Introduction

Consumers do new things online. But this novelty has been obscured. This book applies a sociological lens, to lift the curtain and shine a light on the exercise of taste, the consequence of audience, and the pleasures of a public.

It is hard to overstate the distaste that scholars feel toward claims that something is new. Experience shows such claims to be either hyped, or ignorant of history, both of which are distasteful to people whose lives center on knowledge. In the rare case where a claim of newness seems credible, it creates even more difficulties, as it suggests that what the scholar thought was settled knowledge may no longer be so. A truly new thing would call into question existing theories and threaten to obsolesce a conceptual toolkit that the scholar had spent decades refining. Oscillation and development are fine, but a claim that something is new will be fiercely resisted.

Nonetheless, the Web has produced new forms of social being, which this book explores. I focus on new forms of consumer behavior online, but define this behavior more narrowly than some colleagues. I mean actions toward products and services that are bought and sold, as viewed from the perspective of the buyer, rather than that of the seller, as in marketing. This may not sound very restrictive—uncounted items across many life domains are bought and sold here in Late Capitalist America—but it is. My more imperialistic colleagues are wont to expand consuming to every part of life. In the expanded definition I eschew, the company of relatives would be consumed at family holidays, the flag would be consumed in patriotic ceremonies, ideas of God would be consumed at church, yada yada.

My restrictive definition excludes from this book Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and all similar social media sites. On Facebook people socialize, much more than consume. Yes, a great deal of selling, and more of it all the time, occurs on Facebook, and the challenge of promoting brands by means of social media is one of the great new challenges in marketing; but this is a book about consuming, not friendship, and about buyers, not sellers. If you picked it up to learn about selling to the unsuspecting, as they mingle online, put it down.

Conversely, Yelp has to be part of the book. Yelp is a site where ordinary

consumers write reviews of goods and services that other consumers can buy or patronize. Yes, writing and reading reviews is a form of social interaction, but the social experience revolves around items that can be purchased. That puts online reviews within my declared sphere.

Blogs are a more complicated case. Like Facebook and Yelp, blogging is new. But whole categories of blogs lie outside my sphere. For instance, a vibrant category, present from the beginning, consists of political blogs. Several of these have become a staple of my media usage. And just there I could almost as readily have spoken of my media consumption without doing too much violence to the verb consume. After all, I do purchase a subscription to the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and sundry other publications. But I am reluctant to subsume leisure reading, voting or citizenship under consuming. When it comes to political blogs, I think that media usage remains the better term, and that communication, which is a separate discipline, has scholars better placed than me to discuss political blogs, reality television, and sundry other new things I ignore (see Turner 2010 for an entry to this literature).

Other kinds of blogs do fit, as when a blogger writes about some category of good for sale. A study of fashion blogs was the genesis of this book (McQuarrie et al. 2013), and the first essay delves into this new consumer behavior. Fashion, insofar as it involves tastes, is central to any account of modern consumers, as Campbell (1987) knew.

Pinterest provides a liminal case. This site, described as an online scrapbook, could have been devoted to pictures of pets, babies, and other personal mementos, meant to be shared with family and friends, as happens on Instagram. Instead, my colleagues and I found that many pinboards displayed commercial goods rather than personal photos, placing Pinterest within my sphere (Phillips et al. 2014). But Instagram, by this same metric, falls outside it.

People do many new things online. But my ambit is restricted to some blogs, Yelp reviews, and Pinterest boards. I must leave Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Youtube and the rest to other scholars better placed.

I trust a few of you stumbled over that loaded term, Late Capitalist America. I'm not a Marxist (as far as I know), and don't subscribe to the worldview seen in a Jameson (1991). But this book has to be historically aware. To claim "new" is to make a historical assertion. Why locate these new consumer actions in a historical epoch termed Late Capitalist America?

By Late Capitalist I mean an era in which the market has perfused nearly all aspects of life. Late Capitalist means a period when an author has to take space, up front in his book, to assert that not everything is consuming;

an era where economists claim with a straight face that economic theory can explain any element of human behavior (Levitt and Dubner 2011). So much of contemporary life in America does revolve around the purchase of goods for sale. Only a few centuries ago, most people spent most of their day not spending money or consuming purchased goods. People used to grow their own food, sew their own clothes, and make their own images. Now these activities are so vanishingly rare as to have cultish aspects when performed. Most of what we need for everyday life, and much else that we don't need but happen to want, we obtain in the market. The late in Late Capitalist means a society where the penetration of the market, into every corner of life, is far along (Sandel 2012).

Although the market had begun to penetrate more and more elements of daily life in the West even by centuries ago (McCloskey 2010; Mokyr 2009; Muller 2007), in Late Capitalism, necessities account for less and less of what we buy. Four hundred years ago, residents of Amsterdam were already buying most of their food and clothing in a market, but mostly what they purchased were necessities like food and clothing. There wasn't yet the discretionary income, or distance from necessity, so characteristic of a wealthy developed nation like the USA in 2015. Campbell (1987) gives a deeply illuminating account of the early years of this transition, on which I will draw, and the phrase "distance from necessity" is Bourdieu's (1984), whom I'll discuss at length.

The new in online consumer behavior is newness piled on newness; because the perfusion of the market into daily life, and the spread of consuming beyond necessities, is a new development in human history, on which online behavior is a still more recent overlay. To take the perspective of Big History, the Agricultural Revolution was exactly that: the defining event in human history for 10000 years (Morris 2010). The Industrial or Scientific or Technological Revolution (which is the better descriptor remains heavily contested) was every bit as revolutionary as the advent of agriculture (Landes 1999; Shapin 1996), and transformed the daily life of peasants as much as farming had transformed the life ways of hunter gatherers (Morris 2010). But the I/S/T Revolution, and the associated perfusion of the market—it might even be called the Capitalist Revolution—is still very recent (McCloskey 2010). The conversion of daily life into market activity is still new. The opportunity to go online, which is difficult to conceive, absent a substrate of market-based wealth with its incestuous relationship to technological development (Mokyr 2009), is a newness laid on top of that newness.

Consumer being is new, gathering steam only a century or two ago, and consumer being online is very new, emerging in the last decade. The new actions to be discussed are new forms of consuming, departures from what

occurred during the post-World War II American economy. The benchmark for new, then, will be the life ways and institutions that were established from the 1950s through about 1995 in the USA, even though these old life ways and institutions were themselves new, or at least late, when viewed within the history of modernity in the West.

Finally, as the phrase Late Capitalist America suggests, I will offer a sociological view of consumers online. The label sociological might sound like a neutral descriptor—sociology is most commonly grouped with either psychology or economics or both, within a broader grouping called the social sciences—but, among scholars who write about the consumer, to adopt a sociological stance is to make a radical departure. Most consumer researchers are either psychologists or economists by training. For instance, I have a social psychology PhD, and most of my research has a psychological cast. I spent my scholarly career in a business school where economic perspectives dominated. Journals where I published or reviewed have titles like the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the *Journal of Economic Psychology*, or *Psychology and Marketing*. Neither my past work, nor most of what is published in these journals, has much to do with sociology.¹

There currently exists no *Journal of Consumer Sociology*, and I see little prospect of one any time soon. The widening beyond psychology that did occur within consumer research in the 1980s and 1990s can be seen in new titles such as the *Journal of Consumer Culture* or *Consumption, Markets and Culture*: it was an opening toward anthropology and ethnography, not sociology. Unlike sociology, consumer ethnography, as seen in work by Eric Arnould, Rob Kozinets, John Sherry, and Melanie Wallendorf, is thriving, although still dwarfed by consumer psychology.

What distinguishes a sociological perspective on consumers from a psychological or economic stance in the first instance, and an anthropological view in the second? Today, within consumer research, sociology is so eclipsed, so obscure, so remote, as to require this clarification.

To do psychology is to explain things by properties of individual human beings. Individual agents are primary and all else is secondary. These individual psyches may be more governed by situational factors than they suspect (Kahneman 2011), but it is individual behavior that is explained by situational factors. In the consumer sphere, economic theory merges seamlessly with psychological perspectives: individual decision-makers seek to maximize utility, and the actions of autochthonous buyers and sellers make up market activity.

At the neuropsychological extreme, the focus is individuals conceived as organisms, which is to say, on events in brains and bodies. At the other, social psychological extreme, a second individual enters the picture, so that

the behavioral equation contains two variables, me and you, individual and social object. In social psychology, what people do is a joint function of the properties of the individual and the properties of the social object, which may be another person, or an inanimate object such as a brand. Social psychology is about as social as most consumer research gets, and this perspective dominates the study of consumers. That makes it important to grasp the gap that separates social psychology from sociology proper.

In psychology, there is always me, and maybe you, but never us. We only become visible when a sociological or anthropological lens is applied. Sociology studies collectivity, rather than individual actions or dyadic interactions. A further clarification: biologists often find it useful to analyze phenomena at the level of the population rather than the organism. But population exists only as an analytic device; a population is nothing but the individual organisms of which it is composed. By contrast, in sociology collectives are real and have a reality apart from the individuals that participate. For instance, an organization, such as a corporation, consists of more than the employees who work for it. Its reality is more than an aggregate of the behavior of these employees. To get the reality of collectivity accepted, and to mark out a space for its study, was the foundational struggle in sociology (Nisbet 1966). I take the separately subsisting reality of collectivity to be the central sociological idea, and the one most alien to a scholar trained in psychology.

As noted, anthropology also admits of supra-individual entities, but here the preferred term is culture, and the tacit context that of an intact culture in isolation, as in the hunter-gatherer tribes and small farming villages which provided fodder for the pioneers of anthropology. The “culture of the tribe” sums up the anthropological lens on human affairs. Sociology, by contrast, begins with the death of the tribal community and the destruction of intact cultures, as occurs in any urban, mass society, and as executed most thoroughly in Late Capitalist society. Anthropology can be and has been applied to modern mass societies, but in my view it is a force fit. One can call a habit a ritual, and a group a tribe, but naming them thus does not make them so (Cova and Cova 2002; McCracken 1986).

Sociology didn’t make much sense, perhaps could not even exist, prior to the 19th century, in the developed and cosmopolitan West, after the alienation consequent to a market economy had gone farther than ever before. Mass and stranger are to sociology what tribe and identity are to anthropology. Sociology was made possible, and became necessary, following the Industrial/Scientific/Technological/Capitalist Revolutions that were at full bore after about 1820. Sociology is best placed to describe what is new in consuming online, because sociology is so bound up with the earlier newness of the I/S/T/C Revolutions that constructed modernity.

A sociology of consumers online will examine new ways of being a consumer, itself a new way of being that flowered over the last century or two, as the I/S/T/C Revolutions shaped life in the West, and in America most of all. Some have been tempted to apply a cyclic interpretation to the advent of the Web, and approach online consuming as a return or reversion to older tribal forms of being. This anthropological take, which uses the language of community and authenticity, did shape initial narratives about what was happening online (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Rheingold 2000; Schau et al. 2009). I will argue against this tendency to celebrate community online. The new online world is not about recapturing community and reforming into tribes. Those are category errors in this context. Something new occurs instead.

Under a sociological lens, the new possibilities created by the Web consist of new opportunities to relate to masses of strangers, new connections among people not joined by community, and new routes along which collective phenomena, such as taste, develop. This isn't a book about blogs or Yelp or Pinterest, so much as a reflection on sociological ideas central to consuming. These ideas will sometimes be accepted, and used to illuminate online behavior; and sometimes challenged and extended, by confronting the new reality of consuming online. As a work of scholarship, the focus is more on these ideas, some very difficult, and less on descriptive facts about blogs, Yelp or Pinterest.

Those impatient may now proceed to the Prelude and Essay One. The remainder of this Introduction consists of what Pinker (2014) disparages as meta-discourse, or writing about writing. It addresses readers who prefer to get more context, before wading into a book.

AUDIENCE

I target young scholars and PhD students whose research direction is not frozen in place. Probably these persons have or will earn a PhD in one of the social sciences. The goal of the book is to unfreeze you from the individualistic perspective that dominated your graduate training, and open your eyes toward a sociological take on consumers and what they do online.

A NOTE ON STYLE AND APPROACH

This book does not summarize a lifetime of research; I came to study consumers online late in my career. Nor does it advance a grand theory of

consumer behavior, or try to summarize the state of the art in a subdiscipline, as in a handbook. And neither does it offer a sampling of current work by like-minded colleagues on the topics in the title. Most scholarly books fit one of these models, but my effort is closer in spirit to Billig (2013), Campbell (1987), Gronow (1997), Lanham (2006a) or Turner (2010). I offer explorations intended to advance a point of view, a sociological perspective on what consumers do online.

Mea culpa: it is arrogant to think that anyone cares about a contest that pits sociology against economic, psychological and anthropological perspectives. I couldn't pursue this contest in a scholarly journal. Sociologists don't care what economists think, and the feeling is mutual. Academics stay in their silo, taking for granted that other disciplines are remote and inapt. It is also arrogant to assume that I know enough, about disciplines in which I was not trained, to identify shortcomings in the economic explanation for online reviews, or the ethnographic account of blogging. The risk: that you only wander through a field of straw men set ablaze. And it is arrogant to suppose that there is anything new online not explained by existing theory. I shall be astonished if some reviewer of the book, unimpressed, does not crack wise: "what is new in the book is not sound, and what is sound in this book is not new."²

Yet more arrogance: I position sociology as the nemesis of economics and of the individualistic psychology on which it rests. I mean exactly Nemesis, in the usage of Greek myth; this word is not some synonym for opponent, plucked off the thesaurus page. A nemesis is a corrective, brought into being by hubris and over-reaching, an inevitable snap-back that restores order. The operation of nemesis is not commutative. Economics cannot be the nemesis of sociology in America today, because sociology is too minor and obscure and weakly established. Economics, by contrast, especially in business academia where I spent my career, can invoke a nemesis, because it has waxed so full during Late Capitalist times.³

In this book I violate the scholarly style expected of a social scientist. The language is too literary and too relaxed; metaphor replaces math. I have two reasons for transgressing. The first is simply because I can, here in a book; I grew so pained by the Procrustean bed of journal style! My second motive is to guide consumer sociology—a discipline that does not yet exist—down one path not another. Traditional sociologists are infamous for writing badly. To fish out a quote from Talcott Parsons has been the easy way to win a Bad Writing contest (although postmodernists now vie for the honor). English translations of Simmel's German don't read much better. And when Lanham (2006b, p.47) needed a passage so darkly twisted that it could not be resuscitated, even by his Paramedic Method, a sociologist was there for him. The new consumer sociology must not repeat

the mistakes of the old sociology. It is no accident that sociology has been eclipsed within the social sciences.

The pitfalls that dogged past sociological writing are not incidental. The risk of writing badly in sociology is not just an instance of a widely shared affliction, as Billig (2013) or Lanham (2006b) or Pinker (2014) might argue. The risk is specific to the topics that comprise sociology. It is hard to write well about its subject: collectivity. In physical science we write about tangible things, and formulate matter in math. In psychology, although the subject is intangible, we all have a reference psyche to use as a touchstone. In sociology, there is neither tangible anchor nor immediate referent: none of us is a collectivity, nor can collectivity be touched or prodded. So we start using words like collectivity, which must wrinkle the reader's brow; and from there to the metastasized prose of a Talcott Parsons is but a short step.

Physics has math, and psychology has me and you. Sociology has got nothing, and verbiage flows like lava from that rent, a hot stifling congealment that petrifies even the willing reader. The problem is endemic, and has to be confronted if consumer sociology is to flourish. My solution is to play with language, to channel off the magma of abstraction. On occasion I use set-piece metaphors, as in this paragraph. That may be the worst of my scholarly sins. Since the dawn of modern science and the banishment of rhetoric (Bender and Wellbery 1990; Lanham 2006a), metaphor has been illegitimate, bastard knowledge perverted at its root, the Benedict Arnold of social science, Aaron Burr under the scholarly saddle, murderous and larcenous of truth, to be scorned and shunned. However, if we want to glimpse what is proper to sociology, and speak about it clearly, there is no escape from metaphor. I'll return to these matters in a short Epilogue on assimilating Foucault.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The first essay discusses fashion blogs, and uses ideas from Pierre Bourdieu to illuminate the success enjoyed by some bloggers. The key concept is cultural capital—now a familiar term in some circles, but an enduring puzzle elsewhere. I tie cultural capital back to longstanding debates about taste, and forward to blogging, where fashion blogs reveal a megaphone effect. With the Web as megaphone, ordinary people can reach a mass audience, one instance of what Turner (2010) calls the demotic turn in mass media.

The second essay examines online reviews. To keep the topic tractable I focus on restaurant reviews on Yelp, a leading hosting site. Here the antagonistic, sociology-as-nemesis positioning is strong. Economists think

they have a perfectly good explanation for why online reviews exploded. Psychologists have a plethora of theories to explain the motivation of reviewers. Neither of these disciplines lays a glove on it, because restaurants are taste goods—as are reviews themselves. I hark back to an old distinction introduced by the German sociologist Tönnies: the difference between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, sometimes translated as the difference between a community of intimates and loose association among strangers (and a wonderful example of the obfuscatory tropism that bedevils sociology). Of course, there are more than two basic types of social formations, to use Simmel's term (Gronow 1997). The essay develops a typology of social formations, and situates Yelp as an instance of a new social formation: the Web-based public (Warner 2002). Later I consider the institutional logics needed for the smooth functioning of a corporate-hosted, Web-based public. Trust is a big problem there.

The third essay looks at Pinterest: a digital scrapbooking site where millions of ordinary consumers are busy acquiring and possessing images from around the Web. I draw on Walter Benjamin to set the scene, and argue that Pinterest enables the demotic consumption of immaterial goods. With a nod to Matthew Arnold, I describe how Pinterest became a site for taste discovery, and consider the implications of assuming that ordinary consumers do not know their own taste.

In a more traditional and less promotional era, before keyword search ran riot, this book could have been titled *Three Essays on Consumer Taste*. Ideas about taste provide the unifying theme. Consumers online navigate new vicissitudes of taste. Taste can pry the consumer loose from the clutches of economists, psychologists, and anthropologists, and clear a space for sociology.

The parts are called essays because historically, this is the most freeform of non-fiction genres, and elements of this book are very freeform. Because each essay covers a great deal of ground, the risk is real that the reader may get bewildered, and lose the thread. To forestall confusion, I've resorted to two formatting devices. I make liberal use of subheadings, and all the subheadings in an essay are listed at its beginning, so the reader knows where the essay will go. Second, to keep the main narrative moving forward, while taking a multifaceted approach, I've exported some topics to boxed text. If interested, you can depart from the main narrative and read a gloss, or an aside, or a brief description of method, data, and even a bibliographical essay; or you can just skip these boxes, and maybe come back later. I got this template from Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction*.⁴

I avoid scare quotes. The first draft of this introduction was full of them, out of an urgent need to make the reader focus on the words I use and just what I mean by them. Pinker (2014) talked me off that ledge; quote marks

that remain were re-inserted by the copy editor. Sometimes you may trip over a word because of the frustrated expectation of seeing scare quotes. That momentary pause will serve the purpose just as well. So be careful, dear reader: this isn't a podcast, but a repeatedly revised written work, by a scholar who made his reputation in rhetoric (McQuarrie and Mick 1996), and isn't chary to wield what he learned there. If you haven't read Richard Lanham, you have idea not, that which I.⁵

Another feature of the style, which I learned from Billig (2013), is an excess of commas, some of them oddly placed, their usage not wrong exactly, even in Sister Bernadette's class, but not right either, so that those who misremember Strunk and White's dictum as "omit needless commas," will surely balk. I do it for clarity and for rhythm, so that you can breathe what I wrote, the better to understand.

Last, I was reading Pinker (2014) and Billig (2013) while writing, and then went back to Williams (1990), and on to Lanham (2006b).⁶ Their cautions were liberating, loosening the grip of hoary conventions, but also a rap on the knuckles, a spur to use short words and choose verbs over nouns. Although I will disagree with Billig (2013) on one big point (see the Epilogue), his book was like the slap of a master, to wake the dozing acolyte. I grew ashamed of my tendency, when younger, to seek the sonorous orotundity of the polysyllabulary. I see now how it gets in the way. Then Lanham and Williams beat me up. If I healed well, you will never glimpse the tiresome verbosity of early drafts. Apologies, if attempts to be crisp come across as abrupt.

The book was enormously engaging for me to write. I hope it works for you in the reading.

NOTES

1. There are exceptions, of course, prominent among whom are Douglas Holt and Craig Thompson, who have published copiously in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. Although I follow in their footsteps temporally, I think you will find that, for better or worse, I do not follow them conceptually. The situation is better in Britain, where Colin Campbell and Alan Warde, among others, have contributed to a consumer sociology. Nonetheless, most journal papers that address the consumer do so from within psychology.
2. This has to be one of the oldest slams used to reject the scholarship of others, dating back at least to Lewis Mumford, seen recently in Goldthorpe's (2007) takedown of Bourdieu, and if my own experience on the receiving end is representative, remains a staple of journal reviewing. It nicely captures that distaste for the new so characteristic of scholars every when.
3. Although after reading McCloskey (2010), perhaps I flatter myself, with this talk of nemesis. In this assault on economic theory, I am rallying bowmen at Agincourt, while she hits the beaches at Normandy. The disproportion in rhetorical force is about that large.

4. I've also inserted a couple of dozen endnotes. I could not see writing an essay on Web behavior without simulating the hyperlinked aspect of Web text. Consider the boxed text to be like an on-page bookmark, and these notes to be mouse-triggered pop-ups. My promise: an endnote never just gives a bibliographic citation; these are inserted parenthetically in the main text. An endnote offers an aside for the interested, to motivate the labor of paging to the back.
5. This note confirms that wasn't a typo. Interesting, I thought, that my copy of Word put no squiggly green line under this aberrant sentence.
6. Thomas and Turner (2011) had an even more salutary effect, in weeding out meta-discourse and like verbiage. I mention them only in a note, because the ideology behind their classic style troubles me. Is anyone else bothered, that the acme of classic style is said to be a field guide for identifying birds? Can the visual metaphor that underwrites classic style work for gustatory explorations? And why ignore Lanham's work on style?