

# Consumption, Food & Taste



ALAN WARDE

# **CONSUMPTION, FOOD AND TASTE**

**Culinary Antinomies and Commodity Culture**

**Alan Warde**



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Alan Warde, Lancaster  
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## Abbreviations for Popular Magazines

<i>FC</i>	<i>Family Circle</i>
<i>GH</i>	<i>Good Housekeeping</i>
<i>IH</i>	<i>Ideal Home</i>
<i>MW</i>	<i>My Weekly</i>
<i>PF</i>	<i>People's Friend</i>
<i>WH</i>	<i>Woman and Home</i>
<i>WO</i>	<i>Woman's Own</i>
<i>WR</i>	<i>Woman's Realm</i>
<i>WW</i>	<i>Woman's Weekly</i>



## Introduction

This book arose from dismay about shifting fashions in sociology. A decade or more of analysis, founded in political economy and developing a materialist perspective on social life, seemed suddenly to be abandoned for a mode of studying culture which operated with wholly antithetical assumptions, according signs, discourses and mental constructs an exclusive role in understanding social activity. This shift entailed a radical change of substantive focus from the shop floor to the theme park, from labouring to shopping, from class to lifestyle, from resources to images, from practice to interpretation, from production to consumption. From this has emerged a large corpus of often interesting and suggestive work on consumption and consumer behaviour, a field previously dominated almost exclusively by practical concerns with marketing commodities. These shifts in intellectual focus were justified in different ways. Sometimes methodological and epistemological reasons were foremost. Sometimes political considerations were primary. On other occasions it was maintained that rapid social change required the reorientation of sociology: general material security, the declining importance of work, the fading of class divisions, final recognition of the impossibility of modernist social and political projects, and enhanced cultural complexity and differentiation were all cited. Doubts about the adequacy of this third set of, ultimately empirical, claims inspired the research reported in this book.

My ultimate theoretical concern is to reconcile the achievements of materialist and cultural analysis, which here takes the form of seeking to understand systematically the interrelationship between processes of economic production and patterns of consumption. Currently the main barrier to this endeavour is the inadequacy and inconsistency of accounts of consumption. Because it is a comparatively new area of investigation it is inevitably underdeveloped and remains in a condition where each discipline in the social sciences tends to operate with different premises and in the light of a limited and restrictive set of examples. There remains a shortage of systematic and focused analyses of consumption practices. Too often simplification results from using illustrations chosen arbitrarily to confer credibility on a preferred thesis. Also, there is a tendency to generate general theory from the study of the more glamorous aspects of a field of behaviour, particularly those most subject to fashion. Perhaps different impressions will arise from examination of a mundane field like food consumption which, while having highlights of display and symbolic

distinction, is more characteristically a routine, practical and private matter.

The research reported in this study was structured around doubts about the adequacy and accuracy of theories of radical social transformation prominent in the late 1980s – especially postmodernism and post-Fordism. The first is primarily a theory about cultural trends, the other a thesis about industrial production. Both entailed that there was a turning point in economic and cultural production after the 1960s the consequences of which had become well established and entrenched by the end of the 1980s. An example might be David Harvey's analysis in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), where he seeks to 'represent all the shifting and churning that has gone on since the first major post-war recession of 1973' as evidence of a turning point following which there was both an intensification of a postmodern structure of feeling and the replacement of a Fordist system of mass production by flexible accumulation. Concerned with such debates, the research was designed to explore change in the period identified as critical by such theories, thereby in some sense to 'test' them. The ambition to adjudicate rigorously and decisively between competing theories remains unfulfilled, but empirical examination of particular social practices provides much evidence to challenge current accounts of the transformation of the field of consumption.

The elaboration of these theories, for neither any longer constitutes a single unified position, generated a series of new claims about contemporary social and cultural processes relating to consumption. Particularly important was an idea of enhanced individual freedom, the notion that people are increasingly empowered, through their own choices exercised in the market-place, and by virtue of their personal tastes, to determine the form and direction of their own lives. This proposition was based on a number of ideas: that membership of a social group or category was less decisive in determining consumption decisions, as lifestyle became elective rather than prescriptive; that self-identity was increasingly bound up with lifestyle, itself ever more a function of consumer behaviour; that individuals now continuously monitor their own consumption behaviour with a view to estimating the impression that they present to others; that cultural preferences became increasingly important in the presentation of self in the context of a process described as the aestheticization of everyday life. Projections such as these have major implications not only for understanding social change but also for theoretical explanations of consumption itself. The identity-value conferred by commodities, the way they constitute the self and communicate it to others, replaces use or exchange value as the central mechanism driving consumption decisions. Personal taste and aesthetic judgment become critical assets in the project of self-development.

Ultimately I argue that such positions exaggerate the degree of change in consumer behaviour. While accepting that selection among the ever-expanding range of commodities is a complex and skilled task, I find it a less individualized process. Strategies for dealing with the diversity of goods

include drawing upon deeply seated social dispositions and the advice of experts.

The book explores the expression of taste through consumption. I use food as a case study and seek to estimate the effects of social and cultural change on British food habits between 1968 and 1992. I collected and analysed data on what people are advised to do and on how they spend their money and their time.

The advice offered to people about what to eat comes from many sources which are, on the surface, incoherent. However, I argue that there is a systematic basis to these contradictory messages which can be found in what I describe as four 'antinomies of taste'. These oppositions – novelty and tradition, health and indulgence, economy and extravagance, care and convenience – are criteria for making legitimate choices between foodstuffs. They permeate the food and recipe columns in the mass media and provide guidance in the face of the diversity of alternatives. I interpret systematically the changes and continuities apparent in popular media representations of taste.

As regards practice, I examined food expenditure patterns and aspects of household organization for the provision of meals. The influence of social group is examined by analysing the food budgets of different types of individuals and households. Persistent and shared patterns of spending are taken as some indication of the power of the 'habitus', a set of deeply seated dispositions that act as practical and aesthetic criteria in the activities of consumption. I argue that contemporary consumption is best viewed as a process of continual selection from an unprecedented range of generally accessible items which are made available both commercially and informally. In response to the enormous variety of mass- and batch-produced commercial foodstuffs and food services for sale, consumers select an array of products which is in one sense, but only a trivial sense, personally unique. No two people will exhibit identical behaviour. However, and this is an empirical matter, there may remain considerable similarities between some individuals, and systematic differences between one group and another. This arises because consumers draw on many but shared sources of guidance in order to make their selections, including their own experience as children and adults, the recommendations and practices of networks of friends and kin, expert advice, official propaganda, and commercial advertisements. My conclusion is that tastes are still collectively shared to a very significant extent.

These themes are introduced through some general theories of change in the late 20th century which bear upon consumer behaviour. I outline those theories in Part I and show that they generate parallel applications in accounts of changing food behaviour. Part II reports in detail empirical evidence about food practice and representation and how this has changed since the late 1960s. This might be read as an extended critical footnote to the major sociological history of British food habits, Mennell's *All Manners of Food* (1985). Part III summarizes changes in both the representation and

the purchase of food and argues that they can be understood structurally, their contradictory aspects reflecting the dilemmas of practical life in late modernity. From this are drawn the implications of the case study of food for theoretical accounts of changing patterns of consumption.

# PART I

## Issues of Taste

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Part I contains three chapters. The first gives an overview of general competing theoretical explanations of the way that consumption is changing. The second shows that similar theoretical positions have generated contrasting accounts of changing food habits. The third chapter describes the empirical research carried out in order to estimate the origins and extent of change in British food habits between 1968 and 1992.



# Consumption, Taste and Social Change

## 1.1 Sociology and consumption

After decades of comparative neglect, there has been an explosion of interest in the topic of consumption. Some sociologists have made strong claims for the new structural role of consumption practice as a central focus of everyday life, a focus in earlier times provided by occupation. In such a view, *lifestyle* increasingly becomes a basis of *social identity*, displacing class as the central organizing principle of social life:

The crucial effect of 'affluence' in post-war capitalism has surely been to justify the ideology and allow the practice of individualism and to link the acquisition and use of consumer goods to values which emphasize the importance of the search for personal identity and authenticity. (Moorhouse, 1983: 422)

Concomitantly, attention has shifted from seeking producer-centred explanations of social change to interpretive analysis of cultural meaning and communication. The portrayal of consumer culture, or the consumer society, as a world of signs and images challenges fundamentally previously dominant materialist approaches which concentrate on labour and production.

Most sociological accounts of consumption, until very recently, implicitly began from a set of materialist premises, considering consumption a matter of survival in the face of unequally distributed resources. The classical sociology of Marx, Weber and Simmel considered consumption a function of production, and consumption patterns a corollary of class position. Consumption was an expression of a central social hierarchy, inequalities of resource being turned into tools of class and status group struggle. Max Weber offered an understanding of the *nouveaux riches* and Thorstein Veblen dissected the social practices of the leisure class. In similar vein, at the opposite end of the social scale, the experience and culture of ordinary working people were deemed the effect of household class position, which exerted material constraint upon possessions, adequacy of diet, level of health, educational opportunities, and so forth.

Such theories revolve around unequal distribution of resources in both spheres of production and consumption. They isolate distinctive classes, with particular property or occupational bases, behaving or expressing

themselves in particular ways through their consumption practices. Hierarchical inequalities, derived from a collective role in production, are reinforced in consumption and create a social identity for a producer group. Thus differential consumption practices were explained in terms of the location of social classes in the system of production.

It is widely accepted, and is a starting point of my analysis, that class used to be the dominant social division with respect to consumption. For example, there are many characterizations of British class cultures: consumption behaviour characterizes class position in Hobsbawm's (1978) description of British proletarian culture in the first half of the 20th century, in Cronin's (1984: 70–92) persuasive account of a homogeneous working-class culture in inter-war Britain, and in Martin's (1981) depiction of traditional respectable working-class life in northern cities in the 1950s. The aristocracy and the middle class in the 19th and for much of the 20th centuries had their own distinctiveness, with stereotypical routines, pastimes and tastes. But many argue this is no longer so, though exactly when the demise of class cultures began is much contested (compare Moorhouse, 1983; Bauman, 1983; Benson, 1994). The decline of class is in many respects an empirical question and I deal with it as an historical claim about the dominant trends in consumption.

While some analysts, like Bourdieu, continue to move within the ambit of the classical sociological accounts of distribution, display and class expression, class-based accounts of consumption have been increasingly criticized. Much contemporary social theory posits new social forces and a reorientation of personal motivations which underpin modern, or post-modern, culture. Consumption is very important to such accounts, 'consumer culture' being one prevalent term denoting the present condition. The next section examines the debate by contrasting the contributions of Bourdieu and Bauman. Section 3 examines the nature of some general social trends and counter-tendencies with implications for consumption which might suggest that the determinants of consumption practices have changed. Section 4 locates some competing theories of consumption in terms of these trends. Section 5 identifies some conceptual and methodological difficulties involved in evaluating alternative theories. Section 6 summarizes the position, i.e. what is at stake in current debates about the nature of contemporary consumption.

## **1.2 Consumption: from habitus to freedom**

To the extent that class cultures were once homogeneous, then mechanisms of socialization were sufficient to explain consumption behaviour; the social group determined norms of consumption and the individual learned appropriate tastes and consumer behaviour occurred within the parameters of such cultures. The concept of habitus, popularized by Pierre Bourdieu, is often used to explain the mechanism.

*Habitus and distinction*

The most sophisticated exponent of the theoretical view that consumption behaviour is an *expression* of class position is Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Taste, knowledge and the desire for particular commodities are necessary elements in the process of class formation and class reproduction. Classes can be identified by their consumption patterns; and consumer behaviour can be explained in terms of the role of display and social judgment in the formation of class identities.

Bourdieu (1984) offers a complex and nuanced account of everyday practice. He is primarily concerned to map the differences between social groups in terms of their distinctive social practices and their capacities, reflexively, to appreciate those differences. Habitus links a person's social and economic position with corresponding position in 'the universe of lifestyles' and 'makes it possible to account both for classifiable practices and products and for the judgments, themselves classified, which make these practices and works into a system of distinctive signs' (1984: 170). This suggests that people's own practices, their capacity to appreciate and judge (i.e. classify) their own practices, and also to be able to do the same about others' practices, are indissolubly linked. Moreover, classifying and passing judgment are simultaneous. Such capacities for reflection and judgment are automatic and in many ways subconscious, and represent deeply embedded dispositions to thought and action.

'The habitus is necessity internalised and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions; it is a general, transposable disposition' and hence can be applied to unknown and unanticipated situations. In other words, agents possess 'systems of generative schemes applicable, by simple transfer, to the most varied areas of practice' (ibid.).

Bourdieu argues that from these capacities emerge unified and distinctive lifestyles. 'That is why an agent's whole set of practices (or those of a whole set of agents produced by similar conditions) are both systematic . . . and systematically distinct from the practices constituting another life-style' (1984: 170). He continues:

Systematicity . . . is found in all the properties – and property – with which individuals and groups surround themselves, houses, furniture, paintings, books, cars, spirits, cigarettes, perfume, clothes, and in the practices in which they manifest their distinction, sports, games, entertainments, only because it is the synthetic unity of the habitus, the unifying generative principle of all practices. Taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices, is the generative formula of life-style, a unitary set of distinctive preferences which express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic sub-spaces, furniture, clothing, language or body hexis. (1984: 173)

Thus Bourdieu is unequivocal about the coherence of lifestyles and the unity of the habitus, which he attributes primarily to different social classes.