

Effect of consumption on identity in britain



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“ We are what we consume.” To what extent does consumption contribute to the construction of identity in contemporary British society?

In order to understand the extent to which consumption contributes to the construction of identity in contemporary British society, and thus be in a position to comment on whether or not “ we are what we consume” is a valid statement or simply hyperbole, it is important to first understand the sociological concepts behind the question being asked.

“ Consumption” in sociological terms does not simply mean the buying and consuming of goods and services. In particular, sociologists are interested in consumption as a means of conveying meaning. “ Conspicuous consumption” is a term that was originally coined by Thorstein Veblen and it refers to the ways in which people convey the extent of their wealth to others in a society in which the traditional means of conveying meaning have largely disappeared. Veblen argued that in society, a person’s standing was directly related to their wealth. The manner in which this wealth had been accumulated was also important, with old wealth being more highly esteemed than new wealth. The wealthy individual had two ways in which to proclaim their social standing; conspicuous leisure and/or conspicuous consumption. ^[1]

It is important to understand the historical background that has led to the current consumption patterns in contemporary Britain. The industrial revolution was a time of massive social upheavals. Historical bonds of servitude and deference were shattered and millions of people streamed into the UK’s cities. A consequence of this mass upheaval was that wealth

creation was no longer tied to the land. Suddenly a person who owned a factory could potentially have the same amount of wealth as someone who considered themselves to be part of the upper classes and whose wealth came with status. Wealth, by itself, was no longer a sufficient means of separating the upper classes from the pretenders. This was especially so in the large towns that had been created in which people were constantly interacting with strangers who were unaware of a person's social status. As such, conspicuous consumption came to be an increasingly important means of differentiating oneself from others. [2]

The aspirational dreams unleashed during the industrial revolution meant that, in general terms, people belonging to a lower class could now potentially overcome the wealth divide simply through hard work. Overcoming the class divide was a little more difficult and it was achieved by essentially copying the consumption habits of that class to which a person aspired. Whether consumption drove the industrial revolution or whether the industrial revolution drove consumption may never be answered. The one thing that is certain is that each fuelled the other. The more people consumed the greater the flames of industry. The more exotic and fashionable the items produced, the greater the frenzy of consumption.

However, what is clear is that traditional attitudes to work and consumption had to be overcome. Weber gives an interesting example that illustrates this point;

“ a man... who at the rate of 1 mark per acre mowed 2.5 acres per day and earned 2.5 marks when the rate was raised to 1.25 marks per acre mowed,

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not 3 acres, as he might easily have done, thus earning 3.75 marks, but only 2 acres, so that he could still earn the 2.5 marks to which he was accustomed. The opportunity of earning more was less attractive to than that of working less. He did not ask: how much can I earn in a day if I work as much as possible? But: how much must I work in order to earn the wage, 2.5 marks, which I earned before and which takes care of my traditional needs?" [3]

In the above example Weber seems to be lampooning this simple person who fails to understand that by working longer hours they can earn more money. In contemporary British society, it almost seems as though leisure time cannot be enjoyed without having first purchased the means of enjoying that time. Thus wide screen televisions, games consoles, international holidays, books, DVDs, etc are all things without which people are made to believe they could not enjoy their leisure time. This should be contrasted to the person in Weber's example who believed that simply being away from work was enough of a reward in itself.

One suggested definition of a consumer culture, put forward in order to encompass conspicuous consumption in Third World countries, but also useful as a general starting point, is one, "in which the majority of consumers avidly desire (and some noticeable portion pursue, acquire, and display) goods and services that are valued for non-utilitarian reasons, such as status seeking, envy provocation, and novelty seeking." [4] As such, any society in which consumption involves more than simply subsistence living

(ie living to survive) will involve to some extent a degree of conspicuous consumption.

Likewise, the concept of “ identity” in contemporary sociological terms has developed beyond simply looking at a person’s occupation and class. ^[5] This move away from employment constituting the main source of a person’s identity splintered sociological thought. Whereas previously a person’s identity fell into several reasonably clear sociological categories and sociological theorists could hypothesis on the “ macro” topics of relations between these groups, the shattering of the nexus between work and identity meant that sociologists now had to turn their attention to areas which had to that point been somewhat overlooked.

The study of consumption by sociologists has relatively recent origins. While Marx and Veblen touched on consumption, their focus remained on class and occupational identities. That said, their early work in this area should not be discounted. Marx argued that by separating workers from ownership of the goods they produced and the means of that production, they were essentially being “ estranged from their labour.” ^[6] As we will see below, this estrangement can lead to disillusionment in employees. However, it should be noted that consumption, being aspirational, actually thrives on feelings of disillusionment. As Weber’s example above illustrates, it is difficult to sell a person who is content an illusion.

In their pioneering text on consumption, “ The World of Goods”, Douglas and Isherwood noted with incredulity that, “ it is extraordinary to discover that no one knows why people want goods.” ^[7] They went on to put forward the

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argument that “ consumers use goods to construct an intelligible universe and to make and maintain social relationships.” [8]

One could perhaps argue that in contemporary British society identity and consumption have become one and the same. As the wealth of society as a whole has increased and family bonds have slowly eroded, people look to advertisements, their peer group and celebrities to assist them in identifying themselves. However, by creating an identity which is outside of themselves and which relies on imported meanings, they run the risk of the identity they present to the world being itself an illusion. When such an illusion is shattered, it can have serious consequences for that person and those around them.

Historically, British society has always been extremely class segregated. However, in modern British society, class wars have been to a large extent been replaced by battles of consumption. A particularly good example of this was the recent news that the Labour minister Ruth Kelly had made a decision to send her child to an expensive private school when a suitable state alternative existed. The arguments surrounding her decision clearly illustrate the extent to which choices about consumption can clash with a person’s public identity. The fact that Mrs Kelly is a Labour minister and former Education Secretary means to some people that she should not make decisions about her consumption of services which are contrary to party lines.

A clear example of this thinking is set out in Simon Jenkins recent article in the Guardian. [9] He argues that:

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“ To remove a child from the state school system is rarely an educational choice, whatever euphemism is customarily applied. It is a social statement. Across class-bound Britain, the exclusive school, whether state or private, reinforces the great divide.” [10]

Other commentators from within the Labour party went on record to state [11] :

“ I think it goes against the principles of the Labour Party. I am saddened by this and it makes me wonder about the sort of people who achieve high office who are in New Labour” (Birmingham Selly Oak MP Lynne Jones).

“ I think we should expect Labour ministers to put their children through the state system. I deplore others transferring their children out of the system to go private” (Austin Mitchell, MP for Great Grimsby).

What underpins these statements is the underlying belief that a person’s true identity is revealed by their consumption decisions. Furthermore, if one believes in a certain cause, not to support that cause through consumption decisions is akin to betray. While the Labour party may no longer be the “ worker’s party”, it is still the party that most fervently advocates the role of public services and those less well off. The difficulty then for Labour ministers is that with their own increasing affluence, they are more likely to want to make consumption decisions which are more akin to the upper middle classes as opposed to their traditional support base. This naturally causes friction and inevitably calls of hypocrisy when the illusion is discovered.

It should be noted that conspicuous consumption crosses divides of culture, race, age and religion. An interesting case in point is the Muslim Hijab which some women wear. These have now become “hot fashion items” for young Muslim women branded with for instance, Calvin Klein, Burberry, L’Oreal and Chanel logos. In this way, a Muslim woman can make the statement that while her religion is Muslim, her identity is Western.

Likewise, Fulla dolls have replaced Barbie dolls in many Middle Eastern countries where the doll is a best seller. ^[12] The fact that Fulla’s popularity is about identity is clear in Mr Abidin’s (the brand manager behind the doll) statement:

“ This isn’t just about putting the hijab on a Barbie doll. You have to create a character that parents and children will want to relate to. Our advertising is full of positive messages about Fulla’s character. She’s honest, loving, and caring, and she respects her father and mother.”

While one may question what relevance the sale of a doll in the Middle East might have in contemporary Britain, the point is that in a global, inter-dependant marketplace, the West no longer dictates the consumption agenda as it once did. And as new ideas and aspirations emerge, these then filter back into the consumption patterns of British society as people in Britain seek to communicate those aspirations through their consumption. The interesting irony is the way in which a consumer society has managed to incorporate all these conflicting and competing ideas, some which even argue against consumerism, into nice, consumable packages. This is perhaps what is at the heart of the statement “ we are what we consume”; that even

if we identify ourselves as being anti-consumer, the only way to communicate that message to others is through consumption itself.

Ritzer ^[13] suggests four changes that have occurred within society as a result of the process of consumption. These changes are first, that people no longer have to go to different shops to obtain the goods they wish to purchase but can instead go to supermarkets or shopping centres which cater for all their needs under one roof. While this does on doubt create a more convenient shopping experience, it also creates a more sterile one as everything is controlled and there is little chance of anything out of the ordinary occurring. ^[14]

Second, many of what he calls the “cathedrals of consumption” such as Disney Land and Las Vegas, have become destinations in their own right. People are just as likely to go there to enjoy the sites for what they are/represent as they are to go there to consume the goods and services offered by them. ^[15]

Third, customers are more likely to do more of the things employees previously did for them, for themselves for no pay. Clear examples of this are the checkouts at supermarkets, with many British supermarkets now having some type of self-checkout service, self-service petrol stations, and cash points. ^[16]

Finally, the process of consumption has altered social interaction to such an extent that a consumer is more likely to interact with the sites as opposed to any other people. ^[17]

In many cases, the people with whom a consumer is interacting during the consumption process are so scripted in their role that interaction on a human level is close to impossible. To a certain extent, those employers are trying to break down the roles that their employees perform to such an extent that they can eventually be replaced by machines. In circumstances such as these, it is hardly surprising that many workers feel disillusioned and seek, in their leisure time, to escape from the monotony of their unfulfilled lives through consumption. In this case, perhaps consumption isn't conspicuous but rather innocuous.

Ratneshwar ^[18] looks under the illusion created by many of these “cathedrals of consumption” and in a scathing indictment argues that the “underlying rationality and sheer manipulateness of these places are more likely to remain hidden from consumers.” However, people who work in these places quickly become disillusioned and come to see them as places “largely devoid of meaningful content.” ^[19]

The interesting thing about modern consumption is that a person's presence is never permanent. At the end of every day, everything is put back the way it was and when the shop/amusement park/cinema reopens the next day it is almost as if the previous day never happened. These places of consumption lack any historical or human dimension. They rely on people to give them meaning and yet, perhaps ironically, they themselves claim to be the givers of meaning. One could perhaps say that they sell back the meaning they have stolen from their customers (no doubt this would be Marx's view).

That said, it would be difficult to argue that a middle class person living in Britain today is worse off, or would willingly trade places, with a person living in the middle ages. Even though that person in the middle ages may have had a clear identity about themselves and their position in the world, that certainty constrains them in a way in which a modern person would not be willing to be constrained (although it is arguable that this is slowly changing and that people are becoming more constrained). The fundamental feature in a society of consumption is that we are all complicit in the illusion taking place. As Ruth Kelly has shown, our consumption habits make hypocrites of us all.

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Footnotes

[1] Corrigan, P. (2006), p. 17

[2] Corrigan, P. (2006), p. 17

[3] Weber, M. (1976), pp. 59-60 in Corrigan, P. (2006), p. 66

[4] Belk, R. W. (1988), p. 105 in Goodwin, N. R., Ackerman, F. & Kiron, D. (1997), p. 312

[5] Ransome, P. (2005), p. 96

[6] Bocock, R. (2001), p. 37

[7] Douglas, M. & Isherwood, B. (2005), p. xxxi

[8] Douglas, M. & Isherwood, B., in Corrigan, P. (2006), p. 17

[9] Jenkins, S. in Guardian Unlimited, 10th January 2007

[10] Jenkins, S. in Guardian Unlimited, 10th January 2007

[11] The Daily Mail, 8th January 2006

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[12] The New York Times, 22nd September 2005

[13] Smart, B. & Ritzer, G. ed (2003), p. 424

[14] Smart, B. & Ritzer, G. ed (2003), p. 424

[15] Smart, B. & Ritzer, G. ed (2003), p. 424

[16] Smart, B. & Ritzer, G. ed (2003), p. 424

[17] Smart, B. & Ritzer, G. ed (2003), p. 424

[18] Ratneshwar, S. & Mick, D. G. ed. (2005), p. 305

[19] Ratneshwar, S. & Mick, D. G. ed. (2005), p. 305