

## CONSUMER SOCIETY

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### Summary

The growing affluence in many parts of the world and across many social strata has led analysts to refer to the emergence of a 'consumer society' in which people are represented as having a wide range of choices in respect of a growing range of consumer goods and services. In neo-liberal economic discourse and neo-conservative political rhetoric in particular the exercise of consumer choice has been equated with freedom and promoted as an unquestionable virtue, and increases in conspicuous forms of consumption and the consumer lifestyles of iconic celebrity figures, the 'rich and famous', have been widely celebrated. However, if consumerism has become a global cultural form a significant proportion of the world's population people have been deprived of the benefits, effectively have been excluded from any meaningful participation in 'consumer society'. Reflecting on the cultivation of consumer demand and the role of cultural intermediaries in advertising, marketing and branding, commentators and critics have argued that for many consumer choice is more apparent than real and further that the focus on consumerism has had major consequences for social relations, the environment, and social life more generally. Although consumerism is now global in scope there is growing concern about its consequences for individuals, communities, and the environment and a number of counter-consumerist organisations have emerged to draw attention to its unsustainable character.

### 1. Introduction: Consumer Society

Social analysts have argued that consumerism and individuals conceiving of themselves predominantly as consumers are distinctive, if not defining features of

contemporary social life. Contemporary society is now often described as a 'consumer society' in so far as identity and status are acquired and social inclusion or integration is considered to be achieved through participation in consumer activity. The industrial capitalist society with which Karl Marx was preoccupied is regarded as a work-based society, a society that 'engaged its members *primarily* as producers', in contrast Bauman suggests our society – in its 'late-modern, second-modern or post-modern stage ... engages its members – again *primarily* – in their capacity as consumers'. This relative shift of emphasis from production to consumption, in Bauman's terms the 'passage from producer to consumer society', is exemplified by the increasing prominence accorded to consumer activity and consumer choice. It is also reflected in the respects in which individual identity and satisfaction now appear to be less and less bound up with job, work, and career and more and more with lifestyle, consumption, and shopping. The passage from producer to consumer society is marked by a diminution of the significance of the work ethic and a corresponding valorization of consumption. Consumer spending rather than waged work is now a 'duty', the 'spending-happy consumer' rather than the disciplined worker, for whom work or labor constituted a calling, is now considered a necessity and 'confidence' to spend is deemed vital to economic wellbeing. The implication is that consumerism occupies a central place in contemporary social life and that it is no longer appropriate to equate consumption with need satisfaction or the gratification of desires for what now provides the motivational emphasis necessary to sustain the seemingly ever accelerating consumer cycle is the stimulation of wishful fantasy.

The consumer way of life is open to criticism for its excessiveness and profligacy, for the accelerating rate at which things are being consumed, the waste that is produced, and the fact that it is a form of life mediated through the market, a form of life that recognizes no limits, one which now encompasses public as well as the most personal of private domains of everyday life. It is a form of life that trades on and continually promotes the value of consumer choice, exercise or expression of which by individuals, under conditions that tend to receive less analytic consideration, is generally represented as an exemplification of 'freedom'. The promotion and extension of consumer choice is now regarded as a self-evident manifestation of freedom, but increasingly it is the beguiling activities of cultural intermediaries in advertising, marketing and branding, aided by the iconic status and example offered by the stellar figures of the celebrities, that cultivates individuals as consumers, that stimulates them in their flights of fantasy to buy into the notion that a sense of self-worth, self-identity, and happiness can be achieved through the consumption of things. Increasing choice of goods and services, in and of itself, does not necessarily contribute anything to the kind of freedom that matters. What is clear is that the freedom *not* to consume is one freedom that a neo-liberal capitalist market economy cannot afford to promote.

From the late twentieth century societies have been increasingly exposed to accelerating processes of transformation associated with the development of global neo-liberal capitalism and a growing consumer culture. Neo-liberal and neoconservative discourse conveyed the impression that there can be no alternative to market forces and a dynamic culture of consumption, that it is impossible to imagine anything else. An inability to imagine anything else has not been helped by the tendency to accord primacy to market forces and consumer sovereignty, a tendency

which simultaneously marginalizes matters of production, including the production of consumer subjects and the value system within which priority is accorded to the sovereign figure of the consumer and the expression of `choice`. Retaining an analytic focus on the persisting significance of production offers the prospect of exposing the inadequacies of consumption-oriented models of contemporary social life and the market rhetoric that is a corollary.

The notion at the heart of the neo-liberal position is that the `free' or deregulated market effectively coordinates and organizes the activities of large numbers of individuals pursuing their own economic interests in a manner beneficial to all the parties involved. But the reality has been radically different for markets are not free. The parties involved in market exchange relations are on the one hand individual consumers, badly miscast as sovereign figures in the myths propagated within economic analysis, and on the other large and powerful corporations with the capacity to invest substantial sums of capital not only in the design, planning, and manufacture of goods or provision of services, but also in respect of the intermediary practices of marketing, advertising, branding, and celebrity endorsement deemed necessary to cultivate an appropriate level of consumer demand by stimulating desires and promoting flights of fantasy on the part of potential consumers. The rhetoric equating consumer choice with freedom neglects to give any critical consideration to the complex processes in play that attempt to stimulate consumer activity and simultaneously influence, if not direct, the ways in which choice is expressed.

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### Biographical Sketch

**Barry Smart** has worked at universities in Australia, England, Japan and New Zealand. He lectured at the University of Sheffield until 1988 and was then Associate-Professor at Auckland University before joining Portsmouth in 1995. His main publications include books on the Sport Star; Economy, Culture and Society; Michel Foucault; Social Theory; McDonaldization; Modernity and Postmodernity.

Barry is currently doing research on consumer culture, writing a book on sociology and editing four volumes on the debate over post-industrialism, information technology and the knowledge society. He was editor of the *Social Futures* book series with Routledge and is a co-editor of the monograph series on *Social and Political Thought* published by Liverpool University Press.

Barry has published in a wide range of prestigious journals such as *Theory, Culture & Society*, *European Journal of Social Theory*, *Body & Society*, *International Sociology*, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, *Thesis Eleven* and the *Journal of Classical Sociology*. He is currently a member of the editorial boards of *Theory Culture and Society*, *European Journal of Social Theory*, *Journal of Classical Sociology* and *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*.