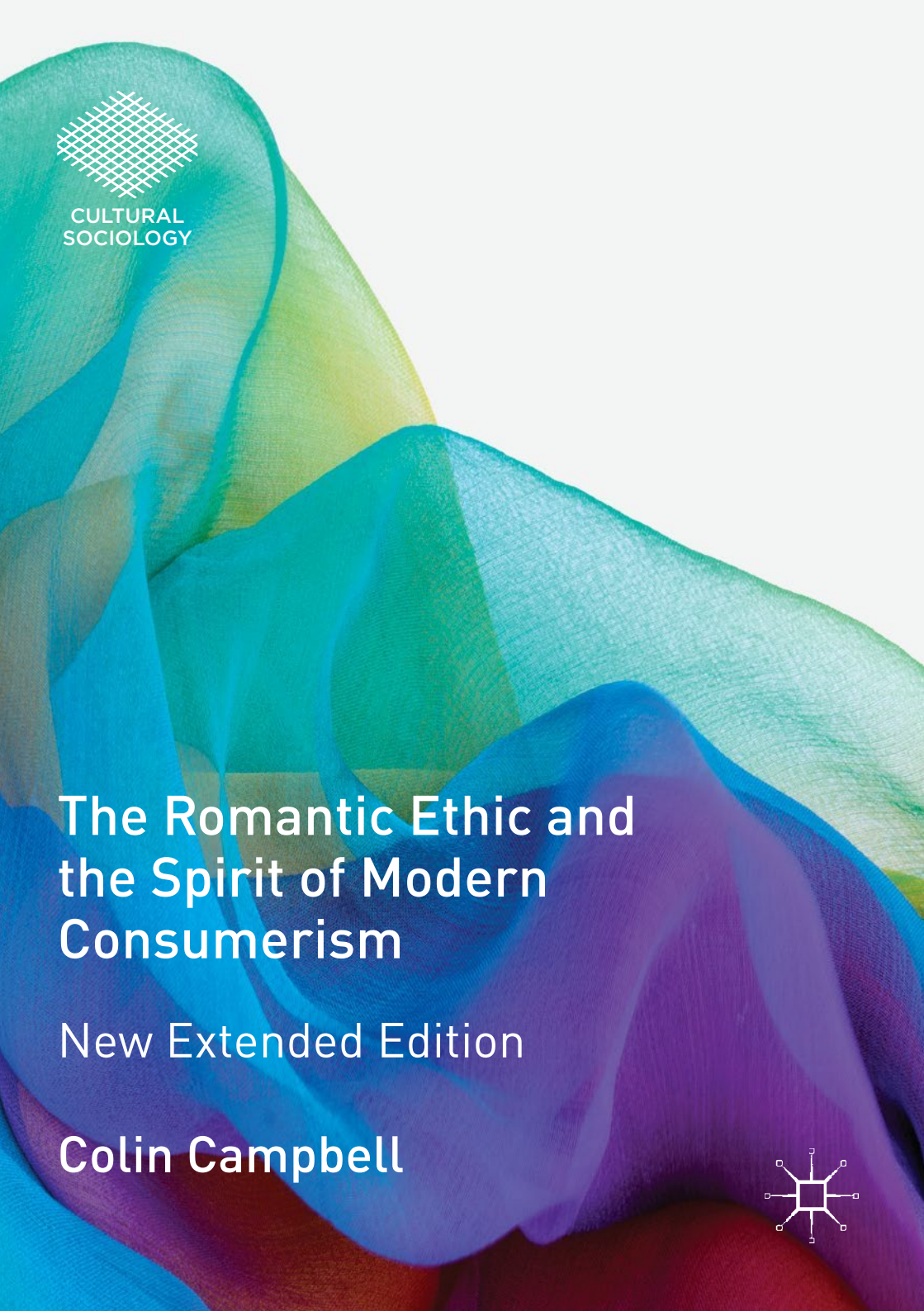


# The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism

New Extended Edition

Colin Campbell

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Cultural Sociology
ISBN 978-3-319-79065-7 ISBN 978-3-319-79066-4 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-79066-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018940532

Originally published by Basil Blackwell in 1987


Cover credit © Tramont_ana

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer International Publishing AG part of Springer Nature.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*to Elizabeth and Duncan*

# Series Editor's Preface

This bold and brilliant essay lays out a heretofore invisible cultural link between capitalist consumption and modern religious history. Contemporary social thinkers—critical theorists, neoliberals, and conservatives—join together in their condemnation of contemporary market society as materialistic and individualistic. Campbell's hermeneutical reconstruction of historical-cum-collective meanings, almost shocking in its originality, provides a radically different point of view. In the midst of their consumption of material goods, modern people are actually searching for meaning, and finding it in the aesthetic feelings and moral virtues that contact with such goods so often carries. The *Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* lays down the historical and intellectual tracks for taking cultural sociology into the heart of contemporary economic life.

Classical sociological theory threw down great impediments to appreciating the continuing role of collective meaning in modernity. According to Marx's commodification theory, monetizing the production, circulation, and consumption of material objects is so powerfully deracinating that goods and labor come to be treated as things, valued only for what they can bring in exchange. According to Weber's disenchantment perspective, in a secular age, when religion ceases to be all-embracing, the sinews that attach deep meaning to social life—myth, narrative, and emotional feeling—are torn away. According to Durkheim's pathological division of labor, solidary ties between modern human beings have been destroyed, and only egoism and anomie remain.

The possibility of a cultural sociology depends on challenging such imposing claims. The Strong Program in cultural sociology, the perspective that provides the overarching rationale for this book series, rests largely upon a rereading of Durkheim that privileges his later work. Only Durkheim's theorizing about rituals, solidarity, and symbolic classification, crystallized in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, can provide a meaning-centered framework for comprehending a collectively meaningful modern life.

Campbell's book provides a rereading of Weber that points in exactly the same way. Weber's great contribution to the foundations of cultural sociology was his demonstration that Calvinism provided a religious basis for the creation of modern capitalism. The irony of this early essay is Weber's claim that, once religion had created the material structures of capitalism, culture became irrelevant: "The Puritan wanted to work in a calling, we are forced to do so." What for Weber was a tragic historical irony became, for contemporary sociology, an intellectual tragedy, seeming to legitimate a hollowed-out view of a modernity haunted by rationalization and distorted by domination.

To the contrary, Campbell demonstrates! "The process of disenchanting the world served both to permit and to prompt the accompanying voluntaristic re-enchantment of experience" (p. 138). Post-Calvinism involved internal religious developments that eventuated in the demand that subjective sensibility permeate the modern material world. There could be enchantment without godliness, the sacred without the theological, transcendence without salvation in any metaphysical sense. Campbell allows us to understand that this-worldly asceticism gradually came to be transformed into a worldview that allowed a mystical experience of wholeness, a kind of this-worldly sublimity. Calvinism gave way to Arminianism, predestination to the belief that men and women could actively gain their own direct experience of the divine. "Asceticism was now less significant than manifesting sensibility," Campbell informs us, "something which required continuing evidence of one's good taste" (p. 153). Sensibility and sentiment became sacred in the eighteenth century and manifest in the material surfaces of goods that one could own and display. "Closer examination of the consumer revolution in eighteenth-century England," Campbell promises, will reveal "that a wider cultural revolution was involved." Indeed, it does, and this cultural revolution continues to have repercussions three centuries later, now far from English shores.

It is a great honor for the Palgrave Series in Cultural Sociology to publish, some three decades after its first appearance, this new edition of Colin Campbell's extraordinarily prescient book. The author has provided an extensive Introduction that makes manifest the ways in which the theory and method he employed were cultural sociology *avant la lettre*. Karin M. Ekström's Afterword describes this work as having provided a foundational building block for the field of consumer studies. My point in this brief Preface is to suggest that Campbell's book is also so much more.

New Haven, CT, USA Jeffrey C. Alexander

# Contents

CHAPTER 1

# Introduction: The Romantic Ethic 30 Years On—Reflections on the Nature and Reception of a Weberian Thesis

## Background

*The Romantic Ethic and The Spirit of Modern Consumerism* was first published by Basil Blackwell in 1987. A paperback version, in Blackwell's *Ideas* series, was published two years later. It was then reprinted several times in the 1990s prior to Blackwell's ceasing publication towards the end of the decade. Given that I continued to receive inquiries from academics seeking to purchase copies in 2005 I arranged for it to be published on demand by Alcuin Academics,[1] while at the same time hoping to organize a new edition to be produced in time for the 20th anniversary of the book's publication in 2007. This, I hoped, would allow me to write a new introduction, one that would enable me to respond both to the passage of time and to the various responses that there had been to the work. However, in the event, other projects came to take precedence, and that deadline passed, as too did the 25th anniversary. So it is that only now, a full 30 years since it was first published, that I have finally got round to doing what I had intended many years ago, which was to write a new introduction to the work.

## Initial Reception

I was well aware, when writing this book, of the danger facing any academic brave enough, or perhaps one should say foolhardy enough, to venture outside his or her own discipline. Given therefore that, as one reviewer



C. Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Cultural Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-79066-4_1

described it, this book 'mixes social theory with economic history, psychology, history of religious thought and literary criticism', I had anticipated trouble.[2] Indeed, as Professor Evans predicted in his review for *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 'As with so many inter-disciplinary efforts, it will be widely criticized by subject specialists.'[3] In this he was not wrong. There were, in the event, two groups of academics in particular who were inclined to find fault with my argument, those specializing in the study of English literature, and those historians whose focus of concern was the English Industrial Revolution or 'Great Transformation'. In the former case my foolhardiness had taken the form of writing about Romanticism, a highly controversial topic that had long been the subject of passionate debate, even to the extent of a widespread difficulty in agreeing on a definition of the term. Hence it was no great surprise to discover that I was taken to task for my depiction of this particular movement. But then I was also running a considerable risk in discussing the transformation of England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and especially in focusing on the role attributed to the bourgeoisie. For this was territory that had been ably mapped by the likes of such prominent figures as E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Perry Anderson.

Yet as it transpired formulating a thesis that drew upon material from a number of different disciplines also brought some rewards as well as penalties. In particular it was gratifying to discover that those academics working in such fields as aesthetics, design and fashion judged my comments on taste, aesthetic theory and the role of the artist to be of importance, as too, for perhaps more obvious reasons, did those in the fields of marketing and consumer research. I was also able to draw comfort from the fact that several reviewers, while judging my thesis to be wrong-headed in one way or another, nevertheless deemed it to be of importance, given that, as one suggested, it 'helped to change the way we think about the critical elements in the transformation of the past into the present'.[4]

Undoubtedly one other reason why the book was reviewed by academics in a number of disciplines, in addition to its character as an interdisciplinary work, was because of my good fortune in publishing it when I did. For if embarking on an interdisciplinary work was a risky venture, it was less so when its central subject matter was just beginning to attract the attention of academics in a number of different disciplines. Yet this was exactly what was happening to the topic of consumption in the mid-to-late 1980s. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb's study of the birth of a consumer society in England was published in 1982, while

Michael Schudson's *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion*, a book in which he called for the creation of a 'sociology of consumption', was published just four years later; these two publications were then accompanied by Rachel Bowlby's book on consumer culture in 1985, and Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* in 1986. So the fact that this book was published in 1987, the same year as Danny Miller's *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, was very fortuitous, especially given that Grant McCracken's *Culture and Consumption*, Per Otnes' *The Sociology of Consumption* and Lorna Weatherill's *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660–1760* were all published the following year. The only downside of this from my perspective was that this fortuitous conjunction of events helped to confirm the perception that this book was primarily a contribution to the study of consumption, rather than—as I had been inclined to regard it—a contribution to cultural sociology.

But what about my fellow sociologists, how did they receive the thesis? Well here, for many of them, there was the initial problem of deciding precisely to which sub-discipline or field of study this work could be seen as principally connected; should it, for example, be seen as an exercise in historical sociology, or alternatively perhaps, as a contribution to the study of cultural change, or even the sociology of religion? Or was it perhaps simply a contribution to the emerging field of the sociology of consumption? The fact that the title advertised a direct link to Max Weber's famous essay didn't necessarily help to resolve this problem. Although it did help when it came to the question of evaluating the work. For, as Gordon Marshall expressed it, in all probability echoing the view of many in the discipline, 'one is likely to find the thesis convincing … only to the extent that one concurs with the Weberian original', having 'the same strengths and weaknesses', to which, judging by some of my fellow sociologists' remarks, Gordon could also have added, 'and is likely to be subject to the same misunderstandings'.[5]

It is always interesting for an author to read reviewers' comments, if only to discover the kind of book reviewers thought one should have written. But then it is also interesting to discover what it is that one should have consulted or discussed at length, yet in the opinion of the reviewer regrettably failed to do. In my case it seems that I was especially remiss in not mentioning the work of Baudrillard, Braudel, Elias, Foucault, Halevy and Lacan, to mention but a few of the names of the distinguished scholars suggested, while I was also judged to be seriously misguided in failing to consult the extensive literature on Methodist theology, English

Evangelism and the psychological literature on consumer behaviour, again to single out just three of the bodies of work that various reviewers thought I should have referenced in my discussion. But then I was also criticized for failing to bring my analysis of modern consumerism up to the present day—which in the context of these reviews largely meant the 1980s—and in so doing examining the manner in which it had been modified as modernity gave way to post-modernity.[6] But then, in addition and perhaps more predictably (and in an obvious echo of Gordon Marshall's observation mentioned above), there were those reviewers of a Marxist, or at least Marxist fellow-traveller, disposition who considered my major failing to have been an undue neglect of the role played by power and wealth in the emergence of modern consumerism.

One last point needs to be mentioned before leaving the general issue of how this book was originally received, and this concerns the question of my own values and whether, in presenting a thesis linking a romantic ethic with modern consumerism, I could be said to have adopted a particular moral standpoint. Some reviewers believed this to be the case, for while noting my criticism of writers such as Veblen, Galbraith and Marcuse for prioritizing the condemnation over the investigation and explanation of modern consumerism, they appear to have come to the conclusion that I was intent on defending, if not actually celebrating it. Some commentators then took this argument one stage further, even suggesting that I sought to justify hedonism and in so doing was acting as an apologist for the romantic counter-culture of the 1960s. But then, as if to demonstrate the extent to which starkly different meanings can be extracted from the same manuscript, other commentators found a very different message in my claim that the modern consumer is of necessity a day-dreamer, as they saw this as meaning that such individuals are 'deluded'; inhabitants of a fantasy world largely divorced from the reality that surrounds them. Consequently, the message they extracted from my analysis was a distinctly dystopian one, a vision of post-modern society in which consumerism depends for its continued existence on individuals being perpetually high on the 'drug' of self-illusory hedonism. That it was possible for reviewers to form such different opinions has helped reassure me that I had largely achieved my stated intention, as outlined in the original introduction, of avoiding condoning or condemning, and to focus instead on explaining rather than moralizing. But then here I was simply taking my cue from Weber, who says at the end of the *Protestant Ethic* essay that he does not intend 'to burden … this purely historical discussion' with 'the world of judgements of value and faith'.[7]

## This Is an Essay

Given the ambitious scope of this work it was always highly likely that it would contain both errors and omissions, so it is not unreasonable to suggest that the book might have been improved by the inclusion of some of the material mentioned above. However what is critical here is whether the inclusion of the additional material would have substantially altered the main thrust of the argument and hence resulted in significantly different answers to the questions posed. Thus although I was accused, among other things, of neglecting society's power structure or 'material reality' as well as 'the social relations surrounding consumption', those who made these observations failed to explain quite how taking such factors into consideration would provide fundamentally different answers to the questions posed.[8] Consequently I haven't felt under any great compulsion to modify the argument by including discussion of the above-mentioned topics.

But then the other consideration that has counted against the addition of extra material was that this would have resulted in a considerable expansion in the size of the manuscript and hence would have robbed the book of its essential character as an essay. It is therefore important to repeat what I said in the original introduction, which is that the book, like that upon which it is modelled, is essentially an essay and that consequently, 'despite its length it remains an attempt, an experiment, arising out of a deep dissatisfaction with the doubtful cultural contrasts and marked productionist biases of most contemporary discussions, to see if a more plausible and acceptable account of the development of modern consumerism and the culture of modernity can be constructed. It is not a detailed scholarly study, but a broad-ranging and fundamentally speculative attempt to draw together a highly diverse and apparently unrelated body of material to form a meaningful and coherent story.' Unfortunately several reviewers seemed to overlook this important caveat, something that probably helps to explain why I was frequently criticized for not including this or that body of work. The fact remains that this is still an essay and not 'a detailed scholarly study'; which is also the reason why I have resisted any temptation to undertake a revision of the original manuscript, preferring instead to focus on responding to some of the more significant criticisms and associated misunderstandings in this introduction.[9]

In emphasizing that the book was intended as an essay I did not just mean that it was intended to be a short piece of writing (in fact some reviewers considered it to be quite long), but rather, as stated above, that

it was intended to represent an attempt or an effort, one aimed at exploring a new way of looking at familiar phenomena and in the process resolving certain intriguing problems. Again in doing this I was simply following Weber's lead (Part 1 of *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism* is called 'The Problem'). For him the initial problem, which he went on to refine, was how to explain the widely recognized link between religious affiliation and social stratification, specifically the correlation between Protestantism and capitalist activity, or as he expressed it, 'why were the districts of highest economic development at the same time particularly favourable to a revolution in the Church?'[10] In addition he asked how it was that deep-seated traditional attitudes towards labour and entrepreneurial activity were cast aside, and hence how 'an activity which was at best ethically tolerated, [could] turn into a calling in the sense of Benjamin Franklin'?[11]—not to mention the fundamental question of why modern rational bourgeois capitalism emerged in Western Europe in the eighteenth century rather than in such developed civilizations as Classical Rome or ancient China.

In my case the initial problem was to explain the perceived correlation between periods of consumer boom and Romantic sociocultural movements, starting with events that marked the 1960s and working back to earlier periods that were characterized by similar features. But then, just like Weber, I was faced with explaining how it was that deep-seated traditional attitudes were cast aside and in particular how the English middle or trading classes, the very people whose Puritan inheritance had led them to extol the virtues of humility, abstinence, frugality, thrift and industry, could have become the standard-bearers for a new and dynamic consumerism. How was the force of traditionalism overcome, and in particular what was the source of the new propensity to consume that drove the Industrial Revolution? How, in effect, did we become modern consumers? Although here I first had the difficult task of identifying precisely how modern consumerism differed from its traditional counterpart, while also demonstrating how the account provided by economic historians of the processes that underpinned the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century, with its emphasis on fashion and emulation, was implausible. Despite these many similarities one could also say that I was faced with a more difficult task than the one that confronted Weber. For while in his day the existence of a link between Protestantism and modern capitalist activity was an acknowledged fact, even if the nature of the connection was disputed, this was not true of the link between romanticism and modern

consumer behaviour. In addition modern consumer behaviour itself wasn't widely recognized as a distinct form of conduct (I have always felt that Weber made a mistake by omitting the adjective 'modern' from his reference to capitalism in the title of his essay), but then nor indeed was the inability of conventional economic theory to explain it.

## Misunderstanding Matters

I suppose all authors complain about being misunderstood and it is certainly frustrating to encounter criticisms that are directed less against one's actual arguments than misrepresented versions thereof. To what extent the author should accept some responsibility for being misunderstood is a moot point and there is, as I will suggest, a case for saying that to some degree I was naive in not spelling out some parts of my thesis in greater detail; for although there were a number of simple misunderstandings, deeper disagreements often stemmed from a more fundamental difference of perspective. This was especially the case with economic historians, whose commitment to a neo-classical economic theoretical framework meant that they had great difficulty in even grasping the nature of the problem I was attempting to solve, let alone understanding the solution offered. But this was also true to some degree of my fellow sociologists, who lacked familiarity with the integrated theory of motivated action and cultural change that I was employing. One could say that this was especially ironic, given that it was virtually identical to the theory that Weber used in *The Protestant Ethic* and hence should, in theory, have been familiar to all sociologists.

So, what were the most common misunderstandings, in addition that is to the already mentioned matter of the failure to recognize the character of the work as an essay? The first was that I was attempting to describe contemporary consumerism.[12] But of course that was not what I was doing. My concern was with 'modern consumerism' as opposed that is to its 'traditional' form, and while 'modern' and 'traditional' are recognized sociological concepts, 'contemporary' is a term that has little conceptual or theoretical significance. In fact, like Weber, who said that it was not capitalism that needed explaining, but rather its origins, I too was primarily concerned with understanding that novel form of consumerism that emerged in England in the eighteenth century, a phenomenon that—whilst it shares certain crucial features—is also markedly different from today's hyper-consumerism, with its emphasis on high-pressure advertising and marketing techniques, consumer research, extensive credit facilities, internet purchasing and fast fashion.

But then, secondly, several commentators failed to appreciate that I was also following Weber in employing idealized-type constructs when referring to 'the traditional' and 'the modern', and hence what naturally followed from this was that contemporary reality would consist of a mixture of traditional and modern forms. Consequently it would not be at all surprising to find routine, mundane or non-dis-illusory consumption activity existing side by side with the more modern 'self-illusory' form, just as traditional forms of hedonistic activity continue to exist alongside modern autonomous hedonism. Then, thirdly, there is the fact that I was attempting to outline the origin of the spirit of modern consumerism, not modern consumerism in total, this spirit being what I identified as self-illusory hedonism, while fourthly, some commentators conflated this spirit with the Romantic ethic itself and hence tended to assume that the former was necessary for the continued existence of the latter.[13] Yet here too, in a direct parallel with Weber's argument, the role of the ethic was restricted to assisting with the emergence of the spirit of modern consumerism and that subsequently, its midwifely function performed, it faded away, such that modern consumerism was able to continue without the need for any help from a romantic worldview. In other words, modern consumers did not need to be Romantics any more than Weber suggested that modern entrepreneurs needed to be Calvinists. Fifthly and finally, and directly related to this last point, there was the common mistake of failing to appreciate that the spirit of modern consumerism was an unintended consequence of a Romantic worldview.

## A Theory of Motivated Conduct

While these misunderstandings were indeed commonplace and can, to a large extent, be put down to the fact that readers had not paid close enough attention to what they were reading (as all these points are made quite explicitly in the text), there is a sense in which many also stemmed from a lack of familiarity with the theory of action that is employed in this work, and especially the significance attached to moral motives, for my essay, like Weber's, could be regarded as a study in 'the motives of moral action'.[14] It follows from this that those academics who subscribed to a theory of human conduct that did not accord significance to moral motives, or indeed even recognize that the motives underpinning action were necessarily variable, being sociocultural constructs, would fail to understand the argument presented, and what is more, that this failing

would occur in relation to the very first hurdle: that of recognizing that there was a problem in need of a solution.

This can be illustrated by the final sentence of Michael R. Smith's review of the book, where he says: 'The "consumer revolution" of the eighteenth century was farmer's daughters buying ribbons and prosperous artisans buying better cutlery … Do we really need the Cambridge Platonists to explain behaviour of that kind?'[15] What is striking about this observation is the fact that the writer does not see the behaviour he describes as in any way problematic, and what is more, he assumes that neither would we, the readers. In other words buying ribbons and preferring decorated to plain cutlery is considered utterly normal. But then all this reveals is that Smith, like most of us, is a modern consumer. Consequently it is not surprising that one modern consumer fails to find the behaviour of other modern consumers puzzling. Sadly this kind of ethnocentricism is not unusual, for if those we study behave as we do, or possess attitudes and beliefs resembling ours, it is all too easy to assume that there is nothing to explain: no puzzle to be resolved. It takes a particular ability to stand outside the taken-for-granted reality of one's own existence and see modern consumer behaviour—as Weber described modern capitalist behaviour—as distinctly unusual, if not 'irrational'.[16]

What Smith is actually guilty of in the above quote is not correctly specifying the nature of the problem to be solved. Indeed one could say that he fails to see the whole purpose behind the book. Which was less to explain modern consumer behaviour than to explain its origins. For the question that required an answer was not why farmer's daughters in the eighteenth century bought ribbons and prosperous artisans fancy cutlery, but why those who had formerly eschewed this form of conduct began behaving in this way. For the actions Smith describes would not have been regarded as unproblematic by an earlier generation of those self-same farmer's daughters and artisans. Indeed the purchase and display of ribbons, as well as the use of decorated rather than plain cutlery, would have been regarded as indicative of 'vain ostentation' and as such abhorrent to the Puritans and their insistence on 'sober utility', an attitude that, as Weber says, 'was especially true in the case of decoration of the person, for instance clothing'.[17] Indeed, as he emphasized, 'this worldly Protestant asceticism … acted powerfully against the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions; it restricted consumption, especially of luxuries'.[18] Consequently, even if we are to take the behaviour of modern consumers as self-evidently explicable, we still need to account for how it was that such conduct came to replace the

asceticism and deep suspicion of ostentation and luxury that preceded it; an account that may indeed have a place for the Cambridge Platonists.

One suspects that underlying Smith's quote is a presumption concerning where one should look for an explanation of the eighteenth-century consumer revolution, for like many of my critics, he probably started with the taken-for-granted assumption that the answer lies in an examination of the economic circumstances of the time, which is why, since I accord this little significance, I am naturally deemed to be looking in the wrong place. But this presumption is highly questionable, arising as it does from the etic approach that economists and economic historians typically adopt when examining human conduct, as this means that they necessarily fail to appreciate the extent to which this term is a subjectively meaningless category as far as most consumers are concerned. For most people rarely describe their own activity as 'consuming' (except perhaps when eating). What is meaningful to them are activities such as buying clothes, or purchasing items with which to decorate their houses, or indulging in leisure-time pursuits such as reading novels or going to the theatre. In other words doing a whole variety of things that constitute fundamental ingredients in the singular activity of living a life. Consequently it is the framework of assumptions that people bring to the activity of living that should be the focus of concern, not some abstract analyst's category such as consumption. Seen like this it immediately becomes obvious that the way people live their lives is necessarily bound to involve ethical issues, and hence ideas, beliefs and attitudes.

## Rejecting Mono-Motive Theories

But then the basic reason why Smith, and indeed economic historians and economists in general, fails to find consumer behaviour problematic is his assumption that all economic conduct stems from a single universal motive. Unfortunately, as Parsons and Smelser pointed out, 'the postulation of some single motivational entity as an explanation of all economic conduct' is the 'central fallacy in much economic thought' and consequently 'a main source of that discipline's extensive deficiencies'.[19] The crucial deficiency in this instance is the fact that if the motive that underlies human conduct is always and everywhere assumed to be the same, then motive itself necessarily ceases to be an explanatory variable. What then naturally follows is that any significant change in behaviour is necessarily attributable to 'external factors', ones that usually turn out to be material or structural in nature,

such as the availability of funds, or the price of products, something that is usually revealed in the language employed. We can see this very clearly in the attempts by economic historians to explain the consumer revolution in eighteenth-century England, in their use of expressions such as 'the increase in wealth *enabled* the trading classes to afford to imitate aristocratic mode of dress' (italics added), or 'the increase in the supply of market goods *enabled* the middle classes to indulge a whole range of wants and desires which had previous been frustrated' (italics added).[20]

Such a choice of words is revealing for the way in which it allows the complex issue of motive to be sidestepped. It is noticeable that we are not told why 'the trading classes' would want 'to imitate aristocratic mode of dress' or indeed given any evidence to demonstrate that they deliberately used their wealth to achieve this end; equally the suggestion that the middle classes had previously experienced 'frustration' is an assumption. For the fact that people start buying goods that they hadn't bought previously does not constitute evidence that these wants existed prior to the date of purchase. All one can know for sure is that these goods were wanted at the time of purchase. Anything else is speculation. Such interpretations of conduct as these phrases imply are externally imputed and largely unsubstantiated by evidence concerning what the people involved thought they were doing.

It naturally follows that one of the problems that proponents of mono-causal theories of human conduct have to contend with is the need to explain—or perhaps one should say to explain away—the reasons that actors actually give for doing what they do. Given that these can vary considerably, and frequently contradict the single motive attributed to them by the theorist, it is necessary for these accounts to be categorized as 'justifications', articulated for no other reason than to legitimize conduct that is presumed to be undertaken for quite other reasons.[21] The effect of this stratagem is that such theorists necessarily end up advocating not one but two intimately related mono-causal theories of human conduct, with one motive proffered as an explanation for the conduct itself and another invoked to account for the explanations that actors provide for it. The end-result is a perspective that not only denies any role for the actual reasons actors give for their conduct, but suggests that, since these are unrelated to the 'real' forces determining their actions, actors are necessarily either misguided or insincere. In the case of the thesis presented here this leads to the claim, actually advanced by some reviewers, that theological and philosophical arguments were seized upon by middle-class consumers

in eighteenth-century England in order to justify behaviour that they were engaged in for quite other reasons.

The inherent weakness of this theoretical schema is the fact that it involves accepting that actors do have a real need to justify their conduct. Yet given the primary assumption that all conduct is governed by material self-interest, it is hard to see where such a need might come from. For if all members of society are prompted to act, under all circumstances, by the same singular motive, why would there be any need for justifications? Yet by accepting that this need is real, such a theoretical perspective is forced to accept that there is a moral dimension to human conduct. In which case moral concerns can also serve as motives for action, with the consequence that material self-interest ceases to be the only determinant of conduct. Indeed it means that there is a real possibility that this motive might constrain, or even cancel out, a concern with material interests.

The importance of this observation is the way it suggests that the processes of motivation and legitimation should be seen as inextricably intertwined. These are not two processes, separated in time, with conduct first motivated and then subsequently justified; but one process in which individuals formulate plans to engage in 'justifiable actions'. It is this concern with legitimate conduct that is central to Weber's account of the rise of capitalism and explains his focus on the question of how it was that individuals came to believe that they were right to see the making of money as their dominant purpose in life. Consequently, and following Weber's lead but switching from the topic of production to that of consumption, this meant that my object of investigation had to be 'those terms which appear to the actor to be adequate and legitimate grounds for conduct'.[22]

## How Ideas Become a Force for Change

What seems to have prevented commentators from seeing the significant role that legitimate or justifiable conduct plays in the understanding of sociocultural change is the widespread prejudice against according any real role to ideas. Several reviewers belittled or even dismissed the arguments advanced in the book on the grounds that it was 'an essay in the history of ideas' and consequently involved 'a disregard for the realities of the material world'.[23] In some ways this is a strange accusation to make about a book a good half of which is devoted to discussing consumption, an activity that one would have thought was very much a part of 'the material world', more especially given that much of this discussion makes

use of the distinctly behaviourist concept of stimulus-response. But presumably it was the second half of the book that this reviewer had in mind when making the contrast between 'ideas' and 'the material world'.

Apart from the fact that it would have been more accurate to describe these chapters as containing a history of ideals rather than ideas, the suggestion that ideas, especially when embodied in beliefs and attitudes, are somehow separated off from reality, effectively residing in some rarefied metaphysical realm, has to be regarded as distinctly odd. But then Weber himself said that modern man is not prepared to give 'religious ideas a significance for culture and national character which they deserve', and one could echo that sentiment today, the only modification necessary being the removal of the adjective 'religious'.[24]

The truth is that ideas are clearly real if they are acted on, while the possibility that they may be false does not make them any less real. One may argue as to whether or not God exists, but the fact that millions of people round the world believe that he does is as much a part of reality as the churches, synagogues, mosques and temples in which they gather to worship him. Similarly, if we turn our attention to the topic of consumption, it is hard to see why the consumer's belief that purchasing a given product will bring satisfaction should have a different ontological status from the price at which it is offered for sale. Surely the truth is that individuals typically act for a *reason*, in the *belief* that something or other will result from their actions. To this extent one can say that most actions are embedded in a complex web of ideas and beliefs, both those that actors hold about themselves and those concerning the world around them.[25]

But then perhaps what these critics have in mind is the assumption that any such common-sense notions are unlikely to be connected with the abstruse ruminations of philosophers and theologians. In which case the grounds for rejecting the argument in favour of ideas playing a role in socio-economic change is less that ideas have no role in determining the nature of action as that these everyday ideas are far removed from the complex and systematized reflections of professional thinkers. But a moment's reflection reveals that this too is an untenable position, with the conduct of individuals in everyday life intimately tied to precisely those ideas, such as 'virtue', 'integrity', 'taste' and 'beauty', speculation concerning the nature of which is the stock-in-trade of such thinkers.[26] For a society's culture constitutes a system, such that there is an inevitable connection between ideas concerning the nature and content of ideals and the everyday conduct of individuals, especially that between the idea of the good and actors' belief that their conduct is justifiable, as outlined above.

## The Importance of the Concept of Character

If there is one concept, central to the argument advanced in *The Romantic Ethic*, to which I should have given greater prominence, it is that of character. But then the fact that few commentators seem to have grasped its crucial significance is probably as much due to its virtual absence from the sociological lexicon as my failure to flag it up more clearly. For this is not a concept that sociologists generally recognize, its only appearance in the discipline's literature usually restricted to a reference to David Riesman's 1950s book, *The Lonely Crowd* and the idea of a changing US national character as indicated by the shift from inner-direction to other-direction.[27] What I had in mind was something different, something more akin to the system of action that is centred on the person and as such the corollary to the system of action that is centred on the role or status. Talcott Parsons had outlined something along these lines in the course of developing his theory of action but made what I consider the serious mistake of equating it with personality (perhaps due to the influence of the behaviourist Edward C. Tolman).[28] However while one might regard the system of behaviour that centres on the person as constituting that individual's personality, the system of action—understood as constituting the sum total of that person's conscious and deliberate conduct—should be seen as representing their character. The difference is crucial, as character is what individuals consciously strive to create out of the raw material of their personality. It is thus not equatable with the latter, as that term usually covers the sum of an individual's psychic and behavioural characteristics. By contrast character is the entity imputed to underlie and explain all willed aspects of conduct and hence has an ethical quality not associated with personality. It is for this reason that we write character and not personality references.

In *The Protestant Ethic* Weber outlines how Puritanism was largely responsible for the modern idea that individuals should be expected to take responsibility for the construction of their own characters. As he explains, the 'great historical significance' of Christian asceticism was that it had developed 'a systematic method of rational conduct with the purpose of overcoming the *status naturae*, to free man from the power of irrational impulses and his dependence on the world and on nature. It attempted to subject man to the supremacy of a purposeful will, and bring his actions under constant self-control with a careful consideration of their ethical consequences'.[29] And it was this tendency that Puritanism developed to an extreme degree, such that '[t]he Puritan … tried to enable a

man to maintain and act upon his constant motives … against the emotions. In this formal psychological sense of the term it tried to make him into a personality.'[30]

Leaving aside the somewhat misleading use of the English word 'personality', what Weber is outlining is the practice of individuals self-consciously and deliberately attempting to make all their actions conform to a given pattern. In the case of the Puritan this meant, 'the rational planning of the whole of one's life in accordance with God's will',[31] with the consequent imposition of a regime of 'strictly regulated, reserved self-control', and the associated 'destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment'.[32] It was this wholehearted assault on spontaneity and emotional expression that was such a crucial feature of Calvinism because it led directly to individuals gaining virtually full voluntary control over their conduct. Essentially, in this discussion, Weber is contrasting two different types of person, one traditional and one modern. The traditional person behaves impulsively and compulsively, acting 'from nature' as it were. The modern person, by contrast, acts 'against nature', imposing a willed self-control over his or her behaviour, thoughtfully guiding every action such that it is considered, meaningful and intended.

Crucially, this attempt to make one's character conform to an ideal, no matter what the precise nature of the latter, necessarily requires the actor to undertake the same kind of constant scrutiny or supervision of conduct, checking inappropriate impulses and ensuring the execution of ethically approved actions.

Sadly, sociologists have largely neglected the importance of actions patterned by individuals in conformity with an ideal of character in favour of those patterns required by social situations, thereby consistently elevating the significance of role and status over that of character when it comes to an understanding of conduct.

## Character-Confirming Conduct: How Ideas Bring About Change

Weber was concerned to identify 'the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history' and proceeded to describe this as a process in which fundamental ideas concerning reality and truth determine the nature of the ideal of character that prevails among any given group of people, only for that ideal in turn to determine the form of conduct individuals need to engage in so as to demonstrate that they do indeed live up

to it.[33] What followed from this is that different social groups, because of their different belief systems, have contrasting ideals of character and thus different forms of character-confirming conduct. Given that the examples he was concerned with were taken from an age when, as he put it, 'the after-life was more important than … all the interests in life in this world', this meant that the relevant systems of ideas were supernatural theodicies, together with their associated pastoral teachings, with the consequence that he examines the theological differences between the Calvinists, Pietists, Lutherans, Methodists and Baptist sects.[34] He then focuses on the Calvinists and identifies their ideal of character as equivalent to being one of the elect. Although accepting that technically no-one could know whether this applied to them or not, he notes how having the gift of grace effectively became regarded as a reliable indicator, with self-confident restless, systematic work in a calling, the conduct most guaranteed to indicate one's possession of this special gift.[35] It is through a process such as this that it is possible for ideas, through their influence on the formulation of ideals of character, to have a direct effect on the actions of individuals, with character-confirming conduct the distinctive form that it takes.

## Overcoming Tradition

This is not to suggest that all changes in conduct necessarily require changes in beliefs and values. But strongly contested ones certainly do: that is, those that challenge the established order. The reason that Weber attached such importance to character-confirming conduct, regarding it as crucial for an understanding of sociocultural change, is because it is necessary if the entrenched force of tradition is to be overcome. He recognized that conduct that is morally censured or prohibited is not going to become morally acceptable, let alone valued, simply because economic circumstances change or because such conduct can be shown to be useful. If conduct that was considered unjustifiable in one period subsequently becomes regarded as justifiable, it must be because a new system of ideas has served to render it so. This was self-evidently the case with the emergence of modern rational bourgeois capitalism and it is just as true in the case of modern consumerism. The Puritans did not recoil from the purchase of luxuries because they couldn't afford them, or because they couldn't see how there might be any benefit to society from their sale. They eschewed such conduct because they regarded it as wrong. For this to change and such behaviour come to be regarded as justifiable, then

some new system of beliefs and associated values must have served to legitimate it. It could not have happened simply because of innovations in production methods, the spread of advertising or changes in fashion. It follows from this that change can only come about when the normative language itself changes and with it new forms of character-confirming conduct.

## The Autonomous Consumer: Or Actors and Agents

My suspicion is that many of those who, like the anonymous reviewer quoted above, complained about my apparent neglect of material reality are not so much concerned about the contrast between explanations involving 'material forces' and those that attribute significance to 'ideas', as that between the model of human conduct that represents it as heavily constrained by external forces and that which presents the actor as free to engage in voluntaristic action. Indeed one not uncommon criticism of the thesis was that it accorded too much autonomy to the individual consumer, and that terms like 'modern autonomous' or 'self-illusory' hedonism necessarily implied 'freedom from media power and social relations'.[36] But of course they don't necessarily imply anything of the sort. To make this assumption is to confuse two very different interpretations of what is meant by autonomy, or to use a more appropriate term, agency.

Voluntarism implies that the actor can choose; that is to say, that the possibility of choice exists. It does not imply that actors will exercise that choice in any particular manner, or that they will be free from any powerful constraints or limitations on their choice. That sociologists have commonly made this equation is because they have tended to assume that evidence for the presence of voluntarism or autonomy was to be found in the content of the actions of individuals. But this is to make a category error, for these qualities relate to the possession of the power of agency, not to the nature of action; consequently the place to look for evidence of voluntarism and autonomy is in the manner through which actions are accomplished rather than their content.

Consequently what terms like 'modern autonomous imaginative hedonism' and 'self-illusory hedonism' refer to is the ability of individuals to be modern actors, that is to say, to take control of their own behaviour and turn it into conscious, purposeful action, as outlined above. Something that, in the case of modern hedonists, means allowing themselves to be influenced by stimuli they conjure into being through the use of their imagination. It is this faculty that enables them to daydream, and hence

enjoy pleasurable experiences in imagination that they haven't experienced in reality, a practice that generates a diffuse longing, while it is the presence of this longing that enables them to project desire on to novel products; products that otherwise, because of their strangeness, might have little appeal. All of which gives the consumer the ability to generate endless new wants, although it does not determine which, out of the many products offered for sale, they will end up wanting. Consequently none of this implies that consumers are unaffected by the media or their relationships with others, nor does it mean, as one reviewer suggested, that my thesis implied 'there is no need for an advertising industry'.[37] Fundamentally autonomy in this sense simply implies freedom from impulsive or compulsive behaviour and as such refers to the extent to which the actor possesses self-determination. In that simple sense 'modern autonomous' or 'self-illusory' hedonism is most certainly to do with 'power', given that, as Anthony Giddens expresses it, 'the notion of "action" … is *logically tied to that of power*'.[38] On the other hand possession of this power implies nothing about the content of the resultant actions or their relationship to societal norms, cultural forces or the expectations of others.

It follows from this that being a modern actor is not the same as being a modern agent, for the latter term implies that one does possess the ability to act independently of the constraints imposed by the social structure or the expectations of others, something that is judged not by the degree to which one possesses the power to act, but rather by the nature and outcome of one's actions. However, it is of course a crucial part of the overall thesis to suggest that the Romantics (or in Weber's case the Puritans) were indeed autonomous in just this sense, which is to say that they did indeed act as agents of change, something they could not have done had they not been modern actors in the first place.

Being an agent implies that actors have the power to bring about structural change and here Weber's prime example was the modern entrepreneur, for he was the person who had to confront 'the most important opponent of the spirit of capitalism', which Weber identified as 'that type of attitude and reaction to new situations which we may designate as traditionalism'.[39] This was the force, often manifest in 'the stone wall of habit',[40] which had to be overcome if modern capitalist forms of enterprise were to emerge, and it was the 'innovators'[41]—those men who embodied the 'spirit of capitalism'—who broke with the 'traditionalistic business'[42] of 'putting out' work for peasants to undertake in their own homes, and began the process of organizing workers into factories, while at the same

time cutting out the middlemen by taking their products directly to customers.[43] At the same time Weber also specifically observes that the new entrepreneurs did provoke a great deal of 'mistrust … hatred … [and] moral indignation', such that the new entrepreneur had to be 'an unusually strong character'.[44] While of course the action of breaking with tradition does rather logically imply that individuals are acting in a somewhat thoughtful and considered fashion rather than out of habit or impulse.

In my case it is the Romantics who are the people of strong character, similarly fighting against tradition, whether that was expressed as an aesthetic standard in the arts or in the norms and conventions governing conduct in everyday life, and who correspondingly—as with Weber's entrepreneurs—encountered strong opposition. Consequently Boden and Williams would have been correct if they had suggested that I was claiming that the Romantics' actions (rather than modern consumers, as they suggest) were to a considerable extent "free[dom] from media power and social relation'.[45] Essentially they fought to legitimate pleasure-seeking against both Stoic and Puritanical resistance. The two specific examples of this struggle that are referred to in the book concern the hostility expressed towards the novel and novel-reading, and that towards romantic love, especially when elevated to the status of the sole grounds for selecting a marriage partner.

## Bringing Weber Up to Date

Some reviewers correctly noted that in writing *The Romantic Ethic* I was not just attempting to compliment Weber's most famous essay—trying to do for the consumption side of the Industrial Revolution what he had done for the production side—but that I was also, in the process, updating his detailed historical analysis of the development of theodicies in the Western world, bringing it 'into the modern period', as Gordon Marshall expressed it.[46] In fact the larger part of the book is devoted to the teasing out of different strands of Protestant theological and pastoral thought from those identified by Weber, emphasizing the importance attached to emotion and feeling in the cults of benevolence and melancholy, and then subsequently showing how these led on to sentimentalism and romanticism. Unfortunately this feature of the work was rather overlooked by the majority of commentators who seemed more concerned with what I had to say about consumption than cultural change, a response that also had the effect of increasingly pushing me to engage with the emerging field of