



## The Odd Couple: Consumption and Civil Society

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### Résumé

Le temps est venu de s'attacher à l'étude des interactions entre la consommation et la société civile du XVIII<sup>e</sup> au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Il apparaîtrait en particulier pertinent de procéder à une contextualisation du concept de consommateur mais aussi de problématiser la notion de choix pour parvenir à une meilleure compréhension de l'interaction entre consommation et citoyenneté. Il est nécessaire de dépasser le cliché selon lequel le développement de la première impliquerait le désengagement de l'individu de ses responsabilités civiques et le vouerait à un individualisme notamment répréhensible sur le plan de la morale. Les exemples de l'utilisation de l'eau et du gaz au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle montrent la compatibilité entre désir de consommer et implication dans la vie de la cité. En outre, on serait avisé de se défier des généralisations hâtives basées sur des données nationales. Il conviendrait au contraire de distinguer les pratiques de consommation, y compris dans leur dimension sociale, et leurs incidences dans les villes et dans les campagnes, mais aussi selon l'appartenance de classe.

### Abstract

This article calls for research into the impact of consumption upon civil society from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This perspective would require a contextualisation of the concept of the consumer, and a careful handling of the notion of choice to reach a better understanding of the interaction between consumption and citizenship. It is necessary to go beyond the cliché according to which the development of the latter implies a disengagement of the individual from his civic responsibilities and that it condemns him to the moral impasse of individualism. The examples of the use of gas and water in the 19<sup>th</sup> century show the compatibility between the desire to a consumer and an active citizen. Furthermore, one should be wary of wild generalisations based upon national contexts. To do so, one should look at consuming practices, including in their social dimensions, and to analyse how they vary according to geographical locations and class.

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Frank Trentmann est professeur d'histoire à Birkbeck College, à Londres. Il est spécialiste de l'histoire de la consommation, sur laquelle il a dirigé de nombreux ouvrages collectifs et publié de nombreux articles. Il est l'auteur de *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain*, Oxford University Press, 2009. Cet article est issu d'un projet de recherche financé par le CNRS sur le

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Frank Trentmann is Professor of History at Birkbeck College, London. He is a specialist of the history of consumption, a subject on which he edited numerous volumes and published a significant number of articles and books. He is the author of *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain*, published by Oxford University Press in 2009. This article was written for a research project entitled “Knowledge and civil society”, which was directed by Christophe Charle and Julien Vincent, financed by the CNRS and hosted by the Institut d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine UMR 8066 ENS/CNRS.

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“Civil society” and “consumption” were one of the most successful, dramatically expanding subject areas and topics of debate in the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, generating new social movements and international development directives as well as major research initiatives and entire libraries of books and articles. Looking back from the vantage point of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century on these two booming fields, what is remarkable is how little traffic there has been between them. Most research on civil society has not engaged with work on consumption, and vice versa, resulting in a respectful silence between their respective themes and findings. This becomes even more intriguing if we note that from the outset in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the expansion of ‘civil society’ and of ‘consumption’ as a set of practices and norms were intertwined. What happens if we put these two phenomena and literatures together? Most of the thinking and literature on these two topics has taken diverging paths. My contribution to this workshop is a deliberately wide-ranging and (hopefully) provocative foray across these two sets of literatures to think about points of contact across time, space and different domains of life. The main question is simple: what has been the relationship between the development of consumption and civil society from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup>?

To speak of ‘respectful silence’ is, of course, a generalisation. Still, I would contend it is a useful generalisation, for while the interplay between commerce and civil society has been well researched, the contribution of consumption is less clear. Most work has tended to use consumption in an instrumental fashion, either interested in the use of shopping/boycott as a form of political action or in the role of consumer associations for social politics and reform,<sup>1</sup> but rarely with a broader interest in consumption as such, and how people’s use of things over time has influenced the moral and material shape of civil society.

If referred to at all by recent writers on civil society, consumption has featured as shorthand for selfish materialism eroding public engagement, community solidarity, and deliberative reason. Václav Havel, Jürgen Habermas and Robert Putnam may not

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<sup>1</sup> M. Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action*, New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2003; D. Stolle and M. Micheletti, “What Motivates Political Consumers?”, *Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen*, 4 (2005); M. Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003; M.-E. Chessel, « Catholicisme Social et Éducation du Consommateurs: La Ligue Sociale d'Acheteurs au Coeur des Débats (1908-1910) », in M.-E. Chessel and B. Dumons (eds.), *Catholicisme et Modernisation de la Société Française (1890-1960) (Cahiers du Centre Pierre Léon d'Histoire Économique et Sociale, No. 2)*, Lyon, Centre Pierre Léon d'histoire économique et sociale, 2003, p. 19-39; A. Chatriot, M.-E. Chessel and M. Hilton (eds.), *Au Nom du Consommateur: Consommation et politique en Europe et aux États-Unis au XXe Siècle*, Paris, La Découverte, 2004. For the history of the consumer as an identity and category, see F. Trentmann (ed.) *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*, Oxford and New York, Berg, 2006.

agree on much else, but they certainly share a distaste of what they see as the corrosive force of consumerism. In his influential ‘Power of the Powerless’ in 1978, Havel attacked not just post-totalitarian systems in the East but also ‘the consumer society’ which he blamed for creating a ‘*demoralized person*’ ‘whose identity is dissolved in an amalgam of the accoutrements of mass civilization, and who has no roots in the order of being.’<sup>2</sup> Sweeping moral critiques of consumption have been equally central to recent writings with a communitarian flavour. Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* has been the most influential example of this tradition. Television watching here is a root cause of public disengagement, of turning a society of joiners into one of loners.

These anxieties and ways of looking at media and popular consumption have longer traditions, some in fact reaching back to ancient Greece.<sup>3</sup> The threat of materialism to public life was a core theme in de Tocqueville’s *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835). Bedazzled by the sight of new possessions, citizens stood in danger of losing their self-restraint. The connection between private fortune and public well-being became obscured. De Tocqueville worried it might make them ‘lose sight of the close connection that exists between the private fortune of each and the prosperity of all.’<sup>4</sup> Religion and virtuous consumption, de Tocqueville hoped, might contain self-centred hedonistic materialism, but its potential for eroding public spirit was always present. For Putnam, it was TV which succeeded in turning this potential into reality.

Putnam’s analysis and theory of social capital have attracted widespread debate, and go beyond the concerns of this paper. But what is relevant here is to note how these debates about civil society and public life have avoided any sustained engagement with what we know about consumption. References have remained tied to a moral critique of consumption as ‘inauthentic’ and alienating, drawing on a narrative of the loss of the individual in ‘mass’ civilization as well as echoing older fears of excess and luxury undermining an ‘authentic’ community. The debate on Putnam focused on problems with his data, on the role of women’s emancipation and women’s greater entry into the workforce, and on his use of a distinct cohort shaped by the economic depression, the New Deal, and the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, little has been said about the very limited and problematic approach to consumption. Not only has recent research suggested that for many people watching television can create a sense of public connection (at least amongst British viewers).<sup>6</sup> More generally, the assumption that modern consumption is inherently demoralising, alienating, inauthentic or privatising has effectively been thrown over board by a generation of work in anthropology,

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<sup>2</sup> Vaclav Havel, “Power of the Powerless”, in *Living in Truth*, London, Faber, 1987, p. 62, emphasis in original.

<sup>3</sup> J. Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens*, London, Fontana, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, London, Oxford University Press, 1946, Part II, chapters X – XIII. See also D. Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes Towards the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> See the debate in *American Prospect* (1996).

<sup>6</sup> Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham, *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: beyond the presumption of attention*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

geography, sociology and history.<sup>7</sup> Consumption practices are vital in the creation of self and social identity and inject morality into social life rather than just sucking it out. Consumption involves a diverse set of practices, values, tastes and systems of provision – eating out, gardening, shopping, collecting stuff, using and discarding it. What happens if, instead of turning to a small slice of consumption (TV or the shopping mall) we start out with a broader, more open and neutral question about how in modernity different forms of consumption have impinged on civil society, and vice versa?

In this paper I want to take this question into four directions – one could add many more, but these four themes are what I see as some of the principal issues that deserve exploration and might give some focus to our discussion. They are:

- the need to distinguish ‘civil society’ from liberal democracy, and, instead, to explore diversity as its *modus operandi*.
- conversely, not to automatically associate ‘choice’ and the ‘consumer’ with a liberal market model of individualist utility-maximizers.
- to ask what happens to our understanding of civil society, if we look at consumption not just as a momentary act of purchase but also involving routine practices (imagine taking a bath, eating breakfast, listening to the radio).
- to recognise that in reality any given civil society is composed of multiple diverse cultures of consumption and systems of provision. The unevenness of consumption complicates linear, homogenous narratives of national types of civil society.

Both civil society and a modern culture of consumption came to prominence in the eighteenth century, their parallel expansion being a natural reason to wonder about shared patterns and underlying sources of development. It has been tempting to trace these to a liberal domain of markets and politics. This is misleading. Civil society is not the child of liberal reason, self or governmentality it is often presumed to be in Whiggish narratives of democracy or in Foucauldian critiques of it. Most will be familiar with Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), a paean to a masculine, martial culture of propertied citizens. It would be wrong to see this just as the last gasp of an older vision of republican citizenship and international rivalry that was being phased out by a new, more liberal and secular enlightenment model of rights, reason, and representation. Into the early nineteenth century, civil society in Britain remained predominantly linked to an Anglican and monarchical society. Most texts were pamphlets and sermons celebrating civil society as a well-ordered Christian community with a good magistrate at its helm and instilling in its members a sense of

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<sup>7</sup> The literature now runs into several thousands, see the web-bibliography at [www.bbk.consume/worlddocuments/consumption%20biblio.doc](http://www.bbk.consume/worlddocuments/consumption%20biblio.doc). For points of entry to these debates, see e.g. D. Miller (ed.) *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies*, London, Routledge, 1995; B. Fine and E. Leopold, *The World of Consumption: The Material and Cultural Revisited*, London, Routledge, 2002; V. Zelizer, “Culture and Consumption”, in N. J. Smelser and R. Swedberg (eds.), *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2005; J. Brewer and F. Trentmann (eds.), *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges*, Oxford and New York, Berg, 2006.

social solidarity, respect for family, Church, and King – in short, a bulwark against secular excess, barbarism, and a loss of social obligation.<sup>8</sup>

Texts like Robert Burrow's *Civil Society and Government Vindicated from the Charge of Being Founded on, and Preserved by, Dishonest Arts*, a sermon preached at London's Guildhall in 1723 were typical. Burrow took on Mandeville for his idea that self-interest and vice advanced the public interest. Instead, people had turned to civil society looking for mutual love and social solidarity. God was vital, because He taught members of a civil society how to distinguish between good and evil and how to respect mutual obligations. Defenders of civil society like Burrow may have lacked the philosophical rigour and originality of their contemporary enlightenment giants. Still, they make up by far to the majority of publications on civil society at the time, to judge by the English Short Title Catalogue and the Bodleian index. Moreover, Adam Smith and friends themselves did not use civil society in a liberal fashion, separate from government. Hooker and Locke had initiated the renaissance of civil society in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries with a view of civil society as political society, and subsequent generations continued to associate civil society with government.<sup>9</sup>

What emerges from these texts is a predominant interest in civil society as a safeguard against centralising regimes, not a highway to liberal democracy. It is what unites them with Montesquieu as well as Burke, keen on preserving mixed regimes against the despotism associated with absolute monarchy and democracy. The role of religion here deserves special emphasis. '[R]eligion is the basis of civil society and the source of all good and of all comfort, as Burke put it in his hugely influential *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). The legitimacy of the state vitally depended on established religion. In the last analysis, this was a cultural more than an institutional argument. People, especially people with power, as Burke was keen to stress, needed to know they had to act in trust, and that they ultimately had to account for their actions to a Higher Authority. This hierarchical view of civil society, with its mutual fear of despotic rulers and public opinion whipped up by journalists, could not be more different from a model of liberal democracy or that of deliberative reason with which civil society became associated in the late twentieth century.

To search for a common liberal moment of birth in thinking about the relationship between civil society and consumption, then, would lead us to a historical cul-de-sac. As for civil society, so for consumption: putting on liberal glasses may distort as much as reveal about the dynamics of expansion in the eighteenth century. There can be little doubt about the enormous expansion of material goods, ownership and use in the transatlantic world in the course of the eighteenth century. By its end, the majority of urban Britons (poor as well as rich) were active members in a consumer culture. At the same time, market forces or a focus on the individual utility-maximising shopper are unsatisfactory to explain the scope and substance of this expansion. Transnationally,

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<sup>8</sup> Frank Trentmann, "The problem with civil society: Putting Modern European History Back into Contemporary debate", in M. Glasius, D. Lewis and H. Seckinelgin (eds.), *Exploring Civil Society: Political and Cultural Contexts*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, ch.3.

<sup>9</sup> On Hooker's influence, see Jose Harris's chapter in Jose Harris (ed.), *Civil Society in British History: ideas, identities, institutions*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003.

consumption expanded on the back of slavery and imperial power.<sup>10</sup> At home, a main engine was a new cultural ideal and practice of ‘civility’ and ‘comfort’, boosted by a search for novelty, distinction, and pleasure.

It is in this domain that we may discern symbiotic features between civil society and consumption. Civil society marked a new material civilization, using goods and services to sustain politeness and sentiment, rather than a cold material-less realm of individual reason. In the early eighteenth century ‘civil society’ came to overlap with ‘civility’ and ‘politeness’, both in Britain and in France. French manuals, like that of the Abbé de Bellegarde were translated, offering the middling sort and aristocracy in Britain *Reflexions upon the Politeness of Manners; with Maxims for Civil Society* (1707).<sup>11</sup> In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ‘civilité’ embarks on a major shift in meaning, as Roger Chartier has shown. Until then it had been either used in an older Aristotelian sense to refer to the government of a town or as description of national customs. Now these meanings give way, pulled in a normative universal direction (civilisation) but also into a more specific social direction, paying attention to the behaviour and moral characteristics of individuals and particular groups (conversing in a civil manner).<sup>12</sup>

Consumption was essential to both sides of this double movement. John Millar in his history of *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1778), traced the development of modern ‘refined and polished nations’ to a new ‘taste for refined and elegant amusement’ in which women were assigned a new social space vital for the polite mixing of the sexes and for the uplifting of civilization. Women played the role of cultural traffic wardens whose politeness and capacity for refined conversation prevented luxurious nations from drifting into licentious manners and disorder.

Civility required not just thought but practices that needed to be performed, to assure oneself as much as others of possessing the interior and social qualities.<sup>13</sup> Sociability and politeness became a source of asserting status, a practice and language for keeping well-mannered elites from ill-mannered plebs. As practice and performance, civility and consumption became intimately tied now. Driven by an increasingly prosperous middling sort, civility and consumption, came together as a strategy of social distinction. It is these features (social practice and distinction) rather than any supposedly ‘open’ or liberal qualities that in my view characterise civil society in the eighteenth century.

But there is another shared characteristic which deserves pondering, and that arises from the anti-centralising momentum of 18<sup>th</sup> century civil society thinking.

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<sup>10</sup> K. Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Rendall, “The Progress of Civilization: Women, Gender, and Enlightened Perspectives on Civil Society c. 1750-1800”, in Karen Hagemann, Sonya Michel and Gunilla Budde (eds.), *Civil Society, Public Space and Gender Justice. Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, Oxford, Berghahn, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> R. Chartier, “Civilité”, in R. Reichardt and E. Schmitt (eds.), *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680-1820*, München, R. Oldenbourg, 1986, p. 7-50.

<sup>13</sup> John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, London, HarperCollins, 1997; Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*, New Haven, Conn, Yale University Press, 1998.

Clearly, these (mainly) Anglican defenders of Church and King were not pluralists and multiculturalists in the current sense. Still, underneath their commitment to hierarchy and a sense of mutual obligations, there was a recognition of the diversity of social relations and practices that needed to be maintained against drives for uniformity. Hence, civil society authors' instinctive dislike of religious fanatics and governments with universal ambitions. Fanatics and atheists threatened to erase the space between the Earthly City and the City of God.<sup>14</sup> Absolute monarchs threatened to eliminate the space for aristocratic parlements and other councils. In brief, civil society was opposed to streamlining and to totalising projects. While never inclusive in a democratic fashion, it respected and legitimated spaces of difference.

If we look at consumption not only in terms of objects or purchase but also as a set of practices (eating, washing, collecting, displaying, having tea parties), we can see why this willingness to live with difference might matter. The 18<sup>th</sup> century involved an expanding space of material culture, and the different uses and performances of objects. Historians argue about how to date this process precisely, and to what degree (if any) British and North-West European societies were ahead of the material advances enjoyed by urban populations along the Asian coast. Quantitative inquiries, however, should not distract from what is a very fundamental qualitative shift: consumption came with an unstoppable flow of new habits and routines – from using particular cutlery for different parts of the meal to domestic rituals of tea-drinking. If civil society recognised the virtue of diversity in the social and political realm, consumption promoted the diversity of social practice. Civil society was a new material civilisation. The slippage in the 18<sup>th</sup> century between 'civil society', 'civilization' and 'civilising', between civilité and honnête, civility and politeness, in 18<sup>th</sup> century culture should therefore not be surprising. There is no need, however, to discuss this overlap only within an intellectual framework concerned with conjectural history and progressive stages of development, or in terms of social discipline as in Norbert Elias' account of the 'civilising moment'. 'Civilising' forms of consumption also meant expanding networks of social practices that diversified everyday life. In this diversification of practices we may discern the material foundations for what Ernest Gellner called 'modular man'.

So far I have argued against seeing civil society and consumption as part of an unfolding liberal regime of rights, markets, and reason. As I hope should be clear from the above, we are dealing not with a rights-based individual or questions of individual interest (in the economic sense) but about performing individuals engaged in social practices aimed at achieving civility. Civility, like consumption, required and created competencies – the culture of sentiment, for example, required a particular form of reading and conversing about the new novel; eating changes with the incorporation of increasingly diversified cutlery, cups, and glasses. This may be good enough for the eighteenth century, but it might not shake a convinced liberal critic, who might see it purely as a small shift in periodisation. After all, in the nineteenth century liberalism and a liberal market system of commodities, land, and labour became dominant, such a

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<sup>14</sup> Dominique Colas D., *Le Glaive et le fléau : Généalogie de la société civile et du fanatisme*, Paris, Grasset, 1992.

critic might retort. Let me therefore come here to a second exercise in historical retrieval, one concerning ‘the consumer’ and ‘choice’. Such has been the influence of neoliberalism on our vocabulary and imagination that these terms have almost naturally acquired the meaning associated with how economists and marketers view individual shoppers. There are two responses to this. First, anthropologists and geographers have shown that shopping is much more than what many economists or marketers may think, involving sociality and moral considerations.<sup>15</sup> Second, and this is what I wish to explore here, we can ask about the historically specific contexts and traditions which helped to establish ‘the consumer’ and ‘choice’ and gave them legitimacy over time.

Most of the confusion or misunderstanding derives from a simple mistake made by most writers in the social sciences and humanities. They have used ‘the consumer’ and ‘choice’ as an apparently universal, ahistorical unit of analysis, somehow accepting as unchanging the liberal content given to these in recent neoclassical economics. Because these have become dominant ways of viewing recently, however, does not mean that they must always been, nor that current usage may not have become grafted onto quite different foundations. Instead we need to ask what ‘the consumer’ and ‘choice’ meant in different historical contexts.

As I have shown at greater length elsewhere, ‘the consumer’ was virtually absent from eighteenth century societies. The consumer was a creation of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Before then, people were merchants or peasants, wives, artisans, the elderly or the mob, but they did not talk of themselves or others as consumers. A shift occurred in the course of the nineteenth century, beginning with Britain and the United States, and later also in France, Germany, and other societies. Significantly, it was particular political traditions and political contexts that made groups stand up and adopt the name of consumers. In Britain and the United States, radical and liberal traditions pushed the consumer to the forefront in conflicts between state and civil society. This is the story of free traders and anti-slavery campaigners appealing to ‘the consumer’ as an embodiment of the public interest and humanity against ‘vested interests’, the producers and slave-owners and traders protected by the state.

Interestingly, it was in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century France, not its commercially more advanced neighbour Britain, that liberal political economists around Frédéric Bastiat began to celebrate ‘the consumer’ in a call for *laissez-faire*. ‘We must learn to look at everything from the point of view of the consumer’, were Bastiat’s famous last words on his deathbed in 1850. In Britain, by contrast, John Stuart Mill condemned the *libre échangistes*’ idea of the market and property as natural system. Consumers indeed needed to be protected against monopolists but to make the consumer and free markets

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<sup>15</sup> D. Miller, P. Jackson, N. Thrift, B. Holbrook and M. Rowlands (eds.), *Shopping, Place and Identity*, London, Routledge, 1998; D. Miller, *The Dialectics of Shopping*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001. C. Barnett, P. Cloke, N. Clarke and A. Malpass, “Consuming Ethics: Articulating the Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption”, *Antipode*, 37, 1 (2005), p. 23-45.

<sup>16</sup> F. Trentmann, “The Modern Genealogy of the Consumer: Meanings, Knowledge, and Identities”, in J. Brewer and F. Trentmann (eds.), *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges*, Oxford and New York, Berg, 2006, p. 19-69, repr. S. Garon and P. L. Maclachlan (eds.), *The Ambivalent Consumer: Questioning Consumption in East Asia and the West*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2006.

a maxim of political economy, let alone of policy, was an alien, even distasteful thought to Mill and colleagues.<sup>17</sup>

But, equally if not more important than these conflicts over trade policy, were local battles over gas and water. These local conflicts are fascinating because they offer a way into an altogether different world of consumption and politics from that associated with the department store and the individual shopper. In battles over London water in the second half of the nineteenth century, ‘the consumer’ initially stood for male property-owning local taxpayers – not all endusers. The object and service in question – water – likewise bore no resemblance to the average commodity. Not only was there no market in water – different parts of London were in the hands of different private monopolies. What consumers paid was also based on the value of their home, not on the volume of water they consumed – an arrangement which continues to dominate in Britain to this day, where only a minority of private users pay by meter. Finally, when ‘consumer defence leagues’ began to agitate they did not do so only with material benefits in mind but demanded rights, accountability, and even formal representation – some called for a ‘water parliament’. Here is an example as good as any of how domains of consumption created nodes of public engagement, advancing a sense of civic entitlement and commitment, rather than necessarily promoting a privatised sense of self and detachment from public life. New domestic consumption technologies, practices, and sensibilities of private comfort and cleanliness (Victorian London was known as the WC capital of the world; the spread of bathrooms in middle class homes) spilled over into public life, widening the terrain of politics.

The battles for water are also a reminder of the continuing importance of non-private consumption – in this case, especially that by commercial consumers. In current parlance, and largely reflecting the ubiquity of recent liberal economic language, the consumer is instinctively taken to be a private purchaser and end-user. When we talk of the history or historiography of ‘consumption’, we don’t usually mean the consumption of coal by industrial firms, the use of water in agriculture or the consumption of food and orange juice in hospitals. In recent years, one main trend in consumption studies, however, has been to reintegrate work, production, and public services into the analysis. There are advantages but also disadvantages of treating work and consumption in separate panels.

Certainly, there is no inherent reason to separate private end-users from public and commercial consumers. Indeed, the one political economist who decided to accord consumption a special section in the first half of the nineteenth century, Jean Baptiste Say, did so by deliberately including the ‘reproductive consumption’ of goods in factories in his *Traité d’ économie politique*.<sup>18</sup> In Britain, on the eve of the First World War, the leading Free Trader and chemical industrialist Alfred Mond, defended the consumer as ‘the national interest’ that included industrial consumers of cheap raw materials as well as private consumers of cheap food. In Germany, as late as the 1920s,

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<sup>17</sup> As Donald Winch has shown, this disagreement between Mill, Cairnes and the French school had its roots in a disagreement about the artificial as opposed to the natural nature of monopoly (such as landed property) and the resulting implications for what was a fair or naturally justified price, and what a legitimate or illegitimate form of state intervention; Donald Winch, “The Problematic Status of the Consumer in Orthodox Economic Thought”, in Trentmann, *Making of the Consumer*, *op. cit.*, p. 31-51.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Baptiste Say, *Traité d’ économie politique*, Paris, Antoine-Augustin Renouard, 1814, III, chap. 2.

the big heavy industries used the language of the consumer to legitimise their seats on corporatist policy councils.

But the use of the consumer to renegotiate the boundaries between civil society and state in radical and progressive traditions in Britain and America were not the only pathway to its growing social and political significance. The strength of rival traditions and identities (production in France; land and production in Germany and Austria) inhibited a similar political appropriation of the consumer as a representative of a public interest; again, we can only note here how in late nineteenth-century France Charles Gide and the cooperative movement highlighted the use and recycling of objects, not just price and purchase. In the Central Powers it was through the orbit of state and nation that the consumer acquired a higher profile. Not surprisingly, it was the nationalist project of war which gave the consumer its breakthrough via the state-sponsored establishment of consumer committees to preserve national resources.

While ‘the consumer’, then, could appear waving different political flags, it is important to recognise its broadly positive contribution to civil society and citizenship in liberal commercial societies confronting a new world of abundance. This is especially true for Britain and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such has been the communitarian or republican critique of ‘choice’ and ‘the consumer’ in recent years, that it has become natural to view consumer and citizen as polar opposite identities and orientations, one favouring personal pleasure the other public commitment.

Radicals, liberals, and feminists at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries would have been baffled by this dogmatic divide. Women demanding the suffrage in Britain and the United States pointed to their competencies as family shoppers to call in their rights as voters and citizens – did they not vote daily with their purse in the marketplace? By identifying consumers with the public interest, moreover, women could rally to causes like Free Trade as proto-citizens; they might have been formally excluded from the vote, but as housewives and payers of indirect taxes they were indirectly part of the political nation. The cooperative movement – the most popular social movement before the First World War – stressed how, by socialising consumers in the art of civil society in meetings, elections, committees etc., it was nursing them for citizenship. Finally, progressive radicals like J. A. Hobson invoked a ‘citizen-consumer’, a person who benefited from the cheapness made possible by Free Trade not by becoming self-interested but by developing higher wants and learning to give social and ethical thought to the conditions of production.

This last position has interested me for some time. Consumption here becomes a source of social solidarity across time and space. It is not the invisible hand but individuals’ consciousness and involvement with their community and those around them that is seen to steer industrial civilisation upwards – consumers would prefer high-quality goods produced by workers benefiting from a fair wage. There were many dilemmas which Hobson side-stepped here – higher wants and quality for one person need not be the same for others; social, ethical and international considerations do not always coincide. Still, what is intriguing is that we are now dealing with champions of the consumer as a virtuous member of civil society, someone who can be trusted

(indeed needs to be trusted, given Hobson's diagnosis of 'underconsumption') to act in the public interest. More 'better' consumption would strengthen the bonds of civil society, not result in excess and disorder associated with a lack of self-restraint and hedonistic display in older critiques of luxury and popular indulgence.

The career of 'choice' similarly reveals the mixture of different ideas and practices that came together as consumption expanded its grip on ever more parts of private and public life. In part the rise of 'choice' is about the increasingly vocal and aggressive role of advertisers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century promising consumers guidance in making choices. But it also registers the activity of social movements and political thinkers at the time turning to choice as a mechanism of creating mature, reflective and engaged citizens.

American historians have recently retrieved the institutional and political dimensions of an advancing citizen-consumer in the era of the New Deal – and its subsequent displacement by a purchaser-consumer. The New Deal state encouraged housewives to expose profiteering and to secure 'fair prices'.<sup>19</sup> The ethical reevaluation of choice was an important source of this vigorous embrace of the consumer as citizen. Hazel Kyrk and the home economics movement looked to choice as a principal mechanism for training mature citizens. Kyrk had little sympathy (or patience) with a mathematical, neo-classical understanding of the individual as someone maximising utility – her first, prize-winning *Theory of Consumption* (1923) began as a demolition job of marginal utility theory, especially of W. S. Jevons. A theory of economics as a mere theory of exchange value, she argued, failed to offer any understanding of the attitudes that shaped choice. Instead of leaving choice to neo-classical economists, however, Kyrk went out to reclaim choice for civic consumption.

The intellectual framework was provided by John Dewey's philosophy of knowledge through practice. Dewey had attacked the 'false psychology' underlying a marginal theory of choice. The idea that knowledge originated in sensations and was composed of cost-benefit calculation, he argued, ignored the influence of habits, customs, and impulses.

The baby does not move to the mother's breast because of calculation of the advantages of warmth and food over against the pains of effort. Nor does the miser seek gold, nor the architect strive to make plans, nor the physician to heal, because of reckonings of comparative advantage and disadvantage. Habit, occupation, furnishes the necessity of forward action in one case as instinct does in the other.<sup>20</sup>

Marginalists got the nature and subject matter of deliberation that preceded choice wrong. 'Deliberation is not calculation of indeterminate future results. The present, not the future, is ours', as Dewey neatly put it. When deliberating about choices, individuals did not calculate future events, but applied memory and experience

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<sup>19</sup> L. Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, New York, Vintage Books, 2004; M. Jacobs, " 'How About Some Meat': The Office of Price Administration, Consumption Politics, and State Building from the Bottom up, 1941-1946", *The Journal of American History*, 84, 3 (1997), p. 910-41; M. Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> J. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*, New York and London, Allen and Unwin, 1922, p. 199 f.

in ‘constructive imaginative forecasts of the future’. Life was all about choosing and developing a reflective habit that helped individuals to make sense of, assess, and order an otherwise messy set of probable actions.

The moral is to develop conscientiousness, ability to judge the significance of what we are doing and to use that judgement in directing what we do, not by means of direct cultivation of something called conscience, or reason, or a faculty of moral knowledge, but by fostering those impulses and habits which experience has shown to make us sensitive, generous, imaginative, impartial in perceiving the tendency of our inchoate dawning activities.

Deliberating choices, then, required people to reflect upon their impulses and habits. ‘Therefore’, Dewey concluded, ‘the important thing is the fostering of those habits and impulses which lead to a broad, just, sympathetic survey of situations.’<sup>21</sup>

From this perspective, choice looks very different from what it has become in contemporary debate, either as an instrument of maximising future satisfaction or as a terrifying ordeal that swamps individuals with too many self-centred decisions and distracts them from a world of values, commitments, and prudential behaviour that (supposedly) lies above the mechanical, narrow level of choice in the marketplace. Choice here rather appears as a life-long opportunity for individuals to practice, revise, and perfect their own habits of reflection, keeping activity alive well-beyond the instant in which a decision was taken. It made and recreated a human self, raising it above the level of animal and machine, for reflection and ‘[i]maginative forethought of the probably consequences of a proposed act keeps that act from sinking below consciousness into routine habit or whimsical brutality. It preserves the meaning of that act alive, and keeps it growing in depth and refinement of meaning.’<sup>22</sup>

It is no coincidence that Dewey became one of the founders of the League for Independent Political Action, a major third party movement set up in 1929, which had consumer power written on its banners. Dewey was no friend of the New Deal. But his view of practical reason, of seeing knowing and doing as one inseparable process, clearly favoured a view of the choosing consumer as someone who by trial and error established ways of coping with experiences and challenges and of developing more enlightened paths of action. It was lack of choice, mindless routines, or rigid hierarchies that stifled this experimental freedom through which individuals attained their humanity. To limit choice was like chaining an individual to a pole of fixed habits or expectations kept in place by others. Put bluntly, to be human was to be a consumer, making moral and personal choices every day of one’s life, outside as much as within the marketplace. For our understanding of the relationship of consumption and civil society, this suggests that critics would do well to recall the creative rationality and critical learning involved in choices in everyday life that is all too easily forgotten in attacks on supposedly mindless or materialist shopping or television watching.<sup>23</sup>

But, not all consumption involves choice. Many (perhaps even most) consumption practices involve unthinking routines – having a shower in the morning,

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<sup>21</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature*, p. 207

<sup>22</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature*, p. 208.

<sup>23</sup> It can also be argued that, far from dumbing down, complex soaps and game shows enhance intelligence, see Steven Johnson, *Everything that is Bad is Good For You!*, London, Allen Lane, 2005.

drinking coffee with sugar (or without), having the radio on whilst cooking, etc. Dewey's call for conscientiousness may be all very well, but there are entire realms of everyday consumption which lie outside an individual's ability to judge their significance and steer behaviour in a direction based on that judgement or at least involve highly complex and often distant systems – to be able to judge the significance of flushing a toilet or running an air-conditioner would require considerable engineering and environmental knowledge about complex systems of provision. This is one reason why changing habits is so difficult. We still know little about how routines emerge, evolve, or disappear.<sup>24</sup> The following notes are therefore little more than suggestive forays, but this should not make them appear flippant or of marginal significance. If consumption impinges on civil society, then, routine practices deserve far greater attention than they have been accorded. Not only do routine consumption practices continue to be a major proportion of how people spent their time and money in affluent societies – people spent more on routine travel than on fashion, more on the home, utilities and home maintenance than on entertainment. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the proportion of the former over the latter would have been even higher. Routine consumption is also a major way in which individuals are positioned and connected to society and their environment. In short, to discuss how consumption influences civil society means we cannot only look at places or activities that people deliberately choose (e.g. the department store)<sup>25</sup> but also at those practices in which people are bound up routinely and that have a life and rhythm of their own (eating, washing, gardening, exercising and so forth).

A short thought experiment to illustrate what is at stake

Perhaps the department store in fin-de-siècle London and Paris did open up public spaces for women,<sup>26</sup> but what if other developments in routine consumption, like the new water and energy use made possible by urban networks, led to a simultaneous narrowing or rearrangement of social spaces at the same time? One of the big transformations in everyday life of most people in British, French and European cities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the arrival of constant, running water, piped into their homes or at least into their courtyards by an urban water and sewage network. The watermark of civilisation literally changed. Different towns and social groups became connected at different speeds, but there can be little doubt about the fundamental change in everyday consumption levels, routines, and sensibilities. This urban network brought benefits of comfort and public health. But it also disrupted established social relations and practices. An aspect of consumption that had been out in the open, involving a whole series of human relations and contacts – fetching water, paying a water carrier, putting out nightsoil for collection – became hidden away in urban networks, a virtually invisible aspect of daily life. Of course, water could still become a subject of controversy and conflict but this was now limited to periods of

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<sup>24</sup> An interesting way into these processes is E. Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organisation of Normality*, Oxford, Berg, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Of course, shopping can also develop into a routine. What I am arguing against here is a narrow and selective focus on commodity culture as representative of all consumption, in which retailing and the expansion of public spaces via the commercial development of shopping streets and department stores take centre stage.

<sup>26</sup> E. D. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women and the Making of London's West End*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2001.

drought, scarcity, and environmental disaster or debates about prices. For the most part, water is taken for granted.

Arguably, in addition to making for invisibility, the transformation of water systems is emblematic of a more general privatising shift in consumption practices made possible by modern networks. Public authorities played their role in preaching and enforcing new habits of washing, as the French school teachers so wonderfully charted by Jean-Pierre Goubert in his *Conquête de l'eau*. But these strictures ultimately aimed at creating private cultures of cleanliness. It makes possible private baths and facilitates gardening. The closure of the few surviving public baths in Britain in the 1970s represent the tail-point of this shift in sociability from public to private and familial. But it was already well under way in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when going to a public bath became a stigma of class and poverty. If civil society depends on engagement, concern, and connections across a community, perhaps we have here a development in routine consumption that runs in the opposite direction? More generally, the growing importance of the private home and of home-ownership, of suburbanisation and of commuting, points to the ambivalent nature of the civilising moment associated with consumption. In her study of the United States, Lizabeth Cohen shows how after the Second World War zoned housing communities, the spread of cars, and the rise of out-of-town malls led to a fragmentation of community, reciprocity and public space.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, networks did not only have a privatising momentum. Gas and electricity enabled public lighting, opening up more areas and time-periods to public use. My main point here is to caution against easy generalisation about whether consumption has been good or bad for civil society. Consumption involves diverse practices and they do not all follow the same trajectory. What I would argue, however, is that our understanding has been too narrowly based on certain, select segments of commercial consumer culture (especially retailing) and has altogether ignored large domains of consumption and their impact on civil society. Consumption is more than commodification. It is a set of practices, about how things are put to use. Putting aspects of routine consumption back into the debate about civil society would further show the limits of a liberal approach. It would also reveal some of the processes by which individuals became routinized into 'civilised' life.

I want to conclude with a final complication. We have already broken down consumption into a diversity of practices, but so far the discussion of civil society has proceeded mainly with reference to entire national societies. The national has been the preferred level of comparison between different civil societies.<sup>28</sup> In one sense this makes sense. There are distinct national intellectual and political traditions, and it would be foolish to ignore these. However, if we place consumption and civil society in the same framework, such national units quickly become problematic – for France and

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<sup>27</sup> L. Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, New York, Vintage Books, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> I am guilty as much as any, having contributed to such national comparisons, F. Trentmann (ed) *Paradoxes of Civil Society: New Perspectives on Modern German and British History*, Oxford, Berghahn, 2003, rev. edn, though note the inclusion of regional case studies.

Britain certainly in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and, it could be argued, even as late as the 1960s. In many rural parts of Western Europe, running water and sewage connection did not arrive until then. Alongside urban/rural divides, there were profound social divides – consumption is partly about the creation of new social classes. But we must also not forget the parallel systems of provision and standards of civilisation that co-existed in towns with fairly similar standards of living – indeed, sometimes even within the same town. In Paris in 1900, for example, not even 18% of dwellings were connected to the water supply (90% in London). At this time in Munich only a quarter of all upper class households had a bathroom – less than half of lower class households had access to a WC toilet (frequently shared or outside).<sup>29</sup> Even in London – the water closest capital of the world – a middle class couple like the Hammonds, the progressives famous for their pioneering social histories like *the Village Labourer*, only installed two bathrooms and water closets in their Highgate home around the time of the First World War.<sup>30</sup> Clearly, for many middle class people and their guests, civil society still included earth closets.

Consumption involved people in a variety of relationships between civil society, economy, and government. In Britain, by 1870 just 60% of all water supply systems were in municipal hands. By 1914 it reached 80%. In France, three quarters of communes controlled their own system at that time. In some cities, municipal and private co-existed – in Berlin in the 1920s, the main municipal undertaking still faced a private firm in neighbouring Charlottenburg. Looking back from the vantage point of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, in which either a few private monopolies or a vast range of providers of all sorts and sizes co-exist in the European utility sector, the era of municipalisation looks more like a temporary extreme than an inherent, inexorable force of Progress. Put differently, accounts of civil society may want to place more emphasis on the creative arrangements and overlap between civil society, town government and the market. For most periods civil societies evolved without recourse to local or central government to deliver basic goods. They worked with private investors and companies. This was not just a failure of imagination or for reasons of selfish middle class interests. As Christopher Hamlin's case studies suggest, local debates about public improvements and about private or public control drew on a range of factors and were debated in a pragmatic manner that fits uneasily the presumed picture of an ideological contrast between state and market. In towns like Cheltenham many officials and townsmen were also stockholders in the private company.<sup>31</sup> Civic loyalties were complex. Whether civilisation was best advanced by private enterprise or by municipal control was a question without a foregone conclusion. If we imagine each national society as composed of a mosaic of different arrangements, it will be clear how difficult it is to connect the local micro-level to that of a macro account of 'civil society' in Britain and France. What such attention to uneven or multiple co-existing arrangements in local communities can do, however, is to introduce nuances to what are often seen to be contrasting national traditions based on different schools of thought.

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<sup>29</sup> C. Zimmerman, *Von der Wohnungsfrage zur Wohnungspolitik*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats*, Aldershot, Gregg Revivals, 1993, p. 206.

<sup>31</sup> C. Hamlin, "Muddling in Bumbledom: On the Enormity of Large Sanitary Improvements in Four British Towns, 1855-1885", *Victorian Studies*, 32 (1988), p. 55-83.

In this paper I have tried to move consumption and civil society into a shared frame of analysis. In the recent revival of civil society in 1970s central Europe as well as in the United States and Britain since, consumption has mainly appeared as a problem, supposedly pulling citizens from the public arena where they belong into a self-satisfied, standardised and inauthentic world of private pleasure. Such a view misses much what is most interesting about consumption and historically significant for the evolution of civil society. There are good reasons why consumption and civil society expanded together in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. I have suggested a certain affinity between the two as a set of practice favouring diverse forms of behaviour and performance and involving more and more things. Civil society and material civilization are conjoined. I have also argued against reducing the two phenomena to a liberal model of self, deliberation, and economic interest. The consumer was not just a creature of the market but fathered by civil society. Its evolution, like that of civil society, has followed different trajectories, and, instead of resorting to some abstract notion of economic reasoning or liberal governmentality, it might be more profitable to anchor consumption and choice in particular forms of local reasoning. The continuing significance of routine consumption, finally, suggests that part of the confusion deriving from a liberal narrative of civil society and consumption may reflect a problematic starting point of human agency. One tradition handed down from the enlightenment is to think of the human self and reason in philosophical terms, as if divorced from the material world. A view of consumption as practice draws attention to the way in which things and people come together in practices seeking to accomplish certain tasks. In other words, things are as important in the orchestration of such practices as people. Becoming ‘civil’ always involved material things and uses. If there is one contribution that consumption can bring to the debate about civil society, it may be that it will lead us away from a lofty liberal conception of individual agency and reasoning to a more grounded view of humans and things as co-evolving actors in the drama of material civilisation.