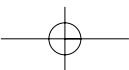
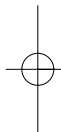
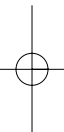


# Consumer Culture and Postmodernism



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# Consumer Culture and Postmodernism

2nd edition

Mike Featherstone

 **SAGE Publications**  
Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore

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First published 2007

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SAGE Publications Ltd  
1 Oliver's Yard  
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London EC1Y 1SP

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Thousand Oaks, California 91320

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Mathura Road  
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd  
33 Pekin Street #02-01  
Far East Square  
Singapore 048763

**Library of Congress Control Number: 2007922932**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4129-1013-2  
ISBN 978-1-4129-1014-9 (pbk)

Typeset by C&M Digital (P) Ltd., Chennai, India  
Printed in Great Britain by [to be supplied]  
Printed on paper from sustainable resources

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## Preface to the First Edition

I first became interested in consumer culture in the late 1970s. The stimulus was the writings of members of the Frankfurt School and other proponents of Critical Theory which were featured and discussed so well in journals like *Telos* and *New German Critique*. The theories of the culture industry, reification, commodity fetishism and the instrumental rationalization of the world directed attention away from a focus on production towards consumption and processes of cultural change. These various conceptualizations were particularly helpful to me in understanding an area which has long been under-theorized – at least in terms of attention directed at it by social and cultural theorists – the study of ageing. Despite the important theoretical problems it raises in terms of the intersection of lived time and historical time, the generational experience, the relationship of body and self, etc., it was clear that few attempts had been made to explore these problems in relation to substantive processes of cultural change. The writing of critical theorists and others (especially Ewen, 1976) seemed to provide a useful bridge by directing attention to the role of the media, advertising, images, the Hollywood ideal, etc., and raised the question of their effects on identity formation and everyday practices. At this time I was writing a book with Mike Hepworth (Hepworth and Featherstone, 1982) on the redefinition of middle age as a more active phase of ‘middle youth’, and an explanation which pointed to the development of new markets and the extension of active consumer-culture lifestyles with their emphasis upon youth, fitness and beauty to this group seemed plausible. This became explicitly formulated in a paper entitled ‘Ageing and inequality: Consumer Culture and the Redefinition of Middle Age’ presented at the 1981 British Sociological Association Conference (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1982). It was followed by a more theoretical piece ‘The Body in Consumer Culture’ (Featherstone, 1982) and subsequently a special issue of the journal *Theory, Culture & Society* on Consumer Culture in 1983.

Today while there has been a steady growth of interest in, and use of the term, ‘consumer culture’, the theories of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and other critical theorists are no longer accorded great significance. Their approach is often presented as an elitist critique of mass culture which draws upon what are now regarded as dubious distinctions between real and pseudo individuality and true and false needs. They are generally regarded as looking down on the debased mass culture and as having little sympathy for the integrity of the popular classes’ pleasures. The latter position has been strongly

endorsed by the swing to postmodernism. Yet despite the populist turn in analyses of consumer culture some of the questions raised by the critical theorists such as 'how to discriminate between cultural values', 'how to make aesthetic judgements', and their relation to the practical questions of 'how we should live', it can be argued have not actually been superseded but have merely been put aside.

Of interest here is the reflexive point which emerges most strongly in the chapters on postmodernism: the question of relevance: how and why we choose a particular frame of reference and evaluative perspective. If the study of consumption and concepts such as consumer culture manage to push their way into the mainstream of social science and cultural studies conceptual apparatus, what does this mean? How is it that the study of consumption and culture – both incidentally until recently previously designated as derivative, peripheral' and feminine, as against the centrality which was accorded to the more masculine sphere of production and the economy – are granted a more important place in the analysis of social relations and cultural representations? Is it that we have moved to a new stage of intra- or inter-societal organization in which both culture and consumption play a more crucial role? Variants of this thesis can be found in the writings of Bell, Baudrillard and Jameson which are discussed in this volume. Yet in addition to this plausible assumption that we have moved into a stage of 'capitalism' (consumer capitalism), 'industrialization' (post-industrial or information society) or 'modernity' (high modernity or postmodernity) which is sufficiently new and distinctive to warrant a new concept to redirect our attention, we must also face the possibility that it is not the 'reality' which has changed, but our perception of it. This latter viewpoint is captured in the epigram by Max Weber which heads the final chapter 'Each sees what is in his own heart.' We therefore need to investigate the processes of conceptualization and de-formation amongst cultural specialists (artists, intellectuals, academics and intermediaries), This directs our attention towards the particular processes which take place within the specialist cultural field and its various subfields: the struggles between established and outsider groups to monopolize and stabilize symbolic hierarchies. It is only by attempting to understand the changing practices interdependencies and power balances of culture specialists which influence the production of specialist culture, in the restricted sense of cultural models, interpretations, conceptual apparatuses, pedagogies and commentaries, that we can better understand our modes of perception and evaluation of culture 'out there'. This problem, that of the interrelationship between the changing nature of the various specialist formulations of culture and the various regimes of signification and practices which make up the fabric of everyday lived culture is not only important in understanding the swing towards positive and negative evaluations of mass, popular and consumer cultures. but also, I would argue, is central to the understanding of postmodernism. In my case, my interest in postmodernism was the outgrowth of the problems encountered in attempting to understand consumer culture, and the need to explore the direct links

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made between consumer culture and postmodernism by Bell, Jameson, Baudrillard, Bauman and others.

A number of the chapters in this volume therefore also illustrate my concern to come to terms with the perplexing set of problems posed by the rise of the postmodern. They attempt to investigate the post modern not only as a cultural movement (postmodernism) produced by artists, intellectuals and other cultural specialists, but also inquire into how this restricted sense of postmodernism relates to alleged broader cultural shifts in everyday experiences and practices which can be deemed postmodern. This relationship cannot merely be assumed to be one in which cultural specialists play a passive role as particularly well-attuned receivers, articulators and interpreters of signs and traces of cultural change. Their active role and interest in educating and forming audiences which become sensitized to interpreting particular sets of experiences and artefacts via the label postmodern, must also be investigated. This also points to the salience of the changing interdependencies and power struggles between cultural specialists and other groups of specialists (economic, political, administrative and cultural intermediaries) which influence their capacity to monopolize and de-monopolize knowledge, means of orientation and cultural goods. In short we need to ask not only the question 'what is the postmodern?' but why and how we are concerned with this particular question. We need, therefore, to inquire into the conditions of possibility for the positive reception of the concept of the postmodern and its emergence as a powerful cultural image, irrespective of the actual cultural changes and social processes which some would wish to foreground as evidence of the postmodern. the alleged shift beyond the modern.

While it may be quite legitimate to work from a high level of abstraction and label a particular large slice of Western history as 'modernity', defined in terms of a specific set of characteristics, and then assume that we have moved away from this core towards something else, as yet ill-defined, there is the danger that, the more the opposite set of features initially formulated as the negativity of modernity is considered, the more it begins to take on a tantalizing life of its own and seems to be made real. Those whose gaze was formerly directed by images and figures of order, coherence and systematic unity, now learn to look through new cognitive frameworks emphasizing disorder, ambiguity and difference. It is then not a large step towards 'postmodernity': a term which carries the weight of a fundamental epochal shift which becomes accorded credibility with a set of deductions from equally speculative terminology such as post-industrial or information society listed to support it. There is nothing wrong with high level speculative theory except if it becomes presented and legitimated as having surpassed, or succeeded in discrediting the need for, empirical research. Unfortunately this would sometimes seem to have happened with the term 'postmodern' and its family of associates. In effect some would argue that the implications of postmodernism are that we must seek to discredit and abandon the old methodologies and not attempt to account for the



postmodern, rather we should practise postmodernism and formulate a postmodern sociology.

A central intention then in this volume is to understand how postmodernism has arisen and become such a powerful and influential cultural image. This is not to assume that postmodernism is merely a deliberate 'artificial' construct of disaffected intellectuals out to increase their own power potential, far from it. Rather it is to raise questions about the production, transmission and dissemination of knowledge and culture. The various chapters also take the experiences and practices designated as postmodernism seriously and seek to investigate and comprehend the range of phenomena associated with this category. Yet, once we focus on actual experiences and practices, it is clear that there are similarities between these alleged postmodern experiences and practices and many of those designated as modern (in the sense of *modernité*), and even pre-modern. This should therefore direct us away from some of the simple dichotomies and trichotomies suggested by the terms 'tradition', 'modern' and 'postmodern' and also lead us to consider similarities and continuities in experiences and practices which can effectively be regarded as trans-modern (and its associated category: *transmodernité*). It is such theoretical issues, the problems of conceptualization and definition necessary to comprehend the alleged salience or expansion of the role of culture within contemporary societies which make the question of the postmodern so intriguing.

Such theoretical questions about the relationship of culture to society, which imply that we have too long operated with an overtly social conception of social structures and suggest that our general conception of culture is in need of major revision, have emerged in the 1980s. Indeed it is difficult to separate the question of the postmodern from the noticeable rise of interest in theorizing culture, which has propelled it from a peripheral status towards the centre of the various academic fields. This has also been reflected in the attention we have given to postmodernism in *Theory, Culture & Society* in a number of special issues. Our attention in the first place was directed towards the 'debates' between Habermas and Foucault which prompted me to construct a special issue of *TCS* around the question of 'The Fate of Modernity' (1985, 2(3)). It became clear in the planning of this issue and the subsequent response that the question of postmodernism needed a much broader and fuller treatment. This occurred in the double special issue on 'Postmodernism' (1988, 5(2-3)). I recall a good deal of scepticism at the time about whether postmodernism was merely a passing fad or fashionable theme of short duration. Postmodernism has surely now outlived the duration of a fad, and shows signs of remaining a powerful cultural image for some time yet. This is a very good reason for social scientists and others to be interested in it. Yet whether from this impulse there emerge useful social scientific conceptualizations of the postmodern which can be integrated into the current conceptual armoury, or even surpass it and point to the emergence of, or need for, new modes of conceptualization and cognitive frameworks, remains to be seen. As it stands, we cannot but welcome

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the emergence of the postmodern for the range of social and cultural theoretical problems it has thrown up.

I would like to thank all my colleagues and friends involved in *Theory, Culture & Society* for their help and encouragement in putting together this book. In particular I have discussed many of the ideas at length with Mike Hepworth, Roland Robertson and Bryan S. Turner and I much appreciate their support. I would also like to acknowledge the encouragement and help of Stephen Barr, Zygmunt Bauman, Steve Best, Josef Bleicher, Roy Boyne, David Chaney, Norman Denzin, the late Norbert Elias, Jonathan Friedman, the late Hans Haferkamp, Doug Kellner, Richard Kilminster, Arthur Kroker, Scott Lash, Hans Mommaas, Stephen Menell, Carlo Mongardini, Georg Stauth, Friedrich Tenbruck, Willem van Reijen, Andy Wernick, Cas Wouters and Derek Wynne, with whom I've discussed many of the issues raised in this volume. In addition I must mention the generous support given by my colleagues in the Department of Administrative and Social Studies at Teesside Polytechnic and in particular the role of Laurence Tasker and Oliver Coulthard who provided the institutional support and encouragement which has helped to make *Theory, Culture & Society* a viable journal, and has been so crucial in nourishing and sustaining my interest in the postmodern. I would also like to thank Jean Connell, Marlene Melber and the Data Preparation Section for so patiently keying in the many versions of the various chapters.

The chapters have appeared in the following previous versions:

- 1 'Modern and Postmodern: Definitions and Interpretations' was given at seminars at Goldsmiths' College, London University in February 1988, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario in March 1988 and at the Amalfi European Prize for Sociology Conference in Amalfi, Italy in May 1988. A further version was given at the Centro de Investigacao y Estudos de Sociologia, Lisbon, June 1989. A version of it appeared as 'In Pursuit of the Postmodern', *Theory, Culture & Society* 5(2-3), 1988.
- 2 'Theories of Consumer Culture' is a revised version of the paper 'Perspectives on Consumer Culture' which first appeared in *Sociology*, 24(1), 1990.
- 3 'Towards a Sociology of Postmodern Culture' was presented at a seminar at Leeds University in May 1987 and at the European Sociological Theories Group Conference on Social Structure and Culture in Bremen in June 1987. It has appeared in H. Haferkamp (ed.), *Social Structure and Culture*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989 and in H. Haferkamp (ed.), *Sozial Struktur und Kultur*, Berlin: de Gruyter 1990.
- 4 'Cultural Change and Social Practice' was given at a workshop on the work of Fredric Jameson organized by Doug Kellner at the International Association for Literature and Philosophy Conference,, Lawrence, Kansas in May 1987. It was revised for publication in D. Kellner (ed.), *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, Washington: Maisonneuve Press, 1989.

- 5 'The Aestheticization of Everyday Life' was first given at the Popular Culture Association Conference, New Orleans in April 1988. It was also given at the Conference on Modernity as History, Copenhagen in September 1988 and at a seminar at Lund University, Sweden in October 1988. A version of it will appear in S. Lash and J. Friedman (eds), *Modernity and Identity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- 6 'Lifestyle and Consumer Culture' was first presented at the Conference on Everyday Life, Leisure and Culture at the University of Tilburg in December 1985. It appeared in Ernst Meijer (ed.), *Everyday Life: Leisure and Culture*, Tilburg 1987 and in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4(1), 1987.
- 7 'City Cultures and Postmodern Lifestyles' was presented at the 7th European Leisure and Recreational Association Congress on Cities for the Future, Rotterdam in June 1989. It has appeared in the post-congress volume *Cities for the Future*, edited by L.J. Meiresonne, The Hague: Stichting Recreatie, 1989.
- 8 'Consumer Culture and Global Disorder' was presented at the Conference on Religion and the Quest for Global Order, St Martin's, West Indies in October 1987. It will appear in W.R. Garrett and R. Robertson (eds), *Religion and the Global Order*, New York: Paragon House.
- 9 'Common Culture or Uncommon Cultures?' was first given at the Higher Education Foundation Conference on the Value of Higher Education, St Anne's College, Oxford in March 1989. A revised version has appeared in *Reflections on Higher Education*, 4 (Dec.), 1989.

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## Preface to the Second Edition

### Consumer Culture

It is now some fifteen years since *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* was published in 1991, with many of the original versions of the various chapters in the book having been written in the period 1983 to 1990. In the intervening period the stock of consumer culture has risen and postmodernism has fallen. Interest in consumer culture has gathered pace with the appearance of journals, book series, study groups, conferences, research programmes devoted to scrutinizing every aspect of the topic. At the same time postmodernism, has dropped out of site and is no longer a fashionable term, indeed for many it is decidedly *demodé*. The rise of consumer culture is perhaps surprising, given the lack of critical purchase the term had in sociology and cultural studies in the 1980s. For some the term needed to be treated with suspicion as it was linked to mass society theory. For those in British cultural studies it was associated with the culture industry analyses of Adorno and the Frankfurt School, or even worse the theories of reification and fetishism of commodities of Lukács, who was seen as discredited with the rise of interest in Althusser in the 1970s. Books like Stuart Ewen's *Captains of Consciousness: Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (1976) which was one of the first usages of the term consumer culture and Daniel Bell's *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) made little impact.

It was the conjunction of consumer culture with postmodernism that sparked a good deal of interest in investigating the actuality of the postmodern. The work of Frederic Jameson (1979, 1984a, 1984b) was particularly influential here. Postmodernism was seen as the cultural logic of late capitalism, the third stage of capitalism, that of the consumer society in the post Second World War era. In effect a consumer society was seen as a culturally saturated society, in which production was geared to consumption with the circulation of a 'surfeit of signs and images' giving rise to both a Disneyland simulational culture and 'a stylish promiscuity' which overloaded the traditional cultural sphere of literary and artistic production. Whereas for Jameson it was the new mass consumer culture which was destroying intellectual culture, for Bell (1976) it was the a section of the intellectual and artistic elite, those associated with the development of modernism in the 1920s, who he saw as legitimating the transgressive and hedonistic tendencies in the nascent consumer culture, turning people away from the 'puritan ethic.' Postmodernism came later, in the 1960s and was regarded as a more dangerous intensification of these transgressive tendencies.

In both cases postmodernism became associated with a consumer culture which was viewed negatively, the superficial hedonistic culture which either eroded the development of ethical, responsible active citizens needed to sustain democratic politics, or impeded the potential for people to imagine the alternative of a socialist future. Yet by the 1990s, consumer culture ceased to be viewed negatively by many people in sociology and cultural studies. The numbers of textbooks proliferates suggesting that consumer culture has become an increasingly popular undergraduate course. By the end of the decade we get the emergence of journals such as *Consumption, Markets and Culture* (1998-) followed by the *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2001-). Consumer culture also became legitimated as a research topic in the United Kingdom with the co-funded Economic and Social Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council's *Cultures of Consumption* programme of research initiated in 2002, which further spawned a series of seminars, exhibitions and publications.

Here we can identify a number of issues arising out of this new wave of researching and writing on consumer culture. Firstly, there has been a laudable expansion of scope and interdisciplinary focus. New histories and geographies of consumption provide an expanded sense of the multiple origins and trajectories of consumer culture around the world. There are, therefore now a growing number of detailed historical and contemporary studies of consumption outside the West, (see the discussion of the rise of consumer culture in China and Japan material in the new additional chapter in this book on 'Modernity and the Cultural Question').

Secondly, the question of the limits of consumer culture has been given sharper focus through the awareness of the finite resource base of consumption and the persistence and sharpening of global inequalities. It can be argued that the vision of abundance has been central to consumer culture in modernity. Increasingly since the 18th century in the West, science and technology have been seen as factors of production which along with the capacity for invention, have enabled the productive exploitation of nature and the expansion of the range of goods. Visions of abundance became associated with free of movement and social mobility and attached to particular symbolic and actual places, with 'America' becoming the key example from the final decades of the 19th century onwards and throughout much of the 20th century (see Ewen and Ewen, 1982; Leach, 1993; McGovern, 1998). The right to consumption became increasingly seen as the reward for industrial expansion. Modern living became associated with the endless supply of new goods, to furnish more efficient homes filled with 'labour saving' devices, along with the access to new styles and fashions, coupled with a greater emphasis upon 'personality' and the presentation of self via techniques of grooming and body maintenance. This vision of consumer culture as involving active lifestyle construction and bodily renewal became linked to mobility: the promise of social mobility and personal transformation, along with the freedom of physical mobility, the capacity to move in search of employment, leisure or new significant others. In the

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United States this coalesced around a particular form of mobility: automobility (Featherstone, 2004). Something which in the course of the 20th century restructured the pattern of urban development with new dispersed locations for the expanding service and tertiary sector; manifest in workplace (the industrial estate and business park, home (the suburbs), and consumption and leisure spaces (shopping centres and malls, holiday resorts, theme parks). The first cracks in this model of the postwar consumer society began to occur in the discussions of the limits to growth in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis, with successive events, especially global warming in the 1990s increasingly reinforcing this view.

It became clear that the consumer society has limits: it is also a risk society, not only accumulating new goods, but also new 'bads' (Beck, 1993, 1996). Not only global warming, but also BSE/mad cow's disease, genetically modified food, new viruses and superbugs. Yet despite the intermittent media scares over the generation of new risks and continuing concerns over global warming, the notion of a limited consumer society, or the transformation into a 'conservative society' has hardly fired the public imagination or brought forth new political strategies. While some politicians acknowledged the need to tackle the carbon dioxide emissions problem in the 1997 'Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change,' others have been reluctant to sign up to ecological policies if they risk jeopardizing the sustained economic growth which ensures their continued re-election. In addition there have been those in various parts of the world, who followed President Bush and have disputed the grounds of the problem, despite compelling evidence from the scientific community and high profile publicity campaigns, such as that mounted by Al Gore with his global warming movie and book *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). The movie was headlined on the US Fox News Channel in May 2006 with the question 'Al Gore's Global Warming Movie: Could it Destroy our Economy?' with a discussion in which some participants dismissed it in terms of 'hysteria' and 'socialist regulation.' Consumer culture and questions of sustainable consumption are clearly public sphere issues, yet we have to ask questions about the nature of the public sphere as it is a undoubtedly a mediatized and affective public sphere, an arena of segmentation and massification, of not just potential 'rational argument,' but of expression, invention and creation (Terranova, 2007).

### **Global Problems of Consumer Culture**

The promise of consumer culture is central to the expansion of the new Asian economies, in particular China and India, which have staved off the possibility of a severe global recession over the last decade. Yet, this expansion of consumer culture means more goods, more air travel, more waste, pollution and carbon dioxide emissions. This dimension of the politics of consumption pushes consumer culture onto the international political agenda, with

various national politicians seeking to engage in a tit-for-tat blame-game, or to deny the problem exists. Consumer culture, then is difficult to relinquish or scale down as it has become both a major source of industrial production and employment. In addition it is a key mode of legitimation, a visible sign of the economic success and standing of a nation-state. Curbing consumption is not a popular option which means politicians, seek out 'technological fix' solutions which will allow the economy to proceed at full speed, but somehow clean up or recycle pollution and waste. Hence, the interest in the development of nanotechnology and other new technologies which will allegedly produce waste-eating organisms, along with the interest in more efficient forms of power such as the hydrogen engine, or nuclear fusion energy (Cooper, 2006). If consumer culture is central to the contemporary neo-liberal increasingly globally integrated economies of nation-states, and politicians' electoral success depends upon economic growth, to seek to constrain consumption becomes the unpopular and potentially unelectable option.

As consumer culture globalizes, there is also the sense, then, of the planetary limits to consumption: that we are literally consuming the planet and our human future at an unsustainable rate (an argument made forcefully by James Lovelock (2006) in *The Revenge of Gaia*). There has, of course, been a long history of attempts to shackle and regulate consumption and develop a more ethical and morally responsible attitude, at every stage of the expansion of consumer culture (Sassatelli, 2006; McGovern, 2006). There have been various forms of religious asceticism and Puritanism and secular forms of regulation. Over the last decade a clearer notion of the consumer-citizen has emerged with the citizen defined as having rights to be a consumer, and the consumer defined as having responsibilities to ask questions about the consequences, risks and planetary costs of consumption. For example, it was reported recently that there are calls to extend the energy efficiency labelling of 'white goods' such as fridges to other goods, not just in terms of output (energy running costs) but also in terms of 'carbon costs,' the actual input of energy expended in their manufacture (Finch and Vidal, 2007). The comparison of different goods will provide interesting evidence and make for more difficult ethical judgements. Motor cars and personal computers are not too different on 'carbon costs,' contrary to the popular image of the former being a major polluter and the latter somehow being clean and benign.

As has been emphasised in this book, consumption cannot be regarded as merely hedonistic, expressive and impulsive, however much this features in the advertising and lifestyle imagery. It clearly involves consumers in calculation, comparisons and research: in short consumer culture involves knowledge. Not just knowledge of cost-efficient goods and bargains, or that of the connoisseur or taste-maker who know their wine, décor, restaurants and travel destinations, but also (especially in the new middle class) knowledge of the ethical background of goods. Consumer movements not only seek to regulate the safety and advertising claims of goods, but also to

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circulate information about the ethical practices of companies (companies with good work practices outside the West, those which avoid cruelty to animals, etc.) and where to buy 'fair trade' goods which support local producers. This is not to say that the ethical gesture on the part of the consumer, is merely a cost, for it can also be displayed as a sign of virtue, of a particular form of ethically consistent conduct (see Featherstone, 1995), which is not immune from being classified by others as only another clever move in the unavoidable round of distinction games. Likewise 'good citizen' actions by retailers and manufactures, as we find in the announcements of 'carbon cost' labelling and emission controls by British supermarket and retail chains such as Tesco and Marks & Spencer in January 2007.

The success in Britain and Europe in the late 1990s of consumer campaigns to persuade supermarkets to label the genetically modified content of food and other goods, is an important episode in the politics of consumption, but by no means the final chapter. In addition, the intensification of circulation of information through the Internet, email lists, blogs etc., means that there is also greater knowledge about the manufacture of goods in the sweatshops of the Global South. The working conditions, low pay and lack of employment rights and protection of those who are subjected to the new forms of compound and indented labour, casts a shadow over the lifestyle advertising and brand images of everyday consumer culture goods such as trainers and jeans, turning hidden conditions of production into an ethical and political issue (Bender and Greenwald, 2003; Brecher and Costello, 1994; Klein, 2001). The highly publicised protests against the World Trade Organization new rounds of global deregulation which occurred in Seattle, Cancún and other places, has also further politicised the act of consumption. These tendencies make people more aware of the network of dependencies, by which consumption is tied to global inequalities. This was one of the driving forces behind the World Social Forum, with its vision that 'another world is possible,' a viable alternative to neo-liberal corporate globalization. The WSF has sought to develop networks and dialogue between a motley array of labour, feminist, new social movements, charity and religious groups largely from the south to explore new forms of global public sphere and civil society participation and democratization (Fisher and Ponniah, 2003; Santos, 2006; Patomäki, 2006; Patomäki and Teivainen, 2004).

In short, consumption can no longer be seen as an innocent act, but as part of the chains of interdependencies and networks which bind people together across the world in terms of production, consumption and also the accumulation of risks. Yet, however much there is a perceived political dimension to consumption and cosmopolitan potential to unite people together through their common human condition in the face of global risks and planetary dangers, consumer culture has become too firmly established as part of the taken-for-granted value assumptions of the contemporary age for it to be easily modified, or discarded altogether. If there is an emergent global culture,



consumer culture has to be seen as a central part of this field. An additional problem with cosmopolitan virtue, is that it can be seen as merely the advocacy of a particular version of cosmopolitanism, such as that associated with market trader cultures, or the European Kantian ideal, which doesn't sufficiently take into account Chinese, Indian, Islamic and other cosmopolitanism traditions (Featherstone, 2001; Cheah, 2006). There is no guarantee that the current international discussions about global warming and the need to regulate consumption will produce a consensus and concerted action.

Diminishing expectations do not sit easily with consumer culture values. If, as in the current phase, the real income of workers in various parts of the Western world, in particular United States, is threatened by the movement of jobs to Asia, notably India and China, then the right to consumption, to be a consumer-citizen becomes a political issue of another order. It is in this context that people start to speak about 'The End of the American Dream' (*BBC News Website*, 4 September 2005), at a time when the United States economy fails to sustain growth in real income levels despite major productivity increases by workers. Certainly the international context is one in which the Washington Consensus, the world economic order which underpins the economic globalization which fuels consumer culture, is under threat. There has even been talk of a new Beijing Consensus, premised on the rise of China which could steer the global economy in a different direction (*The Economist*, September 16, 2006). This suggests that in the longer term, the capacity of the United States to sustain its global military dominance in the face of the rise of Asia and 'the long war against terrorism' becomes more problematic. The difficulties of continuing to hold onto its 'state of exception' status (Malik, 2006), to continue to seek to steer the world in line with US political, economic and cultural objectives in this new context, has the danger of producing within the United States a strong nationalism with civilizational and Christian religious overtones – what William Connolly (2007) refers to as 'The Christo-Capitalist Assemblage.'

The above mentioned threat to the capacity to sustain income levels in the working classes in the West in face of the relocation and migration of jobs to cheaper labour markets is driven by the dynamic of neo-Liberal economic globalization (Featherstone, 2001, 2006). The neo-Liberal pact which became established in the 1980s initially in the United States and Britain, which has subsequently become globalized, provided a package of welfare state cuts, governmental deregulation of financial markets and other bodies, introduction of measurable assessment, competition and league tables for government funded bodies such as universities, hospitals etc., along with low rates of income tax and the promise of economic growth. One consequence has been the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor within Western societies, but also globally too. According to a global study from the World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations the richest 1 percent of the world's population owns 40 percent of the planet's wealth. The richest 10 percent own over 85 percent of the world's

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assets, with over half the world's population owning barely 1 percent of the global wealth. This is a world in which over 800 million people go to bed hungry every night (Randerson, 2006). That those at the top end of the scale are able to increase their wealth more rapidly than people at the bottom is confirmed by *Forbes Magazine*, which mentions that there were 140 billionaires in the world 1986, 476 in 2003 and 793 in 2006. Their combined wealth amounts to \$2.6 trillion in December 2006 – up 18 percent since March 2006. They not only have a greater capacity to increase their capital accumulation, but to retain a level of invisibility in national surveys, and of course national income tax payments (see Parenti, 2002; Venn, 2006).

This is the world given over to 'liquid modernity,' (Bauman, 2000) and 'the new capitalism' (Sennett, 1999, 2006), in which capital and capitalists are mobile and have a much weaker sense of attachment to place and responsibility for local others. This diminished sense of local attachment has been referred to as 'the revolt of the elites,' (Lasch, 1996). At the bottom end, there are not only those who go hungry already mentioned above, but the dwellers in the expanding array of shantytowns in the urban areas and megacities of the global South. According to Mike Davis (2006:2) the 2006 urban population of 3.2 billion will expand to 10 billion by 2050, with almost all the growth in cities. Over 95 percent of this growth will occur in the urban areas of developing countries. This slum growth in the South, is most marked in Africa (Simone, 2004). The explosion of megacities outside the West, not only problematizes many of our assumptions about urban development, the 'slumification of the world' provides important challenges for consumer cultural analysis to understand different circuits of consumption.

The other point to note about the growth in the number of billionaires is the example they set for consumer culture lifestyles. The *Forbes* website has a section on lifestyle with details of luxury homes (you can take a photographic tour of the homes of 15 of the world's richest people), most expensive cars, megayachts, most expensive private islands, and how to travel like a billionaire (private jet, helicopter etc.). Luxury, is of course no stranger to consumer culture, and indeed, the visibility of luxury outside court societies, in the merchant groups in Asia as well as Europe can be seen as an important dynamic in developing the concern for new goods and a fashion system which drew in other groups (see discussion in new chapter on 'Modernity and the Cultural Question' in this new edition; also Burke, 1993; Berry, 1994; Berg and Clifford, 1999). It has been argued that today, as the pull of place and local status hierarchies diminish, the visibility of luxury in the media becomes a more potent reference point for people. Certainly the lifestyles of the rich and upper middle classes attract attention and television provides endless programmes which revolve around the improvement and furnishing of a stylish home, purchase of a second home, holiday planning, cars, fashion, celebrity events. The programmes endeavour to strike a balance between the interest in the lifestyles of celebrities, the new rich and the upper middle class, and the endeavours of 'ordinary people,' who seek improvement and transformation on a tight budget.

The concept of transformation is still central to consumer culture, with magazines, advertising and television presenting an endless range of material on the transformation of lifestyle, living space, relationships, identities and of course, bodies (Featherstone, 1998, 1999). The body is presented as the central vehicle to the consumer culture good life: the source of pleasurable sensations which must be 'looked after,' (maintained, repaired and improved). Yet the body is also understood in terms of its image, as the visible indicator of the self, hence the attention given to 'the look,' (presentation, grooming, style). Celebrities, the new rich and middle class are presented as enjoying access to a whole array of personal body services. In the television transformation programmes 'ordinary' young adults and middle aged people are guided through rigorous fitness regimes, cosmetic surgery, learning make-up and body grooming, clothing sense and deportment to fit them out as a new person able to 'look ten years younger' (Featherstone, 1982, 2007). Yet for the vast majority of the less affluent in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, with obesity levels hitting the 20-30 percent band, to successfully engage in such transformation regimes can seem impossibly distant goals. At the same time it is possible to point to World Health Organization data which shows that obesity levels in France are less than 7 percent, and in Japan they are much smaller still. Clearly, we cannot assume there is a common global consumer culture with uniform effects.

At the same time, if the tendencies noted by Reich (2006) with reference to the United States continue, then we can expect a further expansion of wealth in the top layers of the social structure and a shrinking of the middle layers, as well as shifts within the working class from manufacturing jobs to services. Specifically, he notes that symbol analysts (university educated knowledge professionals such as lawyers, engineers, accountants, journalists) have expanded to make up 20 percent of the workforce. But this group is suffering a decline in relation to what he refers to as the global symbol analysts (CEOs and CFOs of global corporations, and partners and executives in global investment banks, law firms and consultancies). The current tendency is a relative decline in income levels of the national as against the global symbol analysts, with the ones in the West facing greater competition from the expanding numbers of English-speaking graduates in China, India and other parts of the world. Most global symbolic analysts have been educated at elite universities and can work in English (unlike their national counterparts), as well as being at home moving around the circuit of global cities. They also help fuel the army of migrating service workers (cleaners, cooks, nannies, sex workers, many of them women) at the bottom end of the workforce. This latter group expands as a result of the outsourcing of service work from those in the middle and upper levels and includes the legions of maids who are on short term contracts with very limited employment rights (Cheah, 2007; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003).

These tendencies are producing a more complex global consumer culture. New levels of luxury are evident at the top end of the social structure with a good deal of celebration of the lifestyles and consumption patterns of the

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rich. But for those below, who watch the celebrity and elite consumption in the media, their consumption is more the consumption of dreams, plus the occasional purchases of cheaper scaled-down luxuries. Financial institutions constantly bombard consumers in the United States, Britain and other countries, to sign up for easily accessible credit. Debt has long ceased to have the pejorative overtones it carried in 19<sup>th</sup> century moral tale novels. Asceticism, rationing and self-control do not fit well with consumer culture imagery of the good life. Credit became more readily available from the 1920s onwards in the United States as advertisers strove to overcome Puritan restraint and saving (Ewen, 1976). In the 1950s William White in his bestselling *Organization Man* (1956) reminded readers that 'thrift is now un-American' (Belk, 2004:80). Today, both national governments and individual consumers are encouraged to borrow excessively. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that this is a universal tendency on the one hand, or that economies or the planet can sustain an overall American-style consumer culture in the long-run, on the other. Certainly if we look at consumer culture in Japan it reveals a very different pattern, having a long history of sustained urban consumption and leisure with department stores, cinemas, dance halls, cafés, magazines and advertising developing in the 1920s (Tamari, 2006). Thrift and saving have always been central to modern Japanese consumer culture and it has proved exceedingly difficult to stimulate the economy with cheap credit, as attempted on a regular basis in the aftermath of the collapse of the 1980s bubble economy. This lack of enthusiasm for American-style consumption based on consumer debt and credit card spending, not only is evident in Japan and other parts of Asia, but also in France, Germany, and Italy and other Europe countries (Garon and MacLachlan, 2006).

There is, then, a greater awareness today of the costs of consumer culture, of the unsustainable implications of the generalization of the United States model to the rest of the world. The expansion of the Chinese and Indian economies are already bringing home the prospect of the growing ecological footprint of this third of humanity (see WWF Living Planet Report, 2000 for discussion of ecological footprints and the 3.5 planets needed if everyone in the world consumed like Americans). Yet as we have already mentioned above, the 'crisis' is by no means guaranteed to be recognised as such by all, or agreement reached, or solutions proffered. Few people are willing to contemplate reigning in their own consumption, to sacrifice for others, either on a personal or nation-state level. Western economies may well be obsessed with a 'growth fetish,' yet it is hard to imagine a return to a 'stationary state' or move to a 'post-growth society' as advocated in the past by John Stuart Mill, Maynard Keynes and others (Hamilton, 2003). Certainly it means abandoning the obsession with realising the 'dreams of abundance,' which was central to twentieth century American society as it sought to leave behind forever the 'era of scarcity' (Lears, 1998: 453). Yet rather than abandon the notion of abundance, Lears (1998: 466) argues, we should consider the cultivation of 'psychic abundance,' and 'seek to abolish time famine and to create genuine leisure by abandoning obsessions with

productivity.' This takes us into the debates about the 'art of living,' and the various modes of care of the self, ethical conduct and 'sociality with things,' which could provide alternatives to our high material consumption, mobility and travel, way of life (Featherstone, 1992, 1995).

Yet, not all consumption needs to involve the consumption of material goods, and not all fascination with new sensations and invention needs to be fed through the commodity market process. The Internet and new forms of communications technology have started to open up the potential for greater immaterial consumption (this is based on the notion of immaterial labour developed by Tarde and others; see discussion in Lazzarato, 2007; Terranova, 2007; Toscano 2007). When we read a book, we use, or 'consume' something which is still available for others and involves little additional energy or cost. Public libraries are institutions based upon this model, as are the various forms of free and commercial downloads of information, images, movies and data from the Internet. Consumer culture necessarily promotes ambivalence, it offers a world beyond scarcity and hardship, the dream of abundance, yet its *modus operandi* is through the commodity form, the calculus of monetary value. It encourages a calculating hedonism, a cost-benefit analysis of pleasure, time and other people. Yet it also encourages a calculus of public policies, the consequences of growth, along with the costs to other forms of life and the planet, of our actions.

### Life after Postmodernism...

Postmodernism has fared less well over the last 20 years than consumer culture in the social sciences and humanities. This is hardly unexpected, as the opening chapter on 'The Pursuit of the Postmodern' indicates, from the very start there were many who proclaimed it to be a short-run fad and were already talking about 'post-postmodernism'. Yet, there continues to be an interest in postmodernity. As this book firmly suggests there is need to distinguish carefully between the different filiation lines of the various members of the family of terms which spring from the postmodern. The key influential terms was of course postmodernism, an intellectual and artistic movement with clear social roots. To scale up the attribution of the characteristics associated with postmodernism to an epochal shift, has always seemed problematic. The discovery of the dynamics, the 'where, when, who and how many,' of the postmodern, when defined as a mode of experience or set of practices that can be attributed to specific groups of people and pinned down in time and space, has always been challenging. Nevertheless, various definitions of postmodernity have been made and some researchers see it is having been clearly established through empirical research which provides evidence that the advanced societies are going through a process of 'postmodernization,' through the spread of post-scarcity values (Ingelhardt, 1997). Like many variations of modernization theory, there is often the implicit assumption that researchers have discovered cutting edge cultural changes in 'advanced societies,' which will be replicated elsewhere around the world.

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There are, then, dangers that the postmodern will be read, as an extension of the modernization theory problematic. Johann Arnason (2001: 131), for example, writing in favour of 'multiple modernities,' notes that the 'idea of an ongoing and innovative pluralization of modernity is obviously incompatible with postmodernist positions, and it gives a specific twist to the critique of postmodernism: those who consigned modernity to the past based their claims on misguided notions of a uniform pattern embodied in a whole historical epoch' (the topic of multiple and alternative modernities is addressed in the new chapter in this book on 'Modernity and the Cultural Question'). Arnason's attempt to pluralize modernity and step down from the authority of higher level concepts and Eurocentric models of history is to be applauded. He goes on to tell us that the ideal of multiple modernities rules out the notion of globality as a general condition characteristic of a new epoch, and then outlines a number of criticisms of modernization theory and by implication postmodernization theory. These include: the move away from uniform structures to the recognition of greater diversity; the caution against the building of Northwest European 'vanguard' societies into basic concepts in favour of more historical exploration; the doubt that there can be a unifying project of modernity; that civilizational differences provide key differentiating factors amongst modernities. It is interesting to note that all these factors, bar perhaps the last one, would not be at all difficult to incorporate into many of the positions which thrived in the opening developed by postmodernism. Certainly those who work in social and cultural theory who draw upon the writings of Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, the postcolonial inspired writings of Chakrabarty, Mbembe, Said, Sakai, Spivak and others, would not find these positions problematic. Rather, the question would, I suspect, tend to revolve around the issue of what is at stake in the move from the conception of a singular modernity to multiple modernities or postmodernity/postmodernism. However much there has been an understandable reaction to 'anything goes' variants of postmodernism, it is important to recognise the productive side of the declassificatory orientation ushered in by the postmodern.

A key aspect of the unstable conceptual field opened up by the postmodern, then, is to question linear metanarratives and assumption of ordered historical development. There are clearly many genealogies of the postmodern and when one looks into its use in different societies around the world, the term fulfils different needs within particular local contexts (for a history of the postmodern see Bertens, 1995). To take the example of Japan, the postmodern became a short-lived fashionable term in the 1980s at the time of Japanese economic growth (the bubble economy) in which Japan threatened to outpace the United States and Japanese intellectuals and academics were delving into history to discover Japanese difference and distance Japan from the West: the 'always already' postmodern of Tokugawa Japan (Gluck, 1998; see discussion in the 'Modernity and the Cultural Question' chapter of this book). In China, postmodernism was introduced from the West through interest in the writings of Derrida, Foucault, Barthes and others in the 1980s. It was taken up as a strong critique of both the state modernization project and modernism,

which was also seen as legitimate. After 1989 postmodernism could be discussed more openly and after 1992 with the economic reforms and the development of consumer culture, postmodernism had a new space to develop in. The rapid expansion of the Chinese economy in the 1990s, the urbanization of Shanghai and Beijing, offered new postmodern architecture, the expansion of television and advertising media and consumer culture in general, led to a new sense of experience which could not be recovered into the traditional communist party vision of modernization (see Chen, 2006; also Dirlik and Zhang, 2000). The different use of postmodernism in both China and Japan, points to the importance of understanding the local context to get the sense of what is at stake in the term postmodernism, which although given global impetus, clearly has a wide range of local inflections around the world.

The Chinese example suggests an interesting sociology of knowledge account of the reception of postmodern. A process, which was incidentally furthered in its earlier phase by the regular visits of Frederic Jameson to Beijing which helped stimulate a new generation of Chinese intellectuals to read his works and influential ideas on postmodernism (Dirlik and Zhang, 2000: 1). It is also worth adding that the Chinese translation of this book, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, which was published in 2000, also proved timely not only in terms of its references to Western debates on postmodernism, which were useful background to the discussions in China, but also in terms of the chapters on consumer culture. The dramatic growth of the Chinese economy since the 1990s has encouraged the development of consumer culture within China and opened up many questions for intellectuals and academics about the direction Chinese society should take and both the critical potential and social limitations of consumer culture. The globalization process is making us more aware of the reception of works around the world and the changing structure of the global knowledge economy. If, as Naoki Sakai (2001) argues, theoretical knowledge can be seen as flowing out from Western centres and data flowing back from the rest of the world, this process is becoming more complex. Not only through the continuing expansion of Western knowledge institutions such as universities, publishing houses and media conglomerates to set up branches and franchises in the rest of the world, to cater for the growing global market for English-speaking symbol analysts Reich (2006) speaks about. But there are also signs of the emergence of other centres of knowledge production and formation around in the world, China being the most prominent example. The contemporary rise of China certainly poses interesting questions for Western- centred genealogies of modernity and threatens to declassify some of the disciplinary conceptual hierarchies.

### A New Sociology of Knowledge

This question of the various interests and power balances which structure the processes of global knowledge formation, has been one which has been taken

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up in recent years in *Theory, Culture & Society*, with the first volume of the *Theory, Culture & Society* New Encyclopaedia Project on Problematizing Global Knowledge published in 2006, as a TCS special issue. This is the first of a number of planned volumes which include: megacities, media, food, religion, consumer culture. The aim of the project is to use the encyclopaedia form to rethink the formation of knowledge under the impact of globalization and digitalization. These processes not only increase the storage, scope and speed of access to knowledge, making more content available. They also provide new opportunities to problematize existing disciplinary classifications by providing new spaces for counter-examples, dialogue and critical reflection. In effect they can encourage de-classification moves and challenges to the authority of existing knowledge (see Featherstone, 2006, Featherstone and Venn, 2006). The Problematizing Global Knowledge volume is interesting not only through the use of supplements, which deconstruct the authority of entries and provide additional content from different parts of the world, but for its theoretical reflection on knowledge. Many things have happened after postmodernism initiated a new wave of critical reflection on the formation of knowledge and culture in the 1980s. Postcolonialism in particular has deepened the critique of Eurocentric knowledge and sought to provide alternative genealogies of national and global histories (Chakrabarty, 2000; Houtondji, 2002; Mbembe, 2001; Venn, 2006). Other important theoretical tendencies which have been addressed within *Theory, Culture & Society*, include: complexity theory (Urry, 2005), Derridian deconstruction (Turner, 2005; Venn, 2005); posthumanism (Gane, 2006; Braidotti, 2006); the new vitalism, inspired by Deleuze, Negri and others which has led to a revival of interest in Henri Bergson (Fraser et al, 2005; Lash, 2005, Lazaratto, 2007; 2006; Olma, 2007; the recent attempt to develop a new Deleuzian-inspired philosophy of the social science by de Landa, 2006, also deserves mentioning). A number of pieces in the Problematizing Global Knowledge volume, notably those which deal with assemblage, event, the unclassifiable, translation, the knowledge apparatus, method, media theory, life, experience, global assemblage, global sovereignty and archive, favour a more processual and contingent theory of knowledge formation. Postmodernism, then may have been eclipsed in significance, yet the theoretical impulse it provided, has encouraged the search for alternative modes of critical knowledge formation.

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Given the period of time which has elapsed since the publication of *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, it was a pleasant surprise to be asked by Sage Publications to bring out a second edition. The book has sold well and has been translated into over ten languages, which suggests that a good number of people have found it useful. My involvement in the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*, which was started in 1982, has been central to the development of my ideas on postmodernism and the book clearly shows the influence of that heady 'adventure of ideas' in the first decade of the journal's life. As editor I



Preface to the Second Edition

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was able to indulge some of my own interests and the special issues on Consumer Culture (1983), the Fate of Modernity (1985) were direct outcomes of my interest in critical theory in the 1970s, albeit given a new inflection through the rise of postmodernism (double special issue 1988). Also significant influences was the interest in the body which developed specifically through my work with Mike Hepworth (Hepworth and Featherstone, 1982; Featherstone and Hepworth, 1982, 1991) and Bryan Turner (Featherstone, Hepworth & Turner, 1991) with regular papers featured on this topic in *Theory, Culture & Society*; this led to the development of the journal *Body & Society* in 1995. Globalization, was also an important influence in my writings in this book, which was brought into *Theory, Culture & Society* by Roland Robertson in the 1980s and featured in a number of articles prior to the influential special issue on *Global Culture* I edited in 1990 (Featherstone, 1990).

My ideas have been formed in the process of many discussions with the tremendous group of people, working in and around the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*. Especially those on the editorial board: Vikki Bell, Ryan Bishop, Josef Bleicher, Roy Boyne, Norman Denzin, Nicholas Gane, Mike Hepworth, Scott Lash, John Phillips, Roland Robertson, Rob Shields, Bryan S. Turner and Couze Venn. I have benefited a great deal from their intellectual generosity and willingness to tackle new ideas. In addition, I have a special debt to my colleagues in the *Theory, Culture & Society* Centre at Nottingham Trent University who have provided great support for the journal along with all the other schemes we have developed over the last decade since *Theory, Culture & Society* moved to Nottingham. In particular I would like to mention: Roger Bromley, Neal Curtis, Nigel Edley, Sandra Harris, Richard Johnson, Joost van Loon, Susan Manthorpe, John Marks, Ali Mohammadi, Chris Rojek, Tomoko Tamari, John Tomlinson, Neil Turnbull, Patrick Williams, Patrick Wright, David Woods and Couze Venn. I would also like to thank Antonio A. Arantes, Roger Burrows, Takaaki Chikamori, Chua Beng Huat, Susantha Goonatilake, John Hutnyk, Huimin Jin, Celia Lury, Kenichi Kawasaki, Tetsuo Nishiyama, Bruce Mazlish, Makio Morikawa, Tetsuo Maruyama, Volker Schmidt, Kuniharu Tokiasu, Wiljan van den Akker, Andy Wernick, Kathleen Woodward and Shunya Yoshimi, for their intellectual encouragement and support. The new edition has a special debt to Couze Venn who made excellent suggestions to improve the additional chapter and preface to the second edition. At Sage Publications in London, Stephen Barr, Cheryl Merritt, Robert Rojek, Katie Sayers, Mila Steele have provided great encouragement and support for *Theory, Culture & Society* and the *Theory, Culture & Society* Book Series, as well as being wonderful people to work with.

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