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Gian Paolo Lazzer

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1. Author information

Department of management/University Ca' Foscari, Venice/Italy

2. Contact author's email address

gianpaolo.lazzer@unive.it

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Consumption Epiphany: from Abstract to Material

Gian Paolo Lazzer*

Corresponding author:
Gian Paolo Lazzer
E-mail: gianpaolo.lazzer@unive.it

Abstract

This paper aims to offer a reflection on the latest developments concerning the study of consumption in the field of sociology in order to outline a conceptual, albeit not comprehensive, map. Specifically, the intention of this paper is to map a precise point of departure for the approaches which are currently better able to interpret the processes of consumption that characterise modern societies. The literature review has clearly shown a convergence of interests on consumption practices that focuses on material and tangible issues. Approaches that refer to the theories of practice, material culture and studies on science and technology (STS) inspired by the actor network theory (ANT) share an interest in this aspect by offering viewpoints which, although specific, are definitely complementary. The sociology of consumption, through an approach that is both multifaceted and focused, has a major opportunity to provide interpretative frameworks which are increasingly articulate and precise when compared to modern consumption, starting from its most tangible aspects and integrating them with the already-established symbolic aspects.

Keywords: material culture, STS, practice theories

1. Is it possible to stop the present by overcoming the past?

1.1 Nobody wants to marry homo oeconomicus

We know that the sociological analysis of consumption is a useful way to study contemporary society because it has been able to twice outdate accepted paradigms by proposing an alternative view of the dynamics that regulate the processes of consumption. On the one hand it has outdated, by highlighting

* Department of management/University Ca' Foscari, Venice/Italy.

its limited cognitive and explanatory capacity, an economistic approach to the study of consumption based on the rational choice paradigm - still in vogue thanks to its simplicity of application although it has been banned by most academic literature. The so-called "homo oeconomicus" has run its course and the rational choice paradigm has become obsolete both in theoretical terms and in empirical research. In his manual of microeconomics, Robert H. Frank (2003) provocatively asks the reader "would you like your daughter to marry a homo oeconomicus?"¹. Ironically, Robert Frank was examining the issue related to choices based on rational calculation and on individual interests, stating that these do not cover all the facets of human behavior. Hence, due to his selfishness and lack of romance, homo oeconomicus would have very few suitors and, in fact, has been substantially rejected by sociology, and in particular by literature concerning consumption.

Concretely, if we take the recent economic crisis as an example, the inadequacy of an approach of this kind has been proven by its inability i) to predict the crisis and ii) to interpret its evolution that has generated new consumption practices. The predictive incapacity i) is clear and has continued in trying to explain the crisis that has often been described as a natural phenomenon. Concepts developed by renowned economists, which explain economic behaviour through an unorthodox approach, as "animal spirits" or "irrational exuberance" (Akerlof, Shiller, 2009; Shiller, 2000), are back in fashion only because of the crisis. Likewise, ii) the emergence of new consumption practices through phenomena such as the sharing economy, the purchase of second-hand objects or the creation of new types of money, does not suit the old explanatory categories typical of a rational market.

In this light, the economic approach pays homo oeconomicus the token of considering consumption according to three concepts that are, at best of little use - at worst fallacious: consumption as a rational-mathematical act, consumption as an activity engaged in by individuals who are isolated from each other, and consumption as an action that takes into consideration only the relationship that the consumer establishes with a single product, outside a logic of mutual influence between people and objects or between the objects themselves. In other words, it was decided to ignore the cultural aspect of consumption consisting of social ties, symbols and meanings. In particular, by considering goods and services as passive factors, influenced only by the calculation of the economic actor, as the article will be able to show, the role assumed by products has been ignored, focusing all attention on the single individual according to the sovereign consumer logic.

¹ Frank R., Cartwright, E. (2003), *Microeconomia*, Global Edition, p. 18

Homo oeconomicus no longer exists – perhaps he never has - and is unlikely to find a suitor. Society is extremely complex and the challenge posed by sociology has turned analysis of consumption into an even more interesting and complex theme. As Pierre Bourdieu already suggested (2004), it was impossible to turn social issues into economic ones but the opposite was desirable:

Because social aspects as a whole are present in every "economic" action, it is necessary to have cognitive tools that, far from neglecting the multidimensionality and multi-functionality of practices, make it possible to build "historical patterns" able to account for the actions and economic institutions as they arise from empirical observation, with rigor and sobriety².

Hence, the necessary capacity of putting society in a different theoretical framework, placing it before a system that, although functional and linear, did not suit it much. (Barbera, Negri, 2008; Crouch et al., 2002).

1.2 The contribution of the sociology of consumption

On the other hand, the sociology of consumption has been able to capture this need and has proven that it can achieve a society directed towards new paradigms, or rather a society that cannot be inscribed within theoretical models that are too rigid and fixed. In fact, sociological research has the merit of underlining the fact that the consumer is a microcosm able to talk about the complexities of contemporary society and of so-called post-modernity.

Firstly, ever since the classics of sociology, a substantial distinction had begun to be made from paradigms proposed by economics (Simmel, 1900; Weber, 1922; Veblen, 1899); but with the arrival of mass consumption, the sociology of consumption achieved a substantial autonomy of research. The rejection of old parameters which focused on production and considered the sphere of consumption as secondary were legitimized by sociological research (Alberoni, 1964). Before the '70s, in fact, the sociological analysis of consumption focused on the macroeconomic scenario which, according to the Marxist legacy for which production creates the consumer, placed consumption at a secondary level of analysis compared to capitalist production systems (Daloz, 2007, 2010). Consumption, and consequently the characteristics of the consumer, were explained starting from the logic which governed industrial production that is typical of mass consumption; this theoretical frame was a perfect bride for the so-called "homo oeconomicus".

² P. Bourdieu, *Le strutture sociali dell'economia*, Asterios, 2004.

With the development of this new phase, sociology of consumption has substantially opposed the logic of rational choice by means of three perspectives aimed at improving the approach to the study of consumption that could be respectively defined as distinctive, communicative and critical. The first makes the consumer adopt a logic of social distinction to describe consumption processes (Baudrillard, 1976, 1999; Bourdieu, 1979) and highlights the symbolic power of consumer choices in terms of social stratification. According to a dual motion, one of distinction and one of belonging that is typical of fashion (Simmel, 1905), social groups express the social status of their group through consumption choices. In particular, Pierre Bourdieu's work (1979) redefined acts of consumption by assigning a place to them that went beyond individualistic logic, classifying them within collective dynamics that explain how the choices of individuals are the result of the reproduction of collective processes. His great value, therefore, lies in the fact that he shifted the processes of consumption outside individual consumer choices to a plane that is occupied by groups, classes and communities (Gherardi, 2009).

On the other hand, perhaps to a greater extent than others, the communication logic was able to highlight that consumption is not just a functional place to satisfy basic needs and pragmatic wants but is also a communicative act. In this case, in a logic similar to the distinction perspective, sociology has been able to bring out the role of consumption from a self-representative viewpoint, especially as regards subcultures and communities that behave outside the logic of social stratification.

The third perspective highlighted the role of consumption as an expression of certain values and certain political beliefs. This viewpoint originates from the work of the so-called Frankfurt School and from mass consumption critics (Horkheimer, Adorno 1947; Adorno, 1967). Consumption becomes a political act and takes a stand with respect to certain topics and issues, leading the analysis of consumption to the field of political activism (de Certeau, 1984).

In short, these perspectives emphasized consumption as an expressive action, thus minimizing the strictly utilitarian logic that distinguished the vision of economists. Through consumption, consumers represent themselves and the groups they belong to, elaborating tastes and lifestyles that "talk" about their identity and their culture. Especially since the 1980s, the symbolic side and the abstraction of analysis were placed in the foreground and the cultural explanation of consumption almost monopolized the debate on the subject. Following Kaufman (2004), consumption was therefore explained in purely cultural terms, running the risk of falling into a tautological circle through which culture explains a cultural phenomenon.

2. A new present

2.1 *Would you marry a cultural dope?*

The evolution of the three perspectives - distinctive, communicative and critical – became the basis for plenty of interesting literature. The intuition that unites them, albeit with different degrees of involvement, identifies culture as the driving force behind consumption processes (Reckwitz, 2002). These, at their strongest, focused their attention solely on the cultural aspect of consumption, almost going in an opposite direction to the rational consumer choice hypothesis and to the idea of the perfect market theorized in microeconomic manuals. By moving away from homo oeconomicus, sociology has risked stumbling on a “cultural dope” consumer (Giddens, 1991) who uses consumption as a symbolic production terrain that is increasingly disengaged from functional and material needs. Given the risk, it is appropriate to ask how far the model based on consumption interpreted purely on a cultural basis differs from the rational consumer model in terms of logic and implications. In fact, both perspectives place the intentionality of consumption at the centre of their analysis according to an idea that sees individuals as thoughtful and always lead by a purpose, be it functional in the first case or symbolic-communicative in the second (Warde, 2015). Consumer choice thus remains the real focus and the unit of analysis to study the matter, neglecting other equally important elements.

Consumption was almost considered equal to and identified with the expression of certain cultures, but the evolution of society demands further considerations that take into account a new present. The criteria for distinction does not exhaust and does not fully explain the issue, especially if some parameters, frequently used in the past such as income, property and social class, are no longer decisive but only functional to the explanation of the evolution of consumption styles (Rifkin, 2000).

A society that is characterized by the rejection of extreme ideologies demands a new approach to the issue of values (Leonini, Sassatelli 2008; Sassatelli, 2003). In the same way, a multicultural society characterized by an increasing variety and an overlapping of lifestyles can no longer be interpreted from a perspective that predicts a unique relationship between the object and the meaning ascribed to it (Miller, Woodward, 2012). Acts of consumption are not bearers of a unique identity and, similarly, they do not clarify the exclusive belonging to a particular culture (Setiffi, 2014).

The role of consumers has become more active and it is no longer possible to speak only of “choice” to define the relationship between the consumer and goods or services but we should consider the actual co-

construction of consumption and production processes (Ritzer, 2010). Likewise, even climate change, problems related to the reduction of waste (Shove et al., 2012) and the recent economic crisis (Paltrinieri, 2012) have, for the first time, lead the debate that revolves around sustainable consumption beyond a problem of ethics to more practical and pragmatic implications. Notably, sociology oriented to mass consumption analysis does not tend to make a problem out of emerging relations such as the one between new and second-hand goods that are marking modern consumption practices (Setiffi, 2009; Palmer, 2005).

The evolution of societies demands new paradigms that require an analysis that breaks away from the determinisms that characterized economic analysis and sociology after the Second World War, be they ideological, structural or cultural. The focus of rather abstract cultural analysis disregards many of the aspects of consumption related to everyday life such as routines, the objects used and, for example, physicality (Gronow, Warde, 2001). The cultural explanation has therefore threatened to disregard the consumer's behavior, thus failing to provide a full explanation of how culture is linked to consumption actions and to objects and to the way it manifests itself in observable and tangible forms.

We have already mentioned that, as is the case for economists' analysis, by exceeding in the opposite direction we run the risk of focusing sociological analysis solely on the consumer and not on consumption as a meta-individual social form which goes beyond and above the individual. Culture does not determine actions and the manifestation of consumption practices in toto but it directs the action in unison with other important elements.

3. The centrality of the material aspect: following the objects of consumption

3.1 Three integrated perspectives

The strongest vision of the cultural perspective has often neglected the role of objects and technologies in consumption processes; it has preferred to strive to interpret the meaning that people attribute to such material entities, thus systematically raising them to an abstract level according to a semiotic approach that reduces consumption to the interpretation given to it by the consumer (Reckwitz, 2002). Abstraction itself has underestimated the role of the material and everyday aspects of consumption practices and of everything that is related to physicality and the senses with them, despite these factors have been considered of vital importance since the classics, above all by Georg Simmel (1908).

This paper aims to clarify how the latest perspectives on the study of consumption, that are being developed following the so-called cultural turn (Warde 2014) have the attention paid to the material elements that constitute and support consumption processes in common. Ever since the '80s, awareness of the materiality of objects started to grow stronger and was not purely reduced to the symbolic level inspired by the works of anthropologists (Appadurai, 1986, 1988; Miller, 1987, 1998; McCracken, 1990). Nevertheless, more than any other, Reckwitz (2012) insisted on the need to consider the material side of consumption processes by making sure that the symbolic side did not overshadow the functional one. To place objects, tools and technological infrastructures under the sociological lens (Mongili, Pellegrini, 2014) means to deal with a new present within which technological development and the mediation of objects during everyday life take on a predominant role (Secondulfo, 2014). Limiting analysis to the “consumer-individual” would involve omitting a constituent part of consumption processes made of material contexts in which daily activities and routines are performed that do not end in the consumer’s reflective process.

Following the objects (Cook, 2004) is both a necessity and a suggestion that three areas of study are simultaneously following with significant and profitable results. The studies that regard the so-called material culture, internationally and in Italy, (Miller, 2010; Secondulfo, 2012) have clearly shifted their gaze on the trajectories that the objects of consumption draw and on the valuable information they leave in their trail. The theories developed by STS and especially the ANT approach follow the intuition that considers objects and technologies to be real active elements within the networks of relationships that define a social context (Latour, 2005). Just like the relationship between people and objects, through the concept of socio-technical agencies (Callon, 1986), is considered to be a unique social form and translated into a specific unit of analysis. Notably, theories of practice that propose themselves as a broader model of interpretation confirm within their conceptual proposals an essential role for the analysis of objects and technologies that support and mediate collective action (Warde, 2014; Shove, Trentmann, Wick 2009; Schatzky et al., 2001).

3.2 The material culture cycle

The perspective belonging to the so-called material culture originates from an anthropological analysis of society (Setiffi, 2014). We know that the contribution of anthropology was one of the most careful and forward-looking proposals for the analysis of collective life through the study of

objects (Tylor, 1871; Boas, 1938, Malinowski, 1944; Douglas, Isherwood 1979).

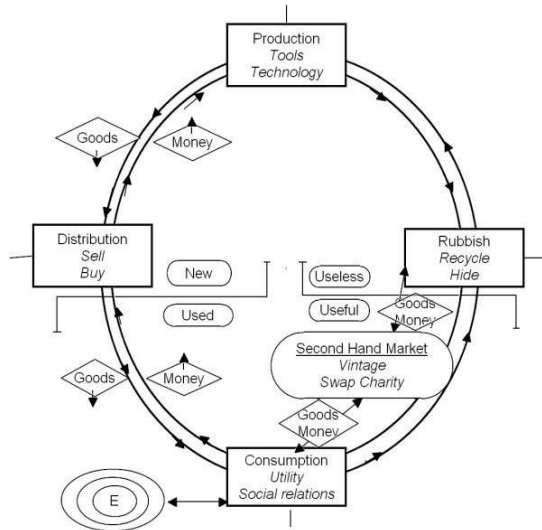
Material Culture applied to the culture of consumption, while maintaining a strong and necessary sensitivity towards the communicative and symbolic aspects of objects, definitely recognizes the importance of the materiality of objects in generating ties and concrete relations that constitute a kind of scaffolding that holds together social life: a perspective capable of linking particular aspects that are empirically observable to more general aspects concerning, therefore, the more general structure of society.

The material culture successfully attempts to solve two problems that sociology was trying to solve. Firstly, mend the rift that had been created between 'abstract' culture and the culture that we might call "real" and, secondly, start a discourse between subject and object that is not merely biased in favour of the former.

Hence, its great merit lies in having rediscovered through objects the importance of certain aspects of daily life and physicality, connecting them with the general trends of society (Dant, 1999, 2006; Desjeux, 2006). In fact, following the movement of objects, as suggested by Domenico Secondulfo in his definition of the cycle of material culture (2012), makes it possible to prevent sociological analysis from merely focusing on the purchase stages commonly recognized by the sociology of consumption. Interest grows and spreads to other areas, be they productive, transformative or linked to the concept of waste. These areas of research were usually ignored by the sociology of consumption but reveal themselves as an integral part of the phenomena they intend to study. Just think of the aforementioned transition from passive consumer to prosumer regarding the production phase. By following the objects of consumption and then the material culture cycle, even the functional and symbolic transformation of the objects by consumers is taken into consideration, such as the second-hand market (Marzella, 2014) and even cases relating to the end of life of the objects and their substantial exit in the form of waste. A prime example of this consists in the literature on housekeeping and sustainable consumption (Molotch, 2003; Evans, 2014; Shove, Southerton, 2000).

Similarly, the perspective provided by the material culture allows us to include money in the study of consumption, which, although often forgotten, is an increasingly more present counterpart in trade and consumption processes (Dodd, 2014).

Figure 1. The cycle of material culture



Source: Secodulfo (2012)

The consumer's appropriation of objects and the objectification of values (Miller, 1994) are, under the point of view of the material culture, the keys to open a new perspective on consumption practices and an alternative to a proposal for a study that favours only abstraction.

3.3 Objects in action and the materiality of individuals

Following the objects, as suggested by the material culture perspective, does not just mean observing and describing the trajectories that such objects trace - as if an invisible force were moving them - because this would imply placing them at a lower level compared to the consumer's action. Objects and technologies, as suggested by the title of the article by Paolo Magaudda (2011) on the use of digital technologies to listen to music, respond and react - materiality bites back - if provoked.

Materiality, from the Actor network theory viewpoint, takes an active role and is not just passively interpreted or used: materiality intervenes and establishes a role of mutual influence with consumers, underlining a substantial dialectical relationship between the two agents. Objects and ideas are influenced by people to the same extent to which these are, in turn,

influenced by the objects themselves. This is the main reason why the position expressed by ANT is of particular interest to the sociology of consumption, although it has not been given as much space as it deserves in international debates (Southerton, 2011).

The contribution of the actor network theory has been particularly active in redefining the economic actor, and thus the consumer too, highlighting how technology is able to influence the assessment capacity of subjects and, consequently, their ability to choose (MacKenzie, 2008; Muniesa et al., 2007). The concept of socio-technical agencements elaborated by Michel Callon (2005) redefines the economic actor as if he, in fact, consisting in a relationship between a group made up of people, technologies, algorithms etc.

Nevertheless, the concept of actant drawn by ANT is the most valuable to explore the matter of materiality within the study of consumption. It states that humans and non-humans connected in a social network have the same capacity for action: even objects act. Things, objects and theories are not only mediators in the network but real actors with agency capabilities.

Far from this perspective, however, is the idea of falling into a blind technological determinism. Indeed, in accordance with the approaches that belong to the material culture, the appropriation of technology by individuals plays a significant role in defining the network (Oudshoorn, Pinch 2003; Wyatt, 2008). The equality between them – objects and actors - and the same capacity for action of people and objects are therefore the fundamental conditions that must be taken into account to analyse consumption from the perspective suggested by ANT.

As for the material culture, even ANT (Latour 2005) proved to be strongly focused on the study of daily practices and of those related to the body (Hitchings, 2007; Christensen, Ropke, 2010). Perhaps, more than any other, Elizabeth Shove (2003) established a solid bridge between the ANT perspective and consumption analysis. The pattern developed by Pantzar (2005), that connects representations, actions and objects, is useful to describe a practice of consumption that contains both some insights of the material culture and ANT. The pattern is translated into a circuit (Magaudda, 2011) that could become a useful tool to describe the different stages that the material culture cycle provides. By means of the pattern provided by Elizabeth Shove and the circuit suggested by Magaudda it is thus possible to define a social practice, the minimum unit of analysis of the approach that follows.

3.4 Practice theories: a proposal of collaborative correlation?

By assuming a more general and wider point of view than the one presented by the sociology of consumption, as clearly stated in the book

published by Schatzki (2001), theories of practice are proposed as a strong interpretation and a turning point.

Theories of practice originate from a large and prestigious pantheon of thinkers. Schatzki identifies four areas of study that constitute the historical foundations of this approach: philosophy with Wittgenstein and Taylor, social theory with Bourdieu and Giddens, cultural theory with Foucault and studies of science and technology with Latour. Admittedly, other distinctions on the origins and theoretical basis of this proposal are possible because theories of practice, as clearly indicated by the “plural”, do not represent a monolithic approach and, in sociology, they are suggested as a theory that “unifies” to a greater extent than others suggested (Warde, 2014). The theories of practice aim at resolving the tension between individualism and structural (or cultural) determinism which, as already mentioned, has characterized the approach to the study of consumption to date.

The theories of practice have become well established as one of the most interesting perspectives for the study of consumption (Warde, 2015; Shove, 2009; Southerton, 2013). As intended in more general terms, theories of practice applied to the study of consumption reject aprioristic sectorialisms. In fact, some research can hardly be ascribed within a specific perspective of study and within a defined theoretical perimeter. Rather, the theories of practice applied to the study of consumption have tried to take the most useful insights from multiple disciplines, starting from empirical research and making materiality one of the privileged focuses of their analysis. In line with the other two perspectives, theories of practice have addressed their interests to everyday consumption practices, i.e., research on the relationship between domestic consumption and energy (Shove et al., 2012; Spaargaren, 2011; Warde, Southerton, 2012; Wilhite, 2012) or on the production of waste (Evans, 2014); other practices increasingly linked to domestic life such as the use of appliances (Christensen, Ropke, 2010), gardening (Hitchings, 2007) or the regulation of household temperature (Shove et al., 2013); practices related to food, its preparation and sharing (Evans, 2014; Warde 2004; Wilk, 2004), games and the world of sport (Crossley, 2005, 2006; Sassatelli, 2010; Noble, Watkins, 2003; Wacquant, 2004).

In addition to focusing on specific and concrete practices, the strength of the theories of practice, when compared to other approaches, is to identify in the practice a precise unit of analysis that is able to build a solid bridge between theory and empirical research through clear concepts.

Within the study of consumption Elisabeth Shove proposed a clear pattern, integrating some insights inspired by ANT. Nevertheless, the contribution of Alan Warde (2014) clarifies more than others both the characteristics of the unit of analysis, by suggesting specific criteria to describe

a practice of consumption, and the relationship with other approaches to the study of the processes of consumption. According to Warde, four criteria aid in describing a practice of consumption: the first states that a practice can be translated into codes or manuals that describe how a certain action is established. The second criterion is related to the time that people devote to such actions; a time that should be conspicuous or otherwise recognized as a dedicated commitment. The third condition identifies the criteria of excellence that represent “good practice” as a clue to identify a social practice. The material side made up of objects, technologies, infrastructures and tools that intervenes in the definition of the consumption practice is the fourth condition and the one which, more than others, links theories of practice to material culture and ANT.

The table below summarizes the characteristics that distinguish theories of practice from other approaches based on the sovereign consumer and expressive consumption. At the same time, following the proposal of Alan Warde, it is easy to notice how concise representations of the theories of practice in the field of consumption have much in common with the material culture and the actor network theory.

Table 1. *Differences between Practice Theories and Models of the Sovereign and Expressive Individual*

Practice Theories	Models of the Sovereign and Expressive Individual
Performances	Acts
Doing (praxis)	Thinking
Knowing how	Knowing that
Practical competence	Reasoning
Habit and routine	Action
Practical consciousness	Discursive consciousness
Embodied sense	Mental deliberation
Collectivity (other people)	Private mental states
Shared understanding	Motivation
Regulation	Individuality
Flow/sequence	Unit acts
Dispositions	Decisions
The material	The symbolic

Source: Warde (2014)

Even theories of practice such as the material culture and ANT see an opportunity of development for the sociology of consumption in the analysis of the material side. Starting from the analysis of this element, possibilities for reflection on other points shared by different perspectives are opened such as everyday life routines, physicality and collective action and understanding.

4. Conclusions

The question we can now ask ourselves is: is the study of consumption suggesting another turning point? This paper aims to reply that, if we want to talk about a turning point, we have to take past research into account and integrate it with the new aspects that the sociology of consumption is processing. If overestimating the importance of symbolic and abstract aspects would be risky, an analysis completely focused on materiality would be just as great an error. The focus on objects and technologies, however, is of vital importance, to the extent that the three perspectives we have briefly considered are fully proving this.

Careful analysis of materiality makes it possible to govern the pervasiveness of technology in society and to describe the relationships that it creates. It also helps to add valuable information to researches: consider, for example, so-called big data and its ability to define some consumer practices with extreme precision. Materiality does not just concern the objects of analysis, it also regards the tools for analysis. Once again, governing certain technologies from a methodological viewpoint allows us to describe phenomena and contexts that would otherwise be barred from the classic tools of sociology.

Nevertheless, the most important factor we want to focus on in this article concerns the convergence of research interests that is distinguishing part of the sociology of consumption. These, while maintaining their specificity, guarantee the intellectual procreativity of a perspectivism that is able to evolve with the evolution of society and, in particular, with the processes of consumption. Consumption is also a material matter and it manifests itself to researchers through the concreteness of objects.

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