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THE AVAILABILITY OF THINGS
A SHORT GENEALOGY OF CONSUMPTION

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Many recent theories of consumption share the assumption that its social and cultural importance coincides with the advent of post-industrial society. Their claim is that, during the last thirty or forty years, consumption has replaced production as the dominant identity-shaping sphere in society (Bauman 2007). A genealogical approach to consumption, which I can only outline here, challenges the presentism of this diagnosis, adopting a *longue durée* perspective and identifying consumption as a formative aspect of modern society and culture.[1] Unquestionably, crucial changes in the regimes of consumption took place after World War II, creating the middle-class-dominated consumption system and its successive global expansion. Many traits of modern consumption, however, are much older. On the level of changing habits, historians have documented a 'consumer revolution' as early as in 18th century England, prior to the industrial revolution (Brewer 1982). Many classical theories of consumption developed around 1900 (Veblen 1899, Sombart 1912), while some of their arguments can be traced back to the luxury debate of the 18th century. Such a long historical prehistory becomes comprehensible when we consider that modern consumption is primarily *commodity consumption*. It differs from other forms of consumption – e.g. in subsistence economies – because it establishes anonymous relations between consumers and producers and detaches the social uses of objects from traditional rules and rituals (e.g. sumptuary laws). The formative effects of commodity consumption on societies and subjects therefore must have begun operating, at least in some regions of Europe, much earlier than the post-industrial or even the industrial period itself. Seen genealogically, it is far from evident that the social and cultural impact of consumption comes into effect only in the post-industrial era. It is much more plausible to say that the history of modern commodity consumption coincides with the establishment of capitalism.

The critical impact of such an approach lies in its attempt to search for situations and constellations in history which are able to unsettle our contemporary views and disciplinary classifications of consumption practices – this not in order to authentically reconstruct past experience, but to discover the historical conditions of our contemporary experience. In that sense genealogy is a 'history of the present', and it is critical insofar as it reveals the contingent emergence of today's views on consumption – as something which has evolved historically, has not always existed as such and can therefore be different as well. The aim of genealogical critique therefore is not that of compiling arguments against or in favour of consumption – as if it were possible to evaluate it as separate from modern society and culture as such – but of taking into account the epistemological impact and the formative effects it has in regard to modern society, culture and subjectivities. Like many sociological approaches, a genealogy of consumption does not reduce the advent of commodity consumption to a mere increase of 'consumer sovereignty'. This interpretation, which is common in mainstream economics, ignores the fact that the seemingly free acts of choice are involved in, and reproduce, socially complex and historically long-lasting power relations. But while social distinction – the sociologically standard explanation of consumption – emphasises only the instrumental function of consumption as an indicator of social prestige, the genealogical perspective examines the subjectivating effects which result from the involvement in commodity consumption, and reveals their involvement in, and contribution to, the change of power relations in modernity.

For reasons of space, I will concentrate, on the one hand, on the emergence of a Western European regime of consumption, which can be char-

acterized by the use of luxury goods for the display of high social rank and which had its heyday in the early 20th century, and on the other, on a distinctively structured regime of middle-class-oriented mass consumption which evolved in the mid-20th century US.

1. Words and terms as historical beginnings of modern consumption

For a genealogical approach, early modern ways of consuming do not figure as preliminary stages in a linear process which concludes with the establishment of the actual habits and structures of consumption. Instead, genealogy conceives the specific traits of contemporary consumption against the background of a varied and changing history of heterogeneous regimes of consumption that have no single origin or logic. The structure of our present experience, insofar as it is shaped by inevitable and repeated acts of consuming – by taking the role of a consumer – can be assessed when the contingent conditions of its emergence are reconstructed. In doing so, it becomes evident that seemingly individual needs, wants and desires characteristic of everyday acts of consumption, but also critical attitudes towards them, are part of socially complex, historically long-lasting structures of knowledge and power. From the genealogical point of view, the changing relations of consumable objects, markets, social structures, patterns of action, and subjectivities of consumers should therefore not be fitted into pre-established models (sociological, anthropological, economic or psychological), since they conceptualize consumption from a 'suprahistorical perspective' (Foucault 1984a: 87). These models subsume the historical variety of consuming acts under global concepts such as social distinction or communication, fulfilment of demand or satisfaction of needs. The genealogical perspective considers them, in contrast, as events or 'singularities', as Michel Foucault has termed it. It makes an effort to be 'sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles' (Foucault 1984a: 76). Besides challenging presentist accounts, a genealogy of consumption therefore also avoids the definitional restrictions of many disciplinary notions of consumption.

In his essay on genealogy, Michel Foucault raises the problem of the 'historical beginning', being crucial for a genealogical approach. Referring to the German words *Ursprung* and *Herkunft,* which Friedrich Nietzsche used to name the starting point of a historical narrative – in English both are translated as 'origin' – Foucault distinguishes two different possibilities of addressing the 'historical beginning of things': the first is concerned with 'the inviolable identity of their origin', while the second considers a beginning as 'disparity' (Foucault 1984a: 79). The task of this genealogical approach is, as Foucault explains, to isolate 'different points of emergence' which do not 'conform to the successive configurations of an identical meaning'. They rather 'result from substitutions, displacements, disguised conquests, and systematic reversals' (Foucault 1984a: 86). If we apply this distinction to the field of consumer research, the search for identical origins seems to be characteristic of approaches that address consumption phenomena by referring to historically invariable items like needs satisfaction, fulfilment of demands, social distinction, or communication. These theoretical definitions of consumption presuppose that the historically diverse consuming practices and infrastructures follow different, but in themselves always identical, logics.

Instead of applying such fully-fledged notions, my genealogy of consumption starts with the consideration that the history of the word field of 'consumption' itself and the different terms and concepts it carries can be interpreted as a formative feature of the emergence of consumption.[2] The idea is that the historical emergence of the words, terms and concepts describing commodity consumption can indicate the changing experience related to the newly emerging practices and conditions of commodity consumption in the early modern period. The genealogy of consumption can, for that task, make use of the insights of conceptual history (cf. Richter 1995, Koselleck 2002), which argues that social change should not be reduced to structural change of political or economic institutions, but that it also encompasses the transformation of ways of life, systems of thought and frames of experience. The pivotal idea of conceptual history is that these shifts of experience become manifest in linguistic and conceptual change which is observable in historical texts and encyclopaedias, and to some extent they are also recorded in etymological dictionaries which I consult in the next section.

Taking the words used to name consuming acts and contexts as a starting point of my analysis allows me to avoid, on the one hand, the universalism of the concepts mentioned above, taking into account that many important traits of the contemporary consumption system are not universal features, but indeed first emerged with the establishment of capitalism in Europe and the US.[3] On the other hand, such an analysis does not operate on the level of concrete consuming habits or mentalities. Therefore, it does not give precedence to a particular social group, decade or region as the origin of modern consumption. In this respect, the epistemological interest of genealogy differs from more traditional historical approaches, as it considers itself, following Foucault, not 'as a history of the past in terms of the present' but as a 'history of the present' (Foucault 1995: 31). The aim of genealogical analysis is rather to detect what evades contemporary views, in order to unsettle present evidences, than to reconstruct authentically past realities.

As historians have shown, between the early 17th and the beginning of the 19th century, there was an increasing diffusion of commercially manufactured and distributed goods even in the lower social strata of the population both in Europe and the US. The dates vary considerably depending on the region and the social groups concerned (Brewer 1997). These findings provide a background for the etymological and conceptual change discussed in the next section, clearly indicating that commodity consumption had become, broadly viewed, a daily experience for a growing part of the populations already *before* industrial revolution.

2. 'Consumption' and 'consommation'

Observing the transformations in the words and concepts used in the semantic field of 'consumption' can thus serve as a starting point for a genealogy of modern consumption; they provide insight into the conflicting and intertwined processes through which, in the early modern period, the new experience of taking part in commodity consumption finds its expression in linguistic and conceptual change. For reasons that will soon become clear, I will not limit my description to the English case, but include variations of the French analogue *consommation*. In this way, I consider the languages of the two theoretically and economically most influential countries in the 18th century, a selection which could easily be extended to other languages.[4] In the first step of my argument, I focus on the divergent etymological backgrounds in English and French and how they influence the establishment of consumption as an economic term. In the next sections, I will take a closer look at the formation of 'consumption' as a social concept used by philosophers, sociologists and social critics, since they refer, from the 18th century onward, to the new economic meaning when describing, valuating, and sometimes criticizing new consuming habits and contexts.

The English word 'consumption' derives from the French 'consomption' and designates, since the 14th century, the effect of diseases like pulmonary tuberculosis, but also the dissipation of moisture by evaporation. From the 15th century on, the word has also been used more generally for other processes or acts of destruction and waste; the latter may also imply the waste of goods or fortunes. The economic meaning of a destructive employment of purchased goods appeared in the late 17th and 18th centuries, since by this time the word served as an abstract term for all the different ways manifold goods are used up by private households (cf. Oxford English Dictionary 1989). In economic discourse, 'consumption' began to lose its pejorative connotations already by around 1700 (Appleby 1976: 500). In this discourse, the word became a technical term that denoted, from a highly generalizing perspective, a common feature of the empirical variety of individual consuming acts in a market economy: the fact that all commodities, regardless of their different forms and uses, are *consumed* becomes relevant when this variety is observed from the point of view of a theory of commerce, a taxating state, or a political economy.

This new point of view marks an epistemological shift with older conceptions of economy which focused on the self-sufficient household (*oikos*) and its sustenance, a purpose which did not require such a comprehensive and abstract term as 'consumption'. By establishing the idea of an unspecific, but predictable sphere of demand, the new term enabled theoretically-orchestrated economic strategies (including tax collection). At the same time, it legitimised the individual pursuit of profit as well as indi-

vidualistic attitudes of consumers. Since then both activities appeared to be detached from traditional rules and estate-based social norms; the objects of consumption apparently depend on the possession of financial resources only. In that sense, the new concept of consumption is a crucial aspect of the arising modern capitalism: it made consuming acts appear as mere individual decisions.

The French etymology shows that this generalized economic term is not necessarily linked to the destructive meaning of the word 'consumption', in contrast to the English etymology. The French economic term used since the 18th century is *consommation*, which derives from the Latin word *cōnsummare* (to consummate), whereas the English 'consumption' traces back, like the French verb *consumer*, to the Latin *cōnsūmere* (to consume) (cf. Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé). The conditions for this peculiar development, which has its parallels in other Romance languages, were in themselves not connected to the advent of the new economic term. It already took place in the 17th century, when French writers began to use the verbs *consumer* and *consommer* synonymously, significantly preferring the latter, which originally designated only processes leading to an accomplishment, like the English word 'consummation'. It was Claude Favre de Vaugelas who vainly criticized this as confusion, but at the same time explained why this usage could appear plausible (besides the accidental phonetic resemblance) to his contemporaries: 'Both words carry the sense and the meaning of ending, so people think it is about the same thing. But there is a strange difference between these two kinds of ending, because *consumer* ends by destroying and annihilating its subject, and *consommer* ends by leading it to its last perfection and to its complete accomplishment.' (Vaugelas 1647: 301, transl. DS). A hundred years later, in Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, this difference is illustrated by the Christian ritual of communion: 'Le prêtre a consumé l'hostie, & consommé le sacrifice' (the priest has consumed the bread and consummated the sacrifice) (vol. IV 1754: 49). At the same time, the noun *consommation* is indicated as belonging to both verbs (vol. IV 1754: 109), and it since then also carries the economic meaning, which is demonstrated by the usage of tradesmen: 'Quand le commerce ne va pas, ils disent qu'il n'y a pas de consommation' (When trade doesn't run, they say there is no consumption) (vol. IV 1754: 49).

On the level of words and their meanings, we can therefore already observe significant disparities in the semantic field of consumption in English and French. It would be inadequate, however, to dismiss the peculiar French usage as confused, which it undeniably is in so far as etymology in a strict sense is concerned.[5] But what is more important here is that, in the French case, we can recognise an aspect that is relevant for the economic term 'consumption' in other languages as well. As has been shown above, the destructive meaning of consumption as a waste of matter may have been the starting point of the modern concept, but it did not capture the economic processes that formed the new experience of commodity consumption – this is a *new*, supplementary connotation that required an abstraction from the concrete, use-oriented idea of consuming matter. In the French case, the coincidental double etymology stressed, when adapted to the economic meaning in the 18th century, the abstract idea of consumption as a stage in a cyclical process of economic reproduction. Economy thus appeared as a social sphere that is not only based on individual decisions, but that has the traits of a virtually natural process. This becomes manifest when taking a look at different conceptualizations of consumption in economic theories in Britain and France.

For the French economist Jean Baptiste Say, consumption was 'not a destruction of matter but a destruction of utility' (Say 1803: 435), and the economist Frédéric Bastiat went so far as to declare consumption as the 'grande consommation' (the great accomplishment) of all economic phenomena and 'headstone of all progress'. By so doing he criticized Adam Smith's political economy which is, in Bastiat's interpretation, limited to a mere 'circulation of matter' (Bastiat 1850: 90f.). Precisely because Bastiat's point is so overstated, it illustrates quite well the different levels of concretion and abstraction which are, in French, connoted by the contrast of destruction and completion.

Of course it is not true that the involvement of consumption in economic processes had been alien to British economists around 1800 – it is just that their terms emanated from the destructive connotations of the English word 'consumption' and therefore took a different shape. Smith's famous statement that 'consumption is the sole end and purpose of production' referred to the anthropological foundation of his economic theory. For

Smith, trade and industry could not exist unless the basic needs of economic actors are constantly satisfied (Smith 1776: book IV, VIII). 'Immediate consumption' as the waste of purchased goods thus appears as a necessary precondition for the proper functioning of a market economy, the 'sole end' of consumption therefore pointed rather to the requirements of the human body, while the act of consumption is itself not seen as a part, but as the base of the economic process. Authors like David Ricardo and John Stuart Mill further developed Smith's labour theory of value, focussing the attention of economics on the production sphere which was rapidly industrialising at the time. From their perspective, similar to that of the French economist Jean Bapiste Say, consumption and production were complementary economic spheres that reveal their sense only within the abstract theoretical framework of economics. Mill's statement that 'all which is produced is already consumed, either for the purpose of reproduction or of enjoyment' shows quite well that British economists operated, like the French, beyond the concrete meaning of consumption, since Mill's statement would be considered as absurd from this standpoint (Mills [1844]1992: 48).

In both cases, commodity consumption had been conceptualised not only as the universal practice of using up things, but as at the same time connected to the volatile and anonymous economic relations consumers maintained with sellers and producers in a rapidly industrialising society. Seen from the point of view of economics, consumption is thus more than just a matter-oriented practice, it is an economic relation – the relation between buyers, sellers and producers which appears free of social asymmetries. But this shift had not been restricted to an epistemological transformation inside the discipline of economic theories; it was also incorporated, as the etymological findings show, successively into common knowledge. In that sense, the theoretical distinction of production and consumption indicates the new social reality of distinct spheres and different role models.

3. Deprivation, consumerism and the consumer role

In his book *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi has analysed the establishment of capitalist market society as a process of 'economisation', which he described as a forced adaption of ways of life and social norms to the model of a market economy (Polanyi [1944]2001). His focus concentrated on the industrial revolution in Britain, emphasising the decisive role that the commodification of labour and land played in this process. For Polanyi, the industrial revolution represented not only a transformation of the social order, but also an epistemological shift by which the whole of society was made to conform to the newly developed model of the market economy, while older social institutions of production and ownership characteristic of the feudal system were liquidated. Communal land was thus transformed into private property and feudal dependencies into money-mediated labour relations, leading first to the pauperisation of a large section of the rural population and then to the formation of the working class in the 19th century.

However, Polanyi did not explicitly mention the role commodity consumption played in this process, and his argument is restricted to the, so to speak, massive under-consumption of the rural and working classes caused by primitive accumulation, as Marx had called this process (Marx 2003, chap. 26). In doing so, he reduced the role commodity consumption plays in power relations to the unequal level of sustenance – which is, of course, crucial for the case he analysed, but obviously not sufficient for explaining post-war consumption phenomena. Nevertheless, what is useful for a genealogical account of consumption is Polanyi's insight that economic concepts are not only distanced descriptions of human behaviour but also became, in modern times, structuring features of the social order. This is also valid for the economic understanding of consumption as an economic sphere opposed to production, which forms part of the new economic model, as has been shown in the previous section.

In the following sections of this article, I will discuss the consequences of commodity consumption in regard to the dispositions of those who were successively exposed to it, which I term with the - admittedly ambiguous - word consumerism. In contrast to other understandings, consumerism in

my usage is neither a synonym of manipulation nor of a political movement consisting of consumers; instead, it simply denotes the culturally defining disposition or mind-set that individuals acquire when acting in the role of a commodity consumer. Again, I will refer to conceptual change, but focus on the social theories of the 18th to 20th centuries that observed, criticised, and propelled the re-shaping of consuming habits and conditions. While economic theories successively constrained their views to processes that conformed to their ever more formalised models, these social theories problematize and thus make visible the new social conditions of commodity consumption and their subjectivating effects.

For this purpose, I will not constrain my argument, as Polanyi does, to situations of deprivation, being the most asymmetric extreme of commodity consumption, and which leaves no room for choice. This case stands for what William Reddy has called the 'disciplining potential of monetary exchange asymmetries' (Reddy 1987: 64, 68). However, conceptualising consumption based on this extreme situation would lead to a coercion-based disciplinary theory of consumption that could hardly grasp all the traits of consuming habits characteristic of modernity, let alone the crucial role that desire and growing expectations have in modern consumption. Furthermore, there is another point that makes it difficult to fully adapt Polanyi's argument to a genealogical account of modern consumption; it lies in his substantialist concept of social life. Polanyi described economisation as a process that disintegrated tradition-based ways of life, substituting them with artificial market relations which themselves seem to be external to any kind of sociality. Conceptualising modern consumption on the basis of this view would inevitably imply normative assumptions of authentic, if not traditional, social ways of life. The role of market relations and choice would then be described as an alienation from such authentic ways of life, thus replicating arguments from older critiques of consumption. Such an account would, indeed, understand commodity consumerism primarily as a problem and not, as proposed here, as a formative mode of behaviour and experience in modernity.

Instead of taking deprivation as a starting point, my argument concentrates on situations in which commodity consumption leaves room for choices. The main reason for that is not that such situations demand decisions between distinct options – an aspect that economists emphasise – but that they form a framework for a specific, consumerist, experience: for those taking the role of a commodity consumer, the restrictions limiting the availability of desired objects increasingly become predominantly financial ones, while moral, religious, conventional, and juridical restrictions regulating consumption in traditional societies decrease.[6] In comparison to these older restrictions, much fewer sanctions impact on the modern consumer. The American economist Hazel Kyrk has therefore compared the consumer role with the „rôle of speculator and adventurer', by which the individual 'breaks through the cake of custom, habit, and convention in his material mode of living as well as in other realms.' (Kyrk 1923: 246). Commodity consumers with a range of choices at their disposal may thus experience the disentanglement of social bonds as a desirable situation, the availability of objects in markets being the crucial condition for that affirmative experience. This does not arise from the mere act of purchase alone, but also from the fact that the availability of consumable goods and services is, on the one hand, stylized in advertising and consumer culture and, on the other, becomes a precondition for many social activities. In that sense, commodity consumption is part of a much broader process of cultural modernisation which reaches far beyond the mere acts of purchase: as an everyday experience of ever new available objects, it stands for an expansion of the horizons of experience and for growing expectations and aspirations resulting from this experience (Koselleck 2004). The disposition commodity consumers acquired over the centuries, which I call consumerism, thus consists of partly adopting the perspective of modern economics while successively neglecting religious and moral verdicts against the sinful and passionate practices of luxury consumption. In their place, individualised concepts like need, want, and desire began to serve, both in social theory and everyday practice, as semantic references for the evaluation of consumption and consuming, which I will demonstrate in the next section.

The morally ambivalent status of consumption that results from this shift is, in my opinion, still the common ground of today's debates on the pros and cons of consumerism, albeit that the focus since the 20th century has shifted from the luxury consumption of elites to the mass consumption

practices of a broader middle class (Hilton 2004). However, this ambivalent status already emerged when rigorous religious, legal and traditional restrictions lost ground, a process that began with the moral reassessment of over-consumption in the early modern age and became manifest, in the 18th century, in the course of the influential luxury debate. If that is true, a genealogical account of this early moral shift gives insights into the role consumption played in more comprehensive processes of modernisation and social differentiation which, in sociology, is usually conceptualized as starting from the division of labour, that is to say, from the production sphere. At the same time, such an account deepens the understanding of present consumption phenomena, since we can observe the emergence of a new set of concepts which still governs the practices of consumers towards objects, others, and themselves.

4. The utilities of luxury and the groundlessness of needs

Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* can be considered as the opening of the luxury debate in the 18th century. It was first published in 1705, an amended version appearing in 1714. It referred to rather technical debates in the field of theories of commerce which assessed the economically advantageous effects of luxury consumption (Appleby 1976). In contrast, Mandeville's *Fable* intended to reach a broader public, and in fact did so in the course of the years, primarily because of the provoking structure of its argument: like its *leitmotiv* 'private vices, publick benefits', all verses of the *Fable* used the traditional language of moral condemnation, opposing vices and virtues, for paradoxically expressing the new economic idea of useful luxury. The advantages of luxury consumption, considered to lie in its economically stimulating effects, were thus blended with the persisting devaluations of luxuriating consumer behaviour, which gives the *Fable of the Bees* a cynical touch. Reading it therefore was (and still is) an irritating experience. The reader is made a witness to the epistemological shift which separates economic and moral perceptions of luxury. However, Mandeville's description of the social groups involved in this process is simplistic and dualistic, distinguishing only luxuriously spending elites and the working poor whose subsistence depends on their spending. Therefore the bee hive in the *Fable* still evoked the image of a feudal society, its originality lying in the new rationalistic legitimisation of invariable social inequalities. In this sense, Mandeville can be included in the line of the authors of the 17th and 18th centuries who, according to Albert O. Hirschman, contributed to transforming the classical concept of passion into the modern idea of interest (Hirschman 1977).

In contrast to Mandeville, subsequent statements in the luxury debate offered more complex accounts of the different social groups involved in, and related to, commodity consumption (cf. Vogl 2001). In their view, the ternary structure of the early modern social order corresponded with three distinctive levels of expenditure, and they introduced an intermediary category of goods called decencies; these were neither seen as merely abundant nor as existential necessities (cf. Brewer 1997). The class identified as the consumers of these decencies was the ascending bourgeois middle class, which distinguished itself both from luxurious aristocrats and the lower classes by its distinctive consuming habits and values. This ternary model also modified the new rationalistic legitimation of luxury consumption, insofar as the socially stabilising role of commerce and industry was associated with its supporting class and related to the consuming habits and values this group embodied. In that sense, David Hume argued that the advantages of luxury consumption lay not only in the fact that it nourishes the lower classes by stimulating commerce and industry; by doing so, he argued, luxury also draws 'authority and consideration to that middling rank of men, who are the best and firmest basis of public liberty' (Hume 2003: 112). The decent luxury consumption of this group therefore had, for Hume, not only positive economic, but also civilising effects, as the consuming habits of the bourgeois middle class propelled, and at the same time diffused, ever more subtle habits to other social strata (cf. Hirschman 1982). Consumption patterns of one social group thus can serve, according to Hume, as a model for other groups. Consumption then functions as a comparative system operating across class boundaries. This crucial idea later reappears in the sociological accounts of consumption. For Hume, this model obviously should have an educative impact, and he did not question the exemplary role of the middle class. In his view, moderate luxury consumption had civilising effects, because it was opposed, on the one hand, to the exaggerations of noble elites

and, on the other, motivates diligence and aspirations towards upward mobility in the lower classes. This is why he stated that luxury, 'when excessive, is the source of many ills, but is in general preferable to sloth and idleness, which would commonly succeed in its place' (Hume 2003: 114).

Hume's new functional legitimation of bourgeois consuming habits conformed with an incisive phrase in Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's 1776 book on the relation of commerce and government. He wrote that 'we want to live in luxury, and we want our luxury to be useful', emphasizing that the new theory of luxury could also be applied to legitimise individual conduct (Condillac 1962: 239). Condillac even went further than Hume when he reflected that the new conditions undermined class-specific definitions of luxury. The level of excessive luxury, he argued, is always relative and depends on the current economic and social conditions of the *whole* society. Excess thus should not be defined in recourse to traditional or class-specific consumption norms, which Hume somehow suggested. It rather depends on common sense judgments that reflect changing living standards. This view is expressed in Condillac's relational definition of luxury: 'I distinguish two kinds of excess: The first are so because they appear as such in the eyes of a certain number [of people], the others are so because they shall appear as such in the eyes of everyone. [Only] these latter I consider as luxury' (Condillac 1960: 230, transl. DS). Luxury had thus, in the course of the 18th century, been divided into an excessive and a useful version (Hume), while the distinction between them was no longer based on traditional norms, but on changing standards of living (Condillac).

Condillac's definition of luxury also implied a differentiation of the concept of needs. In fact, the modern implications of the concepts of need and want, which in French are both expressed by the word *besoin*, also emerged in the course of the luxury debate in the 18th century. Condillac distinguished for example between natural and artificial needs (*besoins factices*), the latter arising from custom. As they change historically, he argued, there is no substantial or normative ground in these *besoins factices* which could serve as a suprahistorical measure, in contrast to natural needs which refer to ultimately physiological necessities. Economically however, they *both* lead to the consumer's subjective assumption that the goods wanted are useful. Economic value, which for Condillac is constituted by this assumption, therefore does not depend on whether usefulness is evoked by natural or artificial needs. From the economical point of view, the distinction between natural and artificial needs becomes blurred, and this affected both consuming practices and philosophical accounts of the new money-mediated social relations.

Some etymological accounts from the German case show that changing consuming conditions correlate with the emergence of these new concepts of need and want. In German this becomes particularly visible with the emergence of a new word. 'Bedürfnis', which today carries the meaning of both English words, appeared in the late 18th century, obviously because the new habits could not be addressed by older concepts (cf. Schrage 2009: 93-102). The meaning of the word was derived from the French *besoin*, which is not surprising since French mercantilism served as the model for political and economic theories in the backward German microstates (known as cameralism). 'Bedürfnis' then replaced the old concept 'Notdurft' which, in a feudal context, designated graded measures for the adequate level of sustenance of a person or household and implied the possibility of legal claims towards the community and authorities (Szöllozi-Janze 2003). 'Bedürfnis', in contrast, carries the new economic meaning used by Condillac and other French theorists, and its point of reference is situated in the individual, which emphasises the difference to the feudal connotations of 'Notdurft'. With 'Bedürfnis', the point of reference used to judge consuming practices and opportunities moves from collective, traditional, and legally defined consuming patterns to individualised economic and anthropological considerations.

On the one hand, this leads to the uncountable catalogues of needs and wants that still proliferate today and that, as Mary Douglas has noted, 'dangle free of theoretical constraints', mainly documenting the different disciplinary approaches to the field of consumption (Douglas 1994: 149). On the other hand, an important impact of the modern concepts of needs and wants in social theory has been the emergence of a new type of critical thought which has its model in Jean Jacques Rousseau's critique of civilisation. While, as shown above, theories such as those of Hume and Condillac stressed the civilising effects of the historical variation of needs,

highlighting prospective higher living standards, Rousseau used the same pattern of argument to come to the opposite diagnosis: when Rousseau stated that 'conveniences lost with use all their power to please, and even degenerated into real needs' (Rousseau: 67), he still emphasised the same civilising effects of luxury consumption as Hume and Condillac and thereby remained within the mainstream of the contemporary luxury debate. But at the same time he re-evaluated the whole process as degeneration, as a loss of original authenticity: civilisation and the refinement of needs and wants now appeared as a process that distances humankind from its simple and true origins, thereby introducing the idea of a fundamental human needs structure situated beneath social and historic change and at the same time not dependent on physiology. The concept of 'real' or 'true needs', which lies at the base of this new critical theory, deeply influenced later critical theories of consumption that refer to 'true needs' as being opposed to the 'false needs' imposed by commodity consumption.

In contrary to such theories, the genealogical perspective does not search for a supra-historical ground capable of justifying normative valuations. Its aim is to reconstruct when and how the basic patterns of our understanding of what consumption is (and should be) emerge. The critical intent of a genealogy therefore cannot lie in establishing a new (or selecting an old) linchpin for a fundamental critique of commodity consumption. It lies rather in aggravating the routines and ontologies underlying both critical and affirmative arguments in current debates. On the basis of the genealogical findings, the concepts of need and want can then be described as a new semantic pattern emerging in the late 18th century. On the level of everyday practices, it is still in use to coordinate the psychic and social situation of the consumer with the choice of available consumable objects. In a society in which commodity consumption becomes dominant, the semantics of needs and wants therefore has a social function: it enables the articulation of individualised reasons for purchase acts – reasons that consumers experience as being peculiar to themselves. These reasons therefore result neither from tradition or custom alone – since this would leave the desire for new products unexplained – nor can they be traced back to an ominous extra-social sphere of individualistic preferences, which would ignore the fact of consumers having to learn new reasons for purchase acts in social interaction. In that sense, the semantics of need and want is indispensable in providing new objects and new practices with individualised meaning. Under the conditions of commodity consumption, this is a prerequisite for the social communication processes described by anthropological approaches of consumption (cf. Douglas 1982).

5. From class consumption to mass consumption

Although many of the concepts that evolved around 1800 still effect on a basic level the way we discuss and evaluate the pros and cons of contemporary commodity consumption, there is another fundamental shift in the regimes of consumption associated with the establishment of Fordism in the 20th century. This new regime of consumption is usually termed mass consumption and it is related to changes in the production system and in social organisation. Technologically, the main feature of Fordist production methods lies in the improvement of standardised mass production which economically led to a far-reaching price reduction (cf. Hounshell 1984). Socially, this made more consumer goods available for more people, thus modifying the social conditions and functions of consumption. The advent of the Fordist production system coincided with a major shift in the social structure of the industrialised countries, in which the middle class grew significantly and lost some of the cultural characteristics of the bourgeoisie it had possessed until the early 20th century. In this last section of my article, I will concentrate on the consequences this fundamental change had for conceptualisations of consumption in social theories.

When looking at social theories of consumption dating from around 1900, it is striking that they built on many arguments already developed in the late 18th century, continuing, on the one hand, the debate on the usefulness of luxury consumption and, on the other, elaborating different versions of the concept of social distinction. In his book *Luxury and Capitalism*, first published in 1913, the German sociologist Werner Sombart developed the argument that the increase of luxury consumption in the

early modern period represented an economic key factor for the establishment of capitalism and was, in his eyes, driven by the individual pursuit of sensual pleasures (Sombart 1996). In this perspective, which obviously is a counter-argument to Max Weber's emphasis on protestant asceticism, luxury consumption appears as the refinement of a basically sexual impulse that requires ever more elaborate luxury goods. The luxuriating hedonism Sombart described is therefore restricted to elite groups who can afford the increasingly expensive goods, their price depending on scarce raw materials and the high amount of skilled labour necessary to produce goods that can generate such stimuli.

A contrasting account was developed in Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, which was published in 1899 and is considered to be the classical sociological description of social distinction. For the American economist and sociologist Veblen, luxury consumption is a means by which elite groups defend their social positions. Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption is mainly restricted to the luxurious consuming patterns of the super-rich who owed their fortune to financial speculation in the years after the civil war and who he designated 'leisure class'. In contrast to Sombart, luxury goods are, in Veblen's view, nothing more than trophies that display achievements in the struggle for social positions. As such, the goods consumed for that purpose are gratuitous, and their use for the display of the highest status positions represents a social dysfunction, distracting resources from socially useful tasks. Luxury consumption is, for Veblen, a powerful weapon for a class which itself has no social function. Veblen's detailed and accurate description of the strategies of 'conspicuous consumption' therefore had a normative component, and it can be seen as an American interpretation of the luxury debate of the 18th century. When he evaluated their social role and habits, it is evident that his argument resembled the critique of aristocracy in 18th century Europe. But what made his account genuinely American is that, in addition to being egalitarian, it was based on the assumption of there being two fundamental human drives, the 'predatory instinct' and the 'instinct of workmanship', in which the conflicting American myths of *self-made man* and *settler* can be easily identified (Schrage 2009: 165ff.). While conspicuous consumption is an expression of the first in the field of luxury consumption, the aim of Veblen's critique was to bring the agrarian ideal of the latter into line with the new conditions of the rapidly industrialising and urbanising US society (Riesman 1953; Mills 2002). In that sense, Veblen's critique advocated the values of a new middle class consisting of academically educated employees which in the 20th century would dominate the field of mass consumption.

Despite their opposing analyses of luxury consumption, Sombart and Veblen agreed on one important point: they both described luxury consumption as the most socially influential form of consumer behaviour, due not to the number of luxury consumers but to the high status they occupy in society. Both offered different explanations as to why the social prestige system and the universe of consumable objects are hierarchically structured and dominated by their respectively uppermost positions, which are the luxuriating elites in the prestige system and luxury goods in the universe of consumable goods. For both, the homologous structure of these systems puts them in the position of precisely representing each other: the price level of consumer goods corresponds with the social rank of its consumers. For Sombart, luxury goods had inherent qualities which constitutively made them unavailable for the majority of consumers. Consumable objects that only emulate their attributes therefore are 'surrogates'; mere simulations that result from the economic interests of mass producers and conform to the aspirations of the lower ranks of society, but never attain the quality of true luxury goods (Sombart: 261ff.). Veblen, in contrast, described luxury goods as being useless except for the purpose of social distinction. The correspondence of high price and high rank was for him an effect of the political power the equally economically useless financial elite wields over society. It is interesting to note that the arguments Veblen borrowed from the European critique of aristocracy – recall Abbé Seyès's revolutionary declaration of the third estate to the nation – transferred the image of the feudal European society to the American context.

The establishment of Fordism fundamentally changed the scene. In the specific form it acquired in the 20th century, mass production differed from preceding capitalist strategies to maximise profit by expanding the quantity of products. It was the significantly increasing status of standardised consumer goods that made the difference. This applies not only in

respect to the mere economic importance of the market for consumer goods, but also to the role they play in the social dimension. When David Riesman described, in 1955, the consuming habits of the majoritarian US middle class, he argued that the social value ascribed to consumer goods was no longer defined by the distance from the conspicuous consumption habits of rich luxury consumers (Riesman: 1955). Instead, the standard package of consumer goods, as he termed the bundle of objects assumed as indispensable for a middle class standard of life (car, TV set, refrigerator etc.), was embedded in the life course of that class and obtained its social value exactly by this involvement in everyday life. Their image of luxury consumption was not informed by the habits of a distant but powerful elite group, but by celebrities they followed in the mass media. This does not mean that strategies of social distinction lost their importance in social life, but rather that they operated inside the differentiated middle class and displayed social differences between adjacent social positions – between neighbours, colleagues and class mates. Consumable objects were used, as Riesman noted, to place oneself within a prestige order which is, for the majority of middle class members, not as stable as the class system Sombart and Veblen describe, but is experienced as permanently altering, allowing ascent and careers, but also descent and failure. As C. Wright Mills wrote in his book *White Collar*, 'the prestige enjoyed by individual white-collar workers is not continuously fixed by large forces, for their prestige in not continuously the same' (Mills 1955: 257). Under these conditions, the use of standardised consumer goods consisted, for that majoritarian class, not so much in simulating expensive luxury goods and thus orienting towards unreachable social positions. The improved availability of standardised products allowed them to rather more easily adopt their lifestyle to changing career positions and to the requirements of a life cycle that is, from school to pension, structured by the permanent use of rapidly renewed sets of consumable goods.

On the conceptual level, these new conditions became manifest in the notion of standardisation, which has so often been used to describe and criticise the new regime of mass consumption. However, considering Riesman's arguments, we should distinguish three different implications of 'standardisation'. Firstly, it describes the mode by which these consumer goods are produced. Many critical theories, such as Marcuse's or Adorno's, insinuated that the problematic consequences of mass consumption lie in the basic fact that, by the use of standardised objects, the alienated conditions and the logic of profit maximisation dominating the productions sphere are applied to the everyday life of the consumers. The notion of 'standardisation' allowed these critical theorists to extend their critique of capitalism to the consumption sphere. Secondly, 'standardisation' describes the fact that the middle class consumers, as analysed by Riesman, orientate their habits towards the patterns displayed by their peers and the media. This can be described as a standardisation of behaviour, which becomes manifest in social uniformity and conformism. 'Standardisation' may thus serve again as a key concept of a critique of consumption, but a critique that highlights the decline of individuality, not primarily capitalism's quest for profit. Riesman's argument, however, had a more analytical shape, although he worried about possible losses of autonomy (Riesman 2001: 239ff.). He emphasised, however, that the phenomena described by the second notion of 'standardisation' should not be confounded with the first one; for Riesman the observed tendency towards social conformism did not directly result from the mode of production, but from the lack of stability experienced by consumers in their life course. While ameliorating or even maintaining social positions becomes more and more difficult in a social order characterised by high social mobility, this difficulty would be compensated for by socially conforming acts of consumption. Uniform consumer behaviour compensates for social insecurity (Riesman 1955).

The third understanding of 'standard' refers to the elementary structure of the standard package of consumer goods itself. It allows us to abstract from 1950s consumer habits and consider the modifications that occurred since. While the rapid replacement of the objects composing the package follows fashions and the logic of social distinction, its basic structure has changed much more slowly and contains, in a more distanced view, certain *classes of objects* considered as accessible and indispensable for 'normal' life, which can also be understood as a standard equipment of consumer goods, irrespective of their concrete implementation. Each of these classes, of course, holds a variety of different price levels, able to represent the minor and major differentiations inside the middle class. But in a more general perspective, these classes of objects are experienced as re-

quired basic equipment under the conditions of middle-class-oriented mass consumption: car, television, refrigerator, suburban home etc. In that sense, the concept of 'real need' gives way to a relational analysis of the use of goods under distinct conditions. Since the 1950s, these classes have mainly been amended by technological innovations in communication and the household, their basic structure, however, showing relatively few modifications. The model of the standard package is therefore much more flexible than the first two interpretations imply. It can even describe the impact of the cultural rebellion against conformity emerging in the 1960s. Starting as a youth-dominated upheaval against the conformism of the 1950s, based on a critical interpretation of the second notion of standardisation, it led at the same time to the enormous popularity of the alienation theory expressed in the first understanding. But even if the results of these deep cultural changes can be described as a pluralisation of consumption habits, this plurality still rests on almost the same elementary classes of consumer goods as those described by Riesman, which still structure our life course.

6. Conclusion

My genealogical perspective has challenged the view that the social and cultural relevance of consumption coincides with the advent of 'postmodern society' in the second half of the 20th century. This shift represents only the latest step in a much longer history of commodity consumption which has been traced back to the beginnings of modern society. My argument focused on three social and epistemological shifts in consumption history which are considered as formative for the present: the development of consumption as an economic concept in early modern time; the establishment of the modern semantics of needs and wants in the course of the luxury debate in the 18th century; and the specific function Fordist mass consumption obtained in social structure and consuming practices in the 20th century. In these shifts, the basic patterns in which contemporary consuming practices are experienced and valuated successively emerged.

As a historical concept, the notion of consumption is part of modern economic thought, which emerged as closely linked with the establishment of capitalism. Although 'consumption' is connoted, etymologically, with older understandings of the destructive use of matter, the concept obtains its modern sense only as the counter-concept of 'production'. It is therefore integrated into the framework of modern economic thought. In this highly generalized thought, consumption is supposed to be a stage in a cyclical process of economic reproduction, which is considered independently of feudal social norms and moral evaluations.

At the same time, the notion of consumption is not only part of these economic models, but also marks, with the extension of market relations in the 18th and 19th centuries, newly establishing frameworks of behavior and therefore evokes moral reassessments, new theoretical models of society and cultural reflections and criticism. My argument has focused on the debates on luxury consumption in the 18th century, in which we can observe that the points of reference used to judge consumption practices shift from collective, traditional, and legally defined arguments to individualized economic and anthropological considerations, above all to the concepts of need and want. These still serve as key concepts both for economic or political legitimations of distribution and for critical accounts of commodity consumption. In that sense, consumption turns out to be not only an economic concept, but also a structural feature of modern society and culture.

The advent of a new type of mass production and consumption, known as Fordism, is the third major aspect considered in this article. By contrasting social theories from around 1900 with this newly emerging regime of mass consumption, it has been shown that in the postwar years consuming practices acquire social functions that are not restricted to the mechanism of social distinction highlighted by the theories of Sombart and Veblen. With the technological innovations of mass production, the availability of consumer goods increases significantly, and the 'standard package' becomes for the growing group of middle class consumers a means to cope with the contingencies of constant change in a society marked by high social mobility.

From a genealogical point of view, these three main traits of modern consumption can be regarded as different 'historical beginnings' of today's consumption practices and structures. This does not mean that the conditions under which they evolved have remained the same, which is undoubtedly not the case, but they do show that the present practices and structures of consumption are not recent occurrences. They are part of a much longer and multi-branched history of consumption in modernity.

The critical impact of the genealogical analysis of consumption is twofold: on the one hand, it lies in revealing the historical preconditions of today's consuming regime, which appears to be neither a 'natural' nor the barely 'rational' way of how populations provide themselves with goods – it is simply the one which is part of our present condition, and it reveals the economic roots of modern individualistic culture. Instead of considering 'consumer sovereignty' as the fulfillment of these processes which overcomes all previous restrictions, the focus of a genealogical critique lies in the question of how the improved availability of consumer goods and the greater scopes of action for middle class consumers in the 20th century is connected with *modifications* in the social prestige order and power relations – and not with their *suspension*.

On the other hand, such a denaturalization of common economic concepts also has to include the assumptions of critical theories of consumption, which turn out to result from the same historical shifts in the history of consumption. As has been shown with respect to Rousseau, the important topos of 'real' or 'true needs' implies an individualized anthropology which is possible only under the very social and economic conditions it radically criticizes. Even if this topos may serve the purposes of questioning a given, allegedly 'normal' standard of living, or of delegitimizing unequal ones, such an argument often tends to dismiss commodity consumption as such. By labeling it as alienation, it insinuates that such a condition could be healed by returning to pre-modern forms of unmediated social relations. The problem of such a point of view is that it tends to underestimate the social functions commodity consumption has acquired in the course of its emergence. To name the main functions only, it still serves, firstly, as a means of social comparison across social classes, which on the one hand stabilizes hierarchical distinction, as Pierre Bourdieu has convincingly worked out, while on the other hand it broke up the hermetic feudal status order and thus is deeply connected with the modern notion of society. Secondly, mass consumption has, in the course of the 20th century, obtained a crucial function in the life course of the enlarged western middle class, providing them with a means to reconcile the contingencies of high social mobility with the requirement of relative stability, as unsteady as that might be.

The genealogy of consumption therefore does not support a global critique of commodity consumption as such, precisely *because* it reveals the deep involvement of modern culture, society, and subjectivity with the history of consumption. Instead, a genealogically inspired critique of consumption should rather consider the historical analysis as a 'work done at the limits of ourselves', as Foucault remarks, aiming for a 'test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take' (Foucault: 1984b: 46). In that sense, the critical questions concerning consumption should take the form of a 'historical ontology of ourselves', beginning with questioning both the alleged universality of the present regime of consumption and the romanticism of a simple anti-consumerist standpoint, which quite often turns out to be easily consumable itself. The question is not: 'how can we get rid of consumption?', but rather: 'what is dispensable, and what is indispensable in modern consumption?'

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[1] For a detailed account see Schrage (2009).

[2] For the notion of word field, cf. Trier (1973).

[3] The universal concept of consumption, as it emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries, can, once established, be effectively used to term the consuming habits of societies and groups that themselves do not use such an abstract concept to describe their practices. In anthropological perspectives, these practices can then be compared with modern ones for the purpose of highlighting the communicative aspects of consumption, thus criticizing the restricted understanding of mainstream economics, cf. Douglas (1982) and Douglas/Isherwood (1979). But in that case, the genealogical question of *how the specific traits of commodity consumption emerge* is not treated.

[4] For a more detailed account including the German case, see Schrage (2009: 43-50).

[5] To my knowledge, the double etymology of consumption/consommation has not yet been considered in the Anglophone consumer culture debate, with the exception of Rosalind Williams (1982: 5-7) who shows awareness of its existence on some pages, and is later quoted by Pasi Falk (1994: 93). For French theorists, of course, these etymological ambiguities are present; see e.g. Jean Baudrillard (1996: 219).

[6] This, of course, negates neither unequal relations between status groups or consumers and producers nor the fact that not everyone is able to take this role.