

## “Consumer Culture” by Roberta Sassatelli

**Date :** September 24, 2007

*Daniel Miller, Anthropology, UCL*

In teaching courses about consumption, the nearest thing I have employed to textbooks are materials that were written over a decade ago. I used *Acknowledging Consumption*, my own edited survey of disciplinary perspectives and Don Slater's *Consumer Culture and Modernity* a summary of more sociological debates. None of the many books that have emerged since then seemed to me very satisfactory as replacement textbook materials. Indeed I think many of these give the very term textbook a bad name. You feel they are written under pressure from publishers, an excuse for a relatively superficial and simplifying encounter with the material. Something done on the side in between the authors real research. Or alternatively they are used to make some particular point, promoting the authors own research under the guise of a textbook. A thesis with a general chapter stuck at the beginning and the end.

This I think has been radically changed by the publication in 2007 of Roberta Sassatelli's *Consumer Culture* with Sage. This is a model of what a textbook ought to be. Over the past decade the original debates about consumption have been overlaid by a vast amount of detailed research, and it seems unimaginable that a single text could do justice to all of these. To do so would involve as much a commitment to depth as to breadth. I was quite astonished at how well Sassatelli succeeds in balancing the two. It covers a huge amount of ground in its three main sections which are roughly historical, theories of consumer agency and finally the politics of consumption. Each chapter is divided into various themes and in each of these themes she manages to be fair to several different perspectives in turn. Furthermore the bibliography is astonishingly up to date, making full use of studies that were carried out in the last couple of years as well as all the classic works. So the bibliography is excellent. There are at least some references for a vast array of different consumption issues. How we came to be thought of as consumers, each genre of consumption from shopping to gyms, all the various institutional forms

that bear on the consumer society. Yet for all this breadth, this sense of something truly comprehensive, there is far more depth than one could possibly expect given the brief compass in which each approach is considered. Instead of simplifying she manages to bring out the key theoretical and often key problematic elements of each approach and author and some of the debates particularly on classic sociological figures would be entirely suited to original research papers in journals.

Furthermore it is a modest book that does not try and privilege the author's own perspective and work, but strives to be generally fair, though clearly with a cultural bias overall, such that the theme tends to be a highlighting of the diversity of causes and factors that create the consumer society and equally the diversity of its consequences and forms. She has a soft spot for Simmel, but I share that so fully myself, that again I can't see anything negative in that. The density of the engagement works as a textbook thanks to a concern with being gentle to students. There are summaries of each chapter, further readings and some useful diagrams and classifications dotted around each chapter. There is an overall theme. Basically she eschews the simplification of consumption around dichotomies. The study of consumption should not be reduced to either the domination of the masses nor the freedom of the self. Instead each and every topic lends itself to diverse strategies and moralities, which are much better understood as a form of value production. A single book can't do everything, There is certainly room for a more anthropological account that acknowledges the centrality of consumption to regions from Africa through to the Caribbean or East Asia and their consequences for the wider study of consumption. The kind of book Rick Wilk would ideally author. Also it is ultimately impossible to divide discussion of consumption into simple discrete areas, and debates about, for example, the relationship between persons and things come up in many different guises, so that one has the sense the consumption cake could be cut many ways. But I cant see how it would be otherwise.

In the end one feels almost exhausted by the sheer amount of work that has been addressed to consumption especially in the last twenty years, a huge contrast to the periods before. I confess this is one of the reasons why personally I tend to disassociate myself from consumption study per se. today and try to work with alternative areas of material culture studies that I feel have been relatively neglected as the study of consumption grew apace. But consumption is hugely significant whatever one's relationship to material culture studies as a whole. It is the best place from which to consider the consequences of the modern world for the people of the modern world. Where once we tried to put consumption into context, nowadays consumption is the context for pretty much anything we might wish to study. There has been a real need for some high level guide to this now bulky literature that one could really trust and recommend to students. Sassatelli now provides that and has done us all a considerable service thereby. It is a truly impressive example of how a textbook can be a serious work of scholarship and a valuable contribution in its own right. Its not just that I am amazed at how much it covers and at what depth. Ultimately it the book that I would trust to help people digest what we now have discovered about consumption and start from a much more mature and reflective foundation to consider what more we might yet do.