

**Consumption:** Consumption is the way we purchase and use goods that are available on the marketplace. Paradoxically, the *OEC* offers two definitions of consumption that point to the utilization of products and five definitions that point to destruction, evaporation, decay, and waste. This dual nature of consumption is reflected in the literature on the topic. On the one hand, authors such as Naomi Klein (in her *No Logo*, Flamingo, 1999) have written on the cultural alienation that results from industrial consumption, building on the earlier work of Frankfurt School scholars such as Theodor Adorno. On the other hand, students of culture and have focused on how individuals use consumption to signal their identity, resist domination, and gain status. Both approaches are reflected in the research on the relevance of consumption for the study of race and ethnicity. Moreover, this research also focuses on consumption as a site for discrimination. Our discussion centers on the three themes of alienation, resistance, and discrimination, focusing on dominated racial and ethnic groups, and on African-Americans in particular. At the end we will describe a more recent perspective that understands consumption as a site for the definition of collective identity of racial and ethnic groups.

### ***Alienation***

A large literature describes how dominated groups consume to compensate for oppression, exploitation, discrimination and humiliation: consumption offers immediate gratification and inclusion in mainstream society for affluent and not so affluent people. However, consumption also has negative consequences in that it erodes racial and ethnic solidarity and subordinates “uplifting the race” (or group) to private wealth accumulation. In his book *On the Edge: A History of Poor Black Children and Their American Dreams* (Basic, 1993, p. 135), Nightingale offers a dreary account of how in the United States,

inner city black children define social integration by inclusion in the mainstream America mass market and hence compensate for the economic and racial exclusion they face in other parts of their lives. Marketing specialists devise advertising strategies to capitalize on this illusive and ultimately inefficient search for a compensatory identity. They produce images that equate personal worth with conspicuous consumption, and indirectly have devastating effects on the life of the inner city (e.g., the increasing number of clothing-related armed robberies, “sneaker murders,” and the rise of girls’ violence over jewelry. For Cornell West, market forces as threatening the very existence of black civil society as they produce a form of nihilism and meaninglessness (*Race Matters*, Beacon Press, 1993, p. 158-159).

The affluent black middle class as similarly alienated and prone to engage in a desperate quest for status by means of consumption. In his *Black Bourgeoisie* (Free Press, 1957, pp. 229-230), Frazier portrayed the black middle class of the 1940s and 1950s as “making a fetish of material things or physical possessions” to satisfy their longing for recognition and to “seek an escape in delusions involving wealth.” However, “behind the masks,” the black bourgeois struggled with insecurities and frustrations stemming from the futility of efforts to acquire membership in mainstream America, and with self-hatred and guilt for “elevating himself above his fellows.” Today’s “buppies” (upwardly mobile black professionals) are similarly described in the popular press as obsessed by consumption. They strive for career advancement and material wealth (designer wardrobes, elegant houses, furnishings, and fancy cars) to gain an ever-elusive social acceptance, as their white counterparts often remain reluctant to acknowledge their status. As argued by George in his *Buppies, B-boys, BAPs and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul*

*Black Culture* (Harper Collins 1992), consumption leads leads middle class blacks to be doubly alienated, i.e., to be alienated from their own race as well as from the mainstream society, in their pursuit of an ever-elusive integration. And indeed, poor and working class blacks view the blossoming black bourgeoisie as preoccupied with conspicuous consumption, absorbed in egotistical pursuits, and drifting away from “uplifting the race.” (Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men*, Harvard University Press, 2000).

The Frankfurt School’s views on the perils of the “culture industry” and mass consumption has been applied to other racial and ethnic groups. Commodity fetishism is posited to generate “false consciousness” as people embrace the illusion that consumption will bring them fulfillment, just as they remain unaware of the inherent limitations of capitalism. At the same time, consumption and money are seen as intrinsically repressive forces, which precludes the possibility that individuals use them to transform their collective identity and improve their position in the status hierarchy.

### ***Resistance***

Others understands consumption as a site where individuals express resistance and defiance to mainstream society and create and transform the meaning of commodity to suit their own purposes, against the dominant meanings provided to them by the advertising industry. This approach underplays the alienating forces of modern consumer culture and refocuses attention to the polysemous nature of commodities. As described by Paul Willis (in *Common Culture*, Open University Press, 1990), consumer goods are “raw materials” for everyday creativity and consumption is an open-ended activity involving a great deal of interpretive freedom and negotiation rather than passive acquisition.

This perspective frames black consumption as “an active, celebratory process” where transfiguration of meaning is achieved by “blackening” mass-produced goods so as to subvert domination and contest their dominant, “mainstream” meaning (see Gilroy’s *There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack*, Hutchison, 1987, p. 221). Black men and women who bleach their hair shades of blonde nowhere found in nature provide a handy example to this practice. Hip-hop culture, B-Boys and B-Girls rebellion (with their elaborately designed sneakers, gold chains, inverted baseball caps, and rap music) also poignantly illustrate the expressive use of consumption in contemporary black culture. d

In *The Black Atlantic* (Harvard University Press, 1993, chapter 3), Gilroy also focuses on the use of consumption as a means of collective action within the black diaspora. For him, hip-hop culture in particular symbolizes a site of oppositional meaning and collective strength. It is a cultural practice that brings atomized individual consumers together and fosters collective action by generating an alternative public sphere. Thus Gilroy points to the potential link between the black empowerment movement and the mobilizing force of expressive black cultures through consumption. Similarly, in *A Consumer’s Republic* (Knopf, 2003), Cohen offers a historical account of the significance of consumption in the civil rights movement. She underlines that blacks have associated their sense of citizenship with unrestrained access to consumer goods and services from the 1950s onwards. She also shows how the personal experience of indignity (or ‘diss’) in everyday interactions and the political effectiveness of organized boycotts of stores, restaurants and buses in the struggle for desegregation, rendered the sphere of consumption a central scene of a social movement.

### ***Discrimination***

A third perspective on black consumption focuses on consumer discrimination and on the racialization of consumption. It describes how blacks encounter stereotypes (as dangerous, without buying power, etc.) in shopping and how these stereotypes are enacted in the retail sector, often under the guise of security measures. An example is provided by Patricia Williams (in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Harvard University Press, 1991), a distinguished black legal scholar and lawyer, who recalls how she was “buzzed out” of a Benetton store in New York City after the salesperson determined that she was an unpromising client, based on her racial characteristics only. Feagin’s (1992) large-scale study reporting on in-depth interviews with middle class blacks suggests Patricia Williams’ experience is not an isolated event, but is shared by an overwhelming majority of middle class blacks. In fact, the incidence of discrimination is highest in commercial settings such as restaurants, retail stores, hotels, and banks and it takes the form of poor service (or no service), excessive surveillance, or redlining. Consumption is a central site of discrimination and one that is particularly hurtful to blacks, because this discrimination sends the message that they are excluded from the “American dream.”

In this discrimination literature, a number of legal scholars also examine how blacks are taken advantage of in commercial transactions. In particular, Regina Austin (1994) explores how blacks’ labeling as deviant legitimizes de facto limitations on their right to shop and sell freely: “It is assumed that blacks do not earn their money honestly, work for it diligently, or spend it wisely. When blacks have money, they squander it and cannot save it. If blacks are cheated in the course of commercial transactions, it is because they cheat themselves either by being unsophisticated or incompetent consumers or by making it difficult for a decent ethical person to make profit from doing business

with them. As a result, individual entrepreneurs feel perfectly justified in taking advantage of blacks as a means of privately policing or controlling blacks' spending malefactions." (p. 151).

### ***Social Identity***

The social identity approach focuses on how ethnic and racial groups use consumption to define and signal their identity. In defining their identity, individuals must be able to differentiate themselves from others by drawing on criteria of commonality and a sense of shared belonging within their subgroup (see Jenkins, **Social Identity**, Routledge 1996). This internal identification process must be recognized by outsiders for an objectified collective identity to emerge. Consumption plays a crucial role in internal and external definitions of collective identity. Molnar and Lamont (2002) show that 1) cultural producers (here specifically, marketing specialists) identify and define categories of consumers, such as "the black consumer," which categories become objectified and shape the cultural tools available for the formation of collective identities; 2) such cultural producers offer cues and cultural models to people about ways to achieve full social membership; 3) individuals use consumption to signal aspiration to membership in symbolic communities (as citizens, middle class people, etc.); and 4) consumers perform, affirm, and transform the social meaning attributed to specific collective categories (here, what is common to blacks, but also eventually, to other racial and ethnic groups.) The first two points address the social categorization process in the making, i.e. the production of external definitions while the latter two points address the role of consumption in the group identification process, i.e the production of internal definitions of collective identity.

Consumption is a particularly felicitous point of departure for examining the symbolic aspects of collective identity beyond the concern for the dynamic between internal and external processes. Indeed, its symbolic efficacy in “identity work” does not require that individuals be connected through networks and engage in face-to-face contact: It can operate either at the level of bounded subcultures, or at the level of widely-shared cultural structure that exist beyond the enactment of specific interpersonal typification or ties. Consumption thus constitutes a useful lens for understanding how membership is acquired in symbolic communities (see Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men*, Harvard University Press, 2000).

MICHELE LAMONT

VIRAG MOLNAR

**Readings:**

"A Nation of Thieves": Securing Black People's Right to Shop and to Sell in White America' by Regina Austin (*Utah Law Review*, 1993, 1: 147-177), which shows how blacks continue to be discriminated against in the real of buying and selling goods and services.

"The Continuing Significance of Race: Anti-black Discrimination in Public Places." By Joe R. Feagin (*American Sociological Review*, 56 (February 1991): 101-116) contests the widely held view that contemporary black middle-class life is substantially free of discrimination and shows that blacks remain vulnerable targets in public accommodations (large stores, restaurants) and other public places.

"Social Categorization and Group Identification: How African Americans Shape their Collective Identity Through Consumption." By Virág Molnár and Michele Lamont. *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Demand and Its Role in Innovation*, edited by Kenneth Green, Andrew McMeekin, Mark Tomlinson and Viven Walsh (Manchester University Press, 2002) presents the social identity perspective and contrasts it with the alienation, resistance, and discrimination perspectives.

*Consumer Culture and Modernity* by Don Slater (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997) surveys theories of consumer culture in relation to the rise of modernity. It investigates among other things the emergence of commercial society, the relation between needs and social structures, the reproduction of social order, prosperity and progress, and changing identities in the post-traditional world.

*Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young* by Paul Willis (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990) Willis views consumer goods as instruments that can be employed to express resistance and defiance to mainstream society. Through use people can transform the meaning of commodities thereby counteracting the alienating force of modern mass consumer culture.