



The
**UNMANAGEABLE
CONSUMER**

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INTRODUCTION

THE FACES OF THE CONSUMER

The consumer is now a god-like figure, before whom markets and politicians alike bow. Everywhere it seems, the consumer is triumphant. Consumers are said to dictate production; to fuel innovation; to be creating new service sectors in advanced economies; to be driving modern politics; to have it in their power to save the environment and protect the future of the planet. Consumers embody a simple modern logic – the right to choose. Choice, the consumer's friend, the inefficient producer's foe, can be applied to things as diverse as soap-powder, holidays, healthcare or politicians. And yet the consumer is also seen as a weak and malleable creature, easily manipulated, dependent, passive and foolish. Immersed in illusions, addicted to joyless pursuits of ever-increasing living standards, the consumer, far from being a god, is a pawn, in games played in invisible boardrooms.

The concept of the consumer sits at the centre of numerous current debates. Policy-makers, marketers, politicians, environmentalists, lobbyists and journalists rarely lose the consumer from their sights. The supermarket has become a metaphor for our age, choice its mantra. In the 20th century a new way of thinking and talking about people has emerged, which engulfs all of us. By the beginning of the 21st century, we had learnt to talk and think of each other and of ourselves less as workers, citizens, parents or teachers, and more as consumers. Our rights and our powers derive from our standing as consumers; our political choices are votes for those promising us the best deal as consumers; our enjoyment of life is almost synonymous with the quantities (and to a lesser extent qualities) of what we consume. Our success is measured in terms of how well we are doing as consumers. Consumption is not just a means of fulfilling needs but permeates our social relations, identities, perceptions and images.

The consumer has also assumed centre-stage in academic debates. If the 19th century tradition of social theory and political economy approached people primarily as workers and creators of wealth, consumption is the focus of much 21st-century theorizing. Psychologists have redirected their sights towards an understanding of what drives modern consumers. Cultural theorists have increasingly recognized the spirit of our age (whether described as late modernity, postmodernity or advanced capitalism) not in modes of production, government,

class structure or art but in modes of consumption, lifestyles and identities. Following the collapse of Communism in the 1990s, consumerism was commonly described as the unchallenged ideology of our times. Its scope constantly stretched to incorporate new geographical areas, such as Far Eastern countries; new spheres of social relations, like health and education; and new social spaces, like homes and the countryside.

Discussions about consumption and consumerism are rarely value-neutral. Some commentators celebrate the rise of the consumer; having lost faith in religious or political recipes of salvation, the consumer is seen as the mature individual who seeks to enjoy life by making choices and exercising freedom. Others lament consumerism as the final stage of commodification, where all relations between people are finally reduced to usage and exploitation, in which the consumer is easily co-opted. The consumer is not merely an object of theorizing, but almost invariably a central character from a story; now a hero or a heroine, now a victim, now a villain, now a fool, but always central. In some stories, consumers feature as sovereign, deciding the fate of products and corporations at a whim, in others they feature as duped victims, manipulated by producers, advertisers and image-makers. In some, they feature as callous villains, indifferent to the plight of the planet or those less fortunate than themselves, in others as addicts, pursuing a chimera that only reinforces their despair.

This book was written because we believe that the word 'consumer' is now so extensively used that it is in danger of collapsing into a meaningless cliché. At one level, to state that someone is a consumer is almost as meaningless as acknowledging that she or he is a living being. We all consume the same way that we all breathe, since life without consumption is as impossible as life without respiration. Plants and other animals consume too. Why then has 'the consumer' in our culture become so loaded with meanings, assumptions and values? From where does this idea draw its power?

In this book, we argue that different traditions or discourses have invented different representations of the consumer, each with its own specificity and coherence, but wilfully oblivious to those of others. Neo-liberal economists, for example, have celebrated the consumer as a rational decision-maker and an arbiter of products while some consumer activists look at the consumer as a vulnerable and confused being, in need of help. Many cultural theorists look at the consumer as a communicator of meanings sustaining the social fabric, while most ecologists reproach consumers for their reckless and selfish behaviour. In this way, the concept of the consumer appears to have lost its specificity. It can enter different social and cultural agendas, including those of cultural theorists, Marxists, neo-liberals, journalists, publishers, marketers, advertisers and politicians across the spectrum with apparent equanimity, in seemingly perfect accord. The consumer can mean all things to all people.

The theoretical softness of the concept of the consumer (its readiness to act as an obedient and polite guest in almost any discourse) is accompanied by a moral hardness which it can readily assume. In reviewing what other thinkers have written and after considering the common usage of the term, we became and still are impatient with one-dimensional views of the consumer, whether they demonize or romanticize the consumer as if in consuming, people transcend every other level of social existence, as if consumption alone defines them. Perhaps surprisingly, love and fear of consumption cross conventional political, ideological and economic boundaries. Religious authorities can side with environmentalists in denouncing excessive consumption, while co-operative socialists and free market conservatives can join hands to celebrate consumer power.

We believe it is time that different traditions of defining the consumer started to acknowledge each other. Our first objective therefore is to identify, disentangle and juxtapose approaches to contemporary consumption that are rarely found within a single book or debate. Our discussion will address diverse features of consumption ranging from gifts and bargain-hunting to cashless systems of exchange, from fashion and fads in the developed world to the effects of Western consumerism on the developing world, from the class dimensions of consumption to children as consumers, from the semiotics of modern advertising to the scope and limitations of the law as an instrument of consumer protection, from the concept of choice to debates about free trade and protectionism.

The book's structure is an attempt to organize a truly prodigious, though sometimes chaotic, array of arguments according to the underlying image of the consumer which inspires and drives them. Thus, after Chapter 1, which investigates the emergence and spread of contemporary Western consumption, each subsequent chapter until the final one presents a distinct portrait of today's consumer, as it emerges from the writings of academics, journalists, advertisers, consumer advocates, policy-makers and others. We portray in succession the consumer as chooser, as communicator, as identity-seeker, as victim and so forth. It will quickly become evident that each of these portraits highlights a different feature of the consumer's physiognomy, while at the same time obscuring others. We discuss the tensions and contradictions inherent in each portrait and examine the tendencies of each to mutate into or confront different ones. We observe how critical discontinuities and anomalies in a particular tradition of consumer studies are overcome by simply switching from one consumer representation to another. We look, for example, at how the consumer as explorer turns identity-seeker or how the consumer as chooser turns into victim or the consumer as activist is seduced into being a consumer as worker. We argue that each one of these portraits has strengths as well as weaknesses and we try to evaluate each.

Our own purpose, however, is not merely to recreate these images, compelling though they be, nor to criticize each one of them from the vantage point of another. In spite of their considerable complexity, we shall argue that all of these portraits are too tame, predictable and one-sided, failing to come to terms with the fragmentation, volatility and confusion of contemporary consumption. By stirring various traditions together, we are seeking to reclaim some theoretical recalcitrance for the concepts of consumption and the consumer. We would thus like to re-inject some critical edge and prickliness into the notion of the consumer that it has lost by being all things to all people. We introduce the concept of the 'unmanageable consumer' to express this recalcitrance, a refusal on our part to allow the idea of the consumer to become domesticated and comfortable within parcelled discourses.

But there is another quality that we seek to capture through the concept of unmanageability, one that pertains not to the concept of the consumer as it features in academic, political and cultural discourses, but rather to the vital unpredictability that characterizes some of our actions and experiences as consumers, both singly and collectively. As consumers, we can be irrational, incoherent and inconsistent just as we can be rational, planned and organized. We can be individualist or may be driven by social norms and expectations. We can seek risk and excitement or may aim for comfort and security. We can be deeply moral about the way we spend our money or quite unfettered by moral considerations. Our feelings towards consumption can range from loathing shopping to loving it, from taking pride in what we wear to being quite unconcerned about it, from enjoying window-shopping to finding it utterly boring, from being highly self-conscious about the car we drive to being quite indifferent to it. Such fragmentations and contradictions should be recognized as core features of contemporary consumption itself, hence the pertinence of the idea of the unmanageable consumer.

To portray consumers as unmanageable does not seek to overlook the difficulties many people have in making ends meet, the lack of choice that we experience due to the oppressive burden of social expectations or the indignity of rank poverty. Nor does it skim over the immense resources and effort deployed to observe, monitor, survey, forecast and control our behaviour as consumers, in short, to manage us. Like today's worker, today's consumer is over-managed, prodded, seduced and controlled. Never before has one's every purchase been so closely observed, each credit card transaction so closely dissected, each movement monitored on close-circuit TV. In the pages of this book, we will encounter countless modes of consumer management coming from diverse quarters. Consumers, however, do not always act as predictably as would-be managers desire. The very fragmentations and contradictions that characterize our actions as consumers enable us from time to time, in devious, creative and unpredictable ways to dodge management devices and evade apparatuses of monitoring and control.

Ultimately, our actions and experiences as consumers cannot be detached from our actions and experiences as social, political and moral agents. The fragmentation and contradictions of contemporary consumption are part and parcel of the fragmentation and contradictions of contemporary living. Being a consumer dissolves neither class membership nor citizenship; it is not the case that at one moment we act as consumers and the next as workers or as citizens, as women or men or as members of ethnic groups. We are creative composites of several social categories at the same time, with histories, presents and futures.

But the most important reason for writing this book has been our desire to explore the qualities of fragmentation and unmanageability of contemporary consumption as part of a long-term historical process. Today's Western consumer is often treated as the terminus of a historical process, which will be duplicated in other parts of the world. Alternatively, Western consumption is viewed as culpable for the escalating plunder of vast sections of the developing world and the continuing deprivation of its inhabitants. We want to emphasize that today's Western consumerism is itself but a stage towards something different. The fact that no one can be sure about what lies ahead does not imply that we should treat today's Western consumer as the summation of a historical development. This is a mistake made by some political ideologues in their romanticization of consumer choice and inability to imagine a future different from the present. We wish therefore to reassert the importance of the debate about the global and historical implications of Western modes of consumption and the legacy that it is likely to leave for future generations.

The meaning of consumerism is framed by its wider political and social context. The demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War at the end of the 1980s signalled to many observers the triumph of Western consumer capitalism. Equally, the spectacular rise of the economies of the Asia Pacific region was seen as confirmation that the only meaningful choice left to nations (now that the choice of capitalism versus socialism was foreclosed) was that between consumer capitalism and poverty-ridden, corruption-rife under-development. Instead, we argue that any triumphalism about Western-style consumption continues to be misplaced. The future of global consumption must remain the object of questioning on economic, cultural, environmental and moral grounds. The rapid globalization of production and markets heralds a decline in some of the conditions that fuelled the rise of modern consumerism: steady jobs, full employment, high wages, rising standards of living and so on. Following the economic and banking crisis of 2007–8, the efforts of politicians, marketers, advertisers, publishers and trend-setters to entice people to resume the riotous pace of debt-based spending have not been consistently successful. Major economies like those of Japan and the Eurozone have faltered, while the USA itself stuttered and has lumbered itself with still more debt. In the wake of insecurity about jobs and pay, fed by countless cautionary tales of debt, homelessness and bankruptcy,

many commentators talk about consumers suffering from spending reluctance and a return to thrift. Some politicians are quick to despair about consumers doing their bit for the economy. Many consumers have become nervous of unaffordable consumption. As earlier generations of workers had been accused of being work-shy by their bosses, so consumers today can be castigated for being spend-shy and failing in their duty to keep the economy going.

The core assumptions of consumerism have also come under scrutiny. The foolishness of pretending that the natural environment contains inexhaustible resources and has unlimited tolerance to abuse has become patently clear to an increasing number of analysts. The notion that everyone in the world could 'enjoy' Western standards of living without leading to an environmental and ecological catastrophe seems increasingly blinkered. Indeed, many giant corporations reliant on consumption now acknowledge that they need to reduce their resource use and environmental 'footprints'. Even the axiomatic equation of quality of life with wealth has started to be questioned, as some vanguard consumer groups advocate 'consume less'. A sizeable number of people are also heeding the call and voluntarily simplifying their lifestyles. While we cannot see the end of consumerism yet, its future and pattern can no longer be taken for granted. For the time being, consumerism, far from resting on its laurels, seems to be going through a period of well-earned malaise.

This book argues that the fragmentation and unmanageability of the consumer are features of this malaise. As long as the consumer could confidently look forward to a future of greater prosperity and affluence, the issue of defining the consumer seemed pedantic. Today, however, defining the consumer has become like a Rorschach Test, the psychologist's tool, where individuals are invited to say what they 'see' in the shape of an inkblot; the idea is that what they each 'see' betrays their state of mind. Similarly, to ask what the consumer is invites us to explore ourselves, our notions of society and our outlook on life. One's tendency is always to search for meaning, cohesion and transparency where there may be doubt, ambiguity and uncertainty. By accepting fragmentation and unmanageability, this book invites the reader to unravel some of the paradoxes that make up contemporary consumption and to assess their implications for the future. Are we going to witness the consumer's resurgence, metamorphosis or demise?