

Comprehensive Exam: Consumption and Consumerism
Questions for Diana Ambrozias

Answer any two of the following:

1) The assumption of universal (unproblematic) human needs has been a cornerstone of Marxian critiques of capitalism. Over the last thirty years however, the legitimacy of that assumption has been challenged by political economist, culturalist, environmentalist, feminist and postmodern theories which have also called into question the usefulness of distinctions between necessity and luxury (excess, waste), true and false needs, material and symbolic properties of goods in the analysis of consumer society. Provide an overview of what you consider to be the most significant of these challenges (no more than three) explaining their arguments against the assumption of universal and biological human needing. Evaluate each of these perspectives in terms of its impact on contemporary critiques of the consumer society.

2) "You are what you eat"? Dictionaries (OED) often define the process of consumption by the acts of eating and drinking. Anthropological and historical accounts of food production, trade and consumption have supported this notion of eating as culturally paradigmatic arguing that the study of food should be a primary focus in cultural and historical analysis. Summarize the main perspectives in the literature leading to the appreciation of the link between food and culture commenting on whether you think such analyses of social contexts of food preparation, meanings and eating continues to be as relevant to the study of the cultural dynamics of contemporary consumerism? Include if you want to, examples of food ads or ads which depict food where you think they illustrate your arguments.

3) Although there is a growing willingness to label contemporary American and European social formations as 'consumer societies' there is considerable disagreement concerning the cultural roots of consumerism (consumer culture) and therefore how it should be defined and characterized. Overview what you consider to be the key debates about the origins, characteristics and development of the consumer society stating clearly your own preferred definition and periodization.

4) Trace the development of the theory of consumer culture identifying what you consider to be the key theorists and their contribution to our understanding of contemporary social problems.