



**Frank Mort.** *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain.* London & New York: Routledge, 1996. viii + 280 pp. \$41.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-03052-6; \$139.97 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-03051-9.



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## Young Men Consuming Britain?

“Cultural and economic life in the twentieth century is significantly about the centrality of this commercial world.”

Frank Mort *Cultures of Consumption*

“The fundamental delusion of our time, in my opinion, is the excessive emphasis upon economic aspects of life.”

Bertrand Russell *Sceptical Essays*

Apparently something significant, indeed “epochal,” happened in London, England, between 1982 and 1989; it concerned masculine identity (in particular, “homosocial” style) and it affected the ‘place of consumption in the fabric of British society.’ Frank Mort’s concern in this book is to compose a narrative of cultural history which, while not able to identify the engine of this change, at least charts the changing consumptive relations during the period, while also pointing to the larger history of a British commercial sphere of which they are part. And, maybe because I was fortunate enough to live outside Britain and London for a number of years in the 1980s—and continue to live outside England—Mort’s story is a

new one to me. I do not recognize the ‘Britain’ he describes, nor the effect of a so-called ‘culture of consumption,’ a “specific regime of commerce,” which is claimed to have “generated a number of [new] personas offered to young men” (p. 183). Mort does admit that the situation and circumstances he describes were not universal, but then the subtitle of his project is pretty much that (*Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain*), as are many of his conclusions. Perhaps his story does ring true ‘for the yuppie and the gay urban *flaneur* in London’s 1980s consumer society,’ but then ‘Britain’ is far larger, more diverse and complex than this. The current (British male) reviewer was aged 23 in 1980, but his decade (spent in Cardiff, Manchester, Newfoundland and Israel) in no manner overlapped with a picturing of London “as the site of a future utopia, which revolved around the world of goods,” and which would lead to “an expansion of [a] sense of self and [...] sexual identity” (p. 187). Mort’s narrative is an involved and detailed one—he writes with commitment and concern—but it surely behooves the cultural commentator to take socio-cultural diversity fully into account.

Mort's portrayal of late twentieth-century British society—interweaving themes of gender, commerce and geography, economy and culture—is this: In the 1980s, the world of goods became a critical factor in determining British identity. Consumption came to occupy a privileged place in the social fabric. That is, basic economic processes moved away from manufacturing to retailing, to financial and other services; Britain became a service economy. Moreover, this featured as a whole way of life; the freedom to spend became synonymous with political and cultural freedoms. Consumption featured as a Levi-Straussian communication system for understanding social life, something imbuing alike the languages of political and economic analysis, of popular imagery and academic commentary.

Furthermore, two distinct foci of this new service culture can be noted: young men, and London. A distinctive market developed which was aimed at young men; they were encouraged to turn their attention to purchasing for themselves, and 'the new man' became a beacon of a new British economic future. Fashion stylists, journalists, advertisers, marketing executives and graphic designers all joined forces to create a plurality of new male identities. These commercial and advertising texts were more than mere scripts for consumption, however, for they also "shaped the interiority of experience" of those who partook of them; "commercial signposts" came to occupy a significant part in young men's narratives of self (p. 205). 'The marketplace' in this way came to dramatize a series of pressing questions about the meaning of masculinity, and about sexual politics as such. In particular, the expansion of gendered commerce made space for the emergence in the 1980s of a host of homosocial identities.

These commercial experiments in masculinity and homosociality, and in sexual politics and community, centered on a particular geographical space: the Soho area of central London. Indeed, London as a whole became a spectacular site of new unfettered capitalism; the capital was recentered, symbolically and materially, in national and international terms, as an entre pot of conspicuous consumption...

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London, the city, has roughly twice the population of Scotland, the country; both are components of 'Britain.' This might indicate at least two of the dangers to which Mort's narrational efforts might fall prey: comparing and

combining unlike with like, and generalizing in terms of enormous complexities—treating the latter as coherent wholes and having them stand for other parts. Talking about 'British,' anything at present (in any but a geographical sense) is a political act; its use in academic analysis is tendentious in ways in which Mort might have done more to acknowledge.

Together with the question of Mort's sociological perspective, there is an epistemological one. At one point Mort compares the 'British culture of consumption of the 1980s' to 'a Levi-Straussian communication system': something to be found in all manner of contemporary social expression and debate. Levi-Strauss's systems of communication, however, were deep-structural, and their workings were largely unconscious (which allowed Levi-Strauss to find them where he pleased, and eschew local knowledge where it displeased). In Mort's analysis—his 'historical narration'—he admits to interweaving and composing of what is plainly there to be seen in advertising and marketing and P-R discourse; his commentary is only ever one step removed from original expressions and debates. So what ontological status would he grant to these (economistic) public discourses to which he and others have seemingly immediate ideological access and yet which at the same time have the power to shape the interiority and mould the experience of those 'subject-positions' which speak them? If this is an up-dated version of Berger and Luckmann's thesis on social constructionism (where now a meeting between, perhaps, Foucault and Heidegger replaces that between Durkheim and Weber), then the theorization of 'discourse' might be more explicitly addressed.

As a Reader in Cultural History (at the University of Portsmouth), Frank Mort would know better than this reviewer (a social anthropologist) the difficulties of writing an 'immediate' history. One may no longer wish for a social commentary to occupy an objective Archimedean point; but, in an historical account published seven years after the event there is still sorting out to be done: in particular, between eventualities of great personal significance in the life of the writer, and events which can be said to characterize life in late twentieth-century Great Britain 'as a whole.'

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