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## INTERVIEW

### Decolonising consumption, the hegemony of consumer culture and the politics of consumption: an interview with Roberta Sassatelli

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**Key words** body • consumer culture • consumption • decolonisation • ethical • food • sharing economy • sustainable • consumption

To cite this article: Sassatelli, R., Wahlen, S. and Welch, D. (2022) Decolonising consumption, the hegemony of consumer culture and the politics of consumption: an interview with Roberta Sassatelli, *Consumption and Society*, 1(1): 216–230, DOI: 10.1332/HKEC2743

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Italian sociologist Roberta Sassatelli is well known for her work on consumption. She was educated and has taught in Italy and the UK and writes and publishes in both languages, and her work has been widely translated. Probably best known for *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics* (2007), she has written extensively on consumer culture, cultural theory, gender studies, the sociology of the body, food, leisure studies and visual studies. Her recent books include the edited collection *Italians and Food* (Palgrave, 2019) and *Corpo, genere e società* (Il Mulino, 2018, with R. Ghigi). She is a Full Professor at the University of Bologna and Co-Editor of the *European Journal of Sociology*.

*Consumption and Society* editors Stefan Wahlen and Dan Welch sat down with Roberta to discuss consumer culture, the politics of consumption, authenticity, the sharing economy, food and the body, and the future of consumption studies.

**Dan Welch (DW):** If I may, I'd like to start our conversation by asking something about the historical emergence of the modern consumer, something you've worked on at length. I was struck by a passage you wrote in a chapter on 'Consumer identities'<sup>1</sup>

in which you place the emergence of the figure of the modern consumer in a broader cultural geopolitics of colonialism and the commodity flows of empire. I'm interested to reflect on this colonial or imperial birth of the consumer, particularly in the context of current prevalent debates in Anglo-American scholarship around ideas of decolonisation. So firstly, could you say something about this colonial birth of the modern consumer?

**Roberta Sassatelli (RS):** Well, this was one of the things that I somehow discovered through a passion for history: the 18th-century debate on luxury was in fact a debate on consumption, even though the category of consumption wasn't yet used. A notion of consumption appeared already in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), but the term 'consumer' took quite a while to be established, as a term that could be used widely by the population. However, the fundamentals of what we understand as modern consumption were already there to some extent. And they were there because of the development of international trade and commodities which were coming from the colonies. Colonial commodities – sugar, tea, coffee, and so on – were by and large the first mass marketed commodities, but they were also luxuries. They were above the average of everyday life, and they commanded a different aptitude on the part of the consumer, on the part of the person that was facing the world of goods. For this new person – facing the world of goods – is placed in the position of *desiring*. And individual desires, constructed as a human finality, are what gives value to the market. So, we witness a new moral economy of value, which is also linked to a balance, and a struggle, between the North and the South, colonised and colonial countries. For growing numbers of the Western population consumption was no longer just related to one's own survival but to one's own pleasure, or capacity to be with other people in society, to share aspects of culture, one's own capacity to signify a number of things through those commodities, including one's own identity, one's own taste. It was very modern, to some extent, the way in which, fairly rapidly, these new colonial commodities became part of everyday life, and changed the particular attitude ordinary people can have with respect to that. They were so modern that one of the first boycotts that we can know of was precisely about sugar. So, these commodity flows, with their new discourses and practices stretching across a globalising world increasingly defined by mobility – both geographical and social – bring with themselves possibilities of subjectivity, which we are still debating.

In terms of decolonising the consumer, we are increasingly studying countries which are not the core, this is also a way of decolonising the consumer. We need to decolonise the consumer more by becoming increasingly conscious of the historical, geographical and cultural genealogy of consumer culture. What we have to understand is the cultural specificity of the notion of the consumer, which is a notion that is related, first of all, to the notion of the market as it developed in the West. The market itself is an entity that was historically constructed through specific geographies.

I think it's very important to go back and recall the different ways in which the market has been seen. Including as well as how, according to a very famous article by Hirschman,<sup>2</sup> the market has been moralised in many different ways. Moralised as something that civilises people, on the one hand, or as something that destroys sociality on the other; or as something that is feeble, not strong enough to do either of them, and needs to

be supported by various forms of politics and culture. So, the civilising, the destructive and the feeble interpretations of the market – and these notions of the market are performative, produce the market itself. And I would say that we have to extend this to the study of consumption. The notion of the consumer is performative, it is not simply something neutral, is something that we can embrace in order to marshal political action, like in political consumerism, in critical consumption, in sustainable consumption movements. It is something one can embrace, to simply conduct one's life. And in this case, we may have a number of different justifications of our consumption, which relate to different construals of the consumer and different discourses and practices of value creation. We should explore how different principles of justification *à la* Boltanski, are indeed intertwined with different forms of subjectification, and the way people embrace or transform these to account for their consumption practices and the value they assign to them. A focus on the subject-consumer is important because with different visions of what the consumer is, we imagine different visions of the market and visions of society. Different visions of the relation between the Global North and Global South – the consuming countries, and the countries that are more consumed.

**Stefan Wahlen (SW):** I think the moralisation of markets is very interesting. From a sociological perspective, it's obvious, but if you think of an economic analysis of markets and consumption, markets are not considered moral. What does it mean with regard to consumer culture? What role does the moralisation of markets play?

**RS:** In this respect, Marion Fourcade<sup>3</sup> has worked on the moralisation of markets, and the way in which economics in itself is performative. And I think her work is very persuasive. Decolonising the consumer implies also decolonising the market which cannot be seen as simply a natural, spontaneous, neutral and a-moral mechanism. It implies visions of happiness and visions of subjectivity. In general, I think, whenever there is agency, there is an anthropology, and economics cannot do without an anthropology. They have an idea of what the subject is doing: it is a maximising subject. It is instrumental. It is rational. It has well-defined objectives. These objectives are his own or her own, and no one has implanted any idea in the head of this wonderful consumer. The idea is very clear of a rational autonomous consumer, and this is something that we may witness on many occasions. But it does not represent precisely how things are actually accomplished. Rational consumer choice is first of all a hegemonic normative frame which we may say stands, for example, against choice as an ongoing constitutive process. So, there are other models of the consumer that may account for action. More processual, relational, embedded. Okay, choosing one particular model of the consumer is a choice that implies also some moral decision, some ethics. It implies that this particular consumer, which is understood in this particular way, is considered as normal and as the norm. Anything which does not follow this model seems absurd or deviant, to some extent. This opens the space to consider the normalisation of consumption, how we define how, in which manner, it is normal to consume, something which is in turn related to the boundaries of commoditisation and the scope for decommunitisation, what can truly count as consumption and can be legitimately consumed within a variety of social occasions.

**SW:** I am wondering whether this autonomous choice works as a hegemonic, normative frame and to what extent we are so used to this hegemonic frame that it is

not possible to think about other modes of action? To what extent is this autonomous choice a form of governance, which leaves no room for imagination beyond that?

**RS:** Yes. Well, this is what hegemonic frames do. They do limit our capacity to think about alternatives in many ways, to imagine, and they naturalise their arbitrariness. I've tried to work with a minimum anthropology, knowing that it is very difficult to avoid any indication of an anthropology, but also by placing emphasis on ongoing interaction, which is often the starting point of my empirical examination. Interacting with people using participant observation is an excellent way to get information about what is going on in very practical terms, close to people's meanings and considering the lively and lived encounter with commodities. Sure, in this way you may tend to emphasise the creativity of consumers, but you can still keep more structural forces in mind. In all cases, I think that the risk when we want to somehow face with alternatives, hegemonic views is always turn the hegemonic definition upside down and provide its opposite. The discursive dynamic in consumer studies, as well as in public discourse, has often been a swing of the pendulum. Once we have understood that hegemonic view of the rational, autonomous consumer, the risk is to propose the opposite: the consumer as a slave of the market, irrational, that does not know what he or she wants. If we are in between these two hegemonic pictures we are still inside the conundrum, and in fact, also a version of the economic picture. The critical picture has been very much used in the public, of course, with a moralising function. Sociology has to find not so much a middle ground, but rather a reflexive position, considering how these claims to truth operate, inquiring how these visions contribute to the shaping of the way the desiring subject is created and constitute itself.

**DW:** I wonder if I could pick up on that point, of the relation to political or sustainable consumption. In your 2015 paper 'Consumer culture, sustainability and a new vision of consumer sovereignty'<sup>4</sup> you made the point that sustainability destabilises the boundaries that define the consumer. Going back to the start of our conversation, if the new modalities of justification that arose with the beginning of the modern culture of consumption posit consumption as a private sphere linked to, in Adam Smith's sense, public virtues, with sustainability, in some sense, we have an inversion of that relationship. Now private consumption is seen to lead to public collective harm in terms of sustainability, ecological crisis and so on, and the sphere of consumption must be opened up to very public virtues so that the relation of consumption to public and private is very much destabilised. Is that a fundamental break with the modern form of the consumer and consumer society and consumption? Conversely, critics of ethical or political consumption maintain that the sovereign *citizen-consumer* of ethical consumption is co-opted by the neoliberal frame of the sovereign consumer. Is ethical or political consumption a fundamental break from previous, modern, forms of consumption, or is it co-opted to the hegemonic form of consumption?

**RS:** I reckon that alternative forms of consumer sovereignty do offer new spaces, new visions of what consumption is: consumption becomes a radically social action, and consequences as well as influences are always to be factored in. The reason I believe this is because, first of all, those visions increasingly get beyond the rational choice paradigm and an individualistic, atomistic, punctual utility function. A number

of elements which are also contingent, which are also related to the specificity of the practice, to the particularity of the object which is taken into consideration, matter for defining the conditions for ethical actions. In all this, there may still be an emphasis on pleasure, on the fact that ethical action does not need to be just a duty. This may prefigure a revolution of desire. Hedonism may become not just tamed, but responsible and responsibility becomes part of the pleasure. Ethical concerns may maintain one of the characteristics of consumption that makes it so for individuality: the fact that it is a finality. The fact that we consume because it's love. The fact that it gives us meaning. That we don't necessarily consume for something else. As sociologists, we are all aware of the fact that certain forms of consumption are placed in certain ulterior categories, such as status, but to begin with, consumption is a finality which finds meaning within the practice. This should be considered, even in the case of ethical, critical concerns. The point is that the perception of what is satisfactory is changing with ethical and sustainability concerns. A satisfaction that's not just a thing that satisfies your eyes, your belly or your mind, but satisfies you as a person. That is in my relationship with *another person* – and so satisfies the possibility of being together with other people and being part of community, being part of the world, the environment.

We will get to real ethical consumption when people will not be able to happily drink a coffee when they don't know its provenance, whether it's been grown with pesticides, with exploitation. Just as we have dismissed a number of things which were consumed in the past. We simply don't like them anymore. Because they feel alien to our relationship with the world, with other people, with people that are working to produce those commodities, and so forth. So, this would basically be a huge change in the way in which the consumer, or consumer sovereignty, is thought, because you enlarge the utility function, change the notion of how some thing can truly be useful, enjoyable. A number of relational values, which therefore modify the way the subject-consumer is actually imagined. Also, I reckon that there is an increasing awareness, which is also related to what I was saying before, that we should consider that the encounter with goods is a very active, open-ended process. Taste is something that is, you know, created and recreated in the encounter with goods. It is very important to consider how our encounter with goods is shaped and carried out in both its material and symbolic aspects, it is a fundamental entry into consumption which jeopardizes the sharp separation of means and ends that sustains both rationalist and structuralist views of consumption and opens the space for truly processual analysis.

**SW:** If we think a little bit further about the relationship between human subjects and material objects, would it lead to a crisis of sociology if we decentre consuming subjects in social and cultural formations? What would it mean for theorising consumption if we would focus more on the material perspective and move away from the consuming subject and focus on social formations or cultural figurations where the human is not central anymore? Is this thinking more inclusive – less anthropocentric than we are in our current thinking?

**RS:** To decentre the subject means to understand how models of subjectivity are constructed and are performative. But it doesn't mean that we have to do without subjectivity. All in all I have to say I still believe that for consumption, in terms of

methodology, it is very important to listen to subjective experience, to collect those experiences. They are very fertile, and people are very good at talking about their relationship with goods and their consumption practices. Think for example of Daniel Miller's *The Comfort of Things*<sup>5</sup> and how it opens the subjective universe of meanings contextualising them in social relations. A focus on social formations and material figurations is fundamental, but it can go hand in hand with a parallel focus on subjectification – which to me means decentring the subject rather than taking it for granted or throwing it away. We can't work without a model of subjectivity, but we can make this model of subjectivity into an object of study, and reflexively show how it emerges from the encounter with materiality, sociality, culture.

**DW:** I think that's really interesting, because what you're talking about is a different kind of decentring of the consuming subject to how that is framed in theories of practice, which have become quite dominant in some areas of consumption studies. It's an important point that we can think about decentring the subject in different ways, which have different effects for consumption studies. Relatedly, I'm interested in your point about consumption as a finality, because I worry that a danger of the practice turn is that we lose the specificity of consumption. Alan Warde's famous point that consumption is a moment in almost every practice, can be turned into talking about social practices per se, absent consumption, without a sense of commodification and decommodification. And it seems to me that the continuity with the consuming subject in ethical, political consumption is authenticity. The consuming subject's quest for authenticity through *consumption* as a specificity, not simply through a range of social practices.

**RS:** I certainly agree. What I propose is not what currently theories of practice are seemingly proposing. Of course we need analytical definitions, but consumption could be seen first of all as a perspective, just like the consumer is a constructed identity which emerges as subjects problematise their practices vis à vis the market and commoditisation. The way in which I see this decentring of the subject is very much along Foucauldian ways of thinking. This is a reflexive move, which entails also considering the ways in which power relations are implicated in subjectivity constitution. And in the case of consumption this entails a special attention to the processes of commodification and decommodification which are imbued with power relations, the formal networks of production and distribution, the informal networks of consumption. The fact that subjectivity is constituted does not mean, however, that whatever this theory might find in the sphere of consumption is false, this would be wrong. One of the points that Foucault wanted to make was that, precisely because we can identify techniques of the self, the subject supported by these techniques is not inauthentic. On the contrary. I think we could envision authenticity as a project, we have to investigate how people may sustain, also in terms of recognition through consumer practices, such a project. So authenticity is a very lively social thing, and it is something that happens first of all in interaction.

One of the things that I often find is that this particular level of interaction, Goffmanian interaction, or face to face interaction, the different norms, ceremonies, strategies and devices which are typical of such interaction, is not always taken seriously enough by scholars of consumption. As we started to study consumption sociologically it

was meanings. Then it is networks of things and streams of practices. But, the level of interaction, which is more classical within sociology, is not always taken into consideration. That level is very important to me. And the other level, which is very important to complement that of interaction, is the level of normative discourse, normative claims and their genealogy. These two levels are linked, of course, because individuals accomplish, take distance from, or may modify, those visions as they participate in interaction. They may adopt other alternative visions. And this is like a cultural battleground, you know, is not set once and for all, it is continuously realised and fought over.

**DW:** Picking up on normative discourse, I'm interested in the ways in which consumer culture was central to the normative claims of post-Second World War democratic capitalism. Jens Beckert has this nice phrase of 'promissory legitimacy'<sup>6</sup> – future-orientated legitimacy. So, while perhaps a normative discourse around choice and so forth, is as hegemonic as it's ever been, there's been a profound loss of faith in some of the central tenets of the 'promissory legitimacy' of consumer society, particularly since the financial crisis of 2007. For example, people no longer believe, with good evidence, that their children will have a higher standard of living than they had. How should we understand 'consumer society' and 'consumer culture' as analytical categories in the context of this loss of the hegemonic vision of post-war democratic capitalism? Do these categories change fundamentally in the face of that loss?

**RS:** One of the findings of a large project on consumption and the middle class in Italy after the crisis was precisely that the middle class no longer felt safe in its projects of security through lifestyle consumption.<sup>7</sup> The notion of consumer culture has typically been read in relation to how consumption seems to grant a promise of happiness, how this is put into question, how felicitous is our capacity as consumers, how real is our gratification. I think we have to recall when the notion of consumer culture was developed and why it was developed like that. The notion was developed in the 1960s as a critical tool against the rapid modernisation of our society after the Second World War. The diffusion of consumer patterns, which were not evident before, promised happiness and wealth to everyone. This was the promise, and immediately developed the worry: that becoming consumers, people no longer were good citizens, not interested anymore in politics or in the community but interested in all the marvellous bits and pieces offered by a burgeoning market. Okay, it's a while we are no longer in that situation and for many reasons. Because there is no such a promise of a splendid future for the vast majority of the population, because we know very well that our levels of consumption are unsustainable. If we sustain them, we do that by keeping numbers of people in poverty, by damaging the environment which sustains us all. This particular vision of consumer culture was working fine, was possible to some extent, because we didn't interrogate democratic capitalism too much. We are now starting to interrogate democratic capitalism especially since the crisis, but also with the pandemic. We probably start to consider that the consumer may not be enough by itself.

All the political issues that we have to face cannot be tackled via the market, because they exceed the market. They require that the market be regulated. Consumer culture

was potent as a category to reflect our contemporary society and culture. I think it was particularly potent in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, at that point we still believed in the power of consumption. I think that slowly, and especially after the financial crisis, consumer culture needs to be put into question, not so much thrown away. I don't think it's time to throw consumer culture away. First of all, recall that it is a personalised form of identification, that it personalises culture. It is related to one particular vision of subjectivity, the subject as a consumer. I would like to make a little note here, because, we are all consumers, but at the same time none of us is a consumer, in the sense that it may be far too abstract and universal. We can all be addressed as a consumer, but in many cases, we do not understand ourselves as consumers when going about consumption. Yet, we may understand ourselves as consumers when we reflect on consumption. One of the things that happened with critical consumption is that increasingly, we have come to reflect on ourselves *as* consumers. So, it has contributed in its own specific way to the personalisation that may sustain the category consumer culture. I think that we have to take seriously what consumer culture means. First of all, a personalisation, then a universalisation. Why is it that we did not call it consumption culture? Because it is one of the two pillars of modernity: the state and the market, the citizen and the consumer. So, the way I see it, these are the two fundamental elements in contemporary society. So why throw away one of them? We have to rethink what it may mean now that the prospect of growth is not the same, that we may even not want it to be the same, and what the environmental awareness should change us for the future.

**DW:** That perhaps takes us to the sharing economy, and how the sharing economy reconfigures processes of consumption. Something that always strikes me about sharing economy is that the term covers contrasting phenomena. Firstly, intensifications of processes of commodification. With Airbnb I can commodify space in my house. Secondly, sharing economy also refers to this whole category of things which are really about decommodification: the kind of grassroots-based sharing economy like tool libraries, and so forth, where we can actually get away from individual ownership. There has been a lot of debate about the utility of the term. I wondered if you had a view on that?

**RS:** I very much agree with you about the way you read the so-called sharing economy as modifying the balance between commodification and decommodification, and as a sensitising concept to investigate that balance for a number of very diverse contemporary phenomena is useful. I believe that commodification and decommodification, and in general the enlargement of the commodity frontier is one aspect that we should always take into consideration. And I really like Arlie Hochschild's work on this,<sup>8</sup> because of her emphasis on emotions and intimate life. It's very important to us, because it contains the possibility to focus on the changing encounter between the market and intimate life, with a variety of nuances in commodification and decommodification. But what I think of the sharing economy is also that it is to be understood very much in relation to class division. In many aspects the sharing economy has to do with the way in which the middle class, and in particular, the middle class with high cultural capital is facing the difficulties that have been generated by declining economic conditions. So, for example, in many cases, Airbnb has become for the middle class an investment, which has had the effect of gentrifying areas in a sort of backfiring

spiral. On the other hand, many of the people who are actually giving life to the phenomenon can be said to be thinking about exchange in a different way, of making commerce in a different way. A way that is more personalised, a way which is much more related to personal trust, and so forth. How do I see it? I see it as something which is also very much related to the new possibilities of digital technologies. And it is probably very much related to the fact that people are more often in the type of jobs which allow them to have the time to participate in some form of sharing economy. At the same time, those people have the need to participate in the sharing economy. But I don't think it will overturn the conventional economy. It will be on the side lines to some extent – an extra set for certain social groups, and probably different social groups according to the specific instances of the practice. I reckon it would be interesting to map these different practices that go under the umbrella of the sharing economy across the globe, across classes and in general social groups, and across the different services which can be shared.

**SW:** Can we expand on that with what you said earlier on authenticity? Under the umbrella of the sharing economy, these kind of alternative ways of consuming in the sharing economy, is there a new sort of cultural class? You said that those that are involved in the sharing economy are middle class, with specific cultural capital. Could it be that the sharing economy might be developing, to some extent, by other cultural groups trying to emulate this kind of luxury? The new service culture that might evolve with it, which might become more mainstream.

**RS:** Discourses surrounding the sharing economy of course deal with authenticity, as authenticity is a fundamental commodity in consumer culture, it is related to the idea that the subject-consumer can truly realise itself in the exchange, in the encounter with goods. It would be interesting to see, for specific instances of the sharing economy, how authenticity is defined and how does it differ from the conventional market. What goes under the banner of the sharing economy will probably grow. Yes, but I don't see the conventional market substituted by collaborative or sharing economy. That seems to be a bit too much. If that would be the case, then that would be a change of an epoch, like from the Middle Ages to modernity. This would be the size of change. It would be really dramatic – the way in which we organise everyday live. I see it growing, but not substituting the conventional economy.

**SW:** Do you think that, for example, the need to possess specific social knowledge in order to be involved in the sharing economy might hinder that development? Again, in the sense of models of the economy being performative.

**RS:** Yes, that is certainly an aspect. When thinking that the sharing economy places emphasis on sharing a property, for example. Well, sharing a house, but there still needs to be property. Otherwise, you don't share anything. So, I don't see substituting property. Still, from what I can see on Airbnb, people may think of their property differently. The notion of property is changing, and you have to have and develop the cognitive and affective capacities for that: it has to be put to work, not left there doing nothing. This makes me think that the sharing economy contains aspects of novelty. So there are continuities and discontinuities, which are practical and

symbolic, with the conventional market which may prefigure changes in the way we understand consumption.

**DW:** The class element of that is very interesting. I think there's a sort of dystopian future vision of the sharing economy as one in which the class division is between those that can afford ownership and those that are forced outside of ownership. On the point you make that true collaborative consumption would be a genuinely epochal shift: I think you sometimes see that represented, especially in discourse around the circular economy, where there are quite utopian visions of collaborative consumption, as the consumption moment of the commodity circuit of a truly circular economy. But I've never seen an account in circular economy discourse which really credits the profound level of change that that would imply.

**SW:** Isn't it dependent on what kind of model of sharing economy or collaborative consumption you subscribe to? The example I always find compelling is community supported agriculture. There are many people involved in community supported agriculture schemes who wouldn't subscribe to being a part of the sharing economy but are thinking that going to the fields assisting the farmers as a consumer is a truly collaborative effort. But venture capital firms like Airbnb or Uber have coined the term sharing economy, which is so prevalent in our thinking. You need to use a specific mobile phone app in order to be a part of the sharing economy, whereas there are other things, like the tool library, neighbourhood initiatives, community supported agriculture. These are all things that you could subsume under the sharing economy, but in colloquial speaking they are not.

**RS:** I can see why it is not, because the sharing economy is too much associated with Airbnb and Uber. We know community supported agriculture is very local, it's not global. It wants to be local, this is a core aspect of it. You know, this is also one of the reasons why I think this could be seen as an element of collaborative economy, but if that would be generalised, and would substitute for our weekly shopping at the supermarket really for the vast majority of the population we would be facing a shift. We would be facing something of enormous proportions, because it doesn't simply mean that you buy at the local farm. It means that you will stop buying those things that are out of season. It's to clean them, wash them, chop them. Do all the kind of work that you have to do with the vegetables that are grown from the countryside – so very different from the kind of stuff you find in the supermarket. It means that you pay them very often in cash, because they may not have a credit card. It means that you spend the whole of your Saturday in this place, so it takes up quite a large share of your leisure activity. It means that you understand and justify what you do as consumer differently.

**SW:** So this also relates to authenticity, if I might turn to your work on food in the case of Bologna.<sup>9</sup> When you consider the issue of territorialisation of the foods, it is something which is, of course, very important for the true consumer of the food, but which might also be used in turn, as you say in your research, as a way of commodifying a particular regional food as having special qualities and a specific value.

**RS:** Absolutely. Yes, you're right. I think we have here a sort of conundrum and another enormous question: can we make the local global without losing the specificity of the local? If we find ways of supporting the local, like the certain local agriculture supporting schemes, would it be possible not to somehow universalise them? And yet it will be very difficult, because part of their value, part of their relevance is precisely the locality. They derive their value from the fact that they are relatively few and are to some extent exclusive. There are few people who do this. And the value is in part in fact that you are against the global market, that you are against the supermarket and so forth. It's a specific way to construct authenticity. If everyone would do this, they will not have the same kind of value that they have now, people would no longer enjoy this alternative practice. Still the local can be commodified, and so it can become highly visible as value and there will be debates and issues about its authenticity. It becomes a very reflexive locality and matters of scale may shortcircuit with visions of authenticity or they may push for a modification of such visions. Indeed, there are many ways of constructing authenticity – or status for that matter – and they depend on the social configuration of the practice.

**SW:** I would agree with that. Something else which I would like to talk about is the role of the body in consumption. The role of the body has not been discussed to a great extent in studies of consumption. In your work on fitness<sup>10</sup> the body has a specific role with regard to status and normative discourse on the body. You published a book on gender and the body in Italian.<sup>11</sup> Maybe you can share some of your perspectives on the role of the body. And if you decentre the consumer, as we discussed earlier, what role might the body play in research on consumption? What is the relation of the body to consumer culture?

**RS:** When I started to study consumption, I was very clear in my mind that I wanted to study consumption as a process. My backdrop was rational choice. That meant that the objectives of the actions were not clearly defined from the beginning but were shaped as the consumer was going on. This way of thinking of action, I thought, was also very importantly related to the idea that the subject, the social actor, is an embodied actor. Consumption is both material and symbolic, in all instances. So, the subject-consumer is not just a cognitive moderator, but lives in time and space, in interaction, fundamentally with his or her own body. We consume *for* the body and *with* the body, or better as embodied subjects. As embodied subjects we experience reality with our senses as well as our mind, we occupy spaces in certain ways, we move towards others, we manage objects in certain ways. We are much more intimately related to reality than a picture of a separated, disembodied agent would allow. And emotions, which are typically associated to the body, are themselves constructed in interaction. From this standpoint, consumption relates to the way in which the consumer comes to terms with objects and services as an embodied subject. So, interaction is fundamental, as I said before, because embodiment is rooted in interaction. I think that is the reason why, in the case of fitness, I decided to do an ethnographic project. Because I wanted to see how people came to want to do certain activities. The constitution of a will to exercise, which is also a will to consume, or to go on consuming, was revealed to be grounded in interaction. In a way, gym goers had become consumers because they had bought a gym pass before becoming gym users. But to really become consumers, to go on consuming, they

needed to become acquainted with the practice, and come to life with the practice. I study consumption as an ongoing learning process, and this is very much related to the body, because embodiment is a continuous process. It is not something that we do once and for all, that we have. The sociology of the body is in this respect very clear today. The idea is not that we have bodies in this form of dualism, but that we are embodied subjects.

In the work which I have been doing more recently in the book you mention, I look at many different things together with my co-author, Rossella Ghigi. We consider the way, for example, normativity is at the same time hegemonic and challenged by contemporary culture. The same things happen with the gender dichotomy: it is hegemonic and at the same time challenged by a plurality of gender identities and gender fluidity. We look, you know, at the way in which the body or embodied self is created and managed by interaction through the development of habitus and practices: bodily practice and the embodiment of emotions. The book does not take this angle, but I reckon this clearly is related to our capacity to realise a variety of consumer practices, to learn how to enjoy things and to use them appropriately. And there is the issue of power, of course, how it operates through embodiment and again at this level you can see how consumption contributes to the consolidation of different forms of embodiment which sustain social and cultural hierarchies. And then there is quite a lot of attention to the particular way in which a notion of the body has developed with modernity, a notion which interestingly relates very much to the picture of the consumer that we have discussed beforehand. Because it is the Western, modern body: a male, white body, but also, and for the most part, a rational body. A body that can be controlled by the self and can do whatever the self says to do. During the 20th century, we saw the development of a consuming body. A body that has become the most beautiful object of design, of consumption. Our body becomes a place through which we can realise ourselves as individuals and a fundamental point of application of the market, with the increasing quantities and varieties of objects being produced to elicit the capacities and the pleasures of the body. So, if the 19th-century body was the disciplined body of the factory, the 20th-century body is the joyous disciplined body of the fitness gym to some extent, where you have pleasure while at the same time disciplining yourself in order to be able to consume more. Because you keep fit, you keep slim, then you can go out and have wonderful dinner with your friends. So, I think that the phenomena which are collected under the problematic of the body, even though they have not been particularly explored in studies of consumption, are very much related to consumer culture.

**SW:** You mentioned gender fluidity. Is there nowadays a sort of body politics when young people say that the normative body is not mine, and I'm going to protest against consumer culture. They're trying to break down gender norms, this dichotomy of male and female you mention, and saying we are more fluid, and that this fluidity might be considered as a form of protest?

**RS:** I reply with an observation. Not yet with all the precision of research, but an observation on TikTok. I have been looking at TikTok recently trying to see the way in which makeup is presented. You have both boys and girls, young and old, presenting various forms of makeup. And there is a certain amount of gender fluidity. Men use female

makeup. Women use makeup but it is not simply only beautifying in the classic way but very strong. But in all this variety nevertheless the duality, masculine and feminine, is very often referred to as a counterpoint. Perhaps we don't want to be completely adherent to it as something that is out there. We may not want to underscore it as something that we want to embrace, and we exaggerate to the level of a paradox. So, it is not that the duality has disappeared. The duality is I think still the hegemonic discourse. That is one of the things that is happening with social media: that the hegemonic discourses are still there. They don't disappear. But they are more obviously hegemonic. They are in your face. And this means that we can see this hegemonic discourse more clearly, play with it and overturn it. But of course, resistance and subversion are to a large extent only possible because of the hold of hegemonic views. So fluidity may try to stay in the becoming, as a possibility of beyond.

**SW:** This is an interesting observation. To conclude this interview, we are curious on your view about what space this new journal *Consumption and Society* could occupy. Referring back to what you said, consumption is more processual: social interaction, as well as normative discourse. From your perspective what are the topics that should be addressed in the next few years? What do you think might be possible avenues for future research? Where are blind spots?

**RS:** Okay, sociology should deal more directly with history. My impression is that there is still quite a lot to be done at the intersection between history and sociology. You know, in a very genealogical manner, with projects that reconstruct historically certain practices that are alive into the present. Starting from a present issue, and then going back historically; mixing different sources, and producing long-term accounts, in the sense of the history of the present which is historically sound but theoretically rich. It is a good entry point for interdisciplinary research. It allows sociology to enter into a dialogue not only with historians; if you think of the politics of consumption we talked about, you could collaborate with political scientists; if you focus on postcolonial perspectives, with geographers, across different spatial scales; and of course, if you deal with material culture it's anthropologists.

I also think that we should reflect more on methodology. There has been very little reflection on methodology and the studies of consumption. But I think it is time that we start to reflect more on that. Okay, we can find methodological observations in various papers. But systematic, sustained methodological reflection about how to do research in the sociology of consumption, and what are the valid options could be developed. Discussion of the relation between quantitative and qualitative data and multimethod research, historical sources, the role of digital methods, visual methods, creative methods: I think there's quite a lot going on, and we need to reflect about this.

Another area which I would like to see developed is teaching. How do we teach sociology of consumption? How do we teach consumer culture? Of course, we have sociology of consumption established over 30 years and many universities where there is a sociology of consumption course. But this is something that we need to start reflecting upon. An interesting discussion can be developed around this, using the experience of different people, different countries, different degrees, different level of teaching, and so on.

These are the more structural directions which I can see, but I can also see some substantive topics that for me are important and should be developed. I think that we can do more work on the super-rich and the powerful. Most of our studies have been conducted on the middle class or the working class also because they are easy to reach, to some extent. But the super-rich are really interesting, and there is now increasingly work on the super-rich, the super-rich as consumers. Another topic is bodies and consumption, that is consumer practices which are related to the body, or ways in which embodiment is implicated in consumption, for I said before there should be more attention to this in studies of consumption. So, I would very much welcome more phenomenological study of the way in which our body is both involved and shaped by, for example, food consumption, or leisure consumption. And linked to this there is the development of the digital on the one hand and sustainable consumption on the other, which invest our embodied involvement with consumption in different ways. Another area which I think could be important for the journal is the study of emotions. Again, there has been a lot of attention in this area with the development of the sociology of emotions, but more needs to be done in relation to consumption, and also because emotions are constituted and implied in process of commodification and de-commodification. And this is related to gender, I also believe more can be done on consumption and gender, especially as it can be contextualised intersectionally and become a way to consider social inequalities in consumption. But the list could continue, as consumption is a very lively, ever evolving field, an angle through which we can really be at the forefront of sociological research.

**SW:** That's a very interesting set of research agendas for the journal! Thank you, it's been a really interesting conversation, and we've very, very much enjoyed it.

Bologna, Giessen, Manchester  
4 April 2022

### Notes

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**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.