

# Preface

Why are we habitual consumers? What does it mean to be a consumer in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and to occupy public space in relatively advanced, cosmopolitan, and capitalist states in late modernity? Is our penchant for consumption due to political socialization, a cultural and material logic for survival; or an irrationality and impulsiveness over anachronistic traditions, cultures, and social belief systems? Could our affinity for goods be traced to a desire to amass things for the sake of the *thing-in-itself*? And to what extent are we the products of the “things” that we consume? Do we become less human as we consume more, or do we increase our humanity with variegated levels of consumption? What, in effect, has human life got to do with consumption and how can we make theoretical sense of it?

We know, for example, that a significant proportion of our time in the human reproductive-life-cycle is devoted to acting in concert with the sale and purchase of goods and services for the sake of acquisition, ownership, proprietary transfers, pure profit, greed, and basic physiological survival. The act of consuming and the nature of consumption in late modernity involves at the minimum a complex political economy of patents, copyrights, legalese, consumer advocacy, policy regulations, governmental standards, official guidelines, the vertical and horizontal integration of firms worldwide, marketing, advertising and business development within regulated and semi-regulated markets. Apart from these consumer markets, the other main actors that figure in the neoliberal international political economy include sovereign governments, NGOs, religious and non-religious organizations, civil society associations, consumer protection agencies, investment corporations, the financial and banking sectors, and the corporate agents of pan-national trading activities.

Consumption is therefore a universal phenomenon with regional, sub-regional, national, and local effects. One such deleterious effect on consumers is information overload. This effect causes consumers to resist:

after a specific level of tolerable data has been absorbed, additional information becomes background noise, and no further data can be optimally processed. This results in the increasing desensitization of consumers to their environment. Another effect is the commodification of tradition and culture into goods and services for sale and purchase that screens like a vivid videotape across global centers of cosmopolitanism. Subsequently, rural areas have increasingly experienced the impact of consumption that is catalyzed through infrastructural “development”, “internal” migration, and policy changes and program development.

Modernity in this book refers to the temporal and spatial processes generated since the Industrial Revolution in the West. *Late Modernity* represents the contemporary experience and consciousness of globalization and technological transformation within the neoliberal international capitalist economy. But modernity also refers to theories that explain the processes within its ambit making it difficult to develop clear distinctions between theories of modernity and acts of modernity. Modernity *as* political practice cannot be understood apart from the seemingly illusory conceptual engagements that approximate what has come to be associated with Michel Foucault’s notion of “discursive formations”:

From Wolin’s perspective, Foucault’s theory engenders an optical illusion. By focusing on the microcontext where regimes of power-knowledge prevails ... rather than on the operations of the state *per se*, it looks as if Foucault is scaling down the pretensions of theory and making it more amenable for purposes of personal and social reconstruction. It shows, the truth, however, is the opposite of what this appearance suggests (Botwinick and Connolly, 2001, p. 132).

The scaling down of appearances within consumer discourses are directly linked to the nature of the beast itself. It renders its users into a totally dependent relationship where power-knowledge hierarchies are structured within consumer culture itself. Consequently, consumers cannot help not consuming, and are singularly culpable of encouraging the spread of consumerism in late modernity. This is because consumption is positively

associated with wealth: the more one earns, the greater the wealth, the higher the consumption. Part of the problem of consumption in late modernity is also found in changing habits, different tastes, mutable patterns of life, socialized behavior, and the remnant effects of 20<sup>th</sup> century politics and culture. We are increasingly imprisoned by the prejudices, stereotypes, and biases that help us survive the late modernity of globalization and technological change. Consumption is about choices over ranges of tangible and intangible goods and services. Yet the central paradox of consumption is that the more choices we have and the more choices we make ironically leaves us with much less room to make those choices. This is partly because the compression of space by the speeding up of time in late modernity has resulted in a narrower avenue for choices, a shorter amount of time for decision-making, and a contracted field of view for thought. In fact some would argue that we do not have to bother about thinking any longer: all we have to do to survive this place (and being displaced) is to follow the *Herd of Consumption*, deadening our instinct for adaptation, survival, and creativity.

The thinking has already been done for us. The decisions about making complex choices in modernity have been scaled down by “industry professionals” to the extent that we only have to “trust” the gurus of marketing and advertising, the specialists and experts who produce and reproduce, the sales persons who exploit that thin space between our activities to catch our attention and passionately convince us of the strengths and benefits of products we know we don’t really care about, and don’t really need.

No one escapes consumption. Regardless of ideological belief, religious orientation, ethnicity, class, culture, or political rhetoric, the majority of citizens are indubitably tied to the processes of globalization. Consumers exchange. That’s what its all about.

Yet very often such exchanges are inclusive in the sense of containing not only purely economic dimensions but also political, cultural and social ones. These multi-dimensional exchanges of the things and services that we produce and consume make for different, interesting, and contesting bonds between and among individuals in groups and communities to the extent of

influencing the nature and formation of community life and community culture. Sometimes such exchanges result in the breaking and hardening of old and, or imagined differences between and among groups. Such social bonding and social breakage also reflects a certain reliance on a common currency that are themselves agencies of exchange: language, national culture, national ideals, religion, and ethnicity.

There appears to be a general belief that the possibility of present and future survival — of individual, group, and community identities — is becoming increasingly dependent on economic growth. Greater economic performance and productivity seems to equal greater goods for the greater number. Resources that are available in state and civil society are often channeled towards various instrumentalist advancement of economic activities that not only create niches in world market, but are also extended and widened to capture a bigger market share, a larger portion of the international stock of wealth, and generate greater economic chances of surviving modernity. Or so it seems. The development, maintenance, and advancement of identity is partially dissolved, partially mired, protuberantly suspended within ascriptive ties to religion, the state, the nation, class, ethnicity, culture, and economic development. These agents of consumption are ironically contingent on the changes that they deliver. If the foregoing description generally describes our behavior as consumers within the international neoliberal political economy, then we deserve to call ourselves *modern*. And if we agree that the description above represents a fairly accurate snapshot of the world in which we live, then we are consciously and conspicuously experiencing modernity. This *is* what it means to be modern. Hopefully, most of the readers of this book would by now have rejected the modern but onerous thesis of uneven global development because of its optimistic posture, its promise of producing wealth; its value-added, time-constraining, speed-increasing, and epoch-advancing vocabulary. But for those who still believe in it, this book helps explore the meaning of modernity in terms of the way in which *things* (goods and services, both tangible and intangible) are being consumed in Singapore, Malaysia, and indeed, the late modern world. This work hopes to remind us to think (before we consume and as we consume) about how the ways in

which we consume life in late modernity determines how meaningful or empty consumption makes us. Consumption is the critical agent that forces and coerces individuals, groups, and communities to engage in ways that appear to make and break the very same individual, social, and political identities in question.

The method used in this book frames five themes from the contemporary political theory of William E. Connolly, Gianni Vattimo, Theresa Brennan, Stephen K. White, and Wendy Brown with regard to (1) the fundamental value in modernity is being modern argued by Vattimo; (2) exclusionary goods decrease the private value while increasing the private costs; exclusionary goods also accentuate social costs to the detriment of the social environment; and increases the costs to the state and hence the general public burden as exemplified by Connolly's work; (3) that consumption involves a Faustian foundational fantasy of horror depicted by Brennan; (4) White's analysis that the greater awareness of the conventionality of what has been taken for certain in the modern west ought to be further interrogated especially since domestic public space is not invulnerable; and, (5) the work-gender contradiction thesis enacted by Brown. These five concepts provide the major conceptual themes used to explain the complex politics of modernity and consumption as Lyotard argues in his *Political Writings* (1993),

capitalism tries to incorporate the dynamic of needs ever more strictly within its global economic dynamic: this incorporation operates both in the form of prediction, henceforth indispensable to the functioning of the system, and in the form of a control effectively, adjusting needs to production possibilities.

The functioning of the systems are built deep within the social structures that uphold modernity's machines, and that is why Lyotard is correct in asserting the critical and formative links between structure, function and control in production. One argument for the enviable successes of modernity and its attendants ironically comes from an alternative tradition. Thomas L. Friedman wrote an article in the *New York Times* (January 2002) where

he quoted a Pakistani writer and businessman, Izzat Maheed on modernity and Islam:

Without a reformation in the practice of Islam that makes it move forward and not backward, there is no hope for us Muslims anywhere. We have reduced Islam to the organized hypocrisy of state-sponsored mullahism ... for more than a 1,000 years Islam has stood still because the mullahs, who became *de facto* clergy instead of genuine scholars, closed the door on *itejhad* (reinterpreting Islam in the light of modernity) and no one came forward with an evolving application of the message of the Holy Quran ... All the Mullahs tell you today is how to go back a millennium.

The political retardation suggested by Izzat is not startling when one considers the kinds of things that are done in the name of religion, and for the sake of partially understood, partially digested, and partially manufactured interpretations of Holy Scripture though the millennia. For Friedman and Izzat, the main lament above is similar to the greatest fear of “Western” modernity. The horror in the mirror of modernity is that it might eventually stagnate and degenerate into the past, and into tradition: it might “go out of style” and be replaced. Yet Foucault’s opening quote reminds us that we possess the “most complex system of knowledge and the most sophisticated structures of power”. Does contemporary this make us any better than the ancient Chinese and Hindu traditions; the citizens of the Greek poleis, the new world citizens of the *Pax Romana*, or the caliphs in the gold age of Islam? Perhaps if we conceive of late modernity as being the vanguard and portal of a truculent modernity it might shed alternative nuances to the meaning of life in neoliberal international capitalist economies. The postNietzscheans in our midst are likely to be a little more skeptical about the plausibility of *a better* life in late modernity as opposed to the ancient belief in a better life after death. Negative postNietzschean thought concentrates on the analytical reconfigurations of the discontented dimensions of modernity — consumption, languages of terror, religious violence, cultural cleansing and ethnic pogroms, technologies of fear, and

neoliberal attempts to re-master the international economic system. Consumers are developing a reliance on the absence of an ethical public philosophy, a commonality of morals, a nonexistent genealogy that some believed existed in the recent and remote past. Consumerism *is* the new religion that has taken over the public sphere of our lives and over taken the private dimensions of our thoughts. The majority of consumers who cease to think because it is just “too hard”, and who have stopped caring about the world are those who have succumbed to the juggernaut of modernity; they are the ones who successfully negotiate late modern life in virtual ignorance. Lest we be heretics to consumption and burn at the stake of neoliberal capitalism.