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# The Making of the Consumer: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel and Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier

While economics have, to a large extent, participated in the invention of the consumer as a category of knowledge, the discipline has paid little attention to the conditions of the production of his/her identity. Instead, it has largely assumed that each individual consumer has a set of preferences and values whose determination is outside the realm of economics. By contrast, the social sciences and particularly history, sociology and anthropology have devoted many studies to furthering the understanding of how consumers’ desires, needs, expectations, rather than preferences, develop. While some have focused primarily on individuals’ social group or trajectory to gain insight into how they consume (Bourdieu, 1984), others have shown more interest in the ways in which consumers, their identities and their tastes are the product of specific techniques, activities and actors within societies. This chapter is a review of these social science studies.

In our analysis we are particularly interested in the ways in which not only market actors but also the State and civil society, as well as consumers themselves, contribute to the social making of consumers, in both the modern and contemporary periods, and in various geographical regions. Research in history, sociology and anthropology has enabled us to broaden the spectrum of actors and knowledge contributing to the making of consumers, from the Middle Ages up to the contemporary period, in China as much as in the West, and in the Soviet Union and countries of the East as much as in the USA (Berghoff and Spiekermann, 2012; Charpy et al., 2016; Chessel, 2012a; Trentmann, 2016).

This chapter first considers market actors themselves who develop techniques to create specific representations of consumers on which commercial offers can be based. We then consider research on the role of the State and of civil society in the construction of consumers' identities. These studies show the extent to which such representations are rooted in specific political or moral projects, so that consumption is determined as a social and political practice with an impact way beyond the domestic sphere. To illustrate this, we investigate surveys on consumption. Finally, in the last part of this chapter we examine research that explores the forms of consumers' capacities and autonomy. We show that the construction of the consumer requires that he or she be given agency, which in return produces effects on the construction of the representation of consumers themselves.

## **Market Professionals and Intermediaries**

Initially the sociology of consumption represented consumers in terms of their social trajectories (Bourdieu, 1984) or their identity formation (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979), without necessarily taking into account the role of the market itself in the construction of the relationship with consumption. By contrast, more recent studies, inspired by the sociology of techniques and innovation, have shown close interest in the activities that produce representations of the consumer, attributing desires and preferences to them, and seeking to orientate their choices. These are the activities of various types of professionals (Barrey et al., 2000) as producers and service providers, who do what sociologists have called market work

(Cochoy and Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013). These activities range from building up knowledge about the consumer, during the stage of product design, to the organization of the consumer's encounter with the offer, downstream, through the definition of the characteristics of the offer. They therefore involve the techniques of marketing as well as those of design, merchandising, packaging and retailing. But this marketing work also produces various elements, qualities, categories and nomenclatures, along with different prices and brands, guides and references to help consumers choose and match product offers with consumers' identities. Market work is particular insofar as it rationalizes the market encounter to a significant degree, by seeing consumers from the point of view of their ability to choose. In short, consumers can choose only between those products and services that market professionals have put together for them. The market relationship with consumers is therefore particularly important in this commercial work, where various market mechanisms have to be devised and set up (Callon et al., 2007) such as labels, prices, messages and advertisements, all of which will guide consumers towards the offers designed by these professionals.

Some of this work and these mechanisms for creating consumers operate upstream from the market world, when the products or the market representation are designed. For instance, in the years around 1800, factory draughtsmen were instrumental in the transformation and diffusion of objects of daily life, such as fabrics, wallpaper, porcelain tableware, and so on. They participated in the new economy of appearances that was being established under the impetus of new technical processes. Their job was both to copy and to invent motifs that were printed on dresses or vases, and they were partially responsible for the profusion of images, colours and visual devices that gradually became a feature of urban life (Millet, 2015; Roche, 1994, 2000).

In the twentieth century, industrial designers designed objects of daily life, particularly small household appliances. By producing the shapes of electric irons or vacuum cleaners, they participated in the daily life of consumers in the 1960s (Leymonerie, 2016). In the fashion industry, certain actors served as mediators between consumers and producers. Some

women created ‘bureaux of stylists’ which disseminated information on the season’s fashion as ready-to-wear clothing became common (Maillet, 2013). Some of these specialists were also experts who explored ways of getting to know markets and consumers. This was the case for example in the 1930s around the London School of Economics, and Paul Lazarsfeld in the US, and the Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung (GfK) in Germany (Brückweck, 2011; Conrad, 2004; Schwarzkopf, 2016).

To a large extent, the marketing techniques of mass consumption were developed to further knowledge about the market. Yet, when they were developed in the early twentieth century, they served above all to sell large quantities of products resulting from agricultural surplus production in the US (Cochoy, 1998). Underpinned essentially by a logic of supply, the rationalizing of the commercialization of these massive quantities of agricultural products forged very imprecise representations of consumers. But as these marketing techniques developed, segmentation of the demand became a strategic tool for controlling competition. Firms and marketing specialists in universities defined consumers with multiple identities. Their aim was less to improve their knowledge of the market than to enable the offer, in the context of saturated markets, to find new outlets. Marketing should thus be understood less as a technique aimed at telling ‘the truth’ about the market and consumers, than as an approach to promote the sale of what has already been produced, on the basis of stable relations between products and the demand. Marketing performs the market (Callon, 2007); insofar as it brings into existence the reality that it helps to describe and to produce (Araujo and Kjellberg, 2009; Araujo et al., 2010; Callon, 1998). To this end, it uses various remote techniques to represent consumers and analyse markets, typical of market studies (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2010; Heiskanen, 2005), such as survey or focus groups (Grandclément and Gaglio, 2011). Consumers’ expectations are thus constructed as multiple realities (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2006) that often compete with one another (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013a) and that enable the various market operators to talk on their behalf in order to design the offer that they need.

Along with marketing, advertising is another set of techniques with performative dimensions. Advertising was provided by various actors even before advertisers became professionals in the twentieth century (Chessel, 1998; Marchand, 1985). In 1646, with pomp and ceremony, King Louis XIV and cloth manufacturers, supported by Mazarin, launched refined ‘Dutch-like’ sheets made in France. They contributed to establishing the royal manufacture of Sedan and used a publicity campaign to certify the products of the royal seal. After the French Revolution, in a new context filled with uncertainty for commerce, the manufacturer and merchant Guillaume Ternaux organized a vast publicity campaign around Sedan sheets, to reassure his customers. In 1798 he positioned himself, without saying so, in the continuation of the Ancien Régime under which articles had been certified (Gayot, 2008). Eighteenth-century retailers, particularly in the semi-luxury industry that promoted the spread of new materials, also used publicity (Berg and Clifford, 1998; Coquery, 2004).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, retailers did not always need publicity professionals to tell them where to set up their shops and to help them produce innovative advertising (Miller, 1981). Jules Ouaki, for instance, who founded the maxi-discount shop Tati in Paris in the 1950s, invented a brand, or more precisely a name and colours – pink and white checks – to symbolize his business (Zalc, 2012).

From the twentieth century, advertisers, as artisans of consumers’ desires, also produced mediations to foster a relationship between products and consumers (Hennion et al., 1989). These mediations were based on particular representations of consumers (McFall, 2011), developed by professionals at advertising agencies. The definitions framed the relationship that advertisers were supposed to establish between consumers and products, with the intention of developing forms of attachment between the two (Ariztia, 2015).

Yet the performativity of operations carried out by these different professionals cannot be based solely on their representations of consumers. It is also connected to the production of a large number of market devices that organize the encounter between products and consumers, which also channel it around the choices that have been made as regards both product quality and consumer profiles (Cochoy, 2010). Some authors have paid particular

attention to market architectures, to gain insight into their contribution to the making of consumers' competences. They have highlighted various 'trade revolutions' (Daumas, forthcoming 2018b). In seventeenth-century England, relations between consumers and merchants took place in a context of lasting social relations, those between an aristocratic family, its suppliers, and its servants (Whittle and Griffiths, 2012). In eighteenth-century Paris these relations played out inside aristocrats' residences, where traders delivered their goods directly to their noble consumers (Coquery, 1998). In the mountains and then the countryside, up until the nineteenth century, goods trading – from clothes to books, watches or handkerchiefs – revolved around the pedlar's visit (Fontaine, 1993). Then in mid-nineteenth century Paris, shop windows were invented, and with them all sorts of architectural innovations intended to display products in public and private spaces (Charpy, 2008, 2010).

The nature and form of consumers' engagement in trade relations were therefore never independent of commercial devices. The trade relationship developed to a very large extent through the staging of the specific features that the two parties grant to this singular relationship within the market context. This point has been remarkably well illustrated by the work of Michelle de La Pradelle (2006). In the case of trading at fairs in the 1990s, she describes how merchants and consumers recompose the depersonalization that everyone believes characterizes the market relationship, by engaging in personalized interactions that are artificially staged to a greater or lesser degree.

Likewise, the analysis of the diversity of market architectures suggests designers' intention to invite consumers to engage in the relationship in different ways. The 'cosy', welcoming and hyper-selective nature of some shops, inspired by nineteenth-century boutiques, builds a commercial relationship with consumers that is intentionally dense, enhanced with various services, and not simply a transaction (Miller, 1981). Some cheap department stores use pale lighting and a very simple system of stacking products to suggest that the relationship is above all economic and devoid of costly artifices (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2007). This diversity of commercial structures and their evolution in time contribute, in turn, to modifying and diversifying consumers' competencies.

The evolution of commercial *agencements* shapes the roles and competences of traders and consumers alike. Paul Du Gay (2004) describes, for example, the development of self-service in early twentieth-century English shops. Introduced in a context where the price war demanded new solutions to cut costs, self-service required consumers to adapt. Faced with these new sales techniques, consumers were initially hostile, to some extent, and complained about having to do the work of salespersons and shop assistants. New techniques and new knowledge contributed to the accessibility of merchandise, as new types of shelf space were designed, along with sign-posting intended to guide consumers and to channel their choices and their actions in the shop (Cochoy, 2016). A nomenclature was developed to enable consumers to identify categories of products so that they could learn to be familiar with them and to adopt them, while other objects became indispensable, such as supermarket trolleys (Cochoy, 2009). A mediated relationship gradually set in between consumers and products. It is the outcome of a fairly long process that started in the nineteenth century, which stemmed directly from the progressive development of various devices used to organize selling: counters, cash registers, labels, shelves, and packaging. With the advent of shopping malls (Cohen, 2003), supermarkets (Daumas, 2006), urban commercial development (Mallard, 2016), and e-commerce websites (Licoppe, 2008), it became usual for customers to adapt constantly and to acquire new competencies. Today, market professionals organize the conditions of expression of consumers' choices in highly controlled and often optimized conditions, based on objectives of profitability of economic strategies rather than customer satisfaction.

Research has moreover shown the wide diversity of market devices framing the expression of consumers' choices. None of these devices is neutral or insignificant; on the contrary, they often reflect the competition and power struggles between the different agents involved in the supply and the commercialization of products or services. Susan Strasser's work shows, for example, that when packaged cereals gradually replaced the sale of products in bulk, it reflected producers' wish to build a more direct relationship with consumers through the guarantees of a brand, and thus to ensure that the seller alone could not control



the relationship with consumers (Strasser, 1989). The making of the consumer is thus also the product of power relations between the actors of the supply: those upstream who do not wish those downstream to have a monopoly on the control of consumers' needs and expectations (Schleifer and De Soucey, 2015). Market devices populate the entire market, and each of them contributes in its own way to shaping consumers' practices and identities, whether it be a question of brands, of packaging (Cochoy, 2002), of shopping bags (Hagberg, 2016) or of loyalty cards (Araujo and Kjellberg, 2009). We even find them unexpectedly in various different worlds, as recent studies on evangelical churches and their promotional practices recently showed (Luca, 2012; Yip and Ainsworth, 2016).

To account for the systematic way in which these market operations and devices shape consumers' behaviours in markets, Michel Callon proposed the notion of market *agencement*. The term refers to the articulation of human and non-human actors that enables the circulation of products, from the people who design them down to those who use or consume them, by making possible the operations of calculation and adjustment that this implies (Callon, 2013). We owe to Lucien Karpik the construction of a framework for interpreting the various types of device in markets. Karpik (2010) classified them according to the size of the market, the regimes of coordination that they supported, and the forms of consumer involvement. His analysis enables us to see the consumer as an individual whose forms of autonomy and engagement in markets are largely organized by the commercial activity itself. Circulation in market spaces, the identification of products and of their properties, their commensurability and their singularization, are operations that consumers perform with equipment consisting not only of physical means but also of principles of calculation and of nomenclatures provided to them by market actors. The identities and competences of consumers cannot be conceived of today in any way other than as a product of market engineering rooted essentially in competitive power relations and strategies of economic control (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013a).

## **The Making of the ‘Good Consumer’**

The making of the consumer is not only the product of market techniques; alongside market specialists, other actors also construct consumer figures. Social reformers seek to know and to educate consumers, while the State, the law and civil society contribute to forging a specific status for the consumer, that of consumer-citizen (Trentmann, 2006).

Whether they are sent by the central government or come from reformist groups wishing to transform society through philanthropy or legislative reform, those that we propose here to call ‘researcher-reformers’ are important actors in the construction of the consumer figure. Social inquiries have existed since the Middle Ages (Dejoux, 2014), but they took on particular importance in the nineteenth century (Bulmer et al., 1991; Kalifa, 2010; Karila-Cohen, 2008). In this context, surveys on consumers’ budgets preceded and sometimes prepared the first market surveys (Schwarzkopf, 2016). Underpinned by a particular ideology, especially from 1860, Frédéric Le Play’s monographic studies painted a picture in France of ideal families (Baciocchi and David, 2005–2006). We see emerging a normative portrait of working-class families that were supposed to save, to manage their budgets correctly, and to avoid consuming too much alcohol (Deluermoz, 2012; Kalaora and Savoye, 1989; Lhuissier, 2007). As these methods of surveying budgets, known as Leplaysian, have had an influence in other countries, such as China for example (Gamble and Burgess, 1921), they are particularly interesting comparative sources (Conrad and Triebel, 1985).

In the twentieth century, Catholic communities, especially those that were organized in the framework of Catholic Action – the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy – were also major producers of surveys that were not devoid of normative advice (Lhotte and Dupeyrat, 1937; Pelletier, 1995). In the UK and the USA, as well as Japan and Eastern Europe, reformers carried out social surveys and studied consumer practices, especially regarding food (Bulmer et al., 1991; Converse, 1987; Thomann, 2015). Some of these researchers had the status of social scientists, such as Phyllis H. Williams, research

assistant in sociology at the Institute of Human Relations (Yale University) in the 1930s. Williams published a book for social workers, nurses doing home visits, teachers and doctors who needed to know the community of Italian immigrants in the USA better. She described their lifestyle and criticized the richness of their diet, which was very different from that of Southern Italy (Trentmann, 2016: 598–599; Williams, 1938). The worlds of social reform and of the social sciences were indeed closely entangled in the first half of the twentieth century. American empirical sociology owed a great deal to social workers, who were very often women, like Phyllis H. Williams (Fitzpatrick, 1990; Platt, 1996; Silverberg, 1998).

These surveys contributed to the making of consumers, but in a very different sense to that of market professionals. Here it is not a question of creating consumers' needs to sell products, but of normatively framing their behaviors. In this respect, the State and civil society have also regularly sought to define moral and citizen-related obligations of consumers (Chatriot et al. 2004; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2016). It is especially in particular contexts where resources were rare and countries experienced economic difficulties, as in times of war or economic crisis, that States appeal to consumers' duties as citizens. In many countries, the making of the citizen seems to be closely articulated to that of the consumer, not only because the State plays a fundamental role in consumer societies (Strasser et al., 1998) by defining a legal status for the consumer, but, more importantly, because consumption appears as a process through which consumers fully occupy the political space (Daunton and Hilton, 2001). The notion of 'pocketbook politics' (Jacobs, 2005) defines citizens' engagement through economic behaviour that has to match the community's expectations (Trentmann, 2009). Consumers are thus regularly invited to adapt their practices according to economic and political situations. During World War I, in both the USA and the UK, governments asked citizens to reduce their consumption so as not to worsen shortages, and thus to participate in the war effort. During World War II, a federal bureau created specifically to combat inflation even asked consumers to watch prices (Cohen, 2003). After the war, women consumers in France were also called on to combat inflation (Pulju, 2011).

The consumer became an actor in public policy-making and the market became an arena in which individuals could express their citizenship.

Consumption was thus also a driver of growth during the New Deal in the USA. It was even during this period that a real social contract was entered into between the State and citizen-consumers, aimed at basing both economic prosperity and democratic life on mass consumption. In *A Consumers' Republic*, Lizabeth Cohen describes how the 'citizen-consumer' of the 1930s morphed after World War II into a 'purchaser-citizen' to serve the national interest, by supporting the new mass consumption economy. This was not only the outcome of commercial trends but also revolved around urban development policies in the 1950s which segmented the population along the lines of class and race. These policies moved the white middle classes into suburban residential areas by assisting them in buying homes and cars, and by creating shopping malls devoted to them (Cohen, 2003). By facilitating access to credit for consumption and home ownership, the US government made consumption rather than savings the main driver of its economy. This contrasted with other countries such as France, where savings were encouraged (Trumbull, 2014).

The Chinese government also opted for consumption when it changed its economic policies after 1979. Aware of the failure of the planned economy in improving lifestyles, the authorities revised their priorities. Production was henceforth to be turned more towards the satisfaction of immediate desires for consumer goods. To sustain growth, buy social peace and ensure its longevity, the Party placed its bets on a Chinese consumer society. Initially this regime was based on exports but then, from the 2000s, it started to rely on the domestic demand. Consumers and especially the middle classes were thus encouraged to consume (Davis, 2000; Gerth, 2010; Guiheux, 2011).

Civil society – especially the non-profit and activist world – has also played an active part in morally framing consumption (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013b, 2013c). Since the emblematic cases of revolutionary boycotts against the British Empire in the eighteenth century in the USA, and then 'free produce' approaches of the abolitionist movements in the early nineteenth century which proposed goods not produced with slave labor, there has been

a significant political tradition in civil society consisting in making the consumer an agent of change (Glickman, 2009). From this tradition sprung the US and European *consumer leagues* that developed at the turn of the twentieth century, with the mission of making consumers responsible for their purchases, and protecting women's labor rights (Chessel, 2012b). They thus embodied two forms of consumer mobilization: both as agents of political change and as a social group that can benefit from these changes. At the same time, in the UK, consumers defended 'free trade' (Trentmann, 2009). Although they did not entirely move away from their ambiguous position, the consumer movements that developed in the 1930s in the US and in the 1950s in Europe specialized in defending consumers' rights and interests (Hilton, 2009). Organizations such as the Consumers' Union in the USA, the Consumers' Association in England, the *Union Belge des Consommateurs* in Belgium, and the *Union Fédérale des Consommateurs* in France invented and disseminated techniques for testing products, with the idea of training consumers to make better choices (Aldridge, 1994; Mallard, 2000). This new representation of consumers, often largely institutionalized by governments themselves, served to defend their interests and was behind many laws passed to protect consumers (Chatriot et al., 2006; Trentmann, 2001; Trumbull, 2006). Indeed, states are themselves very proactive in building representations of the good consumer by designing a large set of public instruments, from taxes, to public campaigns, labeling and more recently nudges, aiming at orienting consumers' decisions towards common good objectives, such as public health or the preservation of the environment (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2016)

In post-war Poland, textile workers and the trade-union, Solidarność which formed *de facto* the largest consumer movement, even if they spoke as workers, demanded that socio-economic resources be distributed equitably (Mazurek and Hilton, 2007). In western countries, from the 1990s and 2000s, civil society organizations developed actions that targeted consumers, providing them with labels (Bartley et al., 2015). Consumers were invited to engage in 'individualized collective action', that is, to manifest their political engagement by either boycotting or on the contrary 'buycotting' certain types of product (Micheletti, 2003). These movements thus proposed numerous types of protest or resistance,

or else engagement in forms of alternative consumption or in sustainable community movements (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013c; Forno and Graziano, 2014).

Market actors, researcher-reformers, government authorities and militant organizations all construct ‘figures’ of normative consumers. It is in this framework that the consumer usually appears as a woman, the shopper whom people notice in the streets of London, or the ‘housewife’ that advertising wants to appeal to, that the reformer wants to educate, that government wants to control, and that militant organizations want to enroll (Chessel, 2011; de Grazia and Furlough, 1996; Rappaport, 2000). Thus, the shoplifter in department stores in France, the UK or the USA who appeared at the end of the nineteenth century was almost always a woman; she represented the dangers of middle-class female consumption (Abelson, 1989; Roberts, 1998). On the other hand, the consumer as an economic figure – *homo economicus* – was always a man and was never considered dangerous (Donohue, 1999). Let us now move away from these normative figures and look at the practices of ordinary men and women. Do consumers not also contribute to the making of themselves? What can be said of their agency?

## **The Consumer’s ‘Agency’**

The framing of consumption by the market, civil society and the State may suggest that the consumer is a passive individual whose acts are largely the product of multiple framings. This view was spread by voices critical of consumption, which tended to see it as being essentially manipulated by marketing and advertising that, they claimed, were capable of stripping consumers of their free will. Advertising messages allegedly alienated consumers and maintained the working classes in a state of dependence on mass consumer products (Marcuse, 1991), thus reducing products to the state of signs mirroring social identities, devoid of substance (Baudrillard, 1996). These studies were set in a long tradition of moralizing writings (Trentmann, 2016).

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen (1899) described how the upper classes in ancient societies compelled themselves to invest heavily in ostentatious consumption intended to show their rank and power in society. As this norm spread from the top down, their servants and then the lowest ranks of society adopted the same modes of consumption. The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1913) similarly showed the propensity of working-class households to increase the share of spending on clothes as soon as their income increased, in order to integrate into society more fully. But he emphasized that consumption should not only be read from the angle of imitations and adaptations between social classes; it is above all a strong marker and identification of class. He thus showed that the working classes' consciousness stemmed precisely from their understanding that, with regard to consumption, their employers did not have to make the same sacrifices as they did. Moreover, the family played a crucial role as the consumer unit par excellence, there where class identity was expressed, inculcated and maintained. It was probably Pierre Bourdieu who proposed the most thorough analysis of the forms of discipline that the social structure exerted on consumption practices. Inspired by Veblen and by Halbwachs, Bourdieu showed the links between lifestyles and the maintenance of positions in society. From his point of view, the manifestation of taste and above all of disgust, through consumption practices, was one of the main factors in the construction and maintenance of social relations of domination and submission. Material goods, he argued, make it possible to make these tastes visible and thus to participate in the construction of social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984). Individuals develop a class identity shaped in a habitus, thus constructing and stabilizing the positions of social groups as much as do individual consumption practices. While Bourdieu's analyses of cultural goods strongly reflect the period in which they were set, the importance of the social group in the diffusion of certain consumption practices remains strong to this day, as the middle classes' role in spreading organic farming and 'good food' attests (Johnston et al., 2011).

The persistence of particularities related to social groups is clearly highlighted by historians, even though they tend to qualify the determinisms (Daumas, 2018a). Under the

Ancien Régime, when one was part of the ‘people of Paris’, one’s dwelling was poor, in a single room in which it was impossible to feel really ‘at home’. Despite the introduction of new objects – for instance porcelain tableware, mirrors and razors – lifestyles were linked to a particular relationship with precariousness (Roche, 1987). The risk of extreme poverty was an incentive to build safety nets, including by buying and selling goods, as needed (Fontaine, 2008). In the nineteenth century the workers studied by Leplaysian researchers used all sorts of strategies to be able to eat: they could glean vegetables or use bartering (Lhuissier, 2007). At the end of the nineteenth century, small farmers gradually adopted the urban model of consumption, but their practices remained widely diverse and particularities did not disappear. Rural populations still consumed a large amount of their own production (Daumas, 2015).

These popular practices were perpetuated in Paris in the early twentieth century, in a period when there was a broadening of the consumption of goods, notably through the development of credit intended for the working classes. These classes maintained specific practices, notably the use of goods as a means of saving, or by tinkering to extend the life-span of objects (Albert, 2012, 2014). Ethnographic studies show that in the past, and still today, low-income households devise solutions to live ‘from day to day’ and to manage. They count money and time, adapt their spending according to their income, travel far to obtain the cheapest goods, or use their social network (Cottureau and Marzok, 2012). In contemporary China we find the persistence of working-class consumption practices alongside a new extremely rich population. In Shanghai, which in the 1990s recovered the commercial activity that it had known in the early twentieth century, standardized spaces of mass retailing coexist with quasi-rural markets (Guiheux, 2010).

We thus discover consumers’ capacity for ‘bricolage’, their re-appropriation of objects (de Certeau, 1984; Lüdtke, 1994) or their willing to negotiate the recommendations they receive while consuming (Plessz et al., 2016). This was for instance how the middle classes invented a new way of using, arranging and displaying goods in the nineteenth century. Being bourgeois was not solely a matter of owning goods; it was also one of ‘making personal use of them that was consistent with collective practices’. Middle-class consumers protected their



dwellings with locks, displayed their ornaments in cabinets, stored their documents in secretaires, kept their jewelry in boxes, and became enthusiastic collectors of objects. In this way, consumers contributed to their own social making (Charpy, 2010). In the twentieth century, it was through their ‘bricolage’ and their use of goods that European consumers constructed a common material culture, around, for example, the bicycle or the computer (Oldenziel and Hård, 2013).

We now know from studies on men and women’s daily lives that consumption was not absent in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries before the 1990s. Consumers here could also be active in particular contexts (Kott, 2001; Pence and Betts, 2008; Reid and Crowley, 2000). Life in the Soviet Union in the 1930s demanded resourcefulness and luck, in order to maintain normal life in exceptional conditions (Fitzpatrick, 1999). More broadly in East Europe, consumers were neither puppets nor heroes, but they did contribute to transforming the socialism of daily life through their resourcefulness within the framework of a normed system (Ragaru and Chapelle-Popacean, 2010; Zakharova, 2015, 2016).

In other words, consumers are also made through their own practices, and they constantly negotiate the norms they encounter in an ongoing play with market actors. By setting up market architectures, marketers structure the relationship between products and consumers that does not exist in the absolute. By researching and commenting on their research, social reformers shape consumer figures and norms, all the while providing valuable information on popular practices. By creating a framework, actors of the State facilitate or limit acts of consumption – an extreme example of which we see in contemporary China. The technological and general framework cannot be transformed by consumers; it is for instance impossible to heat one’s apartment if the infrastructure is absent.

Yet consumers do not necessarily conform to the multiple injunctions aimed at them. Through ‘bricolage’, adaptation and negotiation they survive on wages below the breadline, articulate consumption and savings, maintain ostentatious consumption even when such practices are frowned upon, and come to terms with nutritional or environmental norms to choose their food. Normative and practical discourses must therefore be distinguished, even if

they are intrinsically interlinked in reality. This dissociation is one contribution by recent studies on consumption, which are now focusing as much on practices and objects as on normative discourses (Crossick, 2000; Daumas, 2010; Trentmann, 2016).

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