

## An Impressionistic Summary of Discussions at the Berlin Workshop

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### The Matrix

	<b>Consumption</b>	<b>Consumer</b>
<b>Society</b>	<i>Consumption Society</i>	<i>Consumer Society</i>
<b>Culture</b>	<i>Consumption Culture</i>	<i>Consumer Culture</i>

The matrix composed by the organisers of the workshop seemed somewhat 'positivistic' to some participants. Pauline Maclaran emphasized the importance of *interdependencies* between the boxes while the matrix on the contrary highlights separation and compartmentalisation: "To me, the four elements of the matrix intertwine in ways this matrix fails to convey."

In addition she contested the symbolic approach in general and believes there is a need to re-situate consumption within the totality of production forces. "In reality you have to be involved in production to be a consumer in the first place", she said: "And if you don't have money you are a flawed consumer." In her opinion neglecting the production sphere has a tendency to stifle critique by making consumers heroic figures.

Detlev Zwick agreed that Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) tends to ignore political economy while Søren Askegaard pointed out that CCT researchers actually also study the logic that prevents political action and the fact that "Utopia has gone to the marketplace".

### Lost in Translation?

Matthias Bode focused on the matrix as an analysing tool – and a tool that to a great extent makes sense of cultural phenomena. But the consequences might be that by looking at people through this matrix research(ers) in fact create(s) consumers everywhere.

Diego Rinallo underpinned this perspective by referring to his own study of "spiritual consumption" where the participants themselves did not see their religious or spiritual agency as consumption at all: "Also in cases where consumers do not perceive their actions as consumption we put these labels on them". Thereby researchers contribute to a discourse that defines people and behaviour as consumers and consumption though their own notion is that they are in a consumption-free zone.

James Fitchett pointed out that the consumption field is submitted to and maybe also suffers from a lot of translations - not only in the linguistic sense from one country to another (for instance Jean Baudrillard's consumer society concept) but also from disciplines. Interdisciplinarity is very fruitful but also apt to cause confusion: "At a distance it appears that we talk about the same thing. But when we come closer it fragments into a lot of different things....." And he agreed that 'the object' – understood as *reactions* and also political etc. forces – to a certain extent is hidden from this matrix.

### **Objects as object...**

Detlev Zwick stressed that what characterises Baudrillard's Consumer Society more than anything is that consumption is *not* linked with the object: "Modern consumption is characterized by mass-produced objects that do not matter as objects. They are just sign carriers." Søren Askegaard argued that this also means "that the object can be seen as the vehicle that makes the aspects in the matrix visible and mediates them from one column to the next." James was not inclined to subscribe to the notion that Baudrillard tried to construct a semiotic ontological object: "*We* are the objects that are also subjects: Objects with agency' - that is human beings."

Objects are of course crucial to the consumption society where everything per definition is mediated through objects. And this rather philosophical discussion on objects tended to pop up occasionally.

Olga Kravets presented - presumably because of her Russian background - a refreshingly new aspect. Olga talked about objectification in relation to Russian constructivism an avant-garde movement shortly after the revolution. Constructivism celebrated the liberation of objects from commoditisation and capitalism. Objects were no longer embedded in alienation and false consciousness – objects had changed from being enemies to become man's best friend. So constructivism is a celebration of a new 'genuine' object and it focuses on the sheer materiality of it - its colour, form and texture – because from now on objects are what they seem to be – no evil inside. ( [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constructivism \(art\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constructivism_(art)) )

Dominik Schrage recalled Kant's concept of the 'Ding an sich' (the-thing-in-itself) (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20123973?cookieSet=1>): "The object as such. . . . we can never really grasp it ...only its materiality...its representations... and may be that is what we call its 'agency'?" And James Fitchett philosophised further: "Objects are beyond our ability, but never the less very present in our lives....only mediated. In science fiction we often meet the reverse subject-object relation: The object has allured the subject to believe it has agency. But why on earth should objects want agency? The thought is a sign of how far our 'objectification' is!" Adam Arvidsson seized the philosophical science fiction track and presented a somewhat spooky vision of future eco-friendly production: "Objectification is a founding human condition – no matter what society we inhabit. But recycling will change this basic existentialistic dogma because objects will also become subjects.... for example when a pair of old sandals "walks" into production and are transformed to .... something else. " "That will be true commodity fetishism", was Dominik's only comment – and the only comment at all.

### **Contextualise the contexts!**

The above phrase was coined by Søren Askegaard and he did repeat it several times: "Contextualise the contexts!" The 'second cultural turn' has put more emphasis on the power structures, he said, and therefore research should be more interested in the macro structures. Not primarily to provide sociological theorising. But to provide useful perspectives on consumers' lived experiences. This call for cross disciplinary collaborations and openness: "We shall not be afraid to tread other domains", Søren said and as an example he mentioned that his own research group has hired post docs from anthropology because of their ability to observe people's behaviour and to analyse what they see in ways that replenish traditional consumer research.

Alan Bradshaw was also deeply preoccupied with "contextualising the contexts" – especially re-constructing the relation between consumption and production and re-situate consumption in the broader context of political economy. But Alan also focused on problems and limitations regarding common methods within consumer culture research (first and foremost interviews): "To raise issues like for example 'false consciousness' is difficult with our research methods (interviews) which the Hummer case bears witness to." (Marius Lüdicke has interviewed Hummer owners in the USA, and one astounding finding in his study is that Hummer owners apparently perceive themselves as environmentalists and see Hummer as a symbol of concern for environmental problems!)

Alan sees a convergence with neo-liberalism within consumption studies: "The terms that are used to hail consumption and principles of business are applied on areas that are not commodified. This confirms liberalist ways of thinking." And with a reference to Judith Butler's "Frames of War" he called these practices "embellishment of the object".

[http://www.amazon.com/Frames-War-When-Life-Grievable/dp/1844673332/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1270572729&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Frames-War-When-Life-Grievable/dp/1844673332/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1270572729&sr=1-1)

Søren on the other hand thought it might be fruitful for Marxists to experience that people actually live tolerable lives in their alienated existence – and interviews and observations can provide this information.

Dominik Schrage argued that 'lived experience' should not be seen as having nothing to do with 'structures'.

Like Alan Detlev also had a problem with the label 'Consumer Culture' and wanted a broader perspective and a connection to the macro perspective. "We seem to align consumer society with autonomy.", he said and Alan summarised that "Consumption can either be seen as emancipating (from a neo-liberal point of view) or as false consciousness and ideology (as critical theory has done)."

Matthias thought that to many researchers within this field the discrepancy is 'lived experience': "We have different audiences and different stakeholders. I work sometimes critical and sometimes in collaboration with businesses".

"And my students will in fact become better capitalists if I 'bring in' political economy", Detlev said ironically.

## **A new Age of Enlightenment**

The 'Hummer case' at one end of the spectrum is a striking example that consumption today often works in mysterious ways and makes "contextualising the contexts" topical. At the other end of the spectrum is the apparently unlimited application of consumer/consumption terms on spheres, behaviour and agency that people do not perceive as consumption. Both political consumption – which is what the Hummer consumers are exercising the way they see it – and practises that people experience as definitely not consumption – or even anti-consumption – calls for an elaborated consumer concept.

Per: "It seems we need a new concept of the 'post-consumer'. We tend to use the 'citizen-concept' to describe political consumption for instance. But we need a concept that is both beyond the 'citizen' and beyond the 'unconscious consumer'."

Søren: "I think there is too much emphasize on reflexive agency. We are reflexive now and then. But most of the time we are not."

Alan: "The Hummer case clearly shows the embedding of consumption in political economy – or consumption society."

James: "To call political actions consumption might be expanding the concept too far – at the risk of making consumption trivial."

Kai-Uwe: "Where are the limits of applicability? Not everything is reducible to consumption". And Detlev agreed: "There are spheres that are outside the market ... (wish we could find a better term than market)."

This tentative search for a definition of market/not market and a demarcation of the borders of the market prompted Søren to repeat his dogma that "Consumption is a *perspective*. We should abandon this search for a topic. There is no topic – there is a perspective!"

Matthias supported this stance: "The consumption perspective definitely helps me to describe and make sense of a lot of contemporary societal and cultural phenomena." And Per underpinned that "consumption is the most characteristic feature of society today" – a claim that was disproved by Kai-Uwe: "This tendency is not empirically proven."

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