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# Knowing Consumers – Histories, Identities, Practices

## An Introduction

*Frank Trentmann*

Missing Person

‘And what do you mean to be?’  
The kind old Bishop said  
As he took the boy on his ample knee...

‘I want to be a Consumer,’  
The bright-haired lad replied  
As he gazed up into the Bishop’s face  
In innocence open-eyed.  
‘I’ve never had aims of a selfish sort,  
For that, as I know is wrong,  
I want to be a Consumer, Sir,  
And help the word along.

‘I want to be a Consumer  
And work both night and day,  
For that is the thing that’s needed most,  
I’ve heard Economists say.  
I won’t just be a Producer,  
Like Bobby and James and John;  
I want to be a Consumer, Sir,  
And help the nation on’.<sup>1</sup>

The consumer as an engine of wealth and representative of the public interest is an established figure in contemporary politics and discourse. Indeed, the consumer may have become all too familiar, exhorted to keep the American economy moving in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, embraced by communist China in the 1990s and charged with reforming public services in Britain under New Labour. Such is the almost instinctive recourse to this persona in politics, media and academia that the consumer is close to becoming a quasi-natural being. Interestingly, the opening

did not arise from the neoliberal climate of the last two decades, but appeared in the British satirical magazine *Punch* in the early 1930s. It offers a convenient entry into this volume and its line of enquiry. For the increasingly powerful vocabulary of ‘the consumer’ as a self-evident category or ontological essence has distracted attention from the historical emergence of this creature, its changing shape and values and the different positions it has occupied in politics and society. Rather than using or presuming a consumer in an essentialist or descriptive fashion, *The Making of the Consumer* enquires how and why the consumer developed as an identifiable subject and object in the modern period. Which processes helped and which discouraged the formation of this new social and political category? What has been the relative role of civil society, state and commercial interests in different contexts? What groups and agencies have spoken as consumers or on their behalf, for what reasons and with what implications? Answers to these questions will not only contribute to a richer understanding of the biographies of consumers, but, in turn, prompt new approaches and questions for studies of consumption more generally.

This introduction and the chapters to follow are an attempt to reposition the field of consumption studies by moving beyond an interest in purchase and the practical and symbolic use of *things* to ask about the *subjectivities* of ‘the consumer’. The expanding literature on consumption has enriched our understanding of the central role of material culture in the reproduction of social relationships and status, everyday routines and selfhood,<sup>2</sup> but has offered surprisingly little in the way of explaining the evolution of the consumer into a master category of collective and individual identity. Put simply, all human societies have been engaged in consumption and have purchased, exchanged, gifted or used objects and services, but it has only been in specific contexts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that some (not all) practices of consumption have been connected to a sense of being a ‘consumer’, as an identity, audience or category of analysis. To retrieve the making of the consumer as subject and object, it is helpful to turn briefly to the self-limiting assumptions in the current discourse of the ‘active consumer’.

If the field of consumption studies originally developed through an emphasis on ‘mass consumption’ and the passive creature created by culture industries and advertising – the consumer, perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious and bored’,<sup>3</sup> in Christopher Lasch’s words – the last twenty-five years have seen a dramatic turn to the ‘active’ or ‘citizen consumer’ – a creative, confident and rational being articulating personal identity and serving the public interest. The ‘active consumer’ appears everywhere from rational choice economics to environmental discourse and from public policy to marketing and cultural studies. In Britain, New Labour has presented the reform of public services as a self-conscious response to the ‘rise of the demanding, sceptical, citizen-consumer’.<sup>4</sup> In Germany, the coalition agreement between Social Democrats and Greens invokes the ‘intelligent, well-informed consumer’.<sup>5</sup> Consumer rights have become an expanding point of reference for individuals and public authorities alike. In 2003 ‘DVD Jon’, a Norwegian computer

hacker, saw a legal ruling defending his right to crack into legally bought DVDs as a clarification ‘that consumers have certain rights that the film industry can’t take away from us’.<sup>6</sup> Health care policies in a growing number of countries give recognition to the ‘consumer rights’ of patients.<sup>7</sup> Instead of a ‘passive dupe’, the consumer has reappeared as ‘co-actor’ or ‘citizen consumer’ in a variety of settings in state, civil society and market, ranging from international organizations discussing environmental policy and Consumers’ International agenda of social justice, to the everyday minutiae of monitoring deregulated directory enquiry telephone calls in Britain.<sup>8</sup> In the world of commerce and art, meanwhile, visitors to Eliasson’s Weather Project at Tate Modern learnt from Unilever’s chairman that its sponsorship ‘reflects the commitment to creativity which lies at the heart of Unilever’s business, helping us to meet the needs of consumers around the world’.<sup>9</sup> For all its critical stance, academic scholarship has been part of this general discursive shift from ‘passive’ to ‘active consumer’, highlighting the agency, resistance and transgression that consumers bring to processes of consumption. Consumers, in the words of the American consumer researcher Russell Belk, must be recognized as ‘coproducers of desire and identity and active participant[s] in consumer self-seduction’.<sup>10</sup>

The new orthodoxy of the ‘active consumer’ in the social sciences has been welcome in retrieving the agency of consumers from relative neglect in the more instrumentalist analyses of mass consumption dominant on both sides of the Atlantic in previous generations. At the same time, this conceptual shift has come with a narrowing of the terrain and temporality in which consumers as agents are seen to live and breathe. Markets, choice and the point of purchase provide the dominant framework for most accounts of agency, be it in economics, political science or sociology and anthropology. Enquiry here starts with individual preferences or what James Carrier in this volume critically terms the ‘psycho-cultural orientation’ in anthropology.<sup>11</sup> From within this framework it is difficult to approach the prior, larger problem of how ‘consumers’ develop as an identity and ascriptive category of interest for social movements, states and bodies of commercial and professional experts. Economics, whether in rational choice or more recent behavioural models, takes the consumer as a given. The same is true for most political scientists, whose work focuses on the institutional openings that allow consumers to overcome costs of collective action – rather than explaining how ‘the consumer’ became an attractive category for mobilization in the first place.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of time, the recent attention given to agency emerged through a self-conscious break with earlier narratives of modernity. Approaches such as post-modernity or late modernity pose a paradigm break with earlier forms of modernity associated with mass production and mass consumption, class or welfarism.<sup>13</sup> It thus involves a temporal distancing from earlier historical formations of consumers and consumption. Attention to the self-reflexive individual, for example, is tied to the study of lifestyles associated with late modernity.<sup>14</sup> Even where the active consumer is seen as ‘effect’, as in governmentality studies with its emphasis on

‘advanced liberal’ styles of government seeking to create the habitus of the citizen as entrepreneur, the focus of investigation is a priori limited to the last two decades.<sup>15</sup> The fixation with the consumer as ‘effect’ ignores not only the diverse workings of the consumer in practice. More generally, it suffers from an in-built temporal ring-fencing of the problem. Whatever their critique of earlier approaches preoccupied with mass production and the power of culture industries and advertisers for ignoring consumers’ agency, recent approaches have tended to reinforce an important part of the earlier temporal frame of ‘mass consumer society’. Being ‘post’ requires a clearly defined prior state from which to turn away. In the social sciences, the focus on lifestyle culture and the self-reflexive or ‘active’ consumer of the late twentieth century acquired its shape in reaction against a prior ‘mass consumer society’, rather than by interrogating the nature of that earlier configuration.<sup>16</sup> This historical disengagement – and here we are back to the market-centred framework of analysis – was encouraged by an intuitive acceptance of the causal connection between the development of ‘modern’ consumer culture and commodification, in which markets, shopping and choice appear as dominant drivers.<sup>17</sup> Put differently, the formation of consumers is not much of a problem since it appears as the natural consequence of the growing commodification and creation of desire in market-based capitalism.

The attention given in recent discussions to self and creativity, signs and symbols has significantly enhanced our understanding of the diverse ways in which consumption is tied to people’s plural identities, from the creation of subcultures to gay identities.<sup>18</sup> And the sociological tradition of Bourdieu has, of course, been equally influential in analysing the role of consumption practices in creating and recreating distinct status groups. Interestingly, however, neither tradition has been intrigued by the problem of how ‘the consumer’ arose and acquired its hegemonic status as a master category. Studies of ‘consumer culture’ have mainly been about the social acts and cultural processes of consumption in market capitalism rather than about the construction of the consumer as an identity and category. The explosion of studies of the ‘active consumer’ has proceeded with a relative lack of critical reflexivity, which, ironically, has tended to obscure the part played by these very academic studies in constructing and popularizing the consumer as a dominant reference point and object of enquiry. Most analyses start with the consumer as a mature agent, whose genesis is taken as given. The consumer is either presumed to be the product of conditions of ‘affluence’ in the 1950s–1960s (standardized mass production, advertising, consumer rights),<sup>19</sup> or to lie buried in the distant past, best left to historians of the ‘consumer revolutions’ of the transatlantic world in the eighteenth century.

Three observations suggest themselves. First, there is an interesting methodological imbalance in mainstream consumption studies between, on the one hand, the recognition of the manipulation and saturation of signs, the economy of symbolic goods and the ‘naming’ of consumption communities and on the other hand, the relative indifference to the naming and representation of the actors who are speaking

as consumers or are being addressed as such. Where identities come into play, enquiries into status formation or subcultures have been better at showing how material culture divides people into distinct status groups than at explaining how and when 'the consumer' provides a shared reference point that can cut across social divides, although we shall soon see that the frequent notion that 'everyone is a consumer' is a historical myth and that the consumer embodied different social groups in different contexts and did not necessarily provide a universal or democratic frame for all private end-users.

Second, the epochal divide running through consumption studies between modernity and late or post-modernity has over-dramatized one particular gulf at the expense of diverse shifts within each formation and the developments cutting across them. There is a danger here of assigning the consumer an essential position within these complex large-scale social formations – the modern consumer versus the post-modern active and creative consumer – that erases from view the dynamic process and changing formation of this person in different contexts. Reflexivity and self-reflexivity have rightly become key questions for students of contemporary consumption. It would yield interesting insights to extend this concern to the field of 'consumer culture' and its key categories. These categories have a very recent and troubled history. 'Mass consumption' became a term in the early twentieth century, but the personification of a social system as a 'consumer society' is only a product of the end of the twentieth century – as late as 1964 George Katona speaks of 'the mass consumption society'. Social scientists and historians alike should be wary when projecting such concepts back into earlier contexts with different social formations, sensibilities and discourses.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, there is the restricting focus on choice and commodity purchase in modern capitalist markets as the natural terrain of studying consuming cultures. This is problematic for several reasons. Not only does it ignore the social significance of consumption in pre-modern, fascist or socialist societies,<sup>21</sup> it also obscures the continuing importance of routine consumption activities (bathing, reading, eating) in the most advanced liberal market societies;<sup>22</sup> in 'affluent' societies like those of Western Europe today, the largest share of people's budget (25 per cent) is dedicated to housing and utilities.<sup>23</sup> Whether their consumption choices have been viewed as authentic expressions of selfhood or as socially constructed, consumers have mainly been approached as moving along an avenue between private domain and market purchase, following their self-interest in ways that stifle civic reflexivity and community engagement, social accountability and citizenship. As this volume will show, much is to be gained from casting our view beyond the market and situating consumers and consumption within their broader social and political spheres. To understand the evolution of the consumer, greater recognition needs to be accorded to processes of identity and knowledge formation that criss-cross the market or occur altogether outside its domain (including law, schools, the home and politics) as well as to those situated in alternative systems of provision or concerning the breakdown

of markets (including monopoly provision, planning, rationing). Consumers did not arise effortlessly as an automatic response to the spread of markets but had to be made. And this process of making occurred through mobilization in civil society and state as well as the commercial domain, under conditions of deprivation, war and constraint as well as affluence and choice and articulated through traditions of political ideas and ethics.

Emphasizing the active process in which people create a relationship and an identity with objects, the anthropologist James Carrier has elsewhere written of the act of ‘appropriation’ that makes consumption always more than a removal of goods from markets: commodities become possessions.<sup>24</sup> We may extend this notion from objects to the consumers themselves and ask who is engaged in an ‘appropriation’ of the consumer, when and how that knowledge is created, for what purpose and with what implications. In other words, the starting point is not how people have certain bits of information about goods, prices, etc., but when information is processed and systematized in such a way that it creates a sense of being a consumer. It concerns the mutual configuration of knowledge and identity. As we shall see, the appropriation of the consumer is a process drawing on political, intellectual and cultural traditions and processes in which needs and desires, acquisition and use are situated. The following sections offer some pathways to analyse and re-evaluate the formation of the consumer. They will highlight the diverse histories and changing boundaries of the consumer; the dynamic relations between consumers and other social groups; knowledge in use; and the flow of ideas and practices between social systems.

## **Histories**

The starting point for a new approach to the consumer has to be greater engagement amongst social scientists, who have done most of the thinking about consumption, with the current historical rewriting of the subject. An enriched view of the diverse traditions and practices of consumers would not only facilitate understanding of past roads taken or abandoned, but also make available historical and theoretical perspectives to those currently exploring new approaches to consumption, ethics and politics. Just as historians have benefited from enquiries into taste, status and the saturation of signs, so social scientists can now learn from historicizing their fields of enquiry. For the crop of recent historical research challenges the very foundations of the dominant model of ‘consumer society’ on which social scientists were raised.<sup>25</sup> Historians have moved the goal posts of ‘modernity’ by discovering supposedly modern or post-modern activities and sensibilities, such as shopping arcades, marketing and luxury fever, in the early modern transatlantic world.<sup>26</sup> More significantly for our immediate purposes, historians have been moving beyond the instinctive causal equation between commodification and the formation of the consumer.<sup>27</sup> If not altogether absent, the consumer was a largely voiceless, marginal



figure in the so-called ‘consumer revolutions’ of the transatlantic world in the eighteenth century. Students of twentieth-century ‘consumerism’, meanwhile, have explored the expanding language of the consumer prior to the age of affluence and mass marketing.<sup>28</sup>

These accounts unsettle the chronology of consumer society. They also widen the frame of analysis, from market to state and civil society, as well as to ethics and informal life. In her account of the United States’ development into a ‘consumer’s republic’, Liz Cohen presents a transition from the public-minded ‘citizen consumer’ of the 1930s to the ‘purchaser citizen’ who served the national interest of a mass consumption economy. Importantly, the relative shift in weight between these two porous categories is not entirely a commercial story but also the result of socio-political dynamics, especially in the class and racialized politics of suburban housing, with its spill-over effects on transportation (from public to private), retailing (the rise of the mall) and the substitution of civic public with commercial public spaces. The ‘citizen consumer’ and ‘purchasing consumer’ are, of course, ideal-typical constructs and do not exhaust the multiple constellations of identities in different settings. They, however, point to the interplay between different traditions and to the shifting discursive politics of the consumer as a necessary first step to any considered debate about the changing place of consumption and consumers in modern societies.

How did the consumer acquire a positive mantle of interests and identities? The negative connotations of consumption as a disease or wasteful practice are well known. These favoured a negative image of ‘the consumer’ that was easily invoked in debates over luxury: ‘unproductive’ consumers were seen to undermine the national economy through their selfish and unproductive pursuit of novelties. ‘“The consumer (monkey, king or bishop) devours the fruits without return”’, as the early cooperator William Thompson put it in 1824.<sup>29</sup> Such negative imagery is echoed in the moralistic and paternalistic outlook of many twentieth-century scholars, social reformers and politicians concerned with consumption.<sup>30</sup> Yet the nineteenth and early twentieth century also witnessed a positive revalorization of the consumer that would carve out new sources of legitimacy, knowledge and identity. In early and mid-nineteenth century Britain and America, political agitation began to assign ‘the consumer’ a new place as guardian of the public interest. As taxpayers and purchasers, consumers increasingly demanded to be heard and represented and were urged to use their material position to advance moral and public causes, such as the boycott of slave-produced sugar or support for free trade.<sup>31</sup> Political economy, citizenship and ethics were three crucial areas in which the person of the consumer began to take a more defined shape.

Liberal economics, more than any other profession or body of knowledge, has been held responsible for establishing the hegemony of the rational, individualist and utility-maximizing consumer in public discourse. The understandable tendency in cultural studies, sociology and anthropology to turn neo-classical economics into a whipping boy, however, has obscured the rich and complex construction of

the consumer in economic knowledge in the first place. The contemporary critique of the rational individualist consumer as insufficiently social or cultural rests on a sharp equation between liberal economics and the marketized consumer. This is commonly traced back to a neoclassical paradigm shift in late nineteenth-century economics and its mathematical fixation with calculating consumer preferences. As Donald Winch shows in his chapter, this textbook story may be a convenient tool in the ongoing battle between culture and rational choice, but fails to capture how the fathers of professional economics understood the consumer. Not only were liberal writers divided over the position of the consumer in political economy and public policy, depending on different theories of value, a division that pitched J.S. Mill versus the French *libre échangistes*. The marginalist revolution of the 1870s–1880s also amounted to far less of a sharp break in attitudes to consumers between so-called classical and neoclassical economists than is often presumed. The latter shared many of the same moral and social concerns of the former. Both came to defend the consumer as representative of public interest, but, as Winch shows, initially this had nothing to do with a universally applicable theory of economic maximization and developed out of considerable ambivalence towards the consumer as a subject of economic knowledge. Mill, in fact, rejected any calls to make consumption a distinct subject of economic knowledge and public policy. Where economists, like Mill, turned to the consumer was in conditions of market failure and in the provision of public goods. Nor did the mathematical turn to inter-personal comparisons automatically reduce the consumer to an algebraic sheet of calculations. Marshall and Edgeworth used biology and psycho-physics to offer a picture of the organic adjustment of wants to activities and the generation of new wants. Rather than an intellectual cul-de-sac pointing to methodological individualism, late nineteenth-century economics was one dynamic behind sociological enquiries into consumers and their changing tastes and wants.<sup>32</sup>

Rationality and knowledge were twin categories central to the expanding debate about consumers in the nineteenth century. Much of the twentieth-century debate has travelled between the opposite camps of consumers as ‘dupes’ or as those who instinctively know their own interests best. The crystallization and legitimation of the consumer, however, also raised prior questions about the construction and boundaries of this new person’s knowledge. In his *Principles of Political Economy* of 1848, Mill wondered whether ‘the consumer, or person served, is the most competent judge of the end’, unlike the worker and producer, who almost naturally acquired a strong sense of self and interest in their work and were thus held to be ‘generally the best selector of means’. At the same time, the uneven distribution of knowledge and reflexivity between these different social actors also attracted particular liberal attention to the consumer. For it marked out consumers – with their underdeveloped sense of reflexivity – as prime objects of a civilizing project. Tellingly, there is a step-change in Mill’s excitement about the consumer precisely where the subject moved from ‘daily uses of life’, with its ministering to existing inclinations, to the

consumption of things tending 'to raise the character of human beings'. After all, the 'uncultivated cannot be competent judges of cultivation'.<sup>33</sup>

Before there could be a popular notion of consumer sovereignty, the consumer had to be cultivated. The consumer as a project took different shape in different traditions – in national economics in Imperial Germany the consumer was appropriated for the project of building a strong community and economy, whereas in Britain it fused into a language of liberal self and citizenship. Whether the consumer 'took off' as a social identity, however, was ultimately not determined by academic traditions but by the ability of political languages to provide a synapse between these new analytical categories and social movements and popular politics.<sup>34</sup> It was in Victorian Britain that the 'consumer' first developed this synaptic configuration between political mobilization and a category of knowledge and rights. The chapter by Frank Trentmann and Vanessa Taylor uses metropolitan London as a microcosm to chart the increasingly powerful mobilization of 'the consumer' by users and providers and its widening social frame of reference. In water politics there was a lively flux between the worlds of economic knowledge and law and the mobilization of taxpayers and water users on the streets and in local government. The case of 'water consumers' thus illustrates some of the interconnected conduits involved in the spread of the 'consumer' as a category of identity and ascription. Significantly, consumer consciousness and mobilization developed here in a sphere of private monopoly where payment had nothing to do with either market price or the amount consumed. The advancing contestation and sensibility of the 'water consumer' further illustrate the danger of a stark separation between basic needs and luxuries or ordinary and conspicuous consumption that has informed much of the literature. For water users became consumers precisely on a slippery and evolving path on which the very distinction between what is a necessity and what a luxury was hard fought.

Social accountability, the rights of citizens and political representation were vital ingredients in the mobilization of the consumer in the British metropole. If the consumer was operationalized by these political languages, it was never solely a dependent function or rhetorical device. Contests over needs in the increasingly dynamic arena of radical politics of the 1870s–1890s gradually broadened the social constituency of the consumer from the tax-paying (mainly male) property-owning citizen across class and gender, as users from different classes came together in consumer defence leagues to find their common interest as 'consumers'.

Here was one liberal-radical trajectory, but it would be simplistic to place this story within a linear master narrative linking it to the more recent consumerist pressure groups and legal advice centres associated with Ralph Nader and others. Different traditions and social milieus made for different national and regional stories of the consumer. A universal language of the consumer as private end-user was a particular historical achievement first emerging in liberal, pluralistic societies. The antithetical position of consumer versus producer, so powerful in Anglo-American discourse, required the exclusion of commercial users (gas, coal, water) from that category

and a language of the public interest that created an equivalence between private ‘consumers’ irrespective of their specific position in the economy: wage earners and farmers were consumers as much as middle-class men and women living on a private income. Note the contrast with France and Germany. Here traditions of production, land and corporatism disadvantaged an autonomous language of the consumer as representing the public interest.<sup>35</sup> In Germany consumers were easily portrayed as a sectional interest that could exclude other socio-economic identities (workers and housewives). Conversely, it often remained industrial interests which appropriated the language of ‘consumers’ in battles over corporatist representation, as did heavy industries in Weimar.<sup>36</sup> For the men and women in the consumers’ league in early twentieth-century France, consumers were by definition non-producers, as Marie Chessel emphasizes in her chapter. The league sought to educate the middle class as consumers to help workers as producers. Although part of a transatlantic network of consumers’ and buyers’ leagues that had sprung up in the late nineteenth century, the *Ligue Sociale d’Acheteurs* reflected its distinct cultural roots. While open to non-Catholics, the league evolved from within a milieu of social Catholicism that limited the chance of a broader synapse with other competing moral and social reform movements, such as Gide’s cooperatives or secular feminism. Much more than a material revolt of the end-user, in their critique of fashion and the department store women and men in the league developed a vocabulary of the ethical consumer, an emancipatory language that offered both an entry into the public sphere and a way of reconnecting the interests of consumers and producers.

These cases point to the diverse social and ideological roots of the emerging consumer. Rather than thinking in terms of a moment of birth or the progressive unfolding of a universal category, it may be useful to think in terms of the multiple and changing *boundaries* of the consumer. The consumer was *bounded* in terms of ideas, social composition, representation and, significantly, by consuming practices. Differently bounded consumers existed alongside each other – making not only for different formations in different countries, but also separating consumers from other users within countries. The bounded character of consumers is worth emphasizing, since it was vital not only for stabilizing certain meanings but also for delimiting the material and political spheres that were legitimate arenas for consumers. Water consumers or consumer leagues may appeal to a public interest, but before the early and mid-twentieth century there was no shared reference point to ‘consumers’ connecting diverse consumption practices ranging from utilities and shopping to health care or cultural consumption. There could be connections and exchange between differently bounded consumers, such as between progressive politics and liberal economics concerning monopoly and public goods. But, equally, there were constellations where diverse treatments of the consumer coexisted in virtual silence, as marginalist economics did alongside the moral debate about the department store. Demands for social accountability or political inclusion were thus framed with specific references to specific sites of consumption, not to universal demands

for consumer rights or appeals to a generic consumer society. Attention to the simultaneity of differently bounded consumers and users may usefully complement the emphasis in some recent scholarship on the different genealogies informing particular practices and objects of consumption at any given moment.<sup>37</sup>

The bounded nature of consumers was not, of course, fixed or static. But the coexistence of parallel spheres of consumer knowledge and identity means that accounts of the formation of the consumer need to begin from a different starting point than the famous *Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>38</sup> As for E.P. Thompson's working class, the making of the consumer owes as much to agency as to conditioning. Unlike Thompson's story, however, the history of the consumer is neither linear nor unified. There is no single unifying experience or key episode comparable to Thompson's formative 1832. Nor would it be sensible to adopt a view of agency that rested on more or less pure experiences of material reality. Languages of the consumer (like other core identities) are situated in beliefs and practices. In different contexts these can be mobilized in different ways, which, in turn, influence perceptions of the consumer. The inflation of the vocabulary of the consumer has often given it a quasi-natural existence, as when people say 'everyone is a consumer'. Such naturalizing discourse tends to obscure that even in today's 'consumer culture' boundaries and differentiation persist. The export of the language of the consumer to such diverse areas as policing, health care and social services – a key feature of New Labour in Britain – is a political project seeking to complete a long-term trend of loosening boundaries. Political rhetoric and policy initiatives, however, are not the same as social identities and practices.<sup>39</sup> Not only do people continue to have selective notions of themselves as consumers in certain social and commercial contexts (but not others), many informal spheres of social life (such as the home) are frequently bracketed in market-oriented approaches to consumption.

The fundamental change in the twentieth century, therefore, is not that the consumer has become a boundless figure, but rather that the expanding language of the consumer has managed to absorb diverse practices of consumption as commensurate activities (while excluding others). This has involved the unification of consumers initially differentiated and bounded by particular practices – water consumer, the consumer as shopper, the consumer of art. What lay behind this expansive, symmetrical reconfiguration? One conventional answer, encouraged by the initial preoccupation in consumption studies with department stores and marketing, has been to associate this dynamic with the material and symbolic expansion of shopping in people's lives and the dream worlds and desires created around it. Advertisers and the psychologists influencing marketing clearly assisted the growing dissemination of the consumer.<sup>40</sup> But on their own they do not offer a satisfactory explanation. Eighteenth-century England was full of shops and had a high degree of commodification without 'the consumer' being a master category. Early twentieth-century China, meanwhile, produced a massive advertising campaign for national products, but the appeal was to 'patriots' and 'citizens', not

consumers.<sup>41</sup> Even in continental European societies it was far from clear on the eve of World War I whether the consumer would be able to assume the more universal persona that was emerging in Britain and the United States. Nationalist parties and corporatist groups portrayed consumers as a sectional interest, while the young advertising profession was fighting an uphill struggle to overcome public scepticism and derision; advertising campaigns directed at ‘the consumer’ in the inter-war years were partly a legitimating strategy of a young profession to present itself as public servant.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the commercial sector, there are two relatively neglected agencies that deserve greater recognition for their role in establishing the consumer as a more unifying, universal figure: the state and law. In Europe and America it was war and the constraints that came with it that mobilized the consumer as a social actor and object of state policy. More than choice, affluence and shopping arcades, it was the need to rationalize scarce resources in war-time or to boost demand to overcome economic depression that made states identify consumers as a core target of public policy and organization. Wartime consumer committees provided an umbrella organization for the previously disparate social movements concerned with consumption. States directly promoted consumer action and sensibility by encouraging local bodies of consumers to act as the eyes and ears of state pricing policy, reporting on profiteers and unfair practices in wartime or in the United States during the New Deal.<sup>43</sup> In 1930s Germany, it was the National Socialist state that reinforced a concern with the consumer – not as price-oriented shopper but as an organic member of the racial community, whose consumption preferences and practices needed to be reformed for the sake of the *Volk*. Similarly, in socialist East Germany, consumers emerged not only as the result of a bottom-up process of frustrated individuals but also as a top-down process through state-sponsored consumption programmes.<sup>44</sup> In Japan, after World War II, organized consumers pictured an organic solidarity of producer, consumer and national interests.<sup>45</sup>

If states, then, were as important in popularizing the consumer as commerce and social mobilization from below, the expanding ambition and attractiveness of this new category also created dilemmas for public policy and institutions. The universal, mobile persona of the consumer was not easily grafted on to nation-states, with their respective legal traditions and territorially bounded notions of citizenship. Legal regimes with notions of universal civic rights that presumed the social homogeneity of citizens had no place for special rights for particular groups of its members – nor much for the shared boundary-crossing rights of some general consumer. How the consumer moved from being a problematic and marginal figure to a key category and structuring ideal in European law is the theme of Michelle Everson’s chapter. Several general implications emerge. Fields of consumer knowledge do not always converge but can compete or coexist in a functional division of labour. The ‘sovereign consumer’ in economics initially discouraged a legal recognition of the consumer; instead it privileged aggregate demand and the market as remedies

for consumption problems. The eventual construction of the consumer in law (as initially in economics) has resulted from competing visions – suggesting that the formation of the consumer is an ongoing, dynamic process rather than an effect, or past accomplishment. Most significantly, the appropriation of the consumer by law must be located within internal processes of knowledge formation and institutional self-justification. The ‘citizen consumer’ was tied to internal debates about the social justice function of law. For the European Court of Justice the consumer served as an instrument of securing greater legitimacy for European law. The accelerating privatization of the consumer as a ‘market-citizen-consumer’ has been part of a supra-national institution’s attempt to transcend the nation-state with its territorially rooted law of citizenship.

Recognition of the role of public agencies and forms of knowledge offers an interesting challenge to more linear accounts of consumerism that see a long-term shift either from public spirit to self-centred materialism, or from a defence of the weak to consumer self-responsibility. These narratives may say more about the ongoing and often moralistic concerns of (primarily Anglo-American) scholarship than about the complexity of consumers in the modern period. Much of the current public debate about the civic and ethical dimensions of consumption has posited itself against an ahistorical materialist narrative. Neat clusters of commerce, market and self-regarding individualism, on the one hand and citizenship, public and other-regarding actions, on the other, are, however, problematic. Nineteenth-century appeals to ‘conscientious’ consumers encouraged individuals to take greater responsibility for their own actions. In 1930s America, choice was defended by some consumer groups and thinkers on moral and public grounds for simultaneously refining people’s sense of personal values and leading to higher notions of needs and regard for the community, a position that has some affinities with recent attempts to retrieve alternative and ordinary ethics of consumption.<sup>46</sup> Conversely, social and global justice are dominant concerns for many consumer organizations today. A simple linear transfer model, from citizenship to commerce and from other-regarding to self-regarding actions, altogether ignores the diverse ‘collective’ forms that an interest in the consumer has taken in the past – from totalitarian policies to liberal radicalism, progressivism to socialism. It also distracts from the ongoing contestation of the ‘citizen consumer’ in different local, national and supranational arenas of public policy, commercial business and knowledge. In response to public controversies over GM technologies, for example, market researchers and firms like Unilever, in dialogue with NGOs, turned to the ‘citizen consumer’ as a way of understanding the complex relationships between the civic and ethical values and market preferences of their customers.<sup>47</sup> If liberalization and privatization have extended the scope of the commercial domain in social life, they have been met by a revitalized discourse about consumers’ human rights and cosmopolitan citizenship and the emergence of new opportunities for social protest and civic identities at the level of local and global civil society.<sup>48</sup>



## Dynamic Relations

Consumers do not emerge on their own but in dynamic relations with other social actors and agencies. These relationships involve uneven access to expertise, authority and power. A psychological focus on individual preferences and motivations or a cultural emphasis on the meaning of objects needs to be broadened to include these dynamic relations in order to understand the changing status and associations of the consumer. The consumer, after all, acquires its normative and analytical power as a collective, shared category that lies beyond explanations at the individual level. Customers and consumer representatives compete with retailers and other experts addressing the consumer over the precise nature and identity of that person. In addition, the consumer can be part of a politics of reputation where different experts are competing for authority and status. The changing relations between consumers and experts is therefore a central strand running through this book.

Research on shopping in Britain in the 1990s highlighted the distinct national, indeed regional, styles of approaching customers.<sup>49</sup> We know little, however, about how these cultures develop. The chapters by Uwe Spiekermann and Jos Gamble contribute to an understanding of these dynamic relations and their significance in shaping the characteristics of consumers in different cultural and economic settings over time. In Germany, in the course of the twentieth century, the changing appeal and characteristics of the consumer constituted part of a transformation of retailing, which itself was conditioned by fundamental changes in political economy and systems of provision in times of war and peace, totalitarianism and liberal democracy. The growing recognition that ‘the consumer is king’ from the late nineteenth century onwards was in part a step by smaller retailers to reassert their cultural and economic authority vis-à-vis more concentrated department stores and alternative retail networks, like the cooperatives. The retailer, in this discourse, had the necessary expertise to educate shoppers, elevating their tastes and guaranteeing better purchases. ‘Personal’ relationships were an essential feature in this commercial encounter – an additional dimension of the ‘civilizing’ project of cultivating consumers noted previously. Emphasis on the personal, more cultured relationship between consumer and retailer was not just a matter of the shop floor, however. It also served larger projects. The ‘personal’ element in retailer–consumer relations was tied to a defence of German *Kultur* in the battle against ‘cheap’, materialist American *Zivilisation* in the 1920s, while the Nazis used independent middle-sized retailers as agents to direct and control consumption behaviour for their project of strengthening a racial community. With advancing retail concentration in the second half of the twentieth century, it has become tempting to feel nostalgic about the loss of the ‘personal’ encounter in shopping. Twentieth-century Germany points to the elements of power and constraint that underwrote this personalized setting. Far from being natural or traditional, the culture of personalized relationships was buttressed by corporate politics and state intervention. For consumers, it was the absence of



choice that put a premium on personal relations with local retailers, in times of war and scarcity but also during the inter-war years when the price of many goods remained fixed or regulated.

The independent retailer as expert would be joined and challenged by a host of other experts favouring a more abstract and aggregate approach to the consumer: the centres for consumer and demand research that sprang up on both sides of the Atlantic, including in socialist countries, in the 1930s–1960s. Market research and department stores began to replace the generalizable, uniform consumer with segmented consumer types. Yet these trends in aggregate research and retail concentration should not distract from the continuing significance of cultures of personal relationships. Jos Gamble's contribution is here significant, for it retrieves the ongoing personal dimensions at work in a concentrated and rationalized part of the retail sector: multinational corporations selling to Chinese consumers. More than a transfer of money, the point of purchase is here situated in a broad context of management culture, local knowledge regimes and cultural values. The high expectation placed on customer service results from the interaction of two spheres: the global export of consumer-oriented marketing and training models and local cultures of trust and reciprocal obligations. A focus on interactions provides a useful counter to more instrumentalist analyses in which identities are read off goods or representations. The global language of the 'consumer is king' is modulated by a variety of local cultural norms and understandings, ranging in the Chinese context from the picture of the consumer as a divine figure or family member to the treatment of the consumer as child or blank sheet. As Gamble's analysis of shopping as a microcosm of cultural relations shows, Chinese consumers are co-producers rather than passive victims of this arrangement. This approach has productive implications for larger narratives in the English-speaking world that have portrayed the consumer as the 'effect' of advanced liberalism activating a novel sense of self-reliance and self-management. In contrast, the case of department stores in China highlights the relational dynamics involved in shaping the consumer. It also points to the contribution of established cultural regimes and values (trust, obligation, family) in shaping the consumer in contemporary societies.

Retailers and department stores have dominated the pages of consumption studies concerned with shopping, but they were not the only experts in pursuit of the consumer. The role of lawyers and social reform movements has already been noted. Scientists and educators shaped the consumer too. Recent public anxieties about GM food have, in part, resulted from a widening credibility deficit of science as authority. Erika Rappaport's discussion of tea in the Victorian Empire offers a provocative counterpoint to the contemporary talk of risk and anxiety. For it was chemists, together with merchants pressing for more standardized and packaged mass marketing, who simultaneously reassured Victorian consumers and shaped anxieties about the physiological and cultural contamination from impure, 'poisoned' Chinese tea. Chemical analysis and advertising offered representations and narratives of

production, consumption and digestion that literally fleshed out the body of the consumer in relation to distant, unknown Chinese producers.

The relations between experts and consumers are also dynamic in remoulding the cultural qualities attached to the consumer in discourse and material practices. The changing social boundedness of the consumer involved an ongoing regendering, as well as a broadening across class and income. This volume contributes to a rethinking of the language of separate spheres that dominated an early preoccupation with the consumer as female shopper in contrast to the male citizen and producer.<sup>50</sup> The early political and cultural formation of the consumer suggests a gendering of the consumer that cut across public and private spheres. This involved male, property-owning taxpayers or small traders and producers who spoke as consumers on behalf of their families (the private sphere) and to advance their own claims as citizens (the public sphere). The tension between 'rational' and 'irrational' or impulsive consumers mapped itself out in different gendered ways in different spheres of consumption, such as water or the department store.<sup>51</sup> In inter-war Britain and America, advertisers targeted 'Mr Citizen Consumer' and 'Andy Consumer' as well as female shoppers; audience surveys used by American corporations in the 1930s found that men were as distracted and impulsive as women.<sup>52</sup> In her chapter on tea, Rappaport offers some clues to the dynamics behind such regendering, highlighting the interface between expert representations of the body and nation and the physical qualities and handling of goods. In advertising in the 1870s the growing contrast between an 'impure' foreign product (loose Chinese tea) and the purity of the British nation simultaneously advanced the claims of the new mass retailer and merchant as protector of the domestic sphere: perceptions of the commodity became merged with ideals of female purity.

Rappaport's focus on the battle over the body of the consumer is complemented by Steve Kline's focus on the battle over the mind of the child as consumer. The role of time and ageing across the life cycle of consumers has received less attention than gender.<sup>53</sup> Children are a paradigmatic case for our understanding of consumers as subjects, for they raise the very question of how individuals become socialized as consumers, their knowledge and reflexivity and how much individuals can be trusted to exercise choice safely and responsibly. As Kline shows, current debates about children's competence and literacy as consumers and their implications for commercial freedom or public regulation, are but the latest chapter in a dialectic between rival models of paternalism and pluralism that came to the fore in the Enlightenment. What has changed in the last century is the increasing density of the mediated marketplace, the formation of consumer sensibilities amongst ever younger age groups and the growing prominence of educators, popular psychologists and marketing experts speaking on behalf of children as new consuming subjects.

The dynamic relations between consumers and experts draw attention to the diversity of knowledge practices. Traditions of the consumer are not established and do not

develop unless they are developed through knowledge in practice. Attention to the internal generation of knowledge in fields like economics and law thus needs to be complemented with a discussion of the reception and employment of *knowledge in practice*, that is the diffusion, reception, employment and manipulation of knowledge. There has been considerable interest in the influence of psychology and economics on consumer research and marketing,<sup>54</sup> but we know far less about other types and conduits of consumer knowledge. These include the knowledge in use by retailers and providers – such as notions of how best to address consumers – the aggregate statistical information guiding state policy, the dissemination of home economics and consumer education, the working knowledge of regulatory agencies, surveys used by firms and consumer movements, consumer complaints procedures and consumers' own acquisition and handling of knowledge of goods, services, choices, rights and risks.

Several themes and questions concerning the construction, flow and reception of knowledge emerge. In European and international law, for example, liberal knowledge of a market-based consumer became attractive not simply because of its status within economics but because it served an institutional project of reforming domestic regulation. Similarly, organizations turned to the consumer in the post-Fordist climate of the 1980s–1990s as a vehicle for organizational restructuring and adjusting to more differentiated demand.<sup>55</sup> It may be useful to think about the changing ideological and institutional use value of particularly bounded forms of the consumer in relation to the interest and power of institutions and movements to define what counts as the consumer interest.

Applied knowledge influences the authority and social status of social movements and agencies speaking on behalf of consumers, such as through the use of social surveys, authoritative research, legal advice, or testing information. Certain kinds of knowledge can have a stabilizing effect on certain forms of the bounded consumer, while posing an obstacle for other configurations. Gender and generational categories of marketing and research are one example. Social research and public policy constitute another; Norwegian consumer policy in the 1960s, for example, distinguished between 'producer consumers' and 'mere consumers'.<sup>56</sup> We still know relatively little about the effect of changing communication systems (such as the Internet) on the behavioural and emotional dynamics between customer and corporation and between consumers and providers, especially in areas where new information systems transform social relationships, such as in relationship marketing, or represent a challenge to a profession's established claim of having a monopoly on knowledge, as in healthcare.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, we should recognize that the landscape of different knowledge regimes competing for the consumer and the balance of power between knowledge-holders are changing in the modern period. Compared with the nineteenth century, when knowledge of the consumer was primarily the terrain of social movements and retailers, today consumer advocacy groups are only one player in a crowded field of

better resourced and staffed consumer experts in corporations, marketing companies, academia, regulatory agencies and the state.<sup>58</sup> A much greater plurality of knowledges has evolved, but this has also meant that those organizing themselves as consumers have become a voice less easily or clearly heard than previously.

## **Flow between Systems**

The question of how the formation of the consumer relates to other knowledge regimes speaks directly to the long-standing debate about the implications of an expanding consumer identity for public life in general and political culture in particular. Distrust of the new persona, the consumer, was one of the few things uniting religious and intellectual elites, conservatives, communitarians and communists in their fear of ‘mass consumption’, a trend with roots in the nineteenth century that gathered momentum in the mid-twentieth century. Suspicion of the consumer arose partly from a moralistic distrust of the ability of ‘the masses’ to handle desire and material pleasures, but it has also drawn on strands of thinking about ‘modernity’ in terms of the advancing differentiation, distance and rivalry between social systems, or what Frank Mort calls ‘competing domains’ in his chapter. In this view, the expansion of one system involves the shrinkage of another, or the advancing differentiation of the economy as a separate ‘autopoietic’ system endangers other social systems.<sup>59</sup> An expanding market culture would result in the commodification of everything, swallowing up civic culture and consumerizing politics.<sup>60</sup> It is not possible here to do justice to the theoretical subtleties of different intellectual projects favouring this general bias, nor their different genealogies. But this short characterization does emphasize a widely shared zero-sum approach to the consumer: the more consumer, the less citizen. Interestingly, one prominent tradition in this mould that is experiencing a recent revival (communitarianism) has its roots in early modern republicanism, which similarly feared that commercial culture would erode civic communities by splitting an active citizenry into separate actors and exclusive identities: the merchant, the soldier, the administrator and so forth. Whatever its intellectual or normative attraction, this picture of a differentiation of identities and systems does not sit easily with the dramatic expansion and energy of political culture in commercial and industrial societies in the modern period. As with eighteenth and nineteenth-century commerce, so with twentieth-century consumption: rather than presuming a zero-sum exchange between consumer and citizen and locating each in separate systems of commerce and politics, it is useful to ask about the flow of knowledge between these systems, the interaction and overlap between ideas and practices of consumption and citizenship and the multiple forms of identities arising there from.

This volume points to several ways of remapping the consumer that challenges a narrative of advancing consumerist differentiation. One, already discussed, is to

loosen the consumer from a tight mooring in the commercial domain and recognize that differently bounded consumers have also emerged in civil society and state. Second, it is argued that a less market-oriented focus on individual consumer preferences may restore a sense of the connections that remain in many societies today between consumption and production and between consumption, community and politics, combining self-regarding and other-regarding mentalities and individualist and civic attitudes. James Carrier's discussion of how anthropologists have viewed consumers is instructive here. Critical of a dominant focus on the individual as chooser, Carrier lays out alternative frames of analysis that situate consumers in webs of social relations, political economy and cultural developments, reconnecting consumption to income flows, systems of labour, temporal rhythms and the production of value in tourism and culture industries. Ben Fine starts with the commodity rather than with social groups. But his reconsideration of commodity fetishism also leads him to position the consumer in material and cultural systems of provision that reintegrate production, distribution and marketing. This reframing of the consumer highlights the workings of two types of external constraints – the limits imposed by consumers' position in the economy, class or clan, but also the effects of outside consumers' choices and desires on internal social relations, such as in the case of marketing carnival or anticipating the desire of ecotourists discussed by Carrier.

These approaches embedding consumers in material and cultural systems are complemented by perspectives on the flow of knowledge and social action between systems. Most often commercial culture and political culture have been treated either as separate spheres or in a functional, unilateral relationship, where consumerist knowledge and practices, such as marketing and consumer research, invade political culture (political marketing, opinion polling, focus groups), replacing democratic practices and civic sensibilities with those of commercial culture. Recent research on the 'Americanization' of post-war Europe has begun to complicate this story, suggesting a much more contingent and interactive process, with resistance to political marketing and the relative autonomy of political culture in some countries (France) alongside more enthusiastic uptake in others (Germany).<sup>61</sup> The chapters by Frank Mort and Ina Merkel take us into the *porous* nature of commercial and political spheres in contemporary societies, highlighting the multiple flows between them at the level of both knowledge and social action.

Placing American and British debates about civic culture and consumer culture in the 1950s and 1960s alongside each other, Mort unravels the dynamic interactions between the evolving knowledge and discourse about political participation and consumer behaviour. Again, his discussion highlights the contribution of hybrid and eclectic forms of knowledge to the formation of the consumer. The social survey tradition, in particular, provided an important channel linking social action, political analysis and commercial consumer research. Instead of a one-directional flow from commercial knowledge to political knowledge, Mort reveals the reciprocal exchange

of information and personnel between these domains, as experts like Lazarsfeld and Abrams moved back and forth between commercial projects and political analysis on both sides of the Atlantic and across it. The mapping of consumer behaviour in this transatlantic project did much to broaden the conception of political culture, not least by moving away from a view of culture as a sphere distinct from politics. Far from being a vehicle of consumerist individualism, to Abrams and Labour party reformers the export of methods like attitudinal research and polling to the political process was part of a social democratic project envisaging a symbiotic relationship between consumer choice and citizenship, private and public sector provision.

The significance of the ongoing reciprocal, interactive relationship between consumption and citizenship becomes even more apparent once we look beyond those established liberal market societies, like the United States and Great Britain, which have been the home of intellectual traditions presenting a paternalistic contrast between noble civic life and selfish or vulgar mass consumerism. It would be difficult not to recognize, for example, the emancipatory and politicizing energy unleashed by the official discourse and recognition of consumer rights in communist China in the 1990s, a reform process that may initially have had an economic rationale but has quickly generated new political sensibilities and demands of citizen consumers, not least in local housing and community politics.<sup>62</sup> The political mobilization of commodities is also pronounced in transition economies and those areas within leading capitalist societies undergoing rapid processes of economic and cultural transvaluation and marginalization. East Germany since the collapse of socialism in 1989 is a fertile field for considering the changing meanings and arrangements of commodity culture, collective identity and political subjectivity, as Ina Merkel shows in her chapter. Here is not only a story of the biography of things. Goods from the socialist past, revalued, reappropriated and rebranded, serve as resources of social solidarity and collective memory for East Germans in a battle of cultural and political recognition directed at both the different value system of the more dominant neighbour, West Germany and the rapid process of deindustrialization. More than a cultural process, the revalorization of old brands and commodities and the commercial staging of *Ostalgie* also amounts to a political repositioning of East Germans vis-à-vis their own political past. The focus on consumption in this collective reliving and rewriting of the past is important here. Representing themselves as consumers and rehearsing conditions and practices of consumption under socialism are partly about legitimating a past experienced as an alternative to 'affluent' consumption in the West – and thus about reclaiming the value system attached to alternative systems of provision, such as gifting, cooperation and solidarity. It also offers a civic language of consumption where material culture becomes an arena of quasi-political resistance, distracting from more overt concerns of political guilt and complicity in an oppressive regime: by highlighting their role as consumers in this collective rewriting of the past, East Germans establish their distance from the socialist regime and can even claim an active position in its erosion from within.

What do these interactions between political culture and consumer behaviour mean for the relationship between consumer and citizen? One answer, spelled out by Ben Fine in this volume, is to emphasize the disintegrating forces cutting across consumers. Consumers here appear situated in different material and cultural systems of provision as well as differing in class, gender, race, income and so forth. Consumer issues in this view are likely to become something else in the process of being politicized, as they are pursued along the chain of provision to point to environmental and labour conditions, such as the role of child labour in the manufacture of consumer goods. Clearly there is something to this process of diffusion, as the proliferation of consumer advocacy groups with distinct concerns testifies. A different answer, that favoured by generations of nationalist, conservative, communist or communitarian critics of the consumer, would stress the diffuse and thin identity of the consumer and contrast it with richer, all-encompassing organic identities that tie individuals to collective projects.

There are other ways of approaching this question of diffuseness, however. For one, this volume draws attention to integrative processes and traditions that have enabled consumers or their surrogates to overcome the disintegrative tendencies and develop shared notions of ethics, citizenship and social solidarity. But the diverse and pluralistic formations of the consumer also suggest a more positive political interpretation of this problem of diffuseness. The consumer may be found wanting when it comes to a comparison with the thick, rooted and more ambitious singular claims of other identities. At the same time, it would be historically unwise to imagine a golden age of civic life subsequently eroded by fickle or self-centred consumers. The consumer may be a relatively thin, flexible or diffuse identity, but it is useful to recall that thicker identities have included not only the republican citizen but also more totalizing and brutal projects of nationalism, fascism and communism. An expanding if diffuse and bounded conception of consumers may be a favourable condition for a pluralistic politics recognizing diversity and toleration. The frequent identification of the recent revival of the consumer in public discourse and policy with neoliberalism has tended to obscure the affinities between consumers and civil society. It may be no coincidence that the renaissance of civil society in the last few decades and the growing awareness and recognition of consumers have happened at the same time.

## Notes

1. Patrick Barrington, 'I Want to Be a Consumer', *Punch*, 25 April 1934, p. 467.
2. The corpus of books and articles now runs into several thousands. Useful points of entry include D. Miller (ed.) *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of*



- New Studies* (London, 1995); J.B. Schor and D.B. Holt (eds), *The Consumer Society Reader* (New York, 2000); A. Appadurai (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986). For a bibliography: [www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/worlddocuments/consumption20%biblio.doc](http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/worlddocuments/consumption20%biblio.doc)
3. C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York, 1978), p. 72.
  4. See the green paper by the Secretary of State for Social Security (Frank Field), *New Ambitions for Our Country: A New Contract for Welfare*, Cm 3805 (London, 1998), p. 16.
  5. L.A. Reisch, 'Principles and Visions of a New Consumer Policy', *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 27 (2004), pp. 1–42; the German Federal Ministry of Agriculture has been renamed the Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture.
  6. *The Guardian*, 8 January 2003, p. 11.
  7. M.E. Rider and C.J. Makela, 'A Comparative Analysis of Patients' Rights: An International Perspective', *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 27(4) (2003), pp. 302–15.
  8. The OECD Environment Directorate (OECD) views 'consumers ... as *co-actors* who interact, shape and are shaped by the way in which systems of production are designed' Environment Policy Committee, Working Party on National Environmental Policy, 'Household Energy and Water Consumption and Waste Generation' (2002), p. 6, emphasis in original. Pamela W.S. Chan, president of CI, at the 2<sup>nd</sup> annual assembly of NGO consumer associations (1999) on the centrality of a "'citizen consumer movement" [promoting] a fair and just society'; [www.europa.eu/int/comm/dgs/health\\_consumer/events/event17s1\\_en.html](http://www.europa.eu/int/comm/dgs/health_consumer/events/event17s1_en.html). The British communications regulator Ofcom stressed its role in providing 'neutral and timely information for citizen-consumers'; 'Development of 118 directory enquiries market', [www.ofcom.org.uk/media\\_office/latest\\_news/](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/media_office/latest_news/); 18 June 2004.
  9. Niall FitzGerald (Unilever) in the brochure 'The Unilever Series: Olafur Eliasson' accompanying the Tate Modern exhibition, London, 16 Oct. 2003–21 March 2004.
  10. R.W. Belk, 'The Human Consequences of Consumer Culture' in K.M. Ekström and H. Brembeck (eds), *Elusive Consumption* (Oxford, 2004), p. 70. See also the contributions in Miller, *Acknowledging Consumption*. Cf. the critique of the overuse of the consumer in Y. Gabriel and T. Lang, *The Unmanageable Consumer: Contemporary Consumption and Its Fragmentations* (London, 1995).
  11. James Carrier, p. 000 below.
  12. S.K. Vogel, 'When Interests Are Not Preferences: The Cautionary Tale of Japanese Consumers', *Comparative Politics* (January 1999), pp. 187–207; D. Vogel and M. Nadel, 'Who Is a Consumer? An Analysis of the Politics of Consumer Conflict', *American Politics Quarterly*, 5(1) (1977), pp. 27–56; P.L.



- Maclachlan, *Consumer Politics in Postwar Japan: The Institutional Boundaries of Citizen Activism* (New York, 2002). For a corrective, see P. Maclachlan and F. Trentmann, 'Civilising Markets: Traditions of Consumer Politics in Twentieth-Century Britain, Japan, and the United States' in M. Bevir and F. Trentmann (eds), *Markets in Historical Contexts: Ideas and Politics in the Modern World* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 170–201.
13. M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London, 1991).
  14. A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge, 1991).
  15. N. Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 164 ff.
  16. Noteworthy exceptions include R. Sassatelli, *Consumo, Cultura e Società* (Bologna, 2004); C. Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford, 1987).
  17. See D. Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge, 1997).
  18. D. Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style* (London, 1979); F. Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1996); Celia Lury, *Consumer Culture* (Oxford, 1997).
  19. Note the frequent reference to President Kennedy's 1962 speech on consumer rights as a historical signpost, even in innovative approaches seeking to expand the analysis of markets to give greater attention to informal, domestic spheres of consumption, e.g. Reisch, 'Principles and Visions of a New Consumer Policy'.
  20. As John Brewer has self-critically noted, historians themselves originally succumbed to this temptation. The influential *Birth of Consumer Society* (London, 1982) by N. McKendrick, J.H. Plumb and Brewer himself mirrored the concerns of the public and academic debates of the 1950s–1970s on the creation of false needs and the power of marketing; 'The Error of Our Ways: Historians and the Birth of Consumer Society', *Cultures of Consumption Working Paper* no. 12, <http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/publications.html>. See also B. Fine, *The World of Consumption* (London, 2002; 2<sup>nd</sup> edn), esp. ch. 8.
  21. Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*; T. Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (London, 1996); D. Howes (ed.), *Cross-Cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities* (London, 1996). H. Berghoff (ed.), *Konsumpolitik: Die Regulierung des privaten Verbrauchs im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1999); C. Helstosky, *Garlic and Oil: Food and Politics in Italy* (Oxford and New York, 2004); V. Buchli, *An Archaeology of Socialism* (Oxford and New York, 1999); Ina Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis: Die Geschichte der Konsumkultur in der DDR* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999).
  22. J. Gronow and A. Warde (eds), *Ordinary Consumption* (London, 2001); E. Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience* (Oxford, 2003).
  23. Eurostat, *Consumers in Europe* (Luxembourg, 2001), Table 1.14; this number does not include household expenditure on furnishings and household

- equipment (another 6%); clothing, by comparison, is on average 6%, food 13%, recreation and culture 10%.
24. J. Carrier, *Gifts and Commodities* (London, 1995).
  25. In addition to the below, see esp. M. Daunt and M. Hilton (eds), *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford, 2001); V. de Grazia and E. Furlough (eds), *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, CA, and London, 1996); S. Strasser, C. McGovern and M. Judt (eds), *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1998). Cf. the place of 'consumer society' and 'mass consumption' in H.-G. Haupt, *Konsum und Handel: Europa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2002).
  26. C. Walsh, 'Social Meaning and Social Space in the Shopping Galleries of Early Modern London'; J. Benson and L. Ugolini (eds), *A Nation of Shopkeepers: Five Centuries of British Retailing* (London, 2003), pp. 52–79; M. Berg, *Sweet Commerce* (forthcoming).
  27. For the following, see F. Trentmann, 'The Genealogy of the Modern Consumer: Meanings, Knowledge, and Synapses' in J. Brewer and F. Trentmann (eds), *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives* (Oxford and New York, forthcoming).
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