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1
Introduction

What is the acceptable amount to consume? Who should be entitled to more and better goods and on what basis? Which goods are appropriate to consume and which fall into the disapproved category? And more generally, on what basis should consumption be judged? The answers to these questions are the very stuff of consumption norms. These norms have been articulated in very different contexts and forms across time and space. The religious taboos regulating what is allowed to be eaten, when, how and by whom; the sumptuary laws defining the kind of clothes, swords and feasts that are legitimate for certain social groups; the modern regulation of consumption ranging from Prohibition to the control over everyday consumption in socialist countries; as well as the mundane discussions conducted around the dinner table about what kind of wedding would be appropriate given the family's social and financial situation – these are all different versions of consumption norms.

Consumption norms are articulated at two distinct, yet related levels: first, in public discourse, including the intellectual moralizing about consumption, the political debate about the regulation of consumption, and views promoted by social movements addressing consumption; and second, at an everyday private level. The moral concerns underpinning public discourse on consumption have been subject to historical analysis (e.g. Hilton, 2001; Horowitz, 1985) and to the recent discussions on consumption and citizenship (e.g. Trentmann and Soper, 2008b). Norms articulated by ordinary people in everyday life, in contrast, lack systematic analysis. Although a number of works in cultural studies, consumer behavior and material culture studies argued that consumption choices often express values, identities and cultural categories, none of the existing literature provides a focused discussion of everyday
consumption norms. As a result, the two levels of consumption norms are hardly connected; and even when they are, it is limited to identifying values in everyday life that conform to the agendas of intellectual and political movements.

The aim of this book is, first, to provide a systematic analysis of everyday consumption norms, by inquiring into what they are about (Chapter 2), how to explain them (Chapter 3), how they work (Chapter 4) and how they change (Chapter 5); and second, based on the analysis, to develop a framework in which the often conflicting moral stances pertaining to public and private norms can be analyzed (Chapters 6–7). This chapter sets up some of the key arguments which will be developed in the book and provides an introduction to the issues and debates that have dominated the study of consumption norms.

Varieties of consumption norms

Consumption norms per se have rarely been the core focus of research or theorizing. Rather, different phenomena that can be classified as consumption norms have been discussed under different headings – the anthropological study of consumption taboos, the sociological and historical work on sumptuary laws and the changing moral discourse on consumption and luxury –, with little or no relation to each other.

The first, and probably most widely studied, type of consumption norms are taboos. Taboos are sanctioned by rituals (Buckser, 1997) and regulate a wide array of practices, ranging from sexual behavior – for example, the taboo on incest – to mourning customs. Consumption taboos regulate what can be used, when, by whom and how. For example, in China during the Qin and Han times (221 BC–AD 220), taboos regulated on which day new clothes could be worn (Tseng-Kuei, 2009); the taboos of the Huaulu, people living on the island of Seram, in Indonesia, forbid human clothing to be put on animals (Valeri, 2000); and in most religions, sacred objects can only be touched by particular people and seen by outsiders only on special occasions.

Yet the most common consumption taboos are dietary restrictions. Some of them apply to certain types of food: pork is a general taboo in Judaism and Islam, beef in Hinduism; meat in general was a taboo in 7th-century Japan (Cwiertka, 2004) and remains a taboo for Krishna believers today. Other food taboos regulate who can consume certain types of food. For example, according to the dietary restriction of the Lele, people living in Congo, different foods are forbidden for men, women, adults and children. Flying squirrel can only be eaten by
children, whereas they are not appropriate for adults (Douglas, 2002). Another set of food taboos differentiate along occasion. Taboos of the Zuni, a native American tribe, forbade eating meat during the first four days of the winter solstice and for four days following a death (Bunzel, 1929); whereas in the religious fasting periods in Judaism, Islam and Christianity, restrictions apply to solid food and drinks.

Consumption norms can also take the form of legal regulation. From ancient to early modern times, sumptuary laws regulated what and how much can be consumed by different social groups in nearly all countries of Europe, in China (Shish, 1972), Japan (Totman, 1993), Iran and other Asian countries. For example, in Ancient Rome the lex Oppia – in force from 215 BC – forbade women to possess more than half an ounce of gold, and laws regulated the maximum amount that could be spent on a feast per year, including the value of the silverware and wine that could be served (Berry, 1994, pp. 76–7). English sumptuary laws from the 14th–17th century regulated consumption by ‘estate’ and gender, defining in detail the apparel that could be worn by men and women of different social ranks. For example, purple and gold could only be worn by the royal family; velvet only by barons or above; hats only by knights or above and so on. Other laws limited the use of foreign materials or even foreign designs (Hunt, 1996b, p. 238). In Japan, sumptuary laws passed in 1649 forbade merchants to decorate their houses with gold or silver trimming or to have gold or silver clasps on tobacco pouches (Slade, 2009). Under the Ancien Régime, laws prohibited men from dressing up as women (Muchembled, 2012).

Modern states have also regulated consumption and continue to do so today. In the United States lotteries were prohibited in the 1830s, and alcohol prohibition was extended to the whole country in 1919 (Cross, 2001). In socialist Hungary, possession of foreign currency, gold, and second homes were regulated by law (Hammer and Dessewffy, 1997; Vörös, 1997). Contemporary legal regulation on drugs or the laws that forbid people under the age of 18 or 21 years to buy alcohol and tobacco are also versions of consumption norms codified by law, constituting modern forms of sumptuary legislation.

However, not all consumption norms are codified in religious taboos and secular laws. Social movements, various organizations, intellectuals and even the state express abundant criticism or encouragement of certain consumption practices on normative grounds, without codifying these in an explicit form (Berg and Eger, 2003; Wilk, 2001). Practices classified as luxury had already raised moral concerns in ancient times, as they were seen as threats to social and moral order, as
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well as impediments to reason and virtue (Appelby, 2001; Berry, 1994; Sekora, 1977). Schama (1987), in his analysis of 17th-century Dutch culture, considers the ‘anxieties of superabundance’ (p. xi) – the fear that excessive consumption may have destructive consequences – so characteristic that he entitled his book ‘The Embarrassment of the Riches’. Appelby (2001) and Hilton (2001) show the ways in which consumption was judged negatively from the 17th century in England, whereas Horowitz (1985, 2004) follows the ‘anxieties of affluence’ in the United States from 1875 in two subsequent books. Criticism of conspicuous consumption associated with the nouveaux riches, and worries over materialism voiced by various intellectuals, are contemporary versions of these discourses. Although these discourses often seem to criticize consumption as such, on closer look their focus turns out to be on specific practices, by specific groups (Wilk, 2001), hence they can also be seen as articulating specific consumption norms. Similarly, the consumption norms advocated by social movements promoting green, national and fair trade consumption, and government campaigns to encourage citizens to conform to consumption norms required by the ideal of the patriotic, socialist or modern citizen (Berghoff, 2001; Garon, 1997; Gerth, 2008; Trentmann, 2006b) are other examples of noncodified consumption norms.

Finally, consumption norms are prevalent in everyday life. They are present in parental advice discouraging the teenage son from wearing torn jeans, in dinner-table discussions of the pretentions of the nouveaux riches, and in chats over the neighbor’s egoistic purchases. Often, everyday consumption norms are not even articulated but guide practices through an unreflected sense of what is normal, decent or appropriate to do (Bourdieu, 1977; Shove, 2003). Shove (2003) uses the term ‘perfect injunction’ to refer to these type of actions that people consider as having to be done without ‘further thought or reflection’ (p. 161), and suggests, following Giddens, that most ‘social norms and conventions are … sustained and recreated through practices like these’ (p. 161).

The division line between religious and legal regulation just like the line dividing the noncodified consumption norms of public discourse from those guiding everyday life is often fuzzy. Sumptuary laws that belong to legal regulation were read out from church pulpits and enforced by ecclesial courts (Muzzarelli, 2009; Sekora, 1977; Slater, 1997a). Often, consumption norms proposed by social movements later became codified by law, as was the case with Prohibition (Cross, 2001; Hunt, 1996b). Further, everyday norms may initiate, incorporate,
rework, contest or even ignore public norms, taboos and regulations (see Chapters 2–5).

The above list of consumption norms could be further refined and extended. The aim here, however, is not so much to cover all varieties of consumption norms; rather to suggest that seemingly disparate fields are variations of the same phenomenon. This point is far from self-evident. Early anthropological theories suggested that taboos are superstitions that are exclusive to ‘primitive’ cultures, and hence have no equivalent in the advanced and rational West (Douglas, 2002). Similarly, sumptuary legislation was long considered an ‘immature or unsophisticated stage of legal development’ (Hunt, 1996a, p. 410), an isolated premodern curiosity that was doomed to fail and perish with the advent of modernity. Differences in grounding and context of consumption norms undoubtedly exist. Yet what is even more striking is not their differences but their similarities and the persistence of normative stances to consumption across time and space.

Moralizing consumption

What makes consumption attract so intense moralizing? What is the reason behind the existence of consumption norms? One might be tempted to think that there is something intrinsically evil in consumption, and this immanent fear surrounding the issue takes different forms in different societies. From this point of view, the ritual avoidance of certain foods, the 17th-century Dutch embarrassment over affluence, the repeatedly reinvented criticism of the consumer society and current ecological concerns are seen as culture-specific expressions of the same anxiety. This approach is suggested by Miller, who considers shopping the contemporary equivalent of a ritual sacrifice aimed at removing the evil inherent in consumption:

[T]here are many cosmologies and regions of the world where consumption is seen as intrinsically evil and destructive. I have argued that much of the logic of traditional sacrifice and exchange is itself an attempt to avoid these dangerous and immoral consequences of consumption as an act that uses up resources. So the specific concerns fostered by Green consciousness have become wedded to much deeper and long-standing fears about the evils of consumption more generally. Where in other societies aspects of sacrifice and exchange are employed to prevent the realization of these immanent evils of consumption, in our society the practice of consumption is itself
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turned into a three-stage ritual [of shopping] that has the same effect of negating what is seen as destructive nature. (Miller, 2001a, p. 132)

This book suggests a different answer. If we look at the content of consumption norms across time and space, we find that through different consumption norms specific ethical issues are articulated. First, consumption norms mediate particular normative visions of how to live and who to be. What makes consumption norms a suitable terrain to mediate these questions is the fact that consumption is involved in most human practices; and as such, in the practical realization of nearly all the endeavors that people pursue. This is because ethical visions of how to live do not exist as mere abstractions but they are always intertwined with specific practices. What it means to be a ‘good mother’, for instance, primarily exists in practical responsibilities, actual practices of care. In Chapter 4, this argument will be further refined, and I will propose the notion of practical ethics that suggests that rather than holding abstract ethical ideas of good life which people would ‘express’ in practice, practice is often the primary realm in which ethics exist and are transmitted. For the moment, it suffices to say that many of the everyday ideas of how to live are objectified in practices that have a consumption aspect. This is what enables consumption norms to serve as a terrain through which we negotiate and redefine abstract ethical ideals at a practical, everyday level. For example, the cut of the jacket that a ‘decent man’ should wear can generate heated normative debate because ethical visions of decency are embedded in, and therefore can be negotiated through, the particular practice.

Second, consumption norms mediate ideals of justice; that is, principles involving questions of entitlement and the distribution of valued goods. Environmental debates over the fairness of current levels of Western consumption vis-à-vis other countries and future generations or the questions raised over the entitlement of the nouveaux riches to their riches, are just some example of consumption norms where the legitimacy of certain consumption practices is assessed from the point of view of justice. At a more mundane level, the consumption norms articulated in the pub over whether or not a politician should get a state-funded BMW, or the routine norm of serving the father first at the dinner table are similarly mediations of ideas of entitlement and legitimate distribution.

In debates on consumption norms, competing ideas of justice, good life and social values clash. The condemnation of the conspicuousness associated with the nouveaux riches, the criticism of materialism, and
even the mundane norms guiding how tidy a room should be acquire a moral weight because they imply normative views on how people should live and what would constitute a legitimate hierarchy and distribution of goods. These normative questions are the primary stakes of moralizing about consumption: these are the points mediated through consumption norms. In this light, the reason behind the constant moral preoccupation with consumption and the persistence of consumption norms is not so much the intrinsically morally evil status of consumption but its interconnectedness with ethical visions of good life and justice.3

Consumption moving to center stage

The point that consumption is intrinsically linked to questions of good life and justice is a general, ahistorical argument that needs some qualifications. Consumption is one of the key fields, even though not the only one, through which these questions can be addressed. In fact, for a long time traditional politics and the realm of work were seen as the primary terrains for their articulation, and it is only in modern consumer societies that consumption has become the key domain through which values are defined and pursued (see, for example, Bauman, 1998, 2001a; Featherstone, 1990b; Giddens, 1991; Slater, 1997a):

Consumption and material culture may be central to all human society but only the modern West came to be defined, and indeed define itself, as a consumer culture or consumer society. The underlying claim here is that because of such modernization processes as marketization, the decline of traditional status systems and the rise of cultural and political pluralism, private, market-based choice has become increasingly central to social life. ... In a consumer culture, then, key social values, identities and processes are negotiated through the figure of ‘the consumer’ (as opposed to, say, the worker, the citizen or the devotee); central modern values such as freedom, rationality and progress are enacted and assessed through consumerist criteria (range of choice, price calculations and rising affluence, respectively); and the cultural landscape seems to be dominated by commercial signs (advertising, portrayals of ‘lifestyle’ choices through the media, obsessive concern with the changing meanings of things). (Ritzer and Slater, 2001, p. 6)

The pessimistic reading of this shift is that the loss of real freedom and the possibility of an authentic self-development in the sphere of
work and politics are compensated by the false illusions offered by consumption. As people are unable to make choices over the political and economic structures that would make a real difference to their lives, they retreat to the pseudo-freedom of inconsequential choices that they can make in their private life over consumption (Baudrillard, 1998; Bauman, 2001a; Shields, 1992).

A more positive reading is that through their consumption choices people are able to influence processes of the political economy, and gain unprecedented power; an argument supported by a growing engagement in citizen issues through consumer movements (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Gulyás, 2008; Micheletti, 2003; Miller, 1995). Captured by Miller's formulation of ‘consumption as the vanguard of history’ (Miller, 1995, p. 1), consumption appears here as a new, progressive realm where values can be expressed and politics are pursued. In this reading, the change is understood as a move toward a more open and democratic participation: through their consumption choices, ordinary people can directly influence even multinational corporations that they could not otherwise reach through traditional means, such as trade unions or nation–state politics. Although the actual impact of consumer movements is debated (Clarke, 2008), what these accounts suggest is that consumption has acquired an unprecedented centrality in articulating, negotiating and pursuing ethical projects.4 (I will return to these debates in Chapters 6–7.)

Despite the emphasis on ordinary people and democratic participation praised by these accounts, in this literature surprisingly little attention has been devoted to understanding what exactly those projects are that ordinary people pursue in their everyday consumption. This is problematic for two reasons. The first is practical: without taking into account the everyday moral concerns we have little hope of understanding how and why consumption norms change, what are the everyday norms that ethical consumption movements – including the environmental movement, fair trade and so forth – have to confront or integrate, and why these movements succeed in certain places while fail in others. The second problem is political. The lack of sustained analysis of everyday moral concerns has led to an approach that acknowledges the morality of everyday concerns and norms as long as they match the norms articulated in public discourse: green consciousness, creative agency or anti-materialism. In other words, the everyday has not been seen as a realm from which alternative, competing, normative visions can potentially emanate but one that needs to conform to norms defined outside it. Any democratic debate on the way people should
live and on justice needs to take into account the voices of those concerned; yet this position forecloses precisely this option by ignoring the visions of good life and justice that underpin everyday consumption norms. These twin concerns of the practical and political importance of everyday consumption constitute the starting questions of this book.

Why everyday consumption norms have been ignored

The negligence of everyday consumption norms, and more generally the reluctance to acknowledge, let alone to study, ethical concerns informing everyday consumption, is not new, and is largely attributable to the theoretical questions in the context of which consumption had been traditionally studied by social sciences. In sociology, the study of consumption had been subsumed to the critique of modernity and capitalism. Modern consumption was seen as emblematic of the negative consequences of these developments and it was identified with status competition, hedonism and materialism, or it was simply pictured as the supplement provided by capitalism for the loss of real freedom. It is not by accident that consumption in this context was depicted as a typically female activity. The female consumer – assumed to be emotional, irrational and susceptible to manipulation – epitomized the duped consumer that this approach critiqued (Slater, 1997a).

In this reading, consumers were seen as either manipulated or morally corrupted, hence it is not surprising that the option of investigating their own norms, and the ethical concerns informing them, did not even arise. The analysis was conducted instead from external moral vantage points; consumption, as Miller (2001c) argued, became a terrain where analysts demonstrated their normative stance to the world. This theoretical tradition has been developed in four different, yet interrelated ways.

First, theories focusing on materialism assume an immoral, nonreflected, homogeneous, innate drive to consume. In these accounts, any desire to consume – ignoring normative distinctions between different practices – is seen as a sign of materialism (Ahuvia and Wong, 2002; Belk, 1985; Richins and Dawson, 1992). The implication of this view is that values are only imaginable outside consumption; what is more, that people can only be considered moral agents as long as they enact values that are in opposition to consumption as such.

Second, status competition theories assume that people want goods out of the superficial motive of social competition. The key author of this line is Veblen (1924), who argued that goods signal status and
people desire them because they intend to use them to demonstrate their status or relative success. Competitive motives are sometimes described as innate human characteristics. Other times, as Campbell (1987) points out, they are depicted as social in their origin, yet still seem to apply universally to everybody; a feature that makes them similar to universal innate drives. More recent theories of this line, such as Schor’s (2000) argument on the increased consumerism in the United States, see status competition as resulting from the structural conditions of the labor market, inequality and the application of neo-classical economics. Yet despite the differences in where they locate the origins of status competition, these accounts share the same skepticism over the moral values informing consumption.

The third approach, that traditionally saw consumption as a realm opposed to normative concerns, draws on Marx and critical theory. This tradition, unlike the above ones, does not refuse the possibility that goods could be part of an authentic cultural and self-development (Miller, 1987; Slater, 1997a), yet it argues that such a possibility cannot be realized under capitalist relations of production. Goods produced under alienating conditions, purchased through impersonal money relations – where they appear to have no connection with subjective contents, work relations and practice – result in alienation and dominate rather than express consciousness. As a result, instead of a development of subjects and objects through praxis in full consciousness – captured by the notion of ‘real needs’ and leading to real happiness and freedom – we pursue false needs that are functional to the interest of the capital.

The same underlying assumption can be traced in different theories suggesting a link between capitalist interests on the one hand, and values and identities expressed by commodities on the other. For example, Bauman suggests that contemporary self-expression is limited to the choice between easily updated ‘ready-made identity’ choices manufactured by the market (Bauman, 1988) that do not simply express false values but lose all reference to values (Bauman, 2001b). A similar link is established even more strongly and deterministically by Baudrillard (1983). He argues that goods have lost all relationship with practice and reality; his argument does not stop at alienation but goes on to suggest that objects mask the disappearance of all content, becoming sheer signs that only relate to each other. Objects gain their meaning from their relation to other objects, forming a semiotic system orchestrated according to capitalist interest. This logic dominates society and consciousness, ‘drawing the consumer into a series of more complex
Some of these accounts acknowledge that people experience commodities as conveying certain meanings or even values. Yet these are classified as false and inauthentic; or worse, by finding the false values in consumption, people do not only accept but willingly reproduce the conditions of their own subordination (Marcuse, 1964). Others go further and suggest the disappearance of all norms and values from the realm of consumption, as it allows for the unlimited consumptive desire required by capitalist interest. The distinctive feature of consumer culture, in Bauman’s formulation, ‘is the emancipation of consumption from its past instrumentality that used to draw limits … – setting consumption free from functional bonds and absolving it from the need to justify itself by reference to anything but its own pleasure’ (Bauman, 2001a, pp. 12–14).

The fourth position that led to the reluctance to study everyday consumption norms has been developed in detail by Bourdieu (1984) and starts from a different premise. Bourdieu acknowledges the normative distinctions that people make between practices, yet considers these as unconscious competitive strategies to acquire social distinction. He argues that the widely held idea that taste – the ability to make sophisticated normative judgments on consumption practices – being innate is an ideology favoring the dominant classes. Taste in reality is produced by objective social conditions, rather than being a personal choice. The idea of innate taste in contrast posits differences in tastes as if they would reflect individual virtues and shortcomings. This makes social divisions appear as if they would be based on innate personal merit, hence naturalizes and legitimizes social inequalities and domination. (For more details on Bourdieu’s theory, see Chapters 3–4.) This account is akin to the previous one in that people’s own ideas are seen to be formed by and functional to maintaining larger structures of social domination. However, here these objective structures are not exclusively capitalist production relations but different capital compositions. Yet the research implication is similar: taking people’s everyday consumption norms seriously would not only be a methodological mistake but also a contribution to the dominant ideology.

These four accounts of consumption put forward both a substantive and a normative claim. Substantively, they see consumption as a uniform practice that conforms to a single immoral motive of materialism, hedonism or competition. Even if consumption norms arise in everyday life, they are functional to these hidden motives, hence they
are worthless to study in their own right. The normative claim that follows is that as everyday consumption is devoid of any value, normative stances to it can only be formulated by the external analyst. These substantive and normative positions have led to the theoretical and research agenda which ignored the ethical concerns guiding everyday consumption, and consequently consumption norms.

Acknowledging the normative concerns of everyday consumption

Criticism of these approaches was developed in cultural studies, consumer behavior, anthropology and material culture studies that argued that consumption is a realm mediating values or ethical concerns. Although the focus of these works was not on consumption norms specifically, the acknowledgment of ethical concerns in mundane consumption opened up the way to the study of consumption norms.

These works seemingly suggest the same point: that consumption is a moral activity. Yet what they mean by the moral nature of consumption differs substantially due to the differences in the theoretical traditions in relation to which their arguments have been developed. Cultural studies formulated its stand largely against Marxist claims that saw work as the only possible realm of genuine self-development, and consumption as a false manipulated activity. They used research findings to question the theoretically based pessimistic views on manipulated consumers and inescapable ideologies and revealed the new meanings and values goods take on in different contexts and subcultures. This led to the theory according to which consumers have the power to impose their own creative meanings on commodities, and these meanings can even go against the ones intended by advertisers or common ideas (Fiske, 1989; Hebdige, 1988; Willis, 1990). As Miller points out, this argument often turned into a celebratory account that redeemed consumption as generally ‘good’ rather than generally ‘bad’ (Miller, 1995).

However, here consumption was only seen as ‘good’ as long as it proved to be creative and resistant to manipulation (De Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1989). The problem with this strategy is that it is open only to specific everyday normative stances: to those that conform to creativity and resistance, thereby equating morality with agency. Consequently, despite its seeming opposition to the Marxist account, it works on the basis of a Manichean reversal and leaves the external moral vantage points for assessing the ‘goodness’ of consumption largely unquestioned.
Consumer behavior scholars argue that consumption is related to moral concerns building on a different intellectual tradition. As a discipline, consumer behavior originates in economics, whose model of human behavior is largely informed by early liberal and utilitarian thought. The founding idea of liberalism is the conceptualization of the human subject as an active, powerful, autonomous agent who is able to judge and develop her (but mainly his) own needs; an ideal which can be traced back to Enlightenment ideas from which liberalism originally emerged (Slater, 1997b). This is why the argument on agency that had to be asserted against Marxism in cultural studies here constituted a starting premise.

The other inheritance of economics is the assumption that all choices are motivated by preferences and that people act according to them by the principle of utility maximization. This idea dates back to the ‘felicitific calculus’ that Bentham envisaged as the maximization of pleasures and avoidance of pain (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001). Preferences refer to simple liking, or desirability with no normative aspects involved.5 This use is reflected in most consumer behavior studies. Even when the term ‘personal values’ is used, it does not imply a normative aspect, rather a more enduring or more encompassing liking and desirability (Caruana, 2007). For example, Solomon et al. define value as ‘a belief about some desirable end-state that transcends specific situations and guides selection of behaviour’ (Solomon et al., 2006, p. 113), and a widely used definition adopted from Rokeach suggests that a value is ‘an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence’ (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5). The problem with this formulation is that values seem to be nothing more than enduring preferences or meta-preferences that underlie more volatile everyday choices, blurring the difference between consumption norms and mere liking. This is why, in actual research, qualities such as ‘customized’ and ‘service’ are listed alongside ‘fairness’ and ‘purism’ (Roland Berger Strategy Consultants, 2009) among personal values even though they have no normative content but simply refer to the preference for personalized products or high-quality service.

Despite these conceptual problems, many of the findings in consumer behavior can be reread as evidence of particular sets of ethical concerns, pertaining to different groups and consumption practices. Value research (Gutman, 1982; Rokeach, 1973) revealed links between personal values and products, and studies on brand loyalty suggested that people choose certain brands because the values conveyed by
them match their own personal values. Lifestyle research – such as the VALS (Values and Lifestyle) and AIOs (Activities, Interests, Opinions) – extends this approach beyond detecting the connection between single goods and single consumer values. These surveys develop relatively homogenous groups of consumers based on a combination of value systems and demographics and link them to product choices (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991).6

Furthermore, interpretative consumer research using qualitative methods to understand consumers’ own experiences (Thompson et al., 1989) provided evidence of a wide array of values and ethical concerns that consumers express through commodities (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Holt, 1997), from Harley Davidson riders (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) to mothers juggling working and maternal roles (Thompson, 1996). The iconic ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 1986 across the United States called the ‘Consumer Behavior Odyssey’ suggested that in contemporary American commodity consumption some goods are treated as sacred (such as flags, the home, collections – etc.), symbolizing values seen as transcendent by the individual and perceived in opposition to profane goods (Belk et al., 1989). Here a clear distinction is drawn between moral concerns and preferences, even though the moral is equated with the sacred, suggesting a rather limited use.

The third theoretical line, that was probably the first to address the ethical concerns informing consumption, is anthropology. It did so by extending the standard anthropological point, according to which categories of goods and their exchange relations reflect social relations, from non-Western cultures to modern ones. Mary Douglas, whose work pioneered this extension, argued that in contemporary modern society, just like in traditional societies, goods make visible, accessible and enduring the social, cognitive and moral order of a given culture. Ordinary consumption hence was argued to be inherently moral in the sense that it mediates the shared conceptual categories and moral rules of society (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996).

The anthropological – and archeological – insights of the mutual correspondence between material culture and social relationships have been developed in different directions by material culture scholars. Daniel Miller extended this point further by connecting the anthropological question on the link between objects and social relations with the argument proposed by cultural studies against the standard sociological depiction of modern consumption as alienated. He suggested that modern mass consumption is a means to appropriate and re-create culture and negotiate social relationships. Unlike Douglas, he argued that
consumption does not simply reflect static social relations or a cultural system but is a dynamic realm through which people are able to renegotiate social relationships and culture. For him, the moral contents of consumption are part of this everyday culture that is re-created through the appropriation of material culture: ‘people transform resources both purchased through the market and allocated by the council into expressive environments, daily routines and often cosmological ideals: that is, ideas about order, morality and family, and their relationships with wider society’ (Miller, 1987, p. 8).

In his later work, Miller developed a somewhat different view on the moral aspects of consumption in dialog with anthropological theories of sacrifice. In his *A Theory of Shopping*, ordinary shopping is argued to be a moral activity: people are motivated by love and care, as well as by concerns of respectability in their everyday shopping. ‘Love’ here refers to a shared and long-lasting moral idea that is ‘in some sense higher than the mere dictates of instrumentality’ (Miller, 1999, p. 19). What gives love its normative nature here is its connection to transcendence: love is a contemporary version of a religious cosmology. In fact, the central argument of the book is that shopping can be seen as a devotional rite. Miller suggests an analogy between the phases of a religious sacrifice and shopping, and traces the roots of the moral cosmology of contemporary love to devotional rituals. This makes it possible to argue that ‘Shopping so far from being, as it is inevitably portrayed, the essence of ungodliness, becomes as a ritual the vestigial search for a relationship with God’ (1999, p. 150). This argument is narrower than his original theory of consumption, as it limits the scope of moral concerns to those which are related to transcendence; which implies that other moral concerns that equally inform consumption norms, yet bear no relation to religion, are less easily accommodated.

These related bodies of research – in cultural studies, consumer behavior, anthropology, material culture studies and, increasingly, in sociology (Zukin, 2010) – go against previous negative accounts of consumption both in their factual claims and their normative implications. The factual claim is that consumption practices are often guided by moral concerns, such as egalitarian ethics, care for others or the resistance against capitalism (Gullestad, 1995; Miller, 1995, 2008; Shove et al., 2007; Wilk, 2001). The normative implication, in turn, is that if consumers themselves express moral concerns and apply normative distinctions between practices (Miller, 1995), the superiority of the normative standpoint of the researcher becomes debatable (Miller, 1995, 2001c; Slater and Miller, 2007). These findings raise the question of
the relationship between everyday moralities and the researcher's own stance: they suggest that rather than assessing consumption from pre-defined moral stances, the norms embedded in the practices of everyday life can also be a basis of normative standpoints. This puts into question the strategy, informing most critical accounts, that analyzes consumption through a critical lens from an external moral vantage point.

To some extent this skepticism toward external moral vantage points and the dissatisfaction with the arrogance that they imply toward people's own views is what informs this kind of research in the first place (Slater and Miller, 2007; Trentmann, 2012). In this respect they fit into a broader trend that seeks to develop a bottom-up approach to normative judgment. Captured succinctly by Boltanski and Thévenot's argument, any social theory that aims to liberate and empower people should not refuse people's own normative judgments as its starting point but find a way to incorporate them:

The main problem of critical sociology is its inability to understand the critical operations undertaken by the actors. A sociology which wants to study the critical operations performed by actors – a sociology of criticism taken as a specific object – must therefore give up (if only temporarily) the critical stance, in order to recognize the normative principles which underlie the critical activity of ordinary persons. If we want to take seriously the claims of actors when they denounce social injustice, criticize power relationships or unveil their foes' hidden motives, we must conceive of them as endowed with an ability to differentiate legitimate and illegitimate ways of rendering criticisms and justifications. (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999, p. 364)

These considerations lead to a new approach to consumption norms which this book also builds on. The book emphasizes the diversity of competing and conflicting visions of good life and justice underlying consumption norms, be they articulated in public discourse or in everyday life. Furthermore, it argues that normative agendas need to acknowledge and incorporate people's own sense of good life and justice underlying their consumption norms. This implies that rather than asking whether private consumption is moral or immoral according to the standards formulated in public discourse, we need to recognize the plurality of value-claims informing consumption and inquire into how to resolve conflicts between them in a fair way. This is not to abandon criticism; but to place it on a new plane that focuses on the extent to which conflicting ethical concerns are taken into account in
a democratic way, rather than taking an unquestioned moral vantage point and criticizing what is assumed to be immoral everyday consumption from it.

Chapter outline

Chapter 2 develops an interpretative account of consumption norms. Expanding the argument developed in this chapter, according to which consumption norms build on ethical concerns, I suggest that both public norms – manifested in intellectual debates, policy and social movements – and private norms of consumption are based on specific cosmologies. These cosmologies consist first of pragmatic ideas, expectations and practical knowledge of how the world is; and second of normative ideals of how the world should be: ethical ideas that refer to how people should live as well as to justice, the fair distribution of goods and legitimate social hierarchy.

In contrast to Chapter 2, which developed an internal, interpretative account, Chapter 3 looks at explanations of consumption norms by external factors, such as the motive to maintain and legitimate power, maximize material well-being or maintain social order. The chapter highlights the problems with general explanations that provide a uniform cause behind all consumption norms and proposes instead an explanation that emphasizes the different degrees of access to the material and cultural resources that norms depend on.

Chapter 4 focuses on how everyday consumption norms work and looks at the connection between normative ideas and the actual everyday practices of consumption. The chapter proposes the concept of ‘practical ethics’ which refers to ideals of good life and justice that exist primarily in their material, embodied form rather than as abstract ideals, allowing them to be transmitted and engaged without conscious deliberation. Drawing on practice theory, the chapter suggests that practices carrying practical ethics mediate between cosmologies of different social actors, and serve as key terrains in which shared cosmologies are developed, maintained and modified.

Whereas Chapters 1–4 looked at the interpretation, functioning and explanation of consumption norms in an idiosyncratic way, Chapter 5 focuses on the question of how consumption norms change. I look first at why consumption norms change over one’s lifetime, and discuss the role biology, cultural conception of different ages and life-cycle play in the change. The second part, in turn, focuses on why consumption norms change over time from one generation to the other. In this
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part I look at the main types of factors – institutional, technological, economic and social – that have been used to account for changing consumption norms. By using cases when these factors did and did not have an effect, I suggest that they affect consumption norms only if they get incorporated into existing cosmologies; that is, into pragmatic beliefs of how the world is and ethical visions of how it should be. Therefore the effects of these large-scale factors are not uniform but they are adopted, modified or rejected by people depending on existing traditions, worldviews and practices. This explains why in many cases consumption norms have remained relatively stable despite economic, social, institutional, technological and ideological changes.

Chapter 6 uses the theoretical framework developed in previous chapters, which explains consumption norms by their underlying cosmologies, to analyze the relationship between norms arising from the concerns of everyday life and the aims set by ethical consumption movements. Building on cases from the United Kingdom, Hungary, Germany and China, among others, the chapter stresses the diversity and cultural embeddedness of the objectives set by ethical consumption movements. It then shows that the norms required by these movements are adopted in everyday practices depending on whether they can be integrated into the ethical visions that inform everyday life.

Building on Chapter 6, the last chapter discusses the political implications of the argument developed throughout the book and situates it in relation to ethical consumerist approaches. These approaches suggest that individual consumer choice can become a new realm of politics, through which people are able to address global environmental, social, political and economic problems. This solution, however, as this chapter argues, has two fundamental flaws. First, it frames systemic problems as individual moral failures and hence provides, at best, a partial solution. Second, it puts forward a substantive definition of how people should live, which risks reducing the ethical complexity that is at play in ordinary consumption. The chapter suggests a different approach (which I will call a qualified liberal solution) which promises to overcome these flaws and allows for integrating the conflicting aims of everyday ethics and ethical consumerist aims.
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