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This book sets out to investigate the relationship between society and material culture, and to assess the consequences of the enormous increase in industrial production over the last century. It will be argued that academic study of the specific nature of the material artefact produced in society has been remarkably neglected, and that compared, for example, to the discipline of linguistics, our understanding of material culture is rudimentary in the extreme. This lack of concern with the nature of the artefact appears to have emerged simultaneously with the quantitative rise in the production and mass distribution of material goods. The average inhabitant of a country such as Britain uses, and is associated with, a range of clothing, furnishing, technology, buildings, and other objects which is vast in extent, complexity and diversity compared to any previous era. In short; our culture has become to an increasing degree a material culture based on an object form. It will be suggested in the course of this volume that the very physicality of the object which makes it appear so immediate, sensual and assimilable belies its actual nature, and that material culture is one of the most resistant forms of cultural expression in terms of our attempts to comprehend it.

The physicality of the material world is, however, only one of the reasons for this neglect. Equally important is a series of academic trends which have led to an overwhelming concentration on the area of production as the key generative arena for the emergence of the dominant social relations in contemporary societies, and a comparative neglect of consumption, together with a concomitant failure to observe the actual changes which have taken place over the last century in the balance of influence between these two forms of interactions with goods. A further major cause of neglect has been the tendency on all sides of the political spectrum to subscribe to certain blanket assumptions concerning the negative consequences of the growth of material culture. This culture has been associated with an increasingly ‘materialistic’ or ‘fetishistic’ attitude, which is held to
have arisen through a focusing on relations to goods *per se* at the expense of genuine social interaction. These assumptions are responsible for the emergence of a variety of generally nihilistic and global critiques of ‘modern’ life, which have tended to detract from the intensive analysis at the micro-level of the actual relationship between people and goods in industrial societies, and a remarkable paucity of positive suggestions of a feasible nature as to how industrial society might appropriate its own culture.

I have approached these questions by starting from a discussion of the subject–object relationship at the most abstract philosophical level and progressing by stages to an analysis of certain highly specific aspects of everyday life. A further understanding of the place of goods in society requires a general perspective on the relationship between people and things. Such a perspective belongs, however, to a larger set of ideas about the nature of society and the processes generally falling into the category of ‘culture’, and therefore entails wider philosophical questions. In view of this, I have begun by considering a key moment in the development of Western philosophy and its constant struggle with the problem of the subject–object duality: that is, the publication of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. I have abstracted from this work a set of processes which are then extended and compared to parallel ideas in a number of other academic disciplines; together, these ideas lead to a general grounding of the original set of arguments in the mundane world. From philosophical studies of the subject–object duality and its resolution in a dynamic process of becoming is derived a tentative theory of culture concerned with the relationship between the human subject and the external world. As a sub-set of this theory of culture, is derived an approach to material culture as a particular form of such externalization. From such abstractions the approach moves on to consider the specific material culture of contemporary Britain, and finally to propose a tentative theory of the nature of modern mass consumption as the dominant context through which we relate to goods.

This sequence results in some unusual juxtapositions. The tendency in modern, highly specialized academic research is for philosophical discussions to take place within the relatively abstract terms set by that discipline, while micro-ethnographic studies of specific aspects of social organization tend to be bound by the relativism of the particular, and lend themselves to philosophical analysis mainly as critiques of philosophy’s pretensions to generality. In the present volume, by contrast, the intention is to attempt a better understanding of philosophical concepts by grounding them in the everyday world of the high-street shopping centres, and in turn to understand better the relationship of people to their three-piece suits by reference to theorists such as Simmel or Piaget.

Such a strategy involves the rather perilous activity of taking objects which are generally regarded as trivial, and holding them up for academic scrutiny. Unless one is a Duchamp working within the confines of high art, or has the literary brilliance of Barthes, this breaking of disciplinary ‘frames’ and the treatment of bay windows and melamine boards as linchpins of modern culture may rapidly lay the author open to charges of affectation. It is evident, however, that those same people who shy away from considered discussion of such objects readily part with a large proportion of their income to acquire them. Indeed, the relative ascription of ‘importance’ and ‘triviality’, and the fixedness of these categories, is itself a matter whose explicit discussion may provide major clues as to the nature of material culture, and help to account for its comparative neglect in academic studies.

A further general aim of this work is to concentrate on the positive elements of the model being constructed. Unlike many of the writers who have followed Hegel, I do not intend to strike a tragic pose, bewailing an oppressive fate which we cannot control, in the name of a utopia we have either just left or are about to create. First, because I believe, with the modernists, and in the tradition of some post-Enlightenment theorists, that many of the changes that have taken place during recent centuries are themselves extremely positive, providing the basis for new kinds of equality, knowledge and social development which were previously unimaginable, let alone achievable, for anything but a tiny minority of the population. But secondly because, unlike many modernists, I do not regard these as the exclusive achievement of planners, leaders, artists and individuals, but rather as the result of large-scale social movements which have enabled ever expanding sectors of the mass population to appropriate these advantages. Furthermore, I believe that there are reasons for thinking that this trend may be sustained, though only through continual struggle, in the future. The material surveyed in the latter stages of this book provides evidence for giving credit for such developments back where it is due—to the mass populace—and for claiming a perspicacity and subtlety in mass behaviour which is a far cry from the passivity, illusion and denigration implied in many self-proclaimed radical perspectives.

The development of such a positive stance regarding the possibilities for mass consumption is intended as a critical perspective; that is, one that condemns the status quo by developing a model of society which could be attained and yet is rarely even aimed for at present. As
such, this view contrasts with the perspective currently predominant in the academically oriented social sciences. For example, the movements and authors loosely grouped under the 'meta-label' of post-structuralism, the various strands of which claim to be radical on the basis of a similar condemnatory attitude, may actually be found to provide only conservative and nihilistic assessments of the ubiquity and thus the inevitability of oppression. This, along with the massive impact on the social sciences over the last two decades of Marxist theory concentrating on a wide variety of exploitative and oppressive institutions, may suggest that in the late 1980s the principal critical challenge is to produce alternative perspectives directly relevant to the recent transformations and developments in both socialist and non-socialist societies.

My present aim is to examine any such tendencies already evident in industrial societies, and to indicate in what way they offer a model for feasible social change. More specifically with respect to material culture, the book concludes with the argument that these positive possibilities are clearly immanent within the consumption activities of mass populations today.

The Shape of Things to Come

A large proportion of the classic texts on social theory, including, in different ways, those by Marx, Freud, Durkheim, Weber and the Frankfurt School writers, focus on the possibilities for resolving the contradictions of modernity. Over the last century, however, there has been a radical change in our perception of what it is that constitutes the 'modern', and any fresh consideration of these familiar themes must involve some degree of detachment from the trajectories of social theory, and a re-immersion in, and a re-examination of, the nature of the problem itself.

Many of the concerns of this work are based on observations of trends in contemporary British society. At the time of writing I am undertaking fieldwork in London which differs from my previous experience in ethnographic research in a South Asian village or the South Pacific in that most of the discussions and observations have to take place outside the public domain, in the context of people's homes. This experience of entering a series of very private domains, selected not because the occupants share common interests as 'friends' or a common origin as 'relatives', but solely because of their residence on a particular housing estate, gives me the impression that there is an increasing disparity between the subjects of public concern, political rhetoric or academic debate, and the experiences of everyday life. There seems to be a particular discrepancy between an enormous public interest in the levels of people's wages, the dole, and public services, and the lack of any comparable interest, outside the commercial sector, in exactly what people do with the money or services received; that is, how they transfer them back into the construction of worlds. This suggests that we respect in analysis the same public/private duality that we ourselves practise. It is worth noting that the market researcher has shown much less trepidation than the academic in crossing this boundary.

Some of the interests which appear to dominate people's private lives have been reflected in a new literature. For example, the widespread fascination for television soap operas, exploited by large numbers of newspaper articles about the private lives of the actors and actresses involved, is reflected in the rise of 'media studies' (e.g. Collins et al. 1986). There is, as yet, however, no comparable concern with similarly important domains, such as home furnishing and supermarket shopping. In particular, outside of the specific interest in gender roles and domesticity found in feminist studies, there is a comparative lack of literature on the increase in home-centred activities, developing local institutions such as babysitting circles or hobbies from which new social networks are emerging (see, however, Young and Willmott 1973; Gershuny 1978; Pahl 1984; Wallman 1982). While television provides the illusion of a hitherto unrivalled voyeurism, leaving nightly the impression of having witnessed the very private affairs of a wide range of households, its impact on the behaviour of actual neighbourhoods is much less understood.

As an example, imagine walking along one of the streets or corridors on a London council estate. The variety of attitudes people may have to the estate itself has only occasionally been documented (Andrews 1979; Parker 1983). It soon becomes clear that any attempt to use normative models to describe the individual household is ideologically charged. Whether one refers to the traditional 'norm' of the nuclear family or to some alternative, all such models appear to hide the actual experience, which seems to be perversely opposed to any ordered characterization. This contradiction is most evident in the radical difference between the modernist façade of the high-rise flats, with doors painted identical colours by the council, and what lies behind, where each householder has played bricolage with the facilities provided, supplemented by goods purchased on the market.

Moving along the corridor, if flat one may be imagined to hold a single Cypriot divorcee with her children, then flat two may house a married couple who have moved from Blackpool with the kids and
grandparents, flat three a nuclear family born in the area, flat four an
everly retired single male born in Ireland, and flat five a locally born
teeneer whose parents emigrated from the West Indies. Ethnic and
family type are, however, only the most evident dimensions of this
diversity, the full extent of which becomes apparent as one begins to
evaluate degrees of affluence, self-esteem, political viewpoint, ho-
days taken, social networks, allocation of leisure time, or a hun-
dred other variables. This diversity is echoed in the furnishing and style of
the interior: in one flat, the facilities provided by the council may
hardly have been changed; in the next, a mass of jumbled gifts,
redundant furnishings which could not quite be thrown away, and
items retained for possible future use may be stored without apparent
order and filling the space to its limits; in the third, a striking and
dominant style may have been imposed: a series of coordinated
colours, textures and shapes creating a systematic and deliberate
impression of 'modernity'. One flat seems focused on the television,
the next on the dining table, the third on the children's toys. The
 symbolism of the objects runs the gamut from futuristic hi-tech
modernity through to pastiches of Victorian or even medieval styles,
often within the same household and even within the same room.

An extraordinary feature of modern British life is the number and
diversity of interests held behind these doors: a fanatic supporter of a
football club lives next to a family that keeps an exotic range of pets; a
follower of a pop group lives next to a political radical. Any one of
these different cultural foci may become a central point of concern
and identity. Television and the media continue to uncover the world
champion hairdresser and the fancy-pigeon breeder, the bibliophile
and the expert on coalholes. In this respect, the division of labour
from civil servant to store detective, secretary, window dresser,
unemployed person, teacher or machine operator becomes only
another dimension of difference.

An inescapable conclusion from such observation is that the culture
of most people is of a very particular kind. The average person's
relatively passive and infrequent interaction with the performed arts
or entertainments appears largely inconsequential, while for those
who live on a council estate or suburb in London, social activities
based on the neighbourhood or community may be extraordinarily
sparse. More striking are the very active, fluid and diverse strategies
by means of which people transform resources both purchased
through the market and allocated by the council into expressive
environments, daily routines and often cosmological ideals: that is,
ideas about order, morality and family, and their relationships with
the wider society. The bricolage of the streets is no longer aided by the
structured conventions of a mythology; as amongst the classic
'peoples' of social anthropology, its foundations are comparatively
weak in this respect. Even images of stability, such as nostalgia, are
continually restructured and reinvented according to individual
domestic situations and expectations. While not denying the impact of
the larger social and economic forces which help to construct such
relationships, what has been neglected in the analysis of such forces is
the mass response which may often be echoed in these micro and
home-centered activities. Despite the high degree of our actual
involvement in these cultural activities, they tend barely to be
acknowledged, and their pivotal position in modern culture certainly
remains quite unappreciated.

The trend towards diversity as such is hardly new. Many of the
major theorists who have examined the nature of modern society have
also attempted to represent the aura evoked by the scale and diversity
of the goods on the marketplace. Those who were in a position to
observe the birth of mass consumption, such as Simmel, Veblen and
later Benjamin, have provided perhaps the most acute accounts. The
interest in consumption as the key to the problem of social
development, current at the time of Durkheim (Williams 1982) has
since markedly declined. In recent years, only one sustained attempt
has been made to encompass this diversity within a totalizing
perspective which might provide an order for its elucidation, while
simultaneously confronting it in its particularity (Bourdieu 1984).
Bourdieu's emphasis is on artefacts as a consumer aid in the major
struggle for social positioning, this relational activity taking
precedence as a practice over the abstraction of class (Bourdieu 1985).
Judgements are made according to the brand names used, the
up-to-dateness of goods, and their arrangement. Increasingly,
however, other activities are placed within the same framework.
Political opinions or views on controversial issues may be canvassed
less because of concern with the apparent subject of debate than as a
means of placing the individual socially; that is of relating their
attitude to CND or immigration to our own. Social positioning is,
however, only one element in the construction of identity, and
Bourdieu's account is usefully complemented by the study of goods as
categories (Douglas and Isherwood 1979), the impact of a single object
form in a variety of cultural settings (King 1984) or the analysis of a
given domain within the mass market, such as fashion (Wilson 1985).

At one level, these features must be connected to the nature of
capitalist production. It is clear that branding policies, design,
targeting of goods, and company competition are all part of the
process of developing close links between social and commodity
difference (Forty 1986; Haug 1986), but the relationship is not simple. The predictions of academics such as Galbraith (1979) and several varieties of Marxist critic (e.g. Ewen and Ewen 1982), who emphasized the corporate control of capitalism, may not have been fulfilled. From the 1920s through to the 1960s, commerce, influenced by factors such as economies of scale, attempted to construct a highly predictable, homogenized and consistent market, which would allow for longer factory runs and high profitability. This is clearly reflected in the advertising of the period which was designed to break down local, ethnic and other customary sub-divisions in the population (Leiss 1983: 19). Commerce was thereby attempting to create a world mirrored in modernist imagery of science-fiction, a future in which all forms of ethnic or regional particularity have been suppressed and replaced by a homogeneous, ‘designed’ population. Observers who lived through the fifties may have seen it as representing the triumph of the logic of technocracy.

In recent years, however, the expected continuity of this trajectory has been called into question. The rise of a new diversity in the market has produced a curious shift in production. Factories have had to move from long runs of identical goods to much shorter runs providing specific forms for increasingly fluid target populations. Given the new ethnicity (e.g. Smith 1981), and the dissolution of the major accepted gender-based models, this diversity seems set to increase. This has led to a less predictable, and for advertising, often less ‘addressable’, population. Naturally, commerce has adapted to such changes. The microchip embedded in industrial machinery now allows for much smaller runs and maintains profits (Murray 1985), but this ability to adapt does not reduce the degree to which industrial production appears to have had to follow rather than dictate these elements of social change.

Academic approaches to modern diversity are almost always condemnatory. Diversity is taken to represent a new superficiality and an alienated form of existence, lacking both authenticity and depth. A number of versions of this critique have recently come together through the development of the term ‘post-modernism’, which has become a means of both defining and condemning this feature of modernity (e.g. Jameson 1984). The history of academic analysis suggests that such approaches, evident, for example, in many of the Frankfurt School writings, seem destined to end in nihilism and elitism. Most common among them is an evaluative or aesthetic stance based on a view of authenticity found in the narrow definitions of culture which assign the label ‘authentic’ to the fine arts, opera and literature on the one hand, and to the music hall or a particular form of labour on the other.

Although on the surface such definitions appear to be evaluations of taste and style, they are always in effect denigrations of those people who are associated with the ‘other’ material and expressive forms. One social group condemns kitsch and soap opera, along with the mass interest in Benidorm or supermarkets; the other is appalled by the mass middle-class culture devoid of any true sense of ‘history’ or even of the present. In effect, only small minorities may be equated with the ‘genuine’ cultures of leisure or poverty. This antipathy to middle-class or inauthentic working-class culture may, however, extend to around three-quarters of Britons today. The alternative is to concentrate upon precisely this ‘unpopular’ culture: the do-it-yourself warehouses, the bingo halls, the fitted kitchens and the ‘inauthentic’ rag-bag and plurality of identities which make up most people’s lives. A similar set of problems would arise if these were treated as positive and authentic simply because they represent mass or popular culture; but it is nevertheless essential to recognize that, however we perceive them, they constitute the major forms taken by contemporary industrial culture. As such, they need to be analysed as specific forms, and not merely dismissed as a fragmented descent from some primitive authenticity of the ‘subjects’ of classic anthropology, nor as merely the symbol of capitalist oppression, nor yet as the mere surface of a superficial era.

Perhaps the major shortcoming of many theories of the concept of culture is that they identify culture with a set of objects, such as the arts in themselves, rather than seeing it as an evaluation of the relationship through which objects are constituted as social forms. For such theories mass populations may be regarded as themselves inauthentic because of the supposed status of their associated environment as, for example, a capitalist or post-modernist culture. Culture, as this book will attempt to demonstrate, is always a process and is never reducible to either its object or its subject form. For this reason, evaluation should always be of a dynamic relationship, never of mere things.

The mirror image of an analysis of objects in themselves is the assumption that society and social relations exist in themselves. The foundation of this defence of the ‘seriousness’ of modern mass culture is, then, the refusal to isolate it as a symbol or a derivative of some prior set of social relations. Most critics of mass culture tend to assume that the relation of persons to objects is in some way vicarious, fetishistic or wrong; that primary concern should lie with direct social relations and ‘real’ people. The belief underlying this attitude is often that members of pre-industrial societies, free of the burden of artefacts, lived in more immediate natural relationship with each
other. This kind of academic criticism extends the distaste evident in colloquial discourse for materialism as an apparent devaluation of people against commodities. I shall question the implication that separable real selves and authentic classes are to be found. I shall argue that people cannot be reified under the concept of 'society' outside of their own cultural milieu. Indeed, much of the first half of this book will be devoted to an attempt to transcend the dualism implied in the very concept of 'society'.

Summary of the Argument

This book is divided into three sections: the first, comprising chapters two to five, sets out the general approach through an examination of the concept of 'objectification'; the second, comprising chapters six and seven, is devoted to the specific nature of the object as artefact; and the third, comprising chapters eight to ten, develops an approach to modern mass consumption. Each section utilizes a particular style and methodology, which it may be helpful to have introduced here, together with a summary of the contents.

The key term in the first section is 'objectification', which will be developed as an initial model to which a series of analyses will be compared. The term is used to describe a series of processes consisting of externalization (self-alienation) and sublation (reabsorption) through which the subject of such a process is created and developed. These processes are first abstracted from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and are then used as the basis for a theory of culture. Since this abstraction proceeds by isolating certain elements of Hegel's work while ignoring the surrounding context within which these ideas were developed, the approach, although taken from a specific source, could not be termed Hegelian. As with all of the authors subsequently discussed, the abstraction of a set of particular ideas will be a somewhat violent one, which may involve the rejection of much of the author's contextual argument, terminology and exemplification. This procedure is justified by the contention that both Hegel and the later authorities have captured something in their use of these central ideas which is not dependent upon the particular manner in which they have developed them, but which may be used to construct another meaning through the accretive insights of diverse usages in various domains.

The third chapter is devoted to what might otherwise be a severe problem for any contemporary attempt to use the term objectification as a tool of analysis. This arises because of the strong association in modern parlance of that term with a specific form of Marxist analysis emphasizing the rupture in social relations through which people are effectively reduced to objects, and objects in turn interpose themselves in relationships between people. This interpretation of Hegel's work will be rejected, and the processes which are described under the term objectification will be retained as a positive model of the subject's potential development, rather than as a negative critique of a rupture in any such development. However, while rejecting this particular form of Marxist analysis as an approach to these questions, many other aspects of Marx's grounding of the philosophical abstractions of Hegel in the actual practices of ordinary peoples will be adopted.

Chapter four moves on to consider the discipline of social anthropology, and establishes the concept of objectification as culture in a non-industrial context. It examines Munn's work on the iconography of a group of Australian aborigines and on the Melanesian kula exchange system. Once again, certain striking parallels may be found: not only is the concept of cultural form developed by the anthropologist reflected in the model of culture as objectification, but there is also evidence that a similar model of such processes is held by the peoples amongst whom the anthropologist has lived and worked. The material is important not only for identifying these parallels at an abstract level, but also because it can be applied to the analysis of the construction and use of the external world of objects, and because it asserts the absolute necessity of culture for the establishment of all human relations, and discredits the idea that the relationship between people and the things they construct in the physical world is separable from some prior form of social relation.

The final chapter in the first section moves back to a more direct encounter with Hegel's ideas since the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the model behind the core text for discussion within this chapter: *The Philosophy of Money* by the sociologist Georg Simmel. Since Simmel remains one of the very few authors who have specifically addressed the question of the quantitative rise of material culture and its consequences, he provides an important bridge between the first section of the present work and the remainder of the book. Furthermore, his ideas have influenced one of my main arguments: that is, an assertion of the intrinsically contradictory nature of industrial society and the impossibility of resolving the conflict inherent in that culture. This will, however, be used to construct a positive, rather than, as with Simmel, a tragic, reading of the possibilities of social development.
The idea of intrinsic and irresolvable contradiction will be used to legitimize a consistent rejection of that Romanticism which stems from a belief that the goal of academic study is the development of a model of society as a coherent totality. In different ways this Romanticism underlies Hegel's absolute knowledge, Marx's Communism, and Simmel's appeal to aesthetics, as well as many later developments in European social theory (Jay 1984). Rather than attempting to propose some utopian end to history, the emphasis will be on the means of living with an inevitable contradiction.

The rather unusual style of analysis of the first section may be accounted for by the dearth of writings sharing a similar perspective to the present study. The method employed is to examine a series of texts by authors who saw themselves as working on quite different issues, but whose ideas are here reinterpreted in order to consider their implications for the concerns outlined above. It is suggested that, although the authors were working in different disciplines on a variety of topics, a series of parallels underlies their texts (as with Piaget and Klein, discussed in chapter 6), which suggests that they were drawn towards a common perspective which may be argued through abstraction to be addressed to the nature of culture.

This attempt to show that texts on one topic may offer insights into a quite different subject results in what may be considered an extremely cavalier treatment of the authors concerned. Such a view is justified in so far as my intention is not to present a balanced representation of the authors' position which would satisfy both themselves and the field within which they worked, but rather to abstract very particular elements of their arguments, distributing emphasis quite differently than is usual, and in a sense rewriting the argument in the light of another goal. I am not concerned, then, to consider or assess the authors in the light of their own history, or the development of their discipline at the time. My overall aim is to gain a better understanding of material culture, not of Hegel or Murnm themselves. What all these texts have in common, however, is a very great profundity in their analysis of their respective problems, with which little can compare in the specific area of material culture studies. As a result of this profundity, these texts offer ideas and models which transcend their specific dilemmas and may be employed in discussion of questions the authors themselves may never directly have considered.

The second section, consisting of two chapters, turns from analysis of such academic texts to consideration of the more specific consequences of the materiality of the object as artefact. The approach to culture in general developed in the first section is thereby narrowed to the problem of the artefact as a single example of cultural form. In chapter 6, an attempt is made to address directly the implications of the materiality of the artefact. First, psychological and psychoanalytic studies are examined which suggest a particular place for the object in the development of the subject, underlining certain implications of the discussions of play in order to suggest affinities between language and consciousness as against the artefact and the unconscious.

There follows a more general discussion of the differences between words and things, and an examination of the close relationship between the object, its context and its place in social reproduction as represented by the arguments of the French social anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu. A number of the points raised suggest reasons for the comparative neglect of artefactual studies in academia; providing the background to chapter 7 in which, following a general survey of material culture studies, a somewhat elliptical approach is taken to the artefact in its context. The importance of considering the artefact as such is argued mainly, not in the abstract, but through examination of a number of more familiar fields of inquiry such as function, exchange, space and style. Case studies are shown to offer illustrations of the specific consequences of the physicality of material culture for investigations which would otherwise have tended to ignore this particular aspect of their own evidence.

The view of the object as embedded in specific cultural contexts is fundamental to the third section, which is concerned with mass consumption as the major constitutive arena in which the relationship of people to artefacts is determined in contemporary industrial societies. It is argued that consumption has suffered a neglect in our assessment of history (for example that of Britain over the last three centuries) comparable in some ways to the neglect of the artefact itself, and not unrelated in cause. Disciplines such as marketing which are concerned with present-day consumption are found to provide for very specific interests mainly devoted to the point of sale; by contrast, there has recently developed in social anthropology a degree of concern with consumption as a larger and less transient social process, a dominant influence within which has been a form of analysis in which differences in artefacts become grounded in social distinctions. Particular consideration is given to the book Distinction (Bourdieu 1984).

Chapter 9 continues the trend towards particularity of analysis by summarizing a series of studies of the objects of modern consumption ranging from children's sweets to semi-detached houses. Such micro-studies are contrasted to a trend in modern social theory arising in particular from post-structuralism and from the critique of
OBJECTIFICATION

post-modernism, both of which tend towards a global critique of 'modern' society, usually under a general term such as 'capitalism' or the 'sign'. It is argued that these global approaches almost always move from an attack on contemporary material culture as trivial or inauthentic to an implied (though rarely explicit) denigration of the mass of the population whose culture this is. By contrast, the analysis of particular domains of consumption provided in this chapter allows for a more sensitive discrimination between those elements of consumption which appear to generate close social relations and social groupings (such as those among children or neighbourhoods) and those which, by analogy with the critique of ideology, appear to act to prevent sections of the population from representing their interests, and to suppress any expression of those perspectives which might help to develop such interests.

It will be clear that the overall argument progresses through highly diverse material and foci. The justification for such an eclectic approach is provided in chapter ten, in which the original theoretical and philosophical model is reanalysed in terms of the artefact as the object of mass consumption. It is argued that contemporary society consists of a series of extremely abstract arenas of social and material order, including commerce, academia, the state and other major institutions. These have arisen in part as the means of producing vast quantities of artefacts, which are in turn distributed through mechanisms such as the market or government services. The scale of contemporary productive and distributive institutions is such that they are commonly the target of that general analysis of modernity which defines the growth of social complexity in terms of 'fragmentation', 'abstraction' or 'inauthenticity', all of which are posed as major dilemmas and threats to modern life. Here, however, it is noted that such institutions are essential to a number of developments which are the foundation for all progressive tendencies in modern society, and that although they are never assimilable in themselves they must be preserved. Propositions for a future society involving the elimination or fading away of massive and abstracted institutions such as industrial production or the state are rejected. Since, however, these remain by definition abstract, and since they all include tendencies towards an autonomy in which separate interests (for example, as capitalism or state power) may emerge as forces almost entirely deleterious to the interests of the mass population, the argument highlights a central contradiction intrinsic to modern society: namely, how to retain the advantages offered by the existence of such institutions while avoiding their potential dangers.

INTRODUCTION

It is suggested that this contradiction may be partially resolved through the use of these very products, that is the vast quantity of goods and services created by industrial culture. There may be mechanisms which permit the positive appropriation of these goods by, and at the level of, the inevitably pluralistic, small-scale communities which make up the population. This appropriation takes place through an expanded process of consumption by means of which goods and services are distanced from the abstracted and alien, but necessary, institutions in which they originate, and are recast as inalienable cultural material. It is argued that this process of consumption is equivalent to the Hegelian concept of sublation as the movement by which society reappropriates its own external form—that is, assimilates its own culture and uses it to develop itself as a social subject. So, far from being merely an extension of those social conditions and relations generated by the organization of production, consumption is, at least potentially, their negation. I also show to be unfounded the assumption that an increasing orientation towards goods is itself inevitably inimical to the development of communal and egalitarian social relations of a positive nature. Such a perspective must complement the proper concerns with macro-political forces if large-scale political changes are to be understood in relation to their effect on social practices, and not just as academic abstractions. It is not argued that this is a description of all contemporary consumption practices, many of which are very far from expressing any such goals, but rather that these are immanent in the nature of mass consumption, and that, depending upon the outcome of particular social strategies, they may be identified and learnt from even within existing society.

This depends, however, upon a view of consumption quite different from that which is current and colloquial. Consumption is considered here as a process having the potential to produce an inalienable culture. This assumes a recognition that our culture is increasingly a material culture which must in some way be made an instrument of social progression. It is further argued that, while consumption is generally considered to be of greatest consequence and at the same time most oppressive under the conditions of capitalism, it is also the single major means of living with the societal contradictions which would pertain under the conditions of either existing or possible socialism (given that this is taken to be a social order associated with the equitable distribution of goods and services and dominated by a socially concerned planning system, as opposed to the relatively unconstrained operation of the market). Under such conditions of socialism, the role of consumption as outlined above would become even more crucial to possibilities for positive social reproduction.
This argument contains within itself certain limits as a theoretical analysis. Theory itself is identified with those series of abstractions associated with the modern institution, while consumption by contrast is identified with a series of practices which are by their very nature embedded and particularistic. The conclusion therefore points towards an anthropology of consumption. Even under contemporary political and economic conditions, the ideal of consumption outlined here may be found to be practised by at least certain sections of the population in particular contexts, although this ideal coexists with a form of consumption expressive only of individual greed, class oppression and mass alienation. An anthropology would therefore seek to identify those conditions which appear to promote, as opposed to those which appear to prevent, the development of the positive forms of consumption as a process. Yet although research may be instrumental in identifying and encouraging these conditions, they must always in the final instance depend upon the development of mass movements.

In conclusion, an approach to modern society which focuses on the material object always invites the risk of appearing fetishistic, that is of ignoring or masking actual social relations through its concern with the object per se. In this book, an attempt is made to develop a non-dualistic model of the relations between people and things. This is achieved by approaching objectification as a process of development in which neither society nor cultural form is privileged as prior, but rather seen as mutually constitutive. When cast in terms of the contemporary political economy, such an approach sheds new light on the place of the artefact within the process of mass consumption as an essential element in the construction of both present and possible societies. By uncovering a model for consumption as a progressive possibility, a critical understanding of society may be achieved, founded upon an image based less upon what industrial culture has forced us to become than upon what it might allow us to be.

Hegel and Objectification

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

The sources for the ideas used in this volume to construct a theory of material culture are various. Several of them are, however, united in that although they appear to relate to quite discrete bodies of material and to provide different theoretical emphases and conclusions, they derive at least in part from a common inspiration. This is the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (or 'Mind' in some translations) by G. W. Hegel, first published in 1807 (here 1977). This is perhaps the single most influential work in modern philosophy and social theory, and a large number of major studies including works by the early Marx, Simmel, Lukács and Sartre, have been modelled more or less directly upon it. Some of these texts will be discussed below. Many of Hegel's ideas have been further elaborated in the phenomenological tradition within philosophy, while a larger number of studies may have taken over the basic structure of Hegel's work without perhaps realizing this, or without being acquainted with their source, so pervasive have Hegel's ideas become.

Defining Hegel as a starting point is in one sense false. Hegel was not himself the originator of many of the ideas commonly ascribed to him. Many were developed in their modern form by earlier and contemporary philosophers such as Fichte. The work of many of these philosophers in turn may be more easily understood when analysed in the light of ideas which had previously been developed in theological seminaries. In fact, Hegel's work forms part of an important movement which effectively secularized theological arguments concerning the relationship between God and humankind. Religious ideals and methods are strongly present in Hegel and, through him, in many of those who were deeply influenced by the *Phenomenology* (Kolakowski 1978: 11–39).

The intention of the present discussion is to abstract relatively few elements from the *Phenomenology*, rather than to follow previous
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The argument which began with the abstraction of a concept of objectification from Hegel has led to the analysis of specific cases of contemporary mass consumption such as semi-detached housing and clothing fashions. The purpose of this final chapter is to complete the circle by using the implications of the case material on consumption as recontextualization to reformulate the concept of objectification as an approach to contemporary consumption. The term objectification was considered initially in relation to a set of ideas concerning the resolution of the subject–object dichotomy derived from an aspect of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The abstraction is only partial, however. Unlike the term dialectic, which signifies the use of a particular form of logic, the concept of objectification, as developed here, is always grounded in some notion of culture. Hegel represents only one source for the meaning of this term, which was later transformed through its exemplification in a variety of studies of human development and cultural relations, all of which were concerned with the development of a given subject through its creation of, or projection on to, an external world, and the subsequent introjection of these projections.

In this chapter, an attempt will be made to associate modern British society with a particular phase in such a Hegelian scheme. It will be argued that, during the period since Marx, social conditions have changed to such a degree that any translation of Hegel must advance a stage beyond Marx’s original reformulation. As with Marx’s analysis of capitalism, the present analysis will be compared with periods in the *Phenomenology* such as the unhappy consciousness, which are marked by an inability to recognize the social nature of social productions, and a series of competing philosophies and practices which threaten to submerge human and social interest beneath several over-autonomous and reified abstractions. Finally, some suggestions will be made as to how we might progress from this period of unhappy consciousness and regain the possibilities immanent in the development of the subject, that is, society.

The return to Hegel is based on the premise that perspectives he developed may still be enlightening today. His work provides the foundation for an examination of subject–object relations which avoids reductionism to either of these two, and at the same time captures the dynamic nature of the historical context in which these relations operate. Hegel subsumed the Kantian concept of an external world which is, in part at least, only constituted through the particular manner of its appropriation, but he did so without reducing this merely to the static mechanisms of mind. He provides for the dynamic construction of these structuring mechanisms within the process of appropriation itself. The spectrum covered by the *Phenomenology* ranged from the individualist psychology of the expanding consciousness, through to the objective context of laws, history, morality, and social relations. In terms of the particular problems of today it did so in a manner which echoes the helter-skelter thrust towards diversity and variability characteristic of modern life.

Perhaps the most attractive feature of Hegel’s ideas is that they are essentially positive. They assume the development of the subject as desirable, and although their pseudo-evolutionist implications may now seem antiquated, they allow us to identify with a subject as progressive. They thereby provide the foundation for a form of critical analysis which opposed the status quo not merely by representing it as repressive, but also by comparing it with what could be, with the immanent possibilities of the present. Although in their original form they sometimes tended towards conservativism in their appraisal of the Prussian state, when abstracted as objectification their critical potential was indicated most forcibly by the early writings of Marx. When developed further as a concept, objectification may become highly atypical of modern theory. It plays emphasis on a cultural context for its realization, but its dependence upon some concept of a developing subject refuses the allure of extreme relativism lost either in theory or empiricism. It provides for a progressive development which feeds on diversity without tending towards nihilism. Its insistence that the products of culture will ultimately be known as our own creations which can be encompassed at some future stage, resists the attraction of the tragic.

In brief, the model insists that a subject cannot be envisaged outside the process of its own becoming. There is no *a priori* subject which acts or is acted upon. The subject is inherently dynamic, reacting and developing according to the nature of its projections and experience.
As an intrinsic part of being, and in order to attempt an understanding of the world, the subject continually externalizes outwards, producing forms or attaching itself to the structures through which form may be created. All such forms are generated in history, which is the context within which that subject — generally some social fraction — acts. As a cultural theory, these forms may include language, material culture, individual dreams, large institutions or concepts such as the nation state and religion. In time, depending upon historical conditions, these externalizations may become increasingly diverse and abstract. Although the subject may at certain periods appear lost in the sheer scale of its own products, or be subject to the cultural mediation of a dominant group, and thus fail to perceive these cultural forms as its own creations, the tendency is always towards some form of reappropriation through which the external can be sublated and therefore become part of the progressive development of the subject.

Although not necessarily implied in Hegel's own use of these ideas, such a return to the subject may be taken as a return to essentially human values from a period in which goals, values and ideas are dominated by a logic stemming from the interests produced by the autonomy of external forms created as culture. This interpretation will be applied in the present work. Society progresses through the creation of external forms, which may be either, as with the Australian aboriginals of the ethnographic literature, concepts or complex institutions embedded in ritual and social structures, or else, as in Britain, of an increasingly material nature. In the former case, the model of objectification as culture, while not static, does not have the element of modernization which leads to ever increasing expansion, as is found in post-industrial societies. These externalizations always threaten to develop autonomous momentum. Within the concept of objectification lurks a Frankenstein image of a model, once externalized, turning away from and then against its human creators, as in Marx's theory of capitalism as rupture. Society in its various manifestations is always striving to reappropriate culture, and thereby progress, a drive sustained by the feelings of estrangement generated by such a condition of rupture. The term 'human values' is defined tautologically as that which contributes to the progressive tendency of society.

**Marx and Simmel**

The attempts by Marx and Simmel to use Hegel as the basis for a theory of modernity were investigated in the first part of this book. In the case of Marx, the privileging of production as the sole site of self-alienation was rejected, as was the notion of communism, which, along with Hegel's original concept of absolute knowledge and all other Romantic versions of the end of history, was argued to be spurious as both a theoretical and a practical solution. Simmel, by contrast, used Hegel to provide a model of the increasingly abstract nature of modern culture based upon the quantitative and abstract nature of money. He also addressed the issue of increasing diversity in terms of the quantitative rise of material culture and its implications. Although Marx is far more explicit about his use of Hegel, Simmel comes closer to the transformation envisaged here. This comparison is misleading, however, in so far as certain central tenets of Marx's moral philosophy, and the attack on class and exploitation, had, by Simmel's time, become firmly integrated into the more general humanistic outlook, and are implicit in, for example, the comparable works of Durkheim and Weber. These are goals which the present work attempts to espouse, notwithstanding the critique of some of Marx's more academic structural reasoning.

The views of both Marx and Simmel concerning the progressive nature of capitalism are clear, though the latter tends to reduce this to the impact of money and impersonal relations. They agree that it has reduced the obligatory ties of the feudal era and is, by implication, the necessary foundation for any modern concept of freedom. In Marx's case, the freedom promised by capitalism is an illusion, since it is wrested away by the capitalist from the people and becomes merely the freedom of the wage labourer to be exploited by the capitalist. I take the stress in Marx's analysis to be based largely on an opposition to the illiberalism of the bourgeois, rather than, as in much contemporary Marxism, mainly an assault on its liberalism. Simmel also notes the alienation consequent upon the rise of abstract relations, but sees this as the inevitable contradiction in abstraction itself, both freeing and estranged. Some of the differences between Marx and Simmel may be the result of the period of time which separated them.

The single historical moment clearly dominating Marx's entire perspective is the industrial revolution. He and Engels witnessed the extremes of degradation and trauma this produced, and, although they could perceive more clearly than their contemporaries the progressive implications of such a transformation, this insight was correctly subordinated to the immediate dilemma of the suffering and exploitation which had been the particular means of its accomplishment in Britain. The resulting bitter condemnation of the dehumanizing practices of the day resulted, however, in support for an essentially
conservative view of the place of production. Its paramount importance in the construction of social relations was simply inferred from recent history. The supersession of the present condition was embodied for Marx and many writers of the time in a series of utopian notions which, in many cases, looked back for their models to pre-industrial relations between the people and the means of production, there being no alternative guide to the future.

At the time Simmel was writing, although it was before the major scientific revolutions of this century, the image of the industrial revolution was less immediate than the overwhelming sense of its products. Although many of the conditions described by Marx and Engels still obtained, the possibility of an industry which did not extract the maximum work out of labour for the minimum wage was evident. Simmel was more impressed with the extent to which mass consumption had become a feature of modern urban life, expanding the material environment beyond all expectations. He describes this moment of modernity as a new diversity and abstraction, which perhaps only became evident when the middle class, rising in size and scope, began to create its distance from commerce and from the specificity of production. The taste complexes described by Elias in *The Court Society*, evolving from the ancient court regime with its princes and aristocracy, were being replaced by that mass struggle over reputation and social position which would emerge as the society described by Bourdieu. With Simmel, then, a similar concern with estrangement and abstraction took the form of the problematic use of this new commodity world, rather than being based entirely on the exploitation of labour.

Today, in the late 1980s, we are still further in time from Simmel than Simmel was from Marx. The changes which have taken place in this century are at least as great and have had consequences at least as important as those which overwhelmed Marx and Simmel. Although many governments continue to assert the direct applications of Marx's philosophical and political perspectives, the very concept of praxis indicates that these must be subject to transformation through the impact of historical change. Taking a global perspective, there are areas today which may be seen as analogous with that part of European history experienced by these writers. The profundity of Marx's model is perhaps greatest in the context of revolutionary movements in the Third World. As a theory of multinational or local exploitation of a labour force, it is perhaps more important in these contexts today than it ever was in Britain in 1850, since the sophistication of international capitalism is such that there seems little possibility of much of the world escaping from its position as underdeveloped, except through violent revolution. This is not always the case. India, for example, has resisted the pressures which would have made it merely the working ground for external capitalism, but India has vast resources on which to draw in such a struggle.

In Britain, however, many of Marx's assumptions appear to have been greatly weakened by the praxis of historical change. The idea that wages are merely intended to cover the demands of social reproduction is unconvincing, as are those functionalist analyses which regard the welfare state as simply the latest extension of capitalist instrumentality (e.g. Castells 1977). The labour theory of value, which, as employed by Marx, postulated productive work as the sole source of value, is even less convincing today than it was when it was first formulated. The idea that surplus value is merely the appropriation of human labour takes no account of the vast impact of the scientific revolution, since it cannot be applied to the age of the microchip, of machines which often make the physical nature of human labour itself entirely redundant. Indeed, at one point in the *Grundrisse*, Marx perceived this consequence of the imposition of science on to his own equation (quoted in Habermas 1972: 48–50). The worker as de-skilled machine appendage is increasingly replaced by the robot. If a quarter of the population still works in direct manufacturing, this leaves a large majority who probably never have, and there is little prospect of industrial production expanding its use of human resources. This is not to deny the continuity of class and inequality, which have made increasing use of the education system for their reproduction; but even such evidence of continued inequality as, for example, the demonstration that the welfare state has continually provided proportionally more aid to the better-off (Le-Grand 1982) does not contradict the general rise in material prosperity of society as a whole over the last century, such that the average contemporary industrial worker may possess a greater wealth of material goods and machines which perform servile tasks than the average member of the middle class in the nineteenth century.

Any progressive developments since the time of Marx have arisen from several causes, among which the beneficent attitude of capital is not numbered. Capital itself attempts to serve its own interests as greedily and as totally as it has always done. Three factors of particular importance may be singled out. First, the trade union movement has achieved enormous advances in the interests of labour, but only through continual struggle and the ability of working people to undergo self-sacrifice and deprivation to ensure the representation of their interests. The second factor is the impact of socialism itself, stemming from Marx, but also from more pragmatic and reformist
inspirations, which have provided models and goals. These have tended to operate through the growing power of the state as the instrument through which certain excesses of capitalism could be countered, and, in the case of the fully socialist state, radically transformed. Today, therefore, the academic writings of Marx are complemented by the histories of a large number of explicitly socialist states and mixed economies, in their successes and their failures.

The third, and for the present argument most important, factor is the central contradiction of capitalism in which the labourer represents, in his or her other role as consumer, the market necessary for the goods produced by capitalism. However opposed capital and labour may appear in the struggle of wages against profit, for capitalism to achieve its goals, and, its sales, it is necessary for the labourer to buy and to continue to desire more goods. When the labour force does not represent the market, the interests of the two groups are totally antagonistic, but when the labour force is the market the relationship becomes more ambiguous. In this respect, the labourers' fight against capital has always depended upon their acquiescence in the capitalist's desire to sell; that is, they 'agree' to fight for higher wages which may then be used for purchasing. With the decline of colonialism, British industry has had to take particular cognizance of its own people as its major market. The desire to repress wages is offset by the profitability achievable through economies of scale in mass production. When this happens, a certain identity of interests between capital and labour may appear. This may be illustrated by postulating a scenario in which capital is always forced merely to produce that which its own labour force as consumers demanded from it in the way of goods. This subservience of capital to the demands of the labourer could still serve the interests of capital, since it would no longer produce unprofitable, in the sense of unwanted, products, providing that consumer demand continued to expand. This potential identity of interests may have proved as important historically as the much more accepted historical antagonism between labour and capital, and is an essential premise for the possibilities of socialism.

The Unhappy Consciousness

The concept of unhappy consciousness denotes periods of dichotomized subject-object relations resulting from the inherently contradictory nature of a number of aspects of modern society. This may occur, in part, because these contradictions are not perceived as such, but are merely experienced as the kind of oppression signified in the anomie of Durkheim or the bais and cynical attitudes described by Simmel. This makes the roots of that oppression harder to identify, and we become unable to recognize our own place either in the creation of these oppressive structures or, potentially, in their partial resolution (since the contradictions are inherent, resolutions are always partial and must always be maintained rather than simply achieved).

The first source of this modern dilemma is the continued rise of mass industrial production and commerce. The contradiction lies in the nature of industry as revealed by history. On the one hand, industry has created all those products upon which modern life is based. Without the car or bus, the phone, the paperback, the health service, the television, the mass produced architecture, modern urban life is impossible to envisage. The twentieth century has seen the original industrial revolution enormously expanded, as scientific advances are continually translated into new goods. There is little sign that most of the populace wish for anything other than a continual increase in the availability of such products and the benefits felt to be received by their possession. Such benefits are by no means limited to material or technological advances, but, as is evident in all the anthropological investigations of mass consumption, are mainly based on the possibilities they present for the expansion of society, its forms and relations. There is little reason to think that a return to craft production on a large scale would produce more than a radical restriction of the availability of goods to elite sections of society. With growing ecological constraints future expansion will come increasingly from scientific innovation rather than new physical resources.

The extension of industry is complemented by that of commerce and monetarization. The importance of money as part of the general expansion of quantification and abstract logic is such that it is probably the main medium through which we think mathematically in everyday life. Simmel's argument that money is the basis of modern freedom and that the complexities and choices represented in our society are impossible even to envisage without it, seems entirely applicable today. Also still evident is the contradiction that money goes beyond serving evident human interests and becomes, as 'capital', an interest in itself, in which people are reduced to questions of profit and efficiency. The instrument of capital is industry run on the logic of profitability, and the accepted criterion for successful industry is almost entirely the expansion of capital rather than the impact of its products. Marx showed clearly that, left to itself, this logic tends to separate the market of consumers from its own wage
labour, reducing the latter to the minimum wages necessary for social reproduction. This situation is most clearly developed through a new international division of labour, where workers in certain countries may be paid minimal wages since the market for their products is abroad. Where this separation could not be sustained, as in Britain, capitalism may still work towards a highly unequal distribution of its products.

The contradiction posed by industry, which lies in the positive nature of many of its products set against its historical tendency to follow its own autonomous interest rather than the interests of the people who create through it, has been partly responsible for the transformation of the second powerful contradictory force in modern society, that of the modern state. Whether or not the state developed to ensure the efficient working of capitalism as it expanded internationally, or to preserve the hegemony of a class, today the state appears as the only force large enough to attempt to redirect the aims of large-scale industry away from pure profit towards the interests of the population. Whether this is done on the massive scale of state socialism, or by means of the more limited but still extensive economic and social policies of the so-called mixed economies, the state appears in the twentieth century to have developed an increasingly large-scale interventionist role.

Just as money is the foundation for freedom, the state is the essential mechanism for the creation of equality. Although in certain societies it may serve as the instrument of capital, it is the only force which has the potential, given certain historical conditions and the requisite social agency, to restrain capitalism's natural tendency towards inequality, and, through redistributive mechanisms and legislative means, to create the conditions for the achievement of equality. Equality should not be defined in Rousseauist terms as a natural order intrinsic to humanity, a primitive condition. Rather, it is a highly abstract concept which probably could not be envisaged as a practical (as opposed to a theoretical) proposition without the prior development of a strong democratic state. The achievement of even a degree of equality is an extremely complex task requiring an enormous investment in bureaucracy, taxation and planning. It is, therefore, as essential to retain the services provided by the state, as the products provided by industry. Again, there appears to be a consensus of opinion in countries such as Britain in favour of some form of essential state services such as education and health, although arguments continue over degrees of intervention and the balance between state and private control.

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Though a means to human progression, the state is as liable as capital to become an autonomous institution which turns against society. In some socialist societies, equality amounts to homogenization and the complete suppression of liberal advancement or pluralistic diversity. The welfare state in Britain has also been increasingly regarded as an authoritarian force which suppresses the interests of precisely those it is intended to aid. This contradiction which is inherent in the state was most forcibly expressed in the writings of Weber on the development of bureaucratic authority (1974: 329–41), and during this century has appeared as an increasingly intractable dilemma.

If money is the basis of modern freedom, and the state for modern equality, then a third force which has seen commensurate growth, and which is promoted as an attempt to gain some modern understanding of these historical processes, is what might be called cultural modernism. The rise of science and quantification, and the continued destruction of previous ties, are all marked in the emergence of new modes of expression. These are most explicitly promoted in the arts, that is, modern literature, theatre and cinema, but are equally prominent in the styles of modern commercial goods. This force not only contributes to the rise of diversity and abstraction, but is increasingly the medium through which these are expressed and understood. For a considerable period, modernism seemed to be equated with largely benign and positive forces, such as the sciences, which were eliminating disease and poverty, or the avant-garde, which expressed the possibilities of the new age. Over the last two decades, however, the social disaster of the new built environment as the major expression of modernity, the image of an inaccessible modern art, plus the general perception of the amorality of the white-coated scientist dealing with the incomprehensible, have contributed to an overall sense of the other side of modernity as alien abstraction so brilliantly described by Simmel.

Although attempting to capture the advances of science in its notions of design, function and progress, modernism as an image may again lead to reification and lose any sense of the human nature of these creations. Hi-tech objects can become so functional in appearance that they no longer function particularly well for the user; art as high taste and education as knowledge become not instruments for understanding, but, as Bourdieu has shown, merely forms of obfuscation acting as instruments for the maintenance of class dominance. Knowledge is no longer used to develop, but to differentiate. Today, the negative side of scientific advancement is so forcibly expressed in the destruction of the natural environment, and in the threat of annihilation through atomic war, that it is doubtful whether the older positive image will return.
These three forces are illustrative of all these changes in society which have combined to create the condition of the unhappy consciousness of today. In all cases, these changes are based upon largely progressive and essential developments which provide the foundation for the unparalleled possibilities of modern life and the promise of socialism. The constant fight for higher wages by members of the work force at all levels cannot simply be reduced to a demand for the paypacket. It must always imply a demand for the purchase represented by those wages; that is, a continued demand for goods. For all the verbal attacks on modern goods, the more effective critique of practised asceticism is rarely encountered; that is to say, the private practices of many academic critics, amongst whom there are very few Gandhis and Tolstoy’s, may well contradict the substance of their argument. As anthropologists who have examined consumption have affirmed, it is impossible to isolate a range of ‘authentic’ goods serving ‘real’ needs (e.g. Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Sahlins 1976a). The political interventions made by the left may almost always be translated as a demand for services in a wide variety of social groups, and for state intervention in the redistribution of resources, which implies the continuance of a mass industrial base and bureaucracy to secure the means for such provisions.

The period of unhappy consciousness is one in which we recognize the negative and abstract nature of these forces as oppressive, but fail to realize that these negative conditions are the outcome of a whole series of historical developments which we otherwise regard as positive and essential to our well being. Certain of the most evident signs of alienation, such as the pressures of mass advertising, the level of inequality and the imposed modernist form so contrary to mass aesthetics and desires, might all be altered through positive political action. This would not itself counter our inability to be reconciled with the deeper contradictions by which a bureaucracy demands some anonymity to act fairly, and in many other areas institutional practices have to consist in compromises rather than resolutions. Following the Hegelian logic, a recognition that the estranged conditions and feelings of alienation created by the rationalism and abstraction of the present are, to a considerable degree, an inevitable consequence of positive developments, might itself be a first step (though only a first step) towards the reappropriation of culture, but this implies a recognition that we are facing contradictions which have to be lived rather than removed. While the form taken by the contradictions outlined here are specific to contexts such as contemporary Britain, they relate to contradictions which are intrinsic, as Simmel indicated, to culture per se, and their equivalents may be found in quite different societies, such as in New Guinea or India.

Modern Consumption

Like the mass of material goods, consumption is examined at present in most of the critical social sciences only as an aspect of the general problem of commodities. Goods are seen, as indeed Simmel in part understood them, as part of the ever growing problem of abstraction and differentiation. Objective culture has become unimaginably vast, producing goods largely as symbols of wealth and fashion, often modes of oppressive social differentiation. The processes leading towards autonomy described above, command virtually all the channels through which we obtain such goods. The vast majority are purchased and are pure commodities in that the money spent on them could equally well have been spent on some other item out of the vast array. Baudrillard and the critics of post-modernism provide the clearest account of this sense of the complete interchangeability of things, implying also a reduction of human relations to this exchange cycle of style. In those cases when we do not obtain goods through direct purchase, the most common alternative source is the state, which may provide the house we live in, the range of furnishings, our education, the libraries, the sport facilities and so forth. Depending on one’s place in class and society, the state may be far more important than money as a source of goods. It is, however, comparable to money in making those goods symbols of an estranged and autonomous force which imposes itself on us as people who are eminently exchangeable one for another.

If this is the nature of the commodity, the interpretation of objectification it implies would still largely follow the two authors so far discussed. Wage labour may be more rewarding than it was, but the place of the labourer as part of the market – that is, as nothing more than the consumer of commodities bombarded by marketing and advertising (e.g. Williams 1980) – appears to follow a similar logic of estrangement. This increase in external form merely advances the first phase of self-alienation, extending the abstract and diverse nature of culture, which thus appears the more alien and the harder to assimilate. Whether because, following Hegel, we are unable to perceive, or, following Marx, objective conditions prevent us from achieving the conditions which would allow for the sublation of goods, the situation is clearly one of incomplete objectification as rupture, rather than of social development.

This is the approach to goods I wish to reject. It is an approach predicated on reducing consumption to the nature of the commodity, and the consumer to the process by which the commodity is obtained. In opposition to this argument is that perspective with focuses upon
the same problem, but sees it as one faced also by the consumer of goods, and which emphasizes the period of time following the purchase or allocation of the item. This alternative perspective is only possible because of the changing historical conditions in the period since Marx wrote, during which the mass of the population have reduced their time spent in labour and enormously increased their time spent in consumption.

As consumers, we confront these abstractions of money and the state most fully at the moment of obtaining goods. In the process of shopping, we have to immerse ourselves in this vast alienated world of products completely distanced from the world of production. We cannot while shopping relate a packet of potato crisps to the factory where it is made, in terms of either the people working there or the machines. At the moment of purchase, or allocation, the object is merely the property of capital or of the state from which we receive it. The individual may feel either estranged from this world of the shopping centre or public institution, or else excited by its scale and potential. Either way, the situation is radically transformed upon obtaining the goods in question.

On purchase, the vast morass of possible goods is replaced by the specificity of the particular item. The extraordinary degree of that item’s specificity becomes apparent when it is contrasted with all those other goods it is not. Furthermore, this specificity is usually related to a person, either the purchaser or the intended user, and the two are inseparable; that is, the specific nature of that person is confirmed in the particularity of the selection, the relation between this object and others providing a dimension through which the particular social position of the intended individual is experienced. This is the start of a long and complex process, by which the consumer works upon the object purchased and recontextualizes it, until it is no longer recognizable as having any relation to the world of the abstract and becomes its very negation, something which could be neither bought nor given. If the item is allocated by the state, then all specificity is a result of work done upon the object following its receipt.

Thus, consumption as work may be defined as that which translates the object from an alienable to an inalienable condition; that is, from being a symbol of estrangement and price value to being an artefact invested with particular inseparable connotations. Commerce obviously attempts to pre-empt this process through practices such as advertising which most often relate to objects in terms of general lifestyle, but this does not mean that advertising creates the demand that goods should be subsumed in this way, and these images should not be confused with an actal process performed as a significant cultural practice by people in society. Work in this sense does not necessarily mean physical labour transforming the object; it may signify the time of possession, a particular context of presentation as ritual gift or memorabilia, or the incorporation of the single object into a stylistic array which is used to express the creator’s place in relation to peers engaged in similar activities. The object is transformed by its intimate association with a particular individual or social group, or with the relationship between these.

Clearly, such work is not to be understood in the narrow sense of that which happens to a particular object after it is obtained, but has to include the more general construction of cultural milieux which give such objects their social meaning and provide the instrument employed in any such individual transformations. The work done on a pint of beer includes the whole culture of pub behaviour, such as buying rounds, as well as the development of an often long term association between the consumer and a particular beer, which excludes all other types of drink or brands identified with other social groups by gender, class, parochial affinity and so on. Such cultural practices cannot be reduced to mere social distinction, but should be seen as constituting a highly specific and often extremely important material presence generating possibilities of sociability and cognitive order, as well as engendering ideas of morality, ideal worlds and other abstractions and principles. Although, for some, the age of the pub and the authentic nature of the ‘real ale’ may be important, others may perceive an atmosphere of plastic facades, parodied images and the products of international breweries as more proper, unpretentious and tasteful. The aesthetics may be entirely relativistic; it is the social practices to which they are integral which make such activity consumption work. The ability to recontextualize goods is therefore not reducible to mere possession, but relates to more general objective conditions which provide access to the resources and degree of control over the cultural environment. As demonstrated in chapter 9, an ability to appropriate cannot be assumed, and relates to the more general inequalities evident in contemporary society. On occasion, as shown in the example of children’s sweets, the act of appropriation starts with the creation of the array of goods themselves.

In short, the modern process of consumption is a much neglected part of the great process of sublation by which society attempts to create itself through negation. Thus, far from being a mere commodity, a continuation of all those processes which led up to the object — that is, the mass abstractions which create objects as external forms — the object in consumption confronts, criticizes and finally
may often subjugate these abstractions in a process of human becoming. If a commodity is defined as the product and symbol of abstract and oppressive structures, then the object of consumption is the negation of the commodity. Although the object’s material form remains constant as it undergoes the work of consumption, its social nature is radically altered. This is not, of course, a description of all consumption or a realizable aim of all the participants in the modern economy, but what must be recognized is that it is immanent in consumption itself. That is to say, we must know that the work we do on the goods we purchase, or obtain, and the cultural networks with which we associate ourselves, can be understood in a similar vein to the work we do on the natural world. In consumption, quite as fully as in production, it is possible, through use of the self-alienation which created the cultural world, to emerge through a process of reappropriation towards the full project of objectification in which the subject becomes at home with itself in its otherness.

In our society, these two moments are inseparable; the same circumstance which constructs production as a moment of estrangement provides the conditions under which consumption as reappropriation appears possible. Even if work conditions are improved, the scale of production must make it unlikely that this could ever become again the main arena through which people can identify with self-constructed culture. In turn, the possibility for consumption emerges once goods are no longer perceived as mere commodities, but are understood as a major constituent of modern culture. From this, it will be shown that, ironically, it is only through the creative use of the industrial product that we can envisage a supersession of any autonomous interest called capitalism, and that only through the transformation of the state’s services can the state also be reabsorbed as an instrument of development. In short, consumption is a major factor in the potential return of culture to human values. As is explicit in the work of Hegel, progress cannot be through recapturing something simpler and past, but only through a new mastering of the enormity of the present.

To argue the necessity of goods is no more than to argue the necessity of culture. It is not, however, to assert the autonomy of culture. In chapter 3, it is argued that Marx, in attempting to redress Hegel’s emphasis on the high culture of philosophy and intellectually appropriated forms, and to ground these ideas in a wider notion of social relations of which social and economic conditions were an intrinsic feature, in practice subsumed culture as form within the play of social differentiation. This tendency has been taken still further by writings in the Durkheimian tradition and by later Marxists, which have reduced culture to merely the external reflection of the history of social conflicts and distinctions. In proposing consumption activity as the continual struggle to appropriate goods and services made in alienating circumstances and transform them into inalienable culture, the aim is to readjust a balance, but not to reduce the subject of history to a world of objects. The manner in which consumption is reformulated here as a process in terms of their place in which objects are always understood, does not permit a return to the simple study of individuals or objects per se. It continues the tradition of studying society in relational terms, but insists on a wider totality in which social relations are always cultural relations, and as such are always constituted within the sphere of what Hegel and Simmel argued were necessarily contradictory circumstances existing over and above social division and conflict.

In contemporary British society, and indeed, as well be argued later on, in any feasible socialist society, culture is generally purchased or allocated in the first instance, but this does not make it inferior to culture physically produced by the appropriation of nature. That is to say that society may construct itself in the appropriation of culture as much as in the transformation of nature. To refer to society as ‘constructing itself’ is to signify that these activities are based on historically given forms and peoples, and that both the subject and the object of this process are cultural, rather than natural, forms. This notion of the self as a cultural form constantly re-evaluated by social criteria is opposed to the concept of an essentialist natural self masked by the artificial nature of culture as commodity. This may be illustrated with reference to cosmetics. It is commonly argued that the real self is represented by the natural face which provides direct access to the person as he or she truly is, while to cover the face in cosmetics is to mask it in terms of a set of unrealizable ideals generally manufactured by the capitalist market or patriarchal society in which the authentic person has become submerged. Certain of these assertions relating to the predominantly single gender use of cosmetics and the interests of the market are undeniable (e.g. Myers 1982), but what is questionable is the implication that the effect of cosmetics is always to hide the ‘real’ person.

In contrast to this may be set the attitude of New Guinea highlanders to their own considerable use of self-decoration, including face painting, as analysed by Strathern [1979]. Here we have exactly the opposite conjecture. For the New Guinea highlander the natural face is relatively arbitrary; they see no reason why the fact that they are the equivalent of freckled or blond, pockmarked or conventionally handsome should be a direct representation of their
real selves. It is only when the face is something worked upon, through elaborate cosmetic preparations which provide an expression of the self constructed by the self, that they appear in their true guise to the observer. The moment when the British critic regards us as most covered up is precisely the moment when the New Guinea highlanders see themselves as lying naked before the world; it is here that aspects of their true self such as their cohesion with the community, or their state of health, will emerge, as revealed by their ability to construct an acceptable cultural self on the external face. The act of self-construction is therefore not totally controllable, but will reveal aspects of their relationship with the wider society which they might have wished to remain hidden. Although a self-construction, it is a social being which is made evident.

The Briton assumes an essentialist given self; the New Guinea highlander a culturally constructed self. But it may be noted that the New Guinea conception is not of the self as constructed entirely by external forces, as in the post-structuralist reading of the body as text; the medium may be conventional and historical, but it is the particular nature of its manipulation by a given individual which is significant for the future development of that person in society. Nor does it appear of great consequence if some of the items obtained, such as feathers and shells, are purchased with cash rather than salt, or are from birds shot with guns rather than arrows. For the highlander, therefore, culture is an objectification through which social relations are developed through being made manifest. This view is closer to that of Wilson (1985: 228–47), discussed in the last chapter. Wilson also rejects that notion of natural authenticity which is the premise behind a wide range of critical discussions, in favour of the active projection of the social being upon the body, and argues for the possibilities of pleasure as a radical activity against the implied asceticism of these critiques.

Returned to the context of modern Britian, this example shows the limitations of the debate between individualism and communal or social expressions (see also Abercrombie et al. 1986). Britain has a far larger mass culture, with far more extensive communal forms, than any New Guinea society, and probably also more explicit concepts of individualism. These are conventionally seen as alternatives, but they are actually both products of one set of differences between Britain and New Guinea. The image and extent of modern individualism is predicated upon the image and extent of communal mass society. They achieve their strength of imagery through contrast, which is merely the product of the inherent contradictions resulting from a process of objectification, that is, the making explicit through externalization of a self-understanding of individual and society in history. Attempts to create societies which are entirely promotions of either individualism or communalism are therefore both disastrous, since they reify one element of a single abstraction. Both extremes tend towards the dualism of subject–object relations which Hegel attempted to resolve.

The large-scale institutions which dominate industrial societies tend to create a sense of an encroaching force which retains control over us, and since such institutions work on the basis of superordinate decision-making which regulates our lives, they conflict with the equal sense of individual autonomy and freedom which is produced by that same force. It is the sense of institutional anonymity which provides us with our most potent image of the struggling, free individual. Indeed, the productive communality of a local or self-constructed community may be achieved in large part by the necessary subsumption of the individual to a group, in the interests of doing battle against these vast institutional forces. Just as these two sets of values are the results of two moments in the same productive process, so their resolution may in part be affected by examining them in terms of two moments of the consumption process.

The processes at the highest level of state organization must be those of quantitative assessment, technological efficiency and social control. Industry and the state could not be reduced to the small-scale, immediately accountable and approachable, without losing their ability to meet the vast demands of modern planning (which is not to say that they could not be more accountable than they are at present). These institutions can only be broken down to sufficiently small-scale elements to be able to fulfill the requirements and reflect the interests of, as well as being a locus of affectivity for, the population, if there is an increased concentration on the work, not of the bureaucracy, but of the people themselves on the products of the state and industry. It is at this stage that we find the extreme expressions of plurality, specificity and diversity which, although conceived of as the opposite image of the central productive sphere, are actually premised upon its very abstraction. These are often directly related, since the larger the plurality of interests served, the larger the scale of planning and organization required. In short, individualism and pluralism are premised upon their antithesis: the autonomous homogenized bureaucracy. A concern with the diverse populace is therefore served not through privatization — that is, switching from one abstracted institution, the state, to a far more invidious one, capitalism — but rather by concentrating on the articulation between the producers and consumers of goods and services.
The diversity of the products of this process of consumption is unlimited, since goods which are identical at the point of purchase or allocation may be recontextualized by different social groups in an infinite number of ways. If we assume the continued existence of large-scale industry employing people en masse, of large-scale institutions providing services en masse, and of a massive market for distribution, we must then consider the means by which people may find new ways of relating to these institutions and recontextualizing their products without reducing the scale, or altering the necessarily distanced nature, of these projects. Analysis of cooperatives, share allocations and so forth has provided abundant discussion of the implications of this problem with respect to the control over production, and, increasingly in recent years, with respect to welfare state services — that is, the consumer influence on the health service, education and involvement in local government. However, it is in the work done on goods at the level of mass consumption that this recontextualization has gone furthest in practice, and this area is the least studied and the least understood. This praxis may well offer lessons, however, for attempts to project plans for these other domains.

Mass Consumption and Equality

In evaluating the role of goods in the production of social relations, a difficulty arises from the common assumption that mass consumption is inextricably linked to the commodity form and is thereby supportive of only one particular social form, usually termed capitalist. This is despite the equal suitability of the label 'mass consumption' to societies as diverse as Britain, the Soviet Union and Japan. Embedded in a similar network of connotations is the supposition that, while activities such as work may provide the foundation for communal values, it is through consumption that individualist and competitive social relations, the 'bourgeois' private world, emerge. This forms part of the general critique of consumption as materialistic and individualistic. Although, in a society dominated by the market, private individually-oriented consumption practices based on the pursuit of money and affluent lifestyles are common, it is useful to question the degree to which the assumed links between consumption, individualism and inequality are intrinsic to the nature of consumption as an activity. The relationship between capitalism and individualism has recently come under scrutiny (Abercrombie et al. 1986). Clearly, leisure is commonly used as a means of expressing a
distance from the estranged conditions of work, and, by analogy with the building styles discussed in the last chapter, it can be argued that the enforced and artificial communality of the workplace is likely to produce an overtly private, self-controlled response in leisure practices. It does not follow, however, that this tendency is a necessary outcome of mass consumption.

The image of consumption as private and individualistic is closely tied to a further concern with its place in the production of social differentiation through taste, which has been emphasized in the tradition of consumption analysis represented by Veblen and Bourdieu. This major consequence of mass consumption is, of course, a thoroughly social activity, but its social nature is here predicated only upon its place as an agent in class oppression expressed through goods. In the following examples, by contrast, consumption can be examined as an intra-class phenomenon used in establishing social cohesion and normative order. These therefore serve to indicate a potential for consumption as a social practice contrary to that stressed in most accounts.

From the work of Engels in the nineteenth century to the long-running television soap opera Coronation Street today, the Lancashire town of Salford has been used as a model for the conditions of working-class life in British industrial centres. This more than justifies the title of Robert Roberts' (1973) description of growing up in the area as The Classic Slum. In a chapter on possessions, Roberts makes clear that, despite some of the worst poverty seen in Britain, there was a major domain of consumption in Salford which refused to be eliminated by the vicissitudes of the time. Over a long period of time, there had developed among the working class a concept of the parlour. Despite lack of space, this room was not used except on special occasions, but was reserved for displaying goods such as ornaments. The parlour does not seem to be a result of recent emulation of the middle class, but may rather relate to much older traditions. There is evidence of a similar concern with display in medieval Europe; in some cases it would appear that half the commoner's house was set aside for display purposes (Burke 1978). In the history of European house interiors, display appears generally to have been predominant over comfort (Braudel 1981: 306–11). Such evidence, based on a record of an industrial slum, is quite contrary to Bourdieu's representation of the 'true' worker as only interested in consumption of a very immediate nature, directly connected to basic demands.

Roberts describes the importance of the parlour, its care, furnishing, cleaning and decoration, among people who were pawning
clothing to get by from week to week. Indeed, it may be that working
people were devoting at least as high a proportion of their much more
limited free time and cash to display purposes as the contemporary
middle class who are more commonly associated with such activities.
This was not entirely undivisive, as it pertained to that section of the
working class who saw themselves as 'respectable', as against those who
were beyond the pale, but this is only to say that they were next to the
bottom of the social ladder. Recent work on the transference of
working-class families to new towns such as Harlow in the 1950s
suggests strong resistance by the occupants of these properties to the
plans of architects and designers, which imposed a quite different and
more restricting, spatial order, which the residents had then to adjust
for their own purposes and in terms of their own traditions (J. Attfield,
personal communication).

Such practices emerge with particular clarity in a recent ethnography
of the lives of working-class Norwegian women in the town of Bergen
(Gullestad 1984). Gullestad describes a world in which men play a
relatively small part. The women control the aesthetics of furnishing
and household arrangements, spending some considerable effort on
these, with the men helping through do-it-yourself work and repairs.
The women often undertake part-time work as childminders, cleaners
or shop sales staff, otherwise working as housewives and mothers.
They associate themselves with a particular social faction opposed to
the values of both the 'trendy' left-wing students and the 'posh' middle
classes, but are to some extend emulatory of the wealthier business
classes. As in Salford, they have a strong sense of respectability and
oppose those who fail to keep up standards through heavy drinking or
failing to look after children. They appear to have much stronger social
networks than the men, and although married, they go out to discos,
and have parties and their own clubs from which their husbands are
excluded. This social network is centred upon the custom of regularly
meeting to 'chat' around the kitchen table in mid-morning. Furnishing
is a major part of the context of these meetings, and they all work hard
to present their homes as suitable settings. There are, however, limits.
The women seem well aware of the possibility of furnishing and
cleaning becoming a vicarious and thus anti-social activity. Anyone
who carries on tidying in company, or is said to have 'dust on the brain'
is held as culpable. Furthermore, although there is clear interest in
evaluating different abilities in terms of home furnishing, there are
strong normative limits. An individual possessing more than average
money and ability would be cautious about overdoing her furnishing in
any way which would transform her from being a good example of her
social group to being apparently above and beyond her peers.

In this case, mass consumption goods are used to create the context
for close social networks of which they are an integral part. They help
to provide equalizing and normative mechanisms promoting solidar
and sociability. There are elements of this 'housewifery' which
are clearly problematic, just as class as context is problematic in other
analyses, but these cases do at least suggest that the quantitative
increase in material culture does not itself, even when purchased
through the capitalist market, mean that goods can only signify wealth
and therefore the competition of conspicuous consumption. It is
commonly ethnography, immersed in the everyday lives of the people
while being used to exemplify some academic argument, that appears
to counter the assumed 'truths' about, for example, the nature of new
suburban towns (eg. Gans 1967). It is mainly those groups who
identify themselves entirely with the abstraction of money as
quantitative division, and thereby with goods as largely an expression
of wealth, which then engage in the kinds of strategies described so
wittily by Veblen in his account of the leisure class.

These examples lead not only to a questioning of the materialism
and individualism thought to be intrinsic to the process of consumption,
but also to the equally common assumption that it is a direct
expression of capitalism which extends capitalist values into the
private domain. In the Bergen study the women's normative and
egalitarian practices could hardly be seen as a form of resistance to
capitalism given their general emulation of the values of the business
classes. The more basic question as to what forms of distribution and
consumption mechanisms might be considered as fundamental
components of capitalism may perhaps be most clearly posed in terms
of a possible alternative socialist society.

There are enormously diverse images of what socialism might be,
and each has different implications for the ideas being explored here.
Clearly, if the aim is to establish a critical position in relation to the
status quo in countries such as Britain, these models need not be
restricted to those governments currently claiming to represent
socialism, although equally it would be wrong to ignore the
experiences of such countries. One study which offers clear evidence
from the history of socialism in practice, as well as examining the
possibilities for a more ideal socialist society which has not yet
appeared, is that by Nove (1983) entitled The Economics of Feasible
Socialism. Just as it was argued in chapter 7 of the present text that
socialism need not result in the elimination of individual property,
though it would eliminate private 'collective' property, Nove's work
shows that the advent of socialism as the end of class oppression might
not mean the destruction of the market as the major means of
distributing goods, only its elimination as a means of producing inequality. The better part of the present vast array of goods which are often claimed to be solely the result of capitalism might therefore be preserved under a socialist system.

Nove examines the implications of a new situation in which control over production is no longer in the hands of capital and the class it serves, but has devolved to a version of the cooperative, the state or another collective mechanism. He assumes that such a socialist society would retain the heavily industrialized base which provides for the production of mass commodities. His socialism is not, then, a conservative return to a kind of Morris craft tradition. In these conditions he argues that:

To influence the pattern of production by their behaviour as buyers is surely the mos8: genuinely democratic way to give power to consumers. There is no direct ‘political’ alternative. There being hundreds of thousands of different kinds of goods and services in infinite permutations and combinations, a political voting process is impracticable, a ballot paper incorporating microeconomic consumer choice unthinkable (Nove 1983: 225).

Nove refuses to accept that central planning and a free competitive market are mutually exclusive alternatives but argues for the essential place of both. The details of his discussion (see also Kellner 1984, Nove 1985: 24–7, 34–5) providing a picture of the complex logistics of such an economy, which would have to deal with the vast problems of a large modern state, give an often more profound understanding than that available in abstract philosophy of the necessary articulation between the philosophical ideals of liberal freedoms and egalitarian justice, the former enshrined in the abstraction permitted by money, the latter in the abstraction of the state. Although Nove notes the faults of a market system, his argument is that for a feasible socialism, any alternative to it has far greater drawbacks and more invidious consequences. The model allows the consumer a measure of choice of goods, but proposes state regulation of their social implications, in order, for example, to ensure adequate safety standards and to guard against the misleading representations so common today.

If Nove’s model of the distribution process were extended to consumption, goods would be returned from the necessarily regulatory and homogenizing domain of central planning, through the state, back to the parochial, transient and diverse needs of the populace. The state itself might well have to increase its regulatory activities in order to counter practices which appear to favour only private interest or marketing geared toward producer ‘created’ demand. This seems more credible than the attempt by Offe (1984) to argue in the same context of consumption decisions to the workplace. There is no reason to assume that factory workers who produce pig troughs or aids for the disabled are in any respect better judges than management today of the necessity or quality of such products, Nove may be mistaken in his estimation of the importance of the market as the appropriate mechanism for relating goods to people; although it will inevitably play a role, the threat of capitalist autonomy where profit serves only itself is extremely evident at present. What is currently absent is the kind of dynamic debate over alternative distributive mechanisms starting from the nature of consumption, which Williams (1982) suggests operated in France a century ago. The precise models of, for example, consumer cooperatives, may no longer be the best available, but a change in our understanding of what consumption is about as a social activity should provide a starting point for a re-examination of this key question. In socializing mass material culture, debates over the forms of distribution should properly follow rather than precede decisions concerning the desired form of consumption.

It is hard to derive from historical example any support for the argument that involvement in cooperative production produces a direct association with production and, through production, with culture itself. In the kibbutz of Israel, the one long term case of free collective production (that is where collectivization is clearly derived from social choice rather than political pressure) at present available, a cooperative approach is taken to the production of commodities such as plastics, fruit and vegetables or micro electronic components. Since the kibbutz is a cooperative, all members take a turn at the excessively boring task of overseeing, often at night, the machines spewing out plastic buckets, soap dishes and so on. It is highly unlikely that the socialist nature of the production scheme provides for a new identification between the worker and either the form or the result of production. While these aspects of the original cooperative continue to the total communal ownership of goods has generally faded away. Although meals and child rearing facilities continued to be collective responsibilities for some time, individuals did not feel able to support a system in which a blouse they had hand crocheted might be redistributed to someone they did not like. Such a system is probably unsustainable except through highly authoritarian structures or Messianic beliefs. A more reasonable outcome is a continued dissociation from the mass production of plastic buckets though an equitable share of work, but combined with a market which allows for the actual distribution of such products between these localized
production units ensuring equal availability, and a free area of equitable consumption which allows for the assertion of control by the consumer, with all the resultant pluralism. Communal consumption as sublation arises through similar desires concerning the specific nature of goods and services; that is, consumption as a participatory normative activity. It is not solely the outcome of communal work or an equal share in profits, which remain on the plane of abstraction.

Such discussion offers two important lessons. The first is that, even if we envisage (somewhat optimistically) the destruction of inequalities, class divisions, profit-based distortions of claims to public welfare, and all the other iniquities of contemporary society, certain central problems integral to the contradictions, and essential to the production of the material conditions of modern life would remain to be faced. We would still have a vast scale of industry, a vast (probably far more vast) state bureaucracy, and a massive population in huge urban conglomerates, all requiring the powers of flexibility, rationalization and quantification which would be essential to such increased planning operations. The second lesson is that this contradiction is relevant for thinking about politics today, and not just in some future society, because it radically affects the image of possible alternatives to present social conditions. If the intention is to stand by a commitment to the reduction of oppressive inequalities, then mass consumption appears as a key area in the resolution of the alienatory consequences of the mechanisms necessary for the achievement of such goals.

This presupposes that the expansion of goods and services seen in this century is a largely positive development, tied to some historical recollection of the constraints and suffering which this expansion ameliorated. This is suggested by the general support for a struggle for higher wages. No popolupon having fought for generations for an increase in their pay packets is likely to give up all the material advances such wages represent without some evident and plausible reason. Although new considerations might influence a decision to vote for a 'green' political party committed to raising electricity prices as the only means of eliminating dangerous nuclear power stations.

Such material advantages should not be confused with functional efficiency. It is not that workers have fought for some basic or necessary level of attainment after which all further material additions are superfluous. For those with secure work, most increases in wage levels relate today to possibilities for holidays, and a new diversity in food, clothing and house facilities which, however desirable, are hard to define in terms of finite basic needs. Although poverty continues unabated (and indeed has recently clearly increased) in countries such as Britain, it is not (however much it ought to be) the main pressure behind demands for material increase.

These contradictions in modern society posed by the vast and abstract nature of modern institutions might emerge more explicitly under socialism, since many of the more evident and in a sense 'simpler' causes of social strife would have been eliminated; that is, the regulation of society for the social advantage and the identifiable interests of a few. For this reason, any social practices which can be identified today as having arisen in part as the population's response to these contradictions, become of still greater consequence when considered as models for a possible socialism tomorrow.

Within contemporary Britain, examples of a reabsorption of resources back from the autonomous and massive state through to smaller-scale communal or popular bodies which then distribute them locally may be found in diverse circumstances. There are cases of government bodies such as the late Greater London Council actively pursuing a policy of pluralistic redistribution, often to groups such as extremely orthodox representatives of minority religions who may be quite opposed to the council's particular political persuasion. Indeed, to a degree, this is true of all modern governmental services. Bodies such as the National Childbirth Trust and the Hospice movement may arise at the consumer level and seek to re-order the impact of national services in the interests of given consumer groups. Other groups, such as the miners' wives committees formed during the 1984-5 miners' strike to redistribute supplies and keep up morale, come from within a group acting in direct confrontation with the government of the time. All of these serve to transform welfare provision into something approvable on a local level. These examples accord with the older liberal tradition of self-creation, rather than the imposed or philanthropic authoritarian image of welfare provision. The Greater London Council was a particularly interesting case of an avowedly socialist body which presented an image based on the diverse possibilities of mass culture forms such as public entertainment, as opposed to the generally rather austere image of socialism, whose opposition to capitalism is thought to demand an opposition to mass consumption taken as synonymous with materialism. The GLC also made considerable use of advertising, marketing and the structures of the market to transform itself from a populist to a genuinely popular body. There has been a considerable increase in concern with this area of cultural/commercial activity amongst the British left, as reflected in the pages of journals such as the New Socialist (e.g. 1986: 38) and Marxism Today.
The above account suggests a reworking of the various critiques of consumption subsumed by the term fetishism. The traditional uses of this term are problematic. First, fetishism is used to assert in a very broad form a general discontent with consumer culture and the nature of goods, accompanied by an asceticism conveyed as a feeling of the general malaise of materialism. Obviously, a book devoted to the subject of material culture will in a sense place undue emphasis on the relationship between people and goods, rather than directly on the relationships among people. The argument of the first half of this book was intended to indicate, however, that all such social relations are predicated upon culture, that is objectification, and that material goods are merely one, though an increasingly important, form of culture. The blanket assumption of fetishism is therefore predicated on the false notion of a pre-cultural social subject.

The narrower and more reasonable accusation of fetishism comes in the form of an argument related to the very particular conditions of modern mass consumption, in which it is said that goods are used vicariously. That is, instead of engaging in social interaction, people become obsessively concerned with their individual relation to material goods. Clearly, this describes an actual condition in modern life and is a further example of that reification which defines the unhappy consciousness, in which the forms of culture become abstracted interests in themselves, preventing rather than generating the development of social values. This is to say that, like those other institutions already discussed, such as the state and monetarization, consumption may be seen as having tendencies towards antisocial autonomy and exclusivity of interest. While some goods such as private art collections or guns may indeed favour antisocial orientations, other such as the telephone and bus do not. The examples given in the last two chapters were intended to indicate that such fetishism is not a necessary outcome of mass consumption, but rather a reification of goods comparable with other examples of reification. Mass consumption may also be seen as a key instrument in exactly the opposite tendency: that is, the creation of an inalienable world in which objects are so firmly integrated in the development of particular social relations and group identity as to be as clearly generative of society. In this sense, the productive capacity of the object as exemplified in Mauss’s account of the gift may be retained in the very different social context of a highly extensive division of labour, in which objects can no longer be viewed as directly related to social totalities, but may nevertheless remain an instrument of objectification.

A third form of the critique of fetishism, and the most precise, is that derived from Marx’s original use of the term in Capital. Marx noted how both the structure of the political economy and the language of business as a particular form of representation tended to make the manufactured object appear, not as the work of the people, but as an alien form confronting them only as a commodity to be purchased by them. This notion of fetishism follows from the arguments of Marx’s earliest writings, as explored in chapter 3. Marx stressed, however, in this later work, the manner in which these problems of representation were closely articulated with the mechanisms of class and the manner in which a class reproduces its interests.

This critique may still be germane, even if, as has been argued, the site of potential communal self-creation has moved increasingly towards the sphere of consumption. Fundamental conflicts of interest between social classes might still create analogous conflicts in the way in which the relationship between goods and people appears to us. Much of the evidence presented in this book suggests that there is commonly a close relationship between possession, the construction of identity and the adherence to certain social values. This suggests in turn that deprivation with respect to goods is not to be judged as mere loss of physical resources. If the identity of the peer group is formed, in part, through its association with particular items, then the individual’s ability to afford those items reflects directly on what may be for them a disastrous split between their desired social identity and their actual self-projection. Such close articulation between social group and object possession is encouraged by advertising and design (e.g. Dyer 1982; Forty 1986), one of whose aims is to create unprecedented desires. In the context of present inequalities, with unequal distribution of goods and unequal access to forms of ideological control, these may exacerbate class and status differences.

The market, which might work to express general consumer desire in a socialist society, often does exactly the opposite today, as shown by those studies of media such as newspapers, which have demonstrated that the importance of advertising revenue creates biases in favour of the wealthy, whose views are disproportionately represented (Curren 1986). At present, then, some classes are consumers to a far greater extent than others, and their interests are therefore unduly represented. This is compounded by the more subtle influence of ideology discussed in chapter 9, which determines that these goods are made according to specific perspectives and interests which results in a material culture constructed for one group in the image of that group held by other dominant forces. This could result in what might be described as a lack of access to the means of objectification.
Fetishism as a representation of an apparently autonomous world of goods outside the context of human self-creation may also be a feature of certain academic positions which might otherwise be related to Marxism itself. The critique of post-modernism discussed in chapter 9 appears to adopt a similar position, in which goods are understood as entirely the result of the dictates of late capitalism, and all the human work of consumption which goes into them is ignored. The reification of concepts such as 'myth', 'discourse', 'deconstruction' and so forth is as effectively dismissive of the actions of the mass of the population as are the more conspicuous languages of capital. Indeed, as with Marx's critique of capitalist practice and representation, we are in a situation today where goods are often regarded as mere commodities and their place in social development therefore goes unrecognized by the very people who use them.

Equally problematic is that form of socialist philosophy which was so skillfully demolished by Baudrillard's earlier critical writings. This was the assumption that these goods possess some basic 'use value' relating to a constant and evident need, and that stylistic diversity is mere waste promoted by the branding policy of capitalism. One of the major failures of socialist practice is that it is has attempted to embody this modernist approach to function. A popular opposition to vulgar functionalism as a criterion for which goods should be produced, often emerging as consumer concern for style or fashion, is neither the result of capitalism or the operation of middle-class values, but simply an assertion of the nature of goods as culture. If put into practice by some naive socialism, the functionalist perspective would threaten the very means by which goods may be reappropriated by the consumer, and this may well already have occurred in the socialism of Eastern Europe. A problem with all these uses of the term fetishism, however, is that they specify too narrow an area for what goods do, mainly related to class relations. In contrast to this, when goods are treated as an element of culture itself, we find a much wider spectrum of contradictions and strategies within which objects are implicated.

Learning from Consumption Practices

The attack on Romanticism for its derision of the mundane and tainted practices of everyday life could easily translate into an alternative Romanticism about modern consumption as always acting to create inalienable, highly sociable communities. Clearly, this would be a travesty of the social relations observable today, and would ignore all the uses of goods for social oppression documented in such detail by Bourdieu and contemporary Marxists. The argument for the potential progressive importance of consumption is one based on a historical tendency, as over the last century populations have attempted to overcome the problems of industrial society; but it is not a general description of the world today. Such a Romanticism is based on the assumption that populism is right simply because it comes from the mass populace, and ignores the clear ability of mass movements to favour antisocial politics such as fascism, or self-destructive private practices. At a lesser level, this Romanticism may lead to an undifferentiated treatment of popular culture as intrinsically positive (Williamson 1986a), an attitude which leaves no room for principle or discrimination. The problem is to avoid either a blanket condemnation or blanket populism, and instead to investigate the key issue of what conditions appear to generate progressive strategies in consumption. It is evident from examples already given that such tendencies may be identified in some aspects of present day consumption activity, and these might provide insights into the strategies by which people are able to recontextualize cultural forms. The limits to philosophical and theoretical discussion of these questions are evident in the extent to which what should be relevant critical social theory appears to lead only to an extreme relativism, nihilism, and anti-humanism. Although something of this trend emerged from a particular branch of social anthropology – that of structuralism –, traditional anthropology may provide a means of extricating social analysis from this tendency, because of its commitment to the close observation of everyday human practices as the basis for its generalizations.

Since the world of practices refuses the separation of variables and factors required for the development of most economic theory, an answer to the question of the conditions favourable to particular kinds of consumption is best searched for in the same areas to which any implications drawn from it will in turn be applied. There are many distinctions which are clearly of crucial importance, but about which we know relatively little in terms of their social impact. The example of the distinction between the allocation of services by the state and the effect of private purchase has already been noted. Since there are relatively few studies of long term consumption and its place in the construction of culture, it is difficult to take account of such practices in the development of planning. This deficiency of modern academia becomes still more acute if the desire is to move towards a greater reliance on planning as part of some variant of a socialist society.

Such an anthropology presupposes that we regard the activities of everyday life as a form of praxis; that is, a working out of
philosophical conundrums by other means. This in turn implies a respect for the philosophy implicated in mass activity, according to which suburbia, the council estate and the consumption patterns of housewives, as well as more obvious alternative cultures such as youth groups, are understood as active constructions of particular cultural forms from which we can gain some understanding, if we can learn how to read what Berman (1984: 114) has called the 'signs in the street'.

Compared to the purity of theoretical academic positions and dichotomies, the practices of households as observed in ethnography appear as a kind of mass kitsch whose pretensions articulate at the level of practice so much of that which is carefully kept apart in academic study. Consumption at this level cannot be seen as concerning simply one thing, and self-construction by society cannot be reduced to two dimensions; rather, it is the site at which the whole range of often self-contradictory and unbalanced desires, constraints and possibilities come together in that very incoherent process often glossed as social reproduction.

Material culture contributes in specific ways to the possibilities and maintenance of this kitsch contradictory nature of everyday culture. There are abundant examples of oppressive ideologies established through the dominance of certain groups over material production, enormous inequalities or taste as classism. Yet at the same time, and in the same society, examples may be found of goods used to recontextualize and thus transform the images produced by industry, or goods used to create small-scale social peer groups by reworking materials from alienated and abstract forms to re-emerge as the specificity of the inalienable.

As noted in chapter 6, material culture promotes framing, which provides for the maintenance of diversity, while keeping contradictory forces operating without coming into conflict. Reduced to the level of individual furnishings, these are often divided into a variety of styles designed to fit different circumstances from formal presentation to informal relaxation, different moods, or simply the use of small-scale controlled environments to reproduce different possibilities in a manner which extends the notion of play also discussed in chapter 6. Consistency of self or object is not a noticeable feature of the modern age. This raises the question of what is indicated by such inconsistency. Although many philosophies and theories appear to assume that a homogeneous and totalizing ego is the goal of psychological development (e.g. Greenberg and Mitchell 1983), while any fragmentation or splitting is pathological, and that by analogy the same is true

of society as expressive totality (see examples in Jay 1984), these assumptions should be treated with some caution. As indicated in chapter 6, there are alternative models of the person in which contradiction may become an essential element of the developmental process. If the modern personality appears as a kind of counter-factual self, which keeps alight several possible characters, aided by a range of goods which externalize these into different forms, this may be a positive response to a necessarily contradictory world. It may not be socially desirable to act in relation to a work situation in the same way that one interacts with a family at home, not because of some fault in either situation, or the greater authenticity of one, but because the possibilities of modern life have developed from such divisions and frames. A refusal of quantitative rationality as embodying attitudes which impose too great a distance from human values is not necessarily a progressive stance when directed, for example, against a computer used for redistributing resources. Nor is this element of contradiction solely an aspect of modernity; it may be identified in communities such as rural India, where the logic of the market is systematically separated from that of ritual exchange (Miller 1986).

These attributes of material culture may be used to counter the pessimism in Simmel's view of the tragic nature of modern culture itself. Despite the enormously powerful and revealing quality of Simmel's writing in this area, he tended to develop from his analysis of the necessarily contradictory nature of modern life, a common frustration with its apparently fragmentary consequences. The massive form taken by material culture, and its extreme diversity, suggested to Simmel that, despite the liberating nature of its possibilities, it would overwhelm what he called subjective culture and would always tend to remain the abstract, quantified, oppressive and inappropriable presence of an unsublated objective culture.

What Simmel could not include in this argument, because they have developed largely since his time, are the myriad strategies of recontextualization and consumption which have been used to overcome the alienatory consequences of mass consumer culture. The sheer profusion encouraged by the transience of fashion was expected to overwhelm us in its very diversity, but in practice there is the building up through bricolage of specific and particular social groups which define themselves as much through the rejection of all those cultural forms they are not as from the assertion of their particular style. Small sections of the population become immersed to an extraordinary degree in the enormous profusion of hobbies, sports, clubs, fringe activities, and the nationwide organizations devoted to interests as diverse as medieval music, swimming, ballroom dancing,
Mass Consumption

Steel bands and fan clubs. The building of social networks and leisure activities around these highly particular pursuits is one of the strangest and most exotic features of contemporary industrial society, and one which is for ever increasing. There is no more eloquent confrontation with the abstraction of money, the state and modernity than a life devoted to racing pigeons, or medieval fantasies played out on a microcomputer. All such activities, whose adherents may be widely dispersed, depend upon the paraphernalia of mass consumption such as telephones, trains, and easy and relatively cheap access to relevant goods from commercial markets.

This plurality suggests a growth in the use of time for activities which are seen by the general population as self-productive. In this sense, the older dichotomy between production and consumption is challenged. The workplace is not, and, indeed, never has been the only site for self-production through work. This challenge is echoed in the economic sphere itself. Gershuny (1978, 1983, 1985) has written extensively on recent developments which enables processes previously considered as the sphere of production or service industry to be performed at home - for example, the flourishing do-it-yourself tradition, car repairs and house extensions. Today, even semi-industrial processes strongly identified with the workplace are part of a home economy, not paid for by wages, but saving the household considerable amounts of money. Gershuny points out that this means that the expected increase in demand for service provision in developed industrial societies may well not occur. Anthropologists have also analysed the way different resources may be looked to in dealing with problems and crises (Wallman 1984), and Gortz (1982) provides a more extreme view of the significance of a decline in waged labour as the definitional pivot of class relations.

These observations served as some of the points of departure for an ethnographic study of certain related trends in contemporary British society, based on fieldwork on the Isle of Sheppey (Pahl 1984). Although not primarily concerned with consumption, Pahl's work follows through the argument that one particular kind of work, that of waged labour, has been over privileged in academic discussion at the expense of the wide variety of activities which are articulated by the household as strategies both for producing monetary income and for providing opportunities for non-monetary work with which household members can identify.

Pahl notes that his fieldwork on Sheppey is complemented by studies in Hungary, New Zealand and the Soviet Union (1984: 331). The key point of agreement between many such observers is the perceived failure of modernism, with its particular variant of the image of participatory collective action, as a means of emancipation. Instead, there has been a growth or return of the small-scale, household-based strategies of obtaining and dispensing resources. This has also been a clear trend in the economic structure of a number of socialist states (Nove 1983). Pahl tends to overemphasize the particular level of household organization in a manner comparable with others privileging either collective bureaucracy or autonomous individuals, but the small-scale level of organization is clear.

An important conclusion from Pahl's evidence (1984: 317; Pahl and Wallace 1985), and that of others working on the 'informal' economy (e.g. Mingione 1985) is that self-provisioning is not an alternative means by which resources may be obtained, and is only available to those who have a basic level of income in the first place. As a result, there is developing a new polarization between those who are involved in both work and informal self-production, and those without resources to be involved in either. This suggests that under present economic structures the development of positive consumption strategies by the majority is often supported by a worsening of conditions for a large highly oppressed minority. Consumption is by definition concerned with the utilization of resources; it is not an alternative 'leisure' arena which compensates for their absence. An uncovering of the positive potential in consumption should not detract from the struggle to eliminate poverty and inequalities. On the contrary, what has been insisted upon is that it is absurd to call for the end of poverty and simultaneously imply that this would represent the end of authenticity. Consumption as portrayed here is not a return to a simple 'enclosed' world, but a highly sophisticated historical development predicated upon the articulation between small- and large-scale spheres of involvement.

The evidence may be used to suggest a potential balance between a strong state which might intervene to ensure some level of equality and preserve public control over major resources, and activities which encourage flexibility and plurality at the level of consumption. Both need to be stronger, and the condition for the strength of one is the power of the other. Pahl is correct to stress the importance of primary fieldwork in order to provide policy-making with insights gained from the actual practices of the population at the micro-level. He points, with caution, to writers who have started to move from production to house ownership as points to identity formation, but fails to appreciate that one of the major reasons for the present importance of the household is that it is one of the sites of modern consumption where these activities, as much as different kinds of employment, are articulated (see also Young and Willmott 1973).
Problems which arise from this stress on the household include the danger of a 'neo-familism' ideology (Godard 1985: 324-7), and also of ignoring the rise of an isolated and anomic part of the population, especially in the larger cities. A more general ethnography might reveal a series of levels of cultural construction through recontextualization. For example, television is clearly a home-based activity, but the appropriation of the media may not be centred on the household as a group. Soap operas, which are often condemned as providing vicarious neighbourhoods, are typical of a nationwide production system that provides material which can be dissected and commented on for its moral and social implications in a wide variety of circumstances, as with one's 'mates' at work, or in shopping- or street-based actual neighbourhoods, making the activity less vicarious than it at first appeared. Consumption is concerned with the internalization of culture in everyday life, but thereby incorporates parties, pubs and holidays as much as do-it-yourself, home-based activities.

In studies of this kind, extensive quotation from oral history often complements the ethnography in showing the satisfaction gained from controlling one particular domain of self-productive activity. It appears that there has been a return, in part, to activities such as performing rather than simply listening to pop music, and also to gardening, home brewing and do-it-yourself, though this is balanced by leisure created through maximizing monetary income and the full use of mass manufactured services. Again, this is because social groups work best as a kind of practical kitsch, amalgamating and juxtaposing a wide range of activities otherwise separated as work and leisure spheres. There are diverse areas which can be selected for emphasis by this kind of productive consumption, often conceived of as small domains or ponds in which one can feel oneself to be a significant fish. This all depends, however, on access to certain cultural and financial resources which provide the means for appropriation. Without such resources, the feeling is simply one of increasing insignificance within a vast sea.

Capitalism itself has had to adjust to such transformations. For the first half of this century, commerce attempted to create larger, more homogeneous, markets for its goods, using advertising to demolish regional, ethnic and other divisions in the consumer sphere (Leiss 1983), and for a considerable period it was predicted that this trend would continue; but since the 1950s it has had to respond to the emergence of a new ethnicity (e.g. Smith 1981) and general social diversity. The major technological advances brought to industrial production by the microchip appear largely to have followed, rather than promoted, these new patterns of consumption, allowing continued profits when these had been threatened by the demand for more diverse products and shorter production runs made for specific social groups. Late capitalism may have had to adapt to, rather than be the cause of, current social trends. The potential benefit to the consumer might also be extended to the worker, allowing for more flexible working hours, if this new technology was harnessed by progressive political forces (Jones and Graves 1986; Murray 1985). Similarly, political theory appears to have followed observation of a new plurality in political practices and positions (Hall 1985).

Consumption cannot be considered in isolation. There exist much more widely discussed parallel arenas, such as the use of state services, including the National Health Service and the education system, which are more obvious candidates for the transformation of objective conditions. The stress on consumption is justified partly by its previous neglect, but also by the contention that it is in this area that the strategies of recontextualization are at their most advanced. This is to say that consumption is now at the vanguard of history, and may provide insights into the further transformation of areas such as welfare and the workplace.

Such an approach also implies a limitation to the kind of analysis of consumption offered by authors such as Bourdieu. Although it is a brilliant picture of the nature of cultural practices in industrial society, Distinction reduces almost all consumption to the play of social differentiation. Yet, clearly, even the dominant groups in society face the problem of alienation, as shown from certain genres of literary fiction such as nineteenth-century tragedy set amongst the bourgeoisie amongst other sources. Neither is this problem entirely resolved by the kind of close social solidarity often postulated as prevailing amongst dominated groups. If this classism is stripped away, there remain common problems, in response to which consumption practices develop a plethora of projects. As indicated in the discussion of fashion in chapter 9, such projects may include ideas about the proper relationship between individual and society, models of Romantic pasts and utopian futures developed through style, or adherence to certain moral values, such as feminism or conservatism, expressed in developing particular forms of cultural relations.

These projects, which include many domains otherwise treated in terms of religion, philosophy and morality, comprise a whole series of often fantastic possible worlds, partly submerged and implicit, but which find their primary external expression in material form rather than in any other media, and are the means by which possibilities are discovered and commented upon. These are largely mass practices developed in groups ranging from small youth sub-cultures to large class fractions, but with an individual level of expression. Such
projects are not best studied, however, by starting with the social individual, since modern material culture is so complex that it often cuts across particular and possibly contradictory aspects of the same individuals, and is best approached from the cultural patterns themselves. Given these characteristics, ethnography may well provide the most satisfactory methodological approach to the study of this phenomenon.

Conclusion

In this book, a concept of objectification, somewhat violently abstracted from Hegel, has been used to characterize a central issue within the general problem of modernity. I have isolated from the themes of the Phenomenology of Spirit a particular historical trend towards an increasing abstraction, but also a specificity; and, following Simmel, I have argued that this trend has as one of its most prominent forms of expression an increase in material forms. Contemporary life is situated not only in a nexus of struggles between freedoms, equalities and competing claims towards totality, but more generally within the context of a quantitative advance in the material forms of culture in almost all countries, creating a massive external world whose internal relationships and social implications are extremely complex. The Romantic illusion that the solution to this complexity lies in simplicity has been rejected. Rather, the emphasis has been on the nature of culture as intrinsically contradictory, a contradiction which is unresolvable. The problem has been to elucidate the historical basis of this contradiction and its contemporary nature, attempting to show how it is grounded in the 1980s. Hegel's non-reductionist approach provides a model for understanding a process of development which takes place within such conditions of contradiction. He illustrated a continual process of societal self-creation through objectification and sublation, through which social self-alienation was the instrument for the historical construction of culture, but the subjects of history had always to preserve themselves from the autonomous forces thereby created, whose re-appropriation was the means of their development. Hegel saw philosophy and comprehension as the means of sublation; here, however, the emphasis has been on praxis - that is, material activities or strategies based on objective conditions.

In order to achieve this aim, it has been argued that it is possible to maintain a critical stance in relation to the mass goods which are produced by modern industry, and to attack the contribution of present relationships in the spheres of mass production and property ownership to inequalities and more general social oppression, while at the same time insisting that these mass goods are indeed our own culture. Emphasis has been placed on the implications of mass goods as the product of industrialization and modernity, rather than assuming that any problematic aspects may be dismissed as having arisen within the context of capitalism. Equally, any attempt to construct models based on a separation of a population from its material environment as thereby embodying some prior or more authentic body of pre-cultural 'pure' social relations is based on an illusion concerning the nature of society. Mass goods represent culture, not because they are merely there as the environment within which we operate, but because they are an integral part of that process of objectification by which we create ourselves as an industrial society: our identities, our social affiliations, our lived everyday practices. The authenticity of artefacts as culture derives, not from their relationship to some historical style or manufacturing process - in others words, there is no truth or falsity immanent in them - but rather from their active participation in a process of social self-creation in which they are directly constitutive of our understanding of ourselves and others. The key criteria for judging the utility of contemporary objects is the degree to which they may or may not be appropriated from the forces which created them, which are mainly, of necessity, alienating. This appropriation consists of the transmutation of goods, through consumption activities, into potentially inalienable culture. Again, no solution has been foreseen to this contradictory strategy, through which inalienability is achievable only through societal self-alienation; and no panacea has been proposed to the ordinary human suffering engendered by the loneliness and massivity of modern culture. Rather, there has been the more modest claim that there is much to be learnt from the activities of those who, faced with the same problem on a mundane and daily basis, appear to have developed strategies from which others might gain.

Our difficulty in perceiving progressive possibilities in the consumption activities around us may derive from three factors in particular. First, there is the inherent invisibility (argued in chapter 6) of what otherwise appears to us as the highly visible material culture which is the form increasingly taken by culture's contradictions. Secondly, there is the continued attraction of a simplistic view of the relationship between production and consumption, where the latter is reduced to merely the problem of the reproduction or completion of the former. Thirdly, under present conditions, consumption only rarely amounts to the ideal model developed here, which is based on its potential as evident in certain cases, and is not a description of
general practice. Contrary instances naturally abound. What has been shown, however, is that there is evidence that consumption is developing as one of the major sites through which the necessary autonomy of the objects of commerce and of the modern state might be made compatible with the specific demands of dynamic social groups. An analysis of consumption may then once more become a critical theory of the status quo; but rather than through mere utopianism or nihilism, this will be achieved through the detailed analysis of, and differentiation between, positive and negative tendencies in consumption activities as already practised within the otherwise infertile conditions of the class inequalities of contemporary society.

Following Simmel, it has been argued that the trajectory which leads to modernity has revealed with particular clarity the contradictions inherent in the process of objectification. The general claims of the Enlightenment, the development of its mode of thought and activity and the material advantages which have been created through the division of labour, industrialization, the search for objective science and liberation from customary ties, are all accepted as irreversible historical developments, which cannot be offset by utopian totalities. The development of a strong state which alone can provide the instrument with which social agents might bring about the possibilities of equality, and which can control those forces in modernization tending towards autonomous interest and reification, is accepted, while acknowledging the state’s own tendencies in this direction.

The nature of state’s institutions, their rationalistic, quantitative, abstracted orders, their scale, and their tendency to relate to particular interests, makes them an externality for the mass population which cannot simply be conceptually sublated through some form of identification with their construction, in the original Hegelian sense, as has been attempted in some totalitarian states. Real sublation may be achieved only through a mass materialist practice, by which people directly participate in the reappropriation of their culture. Self-consciousness, self-knowledge about the processes of objectification and a progressive philosophy or political allegiance are not enough; nor, today, are collective curbs on the exploitation by a minority of the advantages and profits of mass production, or a degree of participation in the political processes of adjudication over the allocation of resources, although these laudable aims are themselves far from achieved at present, and remain complementary to the projects discussed here. Observation of industrialized societies reveals a search by the mass population for other instruments which might act directly to negate the autonomy and scale of these historical forces, and turn to advantage certain aspects of the very materiality of the object world in consumption. It is this activity which requires further study, elucidation and development.

For this reason, and in order to obtain a greater understanding of these same processes and their limitations and possibilities, it is necessary to pay far more attention to the qualities and consequences of that surprisingly elusive component of modern culture, which, although apparently highly conspicuous, has consistently managed to evade the focus of academic gaze, and remains the least understood of all the central phenomena of the modern age, that is material culture.
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