

The Very Basics of Consumption from a Sociological Perspective

Joel Stillerman:
The Sociology of Consumption. A Global Approach. Polity: Cambridge, 2015, 224 pp.
 ISBN 978-0-7456-6127-8.

Over the last ten years, only a few textbooks have been published for students of consumer culture – notably Roberta Sasatelli's *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics* (2007) and the new 2011 edition of Celia Lury's *Consumer Culture*, originally written in 1996. As its title suggests, Joel Stillerman's *The Sociology of Consumption – A Global Approach* (2015), commits to exploring the sociology of consumption from a global perspective. As such, the book promises to distinguish itself from earlier works on the subject of the sociology of consumption. Additionally, consumption is approached in this work in particular from the perspectives of inequality and consumer-citizenship.

The book consists of nine chapters, of which seven are chapters proper. The titles of the chapters are frank and focus on describing the content of each chapter. The book's language and structure are equally clear and straightfor-

ward. As the book is, according to the publisher, intended primarily for students, this arrangement appears suitable. Alas, the downside of this simplicity is that the book does not necessarily have much to offer in terms of novelty or stimulation for a reader who is already acquainted with the sociology of consumption. Nevertheless, examples in the book are topical and carefully chosen, so a reader who has a basic grasp of the sociology of consumption, but isn't actively following the field, might also use the book to add to their knowledge.

The introduction commences with a short definition of consumption. Stillerman defines consumption as "the desire for, purchase, use, display, sharing, exchange, and disposal of products and services" (p. 2). However, this definition is never problematized. The reader could have been encouraged to think about how consumption is delineated; the relationship of consumption and production, the role of money, the implications of sharing and exchange in relation to recent developments (e.g. sharing economy), and, in particular, the significance that disposal holds in consumption processes. The book's emphasis is on exploring consumption from the perspectives of purchase, use, and display. This focus is somewhat understandable considering that much of the scholarship on the

sociology of consumption has traditionally dealt with use and display. Nevertheless, it is regrettable that so little attention is directed towards considering consumption from the perspectives of disposal and waste, and the topic is only touched upon on the macro level, regarding the environmental effects of overconsumption. In addition, the particular traits of the sociology of consumption could have been more clearly spelled out for a novice reader, had the particular perspective of the sociology of consumption been contrasted with other approaches. A brief account of how the sociology of consumption relates to fields such as economics, marketing, and evolutionary psychology would have also been in order.

The book's greatest merit is definitely in its global take on the developments and present characterizations of consumer cultures. Chapters two and three are the book's finest contributions. Using meaningful examples, they provide a vivid account of the birth and development of consumer cultures around the world: in the US, Europe, Latin America, and Asia. The birth of modern consumer society is presented as everything but a simple consequence of the mass-production urged forward by the industrial revolution. The Finnish reader will be pleasantly surprised that Lehtonen and Mäenpää's 1997 re-

search on the Itäkeskus shopping centre is also included among the examples given.

Another theme that runs throughout the book is the inequality of consumer culture. Two chapters explicitly address this theme: one focusing on status and social class, and the other on gender and race. The chapter discussing status and class is almost exclusively based on the Bourdieuan tradition. This particular orientation has a long heritage and a strong position in the field of the sociology of consumption, which is perhaps why the chapter would have profited from the introduction of alternative perspectives as well. For example, comparing the consumption expenditure of different socioeconomic groups with suitable data available in a myriad of countries, or exploring the differences in leisure activities with time-use data, would have rendered the discussion on differences between socioeconomic groups more tangible.

The chapter on gender and race opens with a reflection on the gendered history of consumption. The construction of male and female consumership is approached from a media perspective. Again, the examples used are engaging, but the significance of factors other than media's role in shaping gendered consumership could have been addressed. The chapter offers compelling

accounts of consumer decision-making within families as well as of the significance that sexuality has for consumption. The latter topic, in particular, has been quite neglected within the sociology of consumption, and thus could have profited from an extended discussion. Race is considered mainly within the American context. Finally, the chapter introduces the quite recent intersectional approach to the study of consumption.

Writing a whole chapter on the connections of life course and consumption shows great insight on part of the author. Although, the chapter might have been more logically introduced before the chapters on class and gender. The chapter's only weakness is the section discussing elderly consumers. Consumption and third age has recently been much studied in the sociology of consumption, yet the book's section on the topic remains very short, and does not even mention the term 'third age'. It is in particular this section that would deserve more attention in a possible future edition of the book.

Consumer-citizenship, which has been a prominent topic in the sociology of consumption for years, has been granted two whole chapters in the book. The section on the historical development of consumer-citizenship

may be considered commendable, as it once again deals not only with American developments, but Asian and European as well.

Stillerman's book is decidedly an introduction to the essentials of sociology of consumption delivered with a strong global touch. It is no easy task to write a general work on consumer culture without eventually only describing the consumer culture within which the author themselves live. This book will no doubt serve well for teaching purposes, and by virtue of its simple language and clear structure it is well-suited as course material, even for undergraduates who are not all that familiar with reading texts in English.

Outi Sarpila