Rethinking consumer agency in the global economy

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Abstract

For the average British consumer, even the most mundane commodities they encounter depend on raw materials and labour sourced from across the globe. Consumers are at the heart of modern globalisation as participants in a complex tangle of globe-spanning social relations, yet International Political Economy lacks a compelling account of their role in generating, sustaining and resisting the unequal relations of global trade. Instead, the consumer remains trapped within the black box of statistical aggregates. This can obscure more granular questions of how and why consumers make the choices that they do. In place of the empirical study of consumers themselves lie axiomatic assumptions about the nature and extent of their agency. This thesis sets out to a richer, sociological account of consumption to IPE's global perspective. To do so, it develops a dataset that studies the everyday consumption practices of 34 South Yorkshire households, recorded through consumption diaries and interviews. This provides the basis for an account of consumer agency located in a Pragmatic understanding of human agency, which can better account for the balance of habit, deliberation and creativity that shape people's encounters with the material commodities they consume. In particular, by focusing on how the act of valuation is shaped by these different dimensions of agency, a new, bottom-up perspective on the consumer's role in the global economy can be developed. This is grounded in two conceptual devices, *regimes of everyday valuation* and the *social standard of living*, that help unpick the complex relationship between consumer behaviour and the contingent conditions of the global economy in which it takes place. This reveals the role played by consumers in sustaining the unequal relationships of global trade, whilst also highlighting potentially transformative avenues for change.

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Introduction

The most tangible manifestation of the modern global economy can be found within any average home of a country like the UK. In it might be hundreds, even thousands, of items which traced a complex path across the surface of the globe before ending their journey within the home. Within each such objects resides a great cast of social relations, all concealed from the consumer by the anonymity of alienated capitalist production (Callon, 1999). But at each instance in which a commodity is given new life as a personal possession (Appadurai, 1986), a conscious and deliberate choice took place. It is the accretion of these choices that ultimately animates the circular flow between firms and households that describes the most primitive model of a capitalist economy. Despite this, contemporary political economy lacks a complete and compelling account of the nature and degree of the agency that informs and mobilises such choice. Consumption as a practice is firmly situated in the texture of people's everyday lives, and it is in this context that it can be most productively investigated to establish its wider consequence to the global economy. Everyday political economy is a growing field of enquiry in the discipline (Hobson & Seabrooke, 2007), yet little existing work from this perspective has directly sought to address the nature of the consumer's role in the global economy. It is by developing a fuller account of the everyday politics of consumer agency in the global economy that this thesis sets out to contribute to the discipline.

The research presented here explores the nature of consumer agency and the role it plays in the global economy. It does so by considering the practices of individual consumers within the context of their everyday lives. This is examined using data generated by qualitative research methods based around diary studies and interviews. This sheds light on the motivations and considerations that underpin the everyday consumption decisions of consumers in the UK. By taking as its starting point a more pragmatic account of human agency, this thesis demonstrates the value in bringing consumers into an analysis of the global economy. It is their role as a locus of choice that gives them substantial, but ultimately distributed and inchoate, power within the networks of international trade. This introduction begins by establishing the nature of consumption in the modern global economy, and the limitations of the accounts of agency that dominate both lay and academic understanding of it. It then outlines the conceptual frame through which this thesis seeks to study and understand consumption, before focusing on how this has been operationalised. The final section then develop an overview of my central argument and the contribution this thesis makes to the discipline of IPE, before concluding with a brief outline of the chapter structure of the thesis.

Consumption in the Global Economy

Over recent decades, how and where the goods people consume are produced has changed significantly. Whilst globalisation is a contested term (Hay & Marsh, 2000; Hay 2002) it nevertheless captures the epochal scale of transformation in the distribution of productive capacity. Capitalism has always been 'global' (Rosenberg, 2005), but the nature and patterns of the global linkages that define it have changed over time. The era of globalisation coincides with, and is arguably even defined by, a wholesale relocation of production and a 'new' global division of labour. From the dawn of the industrial revolution until the post-war era, the patterns of world trade were dominated by the movement of raw material commodities from the global South to the global North, often facilitated by directly extractive colonial relations (Patnaik and Patnaik, 2021). The increased capital intensity of the more industrially developed states of the global North allowed them to transform these materials into manufactures that could be exported back out to the world at the expense of less competitive, nascent industry elsewhere. This division has been turned on its head, such that a significant volume of consumer goods is now manufactured in the global South (Dicken, 2015), largely driven by lower labour costs. This change was made possible by a raft technological, political and institutional changes that were in motion by the end of the 1970s (Ruggie, 1982), and propulsively accelerated by China's formal accession to the WTO in 2000(Gu et. al., 2008). The consequence of these transformations was a great reversal in these trade flows, with numerous categories of goods now overwhelmingly manufactured in the low labour cost regimes of the global South (Gereffi, 1994, p. 97).

Trade has always taken place, and no country has ever been completely autarkic with respect to the things they consume. But the patterns of global trade are shaped by, and reinforce, underlying inequalities between nations in terms of power and wealth. In the contemporary global economy, this dynamic has been exacerbated by the fracturing of the value chain, meaning that different parts of the production process can be conducted at greater distance (Baldwin, 2014). A consequence of this is that the more productive tasks within the value chain - research and development, marketing and branding, retail and distribution - can all be retained by firms in the global North. Capital intensive production is subjected to significant returns to scale, incentivising increased specialisation and complexity in the global economy. More labour intensive tasks, less amenable to productivity gains, are instead partitioned and subcontracted as a way of subjecting them to more competitive dynamics. This incentivises states to make themselves attractive destinations for this highly mobile source of investment and employment, placing downward pressure on wages and conditions for workers as a result. The emergence of these value chains and production networks mean that the global 'footprint' of even the most mundane commodity now potentially extends across multiple countries, undergoing processes controlled by numerous different firms and regulatory environments.

Gains to consumers

The consequences of these transformations, in terms of the politics of a country like the UK, have been unevenly felt. The impact of increased global competition on manufacturing industries in the global North has been severe, harming low-skilled workers (Wood, 1995) and driving deindustrialisation (McGrew, 2011) that has generated steep geographical inequalities. The benefits, both of higher growth and of cheaper and more numerous consumer goods, have been spread much more thinly but are no less consequential[1] (Fajgelbaum et. al, 2011; Fajgelbaum & Khandelwal, 2016). People have access to more consumer goods, and they are relatively cheaper. It is notable that many of the goods manufactured and distributed through these global channels represent some of the most mundane objects in the daily lives of consumers. Jacob Rees-Mogg was mocked for suggestion that cheaper children's shoes was a potentially substantive benefit of Brexit (Lee, 2018), but his comments were aligned with the underlying ideological justification for the political project of neoliberal globalisation. This fall in the relative prices of consumer goods both drives immediate material gains in living standards, as well as freeing up consumers to spend a greater proportion of their income in meeting higher order needs.[2] Whilst this

[1] A line can be drawn from this vast expansion of global productive capacity to the long period of non-inflationary expansion that characterised the 1990s and early 00s. Coinciding with the broad uptake of central bank independence, the downward pressure on prices arguably helped to support the benign monetary environment that drove debt-fuelled expansion of housing wealth in countries like the UK.

[2] This can be seen as part of the general shift from consumer goods to services in the

promise of human flourishing in a deindustrialised society has been realised unevenly, if at all (Moraitis, 2021), it remains the central transmission mechanism by which global trade is held to improve living standards.

But the extent to which these benefits should be appreciated as meaningful gains are ultimately a factor of how the interests and agency of consumers are understood. On one level, the ability of people to meet their basic needs, and those of their family, with a smaller proportion of their overall income is a net gain in welfare. They are then free to spend more of their earnings on whatever else they might choose. To the extent that certain things are consumed, they are all ultimately the consequence of deliberate choice, a 'revealed preference', that suggests such material concerns can't be totally hollow in their value to consumers. Yet any accounting of this benefit is difficult to capture empirically, with the gains from trade measured in cheapness and plenty as much as by measurable increases to people's incomes. And taking a wider perspective, these gains are often accompanied by negative externalities, which may manifest at great distance from the act of consumption itself. Another perspective would say that a world of cheap, mass-produced consumer goods meets only a limited definition of human need and reflects a contingent and highly contestable sense of what it means to lead a good life. It is this that informs the understanding of consumption deployed by a more critical strand of research within IPE

The Problems of Consumption

The realities of the global economy are not advertised on the packaging of a new toaster or a emblazoned on a pair of trainers, but even so, through their choices consumers become entangled in far reaching processes of extraction, production and exchange. These processes

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composition of economies like the UK.

all have implications both for the people engaged in them, and the wider planetary system. It is because of these linkages and their far reaching consequences that consumption poses a problem to both global justice and environmental sustainability (Dauvergne, 2010). For these reasons, the relationship between the current arrangements of global production and dominant norms around consumption have been a site of significant political challenge and activism. Certain sectors or brands have fallen under intense scrutiny, often in response to high profile events such as the Rana Plaza tragedy. The death of over a thousand Bangladeshi garment workers in a building collapse highlighted the intensely exploitative conditions faced by many in the industry (Seabrook, 2016). Such tragedies intermittently draw attention to the links between the retailers providing cheap and plentiful garments to largely Western consumers and the exploitative conditions in which they are made. Whilst various voluntary schemes have been adopted to reassure consumer conscience about the conditions in which their goods are made, but the effectiveness of these are constrained by the nature of global capitalism itself (LeBaron & Lister, 2015). It is the structural imperatives within capitalism for ever greater levels consumption that are ultimately responsible for its ever-growing shadow (Dauvergne, 2008).

Two Poles of Consumer Agency

Perceptions of the role and consequence of consumption are ultimately grounded in assumptions about the nature and extent of consumer agency. These underpin profound divisions in the understanding of how, and for whose benefit, the global economy is organised. To the extent that the consumer is considered at all, it is typically by way of assumptions imported from an underlying theoretical perspective, rather than through direct empirical study. The mainstream of the discipline, often building on the worldview of neoclassical economics, implicitly incorporates notions of consumer sovereignty within its analysis[3]. More critical perspectives, meanwhile, often draw on a long-standing critique of consumerism that diminishes the consumer's role within the structures of the global economy. Embedding these initial assumptions about the nature and limits of consumer agency has been to the detriment the disciplines capacity to wield it as a genuinely explanatory variable in its account of the global economy. A wider literature on consumption, grounded in disciplines such as anthropology (Miller, 2008), sociology (Warde, 2005) and geography (Hall, 2011), presents the drivers and motivations of consumer behaviour as a more complex tapestry. However, these approaches often fail to engage with the big questions of political economy that situate the consumer within their wider macroeconomic context (Evans, 2020). The central challenge addressed by this thesis is to incorporate such perspectives within IPE and in doing so open up ground between the two poles to which much existing work gravitates.

The first pole is grounded in neoclassical economics which, with its emphasis on the gains from trade, has long been the guiding ideology of contemporary capitalism. It is an approach that speaks of an empowered and 'sovereign' consumer, whose choices are the ultimate determinant of productive activity and who, in the final accounting, are the main beneficiaries of a market economy. Yet these conclusions rest on a series of arguably heroic assumptions, which overlook, for example, the role of market structure in empowering firms, the role of advertising in shaping consumer preferences or inequalities in the distribution of income[4].

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[3] This is not to say that all working with such approaches are blind to other forms of power, particular in cases where market failure can be observed and specified. Rather, this represents a default assumption for how markets operate in the absence of any explicitly stated attenuating conditions.

[4] Hutt, who was the first economist to formalise ideas of consumer sovereignty, was live to these critiques but, true to the Austrian tradition from which he hailed, still believed the market to provide a superior answer to these problems than anything that could be reached

The arrangement of productive activity reached through the market is, from this perspective, only one of many possible arrangements, of which many others would better serve the needs of society. It is from such a perspective that the second pole is based, with its roots in Marxist political economy and the more structuralist account of economic power this presents. With the trajectory of economic development being guided by the imperatives of capital, the wants and needs of consumers are manipulated in the service of accumulation. As a consequence, consumption is frequently seen as needless, wasteful or decadent, serving the needs of the producers who stand to profit rather than either the consumers themselves, or society more widely. Whilst these two perspectives are both influential in shaping the discipline's understanding of consumer agency, the underlying assumptions are rarely acknowledge or expressed explicitly. This is a symptom of the discipline's broader oversight of the topic of consumption, one that often leaves consumers stuck within a black box. Whilst their actions and choices may be visible through their wider consequences, consumers themselves are rarely subjected to direct empirical study.

Consumer Agency in Policy and Politics

The arguments in favour of free trade, that have served to support and legitimate decades of neoliberal trade policy, have their roots in the neoclassical vision of the sovereign consumer (Slobodian, 2018, p. 118). It is an argument that has reared its head at various points of political contestation. When protesters disrupted the 1999 meeting of the WTO in Seattle, they were chided by liberal newspaper columnist and fervent herald of globalisation Thomas Friedman that they failed to understand the power wielded by consumers in the newly globalised economy (Friedman, 1999). Major bi- and multi-lateral trade deals have been framed in terms of their benefits to consumers (Such as TTIP (Department for Business,

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through more 'political' channels.

Innovation & Skills, 2014), or the cumulative effect of all EU free trade agreements (Breinlich et. al, 2018)). Economic arguments for a 'hard' Brexit (i.e. leaving the EU without a formal trade agreement) were grounded in the supposed benefits to consumers of leaving existing protectionist trade agreements and unilaterally dropping all tariffs on imported goods (Begg, 2017)[5]. Such calculations all ultimately translate the impact of these lower prices into a better standard of living for consumers. The nature of the assumptions underpinning the economic models from which these conclusions are derived are such that this result is taken as a direct proxy for wider quality of life. Yet this ultimately all rests on a model that place a highly abstracted account of human agency as the central driving force of the global economy.

The concept of consumer sovereignty has played a central role in justifying the expansion of free markets, grounded in a faith that the best possible outcome will derive from allowing the 'catallaxy' of market operations to play out. This implies certain assumptions about the nature of consumer demand in markets. The first is that, absent political interference, markets typically conform to the ideals of 'perfect competition', such that price signals originating from households are (or should be) the ultimate determinating factor in the distribution of productive capacity, subject to a given set of supply constraints (Hutt, 1936). The second is that the needs, wants and desires of consumers are stable and unchanging, the "unchallengeable axioms of a man's behaviour" (Stigler & Becker, 1977, p. 76). On the basis of these desires, consumers then make decisions in a rational and calculative manner to maximise the utility they gain from participation in the market. It's an account of human behaviour that lies at the heart of Walrasian marginalism and the conclusions about Pareto

[5] It should be noted that this position was considered fairly extreme by the majority of economists, for whom the productive benefits of trade with the EU vastly outweighs any marginal benefits to consumers from lower tariffs.

efficiency that derive from such a model. Through their ideal operation, markets generate an unimprovable volume of utility for consumers, who express their immanent and unchanging desires in the choices that they make. In this way, consumer agency is the ultimate driving force in economic life, albeit through a utilitarian account of agency that is ultimately hollow (Beckert, 2009)

No Ethical Consumption Under Capitalism

Critiques of this 'homo economicus' account of the consumer are numerous (Tsakalotos, 2004). As the problems of consumption become increasingly visible, people's dissatisfaction with consumption being seen as a central motivating driver of human existence has become increasingly vocal. The relationship of consumption to unceasing economic growth and its role in deep social and environmental problems has grown in political salience (Clarke, 2008; Hall, 2015; Carrington et. al. 2016). Such critiques are frequently more structural in focus, emphasising the incentives and power dynamics of capitalism that drive ever more consumption. It is this sentiment that is captured in the slogan that "there is no ethical consumption under capitalism", one that has become a recurrent motif within debates about consumption, particularly those on social media.[6] Such a phrase reflects a sense that consumers as a group are patsies in a system that is operating in the interests of others. What are perceived as choices are ultimately hollow distinctions between alternatives all ultimately produced through the same system. Any thought of consumption as being a domain in which people can exercise moral agency is simply a distraction from the arenas through which more

[6] Sites like TikTok have become a rich environment for debates about consumption. It captures the intersection between users who promote and celebrate consumption for its own sake, including a diverse ecosystem of influencers who play a novel role in the advertising of commodities. But the open and discursive nature of such sites mean that they are also places where their predominantly young user base can address and debate their political concerns around consumption and its impact on the planet.

substantive political change may manifest. These perspectives are supported by a body of critical literature that grew out of the emerging consumer society of the 20th century.

Such accounts are typically grounded in a structuralist view of the economy, in which the arrangement of productive forces and their need to generate profit ultimately determines the necessary level of consumption. From this perspective, consumer preferences, far from being inviolable and absolute, are endogenous to the capitalist system itself. Amongst the earliest expressions of this perspective were the Frankfurt school, who in various works outlined how the ‘culture industry’ encouraged mass consumption at the lowest common denominator. Needs were manufactured by the interests of capital and consumers were manipulated to fall in line. Manufactured needs were contrasted with a richer aesthetic life that more authentically met human needs but was being crushed under the weight of consumer culture. Their account presented a highly jaundiced view of consumer society and the possible agency of consumers within it. Whilst critical writing on consumption since then has stepped back from the totalised structuralism of the Frankfurt School, they still remain one of the clearest expressions of the critical pole of consumption studies and remain influential across the social sciences. Baran and Sweezy, writing from a more economistic perspective, also sublimated consumption to the needs of capital but did so in a less totalising way. Instead, concentrated corporate power deployed advertising to appeal to the basest attitudes of consumers (Baran & Sweezy, 1968). It was a view shared by Galbraith (1958) in his critique of the Affluent Society, which also highlighted the key role played by inequality in both constraining the agency of consumers at the bottom, whilst meeting the ever more frivolous needs of the wealthiest in society.

The critiques developed by these accounts all highlight the central role consumption plays in capitalist society and the way in which the demands of the system shapes the way people conduct themselves within it. The accounts are all historically contingent - the Frankfurt school were writing at the dawn of consumer society and weren't gifted with the foresight to see how it would develop, whilst Baran and Sweezy wrote during the imperial phase of Madison Avenue's sway over America culture. All provide compelling reasons why consumer agency might be sublimated or constrained by the demands of more powerful actors in the economy. But the nature, or even the possibility, of any such agency is itself given little thought. Consequently, writing that draws on these perspectives tends towards excessively structuralist explanation for the drivers of consumption. Although these perspectives remain influential, they attracted significant critique - ironically as many of the processes they spoke about deepened and intensified. The late 20th century saw consumer culture reach its fullest expression, yet scholars began to appreciate the more complex and multi-valent nature of consumption (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996, Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 1998). These perspectives emphasised the role consumer goods played in meaningful process of identity formation and in the interplay of social relationships. Characterising this simply as the product of manufactured desire failed to reflect the ways in which consumption was actually weaved into the fabric of people's lives.

Such approaches, particularly those grounded in the concept of practice, have come to dominate consumption studies (Shove, 2003; Warde, 2005). These deliberately place themselves between the two dominant poles of consumer agency, focusing on how consumers create and reproduce the conditions in which they consume. Reacting to the overbearing structuralism of earlier critiques, they severed the analytical link between production and consumption, so as to study the texture and character of consumption practices in their own right. But these approaches have been critiqued for the focus on the micro-level, without situating consumption in the wider political economic conditions in which it takes place (Evans, 2020). It is through the established framework of everyday political economy, and particularly the 'everyday politics' frame set out by Hobson & Seabrooke (2007) that these two accounts can be productively linked. This is an approach which considers the (often distributed, limited and partial) ways in which actors in everyday settings can both sustain and resist the economic orders or regimes in which they live. With its focus on the contingent and situated agency of ordinary people, it provides a perspective to place the more sociological accounts of consumption into dialogue with the global focus of IPE. That is the task taken up by this thesis, and the next section will outline the specific research question that mobilises this inquiry.

The Question

Both of the poles around which the discipline of IPE clusters in its understanding of consumer agency are ultimately unsatisfactory representations. The agency of the homo economicus of economic theory ultimately lacks any explanatory content. Instead, it bubbles up beyond the horizon of our understanding, only able to be imputed through the preferences revealed through the choices they make. The critique of consumerism, meanwhile, places too much weight on the role of those with pecuniary interest in shaping such wants and needs. Whilst advertising and the wider shaping of cultural sensibilities is clearly something that is undertaken in pursuit of profit, this doesn't negate the active participatory role the consumer plays in making the choices that ultimately determine economic outcomes. Plenty of well-advertised products are unsuccessful, whilst others find their market through the identification of genuine unmet wants or needs. Although distribution might be uneven, and outcomes may be sub-optimal, it is nevertheless the case that, to at least some degree, most firms are beholden to consumer choice. A third way is available, as demonstrated by more practice-theoretical approaches that describe an active and creative agency that is at work across the diverse terrain of consumption. But these approaches have lost their grounding in the wider macroeconomic conditions in which they take place. How questions about the nature of consumer agency are answered is ultimately of significant consequence for our understanding of how the global economy operates, and in whose interests. This thesis therefore addresses the following research question:

What is the nature of consumer agency in the global economy?

Such a question demands significant further clarification of the scope and definition of the terms within it. It must also necessarily be caveated by considerations of the scale and scope of a research project such as this. In the following sections, I will introduce and define the core concepts implied by the question above and how these were operationalised. This starts by examining exactly who 'consumers' are, a question that by extension requires exploring in more detail the nature of consumption itself. Next, it is necessary to consider exactly what it means to study agency, before outlining the account of agency that informs this study. This draws on Pragmatism, which provides a way of conceiving of agency in markets that doesn't demand full rational and calculative participation by consumers, but nevertheless still understands their engagement as being fundamental agential in nature. Having established these parameters, these then informed the choices that were made in translating the question into an appropriately scoped research project.

Conceptual Foundations

Who are consumers?

The first point to address when considering the question above is who exactly are consumers?

As a category, it is broad and notably undifferentiated. As Fine and Leopold (1994) note, thinking of people as consumers is distinct from taking perspectives around categories like class or gender, because there are no fundamental divisions between different types of consumers. In the world of contemporary capitalism, it is a group includes almost every human being on the face of the earth. Such a category must obviously be whittled down to something that it is realistic to study as a coherent group, but from which broader conclusions about the nature and consequence of consumption can still be read. In thinking about people as consumers, people vary by degree rather than by type, often significantly so, with the extent of possible consumption being determined by the level of income. Where people exist on the income spectrum is therefore a central considerations that must be addressed in bounding the precise group for analysis. Anyone who relies on markets to secure either the bare essentials of life or to meet their more discretionary wants is a consumer. However, whilst the realities of modern global capitalism mean that those on very low incomes are required to act as consumers, their capacity to exert choice freely in the market place is limited by the fact it is the very means of their subsistence that they are seeking to secure. In such a context, choice and agency plays second fiddle to mere survival, their fates largely in the hands of wider market forces.

In the context of the modern global economy, the extent of between country inequality and the global division of labour means that an average citizen in the global North is, by dint of their income, going to be more empowered as a consumer than many of the billions of people in the global South. As has already been noted, beyond a certain level of income, questions of consumer agency are rendered moot by the imperatives of securing basic sustenance. For many consumers in more advanced capitalist economies, however, consumption is less a matter of life and death. Instead, the economies in which they live pursue economic models that are grounded in encouraging and supporting a diverse range of consumption. This global picture is changing rapidly, as the middle classes of countries such as India and China continue to expand. Yet internal consumer markets remain less essential to the growth models of export-oriented countries, and in many cases consumption is actively suppressed for reasons of political economy. (Klein & Pettis, 2020). So whilst the growth of consumer economies in the global South represents potentially interesting new frontiers for this kind of research, it is nevertheless the case that the great bulk of consumer spending in the global economy derives from those with medium to high incomes in the global North (Hickel, 2020). At the other end of the income scale, those with very high incomes represent too unusual a case to draw wider conclusions from, despite their high levels of consumption. The consumers that will form the focus of this study are therefore *everyday* in the sense that they broadly exist within a broad middle band of the income distribution, rather than representing either of its extremes.

What is consumption?

Consumption can be found, and thus studied, within moments of exchange. Graeber (2011) lays out its etymology, noting that it "derives from the Latin verb consumere, meaning 'to seize or take over completely' and, hence, by extension, to 'eat up, devour, waste, destroy, or spend.'" (p. 491). This reveals that the dominant perspective from which consumption is understood is that of the market and the world of commodities. From this perspective, the moment of consumption is the point at which it is removed from the circuit of capital, its task within the wider process of accumulation complete. Given that this study seeks to contribute to a discipline that takes a macro-scale perspective of the global economy, it is this perspective that will serve to inform its understanding of consumption. But it is also important to note that there are many accounts (Graeber's included) which problematise the idea of consumption being reduced solely to exchange. These argue that it is an ongoing social process that extends into peoples lives (Miller, 1998). This applies doubly to ‘things’, where the commodity becomes an artefact whose continued presence in the world gives it a rich ‘social life’ (Appadurai, 1986). These are important correctives to viewing consumption solely through the moment of exchange, highlighting the need to understand the wider social life of commodities that informs it. As such the focus of this research then, is on what motivates consumers to act at the moment of exchange, but from a perspective that accounts for the life of the commodity beyond it.

In strictly economic terms, consumption is the function within the circular flow of the economy that represents the proportion of net[7] income that is spent within the period in which it is received, rather than saved for future consumption. Through their ‘systems of provision’ account, Fine and Leopold acknowledge the essential incommensurability of different types of consumption, as at its widest possible definition it could include everything from haircuts to housing costs. For the sake of generating manageable and comprehensible empirical data, it is necessary to restrict the focus of this study to a sufficiently constrained set of practices. Yet these must also present a clear framework for understanding them in the broader context of the global economy in which they are produced. For this reason, the focus of this research is on tradeable goods that manifest as material culture - namely durable and semi-durable goods, whose use value is not directly reliant upon their destruction.[8] The methodological concerns that inform this definition are outlined more fully in chapter 3, but it ultimately represents a “very clear route for linking ‘consumption’ to ‘production’” (Evans, 2020, p.

[7] The alternatives to consumption through the market are 1) any form of homesteading or domestic provision (such food grown on an allotment, or much of the labour that contributes towards social reproduction) 2) Government taxation and spending on the direct provision of services, rather than simply cash transfers (i.e. education, health, libraries etc). Consumption therefore represents whatever is remaindered when provision from these two channels are accounted for.

[8] In this, the objects of this study are distinguished from directly ‘consumable’ goods like

349). Whilst this definition narrows the scope considerably, it still encompasses sufficient diversity that multiple 'systems of provision' are represented i.e., electronics, clothing, toys etc. The aim is to not just examine the particular contingencies of a single commodity, but to draw wider reaching conclusions about the role of the consumer in the economy more broadly.

As well as presenting a clear link to the wider processes of exchange and production through which they are brought to market, a focus on such goods also inform a clear and well-defined site for the research. These are forms of consumption that are largely grounded in household, giving the research a coherent frame in which to conduct the study. The household represents a site of economic processes that are frequently overlooked by more mainstream accounts of the economy (Todorova, 2015). Consumption is a key facet of the work of social reproduction and its role in distributing economic resources around the household. This provides crucial context to understand the drivers of consumption, which is pursued not merely for reasons of individual utility but for its role in sustaining social bonds and relationships (Miller, 1998). In particular, the relationship between parents and children represents one in which consumption plays a key role in transferring and distributing economic resources around the home.

In making this choice of research site, this thesis can be situated within the existing research paradigm of everyday political economy, which studies how the broad accretion of small acts by ordinary or 'everyday' agents works to either legitimise or resist economic regimes and institutions. It is an approach that has been deployed successfully in enquiries around finance (Seabrooke, 2006; Langley, 2008) and work (Herod, 2007). Despite the conceptual suitability of an everyday frame for studying consumption, surprisingly little work in this tradition has

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food, cosmetics etc

undertaken on the topic. This reflects a broader lacunae in the discipline of political economy for the subject of consumption. As I have already outlined, the reasons for this stem from its too strictly bifurcated account of consumer agency. Incorporating an analysis of these forms of consumption into a wider account of the global economy requires a richer and more expansive account of individual agency, and it is to this I turn to next.

How to think about agency

Having settled on the broad outline of which consumers and what forms of consumption will fall under the scope of this study, the next problem is to establish what agency means in this context. Agency represents one school in the theory of causation, in which the conscious and deliberate actions of individuals is held as the determining factor in the function or outcome of social processes. Its antonym is in structure, whereby the choices available to actors are tightly conditioned and constrained by the social and institutional context in which they take place. Debates as to which holds the upper hand in society have been central to the philosophy of social science and wider social theory for centuries (Hay, 2002). This thesis doesn't seek to re-litigate these debates, but rather takes as its starting point the position that human agency plays at least some role in processes of consumption. On a philosophical basis, any act of consumption ultimately represents the choice of a free agent. The degrees of freedom available to consumers are ultimately dependent on their income and the circumstances in which they find themselves[9]. But in the context of an everyday consumer in the UK it is taken as a given that they have some facility to exert choice over the nature and extent of their consumption. The question then is how best can this agency be understood, analysed and incorporated within a wider account of economic life.

[9] For example, someone in extreme poverty may have little to no choice other than to buy sustenance at the cheapest price available to them.

The dominant accounts of agential ontology derive from positivism and naturalism, which include both neoclassical economic thought and its analogue in the wider social sciences, rational choice theory. The limitations of this have already been explored in relation to consumption, with the a priori assertion of individual agency ultimately draining any conclusions of their explanatory content. In this respect, the rigidity of their account of human action can often render such theories inadvertently structuralist (Hay, 2004). One corrective to this is the notion of axiorationality (Hobson & Seabrooke, 2007). In this case, rather than cleaving to constant and universal notions of how people behave in any given circumstance, it is instead accepted that people act to advance their own interests but in ways that are shaped by the context in which they find themselves. Post-structural accounts of various stripes also broaden the scope of agency to reflect the different forms it takes as people take on and perform various different subjectivities. These in turn then define and sustain the outwardly determinant structures without reifying them. Of these approaches, those grounded in practice theory in particular have informed a broad and thriving literature around consumption. As such, it is this approach that informs the account of agency developed here.

Practice theory represents a broad school of approaches who ultimately ground their account of the social world in human action. Whilst much of the existing literature on consumption draws on the Wittgenstian approach developed by Schatzki (2008) and others, the account developed here will reach back further into the history of social practice theories and take its cues from the tradition of Pragmatism. As with other forms of practice theory, this grounds its social theory in a nuanced account of human agency. It places human action at the heart of all social phenomena, in such a way that it constitutes both agency and structure alike (Frankel, 2016). Social ‘things’ are woven through the warp and weft of transactions and the inter-relations between individuals, which themselves are the product of action. These actions, however, are conducted not by rational and autonomous beings, but instead by people who are deeply informed by and grounded in their experience of social life. These experiences manifest as habits, understood as “a discrete repertoire of available acts” (Frankel, 2016, p. 520). Rejecting the dualism of structure and agency, pragmatism instead sees them as co-constituative, with agency therefore representing "a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its "iterational" or habitual aspect) but also oriented toward the future ... and toward the present” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963).

Whilst habit in the pragmatist sense represents less than rational action, informed by its social context, people as agents are not prisoner to them. People enact habits through their actions and, to the extent that they possess varied desires about the ends they wish to achieve or demonstrate creativity in how they wish to express them, they are able to change, transform and escape habit. In this sense, although people are confined by a given social context, the fact that that context is ultimately given meaning through their own actions also empowers them to change it. The interplay of habit and the attempts by individuals to subvert or overcome them presents a promising ground to study the nature of consumer agency. Furthermore, by grounding its understanding of the social world in action, pragmatism also presents a particularly useful framework to understand and relate this account of agency to the economic realm. Pragmatism developed the concept of valuation (Mitchell, 1945; Muniesa 2011) as a means of sidestepping intractable debates about the nature of value. Placing human action at the heart of the social world means value makes no sense in its own terms, but must instead be understood as manifesting through the acts of valuation that ascribe it to things in the world.

The site and process of the research

The Everyday

This introduction has already touched on the everyday nature of the consumption being investigated here. Exactly what it means to be ‘everyday’ is a matter of some contestation, with the term reflecting both theoretical / conceptual (Lefebvre, 2014) and more prosaic (Highmore. 2011) derivations of its meaning. The former conceptualises it as a space that is explicitly shaped and conditioned by the social structures that define it, and in particular capitalist social relations. The latter is defined more simply through its opposition to methodological focus on ‘elites’ in one form or other (Stanley & Jackson, 2016), emphasising instead that states of ordinariness and mundanity are not without political consequence. It is in this latter sense that the concept is deployed here, focusing on forms of consumption that whilst outwardly mundane in character, are nevertheless consequential in what they represent about people’s engagement with the global economy. Through the countless individual consumption decisions that people make, they contribute to processes that sustain, legitimate or resist wider regimes or structures in the economy. In the case of consumption, consumers are also actors whose choices, at the aggregate, render the sale of commodities and the accumulation of capital possible. Studying the consumption practices of individuals can therefore help to highlight the tendencies or regularities that hint at the wider economic consequences of consumer behaviour.

Focus on the household

It is this that provides the methodological starting point for this investigation, grounding the research in the mundane and day-to-day acts of consumption conducted by average British consumers. Granular questions about the nature of consumption has often been overlooked in economic analysis because of an assumption that it takes place in the ‘private sphere’, away from the domain of circulation and exchange that represents the economy. To understand what motivates and conditions the choices of consumers, it is therefore necessary to ground the research in these spaces, beyond the point of exchange to where people enact the relationships they have with commodities as objects in their lives. The dismantling of the binary between 'public' and 'private' spheres is at the heart of the feminist tradition in political economy. This tradition has also long been grounded in an everyday, bottom up perspective (Elias & Roberts, 2016), which attempts to foreground otherwise overlooked spaces like the home as being key domains for understanding the distribution and control of economic resources. Scholars of consumption have also highlighted its role not just in discharging individual wants and needs, but in knitting together social relationships, in particular those within families and household units (Jackson & Thrift, 1995; Miller, 1998) The focus of this research, then, is not just on consumption at the moment of exchange, but situating it within the spaces and social relationships in which it exists. Consumption plays a central role in processes of social reproduction, conducted not for self-interest but to provide for and sustain others. As such, it is in the home, and specifically homes in which children are being raised, that will provide window in the roles of these dynamics in shaping consumer behaviour.

Research Design

The population for this research is therefore British consumers, specifically those who live with and are responsible for the raising of children. Whilst this narrows the focus of the study to a specific group, it does so because the consumption habits of this group will reveal more about the social foundations of people's consumption decisions. On a purely practical basis, such a group is also likely to consume (or at least be responsible for purchasing) *more* of the commodities of interest, and thus provide a richer data set for study[10]. The implications of

[10] For example, ONS expenditure data (ONS, 2022) highlights the increased proportion of

this population for research design and sampling are surprisingly complex. The designation of 'everyday' makes it almost maximally inclusive, in that it aims to capture the commonplace or typical experience of consumers within capitalism at a given time[11]. As a category, then, this discounts only those who are either extremely rich or extremely poor, or whose situation is very specific and unrepresentative i.e. those living in a monastic order. In such cases, the consumption patterns observed might reasonably be expected to be subject to different, incommunicable logics as a result. Yet speaking to the first 20 people encountered on a given street, whilst they all might be broadly encompassed within the field of 'everyday' experience, they may also share particular subjectivities or biases that distort attempts to draw conclusions from the aggregation of their behaviour. As such, a geographical sampling strategy was used to ensure sufficient diversity of different perspectives and experiences were represented.

The participants in this sample were selected to provide an insight into what motivated and guided them in their practice as consumers. In order to capture this experience as directly as possible, this study used a diary method that invited participants to record everything they bought over a period of a month. This included questions about what each item was for, how much it cost and where it was made. The records contained within the diary capture a snapshot of consumption as it took place, everything from the most mundane goods bought almost unthinkingly, to expensive one offs only bought after much deliberation. The record of these purchases then informed an interview, conducted in the homes of the participants

household income spent on clothing and footwear by households with children (between 30 to 50% more, depending on income quintile).

[11] The 'everyday' should be understood in relation to the specific level of capitalist development that pertains. When E. P. Thompson (1980) developed his influential account of life at the dawn of capitalism, the everyday experience of the working class was one grounded in grinding poverty. The everyday in the 21st century, by contrast, reflects a significantly more comfortable existence.

themselves[12], to reflect on and discuss the factors that motivated them. To expand and contextualise this snapshot of a particular moment, the interviews also covered broader conversations about the participants attitudes. These touched on their feelings towards consumption more generally, the role of consumer goods in their daily lives, their political views, their work histories and their family lives. Through this, an analysis of the moment of consumption could be drawn out of its wider context and the social and relational concerns that shaped it. Whilst the diary itself provided a sizeable list of the commodities consumed, it was the text of the interviews themselves that form the central evidence base for the conclusions advanced in this thesis. These were analysed and coded to identify the commonalities and variations in habit and practice that shaped people's choices as consumers.

The results of these conversations is here analysed and presented through the lens of the pragmatic account of agency. The first empirical chapter examines the habitual drivers of consumption. These emphasise the ways in which people make and justify their consumption decisions through the wider social context in which they are made. Whilst not comprehensive, three habitual logics are identified which demonstrate a clear relationship to the broader global transformation of productive relations. These are characterised as 'Plenty', 'Convenience' and 'Thrift', each of them a way of representing how people's encounters with material commodities are shaped by the wider economic context. The second empirical chapter focuses on more deliberative agency, examining the extent to which the consumer behaviour captured in the data can be seen to reflect the more creative and experimental dimensions of agency set out in pragmatist thought. This reveals significant concerns about dominant consumption norms, particularly in the context of the climate crisis. These

[12] At least, until Covid-19 demanded a transition to more remote research methods - the impact of the pandemic on the research design are detailed more thoroughly in chapter 3.

motivate, at least amongst some consumers, significant and substantive changes in consumer behaviour. Whilst the organisation of the contemporary economy can mask or flatten the consequences of these actions, they demonstrate the potential for meaningful, if limited, market signals to be sent by consumers as moral agents. The final empirical chapter examines in more detail the process by which consumers as agents act within markets, by focusing on the processes of valuation that sits at the heart of any given act of consumption. The way in which this process is shaped by both habitual and more deliberative forms of agency highlights how even mundane consumption choices can be translated into broader consequence.

Rethinking Consumption in IPE

This account of consumption, grounded in a pragmatic account of agency, helps to opens up the black box of consumer decisions and understand the processes that shape them. Taking this perspective emphasises the importance of understanding consumers as agents - albeit with an agency that is both limited and socially mediated. In the first instance, their capacity to act is determined through their income, something over which they may have little direct control. Yet within this constraint, and assuming an income level above that of mere subsistence, their exists significant latitude for free choices with respect to consumption. It is the role that these choices play within markets, as the arbiter of whether or not a product will be purchased at a given price, that gives them their animating input into a much wider system of social relations. It is for this reason that so many other actors have a pecuniary interest in steering these choices, and in this respect advertising and other forms of 'choice architecture' do place their hand gently on the tiller. But such processes ultimately work in and through the agency of consumers themselves, as one of a host of competing influences. Where consumer choice aligns with the interests of capital, it is unsatisfactory to see this somehow working against the consumers 'true' interests. Rather, consumer's understanding of their own interests represent an indeterminate, fluid and contestable domain. Whilst the nature of the contemporary capitalist system means that the consequences of any given act of consumption are often alienated from the consumer themselves, they are still able to conceive of themselves as moral agents with respect to the choices that they make.

Drawing on the empirical data generated by the diary study and accompanying interviews, this thesis develops an account of the everyday politics of consumer agency. This reflects the fact that, whilst they don't necessarily conform to the strict rationality of neoclassical consumer theory, consumers are nevertheless an important locus of choice in the global economy. Whilst these choices are shaped by individual habit and social custom, they are also sites where individuals can deploy moral agency. Two conceptual devices help to illuminate the some of the ways by which consumers as agents work to reproduce, legitimise and resist the conditions of the global economic order. The first are the *everyday regimes of valuation* through which consumers appraise the value of the goods they buy (or don't buy). This highlights the central role that consumer choice plays in setting prices, whilst reflecting the fact that such calculations are shaped by the specific, contingent arrangements of the global economy that pertain. The second device, the *social standard of living,* explains how these wider conditions are institutionalised and embedded into consumer action. It reflects the social nature of habits and custom, that provide a shifting backdrop against which consumer expectations are calibrated and their subjective perceptions of well-being are evaluated. These two devices help to highlight how the character and expression of consumer agency has been mutually constitutive of wider transformations in the global economy. The stability of global productive relations ultimately depends on a countervailing constellation of desires and expectations that sustains the valuations of the commodities produced.

The tradition of political economy is informed by the idea that "social orders and the institutions which make them up need to be studied as complex wholes rather than as analytically distinct parts" (Gamble et. al., 2000, p. 2). Yet in overlooking consumption, the discipline had given insufficient attention to a key economic phenomena. A central reason for this failure has been the somewhat hollow accounts of consumer agency that underpin its analysis. With these embedded as axiomatic first principles, the discipline has had to look elsewhere to find the forces that drive or suppress change in the global economy, be that firms, states or other institutions. The breadth of consumption as a topic of study, and the necessary limitations of a single doctoral research project, means that comprehensively redressing this imbalance is beyond the scope of what it is possible to do in a single thesis. But with that in mind, the contribution made by this thesis is to provide the discipline with a richer conceptual toolkit for thinking about and incorporating consumer agency to its account of the global economy. Across the three dimensions set out below, the work presented here seeks to provide a framework through which consumers could be better incorporated into IPE's analysis.

Empirically, it has presented a dataset focusing on consumers as actors - their choices and motivations, capacity and constraints. This deliberately foregrounds mundane and everyday aspects of consumption, rather than focusing on that which appears important from the perspective of a more productivist analysis of the economy.

Analytically, it demonstrates the value of Pragmatic thought to IPE in providing an analysis of economic life under capitalism, and in particular its value in developing an account of consumption. The account of agency it provides balances its habitual and deliberative components whilst reflecting both the individual incentives and wider social forces that shape human conduct.

Theoretically, it deploys Dewey's concept of 'valuation' to sidestep longstanding theoretical debates about the nature of value and instead focus on the active role consumers play in assigning and ascribing value to the commodities they consume. This poses the possibility of an alternative account as to how value is created and circulated within the economy and the subsequent implications this has for political questions of power, control, influence and interest.

Overview of the thesis

To develop this argument and demonstrate my overall contribution, the structure of this thesis proceeds as follows. The first chapter reviews different existing accounts of consumer theory, demonstrating that these show how each theoretical perspectives addresses the nature of agency and of the nature of value into its analysis. The second chapter reviews the role consumption plays within the existing field of IPE and how this is underpinned by different accounts of consumer agency. The third chapter is split into two substantive parts. It first develops the concept of agency that will form this study, drawing on the tradition of pragmatic thought to develop a conceptual toolkit that can help unpack the black box of consumer agency. The second half of the chapter then outlines how this framework is operationalised into a set of research methods able to generate data about these concepts in the field.

The following three chapters draw on the empirical material generated through these methods to explore different dimensions of consumer agency. The first studies the habitual forms of agency through which consumers respond to and reproduce the social context in which they live. The second then explores the more deliberative forms of agency that people express through their consumption choices, exploring the ends that people seek to achieve and the means they undertake to achieve them. Whilst this demonstrates the value and applicability of the pragmatic account of agency, it must also be balanced against the more structural constraints that shape consumer choice. The final empirical chapter relates these two dimensions of agency to the specific act of valuation, by which consumer choice is translated into a price signal. It is this process that plays a crucial role in situating consumer agency in its broader macroeconomic context. As such, it represents a productive space to explore the operation of interest, influence and contestation at work in the global economy. A final discussion chapter develops two distinct conceptual devices out of this empirical work, christened *regimes of everyday valuation* and the *social standard of living* respectively. Through these, an everyday politics of consumption is developed that relates the account of consumer agency presented here to issues such as firm structure, the organisation of global trade and its implications for the state. The final section concludes, pointing towards the growing urgency of understanding the political consequences of consumption in a world shaped by growing geopolitical tension and a looming ecological crisis.

Chapter 1 - Theories of the Consumer

Introduction

Consumption is one of the fundamental processes of economic life. The purchase and use of goods in the pursuit of individual ends has long been understood as a powerful driver of economic activity. The actions of consumers were placed at the heart of Smith's liberal political economy (Smith, 1776) and ever since they have remained, at least by some accounts, the primal force that mobilises the entire economy. Even when the consumer isn't afforded analytical primacy, understanding the nature of their choices and actions remains an important puzzle piece for any account of the economy as a whole. Given this importance, the different accounts of what motivates and sustains consumption form some of the central distinctions between different theoretical perspectives. Two broad traditions, the liberal mainstream that built on Smith's account of the free market[13] and a more critical strand that, via Ricardo (1817) and Marx (1867), put labour at the heart of its worldview, present the two dominant accounts of the consumer that continue to inform economic analysis of the

[13] Albeit not always fully appreciating the complex subtlety of his account (Watson, 2007)

contemporary economy. Alongside these, but not formally enfolded within economic analysis, are a growing body of more sociological accounts of the consumer. These arose in response to dissatisfaction with the economic accounts from either perspective, which reduced consumption to either an instrumental rationality or as entirely subordinate to productive economic relations. The contribution of this thesis is therefore to bring this more sociological perspective into dialogue with the field of International Political Economy.

IPE often overlooks consumer agency in its account of the global economy. Whilst consumption plays a fundamental role in the operation of the modern market economy, the actions and choices of consumers themselves are rarely incorporated into analysis. Instead, much work in the discipline implicitly builds on accounts of consumer action that work to curtail or foreclose agency as an analytical variable. In this way, the consumer in the global economy forms something of a black box - observable by the consequence of their actions, but never directly studied. Yet the implicit assumptions made around the nature and extent of consumer agency are ultimately highly consequential, based in foundational questions about the nature and distribution of value in the economy. The terrain of consumer theory that I study here is that which explores the terms in which they make their choices and decisions, and by what means. The central question at work in all these approaches is stated most plainly by Douglas and Isherwood (1996) - “why do people want what they want?” (p. xxvi). Exploring the theoretical roots of different accounts of the consumer can reveal much about the wider consequences these implicit assumptions have for their account of the world. This is the task to which this chapters attends.

This chapter examines the dominant schools of consumer theory on which IPE has built its accounts of the global economy. The mainstream of the discipline remains largely wedded to the school of consumer theory that derive from neoclassical economic analysis, which places ‘consumer sovereignty’ as the animating spirit of all market exchange. More critical accounts, meanwhile, ultimately find their way back to Marx (1867) and his account of the economy as being grounded in production. The analysis that derives from this tradition (Marcuse, 1964; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972) see consumers, in all their interests and desires, as being ultimately subordinate to the interests of productive capital. Both approaches, and the IPE work that builds on them, leave little space for substantive and meaningful consumer agency. Mainstream approaches, which defer in much of their analysis to the field of economics itself, can find themselves grounded in the unworldly instrumental rationality of the neoclassical approach. More critical accounts, meanwhile, diminish the importance of consumption by viewing it as a necessarily confected outgrowth of the production relations that turn the gears of the global economy. Such an approach necessarily implies a somewhat jaundiced account of the capacity of individual consumers to understand, and act on the basis of, their own interests. Yet the nature of consumer agency is ultimately highly important. In their simplifying assumptions, these two accounts of *why* consumption takes place, and on *whose* behalf, have meaningful consequences for how the distribution of gains and losses in the economy is understood.

What is missed by much of the discipline is the work that has emerged through the more recent turn across the social sciences towards consumption and its role within culture (Warde, 2005). This has sought to understand consumption not through its relationship to wider economic processes, but as a practice in its own right. Consumption is not merely the end point of a process of exchange, but the means through which individuals enter into relationships with commodities that find their meaning in the context of their wider lives (Appadurai, 1986; Graeber, 2011). These approaches emphasise the active role consumers play in their consumption choices, whilst also not being blind to the cultural context in which they make them. Such an approach quickly runs in to the almost endless diversity of actions and practices that, in a modern consumer society, are mediated through acts of consumption. It is for this reason that these more grounded, sociological accounts of consumption have struggled to connect them to the wider macro-scale processes through which they are enabled. Yet if IPE is to begin to crack open the black box of the consumer, it must discard its careworn theoretical assumptions and meet consumers where they are, in the complex fabric of their everyday lives.

This chapter proceeds by reviewing these three broad approaches in turn, setting out their account of consumer agency and exploring its consequences for the nature and distribution of value in the economy. Perhaps necessarily, given that consumption constitutes such a multitude of human experience, each perspective possesses limitations in their ability to contain and reflect these fully. But each also capture important facets about the nature of consumption. Developing a fuller account of consumer agency means balancing these diverging accounts. Neoclassical theory appreciates the ways in which individuals, acting in markets, are a consequential yet distributed locus of power. Critical accounts, meanwhile, reflect the ways in which the very context and frameworks through which people make their decisions are amenable to influence by those who both hold a pecuniary interest in them and wield sufficient structural power to meaningfully affect them. Finally, the more sociological accounts of consumption understand that it is a process ultimately grounded in people's lives, that must be studied not just at the moment of exchange, but beyond it. Each of these three can be reconciled within the pragmatic account of consumer agency, developed further in Chapter 3, that forms the conceptual heart of this study.

The consequences of consumer theory

Before reviewing the three perspectives, it is first necessary to address the general terms in which consumer agency is understood. The accounts put forward here all hold very different views of who ‘consumers’ are, and what the nature of their relationship with wider society is, or should be. These disagreements are expressed across two key dimensions - setting these out clearly at the start will help to clarify the terms of in which the following debate unfolds. The first issue is the role of the consumer agency as it relates to production, the extent to which the choices and actions of consumers enable and constrain those who would seek to produce goods for sale. This is ultimately a question of the nature and location of power in the economy and as such has been a fundamental dividing line between different schools of political economic thought since early distinctions were first teased out by Smith and Ricardo. The intellectual legacies of these two thinkers each trace out very different accounts of the consumer's place and role in the economy. These questions overlap with fundamental debates about the nature of value, where it arises and how it is captured and realised. These are questions will be explored in relation to the two schools presented in the first two sections of this chapter. Evans (2020), meanwhile, notes that it is a significant oversight of contemporary practiced based approaches that they retreat from linking their accounts of consumption into a wider economic analysis.

Consumer agency is a concept that relates to the ability of consumers, as consumers, to effect consequences upon the world through the choices they make. Beyond the implications of their actions on the world, however, lies a more fundamental question about the nature of choice and freedom. The extent to which consumers should be considered agents depends not just on what consequences their actions have in the world, but the extent to which they are the authentic authors of the choices and preferences that lie behind them. The extent to which consumer choice is an autonomous wellspring of agency to be injected into economic systems, versus the extent to which it can be corralled and directed by those with a pecuniary interest in shaping its nature, forms the second key question around human agency. These two dimensions can be broadly characterised as *agency in choice*, and *agency in* *production*[14]. In each case, their antonyms reflect an assertion that the choices of consumers or producers are established more through the constraints of the broader social structure. The two perspectives, of the role of agency in choice and production respectively, are relatively strongly correlated, such that the two by two Matrix below doesn't reflect an even spread of accounts of consumption. Instead, the top left and bottom right quadrants reflect the two dominant poles of the debate, with the top right and bottom left being more reflective of wrinkles or affordances made by writers working in these two main traditions. Nevertheless, these variations reveal the possibility, and productivity, of deviating from the central binary system.

	Agency in Choice	Structured Choice
Agency in Production	Neoclassical Economics	*Veblen*
Structured Production	*Baran & Sweezy*	Marxism / Frankfurt School

Table 1 - Accounts of consumer agency

It should be noted that many of the more sociological accounts I go on to discuss in the final section are quite deliberate in not attending to wider questions of the consumers role in economic processes. Here, they simply restrict themselves to investigations of how and why consumers make the choices that they do. As a result, these aren't reflected in the matrix above, but they still provide an important contribution in developing a more compelling and empirically grounded account of consumer agency than that which dominates neoclassical economics. It is to this account of consumer agency, and its flaws, that I now turn.

[14] In that consumer agency directs or constrains the choices available to producers.

Consumer Sovereignty and Welfare Economics

Since the birth of liberal political economy, the consumer has been understood to play a central role in the ordering of economic life. Smith asserted, in his treatise against mercantilism, that

> "Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer." (Smith, 1776)

This sentiment was profoundly influential on the subsequent development of the study of economics. Smith's thought was significant more nuanced than later characterisations of it would allow, incorporating a significant role for moral economy (Glaze & Richardson, 2017) and rejecting the instrumental rationality that would characterise later economic thought (Wisman, 2019). But it is in his identification of the consumer as the animating force of the economy, through whose choices the invisible hand of the market is guided, that he sustains such continued reverence with those who support the ideology of the free market.

The most influential branch of consumer theory is that which emerges from the tradition of neoclassical economics. The 'standard model' derives from the marginalist economics of Marshall and Walras, and has changed little since it was first specified over a century ago. The central innovation of the neoclassical version of consumer theory grounds it not in cardinal measures of utility, but rather in ordinal utility that can be discerned simply through the ranking and ordering of preferences. In this way, it escapes the need to either theorise or measure the slippery concept of utility[15], and instead is grounded in relative preferences that can simply be observed through the choices that people make in the market. At the root of its

[15] The reliance on 'utils' as an implicit measure of utility distinct from price bedevilled early marginalist work

account are a series of axioms about consumer choice and the nature of preferences made, in large part, because of their simplifying character rather than as a real reflection of human behaviour. These standard axioms, formalised by Samuelson (1938) are completeness (given x and y, x is at least as good as y or y is at least as good as x), transitivity (if x is at least a good as y, and y is at least as good as z, x is at least as good as z) and reflexivity (x is at least as good as x). These are combined with presumptions about consumer rationality, which hold that consumers will always seek to maximise their perceived utility, to generate the 'well-behaved' demand curves necessary for mathematical analysis.

From this starting point, the basis of consumer theory is *choice.* The relationship between any two commodities can be described in an indifference curve that reflects the quantities of each between which the consumer is indifferent, i.e. they perceive them to be of equal value. Conceptualising the two commodities as one in question versus all possible alternatives (namely, money as the numeraire for all other goods) allows the demand curve for a particular good to be mathematically derived. In this way, consumers generate demand for goods when they would rather have a particular quantity of a given good than all possible arrangements of alternatives they could secure at the same price. The theoretical presumptions of this theory are that it is consumer's system of preferences that induce them to consume when they are able to secure them through what they perceive as beneficial exchange. Yet the implications of this approach turn this causal pathway on its head, introducing the concept of 'revealed preference' (Samuelson, 1938) that works to reverse engineer market outcomes into the original set of preferences that generated them.

The notion of revealed preference is central to the wider conclusions that can be drawn from neoclassical consumer theory. It places questions about the ultimate determinants of consumption on their head, such that any given outcome ultimately reflects the underlying system of preferences that exist. It is this concept that was responsible for finally "eliminating psychology from choice analysis" (Davis, 2003, p. 30). People are inviolably agents in their choices, because the very question of preference formation is placed beyond the field of possible enquiry. Economists from the Chicago School went further, demonstrating that the models they developed from this account worked even if consumers were felt to hold stable, unchanging and relatively universal preferences. In their article "De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum"[16], Stigler & Becker (1977) departed from the concept of revealed preference to claim that there were no (or needn't be) significant variations in individual tastes to explain observed difference. Instead, fixed preferences operating in different contexts could explain a wide range of outcomes. Furthermore, consumer preferences being relatively fixed and unchanging meant that they were not amenable to influence by factors such as advertising or the social pressures of fashion. From this perspective, mainstream economics deployed an account of consumer theory whose response to the question asked at the top of this chapter was ultimately circular. When asked "why do people consume what they consume?" (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996), neoclassical consumer theory cannot ultimately advance a response beyond 'because they want the things they buy'.

The circularity of this account of consumption has some significant implications for the conclusions derived from it. The retreat from accounts of cardinal utility meant "normative recommendation in economics was thus narrowed to the Pareto efficiency principle" (Davis, 2003, p. 29). The quantitative incommensurability of utility meant there could be no calculative shortcuts to desirable outcomes in terms of distribution. Instead, interventions had to be limited those which could be shown to improve the lot of one group in society without making any other group worse off. In evaluating these calculations, however, the central

[16] In matters of taste, there can be no disputes

assumptions about consumer preferences play a key role. In conditions of perfect competition (where all markets clear), the cost of goods on the market is equal to its marginal cost of production. In relation to consumer theory, this implies that their exists a triangle under the demand curve, but above the price level, where consumers *would* have paid more for the good in question, but didn't need to because it was offered for sale at a price fixed by the market. Any deviation from these ideal conditions results in deadweight loss, where harm is calculated not in terms of changes in prices themselves, but the resultant erosion in consumer surplus that results. In this way, the assumptions of consumer theory are at the heart of the normative prescriptions of neoclassical economics.

Despite the reticence of economists to embrace any normative proscription beyond the utilitarian quest for Pareto efficiency, some have taken this concept of consumer agency further. The phrase 'Consumer Sovereignty' reflects, in its broadest sense, the idea already discussed that consumer choice is the ultimate determinant of production. Yet as a concept it has been advanced into more strictly normative proposal for how economic life should be organised. The Austrian[17] economist William Harold Hutt (1939) coined the phrase consumer sovereignty to reflect the more explicitly political implications of this stance for the distribution of power in society. Rather than advancing the argument from the perspective of technical efficiency, he instead understood consumer sovereignty as a way to "discipline producers to the wants of consumers without threatening political legitimacy" (Persky, 1993, p. 186). By privileging the unobstructed operation of market forces, the consumer becomes "the market's Archimedean point, its king" (Schwarzkopf, 2011, p. 109). From this point, the general equilibrium that results demonstrates that consumer choices are the ultimate arbiter of what is produced in the economy, given a particular level of technology and associated

[17] By ideological temperament, rather than nationality

supply constraints. Corporations and producers have little formal power in the economy, because they are ultimately restricted to manufacturing products for which there is demand. Given tastes can change freely, they are always on the back foot with respect to their customers. As a concept, it was central to the Austrian critique of social planning (Hayek, 1935) and their faith that the market represented an unimprovable system of social organisation[18].

Implications

It would be unfair to characterise the entire discipline of economics as adhering slavishly to the simple model of consumer theory described above. Yet whilst a significant quantity of work problematises or expands the assumptions it contains (i.e. behavioural economics), these are dwarfed in their influence by broad conclusions derived from the core model. The subsequent chapter will go on to demonstrate the role that neoclassical economic modelling has played in justifying the expansion of free trade in the global economy. At the root of all these conclusions are the simplifying assumptions about consumer agency that inform the theory of demand. Whilst trade is justified on the basis of its impact on growth and the expansion of the productive frontier of the economy, it is through the overall gains to the subjective utility enjoyed by consumers that these benefits are realised. The ideological project of globalisation, meanwhile, was conceived and conducted by thinkers deeply versed in the Austrian economic theory that placed the sovereignty of the consumer at their heart of their normative political project (Slobodian, 2018).

[18] A clear objection to the normative consequence of consumer sovereignty are the implications of inequality to the distribution of political power. Emphasising the democratic character of consumption decisions exacerbates the potential consequences of inequality. Whilst these flaws were appreciated by Hutt and his fellow travelers, their broader faith in the catallaxy of the market served to reassure them that whatever the potential implications they were more desirable than direct attempts to correct them through the power of the state.

These ideas have then been arguably some of the most influential in shaping the political and economic course of the 20th century. The consumer provides a "clandestine spring of political-theological legitimacy that renders global consumer capitalism unassailable in its status, despite the hardship it causes for millions of people" (Schwarzkopf, 2011, p. 109). Whilst the theoretical assumptions that underpin them may be challenged, the conclusions of neoclassical consumer theory provide a robust defence of the status quo. Consumers, as a group, represent the entire body politic rather than a particular fraction or class, (Kyrk, 1924, p.2) so claims made on their behalf avoid the potential cleavages of different political constituencies. From this perspective, to the extent that people engage with and support, through their purchases, a given status quo, it can be held to have legitimate support of the 'the consumer' rendered as the modern *corpus mysticum* from which political authority emanates (Schwarzkopf, 2011). In this context, any observations of deviation between peoples stated normative desires and their actions in the market (the so-called 'ethical consumption gap') are argued to reflect the 'true' preferences of consumers (Carrington et. al., 2016), making any negative outcomes resulting from the sovereign choice ultimately a failing of their "individualized ethical flaws and internal moral shortcomings" (p. 23).

This account of the consumer and their role in the economy have significant implications for how the creation and distribution of value is understood. It presents an entirely subjective theory of value, where the entire economy is viewed "from the perspective of the individual's demand for goods" (Frisby, 2002, p. 98). From this perspective, it is the price they are willing to pay that determines the amount of consumer surplus the consumer extracts from participating in exchange, which represents the value that they obtain from the economy through consumption. The field of economics itself has largely abandoned more philosophical debates about value, being concerned simply with its role in establishing prices. The work of Simmel (2004), however, presents a more complete account of the theory of subjective value, recognising that “two value formations are interwoven; a value has to be offered in order to acquire a value. Thus it appears that there is a reciprocal determination of value by the objects” (p. 75). In this sense, any act of exchange necessarily has two parties, both of whom have a conceptualisation of the value they are seeking to realise through the process. It is in the realisation of these subjective value through exchange that objects come to “express their value reciprocally” (Simmel, 2004, p. 77) and through this price becomes “an objective measurement of subjective valuations” (p. 79). Across an entire market society, the mediation of the totality of such exchanges through the medium of money becomes representative of “abstract economic value in general” (p. 518). In this way, the entire economic system becomes charged with values arising in people’s subjective understanding of the qualities of the objects they desire.

Critique

Despite, or perhaps because of, its outsized political influence, the theory of the consumer originating from mainstream economics is the subject of extensive critique. There are numerous objections to the central tenets of its theory of consumer behaviour. A host of deviations from supposedly ‘rational’ behaviour can be described in relation to the conduct of consumers (Fellner & Goehmann, 2021). The distributional consequences, and thus the moral validity of, consumer sovereignty rely on a further assumption of ‘worker sovereignty’ (Storper, 2000). This assumes that (in the conditions of full employment that obtain at equilibrium) all unemployment is by its nature voluntary, simply reflecting freely made choices about preferences for leisure over consumption. These assumptions are rejected by a significant corpus of economic thought that acknowledge the great many factors that can prevent markets from clearing (i.e. Robinson (1964), Grossman & Stiglitz (1980)). The central notion of consumer sovereignty of production is hard to sustain in the context of concentrated corporate power that precludes the possibility of perfect competition (Galbraith, 1972). The stability and inviolability of consumer preference is challenged by the significant role of advertising in sustaining demand, both at the level of individual product markets and in the context of the wider commercialisation of society itself (Galbraith, 1958).

Taken in concert, these objections significantly diminish both the normative significance and the explanatory potential of neoclassical consumer theory. For this reason, a great deal of more critical work sets consumer agency aside in its explanation of the workings of the economy. These accounts, that I review in the following section, characterise consumption more as a phenomenon that arises from the economic context in which it takes place, rather than something with explanatory potential of its own. Yet whilst these offer correctives to many of the faltering assumptions of neoclassical theory, in doing so the real agency of consumers as people who hold preferences and make active, considered choices within the economy can fall from view.

Anti-Consumerism, Critiques of Consumption and False Needs

False Needs

The role, originating from Smith, of the consumer as the animating force in the economy, is only one way of looking at the picture in question. Another approach, drawing on Ricardo's more fundamental commitment to a labour theory of value, emphasises that it is producers who are ultimately empowered in the economy. This approach, one of the building blocks of Marx's political economy, would go on to inform a much more critical approach to studying the economy that rendered consumption an outgrowth of production, rather than its genesis. At the core of this account is the idea that capital, as the organising social relation of production, requires consumption of the commodities it produces in order to secure growth and accumulation. This demands consumption over and above the 'true' needs of people as consumers, and so wants and needs must be conjured into being by techniques of advertising and a shaping of the wider cultural landscape. This central tenet of critical political economy gives a very different character to consumer agency, which is shaped and manipulated by forces who seek to wield it for their own ends. Common to these accounts is an insistence that there exists a particular set of 'genuine' human needs, which are only partially met through commodities produced in the capitalist system. Beyond these exists a more contingent set of wants, which are determined through a particular cultural context - one that frequently reflects and sustains inequalities of power and esteem within society.

The influence of Marx on this school of consumption theory stems from his assertion that it is the central dynamic of capital that generates new wants and needs in the hearts of consumers

> "Under the system of private property… each person speculates on creating a new need in the other, with the aim of forcing him to make a new sacrifice, placing him in a new dependence and seducing him into a new kind of enjoyment and hence into economic ruin…[T]he expansion of production and needs becomes the inventive and ever calculating slave of inhuman, refined, unnatural and imaginary appetites" (Marx, 1844)

This observation, of consumption as meeting a set of appetites that are somehow false or illusory, is what underpins an expansive school of critical consumer theory. In Marx's later work, as Landa (2018) points out, his account of 'false needs' softened, and in the *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1939) he emphasises the "historic quality" (p. 325) and "civilizing influence" (p. 409) of capital to elevate the social floor of consumption against which people evaluated their needs. Whilst his later work says nothing against this process (reserving his ire for the distributional implications of capitalism which mean that, whatever the level of people's needs there will be many unable to meet them), the concept of 'false need' has remained a cogent frame from which consumption has been analysed from a critical perspective perspective.

The implications of 'false needs' as a means of understanding consumption is unavoidably a downplaying of consumer agency. If neoclassical economic rendered individual preference as a primal, almost mystical force, critical accounts instead present them as the plaything of corporate capital. The various schools presented here all emphasise ways in which consumer agency is shaped, constrained or denied altogether by the needs of a capitalist system which relies on a continual expansion in the production, and sale, of commodities. The most influential approach in this regard is the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, which returned to Marx's earlier critiques of consumption in the context of the more full-blooded consumer society that characterised the mid-20th century. This emphasised the role of the wider cultural industries in fomenting the false needs of consumers. Another approach grounded in Marxist political economy was that of Baran and Sweezy, whose Monopoly Capitalism (1968) reflected on the ways in which the inevitable concentration of corporate power generated ever greater pressures to consume. Galbraith (1958), whilst not so directly grounded in Marxist theory, developed an influential critique of the imperative to consume under capitalism and the wider distortions that this placed upon society.

Frankfurt School

The most influential account of consumption from a critical perspective was that which emerged from the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. This group of theorists attempted to repurpose Marxist analysis for the purposes of cultural critique. In seeking to understand why the West had failed to arrive at a moment of revolutionary potential, they explored the role of the cultural industries in embedding the ideology of the ruling class. For Adorno & Horkheimer (1997), the false needs that consumers felt for the output of capitalist production were implanted by the 'culture industries'. This was an explicitly aesthetic critique, emphasising the ways in which the imperatives of capitalism had transformed the world of art[19] into something that trapped consumers in a "circle of manipulation and retroactive need" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972). Their critique of the cultural industries and the consumerism they promoted was an avowedly 'production first' account. It was grounded in the nature of mass production, and the requirement for "identical needs in innumerable places to be satisfied with identical goods". The cultural industries generated the demand for these goods, whilst also pacifying the working class and reproducing the "exploitatitive economic system" (Schor, 2007, p. 22). Capitalism is so totalising and inescapable that people "fall helpless victims to what is offered them" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997). From this perspective, there is little sense that the consumer has any kind of agency over what they want or whether or not they might buy it. Instead, their desires are manufactured through the connivance of capital and its control of the cultural industries.

Another key text from this school is Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man,* which set out most explicitly the nature of the 'false needs' that were produced under capitalist ideology. He argues that what we consider to be 'needs' is always ultimately subordinate to the "prevailing social institutions and interests" (Marcuse, 1964, p. 21). What can be considered 'false' needs are "those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice" (P. 22). The only needs whose claims can be considered unproblematically 'necessary' are those that are vital - "nourishment, clothing, lodging at the attainable level of culture" (p. 22). This clear bifurcation makes possible the identification of work that is necessary versus that which is "stupefying" (p.24) and unnecessary, save for the reproduction of the exploitative system

[19] In the broadest sense - the targets of their critique included "films, radio and magazines."

itself. The cultural industries and advertising both play a role in generating these false needs, but Marcuse's contention is that the entire system becomes after a time self-sustaining. It is through the manufacture and sale of the commodities themselves that people are inculturated in the ideology that valorises them. Consumption "becomes a way of life. It is a good way of life--much better than before--and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change" (p. 29). Yet, despite this impression of progress, it ultimately flattens the constellation of human needs to those that can be met through the capitalist system alone.

<u>Monopoly Capitalism</u>

Other thinkers writing in the Marxist tradition avoid the totalising, anti-consumerist critique of the Frankfurt School, whilst still situating the drivers of consumption squarely within the realm of production. Baran and Sweezy (1968) set out an account of how these are promoted and sustained by self-interested capitalist producers under the conditions of Monopoly Capitalism that they describe. The concentration of capital into monopolistic firms increased the need for market differentiation along lines other than price. This drove a significant expansion of advertising, the impact of which was magnified by new forms of media such as television. Previous economic theories of advertising, following Marshall (1919), had split it into its 'good' or 'bad' forms, that either disseminated useful information or introduced cognative distortions into market processes. Baran & Sweezy argue that its impact should not solely be understood on a product-by-product basis, but in respect of the totality of its effect on society. Their account of the needs generated by advertising, whilst understanding them to "reflect existing values and exploit prevailing attitudes" (Baran & Sweezy, 2013 [1964], p. 40), emphasised that they magnified particular impulses to sustain commercial activity. Consumer demand, then, comprised the "totality of biotic urges and social forces which is responsible for the formation of human wants in any given historical environment" (Baran &

Sweezy, 2013 [1964], p. 38). Production ultimately holds the whip hand however, through its ability to use advertising to sustain the necessary level of demand to stave off crisis.

Another key critical account of the genesis of consumer demand while not written from an explicitly Marxist perspective, was set out by Galbraith (1958). Influenced more by Keynes and Veblen, he nevertheless asserts the “paramount position of production” (p. 95) in society, and its key role in generating the demand needed to sustain the markets in which goods could be sold. Writing at a similar time to the work of Baran and Sweezy, he holds a similar perspective of the role of advertising in shaping preferences. It offers a sustained critique of the mainstream economic account of consumer demand and in particular its deliberate oversight of the diminishing marginal utility of consumption. The implications of this are that the needs met by people at higher levels of income are necessarily less vital than those that the poorest seek to secure through their meagre incomes. Galbraith stridently asserts that economists overlook “obvious but inconvenient” (p. 115) evidence simply on the basis that it couldn’t be easily translated into the mathematical language of neoclassical consumer theory. This oversight blinds such analysis to the distorting role of inequality on society, such that excessive productive capacity is brought to bear meeting the most marginal needs of the wealthiest in society. Not only are needs manufactured to meet the demands of producers, but those needs are targeted at the wealthiest in society, compounding the waste and distortion that results. This focus on inequality provides a solid economic justification for describing as wasteful much of the consumption that takes place in a capitalist society. Whilst much of this critique still holds, the simplistic model of a national economy that it drew from has been complicated by the complex dimensions of inequality that accompanied the later era of globalisation.

Critique of False Needs

Such approaches have been critiqued for picturing consumers simply as 'dupes' (Murphy Wiedenhoft, 2016), uncritically imbibing the messages of advertising and wider culture to unthinkingly conform to its desired modes of individual conduct. Their genesis is in an era of culturally dominant corporations and a uniform and conformist society. The Frankfurt School were profoundly shaped by their experiences as exiles from Nazi Germany, which had shaped their understanding of the propagandistic quality of the cultural industries and the extent to which people were susceptible to its manipulation (Wirsching, 2011). They have also been charged with a certain snobbishness (Trentmann, 2016, p. 143), with Adorno in particularly reflecting an overly serious and mannered aesthetic apprecition. Their account is now largely seen as overly functionalist, overstating the ability of the interests of capital to control the behaviour of consumers and eliminating any potential for resistance (Schor, 2007). There is insufficient consideration to what people *do* with the information they absorb from the cultural industries, and their ability to recast or subvert it even as they engage with it (de Certeau, 1984). Such objections have only become more valid as the cultural landscape has become ever more complex, reflexive and ironised, no longer easily characterised as the totalising imposition of capitalist ideology from atop the commanding heights of industry.[20] As the sociological approaches reviewed in the final section reveal, their confidence that ultimate source of different human needs can easily be parsed into categories of 'true' or 'false' is unearned and fails to reflect the complexity of consumption as a human practice.

Ostentation & Emulation

A related but distinct thread that emerges from Marx, but that was given a more central role

[20] As Schor (2011) notes, the Frankfurt School's characterisation of the micro-scale processes of this cultural dominance was always somewhat lacking. Apart from in the specific case of General Electric and their very deliberate use of cultural industries in the promotion of their goods, their was little evidence of direct coordination between those making cultural commodities and the wider interests of the capitalist class.

in the analysis of consumption by Veblen (1899) is the role of luxury and ostentation as a determinant of consumption. Luxuries overlap substantially with the idea of 'false needs', but rather than being imposed by the necessity of capital to externally inspire consumption, they are instead grounded human desires for emulative or conspicuous display. Marx saw the consumption of ostentatious luxuries as a necessary component of the class system. In this, it both delineated membership to a particular class and inspired workers to give up a greater proportion of their labour to appropriation as they sought to emulate those of a higher social station (McIntyre, 1992, p. 43). These forms of consumption, he argued, were ultimately a drain on the reproduction of variable and constant capital. These forms of consumption were the basis for a much more comprehensive account of the social construction of needs, that developed by Veblen in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). In this, what he termed conspicuous consumption became the foundation for an institutionalist account of the consumer in society, one that placed the desire for emulation at the heart of capitalism's restless cycles of taste and fashion.

Veblen's caustic account of consumption is a foundational work of institutional economics, shedding light on the nature of the relationship between individual consumers and the social institutions in which they participate. At the heart of his account of the discretionary consumption of the 'leisure class' was the role of emulation, and the idea that the growing availability of consumer goods produced by industrial civilisation offered the means by which any given member of society could emulate the lifestyle previously only available to those of higher classes. In Veblen's account this is realised through the trappings of leisure and comfort, which indicate their possessor's distance from the necessity of physical labour. By his account, many such trappings are 'purely wasteful' and 'honorific only' (p. 70) yet conveyed 'spiritual well-being' through the social status they conferred. He identifies the inherently positional nature of such consumption, drawing from its historical role in delineating relatively static classes or castes in society such as the aristocracy or the clergy. Under the conditions of industrial development, however, the expansion of incomes and the possibility of consumption made such affectations more widely accessible. Those at the apex of society seek continued forms of distinction even as the expansion of industrial production provides ever greater opportunities for those further down the ladder to catch up. This dynamic would drive great leaps in what Veblen termed the 'pecuniary standard of living', ever tightening the ratchet of what common consensus deemed necessary to secure their wellbeing.

The kinds of social institution Veblen described is exemplary of the kind of social habits that influence the analytical framework of this thesis (see p. 107) In this, he developed a compelling accounts of why people consume, situated in a given economic context but not reduced to it. But his emphasis solely on emulation as the evolutionary dynamic of consumer culture is ultimately a restrictive one, which holds people to a relatively narrow set of social impulses. His distaste for emulation was grounded in the fundamental distinction he cast between the 'industrial' and 'pecuniary' parts of the economy. The former produced things that were useful, understood by him to mean things that enabled people to pursue the productive pursuits that truly gave life meaning. The latter he dismissed as being grounded in the endless pursuit of status, a zero sum game that simply resulted in the restless and wasteful pursuit of ever changing fashion. In developing this perspective, he identified class as a central mechanism through which people's desires as consumers were shaped by their social context, without reducing people simply to their positions in the class hierarchy. The needs people experienced in this respect were not 'false', but the nevertheless represented a form of consumption separate to, and insulated from, that which was useful or productive. This observation has been highly influential in the economic analysis of consumption, but ultimately presents only a limited account of what drives people to consume. Emulation is but one facet of the numerous social practices that can encourage and give meaning to consumption.

What unifies this approach with those which focus more on ‘false needs’, is the sense that all consumption practices can ultimately be categorised in normative terms as being necessary, and hence valuable, or being unnecessary and therefore wasteful. An acceptance of such a binary has significant implications for the understanding of the nature and distribution of value in society. It has already been shown how, to the extent that they do concern themselves with such things, mainstream economists consider value to be determined through the market as a reflection of the qualities of an object and its scarcity relative to the level of demand. Approaches that assert a more normative account of what is necessary, however, have another benchmark against which to calculate value, one grounded in the *use value* it provides to people and their ability to reproduce themselves socially. Goods which don’t achieve this end are still made available for sale at a given price on the market, but their nature renders them essential wasteful, devoid of any truly socially useful value. Yet whilst it is easy to assert theoretically that consumption can sit neatly in these two categories, actually verifying these empirically, let alone quantifiably, is a more significant challenge. The inherent impossibility of this is laid out in a comprehensive attempt to develop an account of consumption from a Marxist perspective (Fine & Leopold, 1993, Fine 2002) which emphasises the unavoidably social complexion of what is and isn’t ‘useful’ consumption.

Systems of Provision

Both the Frankfurt School and the perspectives grounded in monopoly capitalism were ultimately products of their time. The former responded to the dawn of mass production and the sudden colonisation of entire domains of consumption by homogenised commodities. The latter responded to the self-confidence with which commercial society deported itself in the

1950s and 60s, which coincided with the arrival of television and a subsequent explosion of advertising that coloured perceptions of its impact on consumers. An attempt to transcend these historically contingent analyses and develop a comprehensive rehabilitation of the study of consumption from a Marxist perspective was undertaken by Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold (Fine & Leopold, 1993). Central to Fine and Leopold's approach is a firm critique of the idea of 'false needs', and a rejection of the critique of consumption grounded in the work of early Marx. Instead, they reflect the central importance of culture in determining *all* needs, beyond a core handful of physical requirements. These wider social and cultural determinants of wants and needs becomes part of their analysis, reflecting a much greater sensitivity to the social contingency of consumption. This represents a response to the more sociological accounts of consumption that will be addressed in the following section. Yet in asserting that "capitalist commodity production is an appropriate starting point for examining modern consumption" (Fine, 2002, p. 26) they emphasise the ultimate subordination of an analysis of consumption to the social and economic system in which it takes place.

Their central analytical contribution is the development of the 'systems of provision' approach. This takes as its starting point the diversity of consumption as a phenomenon and the subsequent impossibility of conducting a horizontal analysis of it across all possible commodities. Instead, their analysis proceeded from more vertical slices of the productive economy, analysing the cultural, economic and social forces that governed consumption with regards to a particular form of commodity - food, clothing etc. In each case, a different balance of social, cultural and economic forces are at work in determining the behaviour of consumers. This approach succeeds in escaping from the totalising perspective of earlier critiques of consumerism, reflecting the fact that the cultural logics by which people consume develop in profoundly different manners in relation to different forms of commodity. But it shares with Marxist accounts a determination to keep the analysis of consumption firmly grounded within an analysis of the wider arrangement of productive forces in the economy that pertains. This reveals itself through their analysis of the relationship between use and exchange value and their connection through the system of money. In this, they ultimately return to the value of commodities being determined by the capitalist system in which they are created.

The upshot of this most comprehensive attempt to render an account of consumption palatable to Marxist analysis is one laden with nuance. It goes far beyond the reductive accounts that render consumers simply thoughtless 'dupes' and instead appreciates the complex social and cultural contexts through which people come to encounter commodities. The emphasis to retain a clear focus on the commodity as something that emerges from the wider social relations of production is an important reminder to not allow the phenomenon of consumption to become unmoored from its particular social context. But in terms of the specific questions that are attended to by this thesis, as to the nature and extent of consumer agency, the end result is broadly the same as other approaches grounded in Marxist political economy. The complex systems of culture in which acts of consumption are embedded ultimately derive from the imperatives of the system of capitalist production that underpin them. This extends to the creation and realisation of the use value that the commodities are perceived to hold. Whilst they acknowledge that "use value is socially determined in ways that cannot be reduced either to production or the economy alone" (Fine, 2002, p. 66), their account of the wider formation of the social and cultural context in which consumption takes place is grounded in the structures of capitalist production. In this, it is theoretically unsuited to developing an account of *consumer agency,* because the analytical focus is on the system by which both commodities *and* their consumers are produced.

Sociological and Practice Theories of Consumption

The accounts given in the two previous sections are broadly economic accounts of consumption. They focus on commodities as goods in the market, and how people come to desire and acquire them through exchange. But a significant body of work on consumption approaches it from a very different perspective, focusing on the role of consumption in people's lives as social beings. These accounts have typically emerged from fields of study that attend to society more holistically rather than focus on its specifically economic dimension. Sociologists, historians and anthropologists have all developed accounts of consumption that relate more to how it is practised out in the world. These step away from the market, and study the cultures and practices that govern people's engagement with food, material culture, leisure and all the diverse human activities that fall under the aegis of consumption. These approaches sought to take the act of consumption as experienced by consumers themselves seriously. Its starting point can be located in the question that opened this chapter, responding to the startling acknowledgement that "that no one knows why people want goods" (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996). The accounts set out in the previous two sections deliberately place the consumer outside their analysis of consumption. The body of work that would follow in this tradition developed a socially complex account of consumption, which grounded it in the wider social practices it supported and enabled.

As well as focusing on consumers as people, rather than simply market participants, these approaches also developed accounts of commodities as *things.* Rather than blinking out of existing at the moment of exchange as market focused accounts would have it, they go on to perform a social role in the lives of those who encounter them. From this perspective, the sense that consumer demand was a confected epiphenomena of capitalist production stood on shakey ground. People formed complex, ongoing relationships with the goods they consumed, on their own terms and for their own reasons. Even when the purpose was 'informational', in that they were intended to transmit something about the owner to their peers, this was often bound up in complex, consciously formed identities rather than being merely dumb emulation. This section reviews approaches that draw on and respond to this tradition. What is a broad and diverse field (befitting the nature of consumption as an area of study), a significant body of it has nevertheless come to gravitate around various forms of practice theory. After setting out some of the central figures in this wider *cultural turn*, the concept of practice will be introduced to demonstrate how it has been deployed to provide an influential and nuanced account of consumer agency.

Cultural Theories of Consumption

One discipline that has long held an interest in consumption is history. People's relationship with things provides a window into the social and economic conditions of a given time and culture, one that can be explored through commercial records, material inventories and the objects themselves. Materialist historians like Braudel (1985), or those who study everyday histories, like Thompson (1980), have incorporated the historical record of consumer behaviour in their studies. More recently, writers such as Trentmann (2015) and McCracken (1987) have incorporated historical analysis into the wider field of consumption studies, developing accounts that describe not just people's relationship with consumption in the past, but how it can be traced through into practices and experience in the present. Trentmann in particular presents a wider ranging, cross-cultural account which undercuts any simplistic linkage between capitalism and consumerism. Instead, people's attitudes towards things was "shaped by states and markets, income and prices, urbanization and social structure" (p. 22). Whilst such cultures were diverse and distinctive, consumerist impulses and a 'cults of things' existed across the globe for great swathe of the human population since (at least) 1500. This broader appreciation of consumption and its cultural and historical richness is central to the approaches discussed here.

The modern ‘cultural turn’ in the understanding of consumption was instigated by Douglas and Isherwood (1996) An economist and an anthropologist respectively, their book The World of Goods sought to deepen the understanding why people consume the things they do. Explicitly setting out to conduct an anthropology of consumption, it related anthropological insights into people’s relationship with goods to the central assertions of economic theory. This revealed consumption to be a distinctly social affair, with people’s demand for goods arising as much from their “giving away, or sharing, or fulfilling social obligations” as from personal desires. Central to this approach was an emphasis on overturning methodological and theoretical individualism, instead emphasising the social context in which goods are given their meaning. In this way, much that they discuss builds on Veblen’s account of conspicuous consumption, and the role of the consumption of goods in displaying and transmitting information. But they depart from Veblen by dismissing the idea that envy is the sole ordering principle at work, and also rejection the negative characterisation of consumption pursued for such purposes. Instead, goods are needed for “communicating with others and for making sense of what is going on” (p. 67). The ever shifting background of technology means that there are no stable assumptions about what is or isn’t necessary or useful, indeed it is only through the consumption of goods that a broader social understanding of such categories becomes possible.

The project begun by Douglas and Isherwood was taken up by many other anthropologists, in a broader *cultural turn* to the understanding of consumption. Other work has emphasised the importance of the role of identity formation in forming people’s consumption habit, with particular forms of consumption being a way of conferring and signalling group membership (Tomlinson, 1990; Kozinets, 2001). Appadurai (1986) developed a highly influential approach within anthropology to study the social life of ‘things’, tracing them across their “total trajectory from production, through exchange / distribution, to consumption” (p. 13).

Another key figure in this tradition has been Daniel Miller, who has written extensively on various dimensions of consumption. His work straddles both theoretical and empirical contributions, from ethnographic studies of how people shop (Miller, 1998) and the objects in their home (Miller, 2008), to an attempt to resuscitate the role of consumption in economic development, placing it at the 'vanguard of history' (Miller, 1995).Through this final contribution, he makes an explicit attempt to situate these more cultural accounts of consumption within their global economic context, although in the form of a self-proclaimed polemic rather than by concerted empirical effort. Another common avenue by which these cultural accounts intersect with economic analysis is through their contribution to business or marketing focused literature (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Yet such business school approaches seek only to explain consumer behaviour for its own sake and thus work from the macro to the micro but don't make the journey in reverse.

Practice Theory

The cultural accounts of consumption have become less dominant in the contemporary sociology of consumption, being largely overtaken by more practice-theoretical approaches. Cultural accounts, it was argued, focused too much on the outwardly symbolic or ritual aspects of consumption. It was overly focused on "favourite, but restricted, topics – fashion, advertising and some forms of popular recreational activity" (Warde, 2005, p. 132). In doing so, it overlooked the aspects of consumption that were ordinary, inconspicuous, routine, conventional and repetitive, and emphasised individuality over collectivity (Gronow and Warde, 2001). In addressing this, a rich vein of consumption studies centred around understanding it in the context of the wider social practices it contributes to. This is a rich and diverse field, but broadly is grounded in the assertion that social life is constituted through the contextual, embodied *actions* of individuals. These are the wellspring of both social order *and* individuality (Warde, 2005), providing a coherent perspective that is neither individualist nor holist. Practice theory is a diverse field, but broadly it reflects a focus on the practical and embodied nature of agency. This stands in contradistinction to the "models of the sovereign and expressive individual" (Warde, 2014, p. 286) that inform other accounts of human agency.

One of the earliest works in to develop a, highly influential, account of consumption from this perspective was by Bourdieu. In one of his most famous works, *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), he developed a sociology of consumption grounded in its relation to the social setting in which people lived. In particularly, he focused on cultural consumption and the ways in which it was structured by, and reproduced, the class system. In this, he identified taste as a central way by which people formed preferences and made decisions in relation to consumption. This he described as a habitus, the system of dispositions that characterise people's consumption behaviour. The given habitus possessed by an individual is a factor of the social field in which exist, by which he primarily refers to their class position. It was from this perspective that they would form the "sympathies and aversions, fantasies and phobias which, more than declared opinions, forge the unconscious unity of a class" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 77). In this respect, Bourdieu treads similar ground to that walked by Veblen, albeit with a much more complex account of the interplay between the formation of tastes and the hierarchical system in which they are based. Yet whilst his account of how consumers form their preferences is set within a nuanced account of human agency, it has subsequently been critiqued as cleaving too tightly to class as the ultimately determinant structure (Thévenot, 2011).

Whilst Bourdieu would go on to be influential in developing the field of practice theory, Warde (2005) argues that his work on taste neglects many of the injunctions that he formalised in his later work. An over-emphasis on the relationship between habitus and capital imposes a structure that excludes the full range of human practice from the analysis. More recent work on consumption has taken up a more full-blooded practice theory to become the dominant approach in studying the sociology of consumption. This is based on the Wittgensteinian account of practice theory associated with Schatski (among others), around which much of this contemporary approach revolves. Practices, viewed from this perspective, are a broad, flexible and pluralistic accounts of social life that "successfully accommodate complexities, differences and particularities" (Schatski, 2008, p. 12). These are the things that form the "the barely detectable gridlines of everyday life" (Shove, 2003, p. 2) which shape the expectations and conduct of individuals as consumers. Central to such accounts is the sense that it is not consumption per se that takes the form of a practice, but rather it is a process embedded in wider practice (Warde, 2005). In this way, consumers remain conceived as agents, albeit ones who "are neither autonomous nor the judgmental dopes who conform to norms" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 256). From this perspective, a diverse literature has developed which studies the relationship between consumption and the various practices it sustains and supports - such as driving (Carrabine & Longhurst, 2002; Sheller, 2004), eating out (Warde & Martens, 2000) or sustainability (Shove, 2010; Welch, 2020). Yet despite the breadth of productive applications, these accounts draw upon a singular understanding of practice which has struggled in "elucidating the institutional or systemic conditions of existence of those practices" (Warde, 2014, p. 298).

Practice and the global economy

The limitations of these practice-theoretical accounts of consumption with respect to their relationship to the wider macro economy are thoroughly explored by Evans (2020). By acknowledging the wider study of practice that reflect more material semiotic approaches, he sets out three ways in which such a rich, socially informed account of consumption can be put into its wider economic context. The emphasis on consumption as simply a moment within wider practice makes it “harder to establish grounds for the critique of consumption” (p. 344). What is needed is a return to greater focus on “the materiality of markets, processes of commodity consumption, [and] the enactment of political and economic realities.” The approaches he emphasises in providing these perspectives are the ‘new’ new economic sociology (McFall, 2009) and its account of *agencements*, a return to the ‘social life of things’ approach developed by Appadurai (1986), exploring its overlap with actor-network approaches and the ontological politics they imply (Mol, 1999). Whilst all of these approaches represent useful tools to deploy in the study of consumption, they are not employed directly in this research. Rather, their shared lineage from, or association with, a long-established school of practice theory, that of classical pragmatism, provides the jumping off point for the account of consumer agency developed in this thesis. This is set out in full in Chapter 3.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed a range of different accounts of consumer agency, including those that inform various schools of economic thought that are used by IPE. The chapter that follows goes on to show in more detail how these different approaches inform substantive divisions in how the discipline conceives of and analyses economic life. The central purpose of this chapter has been to show that the two dominant approaches to the study of consumer agency are ultimately somewhat hollow. In the case of neoclassical economics, the formation of preferences is deliberately kept beyond the scope of inquiry, instead representing the preset starting conditions from which the rational choices of consumers subsequently play out. Despite presenting consumer choice as one of the central ordering forces in the economy, its account of how these are made and play out shies away from the mess and complexity of people's actually existing lives. The inverse to this approach are the accounts of consumption that render it subordinate to the more structuring imperatives of capital within the economy. Whilst varying in the strength with which they make their central claim, all such approaches ultimately contend that consumer's perceptions of their own interests are subject to manipulation to align them with the demands of capital accumulation. Although such approaches develop a useful critique of the role of culture and advertising in sustaining consumerism, the contention that such processes generate wants and needs that are in some way 'false' undermines the extent to which consumers are seen as meaningful vectors of agency.

These two approaches, which can both work to conceal the actual choices of consumers within a black box of theoretical presuppositions, are contested by a richer sociological account of consumption. These represents a diverse range of perspectives, but that share an attempt to capture the full, situated richness of consumption as an act that exists within a range of practices and social relationships. Whilst this approach to the study of consumption has informed a thriving, varied literature across the social sciences, in its broad understanding of consumption the specific moment of economic exchange can sometimes be lost. It is for this reason that the task this thesis sets out to undertake is to embed this fuller account of consumer behaviour within an account of the specific economic role that consumption plays in the global economy. As the next chapter will demonstrate, consumption plays a central role in many of the key debates within IPE, but is rarely itself the focus of empirical study. Taking the complex, messy and unruly accounts of consumption as it is practised in the world and knitting them in to the more rational and ordered market processes that define the terrain of IPE will form the central contribution of this thesis.

Chapter 2 - The Consumer in the (Global) Economy

Consumption is a process that sits at the heart of the modern capitalist economy. Too little of it, and the balance of forces in the economy fall into disequlibrium, precipitating crisis. Too much, relative to the capacity of the economy to supply it, causes the inflation that has once again returned to bedevil policy makers. And at the global scale, the volume of consumption and its rate of growth is one of the central drivers pushing world society towards its planetary limits. In this way, it lies at the heart of many of the questions that motivate and organise the discipline of International Political Economy. Yet as a discipline, too often the nature of consumption is studied and understood only at the aggregate, a macroeconomic variable that expands and contracts according to regular and predictable economic laws. It is from this top-down perspective that the accounts of the consumer theory reviewed in the previous chapter are incorporated, often in ways that mean the nature and implications of these theories are not brought out into the open. So whilst 'consumption' forms a key macroeconomic variable, this also represents another way in which its placed within a black box, concealing the actual agency and participation of individuals as consumers. This chapter reviews the role that consumption plays in the processes that govern and define our understanding of the economy, to demonstrate the continued lacunae of consumer agency within the discipline of IPE.

One account of the historical formation of the discipline of IPE is that it emerged out of the field of International Relations (IR) in the 1970s, in response to the paroxysms of the international order that seemingly had their roots in the economic realm (Cohen, 2008). This reflects its broadly North American mainstream, which continues to attend to questions about the nature of the relationship between state and market from a perspective informed by IR. In introducing economic analysis to this tradition, it often draws from many of the preoccupations of international economics, grounded implicitly in the models of neoclassical economics that define the dominant accounts of economic life. Yet the discipline has a parallel strand of historical development, the 'British' school characterised as the other side of a "North Atlantic divide" (Cohen, 2007), which draws on a deeper lineage of classical political economy. This is characterised as a "broad-based and inclusive, multi-disciplinary approach… [able] to promote the analysis of everyday social action and large-scale systems" (Hobson, 2013, p. 1032). Departing from the technical, mannered and positivist tradition that dominates modern economics departments, this view of the discipline sees it take the road less travelled in terms of explaining and understanding the "social relationships that constitute the economy" (Watson, 2005, p. 2). Yet even IPE research from this perspective has tended to overlook or ignore the consumer as an active participant in economic life.

A reason for this oversight stems from the underlying theories of consumption that inform the dominant schools of the field of IPE. As has already been established in the previous chapter, highlighting the liberal and critical strands of consumer theory that dominate the disciplines understanding of economic life. It is the account of individual rationality set out by neoclassical economics that remains a key referent for a great deal of IPE scholarship (Watson, 2005). This holds individuals to be rational, calculative and self-interested, such that their behaviour in a given situation is predictable based on what maximises the level of utility they are able to achieve. As consumers, they are the decisive, sovereign source of agency in the economy. Yet that agency is ultimately conceived in ways that renders it hollow and devoid of any genuine explanatory insight, instead rendering consumers as an undifferentiated mass of 'homo economicus'. Other parts of the field, meanwhile, set themselves in contradistinction to the utilitarianism of the economics profession. Here, any agency held by consumers is rendered inert, their desires, wants and needs all existing within a context ultimately determined by productive forces within the economy.

To understand the ways in which these different accounts of consumption are incorporated into analyses of the economy, its necessary to consider it through a variety of scales. Consumption, through its role in national accounting, represents a central component of the key economic problematique of the state. At the most fundamental level, it is only through consumption and the demand for goods that there such a thing as an 'economy' at all. It is as a part of aggregate demand that consumption plays a fundamental role in determining the size and nature of the economy. Given this, a great deal of economic analysis concerns consumption as an aggregated and undifferentiated mass, focusing on how it ebbs and flows with respect to policy choices or distributional conflict. In threading the needle between capitalist crisis and inflation, the level of consumption becomes a key policy target for the state. As such, it becomes a key lever in the technocratic management of the economy, based on assumptions of predictable consumer behaviour, rather than an explanatory variable in its own right.

Expanding the focus to the international and global level reveals the role of consumption as a key driver of trade, placing consumers into globe-spanning relationships with producers and workers often on the other side of the world. It is in how consumption is understood that the nature of these relationships and, crucially, the distribution of their benefits is understood. In the era of neoliberal globalisation, the consumer has played a central role in justifying the ideology of free trade. In this, they stand as the counterweight to the sharper but more focused losses felt by those harmed by exposure to new sources of competition.. Through both comparative and absolute advantage, the consumer in the global North is able to obtain more goods at a lower price, which works both to their benefit and to stimulate growth in the economy as a whole. Yet away from the bloodless ideology of free trade, these relationships can also be seen as being grounded in histories of colonial extraction and the deep inequalities of power that characterise the international system.

Finally, there are approaches to political economy that focus on the more mundane spaces where processes of consumption actually take place. Everyday and feminist IPE both present analytical frames that can ground their account of economic life in (among other spaces) the household. It is here that a great deal of consumption actually takes place, and it is these approaches that are best placed to get to grips with the ways consumers actually *act.* Yet despite the methodological suitability, there remains relatively little work in either tradition that seeks to grapple with consumption as a process. Where such an approach has been used to study consumption, it has often been subject to the same instrumental rationality, or structuralist imperative, as accounts grounded at larger scales. Whilst everyday and feminist approaches present a more amenable perspective to reincorporate consumers into economic analysis, attempts to do so have so far been limited. But in their exploration of the sociological foundations of economic life, they provide the most promising arena in which develop a dialogue between the field of IPE that lacks an account of consumption, and the sociological accounts of consumption discussed at the end of the last chapter, which need ways of anchoring them in the global economy.

In reviewing the field of IPE and how it attends to questions of consumption, two things become apparent. The first is that consumption represents a central process in the operation of a modern market economy, as a determining factor in the rate of growth, the price level and the flows of global trade. In these questions, however, the scale and complexity of the modern economy all but demands that consumption and its consequences are analysed at the aggregate level. In its translation into a macroeconomic variable, however, the individual consumer and their participation as an agent in economic processes is lost. This presents a lacuna in much of the political and economy analysis performed under the broad canvas of IPE, such that it is not unreasonable to characterise it as analysing consumption without consumers. It is in addressing this oversight and reincorporating consumers as active economic participants that this thesis seeks to contribute to the wider discipline.

Consumer Demand

From its very earliest manifestations, the discipline of political economy has been concerned with how goods, and income, circulate around the economy (Murphy, 1993). From such a perspective, the act of consumption is central to the operation of this circular flow, the wellspring of desire from which money is exchanged for goods and services. It is in this role, as participants in the restless circuit of money and commodities, that people as consumers are incorporated into models of the economy[21]. For the most part, it matters little why people buy the things they do, or indeed what those things even are. It is merely the volume and velocity of exchange that is of consequence to the economy understood as the aggregation of all such transactions. The version of this model that now forms the starting point of almost every contemporary economic textbook (Daly, 1985) was popularised by Knight (1933). In tracing the lineage of this model, Patinkin (1973) underlines that its underlying intellectual

[21] Modern versions of this model represent this private sphere where consumption takes place as 'households'. A key feminist critique of mainstream economics is that this model overlooks economic relationships within the household itself (Todorova, 2017).

framework drew on Austrian economics and emphasised “the consumption of commodities is the force that moves the wheels of industry” (Foster & Catchings, 1924). Marx, too, included a model of circular flow in his economic analysis, but one that explicitly viewed it from the perspective of capital. This saw the act of consumption as merely one point in the wider circuit of capital, through a model that emphasised the expansionary accumulation at the heart of capitalist exchange. These two perspectives embody the central dichotomy in consumer theory discussed in Chapter 1.

Whichever view is taken, both ultimately advance an economistic account of consumption, such that it represents the moment at which currency is exchanged for material goods or services. In a capitalist market economy, the aggregation of these acts of exchange across society are the dominant force in driving the circulation and expansion of money and capital. On the most abstract level of analysis, any given unit of income can only either be saved or spent. This role is reflected by its position in the central accounting identity of Keynesian economic analysis. This remains a central pillar of the practice of national accounting, which is the means by which the economy is measured and made visible as a object of state policy. The definition of national income through expenditure is given as $Y = C + I + G + NX$, which is axiomatically equal to its size as calculated through incomes. National Income is, definitionally, comprised of the sum total of all monies spent by households / consumers (C), capitalists (I) and the state (G), adjusted for the balance of trade (NX). Consumer spending (C) is typically the largest of these components; in the UK in 2021, almost 60% of national expenditure was made up of consumer spending (ONS, 2023). The size of this contribution is determined by the income of households, and their marginal propensity to consume. These are shaped in turn by the size of the economy and the distribution of its product. The understanding of an economy that is revealed through this examination of its national accounts shows it to be an unending process of ‘chickens and eggs’, with spending and income locked in irrefutable arithmetic symmetry.

Yet for all that this holds true at the level of the statistical aggregate, it conceals the great mass of individual, personal and contingent consumption decisions that direct the shape and form of the economy. It is for this reason that 'consumer confidence' is a closely watched indicator of an upcoming recession, as individuals respond to expectations or fears about the future direction of the economy by modulating their consumption decisions. It plays a central role in the crisis tendencies first identified in capitalism by Marx, something that has been central to much of the subsequent analysis of the dynamics of consumption within the economy. The billions of individual consumption decisions that are made across an economy like the UK's can be aggregated into a single variable that can tell us much about the economy as a whole. For a great swathe of economic scholarship and policy formation, it is at aggregate, rather than its vast multiplicity of individual components, that consumer demand has tended to be incorporated within the analysis. Yet in doing so, consumption is reified as a thing in itself, something that emerges out of the population as a whole and that grows and shrinks in line with predictable regularities. From such a perspective, consumers themselves are simply members of a faceless multitude, their individual agency subsumed into the movement of the crowd. This section explores the role and consequence of consumption behaviour at the aggregate to some of the central questions of political economy

Consumption, Crisis and Growth

Early in the emergence of political economy as a topic of study, the question of consumption was afforded diminished importance relative to that of production. Early liberal political economy was shaped by what would become known as Say's Law, although Jean-Baptise Say was far from its only exponent, or even its originator (Baumol, 1999). The principle can be summarised as 'supply creates its own demand', and it broadly reflects the faith that early political economists such as Ricardo and Mill held in the ability of markets to clear over the long term. Writing in response to the mercantilist thought that characterised the era of early industrialisation, the principle behind the ‘law’ asserted that fears of a glut of overproduction in the face of inadequate demand were misplaced. To the extent that saving reflected investment in the ‘real economy’ rather than the hoarding of precious metals, over the long term the productive frontier of the economy would grow and generate a higher level of demand organically. Whilst the early exponents of this position were focused on refuting mercantilist thought, it has continued to influence the liberal account of the business cycle to this day. The New Keynesian model of the economy, which dominates neo-classical economic thought, reflect’s Say’s central insistence that the supply constraint is ultimately what determines the output of the economy. Whilst misallocation can arise, this results from poor coordination amongst capitalists rather than a systemic lack of demand.

This principle, reflecting long-run thinking and a faith in the ability of markets to clear, continues to underpin much liberal economic thought. It ultimately reveals itself through the dominance of ‘supply-side’ reforms in contemporary policy-making, particularly on the right. People, as consumers, will consume regardless of the wider economic context, so the priority should be on ensuring producers have the most advantageous conditions in which to invest and improve their productivity. The existence of this unfailing backstop of consumer demand has been subject to extensive critique, as the capitalist economy demonstrated itself to be liable to perpetual fluctuation in the level of output, thus income and thus consumer demand. Rival theories placed this problem of under-consumption at the heart of these slumps in economic activity. In Marx’s critique of political economy, the totality of capitalism as a system of social relations underpinned its inherent dynamics of crisis. The working class, once fully incorporated into capitalist social relations, were forced to sell their labour power on the market if they were to sustain and reproduce themselves. The dynamics of competition between capitalists ensured that the level of wages would fall, in turn cutting off the crucial source of demand that was needed for the realisation of surplus value. Given this "limited expansive capacity of social consumption" (Luxemburg, 1913) relative to the continued expansion of productive capacity, crises resulting from under-consumption were an inevitable and recurrent feature of capitalist development.

This account of the rise and fall of consumption reflected the privations of the industrial society in which Marx wrote. In the dark, satanic mills of industrial England, a crisis of underconsumption was one with life and death consequences for the workers who could no longer afford the means to sustain themselves. But the inevitability of this dynamic has been defrayed by various means, that could be implemented as the capitalist class obtained a more collective understanding of its own interests. This gives the maintenance of consumption a central role in sustaining capitalist order, and there have various means by which this process has been theorised and understood. Finding new markets for consumers was at the heart of the economic critique of imperialism (Hobson, 1902; Luxemburg, 1913). The continually impoverished working classes of the industrial core would never be able to sustain the level of demand needed to reproduce capitalist society, so new markets had to be found. Through imperial conquest, much of the globe was brought into the sphere of capitalist social relations. When new colonies were incorporated, the existing systems of provision for consumer goods were obliterated by cheap imports from the industrial core. Whilst Luxemburg's wider theory of underconsumption has been subject to substantial critique (Fine, 2012), the role played by trade in consumer goods in imperial expansion is a matter of empirical record (Patnaik & Patnaik, 2021). The Indian calico market, for example, was deliberately undermined by restrictive legislation, meaning that British cotton manufacturers had an enormous new market to supply, enforcing an imbalance of trade that allowed for the extraction of surplus and raw materials from the colony.

In the search for new, stable sources of consumer demand, an alternative to endless imperial conquest was found closer to home. In the USA, whose imperial expansion by the 20th century had made only modest gains, it was the workers themselves who were to serve the "double duty as consumers" (Fraser, 2017, p. 30). The model of 'Fordism' developed on the production lines of the burgeoning American motor industry in the context of rapidly expanding American capitalism. The advent of Taylorist production methods, and the relative surplus of capital relative to labour in the American economy, meant highly productive workers could be paid a substantially higher wage without threatening company profitability. Whether through accident or design, the consequence was a mass industrial workforce with a level of disposable income that far outstripped what Marx might have imagined writing about Lancastrian cotton mills. Alongside New Deal era social reforms and strong trade unions, what began in the motor industry soon became a much wider mode of economic regulation (Aglietta, 1979), and ultimately a deep-rooted social ideology. The class compromise that ensured workers would form the bedrock of consumer demand revolved around a strictly gendered social order, and a growing constellation of consumer goods that served to both sustain capitalist reproduction and provide an ever greater standard of living for millions of American citizens.

The other strand of thought in political economy that rejected the assertion of Say's law was put forward by John Maynard Keynes (1936), most clearly in his General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money. Like Marx, he was interested in the problem of crisis under capitalism and saw that the existence of market clearing levels of demand could not be relied upon. In particular, this grew out of his analysis of the Great Crash of 1929, which saw a sustained slump in consumer demand follow out of a sharp stock market crash. Whilst Keynes' analysis drew on all components of aggregate demand (that is, business investment and government spending, as well as consumer demand), it was the role played by expectations that ultimately determined and sustained demand. When a downturn was foreseen, expectations of reduced consumer demand meant that previously viable investment decisions would no longer be pursued. The consequence of this analysis was that the state had a much greater role to play in managing a capitalist economy that had been allowed for under more liberal regimes, and that it was only through counter-cyclical spending by governments that deep recessions could be avoided. These insights were at the heart of the post-war order that prevailed across much of the capitalist West, where active management of demand by states sought to smooth out the fluctuations inherent to capitalism.

The post-war compromise was marked by highly re-distributive taxation systems, with marginal income tax rates of 70-80% in countries like the UK. The vastly expanded provision of public services by the state that this funded provided a baseline of demand in the economy, and universal unemployment benefits were instigated to act as an automatic stabiliser to the business cycle. In the US, the increasing proportion of GDP going towards military spending played a similar role (Mintz & Hicks, 1983). The post-war years were sustained by a particular set of institutional circumstances, which were not necessarily sustainable in the long-term. The crises of the 1970s challenged many of the underlying fundamentals of these models, that faced the twin challenges of inflation and falling output. Inflation was a particular challenge to this model, which had been successful in managing the threat of under-consumption to capitalist accumulation but was less able to respond to the challenge of an overheated economy. The remedy was the emergence of monetarist policy-making that deliberately sought to choke off demand in the economy through punitively high interest rates. The shift from an era of Keynesian demand management to a neoliberal order that returned many key decisions to the market has been explored extensively, and its ramifications go far beyond the topic of my discussion here. But after the transformative ructions of the 1970s, the neoliberal era presented a very different economic landscape, where a new set of forces emerge to shape consumer demand.

The challenges posed by the newly globalising economy meant states had to pursue a range of different strategies to sustain economic growth. In some, such as Germany, this was based around a corporatist model that bore a passing resemblance to the old Fordist regime - except in this case one that was reliant upon markets beyond its borders to find enough consumers for the high-value goods it produced. Other economies became more reliant on finance to generate sustained growth. What Hay (2013) describes as the Anglo-liberal growth model saw consumer demand propped up by debt, largely secured on a housing market that enjoyed unprecedented growth during this era. This huge growth of housing wealth, and the financial instruments that serviced it, propped up consumer demand in an era when transformations underway in the global economy were gutting the industrial base of countries like the US and UK. This era of so-called 'Privatised Keynsianism' (Crouch, 2009) leveraged the wealth effects of a booming property markets, as well as the long-term shift to an economy grounded more in services than material commodities, to manage this transition away from industrial capitalism. In this way, such economies provided an important counterweight for those such as Germany or China which continued to sustain demand through export-focused growth models. These deliberately suppress (or at least, don't actively encourage) domestic consumption to sustain the favourable terms of trade that support export industries (Klein & Pettis, 2020).

Inflation Expectations

If 'too little' consumption represents a threat to the stability of capitalist order, then 'too much' consumption (or rather, too much by the wrong people) is also an outcome to be avoided. A central insight of 20th century macroeconomics, first set out by Keynes and then incorporated into the still influential neo-Keynesian synthesis models, was that the level of effective demand was ultimately constrained by the capacity of the economy to supply it. If "the spending of consumers, capitalists and the government amounted to more than the quantity of goods being produced… the gap could only be bridged by rising prices" (Gamble & Walton, 1976, p. 48). Increases in the price level worked to reduce effective demand and restore the economy to equilibrium although, as the history of the late 20th century would show, the ongoing iterations of exceptions in response to a given shock could produce self-sustaining inflationary dynamics. The adverse macroeconomic and distributional consequences of sustained inflation meant that achieving stability in the price level became the dominant macroeconomic target of policy makers in the latter part of the 20th century. This was pursued through wage restraint on the part of unions as part of the corporatist settlement, then through punitive interest rate rises that aimed to reduce investment, stimulate a recession and take demand out of the economy. Both ultimately operated to reduce the volume of consumption to a level better matched with the productive capacity of the economy.

The starting point for the analysis of inflation is typically the labour market, where workers try and sustain their real standard of living in the face of rising prices. Unchecked, these demands place upward pressure on wages which firms pass on to customers to sustain profit margins. This perspective highlights the nature of inflation as arising from class conflict (Kalecki, 1942) and posing intensely political questions of distribution to policy makers (Watson, 2003). Yet it is in consumption that the phenomenon of inflation is ultimately grounded, as revealed through the statistical constructs that allow its measurement. The 'basket of goods' has long stood as the central pillar of inflation measurement, tracking the changing prices of the goods and services that form part of 'typical' consumption. Understanding consumer behaviour, in terms of the typical patterns of consumption and responses to price increases, can alter the measurement of the rate of inflation (Mugge, 2016).

In this way, the measurement of inflation represents a key vector through which the actions of consumers as economic agents becomes incorporated into broader macroeconomic analysis. But inflation is also a phenomenon that is shaped by profound macroeconomic trends at work in the wider economy, from class conflict to supply constraints. Understanding how the "dynamics of inflation and deflation… directly influence and link events across time and space" (Blyth & Matthijs, 2017, p. 205) is something that has been overlooked by much contemporary IPE work grounded in the microfoundational approach of Open Economy Politics.

By the last decade of the 20th century, the advanced capitalist economies of the global North had arguably resolved the problem of inflation as a key macroeconomic challenge. In this, a significant amount of credit has been given to the institutional transformations such as central bank independence, which depoliticised[22] the necessary macroeconomic policy choices to control inflation and stabilised worker and consumer expectation around an arbitrary target rate. Yet the success of this new era of inflation management cannot simply be explained by such institutional innovations, but rather the wider macroeconomic environment in which it took place. This was an era that coincided with the substantial incorporation into the global economy of both China and India, a huge expansion of the global labour force. In this context, the difficult, highly political trade-offs necessary to control inflation were largely absent, and newly independent central banks were free to engage in substantial monetary loosening in the absence of countervailing inflationary pressures. It was in this era of 'non-inflationary constant expansion' that growth could be sustained through the expansion of consumer debt in a benign, low-interest rate environment. The subsequent deflationary pressure of the 2007-8 crisis only intensified this downward pressure on interests rates, and it

[22] At least in a formal sense - as McNamara (2002) notes, they remained beholden to technocratic policies with distinct and significant distributional effects

is only in the very recent context of extraordinary economic intervention by states in response to the COVID pandemic, post-pandemic supply chain disruption and the energy cost pressures set in motion by the war in Ukraine and associated energy cost pressures that these trends have begun to reverse.

The central policy questions of growth, crisis and inflation discussed in this section are all influenced by consumer behaviour and thus are avenues through which (distributed and inchoate) consumer agency can play out within the economy. A consequence of this relationship between consumption and the stewardship of the economy is that policymakers must attend to the diverse range of factors that influence consumer behaviour. Institutions such as the Bank of England (BoE, 2020) or regulatory bodies like the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA, 2021) have significant incentives to study the behaviour of actual consumers. Variables such as consumer confidence or their attitude to new products and technologies will have a material impact on the objectives that these bodies seek to realise and thus they must be studied and incorporated in the predictive models used to set policy. But away from this instrumental incentive to focus on the behaviour of actually existing consumers, it is only through their reified aggregates that they enter into economic analysis. Their incorporation into statistical aggregates is one of the key ways in which consumers are 'black-boxed' in economic analysis. Yet the centrality of these aggregates to the wider analysis of the economy demonstrates the potentially important contribution that a deeper understanding of consumer behaviour could make to IPE.

Trade & Globalisation

The last section demonstrated the ways in which consumption functioned as an underlying variable in some of the central policy dilemmas that face modern states, and which thus animate IPE scholarship. The fact that all such states are embedded within a wider macroeconomic context demonstrates why, even when faced with questions of domestic economic policy, the 'International' remains an important level of conceptual focus for the discipline. But the discipline also attends directly to questions of the international order that animated its parent discipline, International Relations. In these questions, the matter of trade represents one of the fundamental economic relationships that exists between states. The high politics that goes into the negotiation of trade treaties demonstrates the importance and impact of trade in terms of political influence, economic growth and its subsequent distribution. In these matters too, the discipline draws on a lineage of classical political economy for which such questions were fundamental. The liberal political economy that championed trade over the mercantilism in the 18th century remains a rich vein of ideological succor. Yet the nature of trade has changed markedly since the early days of 'wine and cloth', such that analysis of bilateral exchange is now insufficient to capture the realities of the complex global economy.

The analytical focus of the field of IPE is now just as likely to be the kind of complex supply chains from which the poster child of contemporary globalisation, the iPhone, emerges. The coordination of countless high tech manufacturing processes, grounded in the specialisms and endowments of 43 different countries, is made possible only through a long-term intellectual and political project to deepen global trade. The production of such complex consumer goods reflect one of the key ways in which globalisation has pushed outward the productive frontier of the global economy, with much of the benefits accruing to firms and consumers in the global North. Yet it has also harnessed a relentless logic of capitalist competition, one which drives a race to the bottom in wages and labour standards that has adversely incorporated (Phillips, 2016) billions of workers around the world into a ruthlessly exploitative global system. The consequences of this for the advanced capitalist nations of the global core have also been pronounced, with deindustrialisation causing extensive social and geographical dislocations. These are the transformations that lie behind the production of even the most mundane commodities, bought and sold on a daily basis with little thought as to the global nature of their origins. Yet despite the centrality of consumer goods to many of these complex networks of production and exchange, the role of consumers themselves is still often overlooked within the wider analysis of trade.

This section first outlines the mainstream theory of international trade, highlighting the role that the consumer (or at least, their representations as agents in the models of welfare economics) plays in justifying and legitimising the liberal global order. At the heart of the distributional analysis of the winners and losers is the balance between the broadly but thinly spread gains of consumers, and the losses felt far more intensely by particular workers and their communities. Yet these are frequently evaluated against a reductive account of consumer agency that is little more than a utilitarian accounting of ‘more is better’. Often left out of such debates about the domestic distributional consequences of trade, however, are those in the global South through whose labour firms and consumers stand to gain. A more critical strand of literature focuses on the deep, historical inequalities around which contemporary patterns of trade have formed, and the international inequalities in power and wealth that result. Yet failing to fully integrate consumers and understand how they realise and experience the transfers that they receive by dint of their privileged position in the global economy can distort the conclusions that are drawn from such analysis.

These theories of trade are increasingly losing out to more firm-centric approaches, more able to grapple with the complex, interconnected nature of modern globalisation. A focus on global value chains captures these interrelationships but does so with the consumer rendered a largely inert input to their decision-making processes. These have influenced a broader global production network approach to the study of the global economy, a concept from economic geography that has become increasingly influential within IPE. This provides an inclusive view of globalisation, its flat, network ontology able to incorporate consumers on a relatively equal footing to other actors within the global economy. Yet research that connects "consumptive dynamics to the configuration and operation of global production networks still seems in short supply" (Coe & Yeung, 2019). One branch of research that has productively incorporated the consumer as an active participant in the global economy is that which looks at Fair Trade and other equivalent certification schemes. This literature appraises the, relatively limited, success that such schemes have had in mobilising consumers as ethical actors within the global economy. Finally in this section, work that draws on an ecological appreciation of the global economy as being embedded within planetary boundaries will be briefly reviewed. This has always held a much more central role for consumption as the process that generates the externalities threatening the stability of the environmental system. For IPE to fully incorporate these concerns into its account of the global economy, a greater role for the consumer, and deeper understanding of consumption, will be needed.

Liberal Trade Theory

The benefits, or otherwise, of trade between states has been a question that has animated political economists since the time of Smith and Ricardo. Smith's rebuke to mercantilism in the Wealth of Nations (Smith, 1776) and Ricardo's (1817) mathematical expression of the logic of comparative advantage remain hugely influential ideas mobilising the contemporary ideology of free trade. These have subsequently been formalised by economic models such as the Heckscher–Ohlin (HO) (Stolper & Samuelson, 1941), which calculate the returns to different factors of production arising from trade between countries with different endowments. In approaches which model labour as one (or both) of the factors under consideration, it is the wages that workers receive which determine the relative benefits that they accrue. Yet, in moving the entire productive frontier of the economy outwards, it is ultimately as consumers that people stand to benefit the most from free trade. The theory of comparative advantage and the gains from trade represent "the crown jewels of the economics profession" (Rodrik, 2018, p. 74). Yet trade has always presented a distributed array of gains and losses across different constituencies in societies (Rodrik, 2018), the politics that surround are frequently complex and contested. This has been most volubly discussed in relation to the distribution of benefits to different fractions of labour, and particularly the fate of 'low-skilled' manufacturing labour in the global North (Wood, 1995; Rodrik, 1997).

The idea that free trade 'improves productive efficiency and offers consumers better choices', and that these exceed any losses in terms of wages or employment, is almost universally accepted by the economics profession.[23] These conclusions stem from the neo-classical approach to welfare economics (Samuelson 1938), which are grounded in a particular set of assumptions about the nature of consumer preferences (see p. 37). These are not based on the empirical study of real consumers, but rather assumptions about the utility maximising choices and preferences of representative agents in economic models that seek to find equilibrium conditions for a given set of endowments. The findings from these models have been influential in debates around the political economy of free trade, characterising the broad mainstream of the liberal position. It is this that has governed much of the ideology of neoliberal globalisation, to the point that such self-evident findings had to be defended from those seen to have an overly simplistic understanding of their own self-interest (Rodrik,

[23] At least in North America economics departments, according to an expert panel survey from Chicago Booth Business School (available at https://www.kentclarkcenter.org/surveys/free-trade/)

2007). Yet despite the centrality of people-as-consumers to the economic justification for free trade, the field of IPE has typically focused more on their role as workers or possessors of human capital when evaluating their support for economic globalisation.

The dominant approach to studying trade in IPE is in identifying the relative losses and gains of different cohorts and examining how that shapes their political views. A number of studies, following from the findings of the HO model when applied to workers of different skill levels, examine the role played by different levels of education (Scheve & Slaughter, 2001; Heinmuller & Hiscox, 2006). Other studies have located the formation of preferences at a more social or cultural level, focused less on individual advantage or disadvantage, but rather on perceptions of its broader sociotropic effects (Mansfield & Mutz, 2006; Margalit, 2012). Andy Baker (2003, 2005) has produced the most concerted attempt how people's experience of trade *as consumers* shapes their preferences. This finds relatively strong evidence for consumption being appreciated by individuals as a key way in which they benefit from trade, particularly when the strict assumptions of consumer preference are loosened to allow for nonhomothetic preferences and, particularly, different tastes at different levels of income. The greater import penetration within low-cost, low-quality goods explains the more positive attitude towards trade observed by those on low income. Work by Naoi and Kume (2015) addresses a central tension in asking such questions, namely that (almost) everyone exists both as a worker *and* a consumer simultaneously. Using experimental methods, they demonstrate that priming respondents to respond *as consumers* increased their support for free trade.

The question of who gains and who loses from global free trade is one which has consumption at the heart of it. The economic theory underpinning the gains from trade renders much of them 'invisible'. An expansion of the productive frontier of the economy makes more goods available, more cheaply, to render a Pareto efficient improvement to overall welfare. For the individual consumer, it means a greater surplus is achieved to the extent that the commodities they desire require the sacrifice of less of their income to acquire. Away from the rarefied world of economic textbooks, however, it is less clear that these benefits are so straightforwardly realised. Stepping back from the 'more is always better' logic of neoclassical economics to appreciate the more social contingent nature of people's desires renders the calculation of benefit far less certain. Incorporating a better understanding of the consumer into such debates around trade will help to uncover its political consequences more fully.

Uneven and Combined Development

A very different vision of the global economy, and of trade, rejects the positive sum conclusions of liberal trade theory. Perspectives grounded in theories of uneven and combined development (Bieler & Morton, 2014), world-systems theory or post- and de-colonial approaches (Patnaik & Patnaik, 2021) see free trade as largely a means by which a highly unequal world order is sustained. The practice of free trade has always historically been the prerogative of the imperial hegemon (Krasner, 1976). Rather than allowing competitor nations to develop their industrial capacity behind tariff barriers, free trade locks them into a relationships of unequal exchange that limit long term development (Chang, 2002). These approach is typically grounded either in a realist conceptualisation of state power, or instead focuses on the structuring role played by capital in sustaining core-periphery dynamics. From the latter perspective, trade, and particularly free trade, is one of the means by which the capitalist economic system intensifies the exploitation of those enclosed within it. In its modern guise, free trade means not just the removal of tariffs, but a much more technical alignment of policy to remove 'non-tariff barriers'. In the hands of the institutions of neoliberal governance (IMF, World Bank, WTO), this has often meant conditions amenable to the interests of capital are enforced at the expense of local development and democracy. But consumers, particularly in the global North, also stand to gain from unequal trade and once again the question arises of how those gains can be measured and understood.

There are a number of approaches which have tried to capture the extent of the transfer between workers in the global South and consumers in the global North[24]. Clelland (2014) applies a world-systems theory approach that distinguishes between the 'bright' and 'dark' value that is extracted from the periphery for the benefit of the core in relation to a single commodity - in this case, an Apple iPad. The 'bright' value is that which is realised on company balance sheets whilst the 'dark' value represents "the silenced partner that renders every bright value drain more profitable" (Clelland, 2014, p. 86) namely the "under-paid and unpaid labor and ecological inputs" (Clelland, 2014, p. 95) that are never registered on a balance sheet. By estimating the dollar value of these inputs, he is able to trace the drain from South to North beyond merely that which is captured on balance sheets. His conclusion is that much of this value is ultimately realised by consumers, rather than the corporations themselves, in the form of the reduced prices of the goods they buy. Hickel et. al. (2021; 2022) extend this approach across the entire economy, identifying the sheer volume of labour and resources extracted from the global South for the benefits of consumers. As Clelland notes, this transfer plays a key role in "legitimizing the structure of the system" (p. 86). This provides a different perspective on the role of consumption in the international system, but does so from above, again failing to include or understand the role of the consumer themselves in the process.

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[24] As Coe and Yeung note, increased South-South trade is increasing the complexity of some

Global Value Chains / Production Networks

Models of trade based around bi-lateral exchange between states, or of simple core-periphery dynamics, greatly underplay the complexity of trade in the modern world. 'New Trade Theory' (Krugman, 1987) emphasised the extent to which trade occurred between countries with similar endowments and levels of development. In 2021, whilst the proportion of South-South and North-South trade has increased, North-North trade remains the largest component of world trade, at least in value terms (UNCTAD, 2022). This wasn't reflected either in traditional Hecksher-Ohlin models, or the more critical account of world-systems theory. The new approach emphasised the role of specialisation and economies of scale in deriving the gains from trade. Yet whilst the total value of North-North trade is high, reflecting the concentration of high productivity industries in these figures, the North-South trade is arguably just as systemically important. The two reflect different compositions of how the gains from trade are realised, namely dynamic versus static gains. Dynamic gains are those that exploit positive returns to scale and expand the productive frontier of the economy. Static gains, meanwhile, are those that are achieved through absolute reductions in factor costs. Each has different implications for the overall distributions of winners and losers, both in the domestic and the global economy. The complexities of this new reality of trade are reflected in a literature focused more on chains and networks rather than simply extraction or exchange.

These complexities of modern global trade are better captured in accounts that focus on global value chains (Gereffi & Korzeniewicz, 1994). This perspective draws on both world-

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of these dynamics, but the general historical trend has been a transfer from periphery to core.

systems theory and modern theories of the firm to examine how the different stages of the production process are increasingly conducted across national borders. This has enabled states in the global North to retain the high-productivity components of economic activity whilst continuing to exploit the lower labour costs of the global South. This relationship is becoming increasingly complex and regionalised (Phillips, 2016), but the central relationship between a countries level of development and its ability to capture more of the gains from production remains. At the end of these value chains are the consumers who provide the demand for the finished products they produce. Whilst the typically firm-centric approach to studying GVCs means that consumers are still often kept outside the analytical frame, its focus on particular commodities and sectors means that they can be more easily incorporated into the analysis than more general models of trade.

The particular intra-firm dynamics of a given value chain have been characterised as either 'producer-driven' or 'buyer-driven', depending on a number of factors such as barriers to entry and capital intensity.[25] The latter represents the kinds of global sourcing networks set up by major retailers in the global North, where rather than direct ownership of factories, production is contracted out, through precise specification, to low-cost suppliers in the global South (Barrientos & Gereffi, 2011). In the case of buyer driven supply chains "the organization of consumption is a major determinant of where and how global manufacturing takes place" (Gereffi, 1994, p. 99). One example of this is the growth of flexible specialisation, a form of industrial organisation that looks to meet rapidly changing tastes and exploit market segmentation through responsive, short-run production (Coe, 2014). Yet this approach still struggles to integrate consumer preferences (Coe et. al, 2008). It firm-centrism

[25] It has been acknowledged (Gereffi, 2014) that these two categories present an overly reductive picture of the complexity of contemporary global value chains. However, they remain useful ideal types for elucidating some of the key distinctions.

means that it largely sees consumers as subordinate to the large firms that dominate buyer driven supply chains, who are able to “shape mass consumption via dominant market shares and strong brand names” (Gereffi, 2014, p. 13). Consumer agency is reduced to fairly instrumental assumptions around factors such as changes to their income level or their response to price changes. In some cases, however, the ability to focus on a particular market sector or commodity allows for a focus that incorporates the role of the end consumer, such as how transformations in the taste for coffee consumption have on the conditions faced by suppliers (Ponte, 2002).

Finally, the concept of the *chain* has been expanded into a wider analysis of global production *networks*. This presents the most promising perspective from which to incorporate a view of the consumer into the global economy, being an approach that deliberate deploys a flat ontology through “a relational network approach that neither under-socialises nor over-socialises current developments in the global economy” (Hess and Yeung, 2006). This approach has generated fuller accounts of the role played by consumer agency in diverse fields such as clothing (both high fashion (Weller, 2008) and second hand clothes (Brooks, 2013)), acoustic guitars (Gibson & Warren, 2016) and food (Barrientos & Smith, 2007). Yet this work has been largely conducted beyond the formal boundaries of IPE, typically within the field of economic geography that often addresses a different set of research questions. Whilst these approaches are not incommensurable, there remains a great deal more that IPE can do to fully engage with the broad, geographical conception of the global economy as represented through the concept of production networks. In particular, geography has a longer tradition of including the consumer in its analysis which can be productively built upon in the field of IPE itself. This is particularly highlighted in an area where there has been extensive research at the overlap between the two disciplines, around Fairtrade and related schemes that aim at mobilising the consumer as an agent of change in global trade.

Fair Trade

The concept of Fairtrade, and the various other certification schemes that seek to impart to consumers particular information about the circumstances of production, has been the subject of significant analysis (Watson, 2007; Clarke et. al, 2007; LeBaron & Lister, 2015). These explicitly depart from the view of consumers as expressing a purely instrumental rationalism, instead seeking to capture ways in which they are able to express more normative or moral sentiments through the choices they make in the marketplace. Whilst the implications this has for understandings of consumer agency is significant, the nature of the schemes themselves is often lacking. They have typically been restricted to limited sectors of the economy, particularly “foodstuffs and textiles” (Watson, 2005, p. 217). They are often opaque and organised by private bodies meaning that the exact level of accountability they provide is unclear (LeBaron & Lister, 2022). And in many industries, the lack of an obvious line from the context of production to the specific commodity bought by the consumer lessens their effectiveness - for example in the extractive industries (Bloomfield, 2017), or soy farming (Heron, et. al, 2018).

Such projects can be seen cynically as a deliberate political project to shift the burden of responsibility onto consumers (Shamir, 2008), away from the corporate actors who actually make the decisions that have negative ethical consequences (James & Scerri, 2012; Egels-Zanden & Hansson, 2016). Critics have noted the irony of attempting to address the problems of consumerism through more consumerism, that it fails to challenge or transform the underlying market relations (Watson 2005) and renders the ethical character of goods just another facet of commodity fetishism (Carrier, 2010). Despite this, the existence of such schemes, and the factors that motivate consumers to alter their choices in response to them, introduce a significant element of moral economy into their actions and choices. Barnett et. al

(2011) emphasise the ways in which the actions and choices of consumers can be mobilised politically, subjecting it to a governmentality that seeks to govern the problems of consumption through the consumer themselves (Barnett et. al., 2011, p. 44). Micheletti departs from ideas of ethical consumption to instead focus on forms of political consumerism that use "the market as an arena for politics" (Micheletti & Stole, 2008, p. 750) Whilst the actual efficacy of these approaches to trade justice can be limited, it is nevertheless an area of study that renders the nature of consumer agency within market exchange much more visible.

Political Ecology

The final area where the actions of consumers are directly related to their global economic consequence is with respect to the environment. The study of ecological economics (Jacobs, 1995) and global environmental politics (Barry, 2012; Blühdorn, 2020) has typically placed greater focus on the consumer and the role they play the generation of pollution and the depletion of resources. Whilst IPE remains inconsistent in the extent to which it incorporates the environmental dimensions to its analysis (Paterson, 2020), there is a body of work which focuses on the deleterious effects of human economic activity on the natural environment. In these, consumption and the consumer has frequently been given greater analytical prominence. Rather than viewing the economy from the perspective of production, where goods are manufactured and exchanged until they are 'removed' from the economic sphere by an act of consumption, the focus on both the extraction of materials and their afterlife as waste means that people as consumers occupy a much more central point in wider processes of circulation. Yet the nature of this role is frequently entangled in the wider debates about the extent and nature of consumer agency. Analysis in this tradition can often reproduce the logics of ethical consumption discussed in the previous section, that characterise schemes such as Fairtrade. This reduces the range of solutions solely to individual consumer behaviour represents an individualisation of collective problems (Maniates, 2001). The perspective of IPE presents the possibility of reframing "solutions to consumption problems… to include production system, not just individual consumption, changes" (Iles, 2006, p. 358), yet this frequently veers into overly strict structuralism.

Such an approaches is typified by Dauvergne (2008; 2010) who uses consumption as a frame to analyse the environmental impact of contemporary capitalism. Viewing consumption as a problem, and a systemic, structural one at that, its drivers and influences are all located at a similar level. In situating its analysis in the "advertising, economic growth, technology, income inequality, corporations, population growth, and globalization" (Dauvergne, 2010, p. 1) that generate consumption, the consumer as an active participant is relegated from the analysis. The ultimate solution to the problems he identifies are a return to forms of consumption grounded in cautious consumption based on thrift, frugality, simplicity and self-reliance (Princen et. al, 2002). Yet without a compelling engagement with the consumer as an active participant in the practice of consumption, and the various motivations, incentives and desires they possess, the mechanism by which such transformations might be made remains obscured. As Gregson (2010) notes in a review of this work, much of the criticism of consumption are grounded in a 'deep green' critique that "long[s] for a return to an imagined simpler life" (p. 321). But, drawing on an example from the book, technologies like CFC refrigerators are not simply drivers of consumption for its own sake, but are now "integral to the ordering of billions of human lives around the globe" (Gregson, 2010, p. 321). Consumption and its consequences cannot simply be studied as a discrete phenomenon, but rather one that enables and is embedded in a much wider and more complex set of practices.

Everyday Approaches

The final section of this chapter looks at an increasingly influential tradition within IPE that studies the everyday dimensions of economic life. Whilst it is an approach that represents a significant diversity of perspectives, their shared focus on the micro-social underpinnings of economic phenomena makes them well placed to study consumption. Although relatively new to the field of IPE, the research frame and subject matter of everyday IPE has been well-defined by work in other disciplines such as sociology, geography, anthropology and a wide range of feminist scholarship. What broadly aligns the field is a "mode of study which reflects concerns for under- standing the historically-specific cultural basis of prevailing world economic structures" (Watson, 2013, p. 2). Whilst it has been productively deployed in a diverse array of frames and contexts, it provides an extremely useful perspective to focus on the mundane, daily practices of consumption activity and the spaces like the household in which they take place. As a result, it provides a highly productive frame through which to study consumption as a social practice whilst remaining connected to the broader economic relationships that sustain it, and are sustained through it. Yet it is also necessary to unpick the various different understandings of the everyday that exist within these approaches, as these have significant consequences for how consumption is understood and located within them.

Everyday life

The two central understandings of the everyday have been characterised as Everyday Life and Everyday Politics (Stanley & Jackson, 2016). The starting point for much work in this tradition, which established Everyday Life as field of inquiry, was Henri Lefebvre's Critique of Everyday Life. This is a complex work of dialectical Marxist analysis, and a substantive critique of consumerist society in its own right. It conceives of Everyday Life as the being "sphere where needs and goods meet" (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 96). It represents the spaces of life in which commodities are consumed and find their meaning, in turn sustaining the colonisation of people’s leisure and their social world by the outputs of capitalist production. In this way, it becomes a “social text” (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 97) through which the “practical, historical and social reality” of capitalist society can be read. His analysis was firmly grounded in a Marxist account of capital as the central structuring dynamic of society, and in this sense overlapped significantly with the perspective advanced by the Frankfurt School (p. 46). Yet it overlooked many of the other dimensions that characterise everyday life, not least gender. Later approaches would acknowledge everyday life as “a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determinations interact” (De Certeau, 1984, p. xi). Analyses from this perspective broadly reflects so-called ‘cultural political economy’ (Best & Paterson, 2009; Jessop & Sum, 2013) approaches, that focus their analysis on the subjectivities and practice that are formed and enacted in a given social context.

Everyday life provides a theoretical frame for studying the interplay between macroscale phenomena and the subjectivities and practices of the individuals. In some cases, when applied to consumption this can render it a somewhat structuralist account. In their analysis of the role played by consumers in driving the ecological crisis of capitalism, Wissen and Brand (2021) invoke Everyday Life as a frame through which the so-called Imperial Mode of Living is reproduced. Working from a broadly Gramscian perspective, their account falls into the same traps as many of the critical approaches to consumption (see p. 44) in reducing consumption solely to an imperative of capital. And whilst they set out to describe a ‘mode of living’, their empirical focus is both narrow and largely top-down, studying the structural drivers on car ownership which, whilst clearly important economically, is only one facet of consumption. A more compelling approach in this tradition is found in the work of Matt Davies, who takes up a cultural analysis of everyday life very clearly influenced by the work of Lefebvre. His work focuses on culture and its reproduction in everyday spaces such as the workplace, “the time and space of leisure” (Davies & Neimann, 2002, p. 571) and the household. More broadly, approaches which focus on the processes of subjectification through which economic practices are reproduced and sustained draw on this kind of Everyday Life approach, such Langley (2008) and Marron (2013) on finance, or Larner (1997) on telecommunications. As with Brand and Wissen, the tendency of such approaches is to study everyday spaces, but from a top-down perspective, tracing out the influence of wider structures on its character.

Everyday politics

Everyday politics approaches, meanwhile, are built more explicitly from the bottom up, focusing on the agency and resistance available to ‘everyday actors’. In this, it explicitly sets out to define itself against so-called ‘regulatory’ IPE, which asks “asks ‘who governs and how is international order regulated’” (Elias et. al., 2016, p. 241). This focus unavoidably “reif[ies] or fetishize[s] top-down processes connected to international institutions and states, hegemons, elite actors and global ‘civilized’ norms” (Elias et. al., 2016, p. 241). The approach draws its lineage from peasant studies (Kirkvliet, 2009) and anthropology (Scott, 1989) in understanding the complex webs of legitimation and participation that ultimately underpin any political system. In the context of political economy, it provides an analysis of “how, what and with whom we spend, save, invest, buy and produce in our ordinary lives” (Hobson & Seabrooke, 2007, p. 1) and interrogates how that “shapes markets and how states choose to intervene in them” (Hobson & Seabrooke, 2007, p. 1). With its analytical focus on the distributed and socially contingent agency of everyday actors, it an approach that is the most closely aligned with the central question advanced in this thesis. Yet whilst there has been limited work done in this tradition directly on questions on consumption, it has not been as central to work done in this tradition as questions of work (Herod, 2007) or finance

(Seabrooke, 2006). Yet it has substantial overlap with disciplines such as geography and sociology that have traditionally been more focused on questions of consumption and deploy a similar account of situated agency.

One example of an 'Everyday Politics' approach to the study of consumption is given by Rigg (2016), who studies the everyday response to the economic policy of 'sufficiency' enacted by the Thai state. This examines the tensions and contradictions between the traditional values that align with the policy's goals, and the countervailing tendencies that see "consumer goods define success" (Rigg, 2016, p. 14) and that have driven the growth of consumer debt. In expressing diverse and contradictory responses to government policy, the villagers find a "space, however small, for the expression of agency" (Hobson & Seabrooke, 2007. p. 14). Studying this kind of everyday agency benefits from methodologies that are attuned to fine-grained distinctions in how people understand, and act in, the global economy. Everyday approaches have productively used approaches such as focus groups (Stanley, 2014), diary studies (Ellegård, 2006) or ethnography (Hall, 2011) to provide a richer empirical account of the narratives and practices of everyday life. In this, they align with a significant body of existing research on consumption, that has long used similar methods to study the phenomenon of consumption, and the behaviour of consumers, in context (i.e. Miller (1998); Money (2007)). This approach represents the most productive avenue to pursue in linking a micro-scale account of consumer agency with its broader consequences in the global economy. Yet it is also important to draw from a parallel tradition of feminist research, which has long focused on everyday spaces and through this have provided useful theoretical and conceptual frames through which to understand consumption.

Feminst IPE

Another tradition within IPE that has long attended to 'bottom-up' views of the global economy is that which grew out of feminist scholarship. Whilst its analytical focus has much in common with Everyday IPE, its central interest in the concept of social reproduction extends the framework of early Everyday work (LeBaron, 2010). Though these two approaches have now been productively entangled (i.e. Bedford, 2016; Montgomerie & Tepe-Belfrage, 2016), the specific contribution of feminist thought, and particularly social reproduction theory, to IPE research is significant and draws from a expansive tradition of critique that was overlooked by much of the early everyday IPE work (Elias & Roberts, 2016). What characterises much feminist IPE work is a disavowal of the "foundational dichotomies" (Prügl, 2020, p. 295) that proliferate in the mainstream of IPE. Amongst these is the gendered binary that separates production from consumption. Grounded in the gender binary that defined the Fordist model of the family wage (Fraser, 1994), labour in the 'public' realm of work was given primacy, whilst the labour that took place in the 'private' domain of the household was rendered all but invisible. That the latter was also seen as the primary domain of consumption meant that consumption itself became gendered and decentred from accounts of the economy. The value of feminist IPE is in casting out these binaries and developing accounts of the global economy grounded in these previously unconsidered spaces.

As well as disestablishing the binary of production and consumption, feminist IPE also presents significant theoretical terrain in which to explore its wider consequence. The concept of social reproduction emerged from Marx's work, where it was understood as the necessary labour to physically reproduce the labouring bodies on whom all other processes of value creation ultimately depend. His model of it, however, was not fully developed (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 2) often instrumentally reduced to the material inputs needed to sustain life, rather that the numerous forms of labour needed to facilitate its reproduction. Feminist scholars greatly expanded the theoretical understanding of social reproduction, reflecting the necessary labour that went into processes of sustenance and care (Besanzon & Luxton, 2006; Federici, 2012). It also acknowledged how these processes shifted and changed, the responsibility for them moving between household, state and market in response to wider changes in the structure of the economy (Katz, 2001). Given its oversight in earlier literature, much of this approach focuses on highlighting and denaturalising the labour that sustains social reproduction. A significant review of the field demonstrates both a conceptual and empirical emphasis on social reproduction understood as work (Elias & Rai, 2019).

In attending to “how food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption” (Brenner & Laslett, 1989, p.382), the perspective of feminist IPE makes the spaces and purpose of consumption much more visible than some other traditions. But the nature and role of consumption can sit somewhat awkwardly within accounts of social reproduction. Hoskyns and Rai (2007) conceptualise the economy into three separate spheres - the public, private and domestic. It is this last sphere that is held to be the domain of social reproduction, one that is rendered invisible to traditional economic analysis. In this way, the domestic sphere provides the arena for consumption, but as a process grounded in the market it is ultimately subject to the demands and logic of capital. As a consequence, whilst the physical act of going shopping might represent socially reproductive labour, the commodities themselves are part of capitalism’s central system of accumulation and subject to their own distinct logic. To the extent that the market encloses and alienates parts of the social reproduction process, they become governed by the logic of capitalist exchange. But such a view overlooks the cultural complexity of consumption, reducing “social reproduction to functionalism and of consumption to conspicuous leisure activity” (Fletcher, 2006). A focus on consumption in the context of social reproduction offers a chance to better understand how the two are entangled.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that consumption plays a central role in a broad range of economic phenomena that motivate the discipline of International Political Economy. Key concepts such as growth, crisis, trade and globalisation all have consumption at their core, as one of the key processes that drives the circular flow of economic exchange. Yet the account of consumption that underpins these analyses frequently clusters around the two 'poles' that were outlined in the previous chapter. Furthermore, the disciplines often macro-scale perspective, and quantitative methodology, means that the contribution of consumers to these processes is often bound up at the statistical aggregate. This can obscure or flatten the complex social drivers of consumption, instead representing them as an undifferentiated mass of consumer demand. A consequence of this is that the discipline can tend towards an account of consumption without consumers themselves being present in the analysis.

More recently, everyday approaches have become well-established within the discipline which provide a more appropriate methodological perspective from which to study the phenomenon of consumption. Yet whilst these, along with a parallel tradition in feminist IPE, are well placed to study consumption, their remains little work from either approach that attempts to directly and systematically situate consumers as agents within the global economy. This reflects a broader lack of esteem that consumption holds within the discipline, relative to topics such as work, production and trade. Whilst everyday approaches provide an ideal methodological viewpoint to study consumption, its scope as a field of study means that there remains substantial room for new insights to be developed from this perspective. To do so, it must be married with a more complete and compelling account of consumer agency than those that currently inform the dominant perspectives within the discipline. The following chapter sets out to develop such an account, drawing on Pragmatism to provide a richer conceptual toolkit for understanding some of the contingent and contextual ways that human agency is deployed in the practice of consumption

Chapter 3 - Studying Consumption Pragmatically

Introduction

Consumption is a difficult process to study, one that has found its way into almost every facet of human action. In comparison with production, itself a hugely complex social process, the forms, sites and modes of consumption are orders of magnitude more diverse. The nature of our modern society is such that little takes place within it that is not in some way enabled by, and thus dependent on, acts of consumption. The breadth of experience that this represents is not easily amenable to study or systematisation. It is partly for this reason that existing attempts to incorporate the consumer into economic analysis have deployed an a priori rationality, rather than engage with the messy and uneven terrain of actually existing consumer behaviour. For reasons set out in the previous two chapters, such an account of agency ultimately misrepresents what motivates and guides human behaviour. The purpose of this chapter is first to establish a more appropriate conceptual framework through which to understand how people act as economic agents, before then outlining in detail the methods that will be deployed to study it. Together, these will provide broad but manageable account of consumption that enable a (still necessarily limited) account of the role of consumer agency within the global economy to be developed.

The practice-based accounts of consumption that were introduced in Chapter 1 (see p. 56) point a more grounded account of human agency, sensitive to its specific context and reflecting its often partial or inconstant character. Yet such approaches have often struggled to situate their account of consumption as a complex social practice within the more restrictive context of people's participation in markets as economic agents. One school of approaches that has successfully bridged this gap is work grounded in, or influenced by, philosophical pragmatism (i.e Callon, 2007; Cochoy, 2008). As with other schools of practice theory, this provides great potential for situating human action into its wider context, without giving either the upper hand in determining social outcomes (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). It is a tradition that foregrounds human agency whilst being alive to the relations that shape and constrain it, loosening the strictures of rationality, knowledge and calculation that underpin the unrepresentative agents of liberal economic thought. In particular, the canon of pragmatic thought provides a number of useful concepts for analysing the phenomenon of consumption. These are 'habit', 'deliberation', and 'valuation', which provide a conceptual toolkit that structures the subsequent analysis of the empirical data. The first section of this chapter outlines these in the context of a wider pragmatic account of agency. This makes explicit the nature of the assumptions about the social world in which this research is grounded and reflects on what this means for the nature of consumer agency and how it can be evaluated through the data.

As well as providing the central concepts around which the inquiry will be designed, the pragmatist approach also provides an appropriate epistemological and methodological perspective from which to conduct inquiry about the international arena and economic phenomena within it (Poirot, 2008; Kratochwil & Frediericks, 2009; Frankel, 2016). Central to these approaches is an appreciation of social research as a practice in its own right, which seeks to generate knowledge claims through the judicious and appropriate applications of a diverse range of research methods aligned with the underlying motivations of the study. In this case, establishing the nature of consumer agency in the global economy requires "understand[ing] the texture of human practice via objectifying observation;… and ruminant[ing] on the conceptual instruments used for observation" (Kratochwil & Fredierícks, 2009, p. 714). The first section of this chapter will focus on these conceptual instruments, outlining the nature of their assumptions about the character of human agency and its implications for the research. The following section then outlines in detail the specific methods through which observations of consumer choice and behaviour were gathered. Given the breadth and potential complexity of consumption as a topic of study, this begins with delineating the site and scope of the research, before outlining in detail the research instruments that were deployed to generate the data used in analysis.

In defining the terms of the research, the key task is to find an approach that can best provide a bridge between the practices of daily consumption and the broader analytical scale of IPE. To this end, the focus chosen is specifically on commodities within the home. Since Marx, political economy has understood the central role of *the commodity itself* in instantiating the globe spanning social relations that characterise modern consumption. Yet beyond the sphere of market exchange, such commodities go on to lead a rich 'social life', the character of which shapes and influences the terms of their circulation (Appadurai, 1986). For this reason, the household is chosen as the most appropriate site of research, both because of its intimate connection with the objects of consumption and its central role in the processes of social reproduction that consumption supports and sustains. Having defined the forms of consumption to be studied, there were also extensive and consequential choices made in respect to defining the parameters of the study and the population to be investigated. The 'everyday' nature of the research presupposes little in the way of identifiable characteristics that can inform the sample can be drawn. At the same time, it requires the identification of commonalities across and between different positions in society. The specification of a research frame able to encompass a sufficient breadth of different perspectives, yet remain a manageable project to complete with the time and resources available, is outlined here. This also includes reflections on the practical and ethical considerations around the recruitment of participants.

Finally, to generate the data itself, at the heart of this research was a diary completed by the participants, in which they recorded the specific acts of consumption that they conduct over the period of a month. The data generated this way provides a window through which it was possible to discuss and reflect on the thought processes and habits that guided and informed the consumption captured this way. This was explored using talking methods, in the form of interviews, to invoke reflection on the acts of consumption captured in the diary study. This section also includes methodological reflections on how the research actually unfolded with discussion on the significant changes to the research that were necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The final section briefly outlines the data that was generated by these methods, along with details of the processes that were undertaken to analyse it.

<u>Section 1 - Conceptual Framework</u>

<u>Pragmatic Agency</u>

The concept at the heart of the research question addressed here is that of agency. The nature of agency as it relates to explanations of the social world is ultimately an ontological one. This has been chewed over somewhat fruitlessly by generations of sociologists in an ongoing attempt to establish the primacy of either agency or structure in the social world (Hay, 2002).

Given its character as a facet of social ontology, any investigation of agency in the social world must begin by addressing presuppositions about its nature and extent. To the extent that agency represents the way in which “indeterminacy [is] injected into social systems” (Hay, 2004, p. 39), it is a contention of this thesis that the act of consumption is ultimately an agential one (subject to some caveats). The choices at the heart of any act of consumption - to buy or not to buy, or to buy this widget over that whatsit - are generally situations where the capacity to choose otherwise lies within the gift of the consumer themselves[26]. That there is some role for human agency in people’s consumption practices is thus a presupposition of this research, rather than a question to be resolved through empirically study. What must be addressed, if the research question is to be answered successfully, is instead the character and extent of that agency, and its role and consequence in the wider economic systems to which it is introduced. The strict rationality of mainstream consumer theory is little help in addressing such questions, instead imposing a “paradoxical structuralism” (Hay, 2005, p. 103) that provides little scope for people to act outside of a singular frame of utility maximising.

For this investigation into the nature of consumer agency to proceed, therefore, it is necessary to establish the broad parameters through which human agency will be understood and situated in the social world. For reasons that will be outlined shortly, the approach taken here is one that draws on philosophical Pragmatism. Pragmatism, originating in the work of American scholars such as James, Pierce and Dewey, and influencing a number of later social thinkers (Rorty, Boltanski, Haack), is a school that views the social world as being constituted by, and irreducible from, the actions and associations of its participants. This understands human agency not as “the pursuit of preestablished ends, abstracted from

[26] Clearly this freedom of choice has limits - a starving person is not meaningfully at liberty to choose not to purchase whatever food is available. In the context of the consumption discussed here, however, the latitude of consumer choice is expected to substantially outweigh any direct structural or biotic imperatives to consume.

concrete situations, but rather that ends and means develop coterminously within contexts that are themselves ever changing and thus always subject to reevaluation and reconstruction on the part of the reflective intelligence" (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 967). This cotermination means the Pragmatic account of agency can encompass "historical, cultural, and personal variability" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 973), rather than simply being the expression of a one-size-fits-all rationality. For this reason, it is an account of agency that can serve as a more compelling explanatory force, one that can reveal the complex tangle of associations that drive consumers to act in the ways that they do.

The tradition was grounded in the naturalism of James' (1890) psychological observations, which introduced habit as a non-rational guide for human action. Later thinkers such as Dewey and Mead "began from these premises, but built them out with greater attention to sociality" (Gross, 2018, p. 89). Its account of agency, at least for the purposes of this thesis, is essentially bifurcated into two distinct modes. Its first mode focused on the ways in which certain techniques of practice became socially established such that they would form a habitual guide to action when in the absence of doubt. Human action in this context proceeds in ways that are "undetermined but not unstructured" (Beckert, 2003, p. 771). The second mode, the understanding of which emerged particularly from Dewey's work (Dewey, 1922), is an emphasis on understanding the circumstances in which doubt, reflection or deliberation can wrestle the controls away from unthinking habits and set individuals on a new course. The constant, ongoing constitution of ends-in-view through people's participation in society can bring about moments where they diverge from the consequences brought about, and experienced, through habitual action. It is in these moments that pragmatism confers agency its decisive characteristic, able to provide "a conscious searching consideration of how best to respond to situational contingencies in light of broader goals and projects" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 999). It is this that leavens habit and ensures that it doesn't bind human conduct so tightly that an inadvertently deterministic structuralism takes hold.

Pragmatism represents a productive approach by which an understanding of consumption grounded in 'practice' can be made compatible with a broader scale of analysis. This is acknowledged by Evans (2020) in his critique of existing practice approaches, where he highlights three potential avenues to better link the different scales of analysis. These are the idea of market *agencements* (Callon, 1998), an understanding of the *Social Life of Things* (Appadurai, 1986) and the sphere of *ontological politics* opened up by Actor-Network Theory (Mol, 1999). Each of these approaches hold a shared heritage from, or at least alignment with, philosophical Pragmatism. It presents a useful, if often overlooked, perspective through which to study macro-scale phenomena such as capitalism (Deustchman, 2011) or the global economy.[27] Gross (2018) presents a useful review of Pragmatism's potential, and limitations, for analysing meso- and macro-scale social phenomena.[28] Given this study's interest in situating the phenomenon of consumption within the global economy, pragmatism presents a particularly useful tool for making the link from these micro-interactions to processes at work on a wider scale. This will be demonstrated through the conceptual toolkit developed in the rest of this section. The first two concepts reflected the two modes of pragmatic agency, namely 'habit' and 'deliberation'. The third, meanwhile, takes up the concept of 'valuation' to think about the context in which forms of agency take on an explicitly economic character.

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[27] Poirot (2008) speculates about the impact that potentially negative associations of the more colloquial form of the term pragmatism (e.g. 'the central bank acted *pragmatically* to engender a recession through interest rate rises') might have in deploying classical pragmatism in an economic context.

[28] As an approach, it gained an unwarranted reputation as "a micro affair" (Gross, 2018, p. 91). This arose through pragmatism's revival as symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986) in the second half of the 20th century. This emphasised the role of interaction and interpretation in generating and sustaining social life and thus lent itself towards very micro-focused, bottom up focus on the "flow of interaction and meaning in the concrete settings people

Habit

A central pillar of pragmatic thought, that stems from the work of William James and is founded in his background in psychology, is the role of habit. In its earliest forms, this was presented primarily as a mode of human thought. It reflected a set of cognitive shortcuts used to winnow the overwhelming quantities of choice and decisions that otherwise would paralyse any mind required to deliberate each of them as if as-new. Rather than simply characterising habitual behaviours, the habits of pragmatism extend to the processes of thought that underpin them. Pierce characterised such habits as a *Logica Utens* or a logic in use, a mode of reasoning "found in the reasoner's instinctive and ingrained, inner life" (Pietarinen, 2005, p. 359). Even in these earliest expressions, habits were understood to have a wider social consequence, being described by James (1914) as "the flywheel of society". In James' original formulation, he spoke about it chiefly in the context of work and specifically how the working class could become habituated to otherwise intolerable conditions. But later thinkers, in particularly Dewey, developed an account of habit that went beyond the realm of individual psychology and instead provided the foundation for an explicitly social ontology.

Habits are deeply social things. Whilst they are manifested through the actions of individuals, habits are formed throughout ones life in the context of experience, which inevitably includes encounters with the habits and expectations of others. Habits, taken at the aggregate across society, become customs. Customs, in turn, "persist because individuals form their personal habits under conditions set by prior customs." (Dewey, 1922, p. 58). Pragmatism was a key influence to the field of economic institutionalism (Beckert, 2003). Hodgson (2004) describes how social institutions work to shape habits, identifying it as a key dynamic through which individuals are shaped by their environment. Institutions represent any

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inhabit" (Gross, p. 91).

collectivised set of rules or expectations that govern forms of behaviour in a particular context. At their broadest extent, they can encompass things like language, where a coherent system of rules allows individual participants to communicate with each other in ways that would be impossible without a shared institutional framework. Particularly where these institutions are bound only informally by rules, the shifting habits of individuals can drive changes in the frameworks of the institutions themselves. To take the example of language, whilst the formal rules of grammar might be encoded somewhere that makes them slow and resistant to change, the practice of colloquial language is much more amenable to change, such that new patterns of speech can quickly become established. This intermingling of the individual and the social, with neither being given the upper hand, reflects the rejection of both rationalism and structuralism that characterises Pragmatism.

The concept of habits is particularly germane with respect to consumption - 'shopping habits' is a familiar colloquialism that reflects the way in which people's consumption decisions are frequently grounded in pre-rational patterns of action. Rather than each consumption decision being a distinct, rational choice, a significant role is played by a cognitive auto-pilot, one shaped by the consumers situation and experience. This has significant implications for how we should consider the consumer's role in the wider networks of production and exchange in which they are embedded. As Dewey notes, the "taste for flowers… may be the initial step in building reservoirs and irrigation canals" (Dewey, 1922, p. 22). The habitual nature of the concerns that govern consumption were central to Veblen's work (see p. 51) which was contemporary with, and indebted to, early pragmatic thought. His idea of the 'pecuniary standard of living' fits the brief for the kind of informal social institution that is inscribed and enacted through the collective habits of those engaged in it. But it is too limited in that it only allows for emulation a display as the vector by which people pursue consumption. The concept of habit is here deployed to take a wider view of consumption and reveal the different ways in which peoples conduct is shaped by social customs, expectations and institutions. Studying such habits, and how they are formed and changed, will provide a window into how the actions of consumers shape the wider networks of exchange in which they are implicated.

Deliberation

Any study of habituated patterns of behaviour must allow for them to change or develop, otherwise the system under analyse will appear to be overly static and structured. The other components of the pragmatic account of agency reveal how habits are transformed through experience, creativity and experimentation. Habits arise, and persist, because they succeed in obtaining the desired ends, or at least getting close enough to them so as not to precipitate change. But persistent habits, applied across changing contexts, can lead to different outcomes. The ends that people seek to achieve, and the means by which they seek to achieve them, "flow in a continual stream" (Jackson, 2005, p. 232). Any significant deviation of means from ends is the prompt for "reorganization and reconstitution of habits and institutions" (Joas, 1996, p. 24). The ability to do this stems from the ability of individuals as actors to imagine possible future trajectories of action, and to "make practical and normative judgements "in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). The habitual and deliberative elements of consumer agency exist in constant interplay, each gaining or losing the upper hand in response to changes in circumstance. A full account of consumer agency, therefore, requires not just a focus on habit but also an understanding of how it can breakdown and transform.

The formation and maintenance of habits when it comes to consumption is shaped by the circumstances in which the consumer finds themselves in. The ‘ends’ people seek to secure can range from the relatively trivial (e.g. to watch TV at a particular resolution) to matters of significant moral consequence (e.g. global labour and climate justice). Whilst the potential influences are too numerous to exhaustively categorise, some factors are clearly influential. A central determinant of consumption is income, which must be constant and predictable to allow for stable and sustainable habits. Any significant negative shock to income is likely to necessitate a change or break in consumption habits. A positive income shock might entail more expensive tastes, or the take up of new activities. Habitual consumption in excess of an individuals income can be sustained through access to credit, but not indefinitely. Such an event is liable to spark a period of experimentation, through more carefully considered consumption choices, to seek out new habits more in keeping with the changed circumstance. Similarly, significant life events - buying a house, changing careers, moving across the country - are all liable to occasion a shift in settled habits. Starting a family, in particular, is a point in the life course where habits can be uprooted or established. This is a fact that is not lost on corporate actors, who often target new parents in the knowledge that habits formed during this time can lead to long-term behaviours.[29] In all these ways, habits can change across the lifecourse as people respond to new and different circumstances. But changes to habit can also reflect changes to the wider context in which people act (or their understanding of it), drawing a more direct link between consumers and the world in which they consume.

The kinds of deliberation this represents can be conceived in two distinct ways. The first is creative, representing moments where changes are made in impulsive or exploratory ways,

[29] A famous example was the US supermarket Target using customer data to predict which of their customers were pregnant, and then bombard them with coupons / offers. This led to the (almost certainly apocryphal, but widely shared) claim that Target ‘revealed’ a teenage girl was pregnant before she, or her enraged father, knew about it. This vastly overstates the predictive capacity of such algorithms, but that it was tried at all demonstrates the value of capturing shoppers at this formative stage of the life course. (Duhigg, 2012)

the desired new ends not yet in view but using imaginative and experimental processes to find a more satisfying outcome. The second is *projective* (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 971), where clearly delineated new ends are pursued through deliberate attempts to transform "received structures of thought…in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future" (p. 971). The resultant practices that emerge as people attempt to realign their habits with the moral principles can themselves become habituated. The moral principles people apply in such a process may themselves be habits "of ethical evaluation" (Gross, 2011, p. 89). The central point is that, for whatever reason, people as agents always have the capacity to act in more considered or deliberative ways than a focus on simply habit will allow. Therefore, the degree to which such deliberative reasoning can be seen to inform consumption will represent an important vector to evaluate the extent to which the pragmatic account of agency presents an appropriate model for consumer agency.

Valuation

The pragmatic account of agency developed here demonstrates the central role of action in realising and reproducing social phenomena. A key form of action, which is of particular importance in the study of economic relations, is that of *valuation.* As has already been touched on in Chapter 1, questions about the form and nature of value provide key dividing lines between different accounts of economic life. Whether it is formed through exchange, or created at the moment of production, value is typically perceived in quantitative forms, as something that attaches itself to goods in ways that can be appraised and enumerated, even where the ultimate foundations of such value are contingent and subjective. Pragmatism, by grounding social life in action, provides a perspective that focuses more on the ways in which people act to assign or affix value to things. In ways analogous to the 'speech acts' of pragmatic linguistics, rather than "passively evaluating a given object, [actors] actively participate in its very definition" (Heinich, 2020, p.3). Rather than calculating, observing or otherwise measuring the intrinsic or extrinsic value a good possesses, the act of valuing is central to the very existence of value as a meaningful quality (Hennion, 2015). Such an approach is grounded in the work of Dewey (1939) but has been taken up by the French economic school of '*économie des conventions*' who focus on the ways in which people attach and assign qualities and values to the goods they encounter.

Valuation is a process that typically takes place in circumstances economists would understand as markets. Yet an important perspective of this school of economic sociology is the fact that markets rarely function in the ways they are described in simple models. Instead, the features of 'model' markets are often projected on to actually existing markets (Callon, 1998). Miller (2002), without explicitly invoking the notion of 'valuation', highlights how a reductive focus on price as a quantitative phenomenon obscures how any given purchase actually represents much more qualitative process of evaluating the various perceived qualities and characteristics the object possesses. Central to the idea of valuation is the sense that it is neither intrinsic (reflecting the qualities of the good) or extrinsic (a subjective projection of perceived qualities). This takes place through a process of "singularization" (Chamberlain, 1946; Callon & Muniesa, 2005), in which an object undergoes a gradual definition that allows the qualities and characteristics that denote its value to become attached to it. This is a "process of classification, clustering and sorting that makes products both comparable and different" (Callon & Muniesa, 2005, p. 1235). It is this that shephards objects between 'the world of supply', where they take the form of undifferentiated commodities, and the world of the consumer, where they become adjusted to the particular circumstance of the buyer's world.

The process of valuation is a qualitative, rather than a quantitative one. But in the vast majority of contemporary economic settings, it is necessarily given a quantitative character. In becoming singularized, the good also becomes calculable - it can be compared against those things that are similar, and those that are different. Through the endowment of "properties that produce distinctions" (Callon & Muniesa, 2005, p.1235), the good becomes calculable in ways that relate its value(s) as a qualitative set of attachments, to its price as a quantitative variable. In respect to the latter, in the case of the majority of mundane consumption decisions, this is fixed by processes external to the consumer, as a given price determined by conditions of supply and competition. The sole calculable act then performed by the consumer themselves is a binary 'take-it-or-leave-it' choice, where the good for sale either meets or exceeds the subjectively established value, or it does not. As has been noted by Latour (1987), Cochoy (2002) and others, the calculative agency is not restricted solely to the individual human actor, but is distributed across wider *agencements*. In this respect, the calculation of a given price is not made in a vacuum, but in a particular context, from the arrangement of goods on shelves, the packaging and much more besides. This aspect, (part of the 'agency of supply', from the retailer, the producer and so on), provides the context and comparability that anchor and make possible calculation.

Valuation has been fruitfully employed in many accounts of contemporary capitalism, particularly in the domain of finance (Muniesa, 2011; Chiapello, 2015). By focusing on valuation, it is possible to trace out the ways in which an array of artificially generated asset classes are imbued with value through an established set of calculative techniques. It has also been explored in the world of goods, with Beckert et. al. (2010) analysing the process of valuation across a range of different situations, from vintage wine to scientific papers. It is often used as a framework for understanding the ways in which functionally similar commodities can come to command vastly different prices on the basis of variation in a range of subjective and intangible qualities they are perceived to possess. But, as has been clear since Dewey's first writing on the subject, these processes can also take the form of 'devaluation'. This can happen in the life of a thing, as once the consumer takes it into their possession they can undergo an attendant reduction in their perception of its value[30]. But valuation, reflecting the underlying etymology, can take place in one of two modes. It can be both the positive ascribing of value through the perception of qualities, or it can be the comparative evaluation of a good relative to its potential substitutes. The latter can work to depress and diminish perceptions of value. It is in the operation of these two logics of valuation that people, guided by their habits, expectations and values, exert their agency as economic actors in the economy.

Conclusion

The concepts outlined in this section represent three dimensions through which a pragmatic understanding of agency can be operationalised and interrogated empirically. Whilst fundamental questions about the nature of agency in society have an ontological character that renders them prior to empirical investigation (Hay, 2005), making explicit these underlying assumptions around its nature allow empirical data to be analysed in their light. This addresses a research question that enquires not simply as to the degree to which consumer agency plays a role in the global economy, but rather enquires as to its nature. Setting out these general assumptions about the nature of human agency provides a framework to investigate and explore these in the context of people's consumption practices. Rather than definitively determining the nature of consumer agency through empirical data,

[30] Following Simmel (1900) perceptions of value are a function of distance, and inevitably diminish on acquiring the object.

this approach instead uses it to demonstrate the potential value of such an account of consumer agency to the discipline of IPE. The following section outlines the scope of the empirical data gathered to perform such a task and details the methods by which it was collected and analysed.

Section 2 - Methods

Introduction

The motivation for this study is to 'open up the black box of consumption'. In the eyes of economists, and those whose concerns are broadly economic (corporations / states etc), consumption represents the moment of exchange, where currency changes hands for commodities. The decision that is made at that point, however, is formed by the consumer's expectations of what role the commodity will play in their wider life, and how much value they assign to those expectations. Opening the black box means attending to the *moment* of consumption, but in such a way as to situate it within the rich tapestry of habit, belief, expectation and experience through which that act takes place. As already established in this chapter, at the heart of the act of consumption lies a choice made by an agent participating in economic exchange - either between competing alternatives, or between consuming or not consuming. In many cases, these are decisions that may not even register consciously as such to the consumer themselves, concealed under habit or perceived necessity. But in spite of this, the consumer is an agent whose choices represent quanta of consequence that at the aggregate can produce profound effects. The method detailed here sets out to uncover the motivation and reasoning behind people's consumption decisions, and the logics and habits that support them.

Studying *why* people buy the things they do means first studying *what* they buy. Grounding my analysis of these choices in concrete examples, rather than open generalities, provides the best chance of unearthing the more unconscious or unconsidered reasoning that went into any given choice. As such, the research set out here seeks to isolate and examine moments of consumption, to encourage participants to reflect on exactly what motivated them to make the choices that they did. To that end, it is centred around a diary method that captures each such choice made over a given period. This then provides material for discussion and reflection when explored through interviews with the participants. This section outlines the details of my research design and the choices and considerations that shaped it.

Case Selection

Defining consumption

Consumption is an exceptionally broad phenomenon, encompassing a huge variety of goods and services. Given the scope of a single research project such as this, a maximalist definition of consumption would generate overwhelming data with such internal variety that it may be difficult to draw any firm conclusions. As such, the first task was to delimit the type of consumption that it was most appropriate to study, subject to both practical and analytic concerns. To begin, this section outlines the specific form of consumption that was taken as the focus of the research, along with the population and site from which the empirical data would be generated. The overall research frame is given as durable and semi-durable consumer goods[31] purchased by individuals living in households with children. This frame

[31] The categories of durable and semi-durable goods are widely accepted by statistical organisations such as the ONS (2011). It reflects all material goods whose usage doesn't depend on a 'using up' of the product in question. A t-shirt, for example, might need to be

was chosen as it represents forms of consumption that have tangible links to processes central to IPE analysis, in particular global trade and social reproduction.

The definition of consumption as advanced in this thesis locates it as an action that has a precise location in space and time. It cleaves to the broadly economic definition of consumption as the removal of a commodity from the sphere of exchange and into the private sphere of the household. This action is informed by the wider ongoing relationship that the consumer may have (or expect to have) with a commodity, but it is ultimately this moment of transaction that places the individual consumer into associations with the other participants in the market who have rendered the commodity available for sale. Within this account of consumption, the number of potential transactions is so large and varied as to be unwieldy. It could feasibly cover everything from getting a haircut to paying a gas bill, buying milk to paying for a Netflix subscription. Each ultimately plays the same role in the final constitution of demand, but the situations in which such choices are made, and thought processes behind them, are so diverse that to capture each such discrete choice in a single study would overwhelm any attempt to order it.

A further consideration is the variation in how visible and coherent the 'globality' of any given act of consumption is. There needed to be a consistent way of locating the types of consumption under examination within its wider economic context. With a little thought, it is possible to see how almost any act of consumption depends on the wider global economy. Fuel and energy, for example, depends on a vast network of extraction and supply of staggering geopolitical consequence. But the litre of petrol that comes out of the pump can itself tell us little about the drama at work behind the scenes. Watching a cult Korean TV

replaced due to wear and tear, but this is qualitatively different to a tube of toothpaste, which is explicitly 'used up' in its consumption. Whilst this distinction is an important one, and situates the research with formal statistical categories, throughout this thesis it will show on Netflix clearly tells us something about the global spread of culture, but its infinite reproducability at zero marginal cost means that *that instance* of watching bears little weight to the context of its production. In-person services, a significant component of consumption in an economy like the UK's, are by necessity grounded within a much more local geography. Whilst the barber's scissors and or mechanic's tools may have been manufactured in China or Germany, this comprises only a small fraction of the total service provided. Globalisation clearly shapes much of what we consume but, given the limited resources of a research project such of this, the ability to trace out these links and their consequences are often limited.

What is needed is an ability to draw link between a particular case and its wider context through a set of predictable regularities or stylised facts. A sector where there has been a clear and sustained shift in the location of its production is in manufacturing. The 'off-shoring' of production to rapidly industrialising countries in the Global South, in particular China, has been one of the clearest and most profound transformations of the era of globalisation. For a country like the UK, the production of the majority of durable, manufactured goods consumed by its population is now conducted overseas. Whilst there are exceptions to this, it is a significant enough trend to present it as something of a stylised fact. It was this reasons that informed the decision to focus on durable and semi-durable consumer goods as the form of consumption to be studied. This category is broad enough that it can't be reduced to a single 'system of provision' (Fine & Leopold, 1993), influenced by a coherent set of trends and social pressure (i.e. clothing). It exists within the context of global production and trade, rendered visible through the near ubiquitous practice of labelling goods with their country of origin. Crucially, from the perspective of the participant, it provides a

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occasionally be abbreviated to 'durable goods' for concision.

clear, easy to explain boundary to what is being considered by the study.

This category still comprises a wide range of different goods that it would be difficult to summarise in full, but includes things like clothes, homewares, decorative objects, furniture, toys, electronics etc. Unifying these different goods is their reliance on manufacturing, in other words the direct application of labour in combination with capital machinery on raw materials and intermediate components to produce commodities. As such, they reflect the sector in which production has undergone a sustained and fundamental transformation in the era of globalisation. From the perspective of the consumer in the UK, which underwent one of the most rapid de-industrialisations of any major economy (Kitson & Michie, 2014), almost all manufactured goods available for sale will have been made beyond its borders. Whilst comparative economies may have retained more onshore manufacturing - for example, the export oriented economies of Germany or South Korea - this has typically been in high value-added sectors such as automobiles or consumer electronics. The story of globalisation has been one of an exodus of manufacturing to the global South in search of cheaper labour costs. As such, the consumption of all such commodities happens in the shadow of this great geo-economic shift.

Given the broad nature of this definition, there were inevitably edge cases, but I encouraged my participants to take an expansive approach to the definition. I emphasised that I was happy to offer further guidance or clarification during the course of the diary study, and I was able to monitor responses in real time to check they were broadly compliant[32]. Inevitably, interpretations between participants differed somewhat, but as the research progressed I was able to offer firm clarifications about common raised questions, and ultimately preempt them

[32] Only one participant seemed to misinterpret the guidance, recording numerous food items during the first week of the research, but by monitoring their responses I was able to restate the category of interest.

in the initial instruction. Common issues that arose were the classification of second hand items, which I confirmed were included in the category of interest, and the status of media items such as books or CDs. In both cases, I asked for such items to be included, but ultimately had the discretion to include or exclude items in the subsequent discussion. Second hand objects proved a fruitful area of inquiry, whilst media objects were largely left out of the discussion and the analysis because they ultimately only represent a partial account of such consumption in a sector increasingly dominated by more intangible commodities.

Defining the population

Having defined the specific forms of consumption of interest, it was then necessary to determine the population of individuals whose consumption habits would be studied. The starting point in this regard comes from grounding the research in the 'everyday' tradition in political economy, one which seeks to understand how experiences broadly thought of as mundane or unremarkable can be situated in, and shed light on, systems and processes with global economic significance. This approach generally demands a broad and inclusive definition of the population of interest, as the 'everyday' encompasses a wide variety of circumstances and situations. The ultimate goal is to generate a sample whose behaviour and experience could be understood as a representing a 'typical case' of wider experience. In the case of consumption, the experiences of those with either extremely high or extremely low incomes are unlikely to reflect the logics that guide the bulk of aggregate behaviour. At the same time, claims of 'everydayness' are unlikely to be satisfied if they are made on the basis of an overly uniform set of experiences. Instead, the power of everyday analyses derives from its reproduction across different contexts and different experiences. Developing an account of the 'everyday British consumer' therefore requires a careful balance of commonality and diversity.

Given that simply *consumers*, as in individuals who make consumption choices, represents a category so broad as to encompass almost every single person in the country, limits needed to be drawn. Doing so would ensure the sample struck an appropriate balance between comparability and difference, such that commonalities in experience could be identified across different contexts. Furthermore, having already established the specific type of consumption I was interested in, choices made here would also influence the likely volume of data about relevant consumption decisions. Bearing these considerations in mind, I restricted my population of interest to those currently living with, and responsible for, children under 18. Consumption plays a key role in family life and the processes of social reproduction that sustain it. Participants with (or responsible for) children represented a particularly promising group to study, where it could be reasonably expected that the consumption observed would represent a mix of goods bought by the consumer for their own use, and those bought for or on behalf of others. Given that I was seeking individuals to participate, this stipulation meant that I could be sure that their consumption habits would exist within a wider, known social context. This would both limit the potential for excessive diversity in the sample, whilst remaining focus on a context of sufficient universality that it is still possible to characterise it as 'everyday'.[33]

In circular flow accounts of the economy, 'Households' represent the ultimate domain of consumption and the source of all consumer demand. But their inner workings are often left out of mainstream accounts of the economy, as a 'private' sphere that exists prior to any formally economic interaction. But, as feminist economists have long noted, it is itself a key economic space where the dynamics of production, domination and exchange determine who

[33] Indeed, the household and the family represent one of the foundational sites of everyday study, with roots in Lefebvre's critique of everyday life (Lefebvre, 2014) and its longstanding prominence within work in the feminist tradition (LeBaron, 2010, Todorova, 2017).

get what behind its doors. On the most basic level, social reproduction entails the provisioning of children up to such a time as they are able to sustain themselves independently. Under capitalism, this task frequently involves commodities for sale in the open market - food, most obviously, but also things such as clothes and toys that are of particular relevance to my chosen research frame. As discussed in Chapter 1, the early understanding of social reproduction as developed by Marx looked at little beyond the bare physical reproduction of labouring bodies. But more contemporary social reproduction theory reflects not just the need for society to produce workers, but the rich tapestry of subjectivities that sustain capitalist order. In this way, it is doubly interesting for the study of consumption - revealing not just the habits by which people choose and value commodities, but also how those habits are themselves sustained and reproduced as social customs. Whilst for logistical reasons, the participants in my study were all individuals (rather than entire households being the analytical unit), situating them within this wider context provided a window into the role of consumption beyond the point of purchase.

Sampling

To generate this primary data about the consumption habits of people in households with children, I wanted to ensure that the people I spoke to came from a variety of backgrounds and social groups. Given the practicalities of conducting the primary research myself, the sample would need to be drawn from the area local to my place of study, South Yorkshire. Between the city of Sheffield and a number of surrounding towns and suburbs, there are a range of conurbations with different income levels and demographic profiles that offer sufficient diversity to generate a balanced sample. I used a geographical sampling frame, identifying four separate areas that formed a 2x2 matrix, separated by the distinctions of Urban / Sub-urban and Affluent / Deprived. Urban / Sub-urban was determined geographically, on the basis of proximity to the centre of Sheffield. This distinction was considered important to reflect the different demographic makeup of large cities with respect to their hinterlands. The data in the table below demonstrates a clear difference in the proportion of non-white population between the urban and sub-urban areas. Whilst representative sampling is not possible to achieve in the context of a small-n study such as this, I wanted to ensure that the sample included sufficient racial diversity to avoid obvious bias towards the experience of a single social group. The Affluent / Deprived distinction was measured using 2011 Census data for the respective postcode area, with unemployment rate and education level standing as a proxy for income level. This distinction was important to ensure the sample included a range of different household incomes and class positions, which would clearly have a bearing on consumption habits.

The table below details the characteristics of the areas chosen[34]

Area No.	Area Type	Total Pop.	% Level 4 quals or above	% no qualifications	Unemployment rate	% non-White
1	Urban / Affluent	29001	45.75	9.39	4.45	13.63
2	Sub-urban / Affluent	46532	23.58	22.47	4.96	3.06
3	Urban / Deprived	55676	12.15	38.31	13.20	27.41
4	Sub-urban / Deprived	66856	14.66	34.07	8.33	1.8
	England & Wales		27	23	4.6	14

Table 2 - Breakdown of Research Areas

Area 1 was a wealthy inner suburb, close to the centre of Sheffield characterised by large Victorian housing stock. Area 2 was comprised of two 'commuter' villages on the outskirts

[34] In the case of all areas bar area 1 (Urban / Affluent), recruitment was expanded from the initial postcode area in the face of difficulties obtaining a sufficient number of participants. In each case, it was expanded to a neighbouring postcode area of broadly similar characteristics. The values given in the table reflect the final extent of each sampling area.

of the city. Area 3 was a more deprived part of the city, with a high proportion of (current and former) social housing. Area 4 was comprised of three former mining villages to the North of the city. The aim was to recruit a roughly equal number of participants from each area. It should be noted that, in doing so, the intention was not to generate explicitly comparative data. Whilst the research areas were selected for their varied demographic characteristics and thus different viewpoints they would provide on the process of consumption, the sample drawn from each area was not necessarily reflective of its wider characteristics. Developing any directly comparative conclusions on the basis of data generated across these four areas would be subject to the ecological fallcy that arises when individual level conclusions are drawn from aggregate level characteristics (Kramer, 1983). The purpose of the geographical sampling approach is instead to ensure that the data generated comes from a sufficient range of perspectives such that, where commonalities exist, they can be taken to be representative of a broadly 'everyday' experience.

Recruitment

This research was subject to the full ethical review and approval processes of the University of Sheffield and the committee approved the final version of this research design as being in line with their guidance. A copy of the participant information sheet and accompanying consent form can be found included in the appendix to this document, which detail the information that was given to participants before they took part. The initial plan was for all interviews to be conducted face to face. However, the restrictions on in-person research brought about the pandemic meant that I needed to adjust the terms of my ethics application to include telephone and video interviews. This I did, in line with university guidelines about making such adaptions that were issued at the time. As an incentive for participation, I offered a £30 shopping voucher to all those who took part. Given that this research involved two interviews and a relatively long-term commitment to a research task, this was seen as an appropriate level of incentive to reflect the commitment of time and effort involved. The ethics committee were happy that this represented an appropriate level of compensation. Payment was made in the form of Amazon or High Street shopping vouchers, bought using the ESRC Research Support Grant that formed part of my overall award.

To contact and recruit participants, I anticipated using a variety of different methods. These included recruitment posters in community locations (shops, libraries, etc), attending community events in person with details of the study, and using neighbourhood groups on social media[35] (specifically Facebook, which contains multiple different groups for a broad range of geographical sub-division, including the postcode areas used in my sampling strategy). I was also open to possibilities of snowballing my sample from existing participants and would conclude interviews by asking those who took part to pass details of the study to friends or family members who may be interested. In the final reckoning, the majority of participants were contacted via social media. This became particularly important following the restrictions on in-person research brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, where it became the sole remaining avenue for recruitment.

The research ran for a period of over a year, with the first interview being conducted on 18th November 2019, and the final interview conducted on 10th December 2020. During this period, the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruption to my research, meaning that no research was conducted between March and July 2020 when I restarted my fieldwork. The four research areas were approached sequentially, although there was some crossover, particularly when attempts to balance the sample meant I returned to previously studied areas to recruit more male participants. Area 1 was largely covered in the period November 2019 -

[35] Group admins were always contacted for approval before calls for participants were

January 2020, Area 2 was covered in Jan 2020 - March 2020, Areas 3 and 4 were researched concurrently between July 2020 and December 2020.

The final sample comprised 34 individuals[36] across the 4 research areas. Of these, 32 participated fully in the research whilst 2 failed to complete the diary stage and subsequent interview. Whilst they didn't complete their participation in the study, usable data from the initial interview has still be included where relevant, as neither withdrew their consent. The table below contains summaries of the demographic characteristics of those who took part, separated by research area. This demonstrates the extent to which the geographical sampling strategy was successful in generating a diversity of perspectives, although subject to a few caveats. Those in the sample from the suburban-deprived research area have an education level, employment status and income that was higher than might be expected given the wider characteristics of the area. However, this was largely unavoidable given the impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent inability to use in-person recruitment techniques to redress these imbalances.

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[36] It should be noted that 3 participants were removed from the final sample for not meeting the selection criteria - in each case because they weren't parents or carers of children under the age of 18. Whilst these participants have been removed from the final sample, the data from their participation has been retained and as such this is reflected in the participant numbering system used in the subsequent chapters.

		Gender		Education		Ethnicity		Household Income (£000)					Tenancy		
	Total	Male	Female	Level 3 or below	Level 4 or above	White	Non-White	<10	10 to 20	20 to 30	30 to 40	40+	Owned Outright	Mortgage	Rented
Urban / Affluent	11	3	8	1	10	10	1	0	0	1	1	9	4	7	0
Suburban / Affluent	8	3	5	1	7	7	1	0	0	1	2	4	1	5	1
Urban / Deprived	8	0	8	5	3	2	6	0	6	2	0	0	2	4	2
Suburban / Deprived	7	2	5	2	5	7	0	0	0	4	0	3	2	5	0
Full Sample	34	8	26	9	25	26	8	0	6	8	3	16	9	21	3

Table 3 - Breakdown of Sample

The nature of any specific recruitment practice ultimately has an impact on the composition of the sample and consequently the knowledge that can be produced from it (Kristensen & Ravn, 2015). This is particularly the case for a study such as this, where the pool of potential participants is broad and choices about how to find and recruit informants can narrow it down in ways that have sometimes unforeseen consequences on who is spoken to. Initial plans to conduct a wider range of recruitment methods to overcome this problem (for example, in-person recruitment such as door-knocking) became unavailable following the instruction to cease all face-to-face research during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflecting on the composition of the sample, there is a clear bias towards women. Given the majority of participants were recruited from local Facebook groups, this could reflect a bias in the active participants of such groups. It could also potentially reflect the subject and framing of the research and its association with certain gender norms. As this bias emerged, I reposted recruitment materials specifically asking for male participants, and asked existing participants if they knew any men who would be willing to take part. Despite these efforts, the sample remained fairly unbalanced and I was unable to get a single male respondent in the urban/deprived research area. The imbalance is not so pronounced as to suggest the conclusions drawn from a qualitative study such as this might be seriously at risk but does suggest that caution is needed when drawing specific conclusions, particularly about the role played by gender in people's consumption practices.

Another significant imbalance is the proportion of participants who own their own home. Attempts to redress this (such as posting on forums of social housing tenants) were broadly unsuccessful. Given that housing represents a significant dimension of class in modern Britain (Robertson, 2017) , with significant implications for how people relate to their material possessions, this is a potentially meaningful oversight in the data. As a consequence of this imbalance, the people spoken to in the course of this research may have had more stable, settled lives than those with less certain or unstable housing situations. Along with the higher than average income level across the sample, relative to some of the areas being studied, it means that the experiences recounted are more reflective of life in 'middle-class' Britain and lack voices from outside the more comfortable strata of society. This group still includes a significant diversity of experience, and the inclusion of a small number of participants from different perspectives helps to highlight areas where issues of class might impact the conclusions drawn from the data. But, particularly in the context of the current cost of living crisis, further study of consumption in more unstable, margainal and constrained contexts would be a worthy avenue of future study.

Research Instruments

Diary Study

Having established who was spoken to and how they were recruited, this section now outlines the methods by which the data would be generated. The goal of this research was to try and understand the thought processes, considerations and motivations that accompany consumption decisions. Why do people buy the things they do, and how do they assign a value to them? Given the type of consumption I chose to study, such decisions might range from very deliberate and considered, such as buying a new sofa or laptop, to almost unthinking, like picking up a new toothbrush in the weekly shop. With such broad variation, and the mundane nature of much of what I want to understand, simply asking people to reflect on their consumption habits risked gravitating towards the particular or the unusual. Instead, I wanted to study the consumption decisions people made in 'real-time', drawing their attention towards choices or decisions they otherwise might not have given a moments thought to.

In studying consumption, one way in which such ‘real time’ decisions can be studied is through ethnographic methods, such as when Miller (1998) accompanied people through on their trips to the shops to develop an anthropological account of what motivated and informed their actions. However this method would not have been suitable for this study, both for practical reasons of time and resource, but also because of the desire to capture a total picture of people’s spending decisions. The ubiquity of online shopping means that there is no longer a coherent site where shopping can be contained and considered, but increasingly it is something that can be done anywhere and at any time. For this reason, the decision was made to use a diary method, in which the participants themselves could record everything they bought over a given study period and which would be discussed and reflected on at the conclusion of their participation in the study. Diaries are a well-established method for studying consumption and are used extensively in consumer and marketing research (Penz & Kirchler, 2015; Weidman & Dunn, 2015; Becker, 2018). It has particular utility in studying life in family and household settings, where the presence of a researcher may detract from the naturalistic conduct of daily life (Laurenceau & Bolger, 2005; Hseuh, 2015). For research focusing on everyday life, diaries are a means of ‘capturing life as it is lived’ (Bolger et. al., 2003). In the case of the consumption practices I wish to study, a diary provides the best window into the fullest possible range of consumption practices.

There are many different forms a diary can take. They can be free writing exercises for participants to express their thoughts in their own words, as and when they see fit. Or they can be a more regimented exercise designed to capture specific information at specific moments in time. My focus was on generating a comprehensive record of consumption, and ensuring any potential biases of participants about what was and wasn’t important or interesting didn't influence the data. For this reason, I developed an approach focused on generating the fullest list of all the consumption that took place during the research period. For each item the participants bought, there was a set form that they were asked to complete detailing the nature of the product, their reasons for buying it, how much it cost and where it was made. Because I was concerned with the task being overly onerous, I didn't require the participants to write any free text reflections on their purchases at the time - had such a requirement been in place, it might have dissuaded some from fully completing the diary, or meant that items were missed if the participant couldn't think of anything to say about them.[37] The diary itself took the form of a Google form, accessible from a static link assigned to each participant. This could then be accessed by the participant from their computer or smart phone[38]. Each item purchased would be entered individually, generating a unique entry on an associated spreadsheet that I had access to. I could review this in real time, and would consult it in advance of the second interview to prepare questions about the particular goods they had bought.

Interviews

With the diary study generating only relatively dry, factual data about the consumption that took place, a follow-up interview to discuss and explore the choices that lay behind the decisions was crucial in extracting richer, qualitative data about what was bought and why. Whilst qualitative research has become more commonplace within IPE (Montgomerie, 2017),

[37] On reflection, the *option* of adding some free text comments was ultimately something that I think could have added interesting detail and context, particularly from some of the participants who most enthusiastically took part in the study. I discuss this further when I reflect on the lessons and challenges of research.

[38] Had it been necessary, a paper diary would have been made available for anyone who didn't have easy access to such technology - something I aimed to establish during the initial contact. However this situation didn't occur, prehaps predictably given the overwhelm source for the recruitment of participants was social media.

such approaches have often been overlooked by the more positivist traditions within the discipline (Cawthorne, 2001). But the kind of qualitative data interviews provide, where people are able to give their own accounts of the economic system in which they live from their perspective within it, are essential for constructing "an account of the economic, the political, the social, which is as complex and modulated as the reality it describes" (Cawthorne, 2001, p. 85). Within the literature, there exists a debate about the extent to which talking practices are able to access the full range of actions that comprise people's practices (Browne, 2016), particularly when these are so mundane as to be relatively unconsidered by the person conducting them. However, such objections can be addressed in part through the use of the diary, which intends to draw the focus of participants onto practices that may otherwise go unconsidered. To elicit such reflections further, however, following Hitchings (2012) the interviews would not shy away from questions that might be seemingly banal but which would invite participants to consider and reflect on aspects of their consumption decisions that might have seemed obvious to them at the time.

The interviews themselves were semi-structured in form. The first interview (conducted before the diary study) included sections on the participants home life and background, their work, their views on various political and economic matters, and a general discussion of their consumption habits. It concluded by introducing the participant to the diary form, instructing them in how it worked and defining the relevant type of consumption, giving plenty of opportunity to ask questions. The second interview was largely focused on discussing the diary and the objects bought during the course of the study. There were then broader questions about the home and the objects in it, and further questions about their wider approach to consumption. Interview schedules are included in the methodological appendix. The first interviews were typically conducted in cafes, being convenient public places to meet and establish rapport, whilst the second interviews, where possible, took place in the participants home. This, at least, was the initial plan and characterised the first set of interviews - 19 participants in total, two of whom were interviewed remotely for the follow-up interview due to concerns about COVID-19 (but before any formal guidance was in place). After this, the introduction of social distancing guidelines meant that both interviews had to be conducted remotely - typically over the telephone, but on a few occasions using video call software where convenient for the participant. The remaining 15 interviews were conducted in this manner.

The interviews presented an opportunity to ask questions about their wider consumption habits, life histories, political views, and much else that would contextualise their contribution to the study. In particular, I was conscious that a diary study which ran for around 30 days was more likely to capture information about small, mundane purchases than it would about larger, more irregular purchases. Buying a TV or a new fridge, for example, represents significant outlay on durable manufactured goods, but such purchases would only ever be made at multi-year intervals, so I'd be unlikely to capture many within the confines of the diary study. However, discussing such decisions in the interviews to give a fuller picture of an individuals consumption behaviour. Conducting the follow-up interviews in participant's homes also provided the scope to gather more information. Whilst the potential for true 'ethnography' in such a brief encounter is clearly limited, the homes of participants themselves revealed a certain amount of information about their relationships with commodities and their role in their lives (Bashir, 2017). For these reasons, a research diary was kept, in which observations about the participants home and the objects within it were made, along with wider reflections on the interview.

Conducting the second interview in the home also meant that the objects that the participant bought could be on hand during the interview itself, allowing the discussions about them to be informed by the particular character and qualities of the object in question. The presence of the object also helped the participant to better access the thought processes that informed the moment of consumption itself (Becker, 2018, p. 474). Using object elicitation in this way was not always possible - often things had been bought as gifts, or had simply entered into daily usage and couldn't be easily retrieved. But where available they often presented a way for participants to reflect on and recover the feelings and motivations that were present at the moment of purchase. Moving to online interviews meant that many of these observations were no longer available. However, additional questions were included in the interview schedule to try and get more contextualising information about the participants home, and participants were asked to provide photographs of some of the items where possible[39].

The data generated by interviews should obviously not be taken as objective fact about the state of people's mind at a given time - indeed, no method could generate such an output. Instead, they generate data about 'reported behaviour', an individual's recollections about their state of mind and motivations at a particular time. Whilst these are liable to distortions through misremembering, self-editing and numerous other potentially confounding factors, they remain the best available insight into the interior life of an individual. Furthermore, the text that is generated represents a discourse conducted at a particular time and place, in tandem with the researcher who plays an active role eliciting and shaping the conversation. In the case of the interviews that took place for this research, I was conscious that much of the discussion that focused on the objects themselves necessarily encountered the meaning and assumptions encoded in those objects by both parties. In some cases, it was clear that participants felt sheepish or embarrassed discussing particular items, in response to their expectations of the impression I would draw from them. More broadly, it is necessary to

[39] Ultimately, as this was only requested as an optional extra if possible and convenient, only limited photographs were provided for this purpose.

reflect on my self-presentation as a white, well-spoken researcher and the impact that that had on the relationship between me and my participants, and the things that may have been said or not said as a result. Whilst it is difficult to know what data might have been produced in different circumstances, there nevertheless needs to be an acknowledgement that the speech represented here doesn't necessarily reflect a perfect facsimile of people's true feelings and intentions.

Survey

Alongside the interviews and the diary, a brief set of survey questions was completed at the start of each interview. This sought to gather basic demographic data about each participant, as well as their views on matters of politics and globalisation, reproducing instruments taken from British Social Attitudes (NatCen, 2013) and Eurobarometer (European Commision, 2008) surveys, which set out to establish the participants position on the Left-Right scale (as per the BSA survey) and their attitudes towards globalisation (as per Eurobarometer 69). There were also two brief photo illicitation exercises, which aimed to establish in general the participants awareness of the globalisation of production and their assumptions about its impact on their lives. Whilst these instruments ultimately generated little in the way of data that spoke directly to the research questions, it was a useful way of contextualising the knowledge, attitudes and assumptions of the participants. Some of the results of these survey questions have been used to illustrate the character of the sample in Table 3. However, given the size of the sample it was difficult to discern much coherence from the attitudinal questions, with the majority of the useful information being gathered through the questions focused on the demographic profile of the participants.

Analysis

On completion of the fieldwork, a large volume of data had been generated. This included diary entries for 529 individual products (once trimmed for accidental duplicates and inappropriate entries i.e. food items). It also included the surveys as completed by all participants and extensive interview data which were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The total volume of interview data comprised approximately 65 hours of recorded speech, spread across 72 transcripts. Finally, there was the research journal and the observations that it contained, which weren't formally analysed but were consulted during the analysis and writing up process for context. The data from the diaries was coded and classified manually, and used to generate a set of descriptive statistics about the objects that were bought during the course of the study. Some of these are reproduced below, to give an impression of what people bought and their reasons for doing so.

The types of objects recorded through the diary study (as coded by the researcher) are shown in the graph below, by item count and by total expenditure respectively. In each case, the fill in the bar represents the proportion manufactured in the global South[40]. This simply reflects the country of origin information as recorded in the diary, but it should be acknowledged that this doesn't always reflect the complexity of the production process in modern supply chains.

[40] This was coded by the research as countries outside of the OECD or the EU.

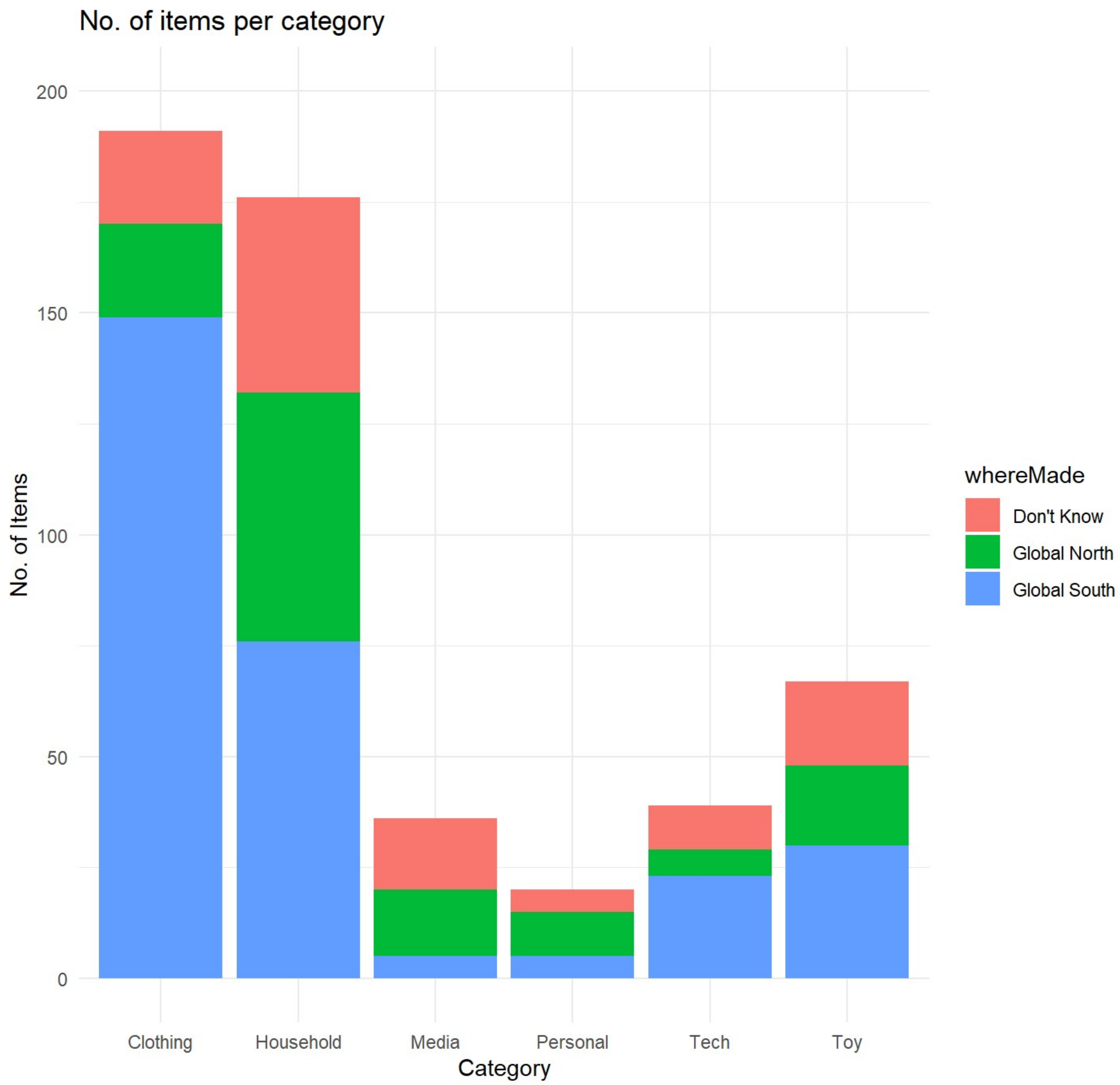

Chart 1 – No. of diary entries by type

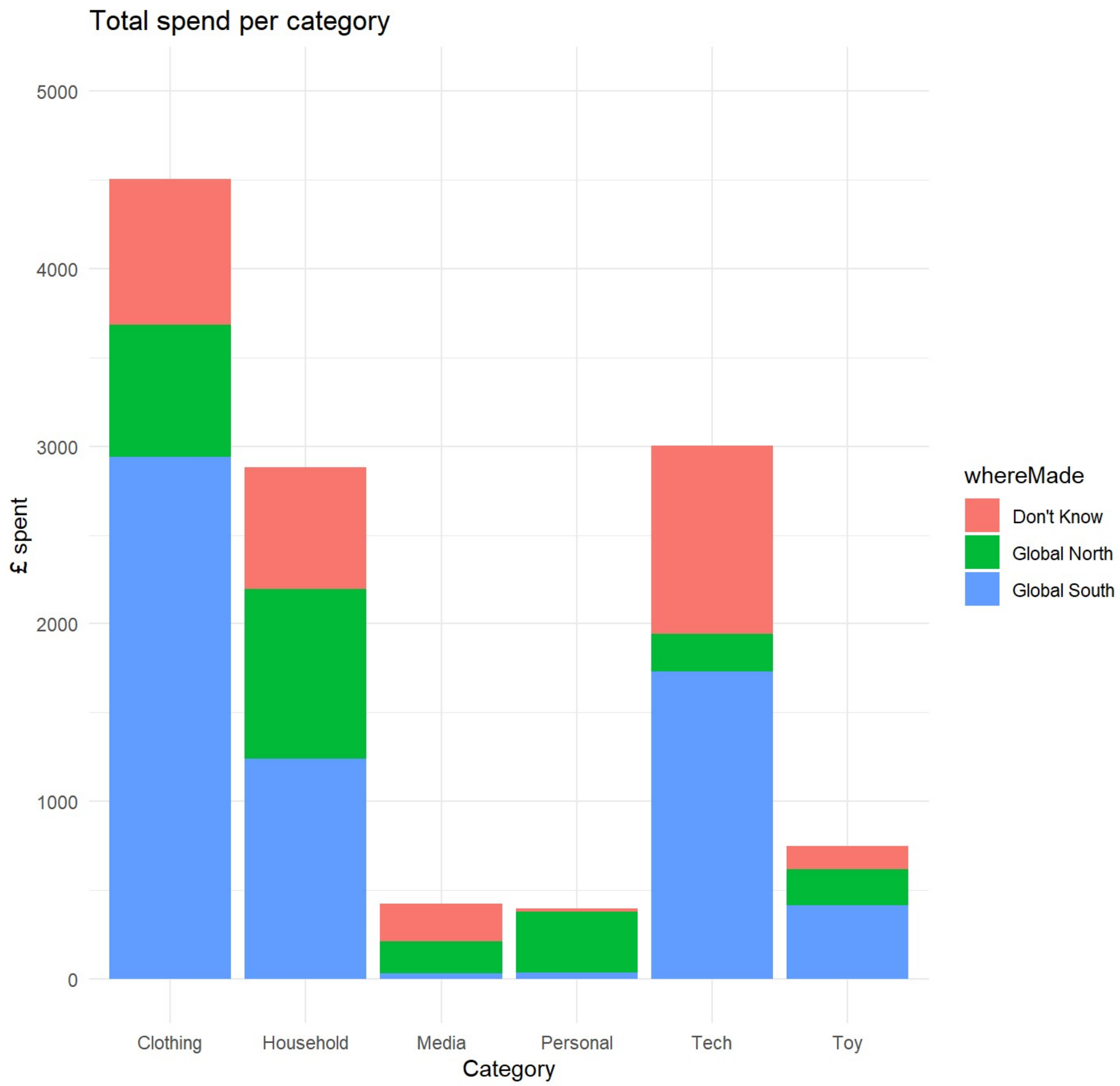

Chart 2 – Value of diary entries by type

The following graphs highlight the significant variation in the amount of items purchased by the different participants in the study. In this instance, the fill represents the reason for purchase, based on the reason assigned by the participant in the diary form. These are given as ‘Essential’, ‘Discretionary’ and ‘Gift’. Beyond a certain amount of recoding to merge some categories together, these categories reflect the self-reported justification of the participants, reflecting the fact that what one person might consider an essential might be seen as discretionary by someone else. The incomplete list of participant numbers reflects the fact that some people who took part either failed to complete the diary, or simply didn’t make any qualifying purchases during the period in question.

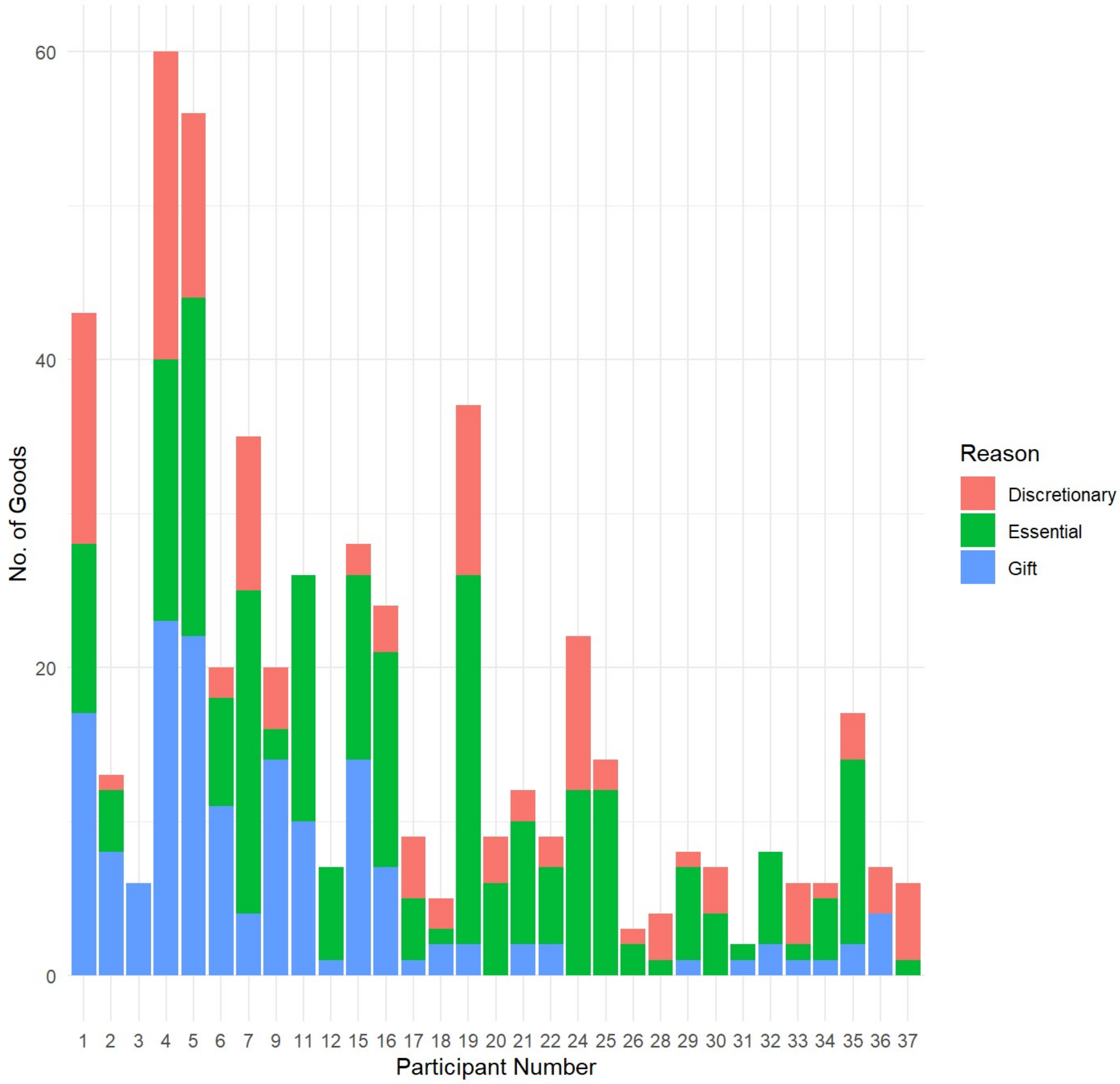

Chart 3 – No. of diary entries by participant

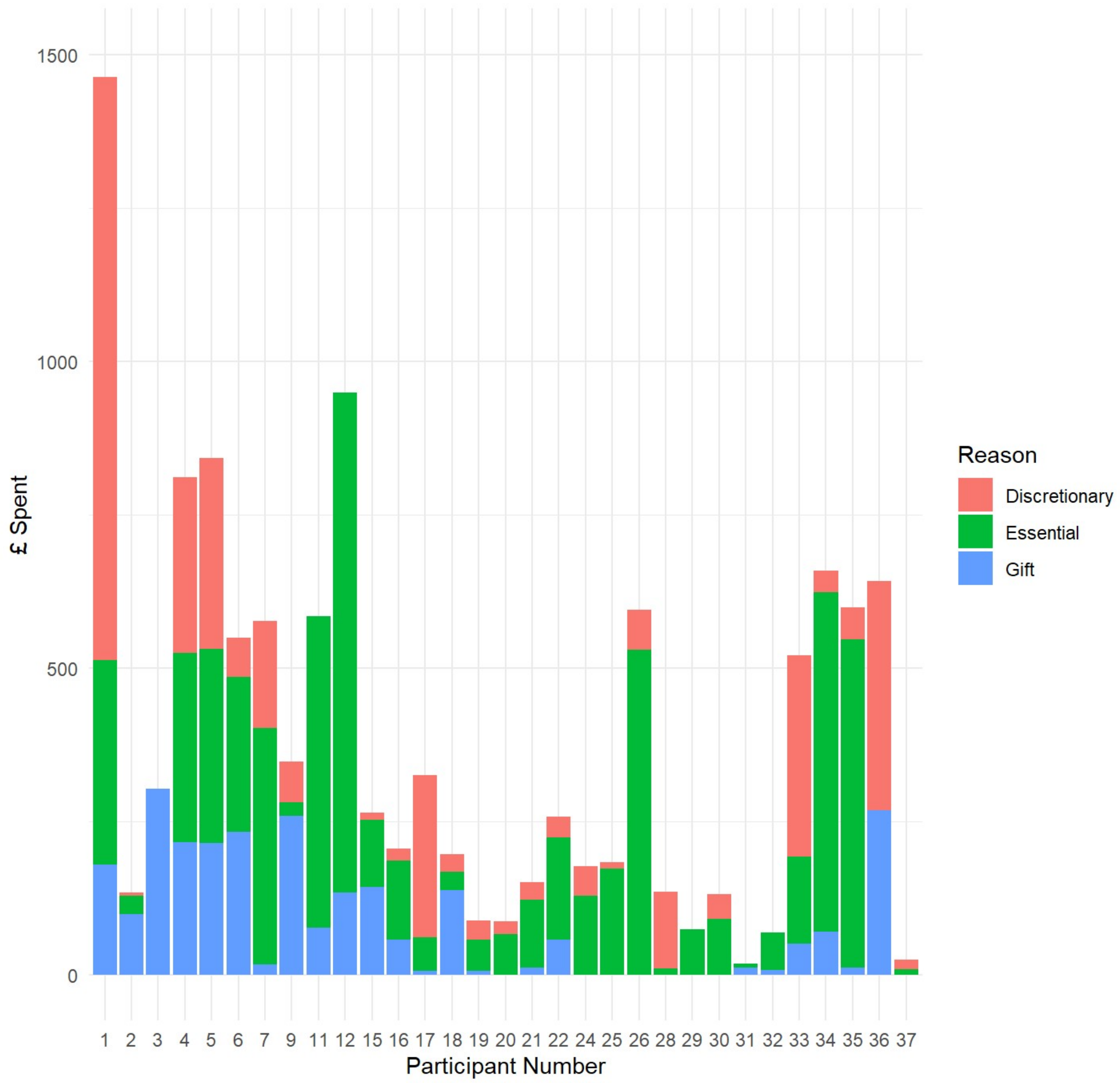

Chart 4 – Value of diary entries by participant

The variation in 'Gift' spending highlights the impact of the timing of the research, whereby the first and last waves of participants were interviewed in the run up to Christmas

The survey data was also subjected to initial exploratory analysis but ultimately presented little that helped address the research questions, so was primarily used to provide contextual information about the participants. As such, the primary focus of the analysis was on coding the interviews to explore the themes and commonalities that were present in peoples accounts of their consumption. The approach to coding followed the 'flexible coding' method set out by Deterding & Waters (2018). Given the volume of data, significant amounts of which weren't relevant to addressing the research questions in the context of the pragmatic framework described above, the data was first categorised by a series of 'index' codes to simply highlight where different topics are discussed in the data. The conceptual toolkit developed at the start of this chapter was then used to develope a more analytic set of codes. In each instance, these were used to explore and categorise the ways these were represented in the data. The data for each was coded separately, using the index codes to identify where relevant information was likely be found and developing a focused set of analytic codes for each of the three concepts under analysis. Each of the following empirical chapters reflects a different aspect of this framework in turn.

Conclusion

This research sets out to inquire as to the nature of consumer agency in the global economy. To establish this, it is necessary to be upfront about the broader underlying philosophical assumptions around the nature of agency in general that inform the study. The first section of this chapter draws on Pragmatic thought to establish the parameters of the role human agency plays in social processes. This highlights its dualistic quality, both as reservoir of the habits that sustain and reproduce social forms, whilst also injecting them with meaningful indeterminacy. This approach is used to develop a conceptual toolkit that will structure the three following chapters. These look at the habitual and more deliberative aspects of consumer agency in turn, before the final one focuses on the specific processes of valuation by which such agency is rendered into an explicitly economic phenomenon.

The following chapters present an analysis drawing on empirical data of consumption practices, derived from a diary study and accompanying interviews. The data was generated from a population of individuals in households with children and focus specifically on the consumption of durable material commodities. These restrictions are placed on the sample to ensure that data generated is sufficiently diverse to cover a range of experiences, whilst also providing a bedrock of comparability that will strengthen the conclusions able to be drawn from it. The focus on material commodities in the household, meanwhile, keys the empirical data directly into processes of production, trade and social reproduction to ensures that it will speak directly to the questions and problematiques that motivate the discipline of IPE. In doing so, it provides the greatest potential for making a meaningful empirical contribution to the study and understanding of consumption within the discipline.

Chapter 4 - Habit

Introduction

Habits are indelibly associated with consumption. The commonplace phrase ‘shopping habits’ captures in it much about how people tend to approach it in their daily lives. The reason we might go to one supermarket over another, or prefer to do our shopping in person rather than online, reflects the role of path-dependency to how we act as consumers in the world. As discussed in Chapter 3, people are creatures of habit and the sheer number of decisions they encounter in the modern world on a daily basis mean some kind of cognitive shortcut is necessary to avoid being completely overwhelmed. In their individualised, psychological sense, habits are an adaptation to a world of overwhelming choice and a necessary constriction of fully rational agency. But, as Dewey and later pragmatists attest, habits are also deeply social things. On the most basic level, someone might prefer to shop at a particular store because it was where their parents always shopped. Other habits might not have such a direct lineage, but be more grounded in things like ones class position, or membership of a particular sub-culture. These ‘customs’, as Dewey identified, reflect habitual forms of behaviour that are ultimately rooted in, and sustained through, shared social practice. The central thesis of this chapter is that the specific conditions of contemporary globalisation have set the stage for a number of such customs that orient themselves to the material world of the commodity. This section explores three distinct habitual logics that emerge from, or are sustained by, the specific contingencies of contemporary economic globalisation.

The three habitual logics discussed here are christened ‘Plenty’, ‘Convenience’ and ‘Thrift’. These should not be understood as simplistic behavioural habits, such as always buying the same brand of toothpaste. Instead, they represent habits of thought, the *Logica Utens* (see p. 107) that shape and condition the way people make their choices. These are by no means the only logics that could be isolated and analysed when thinking about the practices of British consumers. But they each demonstrate something about the social processes at work in a globalised capitalist economy that shape the consumption choices made by individuals. ‘Plenty’ represents the way choices are made when there is a tacit understanding that certain material commodities have become trivially cheap and universally available. ‘Convenience’ represents an intensification of the temporal rhythms of consumption, often deliberately pursued by corporate actors. And ‘Thrift’ represents the nature of consumption on constrained incomes, a constant reality for many trying to keep up in a highly unequal society. Its nature as habit, rather than simply response to material constraint, is revealed through the long legacy such experiences leave on people’s consumption habits. In adhering to, and reproducing, these habits, the actions of consumers work to generate stable and predictable regularities that help to structure the wider economic system. These findings underpin the concept of the *social standard of living* that will be developed in Chapter 7.

This chapter proceeds as follows. The character of the three habits are first fleshed out through a case study focusing on the phenomenon of World Book Day. This popular day in the school calendar has become deeply grounded in consumption in ways that illuminate much about modern consumption practices. The three habits are then developed in more detail, reflecting on the different ways they were expressed and discussed in the course of the research. In each case, reflecting specifically on the *global* dimensions of the commodities in question can tell us something about the world in which such consumption takes place, and the consumers who live in it.

Case Study - World Book Day

World Book Day featured in the consumption diary of two of my participants, and demonstrates some of the small but revealing ways in which the availability of globally produced commodities has transformed everyday life. Based on the World Book and Copyright day established by UNESCO in 1995, in 1998 the the first Thursday of March was made a feature of the school calendar in the UK[41]. Registered as a charity and supported by various members of the UK publishing industry, the day exists to encourage and celebrate reading, with schools putting on special events and distributing free or discounted books. In recent years, many schools have emphasised costume or fancy dress as a way of engaging children, encouraging them to attend school for the day dressed as a favourite character. The two participants who discussed their participantion in World Book Day had different strategies to meet this demand, reflecting the habitual logics of convenience and thrift respectively. Before addressing these, however, reflecting on how a benign celebration of reading has itself become grounded within practices of consumption helps to outline the habit of ‘plenty’.

Plenty

[41] It was moved from UNESCOs original 23rd April date to avoid the clash with St. George’s Day

The pressures and expectations of World Book Day are doubtless familiar to the parents of any primary school age child in the UK. Whilst the intentions behind it may be good, it has also provoked debate about the burden of labour it represents as parents become tasked with procuring an appropriate outfit. This benign act of celebration has become such a fixture of the school year that a significant opportunity now exists in selling off the peg costumes to harried parents. Such costumes arguably represent the apex of what might be seen as needless or wasteful consumption - clothes, cheaply made and sold, bought for a single day and then possibly never worn again. But that such an act of consumption is even possible represents how deeply transformative the globalisation of production has been on the practices of daily life in a country like the UK. The very availability of such goods makes the expectation that every child come dressed in clothes bought or made specially for the day a more realistic prospect. Parents too busy to laboriously assemble a costume have commodified alternatives hanging at the end of a supermarket aisle. World Book Day represents a social practice that has become grounded in consumption because the possibilities for, and expectation of, consumption have been greatly expanded through the growth of the global manufacturing base.

Convenience

Participant 17 was the oldest person I spoke to as part of the research. He had adult children from a previous relationship and now lived with his partner and their adopted son in a modern townhouse in the suburban-affluent research area. In need of a costume for World Book Day, his means of securing it reflected the extent to which effort and friction have been excised from the modern act of consumption

> [He] wanted to dress up as Dogman, and Dogman is a police dog…so, you know, I bought him a police outfit. … It's not something we've been and tried on and looked

> around and shopped for in that way, you know, it's purely online, we needed the policemen's outfit, they had this one on Amazon, it was expensive for what it is, I think it was £15, you know, but… he loves it, so what the hell! (P17.2[42])

Websites like Amazon embody the contemporary desire for convenience, making consumption possible anywhere and everywhere. 'Time is money', goes the old saying, and it is demonstrably one of the ways in which the search for commodities must be costed. The history of capitalism itself has been characterised by a tremendous acceleration in reducing the distance between desires and their resolutions. This has manifested seismic shifts in where and how people consume. The enormous infrastructural technologies that support this drive towards convenience have themselves been transformative force in the contemporary economy. Such transformations have been matched by changes in where, how and when people expect to be able to consume.

Thrift

Participant 19 lived in the suburban-affluent research area, though her circumstances meant that she was one of the more economically constrained participants I spoke with. She had four children, lived in privately rented accommodation and had a husband with long-term health issues that had limited his ability to work. The diary period coincided with World Book Day, and it came up in the subsequent discussion. The school that three of her children attended had said that they "had to dress up" as one of their favourite characters for World Book Day, although even without this formal imposition the social pressure of joining in clearly weighed on her mind, and she was unwilling to see her children be the 'odd ones out'. Navigating this demand on her time and income had required a strategic approach.

[42] The source of quotes is given by a participant number, with the decimal indicating whether it was from the first or second interview

> I bought them in advance.. last year, when [they were] in the sale, I just buy a size bigger.. there are a lot donated to charity shop but, these happen to be from Sainsbury's... It's mainly the supermarkets and, yeah it's about fifteen pounds at the time, and then, that Elmer one, was five pounds sixty a few days after world book day… (P19.2)

Planning ahead and taking advantage of discounted stock in the wake of the previous year's celebration helped the participant to navigate this burden on her constrained income. This is reflective of the kind of labour that can be inherent in navigating a consumer society with a constrained budget. These kind of strategies inform a great deal of consumer behaviour, and not just from those for whom it was a necessity. Instead, practices of thrift and the search for good value are reflective of ways in which dispositions towards consumption are socially habituated.

Three habitual logics of consumption

The empirical data and associated discussion presented in this chapter explores how these habits are experienced, sustained and reproduced. These represent some of the frames through which people understand and pursue consumption. Their habitual nature means that they frequently reflect the confluence of different social forces or interests within the field of human action. Each habit is here discussed to provide a lens on how a particular aspect of contemporary society shapes and conditions consumption. This provides sharper analytical focus, although it should be noted that such distinctions are somewhat artificial, as each of the processes described here inevitably overlap and entwine in complex ways. The habit of thrift provides a window into how consumption operates in conditions of inequality, and the particular constraints and incentives that emerge as a result. The habit of convenience, meanwhile, provides the clearest focus on how corporate interests, who stand to materially gain from the expansion of consumption, shape the very consumers on which they rely. But this section begins with an examination of plenty as experienced and expressed by consumers in the home. This demonstrates how the expansion of global production has shaped consumer behaviour and highlights how such habits reproduce and intensify.

Plenty

Notions of abundance are fraught, and potentially controversial, terms in which to discuss contemporary globalisation. Many of the inequalities inherent to capitalist society have deepened and contemporary social relations leave much to be desired in achieving meaningful material abundance for all. This is particularly true in the context of the current cost of living crisis, where shelter, food and energy, all provided through the market, have become increasingly inaccessible. In such conditions, talk of abundance can seem almost perverse. But as Lears (1994) recounts in his history of American advertising and consumption, abundance has long been a mobilising imaginary of consumer capitalism. He details how its meaning was transformed to reflect the fruits, and the limits, of capitalist production. Thinking of abundance in this way, as an imaginary that informs a habitual logic of consumption, severs it from people's material circumstance. In this way, it is further diminished as a meaningful account of *social* abundance, but remains useful in framing and exploring people's attitudes and approaches towards consumption.

It is clearly the case that the choice and availability of consumer goods has expanded significantly over recent decades, along with - on the whole - the ability of consumers to acquire them. As Miller (1998) points out, this expansion in the world of goods has changed the ways in which people relate to them and how that relationship is understood. In the context of a highly globalised consumer economy, the standard of living becomes grounded in certain expectations about the availability and purpose of a wide range of material commodities. Across the course of their own biographies, many participants reflected the subtle transformations the increased access to material goods made to their expectations and practice of consumption. Asked to compare their own childhoods with that of their children, almost all reflected on the significant increase in material commodities they had witnessed. As much as it might fall short of more utopian understandings of abundance, this expansion in the availability of material goods has had an observable impact on the lives, and the shopping habits, of western consumers.

Mundane Material Abundance

Participant 11 was particularly illustrative of how the wider social context drove a shift in her consumption behaviour and perceptions of material commodities. Interviewed as part of the urban-affluent research area, she lived with her husband and their daughter in a spacious semi-detached house, comfortably furnished and with a large garden. The couple both held high-skilled and well-paid jobs and lived "comfortably". Despite their above average income, however, she still felt they often "lived beyond her means", relying on credit cards or overdrafts to maintain her consumption habits. She discussed her relationship to consumption with a keen sense of self-awareness and irony, one informed by her upbringing in a Communist country. Despite the central role they played in her life, she was conscious of the thinness of abundance represented by material commodities:

> "Having any item available to you at any time, so the convergence of the global economy and kind of the digital age has put us in a really vulnerable position which has allowed rampant consumerism to emerge… certainly having lived in [Communist Country]…it was a bit of a utopia… [the] perceptions of what people should have, and need… it was a less materialistic age" (P11.1)

It was from this perspective that she was able to reflect on what drove her consumption habits, even when they set uncomfortably at odds with her strongly held beliefs about the limits of consumption. In this, she articulated something about the logic of plenty that informed both her consumption, and that of many others in the sample:

> "I see a problem and I feel that it can only be resolved by shopping, I know it doesn't make sense. So if [my daughter] has got an interest or something, I would want to, buy her something to support that interest. So if she's really into ballet I'd want to take her to see the ballet, or practice some ballet, get her some ballet shoes or a ballet toy so… I think it's definitely made me shop a bit more" (P11.1)

This logic was deployed over the period captured by the consumption diary, in which she had purchased a new set of gym equipment from Primark. The diary period had captured the weeks after the New Year or - in her words - the "flabby fortnight":

> I've bought gym kit because it's January… where everybody decides they want to go to the gym, so obviously I'm doing that. I want to go to the gym, I don't feel comfortable in the clothes I've got, so if I buy more clothes I feel more comfortable, so I buy more clothes. Perhaps I could have just gone to the gym with the clothes that I had… so it's thing that are not necessarily derived out of actual need but perceived need, if that makes sense." (P11.2)

This capacity of material goods to resolve problems and meet perceived needs is magnified by their availability relative to other ways of meeting such needs. The existence of plentiful and readily available material goods makes the solutions they represent appear more immediate and closer to hand than other potential courses of action. This kind of logic can be seen both in the context of pursing certain activities, as with the gym kit, or in the kind of gifts bought and exchanged in the maintenance of social relationships. The availability of material goods in any given social context also provides a crucial background against which people make their consumption decisions. This can be seen most clearly in relation to the raising of children, a process that has only grown in its material intensity as the availability of consumer goods has increased. Exploring these contexts can help make sense of how these conditions of relative abundance work to shape people's approaches and attitudes towards consumption.

Plenty and Childhood

This notion of plenty as something that shaped people's consumption habits was revealed most clearly when people reflected on the lives of their children. Drawing comparisons with their own childhood, the often drastic transformation in context provided a sharp illustration of how relationships with material commodities have changed. Participant 22, having only recently had her first child, was struck by the material inventory needed to bring a child into the world.

> "I'm surprised the amount of stuff you just need for a baby … it's all really temporary stuff, we got a cot that's next to us for six months then he's got to go in his own bed… and then you remember when you buy something, there's stuff that goes with it, so you've got to buy the bedding set that fits that particular cot and then you've got to buy so much of [the] things… Me friend, she said to me, if you're going to get this, buy loads of them because they go through things so quickly." (P22.1)

Despite being a bit taken aback by quite how much she had needed to buy, she was generally of a mind that these material goods had had a positive impact on her experience of being a parent. A conversation she had had with her own mother shed light on the positive impact that the expanded world of consumer goods had on the role of raising a child:

> "Safety's like a massive one, I've got like all these different buckles and she's like why do you need... it's a car seat! She's like.. when you were young there were no car seats we used to just put you on the back seat … back then things weren't as safe. She say's there seems to be a lot more stuff that's aimed at babies… they're like 'what does this machine do?' It makes bottles! they're like.. oh my god, it fixes bottles, how many times did we have to do this!… these things you've bought make your life so much easier than what it must've been when we had to like make bottles from scratch'." (P22.1)

These kind of comparisons with the childhoods of previous generations were frequently revealing as to the long term transformations that people had undergone in relation to their experience of, and expectations for, consumption. Such reflections are obviously prone to take on a certain nostalgic character that might overstate some of the differences, but almost everyone I spoke to was clear that a significant transformation had taken place. Participant 18 framed it strikingly through direct comparison between his and his son's respective Christmases:

> "we looked through photo albums from Christmases when I was young and you'd see you'd see me with six seven presents or summat.. whereas he would get fourteen, fifteen presents from us, then he'd get five presents from Grandma and Grandad, and he'd get two three from my mum, and then he'd get.. a couple from my brother and then.. some from his ex-wife.. and then.. my friends given him presents as well, and then… but… it just, there's pil… it's just piled high… so.. you can just you can just see from the pictures the difference." (P18.2)

Whilst there was a widespread acknowledgement that material goods had become more abundant, attitudes as to whether or not this was a good thing were more divided. Participant 26, whose income was much higher than his parents had been when he was growing up, enjoyed the fact that this enabled him to give his children a different relationship with material goods than the one he had experienced:

> "if I wanted a pair of trainers when I were younger my dad would say.. you're going to have to wait a few weeks and then we'd find something a bit cheaper… whereas if my kids, the minute they've even said they want a pair of trainers, they look at them and say 'oh dad I like them', they've got 'em." (P26.1)

Whilst this in part reflected Participant 26 revelling in the material comfort afforded by his higher income, Participant 35 felt his current circumstances were broadly much more comparable with those he had grown up in. Even in this case, however, he highlighted how much the availability and possibility of consumption had expanded for his daughter

I think she's definitely got a lot more than what I had as a child. And I think that's just how things have changed over time… so much more, is just widely available, you know, like I said you want to get something, you can't afford it brand new, but you can second hand, you've got Facebook market place, you've got eBay. I mean, even a two minute walk around the corner there's children's charity shop, you know, it's purely kids stuff, so she thinks she's in the best shop in the world when we take her there, there's all these toys, you know … so it's so much more readily available now than what it was when I was a child, so yeah, I think kids generally just have so much more." (P35.2)

Participant 32 clearly felt that the added material demands of childhood weren't necessarily beneficial to her children, but instead reflected external competitive pressures:

I think we was just content with what we had, whereas now its that you have to have the branded stuff, you have to have a phone in your hand, you have to have you know, social media. You have to be in the limelight, it's almost… planted in your brain! Oh it's hard being young now". (P32.1)

Plenty and Income

Central to the notion of Plenty is the sense that, whilst the transformations observed happen in the context of broadly rising incomes, it is not purely a matter of greater spending power. Instead, there has been a countervailing cheapening of commodities, increasing their availability across the income scale. Participant 19 reflected this change in the character of goods:

"They probably do have more... Even though we had, more money growing up.. just because I do think things are cheaper now.. smaller… you know.. but they're not as.. they don't last as long but you can get it for cheaper." (P19.1)

Participant 29 echoed these reflections on the qualitative change in the nature of goods that underpinned the expansion of their availability

"back in the day they used to allow the wood to mature and, you know, used to get strong, nowadays it's all about quick, plant, let it grow fast, you know, whoosh, bang, here's a wardrobe, you know, flatpack, you know, chipboard." (P29.2)

Participant 10, who reported the lowest income of all those I spoke with, still felt that the sheer volume of material commodities had expanded notably from her own childhood. To her great frustration, she felt this changed the ways that her own children related to and valued the various toys that they owned.

> "I remember having, like, Barbie dolls and other toys and things like that, and I remember my mum telling me I could play with it, and then once I finished playing with it I had to put it away, I had to keep it nice. You played with one thing and then if you decided you didn't want to play with that any more you put it away and you got the next thing out. And I've tried to bring, I've tried to like encourage my kids to do the same thing, but my kids just don't do that. They used to have a lot stuff and it used to drive me mad, I'd go into the bedroom and they'd be thrown all over, or the toys would be broken so one day I just went in, I got a bin bag and I just threw everything away." (P10.1)

In reflecting on their changing relationship with material commodities over their life course, almost all of my participants reflected on how the availability of goods has expanded. At its core, this reflects the extent to which the view of globalisation derived from consumer theory is ultimately valid - globalisation has, across the everyday lives of consumers in states like the UK, increased the choice and availability of consumer goods relative to incomes. Yet outside the theoretical constraints of instrumental rationality, the nature of this benefit is much less clear. Many of those I spoke with were ambivalent about the benefits of such an expansion in their consumption opportunities, often reflecting on the negative connotations of cheapness and disposability that this represented. In many cases, the expansion of material abundance drove subsequent changes in how people valued the objects produced in the global economy, suggesting that the gains may not have been as substantial as economic theory might suggest. The precise nature of these changing appraisals of value are discussed further in Chapter 6.

Convenience

The next habitual logic to be focused on is that of Convenience. This has long been established as a central driver of household consumption (Kyrk, 1923, p. 120). It is the impetus that has driven tremendous change in the retail industry, relieving the "majority of First World consumers almost entirely... of seasonality, of distance (once they possess a car) and of scarcity" (Miller, 1998). But as du Gay (2004) shows in his exploration of the dawn of self-service shopping, what is experienced as 'convenient' is socially contingent. The loss of shop-keepers and gas-station attendants was both decried as an inconvenience that transferred labour to the shopper, whilst ushering a new era of consumer freedom. It has been the impetus behind both a grand transformation of both the retail experience, and the huge productive superstructure which supports it. Much of the developments in global logistics have been to the service of the demands of convenience (Brennan, 2021), often at the cost of workers (Quart, 2018, Evans 2023) and the environment. Shove (2003) develops an account of how convenience operates as a logic of practice, reordering the temporal arrangement of social activities and "enhanc[ing] peoples' control over the scheduling of activity" (p. 170). Yet its benefits are often illusory, as a "reliance on convenient solutions has the cumulative effect of redefining what people take for granted" (p. 170), speeding up the pace of life in ways that necessitate ever more conveniences just to keep pace.

This restless, ever-moving frontier of convenience in society has been driven outwards by the imperatives of capitalist accumulation (Tierney, 1990). There are two key developments in the convenience of consumption that will be discussed here - the supermarket and online shopping. Both represent forms of consumption shaped by corporate actors setting out to provide more convenient forms of consumption so as to attract customers in competitive markets. The role of convenience, and its association with time, increases the immediacy and availability of foods in ways that accelerate the processes by which capital changes form in order to accumulate value (Evans, 2023, p. 30). In doing so, this instigates wider changes to people's temporal relationship to consumption in ways that meaningfully impact why, when and how people buy the things they do.

Supermarkets

Turning first to the supermarket, this services convenience by making a huge range of products available under one roof (assuming, as Miller (1998) points out, the consumer can get there). The modern British family can get all their food, sundries, clothes, and household goods in one place. The relentless competition on price, and the market power exerted by retail giants such as Tesco or Asda, means that such goods are not only readily available, but reliably cheap in comparison to alternatives. These factors combined mobilise convenience as a logic that drives acts of consumption. A preference for convenience means that such chance encounters with commodities can be productively cultivated by retailers. This has been described as a form of *agencement* (Cochoy, 2007) in which the location, arrangement and design of the environment in which consumption takes place works in tandem with the actions of individuals, shaping their agency by way of ordering and manipulating the choices available. Participant 5, for example, found that she now did almost all of her shopping at the supermarket. When asked how she would go about buying a new toaster[43], she replied

P: "It would be supermarket, rather than a department store like you used to once

[43] The toaster was the often the item I referred to when trying to elicit participants to talk about their general consumption habits, being emblematic of the kind of mundane consumption that I sought to investigate in my research. Thwaites (2011) presents a compelling, if absurdist, case for the humble toaster as encapsulating our modern relationship with consumer goods

upon a time…"
E: "Ok, so to kind of fit it in with with what you were doing anyway"
P: "And convenience, because going into town you need to find somewhere to park. But you go to a supermarket you can pick up other things at the same time like clothing" (P5.1)

The ethos of 'everything under one roof', and the centrality of the car to the supermarket shopping experience, works to lessen the demands on the consumer's time. This convenience, and the immediacy of so many goods all in one place, mobilise and encourage forms of consumption that deploy habitual, rather than rational and calculative logics. The experience of going round the supermarket and being placed into unexpected encounters with commodities displayed this mechanism at work. Participant 18 was conscious of the extent to which a trip to the supermarket would generate unexpected additional consumption.

> "[My son] might see a toy that's on sale and we'll be like 'there's no chance I'm buying you that it's twelve quid'. You can have some sweets or summat, or have that toy that's two quid, we're not buying you a twelve quid toy, we're at the supermarket. So try and push back in terms of cost, but he does tend to end up walking out with summat… If we're running low on money or summat then we'll just do an online shop and we won't go to Sainsbury's… If you go to Sainsbury's, you tend to put to more in your trolley because you tend to see it… whereas if you do an online shop you tend to have wrote a list and that's what you'll order." (P18.1)

A number of the objects bought in the course of the consumption diary were from the discount supermarkets, Lidl and Aldi. Both companies have made the middle aisles of their stores a cornucopia of consumer goods, a frequently rotated range whose impermanence encourages impulse purchases of items encountered in the course of the weekly shop, there to "tempt you in" (P2.1). The nature of the encounters with these commodities emphasised their immediacy and contingency, encouraging people to buy things impulsively as a result:

> "I just picked those up in Aldi doing the weekly shop… cos I wanted some leggings and er, they were just there and I thought.. perfect then, that saved me a trip" (P15.2)

> [Discussing the diary] E: "You got some sort of bedding stuff from Aldi."
> P: "Yes, yeah"
> E: "Was that just kind of, it was in the middle of an Aldi, an impulse?"
> P: "Yes… you know, when it's something that… I didn't… It would, it's helpful to have a spare… but it's not like I was desperate for it."
> E: "…. So it wasn't necessarily that it was kind of a massive bargain or anything like that?"
> P: "No it's just cos it's there, you know, they do these special buys"
> E: "Yeah so it might not be there if you come back in weeks time or something like that.."
> P: "No, I wouldn't have gone out especially to a shop to buy it, it's just because it was there at the time." (P.15.2)

The supermarket, and its gradual expansion to incorporate more and more domains of consumption[44], has long traded on convenience to attract customers and maximise sales. Their more recent expansion into online shopping and delivery also trades on convenience as its central organising principle. But here, they are in competition with one of the largest and most aggressive retail firms ever to exist - Amazon. It is this firm, and its influence on online retail, that I turn to next.

Internet Shopping

The second focus is the advent of online shopping, now well established in the consumption habits of millions. The emergence of Amazon as a towering retail monopoly has been driven in part by its relentless focus on convenience, seeking to remove as much friction as possible between the consumer's desire for a commodity and its resolution (Huberman, 2021). The rhythms and practices of online shopping have transformed the consumer experience, both physically separating the individual from the desired commodity, but also making the

[44] Things like clothes and homewares now being relatively old hat in this context, with many supermarkets offering things like financial services and mobile phone contracts at tillpoints

possibility of consumption omnipresent and immediate. Here, too, acts of consumption are enacted by the individual through *agencements*, no more clearly than when it is mediated through a device like a smartphone (Cochoy et. al, 2020). Here, the constant presence and availability of the smartphone allows consumption to potentially infiltrate almost every waking moment. Amazon was, by some distance, the most commonly listed retailer for goods purchased during the diary study, with 101 purchases made on the site recorded (almost half of all goods purchased online). It provides a useful focus for exploring the logic of convenience, and how this has been cultivated and mobilised for their own ends.

Participant 6 was successful, and busy. For our second interview, I was met at her doorstep by an Amazon Ring doorbell, which alerted her to my presence whilst she worked in her garden office. This device was crucial, she reflected, given that couriers and delivery drivers would so often visit during the working day. She and her partner both worked in high-skilled, well-remunerated jobs, and they lived in a spaciously extended house in the urban-affluent research area. It was January, and much of the diary study period had covered the run up to Christmas. As such, a significant proportion of the goods she'd bought had been presents. The convenience afforded by her Amazon Prime membership made it easier for her to fit such shopping into her busy life:

> "We've got Amazon Prime, so we get it delivered the next day for free…with small children, the convenience of having it delivered to your front door… I work from home as well, so I'm always here so it's not the inconvenience of having to find parcels, cos you know, I'm here to collect, you have parcels delivered and stuff as well. So it's just super super convenient." (P6.2)

Yet given the supposed advantages of such convenience, she was instead saddened by the impact this transformation had had on her life:

> "I hate, do you know what I mean. I hate that. I really don't want to do my shopping that way. But you know, I don't have the time or the ability to do it otherwise..."

(P6.2)

The context of convenience afforded by Amazon reflected the wider constraints of her own busy life more than any kind of emancipatory freedom from the tedium of trudging round the shops. She felt herself being drawn into the specific retail ecosystem developed by Amazon through the pull of the convenience it represented. But she was conscious that, as it did so, her perception of the costs of disentangling herself from it increased:

> “It's just that feeling of them taking over your life. And it is then you're watching TV, then you’re storing your photos on Amazon photos and... as much as I don't like it, I still do.” (P6.2)

Her experiences with Amazon were reflective of those expressed by other participants I spoke to. The logic of convenience and its role in the formation of habit has been deliberately, and productively, exploited by the company in driving new forms of consumption behaviour (West, 2023). Not everyone felt uncomfortable about their relationship or reliance upon Amazon. Participant 25, who prided himself on being a canny shopper, was evangelical about Amazon. A pair of bicycle grips arrived in the middle of our second interview, which meant:

> “I don’t have to go all the way down to a bike shop to find out they’ve all run out, because in this current climate bike stuff is like hen’s teeth… Amazon will deliver it tomorrow, free of charge… it was the cheapest on the market. It saved me 50% for exactly the same item... The joy of Amazon, I get video on demand, me free delivery, and I get Amazon Music all in one” (P25.2)

Other participants were less positive about what the company offered. Participant 4 “wished she didn’t use Amazon as much as [she] did”. Participant 23 said they were “far to guilty of using Amazon, just because its so easy”. Participant 21 reflected on how his participation in the study had challenged the habitual relationship he had developed with Amazon:

> I would buy something because it was cheap, for instance on Amazon… completely

> forgetting about the project, but then when I [had to] input the stuff, and had to look up where it was from, I realised… I felt a little bit 'ooof'. (P21.2)

The emergence of a habitual logics around convenience reflect both the circumstance faced by the consumer, and wider social context. The desire and need for convenience can be seen as stemming from the ever growing demands that are placed on a consumers' time by wider structural transformations in the economy (Shove, 2003). Amazon, and the wider sphere of internet commerce, reflects an undeniable economic logic in the amount of effortful work they are able to remove from the practice of consumption. Taking advantage of convenience they represent can be understood as a rational response to the multiple competing pressures and demands that are placed on everyday life in contemporary Britain. But it also represents a productive habit for a company such as Amazon to cultivate, reducing the friction of deliberation and fastening its hold over those consumers who unthinkingly default to its service. The immediacy they are able to provide can invoke certain affective responses in consumers, feelings of "relief, or gratitude, or joy, or satisfaction … [or] comfort" (Evans, 2023, p. 21) arising from the predictable and timely arrival of their signature cardboard packages. As Shove (2003) notes, whilst the immediate benefit of convenience appears to accrue to time poor consumers, its nature as a habit gives it a ratchet-like quality, such that any benefits dissolve as soon as they have been fully incorporated into peoples expectations and contributed to a wider acceleration in their life. Despite the outward appearance of value it offers to consumers, convenience is a habit cultivated by other actors in the economy, who stand to gain from the accelerations in patterns of consumption and the circulation of capital that it represents.

Thrift

The notion of thrift has been historically embroiled in the act of consumption. In the Victorian era, it operated as a "technology of responsibilisation" (Maltby, 2012), disciplining the perceived "deficiencies and depravities" (Martin, 2008) of the working class. Its role as a disciplinary logic has persisted into the contemporary neoliberal era (Rose & Miller, 1997). It represents the responsible management of household income, putting aside savings for a rainy day, in a way that was often deeply gendered (Cain, 2016). In one sense, thrift represented the deferral of consumption, of resisting easy and immediate temptation (Ruppell Shell, 2009). Whilst its meaning can still reflect its historic association with the act of saving and the deferral of pleasure, thrift is increasingly a logic that is expressed and activated *through* the act of consumption. Trenttman (2016) discusses how the advent of consumer capitalism transformed thrift from an act of denial to one of 'responsible consumption'. Evans (2011) highlights this specific quality of thrift as being "the art of doing more (consumption) with less" (p. 551). It takes the form of complex and laborious strategies for negotiating consumption and stretching the household budget, as revealed through the ethnographic accounts of Miller (1998) and Hall (2011). Whilst it has been a strategy of necessity when deployed by those on low or constrained incomes, its long-running cultural salience means that it is an approach to shopping that still pertains higher up the income scale.

The practice of thrift, particularly when pursued out of necessity, is a laborious process of searching, planning and choosing. Participant 19, buying World Book Day costumes a year in advance, is reflective of this. Participant 37 was also driven to pursue thrifty consumption strategies as a matter of material necessity, and she provides an initial case study through which the logic will be explored. Broadening out to consider the wider role of thrift as discussed by other participants, will reveal how such an effortful process is ripe for short-cutting into patterns of habit. It is in this sense that many of my participants played out the logic of thrift, engaging in forms of consumption that satisfied it whilst often diverging from the original sentiment.[45] These reveal how thrift is more often deployed as a heuristic, rather than an all-consuming consumption strategy pursued for necessity. This has opened up productive avenues for corporations to prey on consumers sense of a good deal, in a way that can actually mobilise consumption activity itself.

Labour of Thrift

Participant 37 lived in the urban-deprived research area. She lived in social housing with her partner, who worked in a warehouse, and their three children. She had worked as a nurse, although a long-term degenerative health condition that meant she was no longer able to do so. Although she had been looking for work that would be more sustainable given her condition, they were reliant on disability benefits and her partner's salary to make ends meet. This was enough that "the bills are paid, with a little bit left over at the end of each week for a takeaway, for us and the kids" (P37.1), but only through extremely careful management of the household finances.

> "I've got three kids, like to buy for, and a boyfriend, a cat and a dog, I try to make money stretch as far as possible. So in my day to day life, no, I try and look for the cheapest option." (P37.2)

In terms of her shopping habits, this meant a significant outlay of time and effort in making her money go as far as possible:

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[45] This apparent contradiction is explored by Ellen Ruppel-Shell (2009), where she argues that thrift has been subverted by 'cheapness'

> “going to B&M, buying what I need from there, you know, whatever’s cheapest there, then going to Poundland, getting what I need from there, because it’s cheapest there, then going to Aldi, Lidl, wherever I need to go to go and get the other bits that I need” (P37.2)

Or finding things sold second-hand, given away for free, or otherwise acquired through non-commercial means:

> “this is how cheap I am… [I] don’t pay for stuff, I go online and I find whoever’s giving it away for free and I go and get it… My mum laughs at me, because I’m one of those people, but I don’t care if it doesn’t match, I’ll make it match, I’ll buy paint, I’ll go online… Ed, I found this website and they were doing tester samples, right, and they had unlimited samples ordered an unlimited amount of the colours I liked *laughs”* P37.2

Strict budgeting and money management strategies also helped to keep things on track. £30 worth of paint, bought to redecorate her living room, was bought on an instalment plan of £3 a week over 10 weeks. Without such strategies, it would be unlikely that any given week would have sufficient surplus that such an outlay could be afforded. The availability of such credit facilities, once seen as the anathema of thrift, could now be bought to bear in its mission of doing more with less.

It was clear that the effort, time and knowledge that she deployed in provisioning for her family were a source of tremendous pride to her. She described being referred to as ‘cheap’ by her mother almost as a badge of honour, validating her sense that “I don’t like to waste money if I don’t need to.” (P37.2). Reflecting on her purchases during the diary study, that had taken place over the run up to Christmas, the fact that she had “managed to do Christmas for ten people for under three hundred pound” was recounted glowingly with a clear sense of satisfaction. These hard-won skills had been practised and honed through experience, and she spoke at length about what the various pitfalls and perils of parenthood that had taught her.

Through bitter experience, she had discovered that “the price of something [isn’t] necessarily important when it comes to baby stuff”. Spending “ thousands of pounds” on unneeded baby-changing tables, teething necklaces, under-cot storage, “that I could have saved and gone on holiday with” clearly motivated her to keep putting the time and effort into making her money go as far as it could.

Yet as rewarding as they were, such considerations were also clearly effortful and laborious. In the face of very real material constraints, she was able to maximise what she was able to consume, but at the cost of the time and effort required to shop around, budget meticulously and take the opportunities to acquire things opportunistically. A number of other participants also highlighted the labour and discipline required to practice good household management. Participant 19, whose approach to buying World Book Day costumes was discussed in the case study, applied a very similar approach to buying clothes for her whole family:

> “what I do is I do buy a lot of stuff for them in advance, so things like clothes, I’ve got loads, you know I get it while it’s in the sale or …from charity shops as well… when I see it because, you’ve got to haven’t you, otherwise it’s not there.” (P19.2)

Notably, almost all the participants who spoke in this way about their shopping habits were women, highlighting the extent to which this, as with many other forms of domestic labour, had a tendency to break down gendered lines. Participant 16 was particularly exasperated by the disparity:

> “I made the slight mistake [of] a family trip to ASDA. I stick to the shopping list, my husband doesn’t… I went to the toilet I came back there were two LEGO toys in the trolley… which isn’t much but they were twelve quid each [and] if I’d’ve done the shopping that’s a weeks worth of food…” (P16.2)

<u>Thrift as a Habit</u>

Thrift, perhaps more than the other two forms of habit discussed in this section, represents a spectrum between more habitual and more considered behaviour. One example of the latter was Participant 25, who when asked to talk about how he'd accumulated possessions in the home spoke at length about their very deliberate approach to maximise their living standards:

> "we've not paid face value for them.. they've slowly been rolled up and up-cycled from other items.. so in the last four years to get to a QLED TV, we've gone through four different TVs and sold them, so like we've done with the bikes … it's like wheeler dealers, basically, for items in the house, you know, we know that the value of that item was eighteen hundred pound, but we've only paid five hundred pound for it and that's how we do, we just adapt, we know where we can get it for, we know what to do to do that, and we're just smart and savvy basically… you walked into the room you think crikey, this persons got a lot of money, er, no we've not, we've not gone and bought it at face value is the way, but at first glance you tend to think, blimey, they've got a good lifestyle" (P25.2)

His approach, as he describes it, involves a very active and engaged form of consumption, evaluating not just the value of goods to him and his family, but their potential resale value. This kind of speculative, entrepreneurial consumption stands as a constant, ongoing project, focused not on immediate ends but a longer term goal. In this way, it drifts out of the world of habitual consumption and into the more *projective* kind of logic that is discussed further in the following chapter.

Yet for many others, thrift operated in a much more habitual register. This didn't always represent the kind of laborious work that participants 19 and 37 needed to do to overcome their material constraints. Nor was it necessarily reflective of a sense of frugality or limits on consumption. Instead, the commonly shared logic of thrift, visible at every point of the income scale, was the sense held by participants that they were maximising what they were able to buy for the resources available to them. This could mean, like the partner of Participant 17, that "if she makes a purchase, particularly an item of furniture or… a utensil of some kind…it's gonna be a lifetime purchase". In this instance, spending more on high quality items is justified through a logic of thrift - "I don't buy the cheapest things, because you end up buying twice" (P6.1). Alternatively, it could be a sense of getting a bargain or value for money as a necessary precondition to buying something:

> "I don't like to pay full price for anything, I like to get a discount or some sort of bargain" (P24.1)

> "I tend to only buy something if I know it's the best bargain, or… i couldn't just you know, buy anything, it's always [got to be] the best deal" (P2.2)

These two tendencies were not mutually exclusive, such as with Participant 4 who reflected that her consumption diary revealed that "I either buy very cheap rubbish, or very expensive stuff" as the situation saw fit. Having come unexpectedly into some money, Participant 10 decided to treat herself by buying a new bed, and bedding to go with it. This money having come out of the blue, she abandoned her usual restraint and went for the highest quality items she could afford. Nevertheless, the logic of thrift still guided her choices. The rare opportunity to spend this unexpected windfall still needed to be appropriately maximised:

> "I wanted a pocket sprung mattress with a memory foam topper, type thing, all built into the mattress no extra bits. Thirteen hundred pounds. In the shops. So again I took to eBay, and I found that exact same mattress, without any of the labels or fancy names or anything like that on, and I paid two hundred and twenty nine pounds…if I'm going to spend large amounts of money on bedding, I'd rather do it at a shop that has massive discounts and all together I paid three hundred and twenty five pounds, for three sets of bedding…" (P10.1)

Even in describing what was for her such an unusually expensive purchase, the logic of thrift was central in legitimising and mobilising the act of consumption. Participant 12, for example, bought himself a new watch during the course of the diary study, simply because it was on sale:

> "I didn't really need a new watch, but that just happened to be on sale and I know that… I'll still use this one and then I'll go and use that one" (P12.2)

In this example, and other similar cases throughout the data, the actual difference in price was of less consequence than simply the fact of it being on sale. Sales, discounts and other competitive pricing strategies are key ways in which businesses generate consumption. These can be understood as working by activating the logic of thrift within a consumer, satisfying their sense that it represents a canny and efficient way to deploy their resources.

Thriftiness is a value that has been shaped by historic and social context. It has been seen as both an indelible facet of the American character, or as a pillar of Victorian virtue (Maltby, 2011). Yet much of the moral content of its historic antecedents has been abandoned. At its heart, thrift, representing the desire to 'do more with less', is a relatively rational strategy pursued by consumers in their own self-interest. As Participant 37 demonstrates, thrift can be a habit formed through hard-won experience to maximise their ability to secure value from the market. It is a central tenet of neo-classical economic theory that consumers act to maximise the value, or surplus, they obtain through the goods they consume. Even without enforcing such a rationalist view of what motivates consumer behaviour, it clearly represents an avenue through which the consumer can assert their own interests as agents in the market, by shopping around, being patient and resourceful. That it is not always the result of deep calculation, but instead a more reflexively employed heuristic, can present opportunities to manipulate and exploit the thrifty consumer. In Chapter 6, the impact that thrift, and the other habits discussed here, have on the value consumers assign to objects will be described in more detail. This will help shed further light on how the consequences of this type of agency plays out across the wider economy.

Conclusion

The three habits discussed here, 'Plenty', 'Convenience' and 'Thrift', represent ways in which consumer behaviour has become socially institutionalised. As habits of thought, they placed a gentle hand on the tiller as the participants navigated their ways through often busy and hectic lives. They informed choices not made through purely rational calculation, but rather in line with routines that become unthinkingly incorporated into their practical activities (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). These routines are not grounded solely in individual experience, but rather are developed socially. People's consumption is guided by past experiences of consumption, both their own and that of others. The demands of a school's fancy dress day are made in the context of a given economic environment and enfold generalised assumptions about the capacity and availability to secure material commodities. Calculations about the appropriate amount of time and effort required to buy a new toaster are made in the context of the array of possible options and the affordances they make towards convenience. And thrift translates a deep social history of morality around pecuniary conduct into how people make and legitimise their day to day shopping decisions. These habits, when reproduced against the shifting material and institutional backdrop of contemporary capitalism, can shed light on how it is sustained and reproduced through consumption practices amenable to the process of accumulation. Crucially, it can make sense of how this role is sustained without reducing consumers to marionettes, manipulated by agents of capital to act against their 'true' interests. It instead conceives of how these are reproduced through the active participation of consumers as independent, if not always completely rational, agents.

Chapter 5 - Deliberative Consumption

Introduction

The pragmatic understanding of habit was only ever a partial account of agency, which needed to be made whole by acknowledging the more critical and deliberative components that also played their part. To this extent, habits only hold to the extent that they align to the broader ends desired by the person enacting them (Dewey, 1922, p. 125). When these diverge, more deliberative, creative and experimental action is required to divine new forms of conduct that are better aligned with underlying motivations (Dewey 1922, p. 215). It is a model of agency well suited to understanding the behaviour of consumers, where the mundane repetitions of habit can often sit a cross-purposes with the practical or moral ends people seek. The expansive market economy of 21st century Britain provides manifold avenues for change and experimentation in people's consumption habits, and this chapter examines why and how people make more deliberative choices about the nature of their own consumption practices.

Consumption represents rich terrain for studying the dynamics by which people reflect on, change and update their habits and preferences. As a process, this needn't necessarily be of great political consequence, and could represent something as simple as trying new products or brands to see if they do a better job than those the consumer currently prefers. But it also reflects much deeper concerns that many hold around consumption and an acknowledgement that it is an act with consequences in the world beyond the scope of the good itself. The act of consumption places people into relationships with other people across the world, mediated by multiple processes of exchange. Many of these relationships take the form of 'externalities', in that the harmful consequences of consumption are visited upon others in a way that is not captured or valued within the economic realm. Whilst the nature and extent of these harms are often veiled from the consumer by the alienating nature of contemporary capitalism, many consumers nevertheless have an understanding of how their actions impact the world beyond them. Whilst critics of consumer culture have often presented a stereotype of the unthinking consumer, oblivious to the harm their actions cause, many reflect on their habits and actions in ways that suggest a deeper normative concern.

This chapter begins with a case study to explore the issues presented by this chapter in a particular context, in this instance the giving of gifts at Christmas. This represents a form of consumption that is richly and deeply habituated but that also represents a touchstones for people's frustrations and dissatisfaction with the status quo. Examining some of the ways that people transformed and adapted their consumption practices to address these concerns highlights the more deliberative side of consumer agency at work. The next section then explores *why* some of the people who took part felt motivated to change their consumption habits. This first examines the practical changes people make to their consumption habits, either as they encounter new commodities or experience changes to their income, before examining the more explicitly normative concerns people expressed about consumption. The final section examines *how* people change their consumption behaviour in response to these normative concerns. These broadly fall into the category of *creative* and *projective* transformations. The former represents more experimental and explorative changes, where the status quo is unsatsifactory but alternatives aren't immediately obvious. The latter represents a more deliberate project of habit formation, where the ends are more clearly in view but the challenge is overcoming the weight of existing habit. The chapter concludes with reflections on a particular case that arises in this context, that of 'non-consumption'. This raises the question of to what extent the decision not to consume can be seen as an act of consumer agency? Acknowledging some of the thorny theoretical implications of this reveals the need to study more directly the mechanisms by which consumers as economic agents interact with markets, and the consequences that result.

Case Study - Christmas Presents

The nature of gifts in forming and sustaining social bonds is well-established (Mauss, 1954; Lapavitsas, 2004; Bird-David & Darr, 2009). Gifting practices are a rich tapestry of individual habit and social custom, in which the expectations of others weighs heavily on the individual consumer. But the pressures and expectations around shopping at Christmas are also a flash-point for wider concerns or dissatisfaction about an individual's relationship with consumption. The timing of the interviews meant that a number of them were conducted in the immediate run up to Christmas and, unsurprisingly, this meant that gifts for others formed a significant proportion of the consumption for some of my participants (see p. 136). But this timing also meant that in some cases I was able to capture feelings of dissatisfaction with this period of socially enforced consumption. This case study, focused on people's attempts to uproot or disrupt social habits of gifting, demonstrates some of the drivers of change and the way in which changes in practice are brought about.

Participant 6 clearly felt somewhat uneasy about the expectations that had built up around around Christmas

> I find Christmas and birthdays and things… it's not stressful, but it's just that kind of sickening feeling of seeing all this stuff and you're just thinking, it's so wasteful (P6.2)

Her response to this feeling of unease was to change the kind of presents she bought, 'buying differently', in ways that helped her feel more comfortable with the kind of consumption she was engaging in.

> I've made more of an effort to try and buy certain things, like gifts and things, to buy things that are made in Sheffield or.. that would be made in the UK things like toys and things like that, I always think British companies are always going to be good quality, I associate them with that. … I mean I still go to the supermarket, I still buy things off Amazon, I still do all of those things, but I am conscious of trying to do more of the local things as well. (P6.2)

Such small changes alleviated her feelings of guilt around consumption and demonstrate a way in which normative concerns about the broader impact of consumption can filter down into practice. However, it also reflects the profound limits of such changes - she herself acknowledged that many of the items she bought didn't reflect this more considered approach. In fact, only two of the items she listed on the consumption diary were recorded as being made in the UK, which were both toys manufactured by Melissa & Doug. Whilst as a company making exclusively wooden toys it projects a wholesome image, it seems unlikely that the toys were indeed made in the UK[46]. US non-profit GimmeTheGoodStuff.org states

[46] It's ultimately not possible to verify exactly what information was on the specific packaging of the toys brought by the participant (beads and a stamp set). However, this further investigation was brought about when I personally bought a stamp set from the same firm as a gift for someone and noticed the packaging did indeed say 'Made in China'. It's possible that the participant didn't actually check the packaging at all, but simply imputed the provenance of the good from its wholesome aesthetic. This is speculation, but also a good reminder of the potential for desirability bias that might be at work across the data.

that all Melissa and Doug toys are manufactured in China (James, 2022), and a report by China Labor Watch highlighted multiple instances of exploitation and rights violations in factories manufacturing products for the company (China Labour Watch, 2019). The complex specifics of a given supply chain are clearly hard to follow even for expert researchers, let alone lay consumers, but this example demonstrates how aesthetic and marketing can often fill in the gaps in ways that mislead consumer choice. Given this, more substantial transformations in habit may be needed to do any more than just salve the conscience.

Participant 21 had clearly thought very deeply about their consumption habits. He saw his participation in the research as in part an opportunity for him to further explore and interrogate some of the consumption habits that he was actively trying to change in the face of his growing concerns about environmental sustainability, as well as more pragmatic concerns about the sheer amount of 'stuff' that his family had accumulated. He spoke of a number of ongoing projects and challenges that he was taking part in to change his habits around consumption. One of these related to Christmas and, whilst the diary study itself took place in February, he reflected on how his family had changed its approach to consumption at Christmas. They had taken up a simple rule, following a popular maxim of unknown provenance, that their children would each get:

> "something to wear, something you need, something you want, and something you read" (P21.1)

This represented a very deliberate attempt to limit the amount of consumption associated with Christmas and impart a more deliberate approach to what material goods were brought into the home. Although undermined slightly by the fact that "of course you get lots of presents from family and friends, so they get loads and loads of Christmas stuff' (P21.1), it was an approach that sought not just to physically limit the amount of commodities bought, but change expectations and attitudes about the nature and role of gifts at Christmas. In this latter sense, he clearly felt it had been a success. Whilst their eldest daughter had been “fairly against that idea, whinging and whining because she wanted whatever the latest thing was” (P21.1), it was with some satisfaction that he recounted how “on Christmas day she really enjoyed it and fully got behind it... I’d say she’s sold on the idea now of being a bit more sensible about how much you’re buying”.

These kinds of transformations represent a more ‘projective’ kind of agency, in that they are made with a very deliberate idea of establishing a new status quo and breaking existing habits. Such changes represent a potentially much more impactful form of agency if new customs and habits are established. Exactly these kind of transformations are the focus of organised campaigns by organisations seeking to engineer social change. Participant 3 revealed how she had been inspired by Martin Lewis, the influential founder of MoneySavingExpert.com, to massively reduce her Christmas shopping by having the difficult conversations with friends and colleagues to reduce tit-for-tat gift buying (P3.2). Although that campaign was in service of the websites push for greater individual financial stability, similar approaches are pursued by other campaigning organisations such as Friends of the Earth. These reflect faith in the potentially transformative social impact that long-term, sustainable changes to habit can have.

Types of Deliberative Agency in Consumption

Agency represents an alignment between ends and means. In traditional accounts of agency, such as rational choice or Parsonian social action, ends prefigure the means (Joas, 1996). People enter into situations with a pre-established understanding of the ends they wish to achieve, then ascertain the best way to do so in the given context (Gross, 2018, p.91). Pragmatism complicates this account. Either our ends may change in the course of action

(Dewey, 1922), or our understanding of the situation in which we are acting (Joas, 1996). Rather than clear, fixed objectives, we work towards "ends-in-view" (Dewey, 1922) that are liable to change in the process of meeting them. In relation to consumption, the understanding of its wider context can change in ways that present challenges or contradictions to established habit. Changes to the ends people seek can also relate to concerns much closer to home. These can, most prosaically, relate to people experimenting with new forms of consumption, for example new technologies, where novelty implies that habit is necessarily not a useful guide[47]. Another situation is that of income shocks, where the consumer's ends may remain fixed but the means available to meet them changes, necessitating new forms of consumption to be found. Both situations will be covered, before turning to the more moral and normative concerns that inform peoples consumption habits. These address a key ongoing question in the IPE literature around the extent to which consumer agency can operate as a force of positive social change in the global economy (See p. 89)

Practical Change

The bulk of this chapter will focus on the normative factors that drive people to make changes to their consumption habits. This was the frame in which such discussions most frequently occurred in the research, and which speak most consequentially to issues relating to the role of consumption in the global economy. But in terms of the mechanism of change being discussed, this need not be grounded in a particularly normative or moral objection to the status quo. Processes of experimentation and creativity abound in daily consumer

[47] It may also be the case, that for some people, seeking out novelty through the consumption of new technologies has become an ingrained habit - for example, always having buy the latest phone. The delineations between these modes of agency are never precise, and both may be reasonable descriptors of this kind of consumption, depending on the individual context.

behaviour, as people encounter new problems or become dissatisfied with old solutions. New technologies are necessarily encountered experimentally, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Before turning to the arguably more consequential processes of change, this section will explore some of the more mundane ways in which people adjust and adapt their consumption practices in ways that reflect a deeper, deliberative agency.

Sometimes commodities are pursued as a way of addressing new problems through acts of consumption that are, by their nature, experimental. Participant 37 was trying to move her son onto bottles rather than breastfeed, so had ordered an electronic breast pump. Having not used one before, she was turning towards a commodity in an experimental mode, exploring the potential and possibilities of goods that promised much but that had not been directly experienced. In this case, the product itself was a roaring success, if there remained difficulties about establishing the new routine as she'd hoped.

> [About a Nuby breast pump] I thought it was going to be a piece of crap! Like honestly I thought I was going to use it and I was going to launch it out the window… that thing, is amazing.. It's awesome! I've only used it twice because my little one still refuses to drink milk out the bottle, I don't know what I'm doing wrong there, can't get him to stop breast feeding with me, but um, that thing, it's awesome, I literally shout about it all the time, it's great. (P37.2)

Participant 17 had similar hopes when he bought an Apple Smart Speaker with high expectations:

> "I hope[d] to be able to ask you what time the next bus is into town and things like, and it just… 'Oh I'm sorry, I don't have the answer to that'… oh thanks a lot!" (P17.2)

He demonstrated with a brief back and forth with his computerised assistant, ending with a dejected "Look at it go! What a waste of money".

In these trivial and mundane ways, people engage with material commodities in creative and experimental ways. Although information about their functions and qualities can be transmitted by peers or through advertising, there is ultimately always a leap into the world of experience that must be taken on faith. In making that choice, people cast their expectations forward, to what such a product might be able to do for them and the role it may play in their life.

Income Shocks

One reason that consumers may have reason to take stock and reevaluate their consumption habits is the impact of an income shock. The COVID-19 pandemic, and associated lockdowns and contractions of economic activity, affected a number of the people that I spoke to. Some were relatively insulated, able to continue working from home even as social distancing requirements remained in place. But others had been much more severely affected, either as health concerns limited their ability to work, or because the worked in a sector that had undergone a significant contraction. In such cases, the volume of consumption recorded in the diaries was notably lower than for many other participants, but it was nevertheless interesting to hear their reflections on how they had changed their consumption habits in respone to such an income shock. Participant 31 relied on her husband's income as a taxi driver to provide for her family of five children, which had been significantly reduced by the impact of the pandemic. She had only bought two items during the course of the diary study, and reflected on how the period had changed her thought processes around consumption.

> "it [has] a great effect on the children… and then it effects you as well, obviously because if the kids are not happy, you're not happy, you know so it is like, meeting… somethings, like you know, obviously if they need some things and you have to think twice and… do they really need it, like, you know, affordability and, you know, all all these things, you have to think, like, you know, can we do it or not, like, or now's not the right time because obviously the income's come down" (P.31.1)

The impact of such an income shock on settled and established habits of consumption meant that she had to devote a lot more time and energy to thinking about how to meet her families needs. This meant almost completely cutting out consumption except for the essentials of bills and food, and turning to new forms of support, such as food charity, to meet basic needs. Proceeding simply on the basis of unthinking habit is a luxury that requires stable circumstances and when these are uprooted questions of consumption become a much more pressing concern.

Normative Change

Through the ever expanding world of goods, consumers (at least, those with the money to pay) are offered endless opportunities to solve problems they face or develop new capacities through new commodities. In such situations, consumption can be seen as a genuinely exploratory or creative act in pursuit of new experiences and capacities. But there is also a sense that consumption, and the needs it sets out to meet, are the product less of authentic human desires and instead are the product of corporate manipulation, social positioning or other such malign forces. From this perspective, consumption becomes loaded with a great deal of moral consequence, something that is "socially destructive, culturally bereft and politically dangerous" (Humphrey, 1998, p. 209, cited in Fine, 2002). These views about the morality of consumption were shared by many of the people I spoke to, and it was a factor that modulated their desire to consume. For Participant 7, her attitude to consumption was firmly grounded in her wider sense of morality.

> "I look at what's happening to the kids in the world… Syria, for example, or Iraq and I just think… Like I'll give you and example, the other day as I was out shopping with my husband, and he likes to buy me stuff. I'm in a position where I'm independent, I can go out and buy stuff, but I think it's that man thing, where you know, he wants to buy [something]… And there was something, it was in Ted Baker

actually, it was on sale…And I said, oh I like this dress… my husband said 'oh I'll buy it for you' I said no.. I can't do it he said 'no no no, I'll buy it for you, whatever the price, I'll buy it for you'.. I couldn't do it, I couldn't buy that dress.. because it didn't sit right with me… Even though it's on the sale, I don't need it at the minute, you know, even if I needed it I would never pay that much for a dress.. because I just.. I've got so much in my head when I'm buying stuff.. and I just think about these people and what they're going through and I... yeah" (P7.2)

A number of participants, in reflecting on their consumption habit, expressed their thoughts in very moral register that highlighted the nature of these concerns:

> "There is a sort of shame in overconsumption. It's changed a lot over the last few years and whereas there used to be shame in not having the stuff… now the tables are turning a little bit. But that probably does change depending on the demographic… it's not always easy or cheap to make those changes and so I think.. different demographics would probably feel that the societal norms were different…" (P4.2)

> "We had a very very small [TV], I literally couldn't see things on it, so I gave in and I bought a bigger one. I'm really conscious that I've got now, what to me is a big TV… I'm not sure if that feels quite right to have that. It's a bit of an embarrassment, like a guilty secret [that] I've got a big TV and a new sofa." P30.2

These concerns reflected a kind of ascetic morality, such that the act of consumption itself, particularly of a gaudy or showy character, was seen as being morally undesirable. Similar attitudes were displayed around the end of the commodities life cycle, with perceived wastefulness also attracting moral concern from some of the participants:

> "I can't bear throwing away things if I know there's some use in it… I wouldn't want to just throw perfectly good clothes and things in bin. It's just wasteful, in't it" P24.2

> "Anything which can be used, you know, there's so many charities out there, crying for things… it's just stuff that, it can be used, so why not just get somebody else to use it?" P32.2

People's attitudes towards consumption were frequently shaped by these kinds of "lay normativities" (Sayer, 2005) that provoked feelings of shame, guilt or moral outrage around acts of consumption seen as unnecessary or wasteful. In the examples set out above, the moral sentiment was attached to the act of consumption itself, rather than to its direct consequences. But they often went hand-in-hand with more explicit concerns about the wider cost and harms brought about by consumption.

<u>Externalities</u>

A number of participants were very conscious of the ethical implications of the externalities generated by the goods they consumed. These tended to reflect concerns about both the conditions in which they were made, and the environmental impact of their production and disposal. Yet whilst a broad concern was expressed by a number of participants, there was significant variation in their level of awareness about such issues. Participant 34 spoke particularly reflectively about the ethical dimension of his consumption habits, and those of his family. His approach was shaped, in part, by his background as a development economist and as a worker for an NGO in sub-Saharan Africa. He was very conscious of the realities of production in the contemporary global economy, something that he thought about in the context of everything he bought. He was the only participant I spoke to who specifically mentioned concerns about where the raw materials that went into the commodities he bought came from, conscious as he was of the impact of extractive industries on conflict around the world. Yet such concerns had to coexist with the more mundane pressures of life, and the paucity of alternatives available, such that he often felt he was "forced to go against [his] own conscience".

> "for me every time I see made in China, I think about the kids, I think about those who are exploited. But then… how can I explain this to five year olds and seven year olds, when they want something? It's like this wrestling of… a moral, and ethical issue, versus, you know, ease of existence, if I may put it that way" (P34.2)

A more commonly expressed register of concern was perhaps less comprehensive, but instead focused on specific examples of bad or exploitative practice - particularly the retailer Primark, whose poor reputation in this regard meant they represented a baseline of ethical concerns against which more positive comparisons could be drawn.

> "Primark for example, absolutely brilliant for kids clothes but do I buy them? No, because, I'm not comfortable with the background" (P23.1)

> "like Primark and places that have got a reputation for… below minimum wage employment employing kids in sweatshops it it's not really, ethical… you might get something for cheap, a cheap price, but somebody somewhere's paying for that so.." (P24.1)

Another source of concern was around the impact of consumption on the environment. Here, specific linkages to production were rarely drawn. Few of the people I spoke to linked their own consumption practices with the kind of large scale environmental challenges that are brought about by the system of production as it currently operates. Participant 12 got the closest in exploring some of these issues, although reflected on the extent to which he contributed to the status quo despite his awareness of such issues

> " there's just this continual usage of raw materials and like… instead of us thinking oh we're going to run out of this so we'll maybe.. stop doing [that], they'll just start digging up another country to try and find the resources… it seems to be that we'll all just use them up and then we'll… find somewhere else and we'll just get them. It's not 'er, well maybe we shouldn't be doing this'... cos I mean I know you do, well you kind of start looking at your own home and you kind of start looking at your own home and thinking, we've actually got a lot of pointless products that we have that are here, that maybe either don't get used or serve no purpose but at the time, we needed them…" (P12.2)

Beyond this moment of realisation, people's concern was more often reflected in the small, manageable adjustments they could make to their own consumption habits that they felt addressed the systemic problems that they faced. The next section explores in more detail the specific ways in which people adapted their consumption in response to such normative concerns unsettling their established habits.

Changing Habits

If consumers are to be held to possess meaningful agency, they cannot simply be seen as creatures of habit. The kind of issues discussed so far in this chapter are those that can unsettle or disrupt the habits of consumers, as they come to reflect on the potential consequences of their consumption. People don't necessarily possess a fixed set of aims or ideals that they seek to achieve through their consumption. Instead, they have a set of wants, needs or desires that exist in tandem with broader concerns about the desired state of the world. The pursuit of any given end through consumption is a process which "encourages the coming into view of consequences which will transform it and create a new purpose and plan." (Dewey, 1922, p. 215). As they engage in consumption, experiencing its consequences both through the use of the commodity and through their understanding of the wider impact of this act, "these constitute the meaning and value of an activity as it comes under deliberation" (Dewey, 1922, p. 225). These present the potential for moments of deliberation where habits and conduct change and pivot, as people engage imaginatively with ways that a more agreeable range of consequences could be pursued. As discussed in Chapter 3, these can take the form of creative or exploratory transformations, or more *projective* action that sets in motion actions that have a long-term goal as their ultimate end point. This section outlines the ways in which participants in this study displayed both forms of more deliberative agency in relation to their consumption practices, addressing what and how much they bought, where they bought it from, and the wider role of consumption in their own lives.

Ethical Consumption

There were various ways people changed the things they bought in response to growing normative concerns about the consequences of consumption. In some cases, these inspired fairly banal transformations in people's consumption habits that were nevertheless revealing of the thought processes at work. Two of the participants I spoke two highlighted that they had recently tried wooden toothbrushes, having become aware of the consequences of plastic pollution[48]

> "you can buy wooden toothbrushes, all sorts to try and cut down on plastic and stuff…. We're trying, trying to use that, incorporate stuff like that in… but I think that's on an upwards projectory [sic], hopefully they'll just keep doing more and more stuff like that" (P18.2)

Participant 15 had bought a wooden toothbrush as part of the consumption recorded on her diary, although in her case it didn't seem like a change that was likely to stick:

> "it's like the eco friendly one but it's not the right shape so… which, it's a shame, because I would like to kind of do my bit for the planet and things, but I don't think I'd buy one again, not unless I saw one that was a different shape" (P15.2)

These are perhaps trivial adjustments, but they nevertheless reflect a process at work by which the individual updates and adapts their consumption habits on the basis of new information about the context in which they take place. To turn to a slightly more tangible example, Participant 28 had purchased, as a birthday treat for herself, some leggings from the brand Sweaty Betty. This was "ridiculously expensive" but represented the kind of high-end, responsibly manufactured item that she felt warranted the sale price.

> "they are really nice, they are really well and nicely designed stuff and they claim to have… you know, to not use… dodgy sweatshops and what not… it just makes you

[48] At the time that fieldwork was being carried out, a David Attenborough documentary on plastic pollution had recently been released to significant publicity

> feel a bit better about the price and a bit more confident that the price that it's not just like… 'oh we say we're more ethical and therefore the leggings cost twice as much as you'd normally pay for leggings', it's kind of.. OK, these were made in Portugal.. I feel more reassured that whoever stitched these, you know… wasn't living in.. abject poverty" (P28.2)

Her resolution to go after more expensive, better quality and (supposedly) more responsibly sourced sportswear was, she recounted, a response to an earlier online shopping experience that had left a lasting impression on her:

> "I got seduced by one of those fashion adverts on Facebook for some, um… they looked like really nice dresses of course, because it was an advert and.. it was a company called Shein… and it was some like crazy thing where you get like five items, for like thirty quid and when they came… it was weird, it was like I could… smell the, the stuff, the nastiness of them and … like a lot of them didn't fit very well or weren't very well made, as you'd expect and they're sort of like wrapped in really, roughly, nasty polythene instead of being sort of, you know, lovingly … cushioned in.. bespoke tissue paper. They felt, every bit as bad as, and I, sort of immediately, you know, cancelled the, the subscription and another friend was… a few months ago was like 'has anyone ordered anything off this company, it looks too good to be true' and I was like 'it is!' it's really horrible… the clothes smell of death… That was a quite an instructive experience, cos while I was sort of, always kind of philosophically against fast fashion it's sort of, reinforced that, in that they really were crap they really were crap clothes and then the flip side of that, is like with the expensive sports stuff… just, feeling like, oh if I… I feel good about this, apart from the fact that I should really spend that much money on something as frivolous, but if, you know, I feel, apart from that, I don't feel bad about it on like any level…" (P28.2)

Participant 30, meanwhile, captured the spirit of creativity in how she adapted her consumption habit in the face of repeated disappointment with the kettles that she bought breaking. Her strong aversion to waste meant that a new approach needed to be found, one that meant forgoing a modern convenience to avoid this risk of yet more wasteful consumption:

> “because kettles broke so often that I now use… a camping one on the [hob] because I got sick of buying them, even though you could get them cheaply, they were breaking every single year, and I just hated the fact that they were just then going to the tip and I couldn’t repair them…” (P30.2)

The process can also work in reverse. Choices made for normative reasons can have unwelcome consequences that work to return the consumer to the status quo ante. Participant 34, who was more informed and considered than most in the consumption choices that he made, had made the decision to buy a Fairphone, which advertised the sustainability of materials used in its construction. But ultimately his experience of it as a consumer device meant he felt that the choice wasn’t one he was able to persist with:

> “so back in the day I used to buy a Fair Phone, because I didn’t buy phones that are like, you know normal, like Nokia and all that, because they were made, they’re a product of war. You know, of exploitation and all that. But after a while you know, that fairphone did not work well and it caused so many problems and you’re like, OK, I have to rely on, I have to go for something that’s a lot more reliable and, you know, you feel… you kind of feel forced and obliged, otherwise you will not function in today’s society” (P34.1)

These kinds of changes, whether successful or not, represent (in one way or another) forms of ‘ethical consumption’ (Barrett et. al., 2000), where consumption choices are made with a specific intention of signalling the importance of social or environmental factors in the products people buy. As will be discussed further in the final section, there are ultimately limits to the extent to which this provides an avenue for meaningful change. These limits stem from both the incomplete information held by consumers, and in the obstacles to their choices being meaningfully transmitted through the market. Nevertheless, simply in terms of what *motivates* such choice, these examples reflect how normative concerns can unsettle and disrupt established habit.

Buying Less

Given the limitations of ethical consumption as a response to concerns about consumption, a more common remedy was to simply buy less, or to buy or exchange second hand goods. Participant 12, who was clearly concerned with the environmental effects of consumption, had reflected this in how he approached raising his own children:

> "We buy them things that they need but we tend not to buy them stuff just for the sake of it, or because they say they want it. Going back to my upbringing, I knew I had relatively little, but with the way my parents were, it didn't affect me, I you know, still had a good upbringing without having lots of toys,…Because some people, when they haven't had a lot when they're younger, go into overdrive and spend spend spend on their kids because they didn't have it, whereas I don't want that much stuff, so the environment impact as well…There are things we'd love to buy them, but we just think… it's not the right thing to do" (P12.2)

'Buying less' was a relative proposition, and it was often in drawing comparison with others that people reflected on how they modulated their own consumption habits. Several participants spoke of particularly profligate relatives or peers, used to illustrate examples of when they'd made conscious decisions not to indulge momentary impulses to consume:

> "I was speaking with my younger sister, and she will just buy everything, she's got like six coats and she'll just keep buying them and buying them, and every time I see her boys, she's got two boys as well, her boys have got new matching coats, and it would be nice if ours had newer coats as well. But my husband kind of says 'think sensibly..'" (P7.2)

The desire to consume less was sometimes also driven simply by an awareness of how much stuff had already accumulated in the home. Several of the people I spoke to bemoaned the accretion of consumer goods that cluttered their houses. Solutions to this took one of two forms. Some, such as Participant 26, were simply ruthless in throwing items out:

> "I hate having stuff stuck all over the house… once every year, I just get a skip and I

> just go through the house and bin it all… I'll throw it away and then if I need it I'll get it again." (P26.2)

Such an approach was clearly not attractive to many of the people I spoke to, however, who instead found that the volume of goods they already owned acted as a check on their willingness to consume ever more:

> "I think having two kids and having all that amount of stuff that goes with them up to fifteen years old and they don't like letting go of things, you just accumulate that much stuff, you just don't want any more, you just don't want anything else coming in, so like… like me parents said, oh I've got this for them, or do they want this, I'll say keep it at your house because I don't.. anything else that comes in I don't want it." (P24.2)

Buying second hand items was a key way in which people sought to reduce their primary consumption. It was also acted as an important release valve for feelings of being overwhelmed by consumer goods, an alternative sphere of circulation in which they could be disposed of without activating unpleasant feelings of guilt or shame at the waste involved. As has already been demonstrated in the previous chapter, buying goods second hand is a key way through which people can engage in thrifty shopping practices. But many also reflected on its advantages in addressing the moral and ethical concerns that people held about primary consumption:

> "I do prefer buying second hand because I think, um.. it alleviates some of my mass consumerist guilt, so it feels that item is in the kind of sphere already, so I'm not pulling more in or causing more production…" (P11.2)

Projects

So for various reasons, people made choices about their consumption in ways that reflected and responded to their wider concerns about the impact of their consumption in the world. Sometimes these become established and take on the character of habits, in other cases they remain more unstable and experimental as people balance competing priorities, or simply switch between different modes of consumption at different times. But a key aspect of the more deliberative forms of consumer agency discussed here is the capacity to attend to more long run goals, through the deliberate commitment to a project of change or transformation. This is described by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) as being *projective* in character, in that it attends to projects that people are able to envision, that map out paths to potential future states of the world that the individual finds more amenable. Several of my participants spoke about initiatives they were either currently pursuing, or had recently completed, that served as explicit challenges to reconfigure their consumption habits to address what they saw as a growing disconnect between their conduct and their underlying values. A couple had even remarked (outside the recorded interviews) that their participation in the study itself was driven in part by a desire to be more conscious of their consumption habits. Participant 9 described how she had set out very deliberately to reduce her consumption:

> "[We had] a whole year last year of not buying anything new that wasn't food… So all the clothes were second hand, anything for the house was second hand… we had a whole year of that and actually it was quite nice, it was quite refreshing. We kind of took the foot of the gas a little bit this year, but it's still something that we do do, I'm just not doing it to the extreme." (P9.2)

This was viewed as part of an ongoing process of change, something that she felt would help disrupt the settled habits around consumption practices that she had fallen into. She described the pervasive nature of the kind of habits that she wished to break

> "not taking the easy option, not using disposable nappies, not using the party plates, just… tiny little things like that… that people are doing for convenience. [It] would be a really good idea not to, but those things exist so, you know… the convenience exists so lets take advantage of them." (P9.2)

This approach to disrupting settled habits was often very deliberately mobilised. Participant 3 mentioned that, the month before we spoke, she had completed 'Oxfam October' - a challenge that she had taken up having read about the impact of the fashion industry on the environment:

> "I read an article about the textile industry, the pollution… how drastic that is. So, from that I spent a month where I I didn't buy anything new. I have carried on with that and hardly bought any clothes because I was quite bad just buying clothes if I decided I wanted to, without thinking about, you know, that its got to be made… So this period of time, all the things I've bought.. I've been thinking each time.. 'do I need this, have we got it at home, is this something that we've got at home that could be used otherwise?'" (P3.1)

This campaign represented a starting point for a wider transformation in her shopping habits, albeit from a relatively high base. These kind of campaigns have become increasingly common in a variety of different contexts, either promoted by campaigning organisations (such as Oxfam October as mentioned above, or well known public health campaigns such as Dry January) or proliferated on social media (such as the No Spend Challenge). The central tenet of these approaches to behaviour change is to overcome the various cognitive barriers to habit formation by encouraging a period of increased focus and the deliberate repetition and reinforcement of behaviour (Verplanken & Wood, 2006). Embarking on such a challenge in relation to consumption reflects a higher-order desire to effectively change the consequences of ones' actions in the world.

To What Effect?

So far, this chapter has demonstrated that consumers can act in such a deliberative fashion, responding to an understanding of the wider ethical implications of their actions with either experimental or sustained attempts to change. But it should be noted that there is not necessarily a direct line between the ways in which consumers enact such deliberative agency and the wider consequences this imparts on the world. For a number of reasons, people felt like their ability to actually choose or act in an empowered way was truncated. The complexity of the global economy, and people's alienation from the production of commodities within it, means that for many consumers however much they might wish to enact certain normative values through their choices, they feel dis-empowered by the information environment in which those choices are made. I will now briefly reflect on the nature of some of these barriers and what this means for people's capacity to act as agents in the global economy.

Alienation

The first such obstacle was identified by Marx when he reflected on the role the commodity form played in separating people from the circumstances of production of the goods they consumed. Because money and exchange could mediate between consumer and worker, commodities became unmoored from the context of their origin and encountered simply as fully formed objects shorn of any history. Of course, as already shown in this chapter, people as consumers are fully able to appreciate and respond to a more general understanding of the conditions of production, even if the specific journey of a particular object remains obscured. But ultimately, the illusion remains strong and can often serve to obscure what might otherwise be a normative response to perceived injustice in the conditions of production. Participant 21 described the feeling well, noting the ease and simplicity with which a product could be made available and how, without the prompt of the study to pause and take note of it, he simply wouldn't have considered anything about the circumstances in which the good was made.

> "If we'd have gone into Sheffield and bought a Sheffield steel knife, I probably would have probably consciously thought about the journey a little bit more… [but] in my

head, there's zero journey in that knife, I clicked a button on Amazon and then a few days later it was through the door" (P21.2)

Participant 4 reflected on the active process of 'not seeing' that she felt accompanied her willingness to consume things that, if she were fully aware of the circumstances of their production, she would feel much less comfortable about.

> "It's unpleasant to think about it.. and we try not to think about it… and I think that's maybe a reason that we do import so many things and.. we like to import things because we don't like to think of where it's come from, we like to think of it coming from a long way away. I think people would be less willing to buy stuff from erm… unethical working conditions in the UK... because it's easier to distance yourself from people a long way away". (P4.2)

The nature of contemporary production means that an ethical response to it can never be made in the context of direct knowledge about a specific item on a shelf. Instead, information to shape such decisions must be acquired in the form of broad tendencies, associations with particular brands or retailers. These are much less specific and immediate and may not always provide a complete picture of the reality of global production. Yet even if such a full picture were available, it still may not always be apparent what would present the most 'ethical' course of action

Complexity

Something that a number of the participants in the study remarked upon was a sense that, whilst they felt like they had an obligation to make morally informed choices, it was not always clear what these were. The vast, interlocking complexity of the various social and environmental systems that were drawn into processes of production were such that anticipating the most appropriate course of action was beyond the calculative power of an individual consumer. The nature of the response to such concerns echo the forms of objection that Hirschman (1991) identified as the ‘rhetoric of reaction’, narratives that seek to preserve the status quo by postulating the potentially unanticipated consequences of change. These narratives, of perversity, futility and jeopardy, when deployed cynically by a politician, serve only to truncate debate and arrest the possibility of change. However, they seem like a more reasonable response from an individual consumer to processes of such complexity that there is little hope in fully anticipating all its consequences. Participant 12 was particularly riven by such internal debates, such that even as he worried deeply about the environmental costs of his consumption, he felt conflicted as to what was an appropriate response. His discussion of the broad shift away from plastics mirrored Hirschman’s narrative of perversity, that outwardly positive change might actually conceal a deepening of the problems themselves:

> “it’s a lot more complicated… like [a] plastic bag… you know, plastic is actually a great product and it solves a lot of problems, but now it’s been seen as a problem, but then if you go back to paper then you look at the energy costs of producing paper and disposing of it, it’s more than the plastic bag so… there is no straightforward… there isn’t, do you know what I mean…?” (P12.2)

Such considerations were particularly common in relation to questions about the extent and nature of global inequality. Whilst all participants were conscious of it, their responses where often complex and conflicted. Common to these was a sense of futility

> “it’s a bit of an awkward one really, because… over in say like, China or Bangladesh or something like that, what is their parents doing, why is it that they’re having to send they’re children to work, what are their parents doing. You don’t really hear about things like that… I know that child labour’s cheaper, but the money is also going to their families to help them… so if they’ve got five or six children and they all work in one sweatshop, they’ve got five or six amounts of money going to that family, and helping that family…. But at the same time, children shouldn’t be working, children should be playing..” (P10.1)

<u>Non-consumer agency</u>

The perceptions of the limited effectiveness of achieving social change through consumption means that it was often the deliberate disavowal of consumption, of buying less, that people felt represented the most satisfactory solution to any perceived misalignment between their normative concerns and their habitual practices of consumption. It should be noted, however, that this throws up a particular conceptual puzzle in developing an account of consumer agency - namely, can *not* buying something be understood as the act of an individual as a consumer? From some perspectives, such an act of anti-consumerism might be seen as a deliberate attempt to withdraw from consumer identities and reconstitute a relationship with society and the things within it along less materialist, economistic lines. Whilst this is a valid perspective, in the context of the argument advanced in this thesis such actions will be incorporated specifically into an account of *consumer* agency. As will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter, this is grounded in a sense that the choice to not consume remains a form of participation in the market, one that has implications for the value ascribed to goods. Studying in greater depth the ways in which people do, and don't, place value on the goods they consume will help to resolve some of the tensions described here.

Conclusion

The evidence presented here gives a distinctly mixed picture of people's capacity to act as moral agents within a system as remote and complex as the global economy. Many, although by no means all, of the participants were conscious of the wider impact of their consumption, and experienced feelings of shame or guilt from this perceived misalignment of their conduct and their values. But often their options were limited by the unavailability of possible alternatives, or when they were available, they were insufficient for their needs. The surest way to better align peoples concerns and their consumption practices was to simply reduce consumption altogether. Ultimately, given the scope of this project, it is impossible to appraise the impact of any given change in consumption habits. Wider research would suggest that transformations of the order and character of those discussed here would be unlikely to manifest substantive change, unless pursued by a much greater volume of consumers or supported by substantial institutional reform. Yet in relation to a more limited question, namely what is the *nature* of consumer agency, the concerns, deliberations and projects that people take on to align means and ends reflects the appropriateness of the Pragmatic account of agency for studying consumer behaviour. Many of the participants demonstrated the moments of thought, reappraisal and deliberative change that are consistent with the looser, less than rational account of agency developed in Chapter 3. Whilst this may not be enough to sustain global economic transformations through the actions of consumers alone, it is nevertheless a sign that people can moderate and transform their consumption practices in response to changes in their understanding of the world.

Chapter 6 - Valuation

Introduction

The previous two chapters have developed a description of human agency as it relates to consumption. These have demonstrated the ways in which it can either be habitual and grounded in its particular social context, or the product of more deliberative responses to experience. The focus of these chapters was on describing the nature and operation of agency, rather than its wider impact in the world. The complexity and scale of the modern economy is such that tracing out any causal chain from a single act of consumption is all but impossible. However, this chapter focuses on the central mechanism through which such causal process may occur - that of valuation. In a market economy, the price at which goods are sold is the central piece of information that drives action and change. Even without resort to the market fundamentalist fables of total information and perfect competition, the role of the consumer as ultimate arbiter of whether or not goods are bought at the prices offered can still be understood as being consequential. It is here that pragmatism can make its most useful contribution to understanding the nature and consequence of consumer agency in the global economy. Rather than focusing on value as the animating spirit of economic life, pragmatism centres its focus on *the act of valuation* itself. By focusing on the act of consumption itself, the data presented here reflects ways in which value was ascribed to the commodities themselves.

What is presented here, however, is a more everyday account of valuation. The concept of valuation has already been productively employed in studying the world of high-end consumer goods (Beckert, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). Here, it helps explain the ways in which goods such as wine or fine art come to be held as valuable. It has also found a particularly important role in the study of finance, where assets are assigned value through complex calculative technologies (Leyshon & Thrift, 2007; Langley, 2020). But it is not just in these rarefied parts of the economy that valuation takes place. Instead, it holds that every act of consumption is ultimately one of valuation. The consumer, in their encounters with commodities, assign to them various characteristics and qualities that they come to value (or otherwise). This sits at the heart of the calculative act of consumption, guided not by a fully rational accounting but rather through the blend of habit, experience and creativity encountered in the previous two chapters. This chapter explores why and how the consumers in this study assigned value to the objects they consumed.

As with the previous two chapters, this begins with a case study, in this case exploring the nature of the qualities that can be assigned to a good through a focus on Christmas decorations. These categories of physical, imaginative and symbolic value are then explored in more detail, recounting the ways in which value was ascribed to many of the different objects whose consumption was captured through this study. The following two sections then return to the accounts of agency developed in the previous two chapters and examines how habitual and deliberative practices condition the act of valuation. This chapter then concludes with a brief reflection on how the act of valuation manifests as agency in the wider economic networks in which it takes place. This highlights the limits of markets in transmitting the meaningful intention of consumers.

Case Study - Decorations

As has already been noted, much of the fieldwork for this research took place in the run up to Christmas. This has already provided the focus for the start of Chapter 5 and here again, it is an aspect of festive consumption, specifically decorations, that helps introduce some of the concepts developed in this chapter. One less anticipated consequence of this timing was the opportunity to observe how people's Christmas decorations reflected their broader relationship to the world of material commodities. Talking to people in the run up to Christmas, I was met by both a perfunctory artificial tree draped with a bit of tinsel and a handful of fairly unsentimental decorations (Participant 2), to a floor-to-ceiling real tree dripping with baubles and a large wooden model of Father Christmas (Participant 3). A number of participants also bought various forms of Christmas decoration during the diary period and these provide a window into the process of valuation and the nature of the qualities that people attach to commodities[49].

The most immediately obvious reasons for a good to be valued relate to its physical qualities or characteristics. This category encompasses a vast scope of possibilities but is the most immediately obvious as to the source of perceptions of value, in that the good performs some function that is of use to its owner. The hi-tech, programmable Christmas lights bought by participant 36 reflect this, being capable of performing functions far beyond those of a traditional 'dumb' set of twinkly lights

> "Once you put them on the tree you turn them on, and then there's an app on your phone, and you use your camera, and walk round the tree, and it maps the position of all your lights and then there's programmable things, so it'll do like a rainbow fade

[49] As Beckert notes, it is rare for any one category of value to be perceived in isolation - almost any good represents some combination of these different forms, and such overlaps are reflected in the discussion

> down the lights, it'll do spirals round the lights." (P36.2)

This ability to perform a hitherto unachievable aesthetic displays goes much of the way to explaining the order of magnitude difference in price that participant 36 was willing to pay for these lights at £185, versus the £15 or so you might expect to pay for a less advanced set of Christmas tree lights. They represent how the expanding frontier of technological development can manifest entirely new (and subsequently valuable) physical capacities. But reflecting the composite nature of the qualities attached to commodities, these lights represent not just a specific physical capacity. The ability to create spatially precise light displays is not some immutable human need that has long gone unquenched, but rather one that is ultimately a product of its social circumstance. Revealingly, Participant 36's partner "put them on Facebook and her Instagram and stuff and she had… hundreds of views and people commenting". In a fairly instrumental way, this highlights the social, symbolic component of the value placed the lights. Given that the lights were first encountered on social media, it is not simply expectations of their function that drove their valuation, but also expectations around how that could be displayed and communicated socially.

Participant 1 also spent a significant amount on Christmas decorations during the course of the diary study. She bought 10 assorted baubles from John Lewis for £118 which was, she told me, something of a family ritual every Christmas

> "We like buying new baubles every year… not entirely new baubles, but adding to them every year…it's a nice thing to go and do… this year I had a bit of a spree… because there was a lot broken last year, but yeah normally it's just everyone buys one each and then.. that goes on the tree." (P1.2)

Even as one of the more affluent participants I spoke to, this represented a fairly sizeable outlay on Christmas decorations. The tree, as I noted in my research diary, was "covered in a mix of uniform baubles and more individual decorations". That year's outlay on tree decorations was part of an ongoing project in which members of her family would contribute to a collection of characterful decorations imbued with shared meaning. These objects arrived with a biography that imparts meaning upon them, their value derived in part from this shared social ritual. Whilst the price is an order of magnitude over what more uniform, mass produced decorations might cost, these objects wouldn't contain the biographical meaning that made them so special. The valuation of each bauble, then, comes from an understanding that it will take on particular meaning in the social context of the family. There is an element of *symbolic* valuation in the sense that they are ultimately objects for display that contribute to the overall aesthetic of the home, but it is their *imaginative* value, in how they are enfolded into family ritual, that the participant valued the most.

It is notable that the two participants described above are among the most well off in my sample. It stands to reason, then, that they would have a greater capacity to afford goods that they perceive as contingently valuable. The other participant who bought Christmas decorations during the course of the diary study was Participant 37, who was encountered in Chapter 4 as something of a paragon of thrift. She had needed to buy new Christmas decorations after her previous set succumbed to the rough and tumble of family life:

> "[They had all been] smashed to smithereens! The tinsel was worn as a necklace, the dog had it on her ears, it was everywhere, so… all the decorations, like the tinsel and all the balls all went in the bin last year, so I had to buy all new ones this year" (P37.2)

Examining how she approached shopping for these Christmas decorations reveals the operation of a very different process of valuation, one not of attaching valued qualities to goods but rather of seeking the cheapest possible option for achieving the desired function. Her well-ingrained habits of thrift shaped the processes of valuation she employed, less focused on the quality of the objects themselves, but rather grounded in a more comparative understanding of possible alternatives. Given her limited budget, and her weary resignation that any fragile, breakable objects she bought might not be long for this world, the imperative was to meet her needs at the lowest cost possible. Rather than valuing the intangible characteristics of the goods, she needed to be sure she wasn't paying for any qualities that could be considered extraneously symbolic or imaginative. In line with her broader approach towards consumption, her search for new baubles involved a trawl round various shops to confirm she had found the best price.[50]

This price first approach to valuing objects diverges somewhat from the processes described by Beckert that relate to the assigning of qualities to higher value items. It remains the case that the desire for an object derive from the specific qualities it possesses. But the value assigned to those is ultimately grounded in a much more comparative perspective. The central consideration as to whether an object is worth the price asked for it comes from an awareness of conditions of the wider market, the alternatives, and the opportunity cost of any given good. Whilst retailers are the price setters in competitive market places, "prices are not the outcome of valuation, but part of its setting" (Callon & Muniesa, 2005, p. 1243). They shape the wider context in which people make decisions about the worth of goods. As I will go on to argue in this chapter, this helps make sense of an important dimension through which consumer agency shapes the wider structure of incentives for other actors in the marketplace.

[50] It should be noted that the tree topper, at £6.99, was a bit above her budget of £4. This was an expense she was willing to pay, partly because it fitted with her colour scheme and seemed to be good quality, but also because "I [was] so sick of shopping by that point I thought if I had to go into another shop I'm going to run somebody over!" (P37.2) Even for her, thrift had its limits!

Qualification

The first section of this chapter explores in greater detail some of the ways in which qualities are affixed to commodities by consumers. This is one of the central channels by which consumer agency interacts with wider economic processes of production and exchange. This act of valuation closes the loop on the circulation of money and commodities in the economy, realising and enumerating the surplus generated. Without the actions of people imparting value onto objects, the circulatory values whose movement performs and describes the economy would lose their key referent. Thus those involved in the manufacture and sale of commodities must attend to the valuing subject and offer them goods capable of representing the qualities they seek. The process of 'qualification', (Callon et. al., 2002) represents this transformation of inert manufactured commodities into the socially embedded objects they go on to become. Whilst the universe of possible qualities is potentially boundless, what is described in this section are ways in which these qualities are affixed to commodities through acts of valuation performed by consumers. As described in the case study, and drawing from Beckert, these qualities can be understood as *physical, symbolic* and *imaginative* and each here is addressed in turn.

Before discussing these categories, it is worth discussing their relative distribution of these forms of valuation within the data. Based on the data gathered through interviews and the diary, it's not possible to account for or assign the contribution of each type of value to a given item - such a task would involve a vastly more complex research design. But through the discussions held in interviews, and reflecting on the types of goods bought, the more symbolic or imaginative dimensions of value weren't especially prominent. A number of reasons can be hypothesised for this. The first is that the consumption that formed the focus of the diary studies was, by it's nature, mundane and everyday consumption. Much of this represented domestic consumption of functional objects, where the opinions of others is not a central concern. The kind of consumption with the greatest symbolic component to their value are the kind of luxury goods that are more likely to be consumed by the very wealthy, rather than the broadly middle-income consumers in the sample. Furthermore, the questions and discussions around the participant's consumption practices was largely unguided, in that I asked them to describe their decisions in their own terms rather than question them on specific aspects of the decisions. It may be that the social signalling component of any purchases were downplayed as a consequence, being something that perhaps the participants weren't directly conscious of, or felt was something that would reflect negatively on their motives.

Physical Qualities

Expectations as to the physical value of goods are the broadest and most clearly expressed within my data. It represents a huge range of reasons why a consumer may come to desire or value a particular good, but crucially these reasons are frequently grounded in their own experience. Most prosaically, these expectations are formed in relation to the other activities or practices the good enables, such that the specificity of the good itself becomes subsumed in the context of its usage. A good example of this is given by participant 28:

> "I bought a swimming cap because I needed a swimming cap at the swimming pool… there's not a lot of things where you feel like actually there isn't that much choice, you know.. there was a black one or a blue one… it wasn't like, this one's been made in a sweatshop and this one's been lovingly handcrafted by an artisan swimming cap cooperative, you know?" (P28.2)

This was one of the few purchases she made during a month where she said that money was very tight. However, spending £10 on a swimming cap was an almost unthinking purchase, fully subsumed into the broader activity it was bought in the service of. The expectations of the good in question, and the value that she placed on it as a consumer, were formed entirely in the context of the activity that the good would enable her to do. The value she placed on it as a good was grounded not in any of its particular qualities, beyond those that would facilitate her desire to go swimming.

Expectations as to the physical value provided by commodities can relate to more particular qualities of the goods in question. Participant 30 described choosing to purchase clothes for her daughter from Marks and Spencer for reasons grounded in their particular circumstance and experience. M&S is broadly exemplary of the kind of mid-range retailer where these kind of considerations might be expected to play a role in the purchasing decisions of consumers. The kind of clothes and homewares they sell are typically available elsewhere at a cheaper price, and she acknowledged that she wouldn't usually shop there. So the value implied by the specific qualities of the goods for sale in this case represent the factor that induced customers to spend a little more:

> "I [purchased some] school shirts, and that's something I only buy in September… it's probably the only thing that I ever buy from Marks & Spencer's… it makes me think well why do I get it from there, and it's because I know that there's a fit that works for my daughter. She's got urticaria, and it's not about the type of fabric, but whether or not it causes any friction… cos, anything touching her skin can make her come out in a rash, so if it moves against her, so I've just kind of discovered, that this shirt works, and I keep to the same one." (P.30.2)

The value that she placed on those particular shirts comes from her own experience and their utility to her specific, personal circumstance. Whilst the retailer may have certain specifications for the quality and finish of fabrics, the reasons why value is placed on those qualities over others was unique to the particular consumer in question. These two examples are reflective of a much broader diversity of individual expectations about the physical qualities of goods grounded in experience and understanding of their own personal context. Such is the breadth of these mundane concerns, it is almost impossible to distil any kind of directive effect they may have on economic processes working at a larger scale. What they do speak to, however, is the range and diversity of commodities available for sale in an advanced capitalist economy. It is impossible for every consumer's need or whim to be anticipated in its particular detail, however through the general array of choice and variation in qualities, individual consumers are able to choose those which best align with their particular circumstances and the means available to them.

Symbolic

Symbolic value is the phrase Beckert deploys to highlight the portion of value that is perceived in commodities for what they signal to others in society (or the meaning they have for the individual consumer). These form the focus of much of his work on the topic, as well as much other work about consumption in society (i.e. Bourdieu (1984)). Their value comes from the (perceived) status they confer to the owner, in ways that are often positional or competitive. It is notable that the two most strident discussions of the symbolic value of goods come from participants discussing not their own consumption, but that of (or on behalf of) their children. Participant 26 bought during the course of the research £400 of 'clothing', listed not by the type of garments bought but rather the brands: "True Religion, Mulberry, Micheal Kors, Ralph Lauren". These were bought for a child from a previous relationship, who lived with his mum during the week. Participant 26 used scathing terms in speaking about his former partner, clearly feeling it was incumbent on him to offer support for his son as a result: "for want of a better word, his mum's a scrubber, she puts mucky clothes back in his draw and stuff, she's got no concept of what's going to happen to him at secondary school" (P26.2). In buying this job lot of branded clothing, Participant 26 felt he was doing what he could to protect his son from the slings and arrows of life in the playground:

> "it sounds a bit of dramatic, but you understand, I imagine, what it were like at school, if you didn't have the XYZ, you know, it's gotta be, you've gotta be with what the rest of kids have got otherwise you were the one singled out and I'm not having that done to him" (P26.2)

The perceived cruelty and rigid social norms of teenage life etch the symbolic value of goods into sharp relief, where the consequences of falling behind in the competitive positional tussle are (at least in the mind of Participant 26) severe. Such concerns were also reflected by Participant 3, grounded in her own memories of childhood and experience at school:

> "I had a terrible experience, with a really awful coat. And I remember, even now, at my age, I had to put it on and I was absolutely terrified of being teased at school. I still have that feeling of anxiety… I am very aware [about] my kids being teased… Just one bad experience like that and you can be teased, for months. It only happened yesterday, I tried to show my son, my younger one a jumper, a really nice jumper, and he said 'I don't want to put that on it's ugly'. So if they say 'I don't want to put on a coat that's not cool' then I'm frustrated and I'll say 'Oh, don't be ridiculous", but that experience has really stuck with me..." (P3.2)

Expectations as to the symbolic value of goods reflect wider expectations about the perceptions and reactions of others. Discussion of such concerns is often grounded in the context of straightforward desire for status or esteem, a display of wealth or class emulation. The examples given above reflect some more complex social dynamics at work, that experienced and expressed through much broader range of affective concerns than just a competitive desire to display ones status.

<u>Imaginary</u>

The category of imaginative value is the hardest to capture, being internal and personal to the individual and their own relationship with the goods in question. The value is "inscribed" to the object by the actor, as they become material representations of transcendental ideas. The baubles bought by Participant 1 took on much of their value through their internal meaning within the family, rather than any broader communication of status. The most striking example of imaginative value discussed in the course of my research came from participant 16, who bought in the course of her diary study two plushie toys of the character Stitch from the Disney film Lilo and Stitch at £12.50 a piece. Rather than a being direct representation of the character from the film, these were a collectable special edition created for Easter 2020, reproduced in swirling yellows and pinks respectively, with the year embossed on their feet. Discussing them, the participant spoke about her collection of similar dolls and other merchandise, something that was clearly intensely personal to her:

> "I took my little brother to the cinema to see it, I was about fifteen when Lilo and Stitch came out. I completely fell in love with the film, pre-kids, me and [my husband] would go to [the Disney shop] after payday, pretty much every month. If there was anything, at all, with Stitch on, I would buy it. There's a couple of grands worth of Stitch's in cardboard boxes, in the loft, with the receipt, in the boxes with them" P16.2

Despite her efforts in keeping them in pristine condition, any potential investment or resale value was clearly dwarfed relative to the personal meaning they held to her. Her now husband had bought her a Stitch doll for her 18th birthday, starting the obsession and grounding it in the context of her relationship. That particular doll was the most important object she owned - "if I was leaving the house in the middle of the night, apart from the cats, I grab Stitch, and the kids", and unlike the rest of the collection that was kept pristinely in the loft, played an active role in family life.

> "When the kids were little and they couldn't sleep… it lives in bed, so it smells like me, enough for me to give the kids so they could sleep". (P16.2)

In buying these two toys for her children, it was clear just how much value she placed on this particular character that had woven itself into her biography. That this all revolved around intellectual property belonging to the Disney corporation is clearly indicative of the ways such firms might be able to cultivate and sustain the attachments of such qualities to their goods. The implications of this are discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Valuation and Pragmatic Agency

This section reflects on the ways in which the forms of agency as conceived by Pragmatist thought relate to processes of valuation. Valuation, just as any other action, can be guided by both habitual or more deliberative agency. These can determine both what qualities of a given good are emphasised, and the value that is assigned to them. To the extent that it is guided by habit, valuation is a process that is deeply rooted in the specific social context in which it takes place. The nature of these habits have been outlined extensively in chapter 4, and here I will reflect on the specific ways in which practices of valuation manifest in these contexts. More deliberative practices of valuation, meanwhile, highlight questions around what it means to reject a good at a given price level, by assigning to it a value below that placed on it by the seller. This reveals a particularly subtle and diffuse form of consumer agency, the intentions of which are only communicated partially and incompletely through market interactions.

They also, as I shall demonstrate, serve to explain more comparative forms of valuation as people ground the value they assign to a particular good not just on its specific qualities, but also on their wider experience of alternatives and context. It is this that characterises much of the consumption recorded in this study, and which demonstrates the clearest link between contemporary practices of consumption and the global context in which they take place.

Plenty, Thrift and value in comparison

Dewey (1939) acknowledged that the act of valuation contained within it two distinct processes, that reflected distinctions in the word's meaning. In the sense that it has been discussed up to this point, it primarily refers to valuing as in prizing an object, holding it dear for the qualities it holds. But there is another sense in which valuing means appraising something, judging it in the context in which it sits. This binary distinct was at the heart of Dewey's account of valuation, but grounding valuation in action allows the two impulses to coexist within the same concept. Which prevails is simply a question of the mode or disposition through which people conduct their acts of valuation. For much of the consumption recorded in this study, particularly that of a more mundane character, consumers were guided by habit more than deliberation. In these cases, appraisive forms of valuation played a more significant role, as people grounded the expectations of value in a context determined by comparison and experience.

The habits of Plenty and Thrift, as introduced in Chapter 4, are central to these more comparative forms of valuation. Plenty represents the ways in which people make consumption decisions in the context of widespread availability and trivial abundance. These conditions structure people's assumptions about the availability and value of goods, providing the baseline against which they comparatively evaluate any given commodity. The habit of Thrift, meanwhile, emphasises this evaluative logic in the practice of consumption, mobilising people to ground their choices in their wider experience of the world of goods to achieve the end of doing more consumption with less money. Operating in tandem, these two logics mobilise the fundamentally comparative forms of valuation in ways that work to depress, rather than elevate, what people are will to pay for a given good.

These considerations were expressed most strikingly by Participant 15, who recounted her troubles in buying a mop to her satisfaction:

> PL "it's funny because like with the big purchases we do tend to buy them pretty quickly, but it's more smaller things that takes us forever to buy… "
> E: "Oh really, what would be an example of that?"
> P: "Like a mop.. because we need[ed] to buy a mop. We always joke now, whenever we're like struggling to decide what to buy it's 'become a mop' because it just took us so long to find the perfect mop."
> E: "And what did the perfect mop look like when it was [found]?"
> P: "It's just a mop! *Laughs"*
> E: "So… why do you think it was that that became such a…"
> P: "I think it's when you [look for] the smaller objects that you think, oh I'll be able to pick that up for however much, like the clothes they're the same, you're like oh I'm sure I've seen those for five pounds or something, and then we couldn't find anywhere for under twenty pounds and then I'm like I'm not paying twenty pounds for a mop… and it's just… eventually my mum bought is one, took pity on us!"
> (P15.2)

'Becoming a mop', as she puts it, represents the point where a good is valued less on the basis of its own perceived qualities (a mop is, after all, a resolutely practical item) but rather in comparison with expectations of what might be offered elsewhere by the market. It is valued in relation to all other mops, real and imagined. The expansion in the availability of material commodities, and their fall in relative price, forms the background against which people evaluate any given commodity.

Participant 36 demonstrated one way in which consumption in conditions of mundane material abundance shaped the value he placed on goods. He reflected on his concerns about the quality of goods in general, and a sense that for many mundane and practical objects any extra money spent is ultimately a risk of money being wasted. He'd bought a set of book shelves for his young sons bedroom and discussed what motivated that particular purchase:

> "if it's just a kind of practical object then I'm not going to spend more than what I

think is an alright price for it, to be honest. Particularly off Amazon, I'd rather buy something cheaper and it turn out to be crap, than buy something expensive and it turns out to be crap." (P36.2)

His views on such matters had been changed through bitter experience. A previous inclination towards buying more expensive items (he describes a £90 rotating washing line that "crumpled in the first breath of wind") had been challenged by a general perception that price wasn't necessarily reflective of quality, particularly in contexts where there weren't trustworthy ways to establish this in advance.

In such a situation, goods aren't necessarily valued for the qualities they are perceived to possess. Instead, what is sought is the ubiquitous, the ordinary, the unremarkable, such that it might not have any ostentations that increase its cost above a floor determined by expectation and experience. Participant 33, a construction manager, shed light on some of these lines of distinction when reflecting on why he chose to buy a suit from Marks & Spencers:

> "it's the quality side of it, whereas I wouldn't get a suit from Primark, I've got trousers from there before. When I work on site, in a metal portacabin, which is filthy, I don't really want to get my good quality trousers mucky, I'd rather just get a ten pound, fifteen pound pair and if they get mucky they get mucky." (P33.2)

Participant 37 reflected on how her thrifty desire to get the most out of her limited income meant she deliberately avoided anything that may have had perceived symbolic value over and above its practical application, to avoid paying more than the bare minimum for anything she bought

> "everyone's trying to compete with everybody, like, 'all my kids are in Burburry', oh my kid's wearing Versace… Who cares! OK, as long as the child's got clothes on, and it's not roaming around like Tarzan, nobody cares what they're wearing, mate, only you care… you're the one that's in competition with everybody else… if you want to keep wasting your money you feel free… " (P37.2)

The habits I characterise as 'Plenty' are sustained by the particular arrangements of the global economy. These are characterised by technological frontier of production, the scale at which it is conducted and, crucially, the availability of a huge work force, willing to work at far lower wages and in much worse conditions, than the consumers who ultimately provide the market for such goods. Through this particular set of arrangements, the average British consumer is able to acquire an array of everyday commodities at historically unprecedented volumes. Despite the technical alienation of consumers from the specific circumstances of production of any given commodity, these trends are well-known and broadly understood at the abstract. A piece of information present on almost every commodity sold is the location of its manufacture. This alone can impart information about the implied qualities of the good in question. We have already seen how Participant 6 inferred about a wooden toy certain qualities based on its (assumed) place of production (see p. 173). In this case, her incorrect assumption that it had been manufactured in the UK gave her more positive associations with the good such that she felt happy about assigning it a value commensurate with its price. Participant 21 reflected a common attitude towards the qualities goods made in countries that perceived as being associated with mass production:

> "I think it's the implications of the quality so… stereotypically, products from China, or from anywhere in the far east, really… they tend to be simple, cheap products, that perhaps aren't going to last, and sometimes that's OK, sometimes, you just need, a little product that's just going to be temporary, anyway, you just need something quick to plug a gap. But with other things, depending on what it is, you might feel a little bit negative, because you think if it's going to be a product for the kitchen, and you see that it's from the far East, you think, you wonder if the quality is going to be there, if the longevity is going to be there… Yeah, it was the breadknife from Taiwan, when I input that, I kind of winced a little bit, thinking… Oh no, what if it doesn't last, we've just spent… it's a decent price, like, fourteen quid, it's not going to be an amazing knife, I know… but then you kind of get that sinking feeling because you just think, have I just wasted fifteen quid, am I going to need to buy a new knife in a few months time?" (P21.2)

Here, the location of production directly influenced perceptions of value. That things are seen as mass produced is reflected in perceptions of their qualities (simple, likely to break etc). This is grounded in broad assumptions about the global nature of production, that production overseas in the global South is done at scale (increasing perceived substitutabilty) and at low cost (reducing perceptions of quality and value). That these goods are seen as low-quality, impermanent and easily available all factors into how they are valued. But it also highlights the fact that there are circumstances where these are precisely the characteristics that are sought in a good, when these are all that are required. The fact that for many goods cheap, 'low-quality' alternatives are available serves to anchor and depress the value people are willing to place on them. Participant 9 reflected on the kind of goods that had been on offer at a craft fare of local makers, where she had done some of her Christmas shopping - and where she had bought a bottle of locally produced gin as a gift:

> "I was happy to pay a little bit more, for it... whereas… say the clothes I bought for my sister, say they had a stall at Chatsworth market selling the exact same thing, they would have been five times the amount of money, had they been kind of made in England or whatever… and that would have just been out of the question, but I would be happy to pay four quid more for a bottle of gin. If I'd bought a t shirt which was twenty five quid from Chatsworth market that was made in the UK, giving that might have just felt a bit like 'well that's it… it's a t shirt" (P9.2)

<u>Convenience / Agencements</u>

People are active participants in the process of valuation, making their own appraisals of the qualities and characteristics the perceive in the goods they encounter. But it is important to note that this does not always proceed in a mode of cool, detached calculation. Instead, "calculative agencies are not human individuals, but collective hybrids" (Callon & Muniesa, 2005, p. 1236), grounded not simply in the inviolate rational individual, but in the material and technological context in which they exist. People's appraisals of the value of a good can be contextually and circumstantially altered, a fact that has long been understood by the retail and marketing industry. All that is required for an act of consumption to take place is that *at that moment* the consumer calculates a value on the commodity that meets or exceeds the price at which it is offered. The process of assigning value to a good should not be seen solely as the work of a rational, calculative individual, but rather a process conduct in tandem with the arrangements and devices through which it is encountered. Visiting a supermarket, for example, the position of a good on the shelf transmits subtle information about its value (Cochoy 2004). In modern retail settings, these can be arranged in ways that "better to integrate the product into [the consumer's world] by playing skilfully on the product's qualifications" (Callon & Muniesa, 2005, p. 1238).

In the context of the consumption experiences described by my participants, goods were frequently encountered in settings where the wider context shaped the value they placed on them. These emerge most clearly in settings where 'convenience' is deployed as a logic to shape consumption decisions. Supermarkets have long known this, manufacturing encounters with goods through which consumers can make appraisals of their value. Participant 18 describes how:

> "If I see a t shirt that looks really good and it's, it's like two pound fifty three quid I just bung it in the trolley…" (P18.1)

This outwardly simple transaction conceals a process by which that particular t-shirt has been put in that particular place, at a particular price, through a calculative process on the supply side, one which is far more attended to the minutia and capable of "calculating margins down to the last cent or gram" (Callon & Muniesa, 2004, p. 1238). The middle aisles of Lidl and Aldi (see p. 157), with their cornucopia of constantly rotating stock, are a particularly effective attempt to bamboozle set calculations of value, generating surprise encounters with goods unmoored from their usual context. Participant 18 reflected that, when money was tight, shopping online was much preferred because:

> "If you go to Sainsbury's or you go Tesco etc you tend to put to more in your trolley because you tend to see it… whereas if you do an online shop you tend to have wrote a list and that's what you'll.. that's what you'll order" (P18.1)

This attitude towards online shopping and its role in enabling better practices of valuation was shared by many of my participants.

A significant proportion of the consumption recorded in the diary took place online. Internet shopping is now a well-established form of consumption, one enabled by the predominance of smartphones and other internet connected devices that make consumption an omnipresent possibility. Participant 22 valued the convenience of internet shopping highly, reflecting that her smartphone now meant that

> "you can literally do it at two o clock in the morning when you can't go to sleep but you need to get stuff done" (P22.1)

The transformation in shopping habits represented by the smartphone have thrown up a number of contradictory possibilities, as noted by Cochoy et. al (2020):

> "Examining the role that devices play in mundane consumption behavior enables us to address a puzzling opposition between (A) the supposed manipulative power of large hi-tech companies, infrastructures, and systems at the global level, and (B) the view ordinary market actors (be they marketers, consumers, or other intermediaries) hold with respect to digital appliances as empowering tools at the local level" (p. 2)

From the perspectives of many of the participants in the study, the forms of consumption enabled by the technology they carried around were broadly advantageous. Several mentioned the benefits it provided in allowing them to shop around, read reviews or otherwise maximise the information available to them in evaluating goods:

> "I tend to bring up a page and then I'll read all the reviews about it for the people who've already bought it, and then I'll look at the reviews in comparison to what the price is… looking to see if that TV's got a lot of reviews, and if they have got a lot of

> reviews, what have they said, and then what's the price in comparison to those reviews" (P18.2)

The ability to monitor and compare prices allowed people to be much more deliberate in establishing what they'd be willing to pay for a particular good and then wait for that value to be matched online.

> "If I do it's on eBay.. and, it's because I need something, I've just put a hole in my Doc Martens, so I'm looking on eBay, most of them go for forty quid [E:yeah] yeah… I'm not going that high for a second hand pair of shoes so I'll, yeah, it's going to take me six months to find… a pair of Doc Martens on eBay…" (P16.2)

> "I'll go and look at it over a three week period, and then choose the one I want and go and buy it. But then if I do find it at the right price I just buy it, you know, if it's there, and it's the price I had in mind, I'll buy it straight away" (P35.1)

Others, however, reflected on how the immediacy and availability of opportunities to consume meant that they did so more impulsively. The act of consumption is mobilised by the valuations between buyer and seller aligning, and this need only be momentary for the sale to go through. Shaping consumers perceptions of the qualities of goods, and even their sense of their own interest, through advertising has always been a key part of firm strategy. In the modern online environment, this can be directly linked to the act of consumption in ways that can capitalise on momentary variations in these calculations of value. Two participants who both otherwise described their generally careful and cautious approach to shopping reflected on the role online advertising played in driving more impulsive forms of consumption. Participant 28's Shein order which, as described in the last chapter, had gone against her better instincts, was a clear example of this process at work:

> "it was really weird because it was very unlike me to um… to.. buy, I think it was just yeah… they must have got me at a weak moment.. seduced by the willowy model in her, in her floral dress" (P28.2)

Participant 4 also reflected on the role that online advertising played in her shopping habits

> "I'm very, unfortunately susceptible to Facebook advertising, in the evening [*laughs*] so if I'm scrolling through social media, I, I do see the adverts and then of course the more you look at them the more you get and then the more you end up buying so… I do do quite a lot of that… Um.. So I, my impulse buying is online, rather than in shops.. I don't tend to… go to shops very much, because I find them more convenient to shop online" (P4.1)

The kinds of valuation decisions that people make in the context of online shopping are not grounded solely in a calculation of their own interests, but can be sculpted and shaped by the context in which those decisions are made. The market power held by monopolies such as Amazon has been achieved through a ruthless competitive focus on price (Khan, 2018), and it was taken as a given by many of my participants that Amazon would automatically be the cheapest option available. Participants spoke about using Amazon exclusively because of the sunk costs of their Amazon Prime subscription (P25) or the convenience of getting everything in one place (P22). In such circumstances, the comparative / evaluative dimension of internet shopping is diminished and consumers are more likely to acquiesce to the offered price. Compounding this imbalance of information are the complex algorithmic models setting prices in ways that strengthen the hand of the supply side in determining valuation (Chen et. al., 2016).

<u>Deliberative Valuation</u>

The final section of this chapter examines how the more deliberative modes of consumption, through which people incorporate normative or ethical values into their practices of valuation. People have the capacity to assign values to objects that are grounded not just their physical or symbolic characteristics, but instead reflect facts about the nature of its production. Far from being indistinguishable in the market place, when the biography of goods are made visible these can all filter into the decision making processes at the heart of valuation (Frey et. al, 2004). This facet of valuation is central to the operation of Fairtrade and other product certification schemes, that seek to render visible such information, such that it can be ascribed to goods, and thus valued. Despite many of the participants talking about their concerns around the conditions in which goods were made, or the impact on the environment, there were strikingly few cases where people were able to point directly to valuations that they'd made with respect to goods that reflected these concerns. This may, in part, be due to the relatively limited coverage, lack of awareness, or simple scepticism around the 'ethical labelling' schemes that operate in relation to the kinds of objects that fell under the remit of the study. But none of the objects directly purchased in the course of the study were done so with specific reference to a positive valuation of the perceived ethical qualities they possessed.

Furthermore, an impulse to spend more on an item conflicts with ingrained habits of thrift around consumption, grounded either in well-established habit or in more tangible economic constraints. As Participant 9 noted:

> "I know I would be more about the price I'm afraid. Which goes against everything that I've said! But yeah… it would be a decisions made on how much it was… So I've got this frugal thing and this environmentally friendly thing going on which are quite often in opposition" (P9.2)

Several other participants were very definite that their financial circumstances meant that they didn't have the luxury of placing value on anything other that the particular characteristics of the good itself.

> "At the moment the purchase is based on the ticket price, rather than where it's come from a the moment" (P25.2)

> "Generally, no I tend to look for the cheapest option, because I've got three kids, like to buy for, and a boyfriend, a cat and a dog, I try to make money stretch as far as possible." (P37.2)

> [About a pair of shoes] “You know, I’m assuming that they’re being made somewhere cheap anywhere, they’re probably paying pennies for them to do their labouring anyway.. I was very conscious about that, but then I, you know, I can’t afford to go and pay for something that’s just going to cost maybe three times the amount, because I just don’t have that affordability at the minute” (P29.2)

Against all this, there was little direct evidence that people’s broader values directly factor into the processes of valuation they engage in. At a fairly basic level, people’s understanding of, and assumptions around, the conditions in which a commodity was produced were reflected in the value they were willing to assign to it. But rather than positively valuing products that made specific ethical claims about the circumstances of their production, it was generally expressed as a more general sense that there was price floor that they were unwilling to drop below, largely for ethical concerns:

> “Primark and places that have got a reputation for below minimum wage employment employing kids in sweatshops, it’s not really, ethical you might get something for cheap, a cheap price, but somebody somewhere’s paying for that” (P24.2)

Here again, Primark was often a key referent, where the notoriety of the poor conditions experienced by workers translated onto perceptions of the value of the good itself. The very cheapness of the good became symbolic of the circumstances in which it had been produced. In some cases, the question of value was turned on its head, as people had no expectation that higher prices necessarily equated to better working conditions. In these situations, the lower priced option was preferred, following the logic that even if it was manufactured in poor conditions, at least others weren’t profiting as much from its sale. Participant 36 reflected on this after he’d recorded a couple of items of designer clothing that he’d noted had been manufactured in China.

> “you do wonder… if you’re buying things made in China there’s a lot cheaper things that I could buy in, made in China, of [the] same quality that, might cost a quarter of the price that we paid for this top and that pair of trainers to be quite honest” (P36.2)

In this way, Participant 36 captures the more common way in which people's valuation of the items they bought was impacted by their reflections on the conditions of its manufacture. Rather than entering into the calculative process at the time of purchase, it instead led to an ebbing away of the perception of value only once the item had been purchased and its qualities became more apparent. This was a much more commonly expressed sentiment, as numerous participants discussed things that they had bought which, in retrospect, had caused them to question or resile from the value that they had momentarily placed on something. Participant 4 described a situation where she had bought a spinning, light-up plastic toy (christened by her daughter as a "stick with a ball on the end"). She reflected on how she had bought this against her better judgement, the result of 'pester-power' in a toy shop. Her subsequent discussion of the item reflected her concerns that had momentarily abandoned her in trying to console an upset child in a toy shop.

> "It's definitely Chinese and it's too cheap... Products are *too* cheap and when a product is the cost that it probably should be we're unwilling to pay that, because they're usually too cheap.. so if this costs two pound fifty… made and shipped to the UK… then. a lot of that has to be shipping, some of it's going to be tax… there's not an awful lot left for the actual manufacturing of it is there?" (P4.2)

In this case, the parent's resistance was worn down and they bought the good in question, an act of valuation that reflected a momentary lapse of their usual moral convictions. As an exception that proves the rule, however, this reveals that their more general disposition would be to refuse purchase due to a calculation of the value of the externalities associated with production that exceeded the purchase price. A number of other participants who professed ethical sentiments in relation to their consumption habits had recorded such slippages on their consumption diaries. Yet it could be considered that, despite this handful of purchases, there was a great deal more that they could have bought, but didn't. Participant 1, whilst admitting to buying her children a certain amount of "plastic crap" (P1.1), reflected that she would have been able to buy a great deal more had she wanted to. This highlights perhaps the most tangible, yet least visible, ways in which people's values fed into their valuation processes. Not buying a good, in a market setting, is nevertheless something which "enacts the market" (Gallagher et. al., 2019, p. 1). Whilst empirically unsatisfying and theoretically unbounded (we all 'don't buy' countless items everyday), this is nevertheless a meaningful way in which the value people place on goods is transmitted, imperceptibly, to the market. It may be, however, that in its vagueness, the nature of any specifically moral character is lost.

Conclusion

The subjective account of value that underpins marginalist economics, and that was formally set out by Simmel (2004) (see p. 41) suggests that it is through people's perception of the qualities possessed by an object that it acquires value. The approach set out here broadly aligns with that account in terms of the subjectivity of value, but emphasises the process of *assigning value* as being of more fundamental importance in considering consumer agency than the price level at which markets ultimately clear. Consumers are active participants in attaching and ascribing the various qualities to goods that contribute to perceptions of their value. This is an important domain of consumer agency, one that can be overlooked if the qualities of goods are perceived to be intrinsic to the goods themselves, rather than extrinsically assigned to them through the active participation of a consumer. This act of valuation is a process that is broadly deported through the forms of agency set out in chapter 3 and discussed across the previous two chapters. They can reflect unthinking, reflexive forms of habit, or they can consciously attempt to ascribe value to the facets and qualities of objects that align with the broader values they hold about the world. Understanding the processes through which people come to ascribe value to the objects they buy undermines the absolutist account of consumer sovereignty and of people being fully rational arbiters of what they find valuable. Instead, the process by which people ascribe value to objects are shifting and contested, revealing a key political terrain over which the meaning and consequences of consumption can be established.

Chapter 7 - Discussion

Introduction

The empirical data presented in the previous three chapters has sought to reveal the mundane and situated ways in which individuals act as consumers. Examining the circumstances and reasoning that inform the everyday consumption decisions of households revealed practices and habits that both shape, and are shaped by, the wider economic context in which they are made. The nature of the choices made exists in a spectrum that runs from the most habitual, unthinking reflex to more considered and deliberative reflection. In the discussion presented here, some of the implications and consequences of these forms of consumer action for the wider global economy will be teased out, situating the accounts of mundane consumption within the wider macroeconomic context in which they take place. The nature of this research, and its focus only on the 'end point' of consumption, means that these links can't be drawn directly through specific value chains or production networks. But in highlighting certain characteristics of consumer behaviour, it is possible to discern how embedded and entrenched habits sustain and reproduce the conditions of the contemporary global consumer economy. This preceding empirical chapters represented an attempt to open up the black box of the consumer to better understand the nature and consequence of their choices. The task of this discussion chapter is to then incorporate this fuller account of consumer agency into the wider perspective employed by International Political Economy.

Drawing on these two ways of conceptualising consumer agency in the global economy helps to develop an 'everyday politics' of consumption. Ultimately, consumers in the global economy represent a central locus of choice, and an irreplaceable reservoir of demand. It is the aggregation of consumer choice that ultimately mobilises vast swathes of the global economy, and constrains the choices available to other actors within it. In this way, the central argument of this thesis is broadly aligned with the neoclassical ideas of consumer sovereignty and subjective value. However, the account of agency developed here can better account for the ways in which individual consumption practices are shaped by the environment in which they are formed and the interests of other actors. Taken as a whole, this account of consumer agency realises it as a broadly conservative force in the global economy - the great habitual 'flywheel' of society that imbues the status quo with its stability and inertia. The realities of daily consumption have become aligned with a particular organisation of global trade and production. As these arrangements enter a period of unprecedented challenge, a polycrisis ranging from geopolitical disorder to climate breakdown, the sustainability of these habits can be called into question. Yet given the centrality of consumer politics to modern democracies, there may be continued pressure to support them even as the costs of doing so ratchet up ever higher.

To develop this account of the role of the consumer, this chapter will establish two conceptual devices drawn from the empirical data. The first explores the role of valuation within consumption practices, that reveals two distinct 'everyday regimes of valuation'. These are shown to underpin and sustain particular facets of the distribution of power that pertains in the contemporary global economy. One, the regime of 'qualification', renders valuable the intangible signifiers that are able to be legally separated from the physical commodities that circulate around the globe. These forms of intellectual property play a crucial role in capturing the value generated through the production process and gives firms, particularly those in the global North, their sustained structural power. The other regime, one of 'comparison', works to translate consumer choices into a broader imperative that sustains the competitive dynamics of global production. Both ultimately serve to empower corporate actors in the global economy. Taking the perspective of the consumer reveals how their everyday conduct sustains the position of these more outwardly empowered actors in the global economy. This reflects how the habitual consumption practices of individuals coalesce into wider institutional forms which, in turn, sustain and reproduce particular habits of consumption. This informs the second conceptual device which, expanding on Veblen's 'pecuniary standard of living', argues that these institutional forms coalesce into a *social standard of living* that provides the relatively stable background against which individual consumption decisions are made.

In light of these, what can be said about the possibility of consumer agency driving genuine normative transformations in the organisation of the global economy driven from below? That consumers assign value to products on the basis of different qualities, including those that can be aligned with more just outcomes across the global economy, underpins the operation of schemes like Fairtrade and other market-based solutions to exploitation and injustice in supply chains. But the limited success of such schemes reflects the difficulty of mobilising the market to achieve these ends. Reflecting on the discussion in Chapter 5 of participant's attempts to align their consumption practices with the values, it highlights many of the problems inherent in relying on choice signals transmitted through the market to affect substantive change at the aggregate. As such, the dominant mode in which 'consumer agency' has largely been theorised represents something of a dead end, as the information lost as individual choices are imputed by the market ultimately renders them inert. Yet, with respect to some of the profound challenges of sustaining the current arrangement of consumer society, this is not entirely a counsel of despair. For whilst well-set habits can be slow to adjust, they can also provide the bedrock for much more profound, sustainable and transformative change.

This chapter starts by outlining in greater detail the two conceptual devices that synthesise the empirical findings of this thesis - namely the *regimes of everyday valuation* and the *social standard of living*. Having established these, the discussion then turns towards the specific political character of consumer agency within the global economy. This begins with a critique of the dominant vision of consumer politics, grounded in the mobilisation of consumer choice to achieve wider ends within global social relations. Developing a more rounded 'everyday politics' of consumption reveals its more conservative impetus within the global economy, whilst also beginning to outline more productive terrain in which to mobilise for transformative change.

Everyday Politics

The role of consumers in the global economy has long been under-examined, being either taken for granted or broadly dismissed. Yet the huge number of consumption decisions an individual makes are all imbued with political consequence, albeit often diffuse and inchoate. An everyday politics approach can help understand the political consequence of consumer choice, without signing up to the vision of 'market democracy' presented by the strong theory of consumer sovereignty (see p. 37). Instead, it can more sensitively reflect the often partial and constrained ways in which "our everyday actions transform the world economy" (Hobson & Seabrooke, 2007, p. 1). The account of consumer agency developed in this thesis helps to provide the groundwork for better understanding its true nature, extent and limits. Yet the focus of the empirical work was exclusively on the domestic practices of consumption in people's everyday lives. It is the role of this chapter to pull out the focus from the micro-scale to consider how these are situated in the the wider economic relationships they exist within. In doing so, the perspective offered by an account grounded in everyday politics provides a crucial lens for linking the scales and understanding how agency, no matter how small, diffuse or constrained, plays out through the wider systems in which it is enacted.

This chapter develops an account of everyday politics of consumption that seeks to expand IPE's understanding of the role of the consumer in the global economy. This provides a counterbalance to accounts of the global economy that focus on the actions and choices of elite actors, to understand how 'everyday' participants reproduce, legitimise and resist the wider economic structures in which they act. The nature of such agency is that it is distributed, often thinly, across a vast cohort of participants. Consequently, an analysis of its cause and effects comes less easily than in studies of power more traditionally wielded, following the impact of policy choices and investment decisions made by elites at the commanding heights of society and the economy. Yet its impact on the character and arrangement of society is often no less profound. Two of the central dimensions through which everyday politics can play out are in legitimating and resisting wider political and economic institutions (Kerkvliet, 2009). In all but the most oppressive societies, any political endeavours cannot be sustained unless they are implicitly supported and reproduced through the practices of those who are subject to them. It is through studying these practices that the broader political consequences can be uncovered. The data presented in the previous three chapters relates to the consumption habits and practices of consumers, who as citizens in contemporary Britain are almost unavoidably implicated in the the complex networks of global trade that define the modern economy. Whilst the scope of their influence, as a cast of many actors whose actions play out across the global economy, should not be overstated, they can also be overlooked precisely because of the mundane and distributed nature of the power their wield, away from the spaces through which the economy is typically studied and understood.

An important exemplar for this sort of analysis, which holds significant parallels with the topic of this thesis, is in the Seabrooke (2006) book *The Social Sources of Financial Power*. This took as its focus the global financial order, anticipating the greatly increased focus that the topic would receive in the wake of the 2007-8 financial crisis. Taking an everyday politics perspective, it traced out the ways in which the multitude of financial decisions made by 'everyday' actors ultimately provided the ballast that enabled more elite financial actors to act in the ways they did. What Seabrooke identifies as LIGs (Low Income Groups) were typically excluded from accounts of the financial system because of perceptions that the capital they had available to them wasn't sufficient to drive any macro-scale trends. But Seabrooke identifies their crucial role in providing the broad-based financial support that both provides a stable level of supply and demand for financial services, and a predictable body of capital to underwrite more complex financial arrangements. In this way, whilst everyday savers and borrowers appear to be only marginally influential amongst the upper echelons of the financial world, they play a significant role in supporting, stabilising and legitimatising the wider system.

There are obvious parallels with the above to the role of consumers in the more 'material' economy. Without the broad predictability of demand, rooted in stable consumer practice, the investments made in the global economy would be less certain of return and thus less attractive to the corporations who make them. In this broad sense, the conceptualisation of distributed and overlooked agency amongst the 'low income groups' is directly analogous the consumers of this study. It similarly draws from a 'median range', that excludes both those with very constrained incomes and the very high net worth individuals. In the case of the former, the economic constraints they face mean their participation in markets is robbed of much of its agential choice, being instead subjected to the market provision of necessities and the often brutal disciplining force that represents. Those at the other end of the income scale, meanwhile, operate in rarefied and often entirely disconnected circuits of retailing, production and distribution, a world of luxury that follows its own distinct logic (Beckert, 2011). Yet there are also important distinctions when considering the practice of consumption. People might make a relatively limited number of strictly 'financial' decisions in their daily lives, guided by a broadly rational, calculative decision making process (i.e. borrowing at interest rate x, saving at interest y). Material consumption, meanwhile, is a much more continuous stream of choices, situated in complex systems of taste, custom and circumstance. As a consequence, even greater care is required in drawing out the threads that link individual choice to it wider role in the economic system in which it takes place

For this reason, this chapter develops two conceptual devices that can help make sense of an 'everyday politics' of consumption. These help to organise thinking about how the habits of consumers and their practices of valuation work to structure and constrain the wider patterns of the global economy. First, the role of consumers in valuing the commodities produced through the global market is examined in the context of 'everyday regimes of valuation'. This demonstrates how a bifurcation of valuation practices into those of qualification and comparison can each be shown to underpin particular characteristics of the modern global economy. Finally, the wider implications of stable consumption habits, understood as a 'social standard of living', will be reflected on in the context of the particular political economy of the United Kingdom and the implications these have for its place in the world.

Conceptual Devices

Regimes of Everyday Valuation

The empirical chapters explored one of the key dimensions through which consumers are empowered as agents in the economy, namely their role in the valuation of goods. The ability of consumers to choose to buy, or choose not to buy, a good at a given price is the taproot of 'consumer sovereignty', a locus of choice in the economy around which other actors in the economy must respond. As has already been shown, these choices are made not through rational, utilitarian calculation. Instead, they are grounded in habits and more contingent and contextual acts of calculation. Yet for all this, it an unavoidable, and necessarily *agential* input into the global economy that the consumer should meet (or refuse to meet) the value placed on goods by sellers. Existing accounts of valuation have typically focused on either 'elite' goods, where their value overwhelmingly derives from practices of qualification, or on more technical domains such as finance and accounting (Chiapello, 2015). But, as demonstrated through the preceding empirical chapter, it is an important lens for understanding *any* market transaction, not just those where the practices of valuation are more visible or novel. To assess the consequences of these everyday practices of valuation, this section develops two distinct 'everyday regimes of valuation', that reflect the bifurcation in the logic of valuation uncovered in the empirical chapter. These reflect two distinct ways by which the actions and choices of consumers work to condition how certain market sectors are structured and how value is produced, circulated and captured within the global economy.

The first, and most visible, of these regimes is that which relies on 'qualification'. This is a process that reflects the value that people place on either the specific functions or more intangible characteristics of the goods they buy. Beckert et. al. (2011) investigate how luxury goods come to achieve valuations vastly in excess of more mundane alternatives, through their associations with signifiers that their ultimate consumer perceives as being valuable. Yet this is a process that needn't necessarily be restrict to fine wines or modern art. The symbolic qualities implied by particular brands, fashions, functionalities or aesthetics are all intangible aspects of a good against which the consumer can assign value. What unifies these, and gives them their broader economic relevance, is that these intangible qualities are able to be legally reified into forms of intellectual property against which that value can be ascribed. To take an example from the study, the 'Stitch' plush toy bought by participant 16 (see p. 207) is, in a functional sense, similar to potentially dozens of other cuddly toys. Its specific value, as perceived by the participant in question, is a consequence of its relationship to a broader 'intellectual property' owned by the Disney corporation. The character's meaning to the participant had only deepened as it had become entwined within her own biography, prompting the collection of ever more 'valuable' special additions. Yet the specific quality of the goods that the participant assigned value to is the legal likeness of the character from the film, an asset of intellectual property that can be owned by the Disney corporation and to which the assignation of value can accrue.

Comparison, the other regime of valuation, is also rooted in the context of the contemporary arrangements of global production. People assign value to objects not in isolation, but rather through comparison with the array of possible alternatives. Particularly when informed by thrifty habits of consumption, or constrained by a limited income, valuation becomes a much more widely evaluative affair. The expectations and benchmarks against which people appraise the value of the commodities they encounter do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are formed by the wider world of goods available. People do not have an intrinsic sense of how much they value a good that translates directly to how much they are willing to spend on it.

Instead such calculations are made in a given context, where an understanding of the worth, or otherwise, of goods is reached through a broad appreciation of the price and availability of goods across the wider economy. It is through this evaluative approach to the valuation of commodities that the wider conditions of the economic shape individual consumers understanding and expectations of the value of the goods they buy.

This is distinct to the regime of 'qualification', in that rather than a focus on the qualities that imbue a particularly commodity with distinction, it is instead more interested in the lack of them. When Participant 15 searched for a mop (p. 212), it was some platonic ideal of a mop that she sought, reduced to its barest functions. What she found in the market ultimately possessed a surfeit of qualities that went beyond the basic functionality she sought.[51] Her understanding of the value of such a common, mass-produced commodity was conditioned by the fact that she expected common, mass-produced commodities to be available for sale cheaply, thus she was not happy to meet the value placed by producers on the various options she encountered. This example is perhaps overly specific, as such paroxysms of indecision are presumably not common in the purchase of cleaning products, but it is a broader sentiment that was reflected across the data. The sense of things being 'just a' commodity of one form or other, not seen as anything beyond their direct functional purpose frequently operated to place a ceiling on what people were willing to pay. The vast expansion of production across the global economy, and the impact this has had on the relative prices of all kinds of mundane consumer goods, is touted as one of the key benefits of globalisation. But viewed in terms of its effect on a wider regime of valuation, this doesn't necessarily translate to static gains in consumer surplus for consumers, but rather a wider re-basing of their entire

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[51] Although not mentioned directly by the participant, the mop seems a fitting example. A leading mop brand is the 'SuperMop', but it seems that extraneous 'Super-ness' was exactly what Participant 15 was trying to avoid.

system of expectations.

In their ability to evaluate the goods they encounter in the market, consumers possess a meaningful degree of agency within the economy. In this, the view advanced here aligns with the subjective account of value that informs marginalist economics. It also, in a more limited manner, shares its understanding of the mechanisms by which consumers as agents exert themselves in an economic context. The ultimate choice to buy or not buy at a given price, when the consumer is at least passingly aware of the activity of competing firms, is one of the key acts by which price competition is injected into market relations. This, ultimately, represents a constraining force on the capacity of firms to act freely. Assuming that they broadly conform to a logic of profit maximisation, they are beholden to respond to the actions of competitors at the risk of being undercut and losing substantial revenue. Thus, firms whose competitors find cheaper sources of labour overseas must face losing either profit or revenue, unless they follow the competition. This race to the bottom dynamic, and the consumer's role in it, is familiar from economic theory. But what a 'regime of valuation' perspective adds is a wholesale, systemic shift in the value people place on particular categories goods in response to structural changes in the circumstances of their production. In 'devaluing' entire categories of goods, or entire market sectors, in this way, the race to the bottom becomes more pronounced as people establish expectations of cheap and readily available material commodities.

In their consequences to the wider global economy, these two regimes are remarkably similar. When leading firms are able to capture the intangible value assigned to their products, they are placed into monopolising positions in the global economy that give them significant market power (Mayer & Phillips, 2017). Through that market power, potential suppliers to these lead firms are placed in direct competition. It is as a consequence of this that the 'race to the bottom' dynamic of the global economy in terms of wages and labour standards is sustained in this sector. But a very similar dynamic pertains in sectors that are governed by more comparative regimes of valuation. In these contexts, the inability to sustain anything other than razor thin profit margins of goods sold on a competitive basis provides its own driver towards concentration in the sector. Here, too, lead firms such as retailers possess significant market power that embeds competitive dynamics along the wider value chains. Whilst the ultimate outcome, namely market power by the dominant firm, may be the same in both cases, the implications for how value is generated and distributed are distinct. Where firms hold intangible assets relating to the practical, symbolic or imaginative characteristics of their goods, they are able to capture the value that consumers place on these qualities, as a form of monopoly rent. Where no such intangible assets exist, no such rent can be captured and the price advantages of competition are largely passed on to the consumer whilst driving ever greater concentration and monopoly.

The role of intellectual property in the global economy has been recognised as increasingly important in governing the complex global production networks through which commodities are produced (Johns & Wellhausen, 2016; Schwartz, 2021). It is through ownership of these intangible legal constructs that firms can exclude rivals and exert monopolistic control over their reproduction. They play a key role in both the extraction of value from the global South (Durand & Milberg, 2020) and in the aggressive tax accounting of large corporations (Ongena et. al, 2021), as the value generated through the production and sale of commodities can be ascribed to such intangible capital that can globally relocated wherever is advantageous. Such legal constructions of intellectual property are not always 'consumer facing', and many other actors in the economy, from those working in finance, to other corporate actors, are able to assign value to such intangible assets. However, given the proportion of overall demand in the economy made up by consumer spending, it is unsurprising that it is the valuations of consumers that often underpin these intangible assets. Techniques of accounting that attempt to enumerate this frequently represent the branding, technical patents or other qualifying factors that attract customer perceptions of value (Mizik & Jacobson, 2008). In this way, the active participation of consumers in assigning value to these abstract signifiers of qualities sustains their ability to capture and extract value from global supply chains to the exclusion of other actors - be they competitors, suppliers or states.

It's worth noting here that, in the classical account of globalisation and its advantages to consumers, this downward pressure on prices generates gains to consumers where the price in the market falls below their marginal willingness to pay - the so-called consumer surplus. What the account developed here reveals is that the nature of these gains is more complex, as consumer preferences and their attendant valuations are not independent of the broader economic context in which they are formed. As they become more ubiquitous and available, the perceived value of mass-produced consumer goods falls such that consumers don't necessarily realise the reduction as a direct, psychological surplus. What it does mean, however, is a change in relative prices that enables consumers to spend more money on either goods with greater subjective value or on more discretionary services, i.e. beauty or home improvement. In this way, the consequences of these 'comparative' forms of valuation feed back into an overall 'social standard of living'. As the next section shows, this represents not just a shift in the quantitative 'level' of living standards, but a more qualitative change in their composition and the wider expectations that exist around them.

Social Standard of Living

It has already been discussed, at the end of Chapter 4, how habits congeal into certain fixed, social institutions that are sustained and reproduced by the repetition of those who practice them. This section formalises this observation into an institutional account of consumption that draws heavily from Veblen, one of the earliest proponents of the form. His account of the 'pecuniary standard of living' focused solely on the imperative of emulation in establishing the stable institutional forms that govern consumption. The account developed here broadens this across the different habitual logics described in this thesis, to establish the ways in which consumption practices have been shaped, and continued to be informed, by the specific economic context in which they are realised. The three habits described in chapter 4, Plenty, Convenience and Thrift, are all shaped, in some way or other, by the conditions of economic globalisation that sustain the diversity, availability and affordability of consumer goods. These in turn are all factors that shape the subjective 'standard of living' that informs the decisions of individual consumers. But before going on to describe the idea of the 'social standard of living' that I present here, a brief digression on terminology is required.

The phrase 'standard of living' is commonplace amongst the social sciences, and has a broadly established definition relating to real income levels (Gordon, 2004) - particularly as they rise and fall over time, or vary between countries. The idea of a 'social standard of living' acknowledges that the baseline against which real income levels are evaluated changes as the demands and expectations of society evolve. This is captured in work such as the Minimum Income Standard research project (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022), that seeks to collectively establish the given baseline for consumption as, for example, ownership of a smartphone moves from extravagance to essential. The sense in which the phrase is deployed here abstracts it further from a quantitative, comparative concept to one grounded more firmly in people's habits and expectations. In this, it draws from existing practice-theory literature (Shove, 2003) to emphasise the subtle ways in which people's expectations are rebased and updated by transformations in their wider material context. This has already been explored in relation to convenience, where supposed gains are simply enfolded into a wider acceleration of social life. This is one example of what Shove describes as an "escalators" (p. 10) - an ever moving social floor. Other examples she describes are people's changing expectations of cleanliness, or the climatic conditions in which they live. Both are shaped by the material interests of other actors in the economy, but ultimately sustained and reproduced through the daily practice of individuals.

It is in this sense of an escalator that the term 'social standard of living' is here deployed. In this, it deliberately mirrors Veblen's notion of the 'pecuniary standard of living', through which the drive to emulate higher social classes led people to habituate new forms of consumption practice. This reflects the highly social and contingent nature of living standards as they are subjectively experienced. Veblen, drawing on his own influence from pragmatic thought, described how "a standard of living is of the nature of habit" (p. 111). This primarily operated as a ratchet, such that acquiring tastes for new consumer goods was much easier than then receding from a given standard living, even if that means returning to a once-tolerable state. Writing at the turn of the 20th century, the drivers of consumption on which Veblen focused were predominantly emulative and grounded in matters of taste and fashion. His discussion of 'ascending' or 'receding' up and down a continuum established by taste or class position is restrictively one-dimensional. The nature of modern consumption is instead shaped by the trajectories of multiple habitual frames, which coalesce into an overall social standard of living. Some of these are beyond the scope of this research - those relating to services, intangible goods or public sector provision. These would all figure into full spectrum account of the wider 'social standard of living' and as such the following discussion is necessarily a limited one. Its focus is on how the specific material transformations associated with the globalisation of production and how these relate to the habits in consumption of the goods it produces.

The example of World Book Day used at the start of Chapter 4 shows how everyday practices can become bound up with certain forms of consumption (see p. 145). Expectations and assumptions about the availability of consumer goods shapes how people respond, and are expected to respond, to a variety of situations in their lives. Activities like giving presents or preparing for the birth of a new child are ultimately grounded in these subtle expectations that form "the barely detectable gridlines of everyday life" (Shove, 2003, p. 2). These transformations in people's relationships with material goods has taken place alongside the tremendous expansion in global manufacturing capacity occasioned by globalisation. The imperatives of capitalist production are towards ever greater volumes of goods sold, where sufficient competition exists, at prices as low as the market can bear. The opening up of the global economy, and particularly China, to trade and investment in the 1990s and early 2000s was a sizeable, one-off shock to the material basis through which these processes take place. The consequences of these have played out in the context of people's daily lives - reflected, for example, in the growing piles of presents found under the Christmas tree.

This pervasion of material commodities into the fabric of everyday life is not something that has simply been taken up autonomously by rational consumers making decisions in their best interests. In line with those such as Lefebvre, Galbraith and the Frankfurt School, it is clearly the case that the nature of consumer's relationship with material commodities is shaped by the deliberate influence of capital, particularly retail capital. They are able to influence the location and availability of goods, presenting an expanding world consumer goods as interventions into a range of social contexts. The supermarket which place tempting goods at the end of an aisle, or providing an ever changing cornucopia of different objects in its middle aisle does so to provoke and activate habitual forms of consumption. The rise of digital retail capital has doubtless intensified these tendencies, as habits can be influenced at an ever more precise and granular level through the proliferation of data associated with consumer behaviour (West, 2023). But the targets of these interventions is not to somehow overwhelm or undercut otherwise rational consumer agency, but rather to co-opt and align the less-than-rational habits of consuming agents with the interests of capital. It is by shaping the habits of consumers that these interests are mobilised, and it is through these habits that they are reproduced and stabilised across society.

In this way, the interests of producers clearly shape people's consumption habits. But thinking more about the nature of these habits reveals that this is merely one input into a process that is sustained and reproduced through people's everyday practices. People's expectations and conduct as consumers take on a self-sustaining and broadly stable institutional form. Crucially, these habits can be transmitted and reproduced, particularly within the home. Gregoratto & Särkelä (2021) present an account of habits grounded in social reproduction theory, emphasising the key role they play in the processes of socialisation through which society is reproduced. This highlights the way that habit functions as a spiral in processes of social reproduction. A passive re-articulation of a given habit in new circumstances serves to reinforce and reproduce ratcheting social norms around the purpose and desireability of consumer goods. The accounts of consumption on behalf of children in this section (explored further in the context of gifting in chapter 5) shed light on this process, as people reproduced particular habits of consumption in new material circumstances.

Any given 'social standard of living' is historically contingent and ultimately grounded in a set of wants, needs and expectations that could be different, given different conditions. This does not mean, however, that any given instance of it is not politically consequential, just because it is liable to change. The habits and practices through which these institutions are sustained and reproduced are often slow to update. Where material transformations in the economy take place more suddenly than can be accommodated by a change in habits and expectations, then institutions of established practice can operate as a significant political counterweight that works to sustain the status quo ante. In both the most recent shocks to the political economy of Britain, Brexit and COVID-19, the practices of consumers accustomed to life in a global economy have, in various ways, had to be sustained through political interventions. These help to illustrate the central role that a social standard of living, understood as a shared, institutionalised set of practices and expectations, plays in the political economy of a state like the UK.

The status of a 'social standard of living' as a shared institutional framework means that it should be understood as a group, rather than an individual level, concept. Whilst individual expectations and practices can vary within the overall aggregate, its against the perceptions of a 'generalised other' (Mead, 1934) that these are formed and enacted. The state forms an obvious backdrop to this analysis, being the social unit for which the concept of living standards (more traditionally conceived) is most often applied on a comparative basis. The enumeration of prices in a national currency mean that on the whole the standard of living, and thus the institutional and social expectations that surround it, is normalised at the national scale. It even feeds back into national statistics and the state's perception of its own economy through the device of the basket of goods that informs the statistical measurement of inflation. Here, the updating tastes and consumption practices of the population have to be continually accounted for in generating one of the central macroeconomic variables at the heart of the economic governance of the modern state. Yet it is precisely because of this updating of more quantitative measurements of 'living standards' against changes in the consumption practices that underpin it that make a more qualitative analysis important. Without this, long term transformations in what people understand as being central to their own living standards, and how they subsequently value these things, may be lost.

The discussion of the habit of 'plenty' in Chapter 4 (see p. 149) captures one of the central ways in which these social living standards have been transformed during the era of globalisation. The increased choice and affordability of material goods throughout society is heralded, by its cheerleaders, as the defining triumph of modern globalisation. This has come during an era where society has been increasingly marketised, inequality has deepened and the provision of public services has been hit by waves of austerity. In this sense, the idea of 'living standards' should be taken with a pinch of salt in as far as it relates to substantive improvements in peoples material circumstances. Instead, they reflect a slow alignment of the practices and priorities of consumers around the axis along which measurable improvements are being made. Yet this slow rebasing of consumers expectations around a particular status quo imparts a path dependency on the management of economic policy, as improvements made over a long period of time have to be sustained and defended in the face of more transitory crises. Three such crises have struck the British economy over the last decade and a half, yet in the face of these, the consumption of material commodities has remained a point of remarkable fixity. Considered from the perspective of the broadly consistent demands of consumers, each challenge to the political economy of the UK has ratcheted up the various political and economic tensions and contradictions in its economic model.

The financial crisis of 2007/08 struck particularly close to the heart of the UK's political economy. The broad development model it had pursued since the Big Bang of the financial services in the 1980s saw a deliberate focus on the very high productivity sectors of the economy, such as finance or legal services. These were responsible for much of the productivity improvements that drove growth in the economy (McCann, 2016). Whilst the returns to such was growth was highly unevenly distributed, it was nevertheless the engine that sustained the UKs relatively advantageous position in the global economy. In developing this area of comparative strength, Britain was able to support the favourable terms of trade, even as countries in the global South competed away its manufacturing base. As such, it is a necessary counterweight to developments in the consumer economy, one which worked to keep the scales tilted towards the British consumer and away from the worker in the global South. Since the financial crisis, the slump in British productivity growth that has now entered its fifteenth year has radically changed its economic, and political, circumstance. It is against this backdrop that the consumption data presented in this thesis was gathered. The character of living standards as a 'ratchet' or 'escalator' gives them a profound political asymmetry, such that they don't merely fall or rise evenly in relation to wider circumstance. Instead, their institutional stickiness renders them an increasingly challenging aspect of the political landscape as an economy undergoes shocks in its macroeconomic performance and associated terms of trade.

Through the subsequent period of austerity, public service spending was drastically reduced. For those on low incomes or reliant on social transfers, this period has seen increases in child poverty (Cantillon et. al, 2017) and food insecurity (Jenkins, et. al, 2021). Yet across the economy at large, broad trends around consumption have continued or even intensified. One notable feature of the UK economy since this period is the rise of discount shops - the two competitor supermarkets Aldi and Lidl (with their 'middle aisles' (see p. 158)) and retailers such as B&M Bargains (Eley, 2020). Rather than moderating the volume of material consumption, changes in income were instead modulated through practices of thrift (see p. 163, also Stanley (2022) for further discussion of this phenomenon). In response to changing material circumstances, the broad stability of expectations around consumption mobilise wider changes in the systems of provision through which consumer goods are manufactured and sold.

The second moment of 'crisis', that resulting from the vote to leave the EU, was portrayed in many quarters as a backlash against the economic status quo. This partly reflected the success of a campaign that mobilised political dissatisfaction with the consequences of economic globalisation, particularly in places that had been ‘left behind’. But at the same time, it did not present itself as a complete unwinding of these processes, reshoring the production of mundane goods and commodities. Instead, Britain was presented as a buccaneering global economy, that would continue to deploy its structural advantages in relations of trade and exchange to sustain and improve the standard of living of its citizens. Whilst the majority of academic economists set out the potential harms of leaving a large trading bloc like the EU, the economic justification for leaving was often stated in explicitly free trade terms, seen as escaping from behind the protectionist walls of the single market. Whilst far from the only economic narrative set out by the Leave campaign, the idea that the removal of trade barriers would mean cheaper food, clothing and footwear was a central pillar of its portrayal as an endeavour grounded in free trade (Culbertson, 2017). Rather than any kind of unwinding of globalisation (at least in relation to production) it was seen as a continuation and deepening of global trading relations that were advantageous to British consumers.

The final crisis, that of the COVID-19 pandemic represented a significantly more transformational intervention into the character of everyday life and people’s consumption habits. The pandemic, and accompanying period of lockdown took place at almost the exact mid-point of the data collection for this study. That its consequences did not feature more prominently in the discussion of the empirical data generated reflects the extent to which consumption, at least in relation to material commodities, carried on as normal for many (but not all) people in the country. Whilst a handful of those I spoke to during the period of lockdown had undergone a significant income shock, many more found themselves amongst the ranks of those whose spending continued much the same as before, supported either by state furlough or the ability to continue working from home. Whilst one consequence of this was a tremendous shift from in-person to online shopping, generating record profits for companies like Amazon, the role of manufactured consumer goods in people's daily lives remained remarkably stable for many. The wave of inflation that swept over the global economy in response serves to demonstrate the consequences of settled and sustained practices of consumption playing out in a wider economic environment that is undergoing rapid and profound material transformations.

Consumer Agency in the Global Economy

From the perspectives set out above, the role of the consumer can be seen as a predominantly conservative one. Whilst it is not necessarily true that their interests are the sole organising animus of economic exchange, as would be held by consumer sovereignists, they are nevertheless active participants in processes of valuation that undergird key dynamics of competition and accumulation in the global economy. Their actions are guided by habits that impart an inertia onto the character of everyday life. As consumers seek to meet their economic ends through the means available to them, those means become embedded in expectations in ways that presents a significant political challenge to anyone attempting to reconfigure the political or economic arrangements of society. This perspective offers something of a counterweight to how the consumer's role in the global economy has often been conceived in IPE and related disciplines, where it is often seen to present opportunities for political transformation through the political mobilisation of consumer choice (see p. 89). This perspective is not incompatible with the Pragmatic account of agency developed in the thesis. Consumers also have the ability to uproot and disrupt settled habit, given sufficient motivation to examine and transform their consumption practices. But this suggests a slightly different theory of change to the direct means-end rationality embedded in schemes such as Fairtrade. In this concluding section, I reflect on the consequences of the view of consumption advanced here for our understanding of consumers ability to directly tackle the intersecting injustices in which their consumption is rooted.

The account of consumer agency that underpin schemes such as Fairtrade are inherently rationalist. In this sense, if consumers have normative concerns about the circumstances in which the goods they consume are produced, they will place higher value on goods that make a virtue of their condition of manufacture. Yet such a calculation relies on the information available, both about the status quo and the nature of any alternatives. As shown in Chapter 5, both are broadly lacking, at least with the specificity required for consumers to make informed judgements about the value differential between options. Without reliable, verifiable information about their impact, schemes such as Fairtrade simply conform to the logic of qualification, signifiers that can assigned value independent of the true nature of the commodity to which they are attached. A vacuum of such information breeds a cynicism about the capacity of individual choices to make a difference. As discussed at the end of Chapter 5 (see p. 193), participants discussing these issues often deployed a 'rhetoric of reaction' that works to delegitimise attempts to challenge the status quo. A further challenge to this idea that people can be empowered to act politically as consumers is grounded in the wider political economy that governs distribution. Whilst people as consumers are caught up within a given 'social standard of living' that shapes what and how they should consume, their ability to sustain such consumption is ultimately grounded in their income level. Simply in trying to keep up with socially established expectations around consumption, the ability of individual consumers to discretionally value the ethical qualities of the goods they buy is distinctly uneven.

It was in not consuming at all that people often felt that had the greatest agency to align their consumption to their wider values. This represents a well-established strand of consumer activism in boycotting particular goods. When targeted against a particular company or a particular state, mobilised by a wider campaign that directly links such action with a well-defined set of concerns, such an approach can have substantive success (Sasson, 2016). But on a more individual basis, the choices made by consumers to align their consumption to their own values do not necessarily transmit such clear signals through the market. The agency of consumers is asymmetric, such that 'consuming' drives processes of far greater consequence than are set in motion by 'not-consuming'. To the extent that not-consuming represents an act of consumer agency at all, it is through its implicit role as an act of valuation that signals one less buyer available for a product in the market. To the extent that this has any impact at all, it is an infinitesimal one at the margin, the purpose of which cannot be discerned from any other reason why the product might not have been bought. To this end, whatever the concerns of the consumer themselves, the decision not to consume functionally intensifies the logic of competition. At the aggregate, a fall in consumer demand sufficient to be widely consequential would set in motion significant macroeconomic effects that could themselves ultimately be perverse in their consequences.

Against this, is it the fate of consumers in the global economy always to remain a bulwark against change, an ever-spinning flywheel imparting grim momentum to a system of deep inequalities barrelling ever faster towards climate disaster? Not entirely. The habitual nature of consumption, and the participatory role of consumers in assigning value onto the objects they consume, can both be harnessed to align with more positive and just outcomes. One observation from conducting this research was the number of people I spoke to who had begun to make substantive changes to their habits of consumption as they became aware of the environmental impact of the goods they consume - particularly in relation to plastic, the environmental impact of which was broadly publicised at the time of the research. Establishing new and stable habits around consumption may be a slow and uneven process, but once established their impact can become significant. To the extent that the environmental impact of consumption becomes a more pressing issue in the minds of consumers, there exists potential to establish new, more sustainable fields of practice. Developing awareness and providing the framework to shape these new habits will be an important field of political contestation in the coming years, not least because there are many whose interests still revolve around supporting the status quo.

Furthermore, where the interests of consumers are mobilised to support or sustain regressive features of the status quo, it must be acknowledged that their interests are not necessarily fixed around the preferences revealed through their choices. Through the value that they place on different goods, consumers are able to exert some small agency in the economic sphere. The political work of establishing new systems of value around different forms and quality of commodities may be difficult, but it is not impossible. Indeed, it is this that has informed attempts to rebase people's system of values like the Arts and Crafts movement in the 19th century, or more recent situationist approaches to ad-busting or culture jamming. This is not to say that there aren't powerful forces arraigned behind attempts to maintain the current system of valuation, but simply to note the potential for it to be otherwise. Where consumers have discretionary income above and beyond their need for basic necessities, their ability to place value on different forms and quality of commodity ultimately remains in their own hands. Slow transformations in this, such as increased value placed on the lifespan and repair-ability of consumer technology, or shifts in preference towards more sustainable materials, are already underway and offer the potential to build on. But such transformations are more difficult where inequality means that many consumers struggle to keep up with institutionalised expectations around the acceptable minima of consumption. Thus, the transformative potential held by consumers in a country like the UK is highly influenced by matters of distribution that ultimately sit upstream of an individual consumers choices in the marketplace.

Conclusion

Whilst this thesis has focused on questions of consumption in political economy, this stands as an important reminder that the discipline has always employed a perspective that seeks to capture the wider social whole. As such, the role and influence of consumers is always difficult to study and understand in isolation from the other social forces that govern economic life. Nevertheless, through the discussions presented in this chapter I have sought to demonstrate ways in which the account of consumption grounded in pragmatic agency can be productively situated within a broader analysis. This has been demonstrated by reflecting of the role of consumers play in the value chains that increasingly structure the global economy. It has also provided a new perspective on the political economy of a state like the UK, where the practices of consumption coalesce into relatively stable institution forms that impart inertia and path-dependency onto political decision making. This develops an everyday politics of consumption that sees it ultimately as a conservative force in economic life, but that contains within it an arena of political contestation through which stable and broad-based transformations could potentially emerge.

Conclusion

Consumption is unavoidably political. What may appear as a stream of seemingly inconsequential choices nevertheless represents one of the central ways by which individuals are embedded as agents into the wider economic system in which they participate. As the capitalist economic system has undergone an intensified process of globalisation, the impact and consequences of these consumption decisions have become ever more far reaching. Yet the complexity of the modern global economy, combined with the alienating character of commodity production under capitalism, means that tracing out these consequences directly is all but impossible. This thesis has therefore undertaken to study the manner and circumstance in which consumer choices are made. From this, it has been possible to start to develop new ways of thinking about how mundane and everyday consumption habits and choices are situated in the global economy. Existing economic thought often views consumers as purely rational and calculative actors, from which conclusions about their behaviour flows almost from first principles. The empirical evidence presented here instead suggests that a more Pragmatic account of agency is more useful for understanding consumer choice. Doing so helps to develop an analysis that softens the supposed 'sovereignty' of consumer agency in global markets, without denying it altogether. Whilst the research presented here is a necessarily limited foray into a diverse and complex realm of human action, it begins to highlight the ways that consumers both shape, and are shaped by, their place in the global economy.

A contention that has been advanced throughout this thesis is that, for the discipline of IPE, the consumer resides in something of a black box. This is not to say that consumption as a process has been overlooked by the discipline, but rather that the agency of those who participate in it exist beyond an empirical, theoretical or ideological veil. The research presented here goes some way to lifting that veil, drawing on sociological accounts of the practice of consumption and working to situate them in the global economy. This concluding section begins by restating the overall argument developed in the thesis. This demonstrates that, by analysing the empirical data gathered through the lens of a Pragmatic account of human action, a more complete account of the nature of consumer agency in the global economy has been developed. Yet there are also limitations as to how much a single research project is able to address a topic as vast and as varied as consumption. This research was conducted at a particular time, and in a particular location and set of circumstances, that must be acknowledged when drawing conclusions. As such, some wider methodological and conceptual reflections on the nature and limits of the research will be presented. Finally, the thesis will conclude by developing lines for future research to take, that reflect on how the role of the consumer in the global economy may change. As the world enters a era, one that may disrupt long-held habits and practices of consumption, understanding its political context and consequence has never been more important.

Review of the thesis

Consumption, along with production and exchange, is one of the defining actions of a capitalist market economy. It is not that political economy in general, and IPE in particular, has explicitly overlooked this important facet of economic life. Instead, as reviewed in

Chapter 1, its approach is often grounded in, ultimately limiting, assumptions imported from existing schools of consumer theory. The analytical primacy given to consumer choice in the neoclassical economics that underpins much of the mainstream of the discipline proves something of a simulacrum. Whilst consumers, from this perspective, are afforded unparalleled influence over the distribution of resources in the economy, the nature of their choices and the circumstances that motivate them remain behind a veil. In contrast to this approach, more critical perspectives on the economy focus their account on the concentrated power held by the owners and managers of capital and the structural imperatives that compel them. The choices and desires of consumers, from this perspective, are shaped by the structuring power of capital rather than representing an genuine wellspring of agency within the economic system. Accounts of consumption that are more grounded in the specific, situated choices that consumers make do exist, and inform a broad literature across disciplines such as Anthropology and Sociology. Yet these have tended to overlook the wider economic context in which they are made. The challenge taken up in this thesis was to develop a nuanced account of consumption that could bridge the gap between the messy, culturally situated practices of peoples everyday lives, and the more 'ordered' and 'rational' world of market exchange.

Reviewing these accounts of consumer agency, and demonstrating how they have been incorporated into the discipline's wider analysis of the global economy, revealed the gaps in how IPE has engaged with the question of consumption. Because consumption plays such a central role in many of the processes and phenomena studied by IPE, this matters. As reviewed in Chapter 2, everything from the boom and bust of the economic cycle to the patterns of global trade are grounded in consumption and thus contain within them a role for the consumer. Yet in dealing with such phenomena at the aggregate, the consumer themselves is often lost amidst statistical agglomerations that detach consumption from its specific social context. The emerging school of Everyday IPE, which seeks answer to puzzles set by the global economy in the daily fabric of non-elite actors lives, provides a compelling perspective to investigate such questions. Yet, despite the clear suitability of this approach to the study of consumption, the consumer remains largely overlooked as an actor in the global economy. This thesis has demonstrated that it is an approach able to successfully situate the sociological, practice-based accounts of consumption within the global economic context in which they exist.

The key characteristic of the practice-based account of consumption, that is overlooked by much contemporary IPE, resides in its more nuanced account of agency. Practice theory is a broad school, that conceives of the many different ways humans act to influence the world around them and the different stimuli that drive them to do so. This develops a broader and looser account of human agency than the rationality that underpins so much existing economic thought. In operationalising a practice-based approach for this study, it was an early precursor to modern practice-theory that was alighted upon as most appropriate for understanding the actions of consumers. Pragmatism, with its focus on socially reproduced habits as a partial, but still meaningful, form of agency, was chosen for this purpose. In particular, its understanding of how people's capacity as moral agents drove ongoing and uneven transformations in otherwise settled habits was particularly cogent in the context of the multiple, intersecting social problems that are bound up with acts of consumption. And its unique perspective on 'valuation' as an active and participatory contribution of the economic subject to wider processes of exchange provides an new angle through which to understand consumer's agency in the global economy. Drawing on this approach, with its more nuanced understanding of agency, provokes answers to the central question about the role of consumer agency grounded not only in degree, but also its nature, quality and type.

Given the breadth of consumption as a phenomenon, certain choices had to be made as to what would fall under the terms of the study, in order to deliver a coherent and achievable research project. It needed to be broad enough that it could allow for meaningful claims to be made about IPE's understanding of consumers and consumption in general, and not reflect merely the contingencies of a particular product or commodity type. But at the same time, drawing together data from across too many different 'systems of provision' would offer an overwhelming challenging in drawing out commonalities between choices made in very different contexts. This led to a focus on 'durable and semi-durable material consumption', reflecting a broad range of consumer goods that had both a clearly defined relationship with the global economy as well as a tangible and ongoing presence in the consumer's home. In order to study such practices of consumption, qualitative interviews with consumers were conducted, supported by consumption diaries that outlined the purchases they had made over the month-long period of their participation in the study. This enabled the subsequent interviews to focus on particular consumption decisions, rather that talk in generalities, and reflected the diverse and unpredictable range of commodities that consumers encounter through the course of their everyday lives. By generating and exploring such data, this thesis has made an empirical contribution to the discipline of IPE. Opening the black box that has kept consumers themselves beyond the reach of direct empirical study demonstrates how this perspective can add to understanding of the global economy.

The empirical data was analysed through the framework of three concepts that were developed from the Pragmatic account of agency. The first reflected the ways in which human action is conducted through habits which truncate the fully rational decision-making expected by mainstream economic theory. These work not only at the level of the individual, but are instituted and reproduced socially, reflecting and responding to the conditions of wider society. In relation to people's consumption decisions, where 'shopping habits' are a well understood reservoir of rote and repeated behaviours, three habitual logics were identified that have been shaped in the context of the wider economic circumstances in which consumers act. These were christened *Plenty, Convenience* and *Thrift*. Each highlighted a particular facet of the modern globalised economy. *Plenty* reflects the transformations in people's relationship with material culture in response to their relative abundance secured through globalised production and the associated division of labour. *Convenience* is already well-established as an ever-shifting habitual frame, one exploited by the interests of capital to accelerate the circuit of its reproduction. *Thrift*, finally, has long been embedded in people's consumption practices, shaped by conditions of inequality and the pressures of social reproduction. In calcifying into habit, however, it can be practised and reproduced even in the absence of the material constraints that make it a necessity. Overall, this habitual nature of consumption imparts a substantial path-dependency onto broad transformations in the global economy, as they embed consumer behaviours and expectations that can be difficult or costly to change.

The habitual account of agency, if allowed to dominate, would reduce consumers to little more than autonoma, carrying out their rote decisions indifferent to changing consequence or circumstance. This, clearly, would be a hollow understanding of agency. Pragmatism, particularly the work of John Dewey, identifies the points at which people change or arrest particular habits as being a crucial moral pivot in human action. Habits, repeated and rehearsed in changing contexts and circumstances, lead to different ultimate outcomes. Through this, settled habits can slide out of alignment with the ends they are employed to pursue. It is at this point that the more deliberative, reflective, creative and exploratory facets of human intellect can be put to task in shaping human action. This dimension of agency was reflected in the number of consumption decisions captured in the empirical data. Sometimes, this was for fairly banal reasons, responding to changing tastes and preferences, or new developments in technology. But strikingly, for many of those I spoke to, a recent or growing awareness of the costs of consumption was responsible for driving a variety of deliberate habit shifts. From a detached perspective, the systemic impact of these individual changes might be negligible, or confounded by unintended consequence. The barriers of distance, alienation and complexity, not to mention structural imbalances of power, can make the coordination of its impact difficult However, that people's choices as consumers can be meaningfully shaped by their moral concerns means that it must be considered as a facet of the agency that consumers exhibit. As the costs of consumption become harder to ignore, sustained changes to consumer behaviour may be pursued autonomously by ever greater numbers of people.

The analysis presented here has demonstrated the value to IPE of a Pragmatic account of the social world, one grounded in human action. Whilst not seeking to deny the existence of social phenomena, it is how they are practised, performed and reproduced through the social action of individuals that takes centre stage in its analysis. In the economic realm, this is manifested in a particular concern with the act of valuation. Whilst other economic theories abstract value as a quantity in circulation or as a quality inherent in commodities themselves, pragmatism focuses on the human action that imparts and assigns value to things in the first instance. Such an approach draws into focus the central role that consumers play in wider processes of economic exchange, as it is through the value they place on the items they buy that the entire system is imbued with its vital force. Applying this approach to the analysis of my empirical data, it first revealed the ways in which the consumers I spoke to performed the role of 'qualification' - imbuing otherwise inert objects with the qualities that carry with them perceptions of value. This mirrored existing work, but transposed an approach more usually found analysing fine art or complex financial instruments into the mundane textures of everyday life. Reflecting on the habitual and more deliberate ways in which consumers valued the objects the bought then demonstrated a key transmission mechanism through which the account of agency developed in this thesis takes on an explicitly economic character.

It was this account of valuation that underpinned the first of two conceptual devices that sought to clarify the significance of this account of agency and its contribution to the discipline of IPE. To understand how both conscious and habitual acts of valuation are shaped by the context in which they are made, the idea of *regimes of everyday valuation* was developed to reflect the complex institutional, material and symbolic backdrop that accompanies any given valuation decision. This, in particular, is useful in reflecting the impact of globalisation in shifting the relative value that consumers place on one good over another. The two specific regimes identified, of 'qualification' and 'comparison', were both ways in which the valuations implicit in everyday consumption choices directed the wider flow of value around the global economy. This, in turn, had implications for who in the global economy was empowered or disempowered to receive their share of such value. The second conceptual device acknowledged this thesis' debt to the institutional economics work of authors such as Veblen by developing an account of the *social standard of living.* This reflects the broad matrix of habits, expectations and socially institutionalised practices of consumption that dominate a society at a given point in time. In the UK, in the 2020s, these are indelibly entwined with the wider economic position of the state itself. Yet, in shaping the expectations and experiences against which the consuming public evaluate their economic circumstance, these living standards are often a fixed point that must be sustained even as the wider economy faces disruption and crisis.

In developing these two conceptual devices through the empirical data presented in this thesis, it begins to trace out an everyday politics of consumption. This seeks to provide a sense of how the actions and choices of consumers filter out into the wider economic system in which they take place, subtly but implacably shaping these spaces, networks and systems from below. This represents an attempt to reinsert the question of consumption into the study of political economy, which has long held it as an economic process of central importance, but that has struggled to study and incorporate an phenomenon that is as diverse, distributed and inchoate as that of consumption. This work is necessarily partial, overlooking many different types of consumer or forms of consumption that could all potentially extend or challenge the analysis presented here. In the following section, I will reflect on some of these oversights, which, as inevitable and necessary as they might have been, point towards gaps or caveats in the knowledge generated here.

Reflections

As described in chapter 3, the recruitment and sampling process undertaken in this research aimed to include a range of experiences and perspectives in the final sample. It was designed to be broad enough that commonalities that present in the data could be taken as being representative of a more general experience of consumers in the UK. Yet, with any small-n sample, it is necessary to be conscious of the voices that haven't been included and the perspectives that may have been missed. Some of these potential oversights were outlined in the methods chapter itself, including the skew in both income and housing tenancy present in the sample. At a broader scale, the data generated by the study was located, by geographical necessity, in the immediate vicinity of the researchers home institution. It therefore overlooks a great number of perspectives from elsewhere in the world, not least the billions of people who reside in the global South. Whilst such oversights reflect the necessary limits of working as single researcher, their implications are still worthy of reflection. The account of consumer agency developed here is reflective of largely middle-class consumers in a wealthy country in the global North. Such a perspective is still important, because the position occupied by such groups in the structures of the global economy mean that their collective decisions hold greater economic weight than many other groups. It is important that this perspective isn't considered universal or permanent, but rather understood as being grounded in numerous contingencies with all that implies for their potential to change over time.

With that caveat in mind, it should be noted that the two conceptual devices discussed in the final chapter of this thesis are ultimately pliable to variation in position and experience. Whilst they have broadly been described in the context of British consumers making their choices in the context of economic globalisation and a global division of labour, they provide a framework for thinking about how things might be different. The notion of a social standard of living is here crudely drawn at the level of the state, but this may conceal significant variation within such a collective. More work may be needed to look at variations in people's attitudes and expectations around consumption in the context of income inequality, both within Britain and globally. The original design of this research, before recruitment difficulties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic demanded a change of focus, imagined a more explicit comparative focus on low and medium/high income consumers, in the expectations that these groups would relate to globally produced commodities in meaningfully different ways. Expanding the scope yet further, it would be illuminating to study consumption is a country such as China, where a growing consumer culture has emerged in the context of a very different political economy. Work looking at the expectations, habits and attitudes around consumption in the context of the Chinese state could present very different conclusions as to the nature of the social standard of living and regimes of valuation that pertain. Expanding these conceptual devices to new experiences and different contexts will be a crucial test in establishing their wider usefulness for the discipline.

Future work could also use more historical sources of information about consumption habits to better understand how practices, habits and expectations have changed relative to the wider macroeconomic conditions. One potential source of such information is the Mass Observation archive, which contains a wealth of records about the everyday lives of British citizens across several decades of the 20th century. In particular, the directive of November 1950 (Mass Observation, 1950) records the considerations, motivations and reflections of respondents on the purchase of a range of mundane household items. Although not identical, in that it includes doesn't record actual purchases but rather asks people to speculate on potential purchases, there is sufficient overlap with the empirical data generated in this research that illuminating comparisons maybe drawn. More widely, a fuller engagement with existing historical research around consumption could prove useful in situating and historicising the account developed here within its particular social, political and economic context.

The design and focus of the research methods also reflected necessary limits in scope. Central to this was restricting the study of consumption to durable material consumer goods alone. Whilst these represented a productive avenue of investigation for situating consumption within its global context, clearly such forms of consumption don't exist in a vacuum. People's wider discretionary consumption includes things such as services or media that weren't fully accounted for in this research, yet these things are not all independent of each other. Instead, consumption decisions are made in the context of the range of potential alternatives. Further to this, there were two particular avenues that, reflecting on the data collected, could have been explored in greater detail. The role of both advertising and credit / finance were both discussed intermittently by the participants, but were not systematically investigated by the design of the research itself. Both are clearly key in motivating and mobilising people to act as consumers, such that they are arguably worthy of greater focus than they have been afforded in this research. Doing so may flesh out a richer, multidimensional understanding of how the various different drivers shaping people's consumption behaviour relate to the conditions of the global economy.

Finally, the process of analysing the data and developing the argument presented in this thesis inevitably drove reflection on the design and implementation of the research itself. From this perspective, considerations can be made about how the research might have been conducted differently, and what gaps or oversights in the method might be addressed if it was designed with this knowledge in mind. The diary at the centre of the research was designed primarily to provide a point of reflection for the subsequent interview, rather than a central source of data capture itself. Whilst this worked reasonably well, there were cases where participant recall was patchy, or where potentially interesting data was lost simply because of time constraints in the interviews themselves[52]. Were this research to be run again, a more comprehensive diary, able to provoke and capture reflection on some of these practices in situ, might have provided an even richer set of data with which to work. One reason this wasn't pursued was in relation to concerns about the amount of work for participants, which would need to be addressed either with a tighter focus, a shorter research period, or increased incentives. This approach, capturing data closer to the point of consumption itself, may also have been more fruitful in generating data that spoke to the more affective dimensions of consumption. These proved difficult to illicit in retrospect, although this may have been

[52] One reflection, at the end of the research process, was that the balance of the interview questions could have been productively shifted towards a greater focus on the consumption practices and decisions themselves, rather than much of the more 'traditional' political questions that provided some useful context but ultimately did little to enlighten the central research question.

possible to address with sufficiently sensitive and skilful interview questions. Yet ultimately, a more personal and intimate set of research methods, potentially involving ethnographic research in the field, may be necessary to fully capture the full affective and emotional registers that are mobilised in and through the practice of consumption

Looking Forward

This section anticipates avenues for future research for IPE that could develop out of this perspective on consumers and consumption. The first reflect the changing role of consumers in the global economy and the opportunities this presents for further study. The second, meanwhile, highlights the potential theoretical contribution that a pragmatic account of valuation could make to the disciplines understanding of the production and circulation of this key theoretical concept.

The role of the consumer in the global economy is changing. Geopolitical tensions, particularly those between the US and China, are threatening to reshape long-established patterns of trade. Whilst analysis of these new global tensions often focuses on questions of security or the role of strategically important industries, the implications for more everyday forms of consumption are just as profound. One of the great boons of globalisation, at least for the global North, was that they no longer needed to address the inherent contradictions of overseeing a national political economy where workers were consumers and vice versa. The global division of labour, and the fracturing of the production process, meant that the wages of those making consumer goods could be kept low without threatening the overall level of demand. It was in the resulting period of low, stable inflation that many of the habits and expectations around consumption discussed in this thesis took root. Now, in the wake of supply chain disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy price spike resulting from the war in Ukraine, inflation has returned as an active problem faced by policy makers. The data for this research was gathered before significant inflationary effects had been felt in the UK economy. Yet the challenges presented by the current cost of living crisis only serve to highlight the importance of understanding consumer behaviour, as their response to rising prices may ultimately be transformatively consequential for the economy at large. An understanding of how rapid and destabilising changes in the price level challenge and disrupt the regimes of everyday valuation through which people understand the worth of the goods they consume would be a potentially productive avenue for future research to explore.

It is consumption's relationship to the climate crisis that perhaps best highlights an urgent need for a deeper understanding of what shapes and drives the conduct of consumers. The enormous transformations in everyday life that may be necessary for a sustainable transition are almost certain to deeply effect the consumption habits of people across the globe. Some of the evidence presented in this thesis has demonstrated a tentative, voluntaristic move towards these transformations by some of the people who took part. Yet the scale of potential disruption to the planetary ecosystem suggest much more profound transformations are incoming. These may either be imposed by the state as they try and change consumer behaviour to meet environmental targets, or simply reflect the impossibility of continuing with the status quo in the face of growing disruption to climactic stability. In both cases, understanding the motivations of consumers will be essential to navigating the complex politics these situations represent. In the UK and elsewhere, consumer interests have already been mobilised cynically by those campaigning against the policies needed to meet net zero commitments. Whilst such protestations overlook the potential fluidity of the interests that are revealed through the data presented here, they nevertheless highlight the importance of consumers as a group in sustaining and legitimising climate policy. Such questions are already the subject of extensive research in the sociology of consumption, but will also need to be addressed by IPE as it responds to the unavoidable magnitude of climate crisis.

A different potential avenue for future study stemming from the research presented here relates to the concept of valuation. Value has been a concept at the heart of political economy since it emerged as a distinct area of inquiry in the 17th century. Distinctions between the underlying conceptions of the ontological nature of value inform many of the substantive divisions between approaches to the discipline, as was touched on in Chapter 1. The concept of valuation, which steps back from understanding 'value' as a kind of quality in motion to instead focusing on the acts through which objects come to acquire the value they possess, has been presented as a 'side-move' in debates on the question of value (Muniesa, 2011). The research presented here has demonstrated the potential for applying such an approach to questions within IPE, one which is better able to incorporate the active participant of economic agents rather than abstracting its analysis to a separate domain of circulation. It has focused on how consumers conduct acts of valuation, and the implication this has for their role in the global economy. Yet this is an approach that could be expanded into other domains of economic exchange. It has already made a substantial contribution to the analysis of the often complex and arcane techniques of valuation deployed in financial engineering. But potential areas for future research of this nature could look at the role of other actors in the 'physical' economy in establishing the value of the goods at different stages of their production, manufacture and distribution. How managers working in retail capital translate their expectations around the value consumers will place onto objects into prices, or the way in which labour is valued downstream of these assumptions, are all potential ways to expand this approach into other domains of economic activity.

This thesis has advanced the argument that IPE has not given sufficient attention to the consumer. Whilst consumption is one of the central economic processes that define the field of study, it has largely been understood mechanistically at the aggregate rather than as an embodied and embedded phenomenon. By presenting empirical data about where, how and why people act as consumers, this thesis has demonstrated how the discipline can begin to think about how these practices relate to the central problems it seeks to address. In tackling a subject as diverse, distributed and complex as consumption, it is inevitable that this thesis represents merely a first step in embedding the consumer more fully within IPE's understanding of the economic world. As shown in this conclusion, however, many of the interlocking problems faced by the current economic system are unavoidably linked to consumption. As such, a better understanding of consumer's interests and behaviour may be essential in navigating the many political challenges that must be overcome to place the global economic system on a fairer, sustainable and more just trajectory.

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Methodological Appendix

Contents

Participant Information Sheet

Research project title: The Domestic Politics of Global Consumption

You are invited to participate in a research study which looks at how the goods we buy reflects and influences our political views. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask me if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. I would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.

Thank you for reading this.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

This study seeks to understand the relationship between the goods we buy, our sense of economic wellbeing and our feelings about politics. How much we can buy with the money we have has always been a central pillar of political debate, but as consumption has changed over recent decades the relationship between individuals, the economy and the state has changed as well. It is this relationship that I want to investigate, to understand how people make the links between the money in their pocket, the goods in their home, and the politicians and policies that govern the country.

2. Why have I been chosen to take part?

This study will focus on the link between consumption and politics for everyday families. As such, there are only limited criteria on which participants have been selected. The study requires a broadly representative sample of people, across different range of incomes and from different demographic groups, so you have been chosen in part because I'm trying to include as broad a range of people as possible in my study.

3. Do I have to take part?

Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at anytime without explanation and without incurring a disadvantage.

4. What will happen if I take part?

The research will take place across 3 stages. The first stage will be a brief interview either over the phone or using Zoom or another video messaging app, to discuss your political views, your shopping habits, your employment history, your understanding of globalisation and your attitude towards it. This will begin with a brief questionnaire, and then move on to a more open, conversational format. It is expected that this interview will take no longer than one hour.

When the interview has concluded, you will be instructed in how to carry out the second phase of the research. This will take the form of a 'diary study', where you will be asked to make a small set of observations about the goods you purchase over the course of a month (in the specific areas of clothing, homewares, furniture and toys). This can be completed either online.

Once the diary study is complete, there will be a follow-up interview to talk about how the study went. This final interview will focus more on your own home, and how the things you buy fit into your life and influence your sense of wellbeing. This final interview will begin with a few more survey questions, before going on to discuss your consumption habits, what motivates you to buy the things you do, how these things make you feel and reflections on the experience of completing the diary. It is expected that this interview should also take no longer than 60 minutes. As we will be discussing aspects of your home, I will ask you to send across some photographs of the main living areas of your home to provide some context to the discussion, but these will not be used in the final research itself.

5. Are there any risks in taking part?

This study will involve discussing potentially sensitive topics, relating to political views and consumption habits, in a home environment. If you feel like there is any risk of harm, conflict or offence arising from the issues being discussed, you do not have to participate.

6. What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let me know by contacting myself or my supervisor. In particular, with regards to the diary study, it has been trialled extensively to ensure that it does not represent an overly burdensome time commitment. However, if it is taking more time than you have available to complete it, then please contact me to discuss ways to make it more manageable.

7. Will my participation be kept confidential?

All the information that I collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be identified or identifiable in any of the material associated to this project. Data will be anonymised, and any data collected about you in interview will be stored in a form protected by passwords, or in a locked space.

All interview transcripts, field notes and diaries will be made anonymous and have all potentially identifying information removed. In this form, the data may be shared with other researchers, who have agreed to the standards of confidentiality set out on the consent form.

8. Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

Interviews will be recorded digitally and transcribed directly afterwards. All potentially identifying information will be removed from the transcripts and the original recordings will be deleted. Quotes from the transcripts, and observations from the researcher's field notes, may be reproduced in the final PhD thesis or in articles published in academic journals. With your consent, the researcher may take photographs of objects in your home that may be published in academic journals, on the condition that they provide no information that could potentially identify you. Once anonymised, they will be retained and securely stored for 5 years following the completion of the project (expected completion date – October 2022), for use in potential future research or academic publications.

9. **What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?**

   The information being sought includes your political attitudes and opinions, your employment and work history and information about some of the objects in your home and your consumption habits. These will be studied to make links between the different ways people consume and their wider political views.

10. **What is the legal basis for collecting my data?**

    According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.

    As we will be collecting some data that is defined in the legislation as more sensitive (information about your political views), we also need to let you know that we are applying the following condition in law: that the use of your data is 'necessary for scientific or historical research purposes'

11. **What will happen to the data collected and the results of the research project?**

    The results of this research project will be written up in a thesis and submitted to the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield for the completion of a PhD. The data gathered here may also be used in subsequent articles published in academic journals, or presented at international conferences.

12. **Who is organising and funding the research?**

    I am organising this research as part of a PhD studentship funded by the Economic and Social Research Council

13. **Who is the Data Controller?**

    The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

14. **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

    The University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee, in line with its Policy on Good Research and Innovation Practice. The review was administered by the Department of Politics.

15. **What will happen if I want to stop taking part?**

    You can withdraw at anytime, without explanation. You will still be compensated for your time, and receive any payments already agreed with the researcher.

16. Who can I contact if I have further questions?

Researcher:
Mr. Edward Pemberton
SPERI
ICOSS
219 Portobello
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S1 4DP
T: 07866977220
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Supervisor:
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Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

The University Of Sheffield.

The Domestic Politics of Global Consumption Participant Consent Form

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated 18/02/2019 or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	☐	☐
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include a questionnaire and interview which will take place in my own home. I also understand that it will involve the completion of a diary over the course of a month, in which I will record details of certain categories of goods that I purchase during this time	☐	☐
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.	☐	☐
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that photographs of objects in my home may be taken by the research and may be published in academic journals. I will be given an opportunity to approve these photographs, and care will be taken to ensure they contain to identifying information.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	☐	☐

Name of participant [printed] Signature Date

Name of Researcher [printed] Signature Date

Project contact details for further information:

Researcher:
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THE DOMESTIC POLITICS OF GLOBAL CONSUMPTION

The University Of Sheffield.

The survey below will ask some questions about your background, your political views and your knowledge and opinions of globalization. It should take between 10-15 minutes to complete. Please ask the investigator if you need clarification on any question. If you either can't or don't want to answer a question, please feel free to leave it blank and move on to the next one.

Your Background

The following questions ask about your background. Please tick the appropriate answer, or write in where indicated if necessary.

Are you –

☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other ______________________________

How old are you? (Tick one box only)

☐ Under 18 ☐18-24 ☐ 25-34 ☐ 35-44 ☐ 45-54 ☐ 55-64 ☐ 65+

How would you describe your ethnic origin?

White

- ☐ English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern
- ☐ Irish/British
- ☐ Irish
- ☐ Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- ☐ Any other White background ___________________________

Asian or Asian British

- ☐ Indian
- ☐ Pakistani
- ☐ Bangladeshi
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Any other Asian background ___________________________

Black/African/Caribbean

- ☐ Black British
- ☐ Caribbean
- ☐ African
- ☐ Any other Black background ___________________________

Mixed/multiple ethnic groups

- ☐ White and Black Caribbean
- ☐ White and Black African
- ☐ White and Asian
- ☐ Any other Mixed background ___________________________

Other ethnic group

- ☐ Arab
- ☐ Any other ethnic background ___________________________

Please select the furthest level of education you have completed:

- ☐ Secondary Education (GCSE/O-Levels)
- ☐ Post-Secondary Education (College, A-Levels, NVQ3 or below, or similar)
- ☐ Vocational Qualification (Diploma, Certificate, BTEC, NVQ 4 and above, or similar)
- ☐ Undergraduate Degree (BA, BSc etc.)
- ☐ Post-graduate Degree (MA, MSc etc.)
- ☐ Doctorate (PhD)

What is your current employment status?

- ☐ Employed full time (35+ hours a week)
- ☐ Employed part time (less than 35 hours a week)
- ☐ Unemployed (currently looking for work)
- ☐ Unemployed (not currently looking for work)
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Retired
- ☐ Self-employed
- ☐ Unable to work

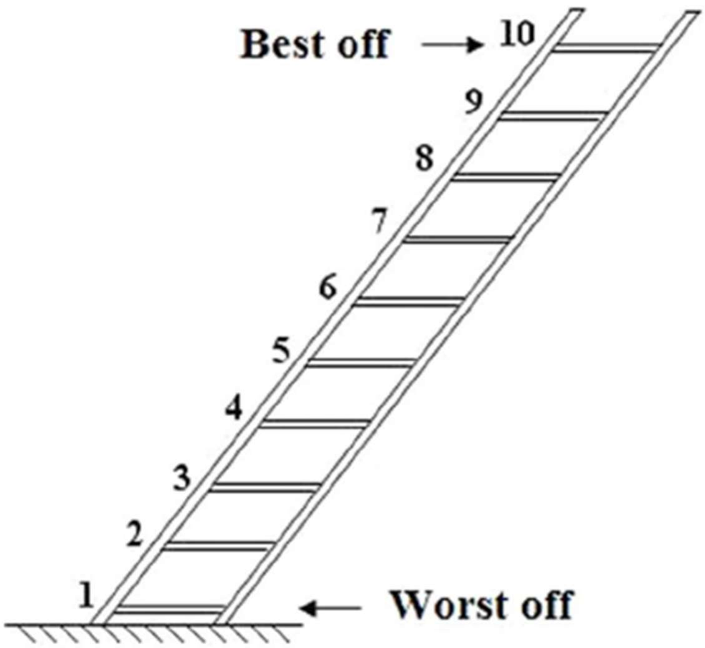
Is your present home:

- ☐ Owner occupied / owned outright
- ☐ Owner occupied / buying with a mortgage
- ☐ Rented from a Housing Association / Local Council
- ☐ Rented from a private landlord
- ☐ Accommodation comes with the job
- ☐ Another type of tenure _____________________

Please indicate below the total annual income of your household (before tax, but including benefits/allowances)

☐ Below £10,000 ☐ £10,001 - £20,000 ☐ £20,001 - £30,000 ☐ £30,001 - £40,000 ☐ £40,000 +

In our society there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups which tend to be towards the bottom. Below is a scale that runs from top to bottom.



Where would you put yourself now on this scale?

- ☐ 10 - Best off
- ☐ 9
- ☐ 8
- ☐ 7
- ☐ 6
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 1 - Worst off

Your Political Views

The following questions will ask about your political activity and your broader political views. Please mark the correct answer, or write in an answer where appropriate

Did you vote at the last election?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don’t Know

If yes, which party did you vote for?

- ☐ Conservative
- ☐ Labour
- ☐ Liberal Democrat
- ☐ Green Party
- ☐ UK Independence Party (UKIP)
- ☐ Something else_________________________
- ☐ Don't know

Do you consider yourself a supporter of a UK political party?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don’t Know

If yes, which party do you support?

- ☐ Conservative
- ☐ Labour
- ☐ Liberal Democrat
- ☐ Scottish National Party (SNP)
- ☐ Green Party
- ☐ Brexit Party
- ☐ UK Independence Party (UKIP)
- ☐ Plaid Cymru
- ☐ Something else_________________________
- ☐ Don't know

How did you vote in the 2016 Referendum on UK Membership of the EU?

☐ ‘Leave’ ☐ ‘Remain’ ☐ Didn’t Vote ☐ Don’t Know

From what you have seen and heard so far, do you think that as a result of leaving the EU Britain's economy will be **better off**, **worse off**, or won't it make much difference?

☐ Better off ☐ Worse off ☐ No difference ☐ Don’t Know

From what you have seen and heard so far, do you think that as a result of leaving the EU, Britain will have **more control** over Britain's economy, **less control**, or won't it make much difference?

☐ More control ☐ Less control☐ No difference ☐ Don’t Know

Political Attitudes

The following section will ask you some general questions about your political attitudes. Please read the statements in the left hand column, and indicate in the grid the extent to which you agree with each statement by marking the appropriate box.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
Citizens have a duty to vote in elections						
There is widespread corruption among those who manage our national politics						
Generally speaking, people like me don't have much say in what the government does						
Politics and government are so complicated that sometimes I cannot understand what's happening						
Since so many other people vote in elections, it really doesn't matter whether I vote or not						
Generally speaking, the people who are elected to the House of Commons stop thinking about the public's interest immediately						
I don't think governmental officials care much what people like me think						
The way people vote is the main thing that decides how this country is run						

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
When someone is unemployed, it's usually through no fault of their own						
Differences in income in this country are too large						
Large differences in income are necessary for this country's prosperity						
The distribution of money and wealth in this country today is fair.						
Everyone in this country should have equal opportunities to get ahead.						
The poor are poor because this country doesn't give all people an equal chance.						
Most poor people simply don't want to work hard.						
The government spends too much money on international aid.						
People in rich countries have a responsibility to help people in poorer countries.						
That some people in this country are rich has nothing to do with that fact that some people in other countries are poor.						

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off						
Big business takes advantage of ordinary people						
Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth						
There is one law for the rich and one for the poor						
Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance.						
The economic system in this country unfairly favours the wealthy						

On the scale below, please mark the number next to each item on the scale below, to indicate how important each of these options are in influencing the level of inequality in the UK today.

① Our government's economic policies

② Workers' pay

③ Our educational system

④ Globalisation

⑤ Our tax system

⑥ Some work harder than others

Not Important At All — Very Important

Globalisation

The following section will ask about your attitudes towards globalisation

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
Globalisation is an opportunity for economic growth.						
Globalisation is profitable only for large companies, not for citizens						
Globalisation increases social inequalities.						
Globalisation requires common global rules ('worldwide governance').						
Globalisation represents a good opportunity for British companies thanks to the opening-up of markets.						
Globalisation represents a threat to employment and companies in Britain.						
Globalisation protects us from price increases.						
The European Union helps to protect European citizens from the negative effects of globalisation						
The European Union enables European citizens to better benefit from the positive effects of globalisation						

Approximately what proportion of goods you purchase would you say come from a different country (to nearest 10%)? (Please circle to appropriate figure)

0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%	D/K

Please look at this photograph:

Image redacted for reasons of copyright

Allan Sekula 'Fish Story'

Imagine that this is a container ship heading towards the UK – Where do you think the goods it carries have been made? Please write the first country or countries that come to mind:

Please list below 5 things that you think it might contain. There's no right or wrong answers here – just write the first things that come to mind, they can be as general or precise as you want.

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

Finally, please look at this photograph:

Image redacted for reasons of copyright

Richard Vogel / AP / File

The image above is of a garment factory in Vietnam. Which companies, brands or shops do you think these people may be working for? Again, there's no right or wrong answers here please just write the first company or companies that come to mind

1) ______________________________

2) ______________________________

3) ______________________________

4) ______________________________

5) ______________________________

Finally, please indicate below your impressions of the value of the goods that the workers in the photograph above are making:

Really Cheap	Cheap	Fairly Cheap	Reasonably Priced	Fairly Expensive	Expensive	Very Expensive

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey!

Interview Schedule

<u>1st Section – Work & Background</u>

Goals – general information about background. Sense of interests and class position. Perception of position in social hierarchy. Relationship to parents job / background / social mobility over the life course

Household situation

Work history – what do you currently do for work?

Potential follow-ups:

> What is your educational background?
>
> Are you doing the kind of work you expected to be doing?
>
> How much would you say your work defines you? Do you give lots of thought to your career, or is it just what you do to get by?
>
> Do you enjoy your work? Is it creative / self-directed?
>
> What do you think you might do in the future?

Do you mind me asking what your partner does for work?

What did you parents do?

How do you think the economic circumstances you face today have changed from those of your parents?

Potential follow-ups:

> Did you feel well-off when you were young?
>
> Did you feel like your parents had to struggle to put bread on the table?
>
> Do you think things are easier now, or more difficult?

Do you have any worries or concerns about the future of your (your partners) employment?

How would you describe your standard of living? What are the things that come to mind when you think about that question?

2nd Section – The National Economy

Goals – What are your priorities for the economic management of the country? How do they delineate and define the economy? What do they think is the appropriate relationship between national and international economy? What informs their sense of economic wellbeing?

Can I ask you how you voted in the Referendum on membership of the EU?

What influenced your vote?

Are you worried or optimistic about the impact that Brexit might have on the economy? Why is this?

What do you think might be the advantages of leaving the EU?

Can I ask how you felt about the recent election? What do you think it means for the direction of the country?

How do you feel about how Brexit is being managed?

How should we relate to the rest of the world in the future?

Do you pay much attention to economic discussion in the news?

Potential follow-ups:

> Where do you get your news from?
>
> How would you know whether the 'economy' was doing well or not?

What would a 'good economy' mean for you?

Potential follow-ups:

> Do you trust the current governments economic management?
>
> Do you think the economy is being well run?
>
> Do you think Brexit will make you better or worse off? Why is that?
>
> Do you think that the national economy is run in the interests of people like you and the place that you live?

3rd Section – Globalisation

Goals – How do people perceive the existence of a 'global economy'? Where do they position themselves within it? How conscious are they of issues of labour exploitation and the global division of labour? What role does the nation-state play in mediating their experience and understanding of global economic processes?

Do you think much about where the things you buy come from?

Do you have a sense of how being part of a global economy has benefited you?

Potential follow-ups:

> Anything in particular you think has been made cheaper? Is that important to you, or would you be OK otherwise?

Are there any ways in which you think you've been harmed through being in a global economy?

Potential follow-ups:

> Do you think that we should be more self-sufficient as a nation?
>
> Do you think anyone *has* been harmed by globalisation?

Why do you think that we have a better standard of living in a country like the UK than many people experience in other parts of the world? What explains the difference?

Do you think that it's important to 'Buy British'? Does that influence the things you buy at all?

Potential follow-ups:

> Do you think much about where the goods you buy are made?
>
> Do you think that goods made in the UK are likely to be better quality? Those made abroad likely to be worse?
>
> Do you think much about the conditions in which the things you buy are made? Would that ever change your decision to buy something?

Does it matter when British companies are sold to international investors?

> Is it a problem even if jobs and production stay in the UK?
>
> Is it something that the government should encourage?

4th Section – Consumption Habits

Goals – Details about peoples habits and preferences. How people subjectively experience the value of the goods they consume. Does increased consumption increase subjective feelings of happiness?

Could you tell me a bit about where you go for the 'weekly shop' – food etc?

And what about shopping more widely – where do you go for things like clothes etc?

Post Covid-19

How have you found shopping in these new circumstances. Have you bought more, less?

Has it made you reflect on or change the way you shop and the things you buy at all?

Has it made you think about any changes to the way the economy in the UK is run? Or do you think / hope it will more or less get back to normal once this is over?

How has it affected your work?

How has it affected your family?

Voucher

Follow Up Interview Schedule –

Diary Study

How typical a period of shopping and consumption would you say this was for you?

Did it make you think about or reflect on how you shop and the things you buy?

Could you talk a little bit about how you felt to focus on where the things you bought were made?

Does focusing on this change the way you feel about politics and how the government should approach our relationship with the international economy at all? Why is this?

Thinking about the Monster Truck toy, I'm just wondering if you have an idea about how it might have been made – who do you think made it, and how do you think it came to the UK?

The Home

What makes your home a home?

What are the important objects to you in your home? How important are the things you own?

How would you say you've accumulated the things you own over the years? Have many of the things you own come from family or other channels? Have you been conscious about buying things and striving for a certain lifestyle and standard of living, or have you just picked up things here and there

How would you feel if, for whatever reason, it became necessary to live a simpler life with fewer material possessions? How do you think your family would feel about it?

How often would you say you throw things out? When did you last need to go to the tip? What did you get rid of?

Please tell me about something you bought recently that you thought was a good purchase – something that made your life easier, was really good value, etc.

Please tell me about something you bought recently that you thought was a real waste of money – something that was disappointing, overpriced, or didn't work

What would you say your favourite object is? Why is that?

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