Consumption: Sociology Caught in the 'Cash Nexus'

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The 'cash nexus'

My argument is simple and rather crude. Let me put it like this. I am concerned that within the discipline of sociology, the topic of 'consumption' has become a centre of attention for thinking about culture and in particular material culture. But the way that 'consumption' tends to be understood is, I wish to suggest, concerned with the economic processes that surround exchanging cash for goods or commodities. This is the 'cash nexus' of my title. The complexity of the social relationships that surround the appropriation of culture and in particular material culture is presumed to be consequent on the key social action of buying and selling.

The literature on consumption is large and growing at an alarming rate. I'll return later to comment on why I think there is such a growth in the topic as an academic discipline. For the moment I just want to comment on the dramatic contrast between the field of sociology that we teach now and the field of sociology in the United Kingdom in the 1970s. I first heard Marx's phrase the 'cash nexus' when I was an undergraduate and we were studying an article by John Westergaard, published in 1970 called "The Rediscovery of the Cash Nexus". In those days
consumption was not a topic taught on sociology degrees; our attention was firmly on the debate about social structure and how it shaped social institutions such as education, the family and the state. Social structure was seen as determined by the current state of the mode of production. It was the developing class relations of late capitalism that had brought about the specific social structure to be found in the industrialised, advanced, western countries like the United Kingdom. For Westergaard and other Marxist commentators, it was through understanding the dynamics of class formation and the relations of production that the structure of society would become comprehensible. Westergaard identified in a number of studies, most importantly the famous Luton survey of car workers, *The Affluent Worker* (Goldthorpe et al. 1968), a recovery of Marx's account of the 'cash nexus'. In the place of the community oriented but fragmented working class of early industrial capitalism in which the worker was connected to the social structure through a commitment to work and to fellow workers, the capitalism of the 1950s and 1960s had produced an amorphous class of affluent, privatized and instrumental workers with no clear social or cultural form. The main bond of the worker and the social order of late capitalism was through the 'cash nexus'; the money paid in wages for commodified labour. The cash nexus was capitalism at work; producing goods efficiently, rewarding labour with increasingly high wages but no industrial or political power.

It was precisely in this climate of sociology that consumption began to be an issue; the increasing wages of some workers under capitalism needed to be spent somewhere and the mass-produced goods needed to be sold. As I re-read Westergaard and recognised the themes, book titles, authors and issues that had concerned me as an undergraduate, it seemed very far removed from the social theory and sociology of culture that I teach now. But of course the embourgeoisement thesis and the studies of workers, particularly affluent workers, were

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beginning to address social structure as formed not simply in the relations of production but also in the relations of consumption.

In 1970, the same year as Westergaard's article, in France Jean Baudrillard's *La Société de Consommation* was published. However, in the past twenty-eight years Westergaard's thesis has slipped into the wings while Baudrillard's concerns have eventually come to the centre of the stage. It has taken that long for Baudrillard's book to be published in an English edition\(^3\).

I want to accuse Baudrillard with having put a version of consumption into the field of sociology that has a focus on the cash nexus. But I also want to use Baudrillard's work, particularly from *The System of Objects* (1996), to recover material culture for sociological study. It seems quite appropriate in English to read Baudrillard backwards since his later work was translated before his earlier work!

So, in the remainder of this paper I will firstly explore what I mean by consumption at the cash nexus. Then I will suggest some alternative ways of approaching the material culture of modern societies. Thirdly I will also reprise Baudrillard's consumption theory, by arguing that he is not studying consumption as a social practice but pointing to the constituents of a consumer society. Finally, I will comment on the way that the topic of consumption has infiltrated the teaching, research and publishing business of sociology.

\(^3\) Although of course his *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* was published in English translation 1981 and a large chunk of *La Société de Consommation* was published in *Selected Writings* in 1988 and another large chunk in *Revenge of the Crystal* in 1990. I guess a number of commentators were reading and using Baudrillard's ideas directly from the French (perhaps most importantly Marshall Sahlins in *Culture and Practical Reason* in 1979) although the reading of work in foreign languages is more typical of the American and European academic than of the English.
Consumption and the cash nexus

My problem with consumption is not that it is not a proper concern for sociology or that it is dull or irrelevant. It is that the sociological study of material culture has emerged within theories and studies of consumption and because of this is organised around a group of topics that are directed to the buying and selling of objects. The themes of consumption are oriented to the cash nexus of commodities and do not adequately account for the sociological features of material culture. Consumption as the point at which cash is exchanged for commodities is treated as an exchange of meanings within the culture. The exchange is, in the most extreme form of consumption theory, analogous to the exchange of meaning in language; as cash is exchanged for commodities, so meanings and values are exchanged within the culture. What are these themes of consumption then? I will mention four but they overlap and intertwine; they could easily be divided up in different ways.

The first is money itself; it is at the end of The System of Objects that Baudrillard discusses 'credit', buying the postponement of the cash nexus is a feature of consumer societies. Within the contemporary sociology of consumption the issue of money has become linked to debt as well as credit, to the judgement of value, to the use of credit cards and to the relative expenditure of incomes on different types of goods – an issue that Baudrillard takes up briefly in The Consumer Society. Limited cash resources are distributed by consumer's in particular ways that are taken to reflect their engagement with society. Bargain hunting is one of the ways that significance of cash is experienced in the cash nexus of consumption. For Daniel Miller (1998) it is the modern form of ritual sacrifice, enacted daily in every act of provisioning in the high street mini-market.

A second theme is that of the image of the object; the concern with advertising, with the presentation of objects, their novelty, their
distinctiveness. Here the pressures to sell goods are often taken as equivalent to the goods themselves; advertisements are taken to be more adequate representations of the objects than the objects themselves. The meanings formed in advertisements by associations between things for sale and other things which already have cultural value is taken to be exchanged in the process of consumption. Baudrillard sets the pattern by sprinkling his argument not with traditional forms of sociological evidence but with quotations of the impacted, sub-poetic language of advertisements.

A third theme is the field of shopping, not only the activity of shopping but the scene of shopping; the mall, the department store, the home-shopping brochure and so on. Here it is the context that is taken for the object; it derives its meaning from the surroundings in which it is purchased. Baudrillard sets this topic in motion with his discussion of the 'drugstore' and the way that items are presented for sale; not en masse nor systematically arranged as in the department store, but arrayed alongside each other, different classes and types of product, for different purchase at different times. This characteristically post-modern vision of order in decline, of what appears to be chaotically different in one glance being so much more of the same in the next, has given way to recoveries and analyses of all the myriad other contexts for doing shopping.

Fourthly, there is the key issue of choice. The attraction of choice in the consumption cash nexus is that individuals appear to be expressing individual choice, using imagination and fantasy, expressing something relatively independent of the determinants of the mode of production. Of course the counter argument has been put from the beginning by a series of commentators including William Leiss (1978), W.F. Haug (1986), Sut Jhally (1987) and the Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen (1992) that consumption is determined in large measure by the forces of production through processes such as advertising. Nonetheless, the possibility for voluntarily expressing identity with, for example, a youth sub-cultural group or a sophisticated yuppie clique through consumption, has attracted the attention of sociologists. Choice in
consumption is, for some commentators, a quasi-political act in which the citizen expresses their approval or not of the actions of a range of social institutions. Again this theme is put into play in Baudrillard's discussion of personalization, of the way commodities and advertisements hail the individual consumer, making them feel unique and distinct but simultaneously fitting them into a social structural niche of consumer categories.

**Material Culture**

My argument is not against the sociological study of consumption – all the themes I have mentioned have produced interesting and valuable work that needs to be put alongside the 1970s analyses of the relations of production. What I am arguing is that this is not all there is to say about material culture; there are other ways of approaching the objects that get handed over in the cash nexus than those I've mentioned so far. So, what do I want sociologists to get off on once they are no longer caught on the cash nexus of consumption? I will mention a number of themes here, though again the list could be expanded or rearranged in a variety of ways. I have not got the space here to explain these in any detail (though I have done so elsewhere; Dant 1999) but will for a change of pace wind them into a little narrative.

I have a knife in my kitchen, which I estimate to be twenty-seven years old – I think I bought it when Westergaard's article and Baudrillard's book were being published. But I'm not sure. Some time after I'd read Westergaard's article for the first time (I'd not heard of Baudrillard of course) I had an argument with Maggie, who was the live-in girlfriend of the geezer I shared a flat with. She maintained that the knife was hers, that it had been given to her by her parents in Surrey and had been with her throughout her university career at Exeter, had survived a relationship in Sussex and come with her to London. My story was that I remembered buying it in the basement of a John Lewis store in Reading from whence it had travelled with me to Stoke and later to Portsmouth and then to London. Now I definitely remember buying a
knife, but to be honest, I'm not now at all sure whether it was this knife. At the time I was, and argued, as I moved out of the flat, forcefully enough that it was mine to win the argument – or at least the knife. You can no doubt guess that there was some resentment about Maggie as the interloper into the beer-drinking, blues-listening household I'd shared with her lover before she moved in.

So there may have been no cash nexus – I probably came by the knife by some sort of misappropriation. Even if it was the one I bought, I was not seduced by advertisements or brand-names\(^4\). I did not have to raise a loan and would have either paid by cash or cheque. The knife I bought did in some way symbolise my identity; it was a very early purchase of household equipment linked to leaving my parents' home and learning to cook and fend for myself. But this cannot be grasped by looking at the knife itself or even in the context in which it was sold.

I want to suggest that the knife did and does fit in with a system of objects, as part of a series, within the household in which I lived and now live. What is more the biography of the knife since it came into my possession – let us say since I misappropriated it from Maggie – can be understood as evolving in terms of the series for which it became a part. To begin with it was the only sharp knife I owned and moved with me in furnished accommodation (I've counted five houses since London) because landlords never provide sharp or sharpenable knives. It was at that point a *model* – dark wooden handle, stainless blade, sharp point, and sharpenable blade. It later became one in a *series* as others were collected – it has five or six companions in the drawer now. Its wide range of *functions* – cutting up meat, salad, fruit, and vegetables, in the kitchen, at the diner table, at the picnic – was a reason for its acquisition and continued use. Within the domestic equipment of the household the knife has always contributed to the *atmosphere* through its status as a

\(^4\) It is a very basic Sabatier knife without the distinctive features of the models they market now. There was no brand name on the handle or on a label attached to the knife. However, in the 1980s I realised that the blade itself carries the brand name 'Sabatier' - by then such things had become important.\(^5\) In the original French "ward off" reads *conjurer*, i.e. a correct translation but not perhaps quite wide or equivocal enough.
practical utensil; it is traditional in style and materials, simple in design, quite clearly not a gadget, but not an ostentatious 'retro' style either. The fact that it has lasted so long is a testament to its quality and yet it came with no guarantee, no attached tag telling me about its materials or design, its history or assuring me of its longevity. These categories of models and series, function and atmosphere are all used by Baudrillard to describe the system of objects.

The *biography* of the knife is linked to my biography not only in the geographical moves I've made but also the types of household I've lived in. It has shared the drawer with the knives of landlords, flat sharers, lovers and partners. In its early useful life it cut up meat four or five times a week. For the past few years it has not touched meat and seldom sees the inside of a vegetable; it mainly gets to slice a tomato or peel a pear. This is not the sort of biography that Igor Kopytoff (1988) describes, who having suggested that ownership and use is important, rapidly moves on to talk about arenas of exchange and the revaluation of objects in the cash nexus. But the biography is in some senses etched on the surface of the knife as the sort of 'patina' that Grant McCracken talks about. The knife, I should tell you, was prematurely aged by the violence done to its wooden handle by an accidental entrapment within a dishwasher.

I and the other human users of the knife have an *interactive* relationship with the knife; it is held in a particular way and fits the hand in a certain way, working as a tool, extending the properties of body within what George Mead (1980: 119-139) would call the 'manipulative area'. As an object it enables its user to do certain things and it will be selected for use from amongst other objects with a similar function on the grounds of its properties. As an extension of its user it is not part of direct interaction with other human beings – it's never been used to threaten another human being with violence – but it does enable interaction with other objects, particularly food. Occasionally it gets used to open a stubborn plastic wrapped parcel or for some other domestic use.
The knife also has a *mediative* function in that it mediates between me and the other humans who enjoy the food I've cut up with it. Perhaps more importantly, this particular object mediates my past to me, a personal symbolic object, that like a memento or a photograph carries meanings that are inscribed but invisible. This is part of the symbolic function of objects discussed by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) and Stephen Riggins (1994). I notice that I am more likely than other members of the household to choose this knife to use. It is not as attractive as later members of the series of paring knives that have plastic handles and ever-sharp serrated blades. But for me it feels right; as people say of clothes that they like to wear and be seen in, it is 'comfortable'.

**Baudrillard off the Hook**

As you can see, Baudrillard is both the source of some of my complaints with the analysis of consumption as caught up with the cash nexus, and the source of some of the issues that I think a sociology of material culture should pursue. However, Baudrillard having raised the themes of contemporary consumption studies cannot be accused of getting caught on the cash nexus. In a simple sense he moved on; *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993 [1976]) marks a turning point in his work in which the issues of consumption have become disconnected from the cash nexus and reconnected to the symbolic economies of sex, death and the simulacrum. Not only is production dead but also, in effect, so is consumption.

Why might Baudrillard be able to let go of the cash nexus so easily twenty-two years ago when it has become an increasingly hot topic for English speaking sociology? I want to suggest that there are two reasons for this. Firstly, because the connotations of 'consumption' are not quite the same in French as in English, and secondly, because Baudrillard's account of *The Consumer Society* was a critique of a social form, a stage in the development of capitalism, rather than an account of social practices.
In French the verb *consommer* refers to using, consuming and eating but it also has the meanings of accomplishing (as of a task), perpetrating (as of a crime) and consummating (as of a marriage). In English the verb *consume* and the noun form *consumption*, refer to eating and drinking, being engrossed as well as using up, expending, destroying or burning up. The noun form also carries the meaning of the wasting away of the body and used to be a term used to refer to tuberculosis. This meaning derives from the Latin verb *consumo* – wasting away.

There are negative meanings of the English word – using up, destroying, burning, wasting away that are not so linked to the French word *consommer* (from Latin *consummo*) partly because there is a separate word in French, *consumer* which means to wear away, or be eaten up, to destroy, including by fire and, in its reflexive form, *se consumer*, to waste away. There is also a French noun *consomption* which has the medical meaning of wasting away, of decline.

I should not make too much of this; when Baudrillard uses the term *consommation* he clearly means the same thing as Veblen, Galbraith and others to whom he refers, mean by the word *consumption*. But there are connotations in the English use of the word that are negative and final; even the standard economic meaning refers to 'expenditure on goods and services for final use'. These negative meanings to do with finality are dealt with by other words in French, while in English the positive meanings to do with the idea of accomplishment are dealt with by the different word *consummate*. In English we have a moral connotation of consumption as wasteful, as a using up, that Veblen connects to pecuniary strength – that's what counts in the cash nexus. In French there is a more sanguine use of *consommation* which is an achievement, perhaps even a marriage between person and object. The French love to eat; the consumption of food is a leisurely pleasure and a process that produces and reproduces culture. The English have learnt from the Americans to eat as much as possible, as quickly as possible for as little cash as possible; a process that produces and reproduces – capitalism.
Secondly, the issue of consumption for Baudrillard is not the consumption of distinctive objects or services but the consumption of the code, the system that goes with engagement with the objects through the cash nexus. Rather like Marcuse, Baudrillard is mounting a critique of the form of a society in which consumption becomes a determinative process. To do this he takes on American sociology's swallowing of the economistic account of consumption (Galbraith, Riesman, Packard, Boorstein). Baudrillard's critique attacks the focus on the cash nexus and its impact on a culture that produces the characteristics of consumer society. His critique of advertising is not as a focusing of attention on commodities but as an extension of the media, which is also a means of socialising people and distributing knowledge. His comments on 'personalisation' are not to emphasise the choice of the individual but to show that both individuals and the choices they make are a construct of a particular social form.

A feature of Baudrillard's critique is the contradiction in consumer society; the desire for consumption is accompanied by an ethic that rejects wastefulness and excess (cf., however, the work of Campbell 1987). It is this dialectic that drives modern culture; we have the technical capacity to produce goods and services that satisfy our every need, so we do. As that capability derives from the application of a systematic rationality to production, the same rationality applied to consumption is repulsed by waste and excess, indulgence and greed. Baudrillard's analysis works as a critique precisely because he is setting out the consequences of this dialectic which is as characteristic of late modernity as the falling rate of profit was of early modernity.

**Sociology Consumes Consumption**

I said I would return to the question of why sociology had got caught on the cash nexus of consumption. It is quite simply because the discipline has itself become subject to the exigencies of consumer society – sociology is busy consuming consumption. As a teaching profession, sociology has been obliged to attract more and more
students, to compete for market share while at the same time developing a 'consumer friendly' approach to quality. On most degree programmes students choose options from a range which need to be made simple, digestible and attractive; the students need to be given educational experiences that they can easily relate to their worldly experiences. This produces the cultural studies phenomenon where students want to receive degrees for 'studying' the action films, soap operas, fashion magazines, dance music and computer games that they and their peers are interested in. The study of consumption allows them to study these things all over again, with the attention now on where and how they are persuaded to buy these things and how such commodities might be construed as shaping their individual identity and so that of the (post)modern world.

The publishers of academic books are sensitive to the student consumer demand to see their life concerns wrapped up in an academic packaging, and so are keen to commission books that are easy to read and designed to fit the topics and 'learning objectives' in courses. This process mirrors those of the 'lowest common culture' that Baudrillard describes as the characteristic form of mass media in consumer society. In an uncharacteristically acerbic passage he says:

The LCC lays down the lowest common panoply of 'right answers' the average individual is supposed to possess if he is to win his spurs as cultural citizen. ...We can see that the term 'culture' is potentially very misleading. This cultural 'consommé', this 'digest'/repertoire of coded questions/answers, this LCC, is to culture what life insurance is to life; it is there to ward off its dangers, and, on the basis of the denial of living culture, to glorify the ritualized signs of culturalization. (Baudrillard 1998: 104)

The study of consumption has become a mass educational medium and the critical, thought-provoking ideas of Baudrillard and Simmel are pressed into soundbits to legitimise studying a set of topics that find the history and detail of consumer activity intrinsically 'interesting'. The
students learn their 'right answers', which allow them to pass as young people in the clubs and bars and also allow them to pass their exams. The degree level unit in consumption studies becomes itself a ritualized sign of culturation – necessary for passing through an age grade and moving into the society, equipped to participate on both sides of the cash nexus, as wage labourer and consumer – knife or no knife..

**Conclusions**

For Westergaard part of the significance of the cash nexus was that it was brittle; if it broke then the allegiance of workers to the system would disappear. This is an inadequate theory to explain the trajectory of working class politics since the 1970s – politics is always more complex than the single strand of the cash nexus, even when the workers are privatized, affluent and instrumental. Such workers became the consumers of the consumer society, enjoying the purchase of a range of objects and services that improved the quality of their lives; cars, washing machines, televisions, furniture, clothes, holidays, insurance and leisure\(^6\).

The cash nexus did break for those who lost their jobs, often whole communities and industries, but for those of us who continue to have incomes it enables us to partake in the life of society. This does not mean that consumption is an end in itself for the vast majority of people. The cash nexus of consumption is just the beginning of a quasi-social relationship with the objects or services that are bought. These relations with objects (and services and experiences) are what bond us to the social order. Such relationships occur whether or not cash was exchanged. In late capitalism they are more likely to follow from the handing over of money but it is not the handing over of cash or the inducements to do so that determine the way objects are lived with or used.

\(^6\) Cf., however, the work of Schwarz Cowan (198)
Like the social world of work, the social world of material culture should not be seen in terms that always refer back to the cash nexus, but should be recognised as complex and interesting in itself.
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