensuing action. This is a core observation of behavioural economics, and underpins Thaler and Sunstein's position. Behavioural economics is having a significant impact on academic and policy discussion about behaviour change. It draws on cognitive science and makes much explanatory use of the proposition that the brain has two systems generating behaviour, one 'automatic', which is uncontrolled, effortless, associative, fast, unconscious and skilled, the other 'reflective'—controlled, effortful, deductive, slow, self-aware and rule-following. The first is employed far more often. If a great deal of our behaviour is governed by mental processes that are automatic, intuitive and emotion-driven, then we are certainly not rational, calculating, self-aware and independently minded in the manner attributed to the sovereign consumer. Behavioural economics devotes much attention to describing how this results in systematic deviation from rational economic behaviour. A fairly comprehensive inventory of the effects of system 1 processes is compiled in Kahneman (2011) and includes the ignoring of absent evidence, neglect of ambiguity, suppression of doubt, inference to and invention of causes and intention, bias towards believing and confirming, and representation of sets by norms and prototypes. Thaler and Sunstein (2009), with a view to intervention, emphasise biased judgements, difficulties in resisting temptation and a strong tendency to social conformity. If most decisions are not rational, planning in the expectation that people will act rationally is a suboptimal and unpromising avenue for altering behaviour.

This argument is fundamentally challenging because it degrades the role of personal education; giving people information they will not use is practically pointless if they rarely deliberate in the course of action. Consequently, it might seem that people must instead be constrained, by legal prohibition, imperative regulation or forceful social pressure, to eliminate undesirable activity. However, Thaler and Sunstein consider this virtually impossible because of the strength of resistance to political administration and direction of personal conduct. Although maybe the USA is exceptional in the degree of ineffectiveness of public policy, they have a point; the solution to problematic levels of household waste is hardly likely to be found by passing legislation about the use of the domestic garbage bin. Hence, they coin the term 'libertarian paternalism', which connotes a 'third way' between *laissez faire* and imperative regulation. The underlying principle is that you can always do otherwise, you are not compelled to act in any specific manner, but if you aren't thinking much, you will do what is best for you and everyone else.

Libertarian paternalism presupposes that democratically elected governments can no longer issue binding directives to citizens or businesses across a wide swathe of issues; for example, measures to restrict waste, cap the use of carbon fuels, set limits to the sugar, fat and salt content of foodstuffs, strictly control alcohol and tobacco use and so forth are deemed politically unenforceable. This presumption reeks of political despair, a renunciation of vision of progress and improvement in social life through the channels of deliberative democratic processes. It may apply to an unruly USA more than Europe, for the power of law is not to be disregarded. Illegal activities in Western societies are infrequent, and then mostly the domain of small deviant communities which operate in seclusion or privacy. Nevertheless, the cost of policing usually renders prohibition on personal consumption of individuals or households impracticable. Except when there is a shared public consensus about misdemeanours of consumption, such that ordinary people and people's friends will report them to the authorities (alcohol in the Middle East, drink-driving in the UK), it is enormously difficult to police new regulations regarding personal behaviour. The fate of policies to prohibit alcohol sales in the USA in the interwar period was a case in point. One problem is that prohibition encourages illegal trade; the ineffectiveness

of states currently to restrict the circulation of drugs declared illicit is the obvious instance. Another is that it attracts accusations of paternalism. Pekka Sulkunen (2009) argued that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, states have lost the indisputable moral authority to interfere with lifestyle choices and, in addition, even were they to try to prescribe behaviour, they have no unchallenged ethical or political rules to follow. Contemporary policy for public welfare cannot any longer find authority because individualisation has tipped the balance against paternalistic discipline imposed in pursuit of a shared vision of the common good.[4] Hence, it follows that even if people did register information in preparation for action, they would resent and resist the directives of political authorities.

2.3   Incentives and Nudges

Thaler and Sunstein's solution to this dilemma is the 'nudge'. It follows from their account of brain functioning that, in order to get what we really want, we may require help in avoiding the detrimental consequences of our naturally rash behaviour. However, this must occur in the spirit of libertarian paternalism. Hence, we need to be nudged appropriately. A nudge is defined as

> any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a mere nudge, the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid. (Thaler and Sunstein 2009: 6)

That is, it should be easy, in order to minimise effort, and avoidable, to maintain an impression of freedom. The key to such a formula is the context of action which can be set by 'choice architecture'. Choice architecture has 'responsibility for organizing the context in which people make

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[4] As Sulkunen (2009: 117) puts it, 'Whereas the state until now had been entrusted with extensive powers to regulate lifestyles in the interest of advancing the common good, now lifestyle issues became a challenge, not only to the state's authority to take a stand in moral issues but to the justification of the welfare state as a whole.'

decisions' and better 'choice architecture' is a solution to subrational arrangements (Thaler and Sunstein 2009: 5). It implies the identification of institutional settings and sequences for guiding us to better decisions about courses of action that will enhance personal and/or collective welfare. An emblematic example (p. 206) is the entry key card in European hotels, which is necessary to make the lights work in the bedroom; when it is removed, on leaving the room, the lights turn off automatically. It thereby prevents the waste of electricity. This device does not require individuals to make decisions or to undertake effortful changes in their behaviour. Rather it works because it offers incentives to businesses to organise the site of consumption in such a manner that energy requirements and costs are reduced. Importantly, though, it also puts the onus for change on the more powerful and less numerous agents, for there are many fewer businesses than there are human beings on the planet and each undertakes far more economic transactions.

If getting individuals reflectively to change their behaviour is so difficult, it may be better to prescribe incentives for firms. Thaler and Sunstein (pp. 193–210) talk a lot about firms, especially in the chapter on climate change. It makes more sense to talk about rational incentives for firms. The performances of firms can be, and usually are, monitored and measured. Relevant, agreed, recognised and robust accounting measures related to income and expenditure constitute a strong disciplinary mechanism for all economic organisations. Firms are organised bureaucratically, imperatively coordinated, managed and assessed in relation to a small number of objectives. They respond faster and more reliably than individuals to changing costs, subsidies and taxes.[5] In the private sector they are also subject to the discipline of competition, which when on a proverbially level playing field is mostly acceptable. Larger companies even respond, for fear of damage to their brand reputation from criticism of environmental misdemeanour, by way of corporate social responsibility strategies (Welch 2012). Thus it is surprising that although Thaler and Sunstein put much faith in incentives, they avoid concluding that firms are more readily affected by calculable economic incentives and

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[5] For rich individuals can afford to be unresponsive to prices.

disincentives. There is perhaps an appealing logic to nudging individuals and incentivising firms.

A major reservation, which Thaler and Sunstein acknowledge, is whether nudging can achieve sufficient scope or scale of change. Can nudges be big enough and sufficiently radical to redesign the conduct of individuals or businesses? Obstacles to large-scale change arise from the strength of vested interests, the defensive power of corporations and the underlying background institutions of capitalist economies. Much depends for corporations on estimations of economic opportunity and incentives. Setting incentives is the product of negotiation and involves the exercise of power. The pattern of incentives, when they are specifically applied, is often blind to fairness and exhibits a bias created out of past situations of political balance. Incentives are precisely the outcomes of previous attempts at economic regulation—of markets, rewards, property rights and privileges. To overlook this is a form of structural and historical blindness which is problematic in the context where regulation is probably the most controversial issue in debates about sustainability. Restricting sales of the most obviously damaging products sold in open markets, like beef, petrol and fossil-fuel-generated electricity, seems especially efficacious yet highly unlikely because of the strength of vested interests. One reason is that the sale and use of objects and substances which do the most environmental damage are legal. The commercial organisations responsible go to great lengths to ensure they remain so. The oil industry is a case in point.

A Royal Society of the Arts report (Rowson 2013), examining the effects of energy consumption on climate change, argues forcefully that too little attention is paid to supply. If the already discovered reserves of fossil fuels are harvested and used, then there can be no chance of preventing global warming exceeding the levels internationally agreed to be prudent. The safest course of action would be to leave the reserves in the ground. The major barriers to such an apparently sensible policy lie in the scale of the sunk investments of large and powerful corporations whose stock market valuations are based on the expectation that these resources will be sold, and therefore burned. The systemic consequences of wiping out capital, income and profits from future oil production would be enormous, with pension funds and banks among the investors experiencing a

massive diminution of assets. Organisations like these, with connections to governments, will surely assert all of their vast influence to keep regulatory legislation well off the political agenda.

2.4   Problems with Value Change

Thaler and Sunstein have been heavily criticised on many other counts, perhaps particularly vociferously by proponents of the fourth prominent strategy, that of 'conversion'.[6] Strategies for changing values rely not just on making information available, but on personal education. They stipulate in addition moral and ethical improvement, a process which in its strongest form may be likened to religious conversion. It is a strategy probably closer to the hearts of social movements than to governments. The tenor of the campaigning messages of movements is often one of persuading people to exercise their moral consciences and thereupon to behave better. Failure to act in accordance with the movement's preferred values may be seen as moral failing. Even when the primary target of critique is the actions of private organisations or public policy, part of the message is that individuals must show personal commitment and ethical probity, especially in order to avoid the taint of avoiding sacrifices demanded of others. Moral and ethical conviction is also promoted partly in the hope that if individuals hold environmentally friendly values, or value social justice more highly, then they will live and shop differently. Although evidence is scant, a spillover effect is anticipated, such that a concern for, say, animal welfare will spread to greater use of public transport, reduced air travel, vegetarianism, a preference for sweaters over radiators, and for radical over conservative political parties. Conversion of a mass population to ethical support for environmental politics seems highly unlikely, however; indeed, it appears that in Britain at least the general public is showing declining sympathy for the environmental cause (British Social Attitudes 2011).

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[6] Thaler and Sunstein would have no truck with that strategy, and they do not address it, but it would for them be unpropitious because it requires costly and effortful deliberation and also unwelcome and intrusive external direction of personal affairs.

This is not to deny that active social movements are absolutely essential as catalysts of political change. Framing an issue, drawing attention to the problem, voicing it in public and demanding responsive action demonstrate citizen concern. It is also necessary to promote belief that change in individual conduct in a positive direction is possible. In this regard, however, prefigurative collective action may be more persuasive. Groups of activists who already practice more or less comprehensive alternative ways of life—through communal living, social centres, informal economies—perhaps provide a more convincing demonstration of the possibility of radical social transformation (Yates 2015). At the same time, most uninvolved observers probably find it almost unimaginable that they would find palatable the total reorganisation of their style of life.

Research in many different fields finds evidence of a gap between values and actions (Barr and Prillwitz 2014; Darnton et al. 2011; DEFRA 2008). People often do things voluntarily that they would rather not. Food waste is an instructive instance. WRAP (2013) estimates that, in the UK, one fifth of edible food and drink brought into the home in the UK in 2012 was sent to the rubbish tip. This amounts to 4.2 million tonnes of avoidable waste which would 'fill Wembley stadium nine times over'. Reducing waste could, in principle, both feed some of the billion or so undernourished people in the world and reduce the quantity of greenhouse gases being emitted in the more affluent parts of the world. The embedded CO_2, energy and water, not to mention human labour, contained in discarded food is politically embarrassing.

David Evans (2014) explores this matter sympathetically. Food waste, and waste more generally, is an excellent site for natural experiments because almost no one is in favour of waste. There is no dispute over values. Rather, the fact that ordinary households discard food typifies the lack of fit between values and actions. Evans shows that people inadvertently, reluctantly and unavoidably throw away food they have previously purchased. They recognise and regret waste. They hold leftovers and otherwise unused ingredients in their refrigerators until the last possible moment, hoping they will not have to be discarded. But in the context of domestic provisioning, a wide range of factors conspire to ensure that much goes into the dustbin. The principal factors, according to Evans, for households buying more food than they consume include 'cultural

conventions, the historical evolution of how people shop and manage their homes, commercial infrastructures of provision and the material qualities of the food itself' (p. 49). More concretely, the location of retail outlets, the portions in which supermarkets sell foodstuffs, the ethic of generosity which means that it is disrespectful to leave people hungry at the end of a meal, and the ideology of family care which requires mothers to give their children new foods to try while still ensuring they eat sufficiently. One telling example is of a mother who cooks dishes she thinks her children should be encouraged to eat, but prepares back-up dishes in case they refuse the first. This is a telling example of Wilhite and Lutzenhiser's (1999) 'just-in-case' scenario.

Evans emphasises that social interactions, consideration for others, interruptions to routines, and so on, scupper planning in the recommended manner. The imaginary rational consumer would ensure that exactly the amount of food required by a household during a week would be purchased, cooked and eaten. But obstacles well up. More important priorities, arising from other practices—keeping children healthy, responding to the needs of friends, flexible working hours, unanticipated opportunities for social entertainment—take precedence. Also, waste would in many instances be reduced if food shops were just around the corner and food purchase occurred daily, a situation common before households owned a domestic refrigerator. However, suburban living arrangements and the dominance of food distribution through supermarkets makes adaptation to immediate and unforeseen needs very difficult, almost guaranteeing waste. Suburbanisation also, of course, adds to CO_2 because convenience requires automobiles for transportation and domestic freezing devices, not to mention water for gardens, which mostly don't grow food. This is a reminder that there are indeed a set of infrastructural arrangements for the conduct of practices which constrain and steer performances but which are rarely brought to mind by either householder or social scientist when contemplating the throughput of the domestic larder. Also, incidentally, infrastructural imperatives run counter to the responsibilisation of the individual in matters environmental which ethical consumption campaigns and governments decree to be in dereliction of personal duties. As Evans (pp. 49–50) observes, 'the competing pressures on household schedules and the work of domestic provisioning

means that the routines of food consumption are not readily amenable to the rational and deliberate models of intervention that policy makers and campaigners are currently deploying in order to reduce household waste.' For '"food" becomes "surplus" as a result of processes that have little to do with "waste" or consumers actively seeking to over-provision on the grounds that they do not really care. Rather surplus is presented as normative and something that occurs in the course of households doing other things' (p. 50).

The strategy for value change remains essentially one which puts its faith in individuals, cognition and benevolent values. It has several other problems besides the yawning value-action gap. It remains cerebral in seeking to put individual ethical choice of values at the centre of projects for change. One fundamental objection is that values are not a principal source of action. There is enough truth in the behavioural economics arguments to suggest that people deliberate infrequently in the relevant contexts and hence rarely consult their values in advance of action. It may also be that values follow habits. Haidt (2007), for example, says that mostly we act instinctively and then construct a reason afterwards for our behaviour if we are challenged. Similarly, the classic paper of C. Wright Mills (1940) asserts the irrelevance of motives for sociological understanding while pragmatist social philosophy attests to values being secondary to habits (Whitford 2002).

A further problem concerns the origins of commitment to values directed towards action consistent with collective programmes for social change. People do occasionally report experiencing an epiphany, a moment of sudden personal moral enlightenment which leads to a determination to act in accordance with new principles. This is probably a rare occurrence, and without other forms of support may not have stable results. People's commitments and convictions are probably more likely to alter in response to new circumstances and new social connections. Often the process is informal and undirected, a function of social networks where, for instance, social honour or reputation require conformity with a local social standard. One of the more successful environmental behaviour change initiatives in the UK has been municipal arrangements for the recycling of waste, but its effectiveness most likely emanates from fear of being thought uncivil by one's neighbours.

Finally, developing sympathies for, or joining, social and political movements is another prominent source of value change. But not many people join. The number of people concerned and active in environmental movements is few. Moreover, movements are in competition and the values promulgated by social and political movements are very likely to be vehemently contested. Recruiting enough people and maintaining their commitment is notoriously difficult. Vaisey (2009; Vaisey and Lizardo 2010) suggests that political values and world views are fairly stable, which makes conversion difficult. Of course, if it were otherwise and people changed values easily and readily they might abandon their new faith and leave just as precipitously. However, a model of personal education and value conversion generally neither explains collective mobilisation—evidence about recruitment, engagement and defection suggests greater complexity—and nor does it provide a scalable solution to environmental damage.

3   Prospects for Theories of Practice

I conclude that the four strategies referred to in Fig. 9.1 are unlikely to effect sufficient change. However, in the search for alternatives, some of their defects might be eliminated if less emphasis were placed on individual choices. The many variants of the practice-theoretical approach acknowledge the limitations of the strategy of intervening at the level of individual behaviour (Darnton et al. 2011; Shove et al. 2012). The theory, as sketched in Chapter 5, proposes that consumption is less a matter of individual expression and choice, and more a corollary of the conventions of the range of the specific, socially organised practices felt to be necessary to live a good life. Participation in a practice mostly involves the requisitioning of familiar items and their routine application to well-understood activities. Performances recognised as competent—for example, in the environmentally sensitive fields of eating, heating and cooling, and transport—find their orientation in collectively accredited and locally situated conventions associated with such practices. Most practices are self-regulating. All practices supply incentives, but they are often tacit, located in definitions of their purposes and associated standards of excellence in

performance. Modes of intervention therefore place less emphasis on personal education or ethical conversion and more on reforming the social organisation and infrastructures of particular practices.

Theories of practice offer a means to circumvent the value-action gap. The difficulty of achieving, cognitively or practically, consistency of behaviour in line with general ethical principles is partly due to the specificity and compartmental character of practices. For example, environmental concern will be compromised when family loyalties call for intercontinental travel. More importantly, practice theory allocates a secondary role to the values of individuals, its account of purposive action lying in the nature of the ends and standards of specific practices. Values do not instigate behaviour. Instead, habit and habituation play a large role in much everyday practice, supported and steered by routines and conventions. It is not that behaviour is mindlessly habitual, as might be implied in accounts expecting nudges to produce predictable and repeatable actions; viewing habit as mindless repetition of an act when subjected to the same repeated stimulus is ultimately unhelpful.[7] Nevertheless, habituation, routine and repetition are critical elements of the performance of everyday life. More sophisticated understandings of habituation might be found in cultural sociology or the work of Bourdieu (see Swidler 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Warde 2016). This promises a better grasp of ordinary consumption and potential levers for intervention. If it is important to change practices rather than people's values, then changing infrastructures, defaults and contexts, as suggested by Thaler and Sunstein, is part of the solution.

Theories of practice might concur with cognitive science (and behavioural economics) in suggesting that our actions rarely proceed from consulting our values and attitudes, but are instead rapid responses to cues provided in the external environment, conjured up from habits and intuitions about the nature of the situation in which we find ourselves. Therefore, to reform behaviour requires altering the environment of action rather than changing people's minds. As individuals we often have limited control over what things we use and how we use them.

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[7] See the brief discussion in Warde and Southerton (2012) and the extended argument in Warde (2016).

Convention, infrastructure and shared goals constrain everyone. In this sense, types and levels of consumption tend to be determined socially and collectively. Also, because theories of practice do not find the primary sources of action in autonomous individuals, neither do they expect the solution to collective political problems to come from the independent endeavours of individuals. Responsibility should be seen as collective and distributed (Barnett et al. 2011; Sahakian and Wilhite 2014).

Practice theory also compensates for some inadequacies of behavioural economics. Habit is not a degraded version of rational action but rather an effective, often rewarded and socially honourable, mechanism which is a collective rather than individual achievement. Practice theory admits of reflection, as does behavioural economics in recognising that system 2 of the brain is engaged on occasion, but it emphasises it as a collective rather than individual process. Its notion of practical sense gives it a degree of superiority because it does not depend upon the presumption that a rational course of action is always available, even if not embarked upon. Theories of practice, by postulating that human conduct has a normative rather than a rational foundation, recognise enormous potential flexibility in social and cultural forms, responses and actions. However, they also imply that changes are likely to be slow and probably partial. So theories of practice might endorse some insights from accounts like *Nudge* concerning the steering role of infrastructure, the importance of variation in context, including the messages on the street, and the distraction associated with targeting the behaviour of individuals when seeking to intervene. The focus on practices suggests some means of steering change, including a significant role for learning from experts, exploitation of the mechanisms that produce pleasure and satisfaction from pursuing the internal goals of the practice, and intervention in the modes of organisation, coordination and regulation of practices.

4   What Is to Be Done?

Practice theory explains well why orthodox strategies for intervention have limited success. It also contains some largely unfulfilled promise regarding alternative ways to deal with behaviour entrenched in

unreflective habit, normalised standards of cleanliness and comfort, and conventional expectations that long journeys will be quick. Prognoses of the societal consequence of climate change in the absence of radical transformation of the lifestyles promoted in the West are often terrifying. John Urry (2010), in a review of the predictions of 'catastrophist' accounts, lists among the imagined outcomes destruction of infrastructure, more refugees and migration, a reduction in available energy, less geographical mobility, environmental degradation, and wars over resources. In the face of such threats it is hard to imagine that anything short of sustained, radical collective political action on the broadest of fronts will suffice as a response; policies like imposing a mandatory small charge on customers for plastic carrier bags, a recent innovation in the UK, are unlikely to make a difference at the required scale. Rather it will require institutional transformation to alter the patterns of consumption in everyday life to mitigate the social effects of climate change. When one of the most powerful men in the world, George HW Bush, president of a large and very rich population, and environmentally per capita the dirtiest country on the planet, announced at the Rio Climate Change Summit in 1992 that the American way of life is non-negotiable, the scale of the political problem was made clear. What can theories of practice suggest?

The theory dictates that it is practices which must change. De facto, all practices do change, and indeed we know a lot about how and why they change (Shove et al. 2012). Their evolution can be steered, although we may regret the normally slow pace of change and also that we are rarely able to mould them precisely to order. In addition, the forms of collective leverage required to give overall political direction tend to be unpopular. The domestic practices with which policies for sustainable consumption deal are ones generally considered private matters, both by the general population and governments. As the proponents of *Nudge* observe, forms of imperative and direct intervention may be rejected as paternalistic and politically infeasible. Sometimes, nevertheless, means can be found to circumvent the impression of invasion of privacy. Infrastructure provision and domestic architectural standards have an obvious role in mitigation of problematic behaviour. If people's habits are formed in a material context, then its purposive design is a strong lever. As with many kinds of intervention in practices, the education of professional workers is a

key place to start the process of refashioning contexts of consumption. Populating domestic and public contexts with cues to environmentally friendly behaviour is another lesson from practice theories, including the messages and demonstrations of radical political movements. For while political consumer movements mostly do not, in either campaigning or prefigurative mode, have the capacity to enrol many people as members or disciples, the messages projected into the public arena populate the environment with cues and clues, which will, on occasion, steer behaviour into preferred channels.

A bigger problem, however, is the lack of political will at the level of governments. Governments can act to improve environmental performance in many incidental ways. They can lead by example, favouring particular suppliers or types of supply chain. They can foster strong planning regimes. They can influence educational curricula and professional training. They can promote popular concern and fashion policy responses in favour of sustainability at home and abroad. They can encourage powerful agents, especially large corporations, to take steps to protect the environment when formulating organisational strategies. What they also might do, but conspicuously fail to do at present, is to *require* citizens and corporations to take concrete and far-reaching steps to alter their practices.

One key point to rescue from the discussion of nudge is that corporations and suppliers are easier to regulate than individuals because they are fewer, but also because, as organisations subject to economic rationality, their behaviour is more predictable. Indeed, there is a compelling logic to penalising dirty firms and industries, and rewarding clean ones. However, that would require greater commitment by governments to economic regulation. More robust regulation, if not rationing or prohibition, is required. At present, governments give directives to the public sector, and secure compliance via financial incentives and penalties. They are more circumspect in relations with organisations in the private sector where the ideology of the virtue of free markets and free trade prevails. However, while for some purposes markets are highly beneficial mechanisms for allocation of goods, they are often not benign in their effects on the environment. Perhaps they should be regulated first and foremost in the light of their environmental consequences, which, in the long run, might be

inevitable given the cumulative nature of greenhouse gas emissions. That would require transitional political strategies designed to legitimise currently unpalatable policies, including higher levels of taxation, greater regulation of markets in light of political definitions of the public good, resource planning, and the greater empowerment of professions.

Governments, however, seem increasingly reluctant to use tools which give direction to people or firms. Prohibition of certain goods or practices, or rationing of supply, are almost never considered in relation to sustainable consumption. Governments are reluctant to use radical shifts in levels of taxation on problematic goods and services. Indeed, in the neo-liberal era, even the idea that the state should regulate individual and corporate behaviour in pursuit of the public good is highly contested. Despite the fact that all markets have rules and are thus already regulated (Metcalfe and Warde 2004), policies explicitly designed to regulate markets are highly contentious, with governments showing great reluctance to intervene to restrain either purchasers or sellers. At present, planning, the regulation of corporations, the rationing of goods, and taxation of the rich are largely written out of neo-liberal and neo-conservative political scripts.

American social scientists of a critical bent who study consumption protested earlier about the distorting power of elites, the effects of intensive corporate lobbying and the privilege accorded to economic interests in the formulation of political policy. Cross (2000), for example, pointed to the power of the business lobby and its ability to incapacitate any kind of consumer politics incompatible with the operation of largely unregulated markets. He noted three types of argument which occasionally, during the twentieth century, had resonance in the USA regarding curtailment of the freedoms of business in the name of the consumer. These were a right of families to privacy, which was invoked against the extension of radio, then television advertising, into the home. The second was a need for regulation—in the key cases prohibition—to prevent the consumer from causing self-harm through addiction to damaging products like tobacco, alcohol, gambling and drugs. The third was a need for the consumer to be sufficiently well informed to be able to make rational decisions about what to purchase. Organisations for testing products, state department interventions to ensure proper labelling, and the like

prospered for a while. Yet none have remained under any strong kind of state regulation in the US, except in relation to children. The power of private sector economic organisations is not less in Europe, although for a couple of decades it has often gone unremarked. Where once there was a robust, if overly broad, critique of capitalism as a system, little now remains other than a concept of market failure. One reason is that a recent focus on consumption and consumers has allowed producers to fade from sight. Maybe only when a wider public concludes that its consumption dreams (of ideal homes, distinctive lifestyles, enhanced material comfort, improvement in standard of living) are doomed to disappointment will it accept the need for reform of economic arrangements. When attainment of a consumer utopia is recognised as beyond personal and individual control then maybe democratic attention will turn to the deficiencies of economic and cultural institutions and popular demand for alternative modes of economic organisation will re-emerge.

Meanwhile, if individual behaviour cannot readily be changed, the main effective alternative lever may be regulation. Regulation, more a matter of negotiation than prescription, offers more flexible remedies than prohibition. It sits at the very core of contemporary controversies about the economy and the environment. At present, although regulation is endlessly controversial, despite social and economic activity being already regulated formally and informally, there may be little practical alternative. Hence, we might consider what activities should be regulated, by which or whose rules, who will obey the rules, and who should oversee compliance with the regulations—all in order to regulate consumption in pursuit of sustainability.

5   Conclusions

Nudge has been subject to extensive, and often justified, criticism (e.g. Brown 2012; Hausman and Welch 2010; John et al. 2009; Sugden 2009; Wells 2010). Nevertheless, while I share many such criticisms (Warde 2015a), several attractive features might be retained: the insistence on automaticity and habit; the shift of attention away from the calculating individual; the implication that targeting firms is more efficacious than

individuals; the role of infrastructure and defaults; as well as a Pandora's box of wheezes for altering behaviour. It chimes with critical trends in the sociology of culture that emphasise the limits of consciousness and of values in explaining conduct (Martin 2010; Swidler 1986). It provides evidence of the role of habits and routines, promising a more appropriate theory of action. It adds another nail in the coffin of particular techniques and approaches to political intervention in everyday practices. Finally, it brings to the surface ways in which behavioural economics diverges from neoclassical economics, potentially challenging the latter's theoretical hegemony. Behavioural economics, in seeking psychological realism and by observing behaviour, acknowledges the role of habit, emotion, imitation, etc., and therefore sees the external institutional context of economic exchange as important.[8]

Social scientists who appreciate the role of culture, social norms and embodied dispositions are well placed to piggyback on the explicit critique of the limits of rationality and information diffusion which have been widely accepted as the best basis for explaining social action and designing interventions. Remarkably absent in critical commentaries is any claim that the social world is an elaborate concatenation of established nudges. An exception is Patrick Brown (2012) who recognised this when reading nudge as a weaker version of a Bourdieusian understanding of social coordination. The concept of choice architecture readily throws up questions about how extant arrangements have come to prevail, whose interests they serve, how production and distribution are organised, which sets of futures or probabilities are designed into retail supply, and how much public input there has been into the underlying regulations. The idea, if refined to conceive it as the institutional configuration of norms, as does Brown (2012), offers an easy approximation to accounts of consumption that see choice as restricted, constrained and intermittent. The underpinning theory of mind and the associated role for habituated and unreflective action deserve more attention in analyses of ordinary consumption.

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[8] Nevertheless, it still tends to explain outcomes in terms of individual actors, with individual rationality the implicit yardstick for understanding.

If the findings of cognitive neuroscience are correct in that people behave automatically in response to situations, inventing motives afterwards when challenged to provide justifications, then theories of action need radical revision. Adding sociological understanding of collective behaviour and rejecting the working assumption that there is no alternative to neo-liberal politics would make a difference. Emphasising that firms are agents capable of making decisions relevant to the guiding of individual behaviour has the strong merit of locating levers of change with agents much more powerful than the isolated consumer. Recognising that they are themselves a significant part of the problem of sustainability and have greater efficacy in affecting what is consumed suggests that purposeful regulation of commercial organisations is a central part of an optimal strategy. For it seems that solutions to the problems of sustainable consumption will evade us for as long as analysis is focused solely on consumption and consumers. Consumption cannot, in the light of the diagnoses of theories of practice, be amended in isolation from other types of practice, and especially economic practice. Thus we seem destined to return to examination of the relationship between production and consumption, which provided one of the starting points for the later twentieth-century study of consumption.

10

Illusions of Sovereignty and Choice

Consumer society, consumer culture, consumerism, consumer politics, consumer demand, the consumer attitude, and above all 'the consumer' are common terms of everyday conversation and media discourse, part of attempts to understand the contemporary social predicament of post-industrial and late-modern societies and to navigate a course to achieve the good life. Consumption, as a subdiscipline of sociology, has had a relatively brief but flourishing history. Its substance shifted from being viewed as the epiphenomenon of economic production and economic relations to an autonomous arena for individuals to express self-identity through fashioning a lifestyle. Yet neither account seemed entirely satisfactory. Both, predictably, were restricted and partial, excluding from consideration some of the factors which give consumption its social and societal significance.

Without doubt, more commodities suffused the performance of everyday life as Western populations entered a phase of unprecedented material abundance. This provided an opportunity for some disciplines whose future lay with keeping the accounts about who purchased what, providing advice about how to sell more commodities, exploring how the intensified commodity culture affected the individual and personality,

and determining the effects on social relationships. However, escaping the idea that consumption is only, or primarily, about the purchase of commodities in the market was a critical development. Cultural studies made that clear when it dissected the symbolic significance of the way in which people displayed material objects and engaged in symbolically charged activities in public and in private.

1   From Choice to Practice

1.1   Choice

A considerable proportion of the research which transpired operated on the basis of an assumption of individual consumer choice. If there is any overall message arising from the chapters of this book it would be the value of deconstructing the ramifications of the notion of consumer choice. I am aware that this betrays a disciplinary stereotype; as the economist Dusenberry said, 'Economics is all about how people make choices, Sociology is all about how they don't have any choices to make.' Nevertheless, sociology ought to be wary of accepting both 'the consumer' and consumer choice for they are substantively and theoretically misleading when seeking a comprehensive understanding of consumption.

I can find no formal definition of consumer choice, but it conjures up features of a particular form of economic exchange from the point of view of the recipient of a good or service. It supposes an autonomous individual, confronting a potential situation of acquisition through purchase, who consciously wants a particular item or service, the means to satisfy which are available and where options exist, making a discrete and deliberate decision, without prejudice to future decisions, where no punishment or disadvantage will ensue and personal satisfaction will be enhanced.

These features of consumer choice, although in many respects illusory, can usefully be incorporated into an ideal type characterisation of an orientation to economic exchange. Among the key elements of such an ideal typification would be the following:

(1) The individual can be considered as having wide, total and perfect choice across multiple domains. No options are precluded. No constraints except those which are self-imposed and subjectively validated pertain.

(2) Each act, decision or event shall be considered afresh. What I did in the past has no effect on my next choice.

(3) These acts are one-off occurrences, concerning not other people but only me. They are private and contained by consideration of the self.

(4) Choices are deliberate. Models of consumer choice presume conscious decision-making. While people may not make rational decisions always, they nevertheless engage in some form of mental calculation about what they want, whether it is value for money, and so on.

(5) Acts are uncontaminated and unrestricted by the situation in which behaviour occurs. It suggests we can theorise about action beyond situations. This is especially important in analysis, where situation is excluded as a necessary part of the description or the explanation of the act. Neither the immediate nor the distant environment of the performance has any force in its determination.

(6) Despite points 1–3, it is assumed that consumer choice will be consistent and in line with some underlying organising principles. Common explanations include fixed preferences, ethical values, lifestyle aspirations and homology of taste across different domains.

(7) Choices are the outcome of an exercise of autonomous will on the part of the consumer.

There is much that is both familiar and appealing about this supposed condition. It has a certain mundane obviousness to it, so long as it is not interrogated too closely. I have £100 in my wallet. There are lots of shops around. No one is at hand to prevent me from spending it on cookies, socks, booze, or gambling on the horses. It is up to me. I can (since I have money, or credit) have whatever I want. What I want is a private and personal matter, and is a potential source of happiness to me. This understanding has become central not only to common sense and public discourse, but also to political ideology and social science. As an

idea it flatters, for it proposes that I know better than anyone else, especially people in authority, what will be best for me, despite a good deal of modern psychology—about decision-making, obesity or happiness—suggesting that my impression is almost certainly false, and that people who know me or who have a great deal of experience of courses of action mounted in circumstances like those in which I find myself would make superior decisions on my behalf (Dolan 2014; Thaler and Sunstein 2009; Wansink 2006). The idea is also seductive, since it suggests that I really can get my heart's desires by means of sound purchasing plans (see Bauman 1990, on the consumer attitude). If only I make the correct choice, satisfaction is guaranteed. As Lane (2000) pointed out, there is some basis to this promise because exercising choice, including in the marketplace, has positive effects of self-attribution and self-esteem. Moreover, it is an exciting idea since, laying aside questions of resources, unbounded possibilities lie before me. I can look forward to novel experiences, or more gratification of my existing tastes, refashion aspects of my daily life and, indeed, perhaps find a new 'me'. Finally, it is also a comforting idea, since it suggests that I can easily change my mind, correct the errors of my old ways, and make more satisfying choices next time. That I chose gin as an aperitif throughout last year shall not prevent me drinking mineral water next.

The ubiquity of these conceptions of choice poses some problems for social scientific analysis. This model of consumer choice is beguiling and much celebrated. Few agencies declare opposition to consumer choice. It has become part of public sensibility. Governments show no hesitation when announcing that reforms of public facilities or services will increase consumer choice. This occurs whether or not it is wise, relevant or plausible to introduce choice for the recipient. Consumer choice is an objective of sorts for governments because they can tell you that you are getting what you want. The promotion and praise of consumer liberties have become a major plank of government legitimacy—this nowhere more than in the USA, which Cohen (2003) describes as *The Consumer Republic*. It is no accident that the term 'consumerism' has positive connotations in the USA while being largely negative in Europe. As Trentmann (2016: 273) proposed, 'Consumerism, democracy and capitalism were promoted as a package' by the American government throughout the Cold War.

A further source of its appeal is the fact that consumer choice can be modelled using attractive statistical techniques by social scientists on the basis of data collected from individuals. Such data are amenable to statistical manipulation in accordance with models of rational action or planned behaviour. The consequence of such techniques is that contextual features and situational constraints are treated as contingent. The individual's behaviour is modelled outside of specific situations.[1] Such models should be treated circumspectly. Reservations might be had about substantive explanations and theoretical foundations. In some, very selective, circumstances, the necessary set of conditions may be met, and may describe the abstract properties of a real episode or transaction. For example, I remember once exercising choice when I bought a liquorice ice cream on a hot day from a stand by the side of a lake in Helsinki. But such episodes are neither as frequent nor as normal as the popular impression of consumer choice implies.

There are many features of the experience of consumption which give pause for thought about the appropriateness of making choice core to analysis of normal processes of consumption. I may not know what I want; lack of previous experience, competing claims on attention, or simple indifference may limit horizons. Equally, I may lack the resources to obtain what I want, including the necessary cultural or social capital for its enjoyment. I may not know that things which I want even exist. What I want may not be produced under terms which make it accessible through economic exchange. Producers may not make, or sell, or sell at a reasonable price the item of my desire. That which I currently want may interfere with what I have already. Obtaining what I want might make my other chattels seem detestable; the Diderot effect (McCracken 1990), wherein a new possession makes me dissatisfied with the others with which it will have to be combined for functional or display purposes, may be very disruptive. Certainly, what I want may disrupt or alter my other preferences. Having my immediate desire gratified, I may find that it disappoints as it fails to deliver the anticipated satisfaction. Colin Campbell (1987) considered this a basic mechanism for the proliferation

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[1] These models, in trying to connect individuals to demand, appear to have the same flaws that sociology recognised 30 years ago when seeing the society–individual nexus as problematic.

of consumer culture and Ian Craib (1994) found disappointment a fundamental feature of the modern predicament. Moreover, getting what I want might damage my reputation. My aesthetic, moral and political judgement is partly brought into question when acquisitions are considered unsuitable within my social circle (Martin and Merriman 2016). And all these considerations pertain before externalities are brought into account. What I want might harm the planet, by increasing greenhouse gas emissions or exhausting irreplaceable natural resources, or promote unsustainable development by supporting exploitative labour contracts. Such are the many sources of potential regret associated with exercising consumer choice.

Such reservations about the model of choice rely on empirical observation and phenomenological experience. Recognition of these frequently observed exceptions to the general idealised model have led to sociological accounts of restrictions on choice.

1.2   Restricted Choice

It might be objected that my characterisation of consumer choice is an instance of mounting an attack on persons made of straw. Surely no sentient economist, psychologist or marketer would be so naïve as to postulate free choice of the kind portrayed in the ideal type. Of course, no single analysis commits all these errors and any empirical description will countermand some of those precepts. Nevertheless, when formulated as theoretical principles, ideological presuppositions or popular understandings, the notions encapsulated in the ideal type are conveyed by the term consumer choice. Contexts are recognised in an ad hoc fashion, but to acknowledge that action is contingent upon context and circumstances throws up difficulties when modelling behaviour. The trade-off between analytic parsimony and veracity in relation to experience always poses dilemmas for social scientific analysis.

One explicit attempt to specify the constraints upon consumer choice is contained in an essay written with Lydia Martens (Warde and Martens 1998: 130), where we observed that 'Material constraints, moral codes, social pressure, aesthetic sensibilities and situational logics all steer

consumer behaviour along predictable paths'. In interrogating the notion of food choice we noted that dictionary definitions offer four different shades of the term 'choice': (1) to select; (2) to pick in preference; (3) to consider fit, suitable; and (4) to will or determine. The problem we identified for explanations of consumption was the conflation of the first two meanings with the fourth, which implies that individuals can freely determine their own fates. The paper examined circumstances and mechanisms which effectively limit choice. Limited resources, limited control, limited imagination and limited room for manoeuvre all conditioned outcomes. First, financial resources are finite. Second, decisions are frequently made on behalf of others about what, where and when to eat. Third, judgements about suitability and taste operate to eliminate options. Finally, a mechanism of 'situational entailment' was nominated to describe how every 'decision' taken narrows the range of subsequent options. Levett et al. (2003) employed a concept of 'choice sets' to capture a similar phenomenon in order to contest the neoclassical economic conception of the discrete nature of choices. We concluded that 'The term choice inflates the importance of individual decisions and conflates qualitatively different aspects and levels of discretion', and that 'Availability of resources, systemic inequalities of power in decision-making, shared cultural and aesthetic judgment, and "situational entailment", all constrain the individual' (Warde and Martens 1998: 144). This we termed 'the logic of restricted choice'.

This account of how sociology might treat choice is not fundamentally at odds with an orthodox sociological conception of individual social action. Indeed, it was formulated at a point in time when the individualisation thesis was at its zenith. Individualisation has been a master theme in sociological analysis over the last 30 years. It is presented as a process with major implications for family solidarity, religious observance, workplace behaviour, partisan loyalty, sexual conduct, recreational pursuits—and consumption. A tranche of works by Bauman, Beck and Giddens in the early 1990s had significant effects on studies of consumption as they explored the general consequences at an abstract theoretical level for elective lifestyles (Bauman 1988; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). More empirically grounded work put their conjectures into perspective by demonstrating that the effects of individualisation on consumption

were to be detected among only some, younger and relatively privileged, sections of the population (e.g. Savage et al. 1992; Schulze 1992). While not wanting to deny some tendency towards individualisation in the later twentieth century, countertrends and other institutional processes with similar effects also operate. For evidence of the reduction of pronounced class patterns of consumption might just as well be attributed to massification or informalisation of mores as to individualisation (Warde 1997). Nevertheless, a framework of restricted choice might still be sufficient foundation for the sociology of consumption. It would be compatible with much social science which operates with models of individual action to anchor explanations. It cannot be denied that in ordinary circumstances any individual could have done something other than they did, but when seeking to explain why particular individuals under examination do as they do, the processes subsumed under the principle of restricted choice provide a useful checklist of likely factors affecting experiences. However, a more radical account might be generated by attending to the precepts of theories of practice.

1.3   From Choice to Practice

At various points in the book I have introduced practice-theoretical themes, outlining ways in which they challenge orthodox theories of action. Theories of practice imply even greater qualification of the power of a notion of consumer choice in the explanation of patterns of consumption by fundamentally rejecting a range of assumptions underlying models of the expressive or sovereign individual. Developments in the analysis of consumption accord an increasing place to theories of practice. Theories of practice are not the creature of a single discipline, although they contain a substantial dollop of sociological sensibility and many features congenial to a sociologist, in particular by diminishing the role of individual choice and emphasising webs of social connection. It is not only extreme methodological individualist positions which are contested, but also moderate versions of accounts of situated individual action where it still remains difficult to escape from individuals considering their options with a view to deciding autonomously to act on the basis of goals, values and beliefs.

In the face of the ideal typical features of the act of consumer choice, practice theories suggest alternative readings. Note that some of the seven features of the ideal type peddle illusions about the nature of *acts*, others about the nature of *actors*. Against unbounded options, theories of practice postulate the operation of social and economic constraints, habituation and imperatives entailed in competent engagement in practices, as well as limited availability. Against the notion that acts are discrete, practice theory maintains that habituation, sequence and career will give clues to the probability of decisions later in time. Granted, I can always innovate; the fact that my last ice cream was liquorice-flavoured does not preclude the next being strawberry. However, few aspects of my behaviour can be accounted for discretely without reference to any preceding, concurrent or other anticipated future acts. Against the illusion of privacy and self-containment, theories of practice point to the role of environmental cueing, the uneven availability of infrastructure and equipment, and the surveillance of significant others. Contra the illusion of mind, practice theories pit embodiment and emotion, detecting a mentalist bias in models of consumer choice. Versions arguing that culture is not in the mind but in the external environment see it as cues in relation to situated circumstances. Thus they talk about distributed mind and marvel at embodied skills. Against the myth of the unsituated act, practice theory emphasises context-specificity and the importance of situations, for people's preferences shift according to circumstances. Theories of practice also have ready explanations for inconsistency: because people engage in many practices they experience conflicting pressures; since action occurs without, or before, thinking, criteria of logical consistency have limited provenance; origins of selection do not lie in external values and norms, rather goals mutate as new internal goods become available. Contradictory behaviour is expected because goals and objectives are grounded in many practices which may give an account of the fragmented self where life-course is the sequencing of practices and performances (see Chapter 5). The modern individual can be interpreted as a product of engagement in multiple practices, rather than as a self-styled and self-furnished aesthetic project. Finally, practice theory denies the radical autonomy of the individual actor, for differential association, situational logic, collective pressure, infrastructure and media hone the dispositions of the actor.

Theoretical grounding for this alternative conceptualisation of conduct and social process is gradually being established by American sociologists with an eye to developments in the cognitive sciences. The objective is an account of action and cognition alternative to that which Vaisey (2008) dubbed the Socratic version, which holds 'first, that *people acquire particular values through a process of socialization* and, second, that *these values play a vital role in causing behaviour*'. Part of a protracted move to distance American sociology from its Parsonian heritage, wherein values and norms are the precursors of action, accounts variously reinterpret the role and nature of mental processes in the governance of conduct. The concept of culture is revised to circumvent the approaches of both Parsons (1951) and Geertz (1973), whose understandings are found problematic in light of the findings of cognitive science. The new concept of culture is primarily founded in shared understanding rather than a learned knowledge of a system of symbols. The concept of socialisation is a major casualty as the mindful learning of cultural knowledge, of beliefs and norms, is relegated in importance when competent capacity for action in the social world is attributed to tacit knowledge, practical sense, and procedural rather than declarative memory. It is insisted that the locus of the mind is the body and that bodily reactions are much more dependent on the encompassing context or environment than is suggested by contemplative accounts of mind. Mental processes work in a much less deliberative, calculative or rational manner than is inscribed in the dominant theories of social and economic action, with profound consequences for the explanation of consumption.

Key features of the new sociological account include the following. First, it has been recognised for some time that the research conducted under the auspices of cognitive science, of neuroscience, psychology, etc., provides material that sociology cannot simply ignore (Cerulo 2010; DiMaggio 2001). It makes a major challenge to both established approaches to cognitive sociology and especially to the standard models of socialisation which propose implausible accounts of cultural action. Culture lies beyond the human mind (Lizardo and Strand 2010; Martin 2010; Swidler 1986; Vaisey 2008). In this respect, values, so central to older American sociology and to portfolio accounts of action, are subsidiary elements in explanations of conduct. Embodied propensities

or dispositions provide the wellspring of action Lizardo 2012a). The implications include the need to reconsider how people learn to become culturally competent when it is primarily their capability for perception, cued by external indicators of culture, which determines what it is practically sensible to do (Martin 2011; Martin and Merriman 2016). In this case, the concept of habitus, implying embodied dispositions and predispositions which furnish practical sense in familiar situations, returns to the conceptual toolbox refreshed (Crossley 2013; Lizardo 2012b).

Omar Lizardo (2004, 2012b) suggests that the shift in focus from the mind to the body, or perhaps to a conceptualisation of the mind-in-the-body, makes possible a renewed appreciation of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus. Taking the interpretation of the concept as a flexible and generative structure (rather than as fixed and deterministic, as some of its critics prefer to maintain) offers considerable promise for sociological analysis. Lizardo (2011) reinterprets Bourdieu as a 'post-cultural theorist' who, having abandoned his structuralism relatively early, developed a distinctive sociological understanding of perception which transcends the structure-agency dichotomy. To treat habitus as objective structure permits it to operate as a key tool for the description and analysis of practical action. Not insignificantly, then, Lizardo (e.g. 2014) makes more of Bourdieu as a theorist of practice than do most other commentators.

One consequence is greater emphasis on the habitual character of behaviour. Habits, bodily and mental, become scored into the brain's neural networks, to which individuals have little conscious access and which fire in situations requiring action. Context, therefore, is critical because the cues to hand, as they are perceived, provide orientation to action. Both simple and complex sequences of actions are habit-uated or habitual. Mostly we respond appropriately to cues because we are expert in relevant practices from the repertoires of which we fashion conduct when faced with a situation requiring action. That raises the question of how cues work and how cues are perceived as relevant. Action is shaped when some cues among the many jumbled up in the environment are perceived to be more significant than others (Martin 2010).

2   Following the Turn to Practice

I have suggested that individualist explanations are both scientifically and politically questionable. Scientifically they obscure important substantive features of the process of consumption, which are revealed through the lens of practice theory. Politically, policy making is hampered by the timid and defensive preference for targeting the behaviour of individuals one by one, as the primary lever for change. Practice theory is a source of a new wave of sociological theory and explanation which promises to re-evaluate and rebalance individualist accounts and play a greater part in multidisciplinary approaches to consumption.

Theories of practice promote some basic propositions about social action and social activity which imply a distinctive sociological approach. Theories of practice emphasise social interdependence rather than individual action, and the role of intersubjective judgement. Differential association, the tendency for persons with similar social characteristics or similar levels of competence to engage in activity together, makes for common patterns of consumption. Differential association is often built upon unequal access to financial, material and cultural resources which are equally critical for consumption. Practice theories stress the role of embodiment and the material embeddedness of performances in given equipment and infrastructure. Throughout, situational logic carries explanatory weight, as individuals adjust their conduct to common and shared norms of propriety. That gives continuity to performances which occur as if a career, rendering discrete actions part of a sequence where a subsequent action is entailed by its predecessors. Considering life as a bundle of practices makes possible predictions, if imperfect, of performances in the light of established habits, routines and conventions. Conduct transpires from the operation of norms and institutions associated with, and by the coordination of, practices.

The distinctive features of theories of practice suggest new angles in the analysis of consumption. They alter orthodox understandings of the processes of acquisition, appropriation and appreciation, which are general components of consumption. First, the approach removes purchase from the centre of consumption. It maintains that scientific knowledge about appropriation and appreciation are at least as important as acquisition.

It points to modes of economic exchange beyond the market, for many items are acquired through other channels. It also recognises that the process of acquisition is often non-rational. However, as well as accepting the widely observed role of emotion, feeling and desire involved in consumption, effects are construed as occurring less through processes of decision, and more through reaction, often in a distracted manner, to commercial, situational and social cues. In these respects, theories of practice decentre accounts from processes surrounding the obtaining of goods and services through market mechanisms.

Second, theories of practice offer a different account of wants, one consistent with Alfred Marshall's dictum that activities generate wants rather than vice versa (Swann 2002). Theories of practice emphasise appropriation. People no doubt use their acquisitions for purposes of display and communication, but this applies only to a small proportion of possessions and then rarely purely for purposes of display. Cars may convey symbolic messages about their owners, but very few people who cannot drive would select this avenue for display, and few cars are owned but never driven. The central claim is that goods and services are acquired with a view to what can be done with them. Thus the functions of items within repertoires of practices are the primary data for an analysis of consumption. That does not imply reversion to a simple dependence on use-value or a simple registering of consumption as a response to need. Rather it implies that the content of what is acquired is conditional upon how people are positioned in relation to practices in which they engage. The list of conditioning factors is long. Appropriation involves a proper assessment of situations, such that options are tailored to what is available and who is present. Group context matters; local standards of practice are observed and suitable adjustments are made with respect to behaving just sufficiently distinctively to assert individuality without offending collective norms. In this regard the social networks to which a person belongs make a significant difference. The character of social interdependence and intersubjective judgement about appropriate standards of performance are pushed to the fore when considering the interpersonal and virtual patterns of interaction. What is acquired depends upon skills and competence, which affect judgements of suitability and the capacity to use items. This may in turn be a function of a person's prior career, of what

they have previously learned to do, what other adjunct equipment they already possess, and what potential their previous experience offers for the future. Equipment, as we have seen, steers performance. Acquisition is also conditional upon institutionalised judgements about what might best serve variously skilled practitioners. Fashion, product rankings, assessments of quality and symbolic attachments of products all influence the way in which goods are appropriated. To this list of should be added the price and availability of goods, and considerations of distinction and the presentation of self which other approaches to consumption identify.

Third, theories of practice offer an unorthodox theory of taste and judgement. Appreciation is neither simply a matter of aesthetic evaluation nor of simple estimation of personal hedonic satisfaction. Rather, it also includes reference to the social rules of the practice. The economic and the aesthetic are tied in closely to a form of social and normative understanding of appropriate behaviour. Sometimes this takes the form of moral judgements, regarding a proper way to undertake practices. Also, quality is judged in the light of differential position within a social field or network. Taste is itself a performance, rather than an instantiation of innate, universal and formalised standards, and is part of collective processes of judgement.

2.1   Eating as an Example[2]

Many of the distinctive features of a practice-theoretical approach to consumption can be illustrated by an analysis of eating (Warde 2016). For good reason, we often speak in common parlance of eating *habits*. Individuals, groups and even nations exhibit regular, distinctive patterns of food preference and consumption. As Rozen (1983) notes, for example, olive oil-onion-pepper-tomato means Spain, olive oil-lemon-oregano means Greece, while onion-lard-paprika means Hungary and so on (see also Ahn et al. 2011). The regularities can be accounted for in terms of practices. Dictionary definitions of eating focus on the ingestion of food,[3] but social science is forced to qualify the terms and introduce

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[2] A fuller account of this section of the chapter can be found in Warde (2016).

[3] The basic dictionary definition of the verb to eat is 'to take into the body by mouth as food' (Chambers 1972).

other considerations. Performances of eating require the coordination of three basic elements which frame the norms and conventions associated with types of eating occasion, menu selection and bodily management. These three elementary components of the social practice of eating constitute a parsimonious scientific object from which to mount an analysis of variations in practice. While claiming that someone is or is not eating is rarely controversial, judgement about whether she or he is eating well or badly may often be hotly disputed. Standards apply. Or rather, multiple standards apply. Perfect eating requires that food consumption should be designed to promote nutritional health, prepared according to conventional recipes, eaten with proper decorum (depending on who is present, the time of day, the type of meal) and savoured in the interests of gratitude and pleasure. Achieving these four objectives in a manner acceptable in the eyes of peers is the subject of various disciplinary discourses. Criteria of good performances circulate in many forms, from official recommendations to formal texts, through popular literature and television, to ordinary conversations about health, economy and lifestyle. For example, conventions governing table manners—'don't talk with your mouth full', 'never eat peas with a knife'—are widely shared as a result of regular reiteration and from observance of reaction to their contravention in everyday eating situations. Standards and procedures evolve often as a consequence of controversies serviced by cultural intermediaries. Nevertheless, norms and standards prevail, irrespective of individual choice. Meal times are prescribed. Appetite is habitual and level of hunger predictable. Celebratory meals have special rituals. Recipes are not endlessly flexible. Family members remain principal companions. Of course, for individuals, there are many exceptions to regularised conduct. Situational force of circumstance, whim and opportunity, and the informalisation of expectations are sources of exception. New projects are sometimes embarked upon, when an alternative dietary regime is instituted—although it is a matter of perspective whether, for instance, becoming vegetarian is seen as personal conversion or recruitment to an already very well-established version of the practice of eating. Indeed, although vegetarians eliminate animal products from their dietary regime, they mostly do not dismantle other elements of their social framework of eating and, after an initial

adjustment, a process of reroutinisation occurs, making avoidance of animal products habitual.

Dietary regimes illustrate well the practical, collective, sequential, repetitive and automatic aspects of consumption (Warde and Southerton 2012: 5–6). As Wansink (2006) shows very clearly, much eating behaviour is mindless. People rarely concentrate on food and eating. They have repertoires and rituals which make for the effective carrying out of performances in a habituated fashion, which does not require much attention. Meals are regular, sequential and social events, the timing and ordering of which are widely shared across whole societies. The foods cooked are limited in variety and change very slowly, even in a period of postmodern impulses. Yates and Warde (2015), examining changes in UK meal patterns over the 60 years since the 1950s, find some modifications in practice, but more evidence of continuity. In addition, for much of the time, food selection is essentially vicarious, for in the domestic sphere it is preponderantly the cook who determines what the household will eat. Embodied habits, temporal routines and conventional judgements produce regularity and repetition in eating behaviour for both individuals and social groups (Warde 2016).

3   Whither Consumption?

Adopting a practice-theoretical lens opens up new avenues for understanding consumption. It would nonetheless be surprising if practice theory supplied a complete solution to problems in the analysis of consumption. Theoretical lacunae and unresolved dilemmas abound. Any list would include the theoretical imprecision implicit in different versions of the theory, uncertainty about the ontological and epistemological status of practices, how to draw the boundaries of a practice, the plausibility of its preferred theory of action, its account of change, whether it requires specific methodological protocols, its ability to generate macro-level explanation, its political orientation, its relevance to the design of interventions, and specification of the range of its applicability. Some of these, including theoretical imprecision, methodological eclecticism and potential political conservatism have no particular relevance to consumption.

Some are mistaken. It is a frequently raised, but misguided, criticism that theories of practice cannot handle social change (Warde 2014). Narrative forms of explanation employed in empirical studies of practice, using a wide range of data, have proved entirely suitable to accounting for change (Hand et al. 2005; Shove 2003). Others are already being addressed effectively. For example, the concern that the theory offers no new insight into how interventions might be designed in order to change behaviour can be discounted in the light of recent demonstrations to the contrary (for example, Darnton et al. 2011; Kennedy et al. 2015; Shove et al. 2012; Vihalemm et al. 2015). Refinement and development of a plausible alternative explanation of the relationship between culture and behaviour is proceding rapidly in the work of American cultural sociologists exploring the consequences of cognitive science (for example, Cerulo 2010; Lizardo 2012a, 2015; Lizardo and Strand 2010; Martin 2010, 2011; Martin and Merriman 2016).

Other issues, however, are outstanding and remain pressing. The task of generating macro-level explanations from practice-theoretical premises has progressed little. So far, practice-theoretical studies have been much better at redescribing and analysing the use of commodities in the performances of everyday practices than they have in elucidating the institutional or systemic conditions of existence of those practices. This problem is tied to a final, and currently highly pertinent, problem concerning the scope of theories of practice: what can and can they not explain (for more detail, see Warde 2014).

Can practices be bounded? Almost any set of activities with a little complexity can be analysed as practices. The concepts proposed by the theory can be applied to quite narrow and closely contained activities like Nordic walking (Shove and Pantzar 2005) or recycling waste in an office (Hargreaves 2011), or to activities on a much grander scale like politics or economic practices. It mostly depends on what the social scientist wants to explain what should be the scale of the scientific object isolated as the practice which shall be the object of inquiry. This implies that there are many practices which could be explored, that their boundaries are constructed for the purpose of analysis, and that the theoretically pure way to deal with large-scale questions is to examine the interaction or intersection of different practices. In Schatzki's (2002) terminology, the

world is a plenum of interconnected practices. Some are more consequential than others and have a greater capacity to affect people's lives than others. However, issues of interpenetration and overlap between practices are difficult to apply analytically. If everything is affected by everything else, explanation would probably be better served by some reconsideration of structure or context. The focal practice is probably best examined against an institutional background which encircles it. Probably explanation is better served by a different mode of describing context. This is perhaps nowhere clearer than when addressing the question of the relationship between production and consumption.

The full impact of theories of practice on the analysis of consumption has yet to be realised. Practice-theoretical accounts are increasingly being employed, to date especially in the areas of food and eating, the organisation of enthusiasms and environmental sustainability (Warde 2014). While the approach is unlikely ever to become hegemonic, it should make a lasting contribution to the evolution of the field. Perhaps the main reason why it prospers is that practice theory smuggled the social back into accounts of consumption. Neither economism nor postmodernism had time for social forms, ties, interrelationships and interdependencies. The rational and expressive individual were at opposite poles of a fractal division, and neither gave much consideration to its interstices. That tension persists still as principal forces in the field pull away towards pure analysis of either the economic or the aesthetic dimensions of consumption. The ground left in between has been inhabited by forms of socio-cultural and socio-economic analysis. Practice theory entered that space, building on the fact that, in the 1980s, consumption was separated out for special attention independently of economic forces of production and exchange. Rather, the analysis of consumption was seen to require documentation of its meaningfulness and as a matter requiring cultural explanation. Practice theory, however, distanced itself from many versions of cultural theory, and especially the view that consumption is primarily a form of cultural communication. Instead, consumption was seen as the means for conducting the ordinary activities of everyday life. The consumption involved in ordinary practices thus has both economic and cultural dimensions but the practical exigencies of everyday life are its core.

Thus practice theory cultivated the interstitial elements of the dominant fractal division, keeping its distance from both the purely economic and the purely aesthetic. While neither economistic nor culturalist, practice theory recognises processes of cultural intermediation as ways in which economic impulses are filtered into the meaningful arena of cultural consumption, and also remembers that forms of cultural expression are conditioned by the social distribution of economic resources. It emphasises appropriation for use over acquisition as property, and competent performances of practices over aesthetic appreciation. In doing so it reaffirms the importance of the social domain as a space where economic and aesthetic impulses are mediated.

Unsurprisingly, for some commentators holding rival positions, practice-theoretical accounts of consumption pay too little attention to either the aesthetic or the economic. Very credible accounts of consumption are still being developed from the aesthetic perspective, where research programmes like CCT and cultural studies are far from exhausted. Indeed, some recent projections about a desirable future for the study of arts and culture advocate a more pronounced development of aesthetic theory for social sciences (e.g. Hanquinet and Savage 2016). Its greater distance from the economic pole is likely to remain a limitation, however. On the other hand, commentators on the merits and weaknesses of practice-theoretical approaches to consumption bemoan its neglect of economic forces. Sympathetic critiques look for ways in which the insights of practice theory might be complemented by more explicit and credible models of economic activity. Inspiration from the institutional economics of Polanyi is one such route; Mark Harvey's (2007) model of instituted economic process and its application in a striking comparative analysis of the sourcing of drinking water on different continents (Harvey 2015) aligns consumption in configuration with processes of production, distribution and exchange. Another mode for supplementing the practice-theoretical approach with the economics of innovation sees the multilevel perspective of Frank Geels applied to issues of sustainable consumption (Geels et al. 2015; McMeekin and Southerton 2012). A further alternative might be the application of the conventions theory of Boltanski and colleagues to an economy of qualities, especially since

its theoretical foundation in 'pragmatic sociology' is highly compatible (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

Early in this book the question was raised about whether there was any need for a subdisciplinary specialism called the sociology of consumption. If consumption is suffused throughout all everyday practices, and practices comprise the proper unit of analysis, then such a specialism might indeed be unnecessary. However, even if inessential, the explicit attention paid to consumption has been positive. Practice-theoretical analysis of consumption emerged from a space between the economic and the aesthetic. Practice theory is not a sociological theory as such but nevertheless has at its core some key sociological themes and axioms. Perhaps it might be dubbed post-cultural. It has achievements to its name, including adding to the detailed knowledge of everyday practices which entail multiple forms of consumption, which is part of the process of escaping the condescension once expressed towards popular culture. It has incorporated contributions from both wings of the fractal formation via concepts of provision, intermediation, industrial aesthetics and cultural capital. The social and practical dimension of consumption, and its role in maintaining social relationships, has been re-emphasised. It also profitably retrieved the social by focusing on collective and shared social activity. In addition, it thematised issues of contemporary political mobilisation, especially in relation to issues of the environment.

What might the future hold? For the many reasons enumerated earlier in this chapter, the notion of consumer choice and the habit of accounting for it in individual terms are likely to be very difficult to eliminate. Only continual vigilance will keep the focus on individual behaviour at bay. Practice theories probably also need supplementing with other frameworks, particularly to capture macro-level or structural aspects of consumption. Observing and exploiting the analytical distinction between production and consumption in order to study consumption as a phenomenon in its own right was an essential step in the 1990s. However, theoretical reconciliation cannot be far away, which will not mean a return to the old economism, but probably must involve recovery of political economy or institutional frameworks to articulate the links between consumption and economic production and distribution.

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