

Cultures of Consumption

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On Wednesday 27th June I went to see the closing display from the ESRC funded five year programme, Cultures of Consumption. For anyone interested in consumption studies there is a huge amount of new research represented here, which can be accessed at <http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/> As the director Frank Trentmann noted, at one stage they had 85 researchers engaged. If there was a single dominant theme to the programme it was re-thinking the relationship between the consumer and the citizen. With many arguments to suggest that the presumed antagonism between these two aspects of the modern individual, with the citizen being replaced by the consumer, is much too simple. In many instances involvement in consumption has led to greater consciousness of the rights and political involvement associated with citizenship. As usual in such programme the highlights came from research that contradicts journalistic and academic presumptions. For example we heard evidence that international retailing firms find that they have to raise their standards to meet Chinese consumers who are more demanding than those in other areas. Another paper demonstrated that people have extended family meals in the UK just as much now as in the 1970s (though migrating from dinner table to kitchen table) and that in terms of food behaviour generally there is no evidence for global convergence e.g. becoming more like the US. A point supported by one of the 'celebrity' discussants Sir Terry Leahy the CEO of Tesco who discussed the diversification of Tesco in different markets. One presentation dealt with the increasing use by people of the equity represented by their properties, but that this tended to be used for house extensions or the costs of caring for others rather than hedonistic holidays. Another showed we are more conservative and less reliant on new media for news than is sometimes suggested.

The range of projects varied from understanding the forces that led to the fashion developments of 1960's London, the spread of Italian coffee, the consumption of the mild drug Khat, the meanings

associated with chicken and sugar along the food commodity chain, re-thinking the place of design in material culture, the evidence that the elderly are just as consumer focused as any other age cohort, the housewife in early modern rural England, the use of the internet in accessing medical services and information, the historic formation of the water consumer, a philosophical engagement with the idea of alternative hedonism, transnational histories of the consumption and production of chewing gum, the history of seed culture, and children's relationship to fashion consumption. I have probably left some out !

In terms of the event itself there were good and bad lessons. The academics summarised their research in less than five minutes with a limit of a single powerpoint, which given a mainly lay audience was very effective and impressive. What one might call targeted bullet points. On the other hand in order to impress the grant givers it was probably necessary to invite celebrity discussants such as a government minister, the head of the consumer association, the head of a branding company and the aforementioned head of Tesco. But this ended up as a very old fashion discussion about how much we should trust the market which blithely ignored, and in effect thereby devalued, the much more nuanced academic research. However, I guess this was a pretty accurate reflection of the actual fate of most of our research, which in my experience does have an impact, but mainly in the longer term through our role in education, rather than, as we would sometimes wish, more immediately within the corridors of power.