EDITORIAL

Consumption and society in the 21st century

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We are delighted to present the inaugural issue of Consumption and Society. Our ambition for the journal is to invigorate and innovate the field of consumption studies and to renew the relevance of the study of consumption for the global social challenges of the 21st century. Consumption and Society will contribute to debates on contested aspects of consumption, such as environmental impacts, digitalisation, the shifting balance of collective versus private consumption, commodification and inequalities. Moreover, the journal aims to bring the distinctive lens of consumption studies to key contemporary debates, around issues such as the Anthropocene, care, decolonisation, surveillance capitalism, platform economies and political populism. This reflects an understanding of consumption as embedded in wider socioeconomic, political and cultural configurations, and intrinsically related to issues of social and environmental justice, as well as other normative notions such as prosperity, wellbeing and the good life.

Journals are often launched in response to a particular historical moment and to scholarly reflection on those new times. This was certainly true of the two major journals of our field, Consumption, Markets and Culture, founded in 1997, and The Journal of Consumer Culture, founded in 2001. In the editorial introduction to the first issue of Consumption, Markets and Culture, Fuat Firat (1997: 1) reflected that the journal would address these three phenomena through which ‘understanding of the critical issues of the end of the twentieth century’ were commonly conceived. The title of The Journal of Consumer Culture is equally instructive of the core concerns of consumption scholarship at the time of its launch. The field of consumption studies was an early touchstone for major debates on macro-social change, especially around the issues of globalisation, the rise of cultural pluralism, aestheticisation and the decline of traditional
systems of status (Ritzer and Slater, 2001; Featherstone, 2007). As George Ritzer and Don Slater put it in their editorial to the first issue of The Journal of Consumer Culture: ‘it is in seemingly local acts of consumption that some of the most global social forces – the means of production and circulation … division of labour, the governance of social provision – are brought to bear upon and are experienced within everyday life’ (2001: 6). Following in this tradition, Consumption and Society aims to revitalise the relevance of consumption studies for the global social challenges of the 21st century. If these two great journals of the field, vital as they still are, were launched in the context of the concerns of the end of the 20th century, the ‘long twentieth century’ is over (Arrighi, 2009), and Consumption and Society is resolutely a journal of the 21st century.

For Ritzer and Slater (2001), writing just over 20 years ago, contemporaneous interest in consumption was premised on a characterisation of the modern era as one of a ‘consumer culture’ and ‘consumer society’. We would not argue that either category is redundant (see our interview with Roberta Sassatelli in this issue). However, writing in 2022, these notions merit reappraisal. In the wake of the financial crisis, the ‘promissory legitimacy’ (Beckert, 2020) that consumer society and consumer culture leant democratic capitalism is exhausted. ‘The modern West’ may have been the first society to define itself through these terms (Ritzer and Slater, 2001), but in recent years, 140 million people have joined the ‘global middle class’, or perhaps better the ‘global consumer class’, annually (at least until the current economic shocks of pandemic and war) (Kharas, 2017). By 2018, China’s ‘global middle class’ reached 344 million people – nearly double the size of the ‘global middle class’ in the United States and matching that in Europe – and constituting 25 per cent of the Chinese population. In 2002, those figures were 1 per cent and 7.5 million (Sicular et al, 2021).

While excessive consumption may have been contested since antiquity, and consumer culture conceived of as a problem since the dawn of modernity (Slater, 1997; Trentmann, 2016), in the context of the climate crisis, and gross global economic inequity, consumption per se has become problematised, in Foucault’s sense of the term. That is to say, ‘an unproblematic field of experience or set of practices which were accepted without question becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in the previously silent behaviour, habits, practices and institutions’ (Foucault, 2001: 74). Consumption has become problematised as both a cause of climate change and other forms of environmental degradation, and, increasingly, as a critical factor for their mitigation. The Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022) stipulates the need to reduce levels of consumption, in addition to an increase in renewable resources and efficiency measures. The promise of technological prowess alone will no longer suffice. Apprehending consumption as both a problem and an opportunity is no longer a radical critique, or the view from the fringe; it is a commonplace, from mainstream media to educational initiatives.

Studying consumption has a long history from various disciplinary angles. How we capture the past serves to inform the future. Understanding the genealogy of consumption is central to understand the place of consumption in the compounded social, economic, political and ecological crises of the present. There is no sole or perfect way to comprehensively account for the rich tradition of consumption studies. We aim to include research in Consumption and Society that acknowledges the long history, not only of consumption as such, but also the history of thought in
the field of consumption studies. Two of the contributors to this launch issue begin this dialogue. Alan Warde, in the opening article, discusses themes identified in the formal ‘Aims and Objectives’ of the new journal, and reflects on connections between the concepts of ‘consumption’ and ‘society’. David Evans’ concluding commentary, ‘Why consumption, why society, why now?’, offers his own reflections on what it means today to think about the relations between the journal’s titular concepts, and the role of consumption studies in addressing societal challenges.

Definitions and understandings of consumption vary across disciplines, times and places. Accordingly, in this new journal, we do not police what is or isn’t consumption, but cherish a multitude of ways of knowing and investigating consumption. The rich field of consumption studies affords multiple robust definitions of consumption as a social, cultural, economic, environmental or political phenomenon. Consumption might be conceptually distinguished from other approaches to environmental problems as the ‘using up’ of resources; as material provisioning outside of the consumption–production dichotomy (Princen, 1999). Conversely, the ‘Systems of Provision’ approach, explored in Ben Fine and Kate Bayliss’s Keyword Essay in this issue, takes ‘the contextual specificity of what is consumed, where, when and by whom’ (Fine and Bayliss, 2022: 197) as the starting point for its analytical framework, exploring how the relations, processes and agencies linking production to consumption construct the consumed and the consumer. Consumption can be defined as a phenomenon of institutionalised economic processes, as explored in different ways in Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier’s and David Evans’ contributions to this inaugural issue. Alan Warde, in his article, argues for a more expansive object of analysis: consumption defined as encompassing more than market exchange alone, addressing the use of goods and services through non-market ‘modes of provision’ – such as household economies, communal agreements, charitable distribution and even ‘unilateral expropriation (theft)’ (Warde, 2022: 20).

While the proper conceptual relation of consumption to production, or the utility of the partial conceptual autonomy of consumption, has been a perennial theoretical conundrum of consumption scholarship (Warde, 2017), the relationship is also materially reconfigured by contemporary infrastructures of provision; not least by the ‘global digital ecosystems’, such as Google, Apple and Uber, explored by Arne Dulsrud and Dendik Bygstad in their contribution to this issue. Thus, definitions of consumption – and the lens those definitions bring to bear on emerging societal dynamics, social processes, contestations and controversies – will no doubt continue to evolve. New times demand new perspectives.

Contributions to the issue

We turn now to the contributions in our inaugural issue. They consist of eight, diverse full articles, ranging from the conceptual to the empirical. The three other contributions are formats we would like to encourage for the journal: an interview with a leading consumption scholar, a commentary essay, and a ‘keyword essay’, exploring a concept or term of importance to consumption studies.

The full articles in this inaugural issue range from the more strictly theoretical, through programmatic literature reviews and theoretical reflections illustrated by empirical research, to novel empirical contributions. Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier
explores the political economy of affluent consumption. Arne Dulsrud and Bendik Bygstad consider the role of consumption in digital ecosystems. Luke Yates engages with the connections between consumption, ‘everyday life’ and political action. Bente Halkier analyses the mundane normativity of food consumption among Danish consumers. Marie Plessz, Séverine Gojard and Marie Zins examine how food consumption changes in later life in France. Manisha Anantharaman addresses the class politics of sustainable consumption in Bangalore, India. And Adrian Leguina, Irmak Karademir-Hazir and Francisco Azpitarte analyse the intergenerational transmission of cultural consumption in England.

Alan Warde (2022) in the opening article and David Evans (2022) in his closing commentary both address the concepts of consumption and society, and reflect on the modes of relation between them. As already noted, Warde (2022) discusses themes identified as aims and objectives of *Consumption and Society*. He considers the legacy of the cultural turn, and the relation between consumption and production, and argues for an account of the use of goods and services in diverse ‘modes of provision’ and an ‘extended concept of social embeddedness’ as the object of consumption scholarship. Warde notes that while consumption research has consistently addressed inequalities, domination and hierarchy, it has rarely addressed the consumption patterns of the rich: as global inequalities continue to increase, and the ecological impacts of the consumption of social elites become clear, this is surely an important emerging agenda. Lastly, the article introduces the concept of ‘controversy’ for understanding social mobilisation around contested consumption.

Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier (2022) calls for a research agenda adequate to the challenge of calls for sufficiency in consumption as a lever of ecological transition, ‘to explore how affluent consumption becomes a legitimised and institutionalised norm’. This calls for resources within economic sociology and a Foucauldian perspective to explore how affluent consumption is governed by technologies of power, emphasising the interdependencies of the triumvirate of public policies, corporate economic models and consumption practices. The highly resource-intensive consumption patterns of affluent consumers arise through ‘market socialisation’ of conduct and dispositions.

In a similar, programmatic vein, Arne Dulsrud and Bendik Bygstad (2022) address the challenge of the emerging digitalisation of consumption through the concept of ‘digital ecosystems’, or global digital platforms such as Google, Apple and Uber, which have radically reconfigured consumption and economic activity more broadly. They analyse the diverse literatures – political, economic, technological and socio-cultural approaches – that have attempted to conceptualise ‘digital ecosystems’ and propose a typology of the role of consumption in these four streams. The consumer emerges as the critical actor of digital ecosystems, because of the interplay between digital ecosystems’ iterative development and the appropriation and integration of their products and services in everyday life.

Bente Halkier (2022) and Marie Plessz, Séverine Gojard and Marie Zins (2022) address food consumption, and its normative prescriptions. Halkier takes up the contested aspects of food consumption – such as issues around health, sustainability and animal welfare – and explores the notion of ‘mundane normativity’, understood as ‘acceptable and expectable consumption’. Existing research on contested food consumption has largely focused explicitly on political and ethical consumption. Normativity in more mundane consumption has been less addressed. Halkier’s article
Consumption and society in the 21st century offers a new framework for investigations of processes of reproduction and change in consumption patterns through examples of empirical research on Danish food consumption, drawing on a practice theoretical perspective to elucidate the notions of ‘acceptable and expectable consumption’. Halkier argues these concepts enable better apprehension of variety in the everyday normativity of consumption, as well as the significance of social hierarchies, neglected in practice theoretical research.

Plessz, Gojard and Zins (2022) offer an innovative, quantitative study of how food consumption changes in later life among a large cohort of French adults. Differences in how consumption changes over the life-course is a neglected area. Drawing on theories of practice, a life-course perspective and theories of tastes and dispositions, their analysis examines how modes of engagement with eating – convenience, health and tradition – are associated with individual characteristics, ageing and living arrangements. Their innovative methods suggest the value of both dispositional and contextual perspectives on the dynamics of consumption practices.

Manisha Anantharaman (2022) and Luke Yates (2022) both offer very different contributions to understanding the politics of consumption. Anantharaman asks ‘what becomes recognised as sustainable consumption’ and ‘who is able to participate in urban environmental politics?’ (p. 120). Her research addresses the class politics of sustainable consumption in Bangalore, India, where the poor perform sustainable practices from necessity, and ‘the new middle classes successfully claim cultural authority over sustainable consumption’. The article connects Bourdieusian theories of distinction to scholarship on ‘just sustainabilities’. The ‘performative environmentalism’ of the new middle classes, she argues, excludes the poor from participation in environmental politics and reinforces class inequalities. In so doing, Anantharaman introduces a welcome, critical discourse to the all-too-often depoliticised accounts of sustainable consumption.

Luke Yates draws on diverse literatures to explore the connections between the contested concept of ‘everyday life’, consumption and political action. Yates explores how ‘everyday life’ has become associated with consumption, and argues that the study of social practices and their relation to socio-ecological change all too often ignores questions of power and politics. He argues that Foucauldian, practice and feminist theories offer ways forward for conceptualising and analysing power in everyday consumption practices. Finally, he explores how literatures on ‘everyday politics’ conceive of how ‘the everyday’ matters for social change and suggests some priorities for future research.

In the last of our full papers, Adrian Leguina, Irmak Karademir-Hazir and Francisco Azpitarte (2022) offer an innovative, empirical contribution to a significant research gap, by focusing on the central issue of intergenerational transmission in cultural consumption. They tackle how children’s cultural participation is formed, structured and linked to their parents’ engagement in cultural practices. Drawing on English survey data, they disentangle the effects of forms of parental cultural capital (level of education versus cultural participation) on children’s cultural profiles, and the implications of this for cultural mobility and arts engagement policies.

Our final contributions are in less traditional journal format. Ben Fine and Kate Bayliss’ (2022) offer a ‘Keyword Essay’ on the Systems of Provision approach, drawing on their recent book (Bayliss and Fine, 2021). First devised some 30 years ago to address the study of consumption (Fine and Leopold, 1993), the Systems of Provision approach has been deployed to examine diverse consumption domains from consumer
durables, food, clothing, to housing and health. Two discussants, Katy Wheeler (2022) and Tom Haines-Doran (2022), offer their responses to the essay.

Editors Dan Welch and Stefan Wahlen interview the eminent sociologist of consumption Roberta Sassatelli (2022) on the hegemony of consumer culture, decolonisation and the politics of consumption, authenticity, the sharing economy, food and the body, and the future of consumption studies.

David Evans’ (2022) commentary concludes the issue by considering what it means to think about the concepts of consumption and society together in our current historical moment, and the opportunity the new journal offers. He suggests a rigorous definition of consumption ‘as a process of market attachment and detachment’ and goes on to explore the relations between consumption studies as a field and the societal challenges to which it seeks to contribute. He reflects that these tensions recall long-standing problematics within the field, and on his own work’s practical engagements with contested areas of consumption.

Looking forward, together

Our ambition for the journal is to invigorate and innovate the field of consumption studies, and to renew the relevance of the study of consumption for the global social challenges of the 21st century. This first issue of Consumption and Society sets out reflections on the journal’s Aims and Scope, some research agendas with which future contributions might engage, and offers some new conceptual tools for empirical investigation. It inaugurates the ambition of the journal by engaging with some of the key issues for consumption studies in the 21st century: the normatively contested nature of contemporary consumption; relationships between consumption and class inequalities; the reconfiguration of consumption through digital technology; the reproduction of ecologically unsustainable forms of consumption; how consumption patterns change over time; decolonisation and the hegemony of consumer culture; and the analytical utility of differing conceptions of consumption to apprehend our new times.

The journal’s second issue will be a Special Issue themed around sustainable consumption, probably the fastest growing area of research in consumption studies and arguably addressing the greatest global social challenge this century faces. For future issues, we invite expressions of interest from colleagues to be guest editors of Special Issues, or shorter Themed Sections.

While anchored in the sociological tradition of consumption scholarship, Consumption and Society seeks submissions from across the interdisciplinary field of consumption studies. The Editors invite empirical, theoretical, pedagogical and methodological contributions to the study of consumption as a societal phenomenon. Diverse methodological and theoretical approaches are welcome. Consumption and Society is committed to promoting scholarship from the Global South. This ambition is signalled by the international scope of our Editorial Board, with Regional Editorial Representatives based in Africa, East Asia, South and Southeast Asia, and Latin America. As editors we have begun to actively promote the journal to scholars in the Global South and look forward to contributions from colleagues in, and about, these areas. While international, the contributors to this first issue all work primarily in Europe or North America. There is a need to draw inspiration from more regions of the world, other ways of knowing, other traditions of thought, other understandings of consumption and their relation to societal challenges. We very much welcome
expressions of interest from scholars around the world who may have less visibility in European journals. We are also committed to supporting early career scholars and making sure that the journal gives space to scholars under-represented elsewhere.

The launch of this new journal would not have been possible without the support of a vibrant and diverse community. *Consumption and Society* has already benefited from input and direction from a wide range of scholars of consumption, from world leading figures across disciplines in consumption studies – including in Anthropology, Economics, Geography, History, Political Sciences, Philosophy and Sociology – to prominent mid-career scholars and promising early career researchers. When the idea of a new journal was first proposed, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Many of these scholars have gone on to support the journal through joining our Editorial Board. Support for *Consumption and Society* in the field is also signalled by the journal’s affiliation to the European Sociological Association (ESA) Research Network on the Sociology of Consumption (RN5), to the British Sociological Association Consumption Studies Group, and to SCORAI Europe, the regional network of the international Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (SCORAI). While we are not limited to these affiliations, we are grateful for their support in launching the new journal.

We are delighted to be anchoring the journal at Bristol University Press (BUP), a not-for-profit university publishing house, with a strong commitment to social sciences. BUP’s orientation towards social impact, social justice and global social challenges resonates with the ethos we aim to cultivate at *Consumption and Society*. We would like to thank the wonderful staff at Bristol University Press, all of our reviewers and contributors, as well as the members of our editorial board, for their hard work, support and commitment. Without them this collective endeavour would not be possible. We look forward to building *Consumption and Society* together.

**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**References**


