

Section Proposal

The Sociology of Consumers and Consumption

American Sociological Association

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The sociological study of consumers and consumption stands today as a significant area of research as evidenced by the substantial published scholarship and by the existence of organized research networks, groups and conferences focusing on the area. Over the last two decades, British, Continental, North American, Latin American, Australian, and Israeli sociologists have produced influential theory and substantive empirical research on consumers and consumption that touches upon virtually all key aspects of social life and social thought. As the classic studies noted below show, questions and problems pertaining to consumption and consumer life have not resided solely within the realm of the economics, psychology or marketing. Instead, they speak to issues sociologists take as being squarely within our purview—e.g., power, inequality, social differentiation and identity, ecological impact, meaning, structure and agency and the relations between micro-interactions and large-scale patterns.

Despite more than two decades of sustained and growing research—and despite the ever growing presence and place of “consumption,” in its many forms in daily life, in political debates and in economic policy—the sociology of consumption has not achieved official, institutional recognition in the U.S. and within the ASA. This anomaly, in part, may be explained by what George Ritzer (2001, pp. 11-12) calls the “productivity bias” of American sociology. The analytical categories, nomenclature and concepts forged by the “founding fathers” of social science in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries aimed at grasping the problems and consequences of production and social organization of a coming industrial

order. Consequently, scholars paid relatively little attention to consumption *per se*, aside from a handful of noteworthy efforts, such as Lynd and Lynd's (1929, 1934) descriptions of the consumption practices of Middletown inhabitants in the 1920s and 1930s, Horkheimer and Adorno's (1944[2000]) model of the "culture industry," the ruminations offered by David Reisman et al. in the 1950s and Herbert Marcuse's influential *One Dimensional Man*. For some decades, consumption remained largely caught in the centrifugal force of this founding context, often treated as little more than the endpoint of a production sequence (see Miller 1995), rather than as integrally intertwined with social-material processes. As noted below, however, consumption—the problems it poses for social life and the questions it raises for social theory—has never been completely outside the sociological picture.

In this proposal and attached list of supporters, we make the case for establishing an ASA Section on the Sociology of Consumers and Consumption. First, we discuss the purpose of the Section in the context of ASA members' already significant activity undertaken in this area, often through ASA channels, noting also the efforts of other groups. We then present something of a sweeping retrospective and overview of selected works, topics and themes addressed by scholars who have focused on consumers and consumption. Finally, we discuss the intellectual distinctiveness of the field and the Section. The attached bibliography is intended to give a general sense of sociological and other work being done on consumers and consumption and, of course, is not exhaustive by any means.

### **Purpose**

One purpose of the ASA Section on the Sociology of Consumers and Consumption is to secure an organizational and intellectual home for the substantial scholarship and dynamic activity already in evidence. In so doing, this Section will provide current members with a forum and structure to better advocate for the import of sociological research in addressing ongoing social problems related to consumption. Since the 1990s, the ASA has supported Regular Sessions on Consumers and Consumption, which have often received enough quality submissions to field as many as three sessions in some years (such as 2011). In 1999, a small group of ASA members organized an informal network of scholars to promote research and scholarly exchange in this area, now called the Consumer Studies Research Network (CSRN). ASA has generously supported this network by, for example, supplying table and meeting space at the annual

meeting. The CRSN has sponsored and continues to sponsor many activities over the last dozen years, including:

- maintaining a website (<http://csrn.camden.rutgers.edu/>) and electronic discussion list
- publishing a bi-annual newsletter with substantive essays in addition to announcements
- sponsoring one-day, pre-ASA conferences in New York (2008), Boston (2009) and Las Vegas (2011)
- publishing two ASA Syllabi Teaching Sets on Consumers and Consumption (2001; 2006)
- holding business meetings at the ASA

CSRN members have also been instrumental in serving as Organizers for ASA Regular, Special and Thematic sessions over these years. In short, significant interest in this field of inquiry has led the network to function as a “quasi-section” for the past decade without the resources, leadership structure and legitimacy that section status would provide.

Evidence of interest in the study of consumers and consumption extends beyond this group’s activities. In universities and colleges, courses on the sociology of consumption and consumer society are offered as regular parts of the curriculum (see ASA syllabi sets). In 2002, Sage launched the *Journal of Consumer Culture*, which has served as an important forum for exchange and debate. Scholars have published a number of readers and overviews on the subject (Miles 1998; Lee 1999; Schor and Holt 2000; Gottdiener 2000; Sassatelli 2008). In the recent *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (2006), there are no less than 75 entries directly related to issues of consumption and consumer society. In 2011, Sage will publish the *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture*, edited by British sociologist Dale Southerton. A separate *Encyclopedia of Consumer Studies* is set to be published by Wiley-Blackwell in 2013. Finally, Hall, Grindstaff, and Cheng-Lo (2011) include nine chapters on consumption or issues that overlap with consumption.

As well, the British Sociological Association and the European Sociological Association both have supported subgroups or streams that focus on issues of consumption for many years. The Consumer Culture Theory group (<http://www.consumerculturetheory.org/>), based in the U.S., has clear affinities with the proposed section and offers opportunities for collaborative work along with the BSA and ESA, as does the Association for Consumer Research, which has kindred European and Asian counterparts. Finally, since 2004, a group of international scholars has convened the biannual conference, Child and Teen Consumption.

Clearly, there is sustained interest in and activity around consumers and consumption. At present, the CSRN does not collect dues, have standing committees, present awards in recognition of scholarship or have any regular mechanism to ensure leadership succession; nor does it have official representation in ASA.

This Section also has the potential to attract new members to the ASA as a number of practitioners who work in government, NGOs and the private sector are actively seeking a community of like-minded scholars with whom to work. The Section also would enable collaboration among researchers in fields other than sociology (such as in anthropology, geography, cultural studies, American studies and business and marketing) and academic associations other than the ASA, as noted above. For example, in the growing field of sustainability, SCORAI (Sustainable Consumption Research Network) is mostly composed of non-sociologists; however, the activities of the proposed ASA section are of keen interest to members of this group. Significantly, this Section would encourage a strengthening of ties between the ASA and Association for Consumer Research (where there already exists a formal connection through the *Journal of Consumer Research*) as well as the Consumer Culture Theory group, which has a high degree of overlap with the type of work done by CSRN members.

The effort to seek ASA Section status arose because students and scholars understand that it will recognize, solidify and support the ongoing significant work and activity of ASA members. Section status would allow this energetic and committed group to continue and expand upon our activities as an organized body with a succession of leadership that will better enable innovation as the landscape of consumption and research changes. The Consumers and Consumption Section would enable professional growth and intellectual cross-fertilization through mini-conferences, publications, newsletters and social activities such as receptions and dinners at ASA meetings. We also expect to partner with other ASA Sections and non-ASA groups with kindred interests to sponsor conferences, joint publications, and additional teaching materials. We would be able to sponsor and co-sponsor ASA receptions, and to recognize scholarship and activity in the field by giving out awards and having a governing body that changes through regular elections.

## A Brief Overview of Select Research and Topics

### *Precursors*

In some sense, issues surrounding consumption have been part of sociological thought and research for over a century. Max Weber's "iron cage" metaphor refers not to overweening bureaucratic rationality *per se* as is often supposed, but describes what he understood as a new relationship between people and material things. In 1915, he wrote:

Material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history... In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the 'saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.' But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage. (p. 181).

Indeed, the iron cage of material goods concerned many early sociologists. In Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, Durkheim's ruminations about organic solidarity and anomie and Simmel's insights about objective culture and fashion can be found some of the fundamental problematics of sociological thought articulated in reference to what we now call consumption—e.g., power, ideology, inequality, meaning, agency and structure, and social dis/integration. And, of course, Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899 [1967]) most directly addresses what many recognize as the relationship between consumption, social comparison and social display.

The questions and issues of consumption and consumer society darted in and out of the purview of sociologists for the better part of the twentieth century. The Lynds in their Middletown studies and W. Lloyd Warner in his Yankee City research offer some descriptive material of the place of goods in 1930s U.S. everyday life and Stuart Chapin did exhaustive investigations of the relationship between material goods and social class. Adorno and Horkheimer's (1944[2000]) influential essay on the "culture industry" formed a template for many subsequent researchers by integrating Marxian, Freudian, and Weberian critiques of industrial society and exploring how the transposition of the industrial system to entertainment and advertising can stifle creativity and diversity within cultural fields. Famously, David Reisman and colleagues (1950) described several social types or orientations of character that in some way reference the ability and desire to accumulate goods. To a less direct extent, issues concerning the transformation to a consumer society can be found in different ways in the mid-

century ruminations about the vicissitudes of modernity, as in the work of Parsons (1951), W. H. Whyte (1956) and Vidich and Bensman (1968), for example.

### *Contemporary and Emergent Areas*

Through the 1970s, the aforementioned approaches dominated sociological writings on consumption. However, in the 1980s social thinkers began to branch out to address a variety of new questions and problems—both social and sociological—posed by consumer society. Stuart Ewen (1976) drew upon Marxian notions of power and ideology to trace out a social history of advertising, followed by Michael Schudson's (1984) critical appraisal of the persuasiveness of advertising on contemporary society. Gottdiener (1987), in an early article, made use of Baudrillard's notions of the political economy of the sign to theorize feedback mechanisms between consumer practice and corporate strategy. Sharon Zukin (1982) described and analyzed the commercial-cultural geographies of cities and their role in urban transformation. Her work on the relationship between consumption, markets and lifestyle in the structure and function of cities and cityscapes (1991; 1995) has been part of an ongoing research stream on gentrification and symbolic economies (Gottdiener 1997; Hannigan 1998; Cronin 2010; Gotham 2007; Lloyd 2006). In 1984, Chandra Mukerji challenged the already orthodox view that consumer culture is simply a product of modern industrialization, arguing that consumption cannot be seen simply as a reflex or outcome of production. This theme was picked up in the U.K. by Colin Campbell (1987) in his reexamination of Weber's Protestant ethic thesis in light of Romanticism and consumer desire. It is a work that remains an indispensable part of the canon of the field.

Pierre Bourdieu's influential work, *Distinction*, was published in English in 1984 and opened a new approach to the study of consumption. In it, he moved away from the focus on corporations, that was paramount in the Frankfurt School, and away from studies of advertising and marketing to the study of how consumption varies by social class and is related to cultural capital. Bourdieusian work originally was centered on the arts and on tests of whether his model applied to the U.S. (Halle 1993, DiMaggio 1987, Lamont and Fournier 1993), but eventually spread beyond "culture" narrowly defined to include studies across the whole consumption landscape.

The 1990s witnessed considerable growth in research and writing on the consumer society. Of these, George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993) is the best known. Translated into at least 10 different languages having sold well over 100,000 copies worldwide, Ritzer revisits Weber's notion of rationalization, arguing that the fast food restaurant has come to replace bureaucracy as the model for this process. Mike Featherstone's *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (1991) takes up the Frankfurt School thread and stitches together "postmodern" issues of lifestyle, globalization and consumer/commodity aesthetics.

A number of significant theoretical treatments came out, including those by Lury (1996), Slater (1997) and Lee (1999), including Douglas Holt's (1997; 1998) reinterpretation of Bourdieu for the American class system. Juliet Schor's "work and spend" cycle (1992) provided an integrated account of labor market dynamics and spending, which was expanded in her 1998 account of the social pressures to consume—works which spawned significant public debate. Her recent writing continues the critical assessment of consumer culture, focusing on children (2004), sustainability (2005, 2010) and ideology (2007; 2012). The activity and practices of shopping and the dynamics of face-to-face marketplaces also came under scrutiny, both as sites of power and as sites for personal expression, and remain a vital area of study (Prus and Dawson 1991; Miller 1998; Miller et al. 1998; Falk and Campbell 1997; Cook 2008b; Zukin 2004; Szaz 2007; Williams 2006).

Twentieth-century scholarship on consumers and consumption charts many courses as this field of social inquiry continues to both diversify and congeal as a body of knowledge. Significant work has been published in many different areas, including the structure and dynamics of fads (J Best 2006), the commercial and cultural tensions informing independent book sellers (Miller 2006), car culture (A Best 2006), celebrity (Rojek 2001), emotions (Illouz 1997; 2007; Hochschild 2003), fitness and "body capital" (Mcquire 2008; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Sassatelli 2010) and on childhood and commercialization (Cook 2004, 2008a, 2009; Schor 2004; Pugh 2009). In areas that perhaps on the surface appear purely "economic"—such as financial trading and markets—aspects of the dynamics and impetus of consumption have been found to be operative and even determinative of such practices (Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger 2000; Zaloom 2006; Botterill 2010). Scholars also have taken note of the overtly political aspects consumption, focusing on lifestyle aspects (Binkley 2007), sustainability and green discourses and practices (Johnston 2008) and the emergent beliefs and practices that centrally position

consumption in social activism, citizenship and social change (Littler 2008; Johnston and Taylor 2008; Micheletti 2003; Micheletti et al. 2004; Schor 2012; Barnett et al. 2011; Humphery 2010; Soper and Trentmann 2008; Soper et al. 2009).

Questions of social identity are in many ways inseparable from consumption practices and commercial environments. Scholars have examined gender (Scanlon 2000; Bordo 2000; McRobbie 2007; Fiske 2000; Stillerman 2004), race and ethnicity (Chin 2001; Davila 2000; Weems 2000; DuCille 2000; Zukin 2004; Colloredo-Mansfeld 1999; Sheller 2003), social class and poverty (Pugh 2009; Power 2005), sexuality (Sender 2004; Nava 2008; Vandecasteele and Geuens 2009; Rushbrook 2002) and youth (Milner 2004; A Best 2000; Magubane 2007), finding intimate entanglements among a sense of self and the materials available to express and form that self. Some have argued that a distinctive “consumer self” has arisen in the last century or more with the advent of consumer society (Slater 1997), a contention that has generated debate among those who see consumer society as a break with the past and those who see it as a continuation (see Martin 1999).

Consumption, trade, and material goods have figured in global and globalizing processes for centuries. Work in this area continues in new and interesting directions, with research taking place on how consumption makes world cities (Beward and Golbert 2006; Cronin and Heatherton 2008), on the articulations between consumption and emerging social classes in non-U.S. contexts (Stillerman 2010; Lukose 2010; O’Dougherty 2002; Zaviska 2008; Mendez 2008) and on the tensions between the global and the local (Wherry 2008; Ritzer 2003; Gotham 2007; Sheller 2003; Wilk 2006; Cook 2008b).

The sociology of consumption has made important inroads into understanding long-standing and newer media-technologies. Scholars have examined the linkages between reading patterns and social inequality (Bennett et al. 2009; Torche 2007) and the global organization of television viewers (Straubhaar 2007). Consumption scholars have also considered viewer-provided Web content, showing how this medium permits a new hybrid activity known as “prosumption” (i.e., combining production and consumption) (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010).

Perhaps the fastest growing area of sociological research on consumption is under the rubric of sustainable consumption and political consumption. This work includes a wide range of sociological approaches, including Bourdieusian class analysis, applications of Giddens’ reflexivity theory and Beck’s risk society, practice theory, social norm theory and ecological-



modernization theory, and has been applied to studies of the alternative food movement (Johnston and Baumann 2009, Thompson and Coskuner 2007), energy use (Luedicke, Craig Thompson and Giesler 2010), impact-reducing lifestyles (Connolly and Prothero 2008), sport (Shove and Pantzar 2005), political consumption and fair trade (Jaffee 2007, Sassatelli 2006, Brown 2010) and a variety of other areas.

### **The distinctiveness of the subfield and relation to other sections**

This partial gloss of the social and sociological research on consumers and consumption is intended to illustrate some of the reach and range of this area of inquiry. The sociology of consumers and consumption addresses these and other issues in a distinctive way that extends beyond a simple topical confluence of the focus on goods, shopping and material life. Here, we present three key epistemological assertions that help distinguish the sociology of consumers and consumption as an identifiable field of inquiry, differing from—yet in conversation with—economic sociology and the sociology of culture, in particular.

The first epistemological assertion notes that consumption does not simply derive from a production process. It is not a mere reflex or outcome of production but has its own genesis and its own provenance. Consuming and consumption reside in social practice that is relational, multi-level (i.e., micro, structural, etc.), reflexive and oftentimes emergent. Consumption, of course, may be connected to production regarding the goods made available in a market, but extends well past this nexus point to the extent that people put materials to use outside the exigencies of markets and outside of an economic calculus.

Economic sociology—as a subfield and as an ASA Section—in many ways responds to a problem structure derived from its origins as a critique of neo-classical economics that posits economic life as equated with markets and market activity and, in particular, those activities and practices associated with production, finance, and organizational phenomena. Consumption here is thereby assumed to be the end point or goal of production and distribution and, as well, something that occurs at the moment of transaction. Hence, it is not surprising that consumption stands as something of an afterthought in economic sociology since it is understood as a derivative social phenomenon. It was only included as a single chapter on “culture and consumption” (Zelizer 2005) in the second edition of the *Handbook of Economic Sociology*.

The second epistemological assertion or break that informs the sociology of consumers and consumption flows from the first; namely, it makes no analytic or practical sense to confine “consumption” to a narrowly defined moment and isolated act encapsulated by the purchase of a thing. Consumption, in the broad view, encompasses life activity—even a mode of life—rather than particular moments of living. Desiring something, considering it, daydreaming about it, refraining from purchasing as well as buying, displaying, gifting and/or disposing of it—these all constitute part of a panoply of relationships to, and activities toward, goods and material life.

Practices recognized as “consumption” interweave with everyday socializing, personal display, and social and cultural identity. A consumer society, as Don Slater (1997) and others note, is characterized not simply by purchases or availability of many goods, but arises when “core social practices and cultural values, ideas, aspirations and identities are defined and oriented in relation to consumption rather than to other social dimensions such as work or citizenship, religious cosmology or military roles” (p. 24). Were it the case that consumption could easily be confined to the moment of economic transaction, there would be no problem, no mystery to it. But, it is clear that people do things with goods not intended or anticipated by producers, advertisers and marketers. “Consumption,” in this sense, continues past the economic moment of transaction and exchange.

The final epistemological assertion of this perspective centers on the idea that markets and market processes are not reducible to “culture” and that they constitute significant and indispensable aspects of culture and social life, even as these processes are themselves socially and culturally constructed. In contrast to the strong program in cultural sociology, which now sees culture as a causal force in and of itself (and hence sees markets and economic activity subordinate to culture), the sociology of consumers and consumption understands “culture” as constructed by and through market activity as much as markets are made through cultural practice. Here, scholars challenge received dichotomies between culture and structure (or market) in favor of a determined focus on the uses and meanings of goods and transactions—be they undertaken at the level of individual, group, class or society.

In practice, “consumers and consumption,” as a field of study, does not reside within the questions and problems typically addressed in economic sociology except in the narrow and derivative manner described above, Viviana Zelizer (a signatory to our petition) being a significant exception to this pattern. In practice in the sociology of culture, “consumption” and

“consumers” have received notice mainly in their relation to questions of social stratification and classification (Lizardo 2008) and, at times, in relation to artistic activity (Halle 2003; Peterson 1992; Peterson and Kern 1996; DiMaggio 1987). This area is an important focus of dialogue between cultural sociologists and sociologists of consumption, and each group brings its own theoretical and empirical approach. As the literature review above makes clear, however, the sociology of consumption is a far broader field than is typically covered within cultural sociology or economic sociology, including as it does, all types of consumption, many of which are not traditionally and typically included in work undertaken in these subfields

The sociology of consumption also has productive areas of dialogue with other subfields of the discipline and brings a unique perspective to them. A growing literature on “political consumerism” (Micheletti 2003) that sparks activism regarding fair trade, the environment, labor rights, and so on, connects directly with themes developed by colleagues in the Collective Behavior and Social Movements, and Labor and Labor Movements sections (though consumption scholars consider this activism as an outgrowth of contemporary modes of consumption). Further, as mentioned above, much of the work in urban sociology on gentrification, the privatization of public space, place marketing, and global cities builds on the important insights in the sociology of consumption regarding the evolution of retail, marketing, and processes of commodification. Finally, our field brings to political sociology an understanding of how the field of applied marketing has colonized political campaigns through the use of market research and marketing concepts. In sum, the sociology of consumption sheds a unique light on problems and themes in many other subfields of our discipline.

### **Concluding Remarks**

A Section on the Sociology of Consumers and Consumption will provide an already active community of scholars with an organizational and institutional place within the ASA. Such a place does not currently exist for them and what does exist does not speak to their interests and scholarship in ways that will facilitate interaction and innovation. This Section will provide recognition for research, teaching and writing that has been undertaken in different ways and under different guises for the last 25 years, thereby allowing a community to coalesce and grow.

With an established infrastructure and an active group of supporters, the Consumers and Consumption section is ready to become an equal partner among the others. Its presence will

encourage collaboration with sociologists and non-sociologists alike by enabling interconnections between the ASA and other already constituted groups in the USA and elsewhere. In a time when marketing, advertising and consumption touch virtually every aspect of social life, it seems quite necessary to have represented in the ASA an established group of scholars whose focus is on pursuing and investigating the problems posed and questions raised by such ubiquitous phenomena.

At first blush, it may appear to many that the Sociology of Consumers and Consumption claims integrity simply as a topic area. On close inspection, it is evident that it cannot be contained within a single topic—no single activity or thing defines consumption. Rather, as we hope we have demonstrated, consumption constitutes a mode of being, doing and knowing that suffuses throughout social life, in much the same way production is often understood. We find it important for the ASA to officially support and recognize the scholarship and activity of its members who are working on problems and questions that, most assuredly, will matter in the lives of people in ways now unforeseen.

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