APPROPRIATING THE STATE ON THE COUNCIL ESTATE

DANIEL MILLER

University College London

This article is concerned with the nature of consumption in an industrial society. It investigates in a manner in which tenants on a London Council Estate have decorated and altered their kitchens. Striking differences in the ability of tenants to appropriate facilities provided by the council are considered in relation to gender, ethnicity and other factors. Such a perspective illuminates the dialectical nature of gender categories under certain conditions. It also highlights the dynamic potential of long-term consumption as an arena through which social groups attempt to transform alienable goods into insalienable culture, but are often unable to accomplish this goal.

Introduction: the theoretical background

The key analytical terms to be employed in this article are alienation and appropriation. These are derived from a considerable literature within which anthropologists have attempted to utilise concepts which arose out of critical debates as to the nature of industrial societies and apply them to smaller-scale communities. A key point of departure was The gift by Mauss (1954), from which a polarity has been developed between 'commodity' societies, used to exemplify the state of alienation, and 'gift' societies, used to characterise the state of insalienability (e.g. Gregory 1982).

This polarity has been most marked in workings on the Pacific where a series of recent analyses have followed from Sahlin's representation (1974: 149-83), following Mauss, of cultural strategies as a form of pre-emptive strike against the possibility of alienation (e.g. Munn 1977; Strathern 1983; Weiner 1985). It would seem worthwhile to utilise our understanding of such cultural strategies derived from the study of non-industrial societies, and return them to the context within which the problematic was first encountered—to see, for example, whether images of culture as insalienability can also be recovered from ethnographic study within an industrial society.

In completing this circle, a shift in the focus of concern seems warranted. In Melanesia, the formation of processes such as gender and exchange ensure that objects are integral to the formation of social relations. By contrast, given the influence of Marx on this 'expressivist' tradition, the main thrust of social criticism within industrial contexts has been leveled against conditions which create alienation as estrangement from the products of labour, regarded as having been invested with aspects of the social being of the producer. It should
be evident by the 1980's, however, that this form of critical theory may be now be anachronistic. The experience of alienation as estrangement may encompass a much wider spectrum of interaction between social groups and their received environment than that of the relations of production which have been the focus of conventional socialism. Within an industrial context, the very scale of the institutions which construct and distribute its products may make alienation an intrinsic condition. In such circumstances what must be looked for are not 'pre-emptive strikes', but rather a response in the form of an appropriation, understood as a re-socialisation of the artefactual environment.

The problem of housing, which provides the background to my study, exemplifies the complexity of the current relationship between society and its artefacts. Self-built housing, despite its political appeal, is never likely to be more than a minority possibility, unless we want to renew the entire housing stock at very short intervals. A theory of housing therefore has to be largely a theory of consumption. The distributive mechanisms—that is, the market and the state—are clearly problematic candidates as the direct source of social identification or affective community. This means that whether as council tenants or owner occupiers, households are likely to receive their built environment as the product of a system which would not be regarded as an investment of their social being. If they are to develop their self-conception as households and neighbourhoods it must be through some form of consumption as appropriation, though their possibilities of accomplishing this task may well be coloured by their consumption status.

The aim of this article about work on the home as consumption is therefore to excavate the nature of the value which confirms such labour as a social activity. This is not some absolute quality but rather derives from the particular position of consumption in the context of more general characterisations of industrial society. Our current notion of consumers is extremely constraining, used mainly in relation to the purchase of commodities or of status in respect to ownership, and the connotations are generally negative, a degeneration from the previous state of 'users' (e.g. R. Williams 1980). There is a considerable literature on what is wrong with consumption, but very little about what is activity which is integral to all industrial societies ought to be like. Consumption may, however, be reformulated in value-related terms as an ideal. One such model might involve a process by which social groups are formed around activities through which they attempt (with variable degrees of success) to render what is inevitably met as alienating when received through the distributive institutions of the nation-state, into an artefactual culture (Miller 1987: 178–217). Our concern should therefore be increasingly with the manner by which relations of production and distribution contribute or constrain this project of consumption as the construction of insalubrity.

The particular subject of this analysis is an aspect of the built environment in Britain. At the present time there are many incentives to establishing alternatives to the dual means of housing distribution with their consequence of potential alienation of sections of our own society from the environment which they occupy. These are a strong centralist planning bureaucracy which during the period of high modernism appears to have alienated the recipients of this aspect of welfare state policy, and, on the other hand, a private housing market,

DANIEL MILLER
from a nearby area, but as the estate grew to the present size of over 500 flats and maisonettes conflicts emerged especially over noise and fights between estate children, who were short) of play areas. The tenants' association folded and did not arise again for a decade. Tenants noted the large number of petty quarrels between neighbours but on the other hand considered it a relatively non-violent 'safe' area, and some at least suggested that its negative reputation was 'undeserved'.

I interviewed forty tenants (this was around 13 per cent. of the total, in flats ranging from bed-sitters to three bedrooms). Thirty-four of them allowed me to photograph the kitchen interiors in the state they happened to be in at the time. The majority of these households were either original tenants or had lived on the estate for a decade or more; only a fifth had been less than five years on the estate. The interviews concentrated on basic background information about the household and questions regarding the kitchen, including details about patterns of use and decoration such as how individual members of the household regarded the kitchen and what activities they associated with it, the pattern of visits, attitudes to the estate, and the processes which resulted in the present pattern of decorations. The information I obtained was therefore kitchen-based, but as noted in the Mass Observation study of 1944-2, kitchens were the key determinant of general housing satisfaction (1943: 55), and remarks to that effect are common from housewives today.

Where possible the interviews were relatively informal allowing informants to raise a variety of issues, so relatively few quantifiable forms of information were given. The aim was not a formal sample study, but to consider qualitative factors difficult to express in language or to excavate from practices, but which might emerge as general trends. Additional background information was obtained from interviews with individuals in a position to assess the general social development of the estate such as a member of a housing action group, a caretaker and the head of the tenants' association. I did not live on the estate but tried to observe patterns of visiting and use of public areas when possible.

The intention of my study was to examine how essentially identical facilities provided by the council had been differentially employed in the long term. The tenants started with the same blank 'canvas' and data consist of their own self-design over the years. One possible focus could have been on the symbolism of the decorations and the principles of 'order' established, but in this article the emphasis will be rather on the degree to which a particular household, faced with the provision of a range of furnishings selected by the council, appears to have engaged in some form of 'appropriation' through transformation and the factors which seemed to have facilitated or constrained such alterations. Almost all the kitchens were based on one of two basic patterns. Most were long but at around 2.4m width rather narrow. They already had a system of modern fitted cupboards and the normal plumbing and energy supplies, but all other facilities were provided by the tenants. At the extremes there were cases in which the kitchen was virtually unaltered from its original state, as against cases where the occupants had thrown out all the fittings they were provided with and purchased a commercial fitted kitchen. My aim was to detect patterns in these transformations, or lack of them, and account for them.

There were limits to what the tenants could do without engaging in structural alterations given the positions of cupboards and energy and water sources. They were modern fitted kitchens with the usual worksurfaces and work 'triangle'. Eating within the kitchens was difficult because they were long and narrow; the three-bedroom maisonettes had a hatch leading to an area of the lounge in which tenants were expected to put a table. Obvious subjects for change included the black linoleum floor, curtains and decorations, white walls (most had purchased Fridges, cookers and washing machines) and the cupboards which, apart from the recently installed kitchens which had laminate surfaces, were of wood and hardboard and required painting.

Some relevant variables

When conducting a specific analysis within an area such as contemporary London there are a vast number of possible relevant variables and questions. Before examining the results of this enquiry, several such key areas of debate may be very briefly examined. Council estates, despite often being inspired by a variety of socialist and welfare ideologies, have commonly been regarded as having failed to promote the intended sociability. This has been associated with tenants' consciousness that they are merely passive recipients of something which they would otherwise have wished to have control over, and indeed councils have traditionally imposed tight restrictions upon the alterations occupants are allowed to make to their properties.

Any evidence for alienation expressed in tenants' refusal to feel 'at home' as occupants may be associated with an antagonism either--more narrowly--to the state as expressed in the council, or--more generally--to the condition of class and poverty such that tenants feel themselves conceived of as the symbolic 'other' to the private sector. The modernist image of council housing is a reflection of the control exerted by the state in general and a reflection of the control exerted by capitalism over both the workplace and the distribution of resources (Miller 1984).

Generalisation from this situation, as found in current political debates, is problematic. It should not be assumed that tenancy is some universalistic condition, or that private ownership has some necessary ontological consequences. In affluent countries such as Sweden, West Germany and Switzerland the proportion of home ownership may be low and in others such as Canada in decline (Agnew 1981: 67). It is in Britain in particular that this relationship operates, where the house and garden have become an almost universal goal within a set of relationships between individualism and the state, and the country and the city, which are hard to assimilate to continental models (see R. Williams 1973).

The focus on the kitchen implicates another series of debates around the nature of housewifery. There has been a considerable interest in the history of the kitchen, emphasising on the one hand the development of domestic science and attempts to construct a set of normative models for kitchen use, and on the other the large number of alternative and radical schemes which challenge the
primary of the housewife-kitchen relationship as it has developed (Hayden
1981). A parallel concentration of research and critique has been on the place of
housework as unpaid labour, in which private domain the relatively isolated
from any of the more important political and public domains, and construct an
elaborate sub-culture of women’s domestic affairs fostered by media such as
women’s magazines which reproduce this ideological form of patriarchy (e.g.,
Barrett & McIntosh 1982; Coward 1984; Davidoff 1998).
A possible alternative perspective may be related to certain trends emergent-
domestic sphere originated as the sphere of ‘spirituality’ which determined the
removal of females from the public domain (Zaretsky 1970). With a decline in
the importance of the workplace, however, has come an increasing orientation
towards the home and the private sphere as the source for future affective
relations. The household has also reconfigured as a key arena for the pooling of
resources, as in Pahl’s research (1984) on the articulation between different
forms of labour. Somewhat neglected is the consumption-equivalent within
which the male may be re-constructed within a new role which provides
Gershuny’s work (1978; 1983) on the do-it-yourself ethos based on
replacing service industries by work within the home. In the one comparable study available, based on a sample of fifty-four both
owner-occupied and council tenants in Guildford (which did not, however,
involve virtually in gender relations. On the one hand there were those women who
followed traditional role models, and were concerned to keep the various rooms
in the house as functionally specific and resembled men in the kitchen. At the other
end were households where the room divisions had broken down as had the
gender specificity of many household tasks, and the home was essentially
regarded as a largely de-segregated family domain. The third group consisted of
those women who under the influence of feminism looked towards the latter
model but were constrained to practise according to the traditional model in the
aware that dissatisfaction was pronounced. It should be noted, however, that
the largest group in Johnston’s survey was owner-occupied, which is also where
feminist ideas were in evidence.
A further major contextual factor is the considerable impact of the advertising
output of the fitted kitchen industry. Many tenants were readers of women’s
magazines and know of companies such as Hygena. In seeing what council
rents do it is worth remembering the very large sums spent on fitted kitchens
by owner-occupiers in an industry worth around 1.5 billion pounds. Most such
commercial kitchens are based on essentially identical melamine-faced chip-
board carcasses and functional differences are minor. The trade journal lists
prices from around £100 to £4,000 based on kitchens all storing the same amount
of objects, the only substantive difference being the styles and materials of the
doors and name of the company, i.e. most private households may be willing to
spend up to thousands of pounds purely on style with virtually no functional
consequences. I analysed a sample of 100 such advertisements from the company
brochures from which it was evident that the major organising dimension was
the evocation of time (for details see Miller forthcoming). That is, there were
three dominant classes:
a) Solid wood doors evoking an old-worldly nostalgia style associated with
carved inlets, leaded glass, items of copper and brass, preserves, dried plants,
old masters and pewter;
b) A laminate fronted modernist form associated with geometric designs,
bright colours, spotlights, non kitchen equipment, stainless steel, fruit and cut
flowers;
c) A mixture of laminate and wood associated with a mixing of nostalgic and
modern items and more often associated with practical functions such as
cooking.
Underlying the temporal symbolism were two modes of organisation. On
the one hand was heterogeneity and bricolage with for example china from a
number of different sets, such that the objects were not united as visual style
but implied memorabilia related to the householder’s own past. The opposite
organisational principle was one of homogeneity, in which all items related
stylistically to all others, and it was the visual cohesion which determined the
meaning and acceptability of particular forms. These advertisements are useful
because they have a clarity in developing the logic of certain organisational
principles which as we shall see is rarely equated in ordinary people’s actual kitchens.
There are significant differences between the assumptions of advertising and
the experience of consumers. For example, in advertisements the young are
shown to take on modernist forms and the elderly with the nostalgia style. Histori-
cally however the earliest fitted kitchens in the 1950’s were universally modern-
ist, the mixed pine and laminate developed in the 1960’s and the nostalgia style
based on oak did not take off until the 1970’s. For the present generation,
therefore, it is modernism that is historical, nostalgia that is relatively new. In
interviewing on the estate it was the elderly who most often preferred the
modernist bright red and white forms out of a sample of advertisements they were
shown, while the young tended to go for the nostalgia styles. However several of
the elderly noted that they were supposed to like the nostalgia forms and would probably have responded accordingly to a simple verbal
questionnaire. This is the first of a series of examples indicating the gulf
between what people felt they were supposed to like and what they actually
identified with.
A final contextual factor is the impact of differences in available resources. In
the commercial world it is generally assumed that ‘doing up’ your kitchen is the
work of owner-occupiers as part of a more general strategy of financial
investment, and council tenants would therefore have little reason to become
involved. Surprisingly Johnston found that council tenants were as likely to
have made significant alterations to their kitchens as those in the private sector
(1980: 120). This is despite the fact that council tenants would make no money
out of their kitchens, and indeed in the North London group most believed they
would have to remove all their alterations and return the kitchen to its original
state before they went, although in practice this was not actually the case.
One possible explanation for this finding might have been that council
Kitchens were less adequate than those in owner-occupied housing and therefore required functional improvements. Johnston, whose background was in housing economics, carefully investigated a number of standard food preparation and similar tasks; although the alterations made did increase satisfaction with the kitchen this was not associated with any actual improvement in the functional environment according to ergonomic criteria (1980: 133). Whatever the reasons behind such alterations they were therefore not reducible just to a search for efficiency.

Certainly material and social resources are variable, and this variation was evident in the north London study group, which included nine households of retired people, six whose adults were unemployed, four single women with children, but also two with four adults in employment. It would, however, be surprising if resources were a major determinant since in periods of over a decade, and using materials which were not costly, retired people were in practice as likely to have undertaken such changes as households of employed adults, with the exception of the installation of an expensive commercial kitchen.

An alternative would be to assume that the objective conditions of working class incomes constitute considerable constraints as compared to middle class life. The key question then would be about the characterisation of these constraints and what permits certain groups to emerge as creative appropriators of their environments, signifying an ability to transcend such oppressive conditions. Such a task is helped no more by romanticising the working class as an immanent society or deriding them as a mass. We need to learn from the differential success in this struggle; this means learning from people’s actions, which often project aspirations beyond the much more codified and perhaps deadening weight of language and legitimacy.

**Kitchens as contexts**

The estate I studied was roughly divided into three main populations, of Black (West Indian), Irish and local origin. As will become evident the main cleavage in terms of the materials used in this survey was between the local and Irish population as against the Black (and continental European) populations. Initially I will focus on the kitchens of the former. The following description is organised around normative clusters based primarily upon the degree to which the kitchens had been transformed. These are then associated first with household form and secondly with household attitudes to the kitchen based on interview data. These groups were therefore polythetic categories exemplified through particular cases and without invariant boundary definitions.

The first group consisted of three cases of single white males. These were conspicuous by marked conservatism of the original kitchen features. An example was a retired male living in a bed-sitting room who had no family and few friends, or, as he put it, 'you see I'm one of those people . . . I keep to myself'. He did not leave the flat except to shop or visit the library but in his bosom he had only the kitchen and bedroom to dwell in. Despite living there thirteen years nothing had been done; there was the original black lino flooring and the units as they had first been installed, with only a lightshade added; yet once retirement the proportion of time he spent alone in the kitchen would rival that of a prisoner in solitary confinement. Another individual appeared equally isolated socially. The third, who was much more inclined to bring friends around to drink, had a few decorations in the kitchen, mainly paintings of the Virgin Mary.

In contrast to these was the sole example of a nuclear family in which the male claimed to dominate household activities. Here the work done was of a classic do-it-yourself variety, resulting in considerable physical change but a complete heterogeneity of effect. There was a new lino flooring, and lino had also been cut into squares and put up as substitute 'tiles' over the cooker and by the sink. Additional work-surfaces had been constructed out of two quite dissimilar laminates, with numerous additions including a neon light. The overall result was somewhat chaotic.

The second group consisted of five households, four couples and one single mother. Although in no instances did they approach the complete conservatism of the first, the alterations made were fairly slight. All had net curtains and had made at least one change of surface, such as a new lino floor or a wallpapered or painted wall, but they retained the basic order of the original fittings. This degree of decorative work was closely associated with a set of interviews which came closest to the image of the isolated and depressed woman identified in a number of studies of housewifery and the image of this particular 'valium' estate. They expressed fears about whether they would sound 'common', complained about 'coloureds' or squatters, talked about the unfriendly atmos-

The estate, or made statements such as 'there is a tenants' association', where you can have a moan but nothing is ever done about it'. They varied from the single mother where the weight of chores appeared overwhelming, to households with several waged workers whose problems seemed to relate more to the unappreciated status of housewifery.

The cluster may be widened by the addition of parallel cases such as that of an immigrant from Spain who expressed strongly the feeling that 'such places' were only for the poor, and showed considerable disassociation from her surroundings. One of the most nervous and depressive interviewees was associated with one of the most radically transformed kitchens. It emerged, however, that these strongly coloured and largely integrated decorations had been carried out by her sister from whom she had inherited the flat. Although she referred disparagingly to the 'ghastly' orange, in the eight years of her occupation she had never been able to change these inherited decorations.

Such households represented the minority in my survey, although the sample was very likely biased towards the sociable by those who refused to be interviewed. The largest cluster comprised kitchens where substantial changes had been made to the decorative order. Although the cupboards were wood and required periodic repainting, these kitchens retained the original plain white surfaces. Instead a large number of additional objects had been brought in and used, as it were, to cover the cupboards up. Objects such as teatowels, breadboards, teacosies and trays were very common and often associated with a particular aesthetic of large bold flowers, cats, dogs and bright patterns. As well
as being placed on surfaces, breadboards and trays were typically placed vertically against the walls with their face forward to emphasize their decorative nature. Post-cards, souvenirs, cuttings from magazines and pictorial calendars might all be hung or stuck on the walls. Sometimes this was used in matching sets, but there was also the 'biographical pattern' in which no attempt was made to find order at the level of design, rather each piece appeared to be a momento of family or history, as is the commercial nostalgia style in which the relation between objects was maintained in the memories of the occupants but expressed visually.

The heterogeneity of effect within any individual household was, however, contrasted with the extent to which similar such objects were found throughout the group. Indeed these objects and their decorative designs are quite familiar as a prevalent working-class aesthetic in Britain and are available in many of the large chain stores. They are distinguished by their decorative forms which are large, taking up most of the available surface of the object, with bright bold colouring drawing the attention. As such they are often regarded by the arbiters of taste as 'vulgar' as against the more subtle but expensive decorations which are intended merely to enhance or 'frame' the object of attention (Gombrich 1979).

It may well be that this particular form of popular taste, found on the estate, was in part accounted for by the requirement for a set of consumer objects, often given as gifts, which could then be employed to personalize properties which did not belong to the occupants. This tenants' aesthetic was used to cover over and draw attention away from what the occupants clearly saw as the intrusive signifiers of their housing status. The cupboards were, of course, utilised but here remained alien, to be submerged in a well of bricolage. This strategy, which might be complementary to others (for example in other rooms within the flats), was also especially associated with single (including widowed) women, involving as it did no physical alteration to the kitchen but merely an arrangement of consumer goods.

In complete contrast to this strategy a few women appeared to have developed a very powerful relationship with the kitchen evident in their decorative order and associated with informants' identification with traditional networks through which they became what one of the informants referred to as 'kitchen-birds'. Here the cupboards had been covered with a strong coloured laminate of paint and all decorations such as curtains, wallpaper and floor coverings had been carefully chosen to create an effect of complete homogeneity within which all items in the visual field co-ordinated as a colour scheme. For kitchen-birds, the kitchen was a focal domain for female, but not male, visitors. The aesthetic emphasis on the kitchen as itself the context for tea-drinking exchange visits was comparable to Gullstråds's (1984) study in Bergen. Norway of a far more developed 'kitchen-table' society based on very powerful female networks. Interview evidence suggested that on this estate, as in virtually every study of British working-class networks, the dominant relationships were with family, for example visiting sisters and mothers, with friendship usually taking second place.

The final two groups consisted of only two cases each. Two kitchens had been transformed to the extent that they were virtually replacement fitted kitchens. In the fitted units were largely retained but the doors replaced with wooden doors, and the wall covered with wood panelling. There were a variety of other doors, and the wall covered with wood panelling. There were a variety of other doors, and the wall covered with wood panelling. There were a variety of other doors, and the wall covered with wood panelling. There were a variety of other doors, and the wall covered with wood panelling. There were a variety of other doors, and the wall covered with wood panelling. There were a variety of other doors, and the wall covered with wood panelling. There were a variety of other doors, and the wall covered with wood panelling. There were a variety of other doors, and the wall covered with wood panelling. There were a variety of other doors, and the wall covered with wood panelling.
or to replace (tinting), and the typical pattern amongst black householders to construct strong visual patterns based on painting the units and using the same or contrastive colours for floors, walls and ornaments. Brown, orange and purple were the dominant colours, while when the white tenants did paint units they were more likely to use blue and green. There also tended to be a different use of ornament, which was less central to the design organisation. One example consisted of fitted units painted light brown. All wood work within the kitchen had been painted the same colour and this was complemented by the painting of the ceiling, fake brown 'tiles' on the floor and in the wallpaper, set of wooden chairs and a smoked glass light shade. More common was the use of brighter orange and purple in contrastive modes, as in diagonal effects within tiling. Not only black tenants employed this decorative order. A Cypriot case was conspicuous by the lack of object bricolage and homogeneity of the matching brown colour scheme.

This strategy was dominant amongst the black population but was by no means a rule. There was an overlap between the different populations, especially amongst the younger, and many kitchens had elements from different strategies, such as a 'biographical' cover-up strategy which still employed a few matching items. At their most extreme the dominant decorative strategies of the two main populations constituted an inversion. One was centred on the structural elements to which additional objects were subservient, the other made the structural fitments entirely subservient to the object bricolage. The 'kitchen-bird' form, however, carried this inversion within the white population.

Another difference was the use made by some black households of the back of the kitchen. At its most extreme this area was covered from floor to ceiling by a massive pile of disparate objects such as broken sewing machines and pieces of furniture. In the two cases of a three-generation female household, one exhibited this disorder to such an extreme as to suggest an inability to cope, but the other in very similar circumstances showed no such tendency. One of the other cases commented on the situation in the form of achina spoon hung on one wall which was inscribed 'I like my kitchen to be clean enough to be healthy and untidy enough to be happy'.

Analysis: the social determinants of decorative strategies

Although both interview and visual data have been provided in the above survey, there was one substantial discrepancy between them. While discussion of changes carried out or intended emphasised functional considerations such as the problems of cooking, smells or of serving food, these did not emerge as a major factor in the actual changes made. Bourdieu noted an identical distinction in his study of householders in Le Corbusier's village of Pessac. He suggested that while the functional logic of any particular household was clear, taken as a group the degree of contradiction suggested that the actual key factors lay elsewhere (1972: 81). In the London group one household's ample space was, for another, 'totally inadequate' (with no evident correlation with numbers of children and similar factors) and feelings about where individual items should be placed varied considerably. This echoes Johnston's (1960) more systematic survey of the disparities between ergonomic functions, language and observable dangers.

This may in part account for differences in these findings and those of Bourdieu (1984). His construction of the major dimensions by which taste is organised in France is largely based on verbal responses to questionnaires. His conclusions regarding working-class taste is summarised as 'Necessity imposes taste for necessity which implies a form of adaptation and consequent acceptance of the necessity' (1984: 372). This looks very strange when set against the traditional British parlour (Roberts 1973) devoted to unused space and its decoration which Bourdieu reduced to mere effect (1984: 179-80). Still today, room for their best, brought out at Christmas if at all.

Although they could be only roughly determined, financial resources did not emerge as a significant factor except in the two cases of a purchased kitchen, and were scarce. By contrast, as evident from both verbal and visual evidence, which was crucial. By contrast, as evident from both verbal and visual evidence, which was crucial. The fact of being a tenant did considerably affect the lives of many of these people and the fact of being a tenant did considerably affect the lives of many of these people...
tenants, reflected in resentment and feelings of being stigmatised. Furthermore, they clearly associated the fitsments provided in the kitchen with the council, as objects embodying in their materiality the intrusive significations of their status. Three main strategies were evident in response to this situation of alienation: One was passive, in which alienation was interiorised as the futility of action and an inability to appropriate the material environment within which one lived. The second was an attempt to use aesthetic construction to impose a facade which as far as possible drew attention away from the fixtures and fittings, while the third was to transform the environment to suit one's personal tastes. This latter approach was often achieved by purchasing or building constructions by the tenants. In such a situation it seemed that in practice such commodities were viewed as having much greater potential for identification than items provided by the state.

This, however, must be set within the particular structure of social inequalities. That there was no intrinsic linkage between forms of distribution and the experience of alienation was evident from a contrast within the estate with the remaining third of the population. Interviews with black tenants confirmed the evidence of their decorative strategies. Although various other resentments were expressed, the actual fact of being tenants did not seem anything like as central to their identity. They were generally negative about this status but saw it more often as transitional to something else, and in that respect providing a valuable opportunity. They did not appear to have the feeling of alienation derived from an introspection of this condition as integral to their identity. As noted above, the combustions of housing consumption status were markedly different, for example, continental Europe, and the black population, in constructing its identity as a group, might well on occasion have been intensifying their experience contrastively with their neighbours rather than empathetically.

The same contrasts suggest that the interview evidence should not be interpreted as direct evidence for any objective facts in the local council. The council here was a prision of self-images as victims or combatants. The attitude to the council was often ambivalent, because at the same time all tenants saw themselves as working class and many would favourably compare their present situation with previous private rented accommodation or the alternative of bed and breakfast 'slums'. For some people, such an ambivalence might be debilitating, since full appropriation appeared to be assisted by a relatively clear sense of overcoming. Sartre perhaps over-abstracted these tensions in his later work (1976) where he implies that true social relations only emerge in the union of terrorism against an oppressive order, but at this more mundane level an agonistic framework appeared to help.

The appropriation of the state, could not, however, be separated off from equally important contextual factors, of which the most significant was gender. In Johnston's survey the idea and ideals of feminism and sexual equality had marked effect on the feelings of association and disassociation households felt for their kitchens. In my own study, however, which did not include the owner-occupied sector, there was remarkably little evidence of such ideas and values; the most commonly expressed feeling was that the kitchen was essentially a woman's domain in which men helped in a few specific tasks but otherwise should stay out. The male's own dislike for the kitchen was strongest amongst the Irish immigrants and weakest amongst West Indian immigrants. But if a decade of apparent stillness regarding feminism in the 1970s had succeeded in a relatively unremarked transformation in male conceptions of their role in the home, the relative influence unremarked in the 1970s was also pronounced effect.

The evidence suggests that unlike the high arts the aesthetic of the home is exclusively female centred (compare Parker & Pollock 1981). The increasing amount of time spent by males in the home has resulted in a new role, based on the link with physical labour as the site for the development of masculinity. But this new symbolic symbiosis operates through men having nothing to do with design. Without a female to direct them they are in most cases entirely impotent, but when given their direction they then perform their specifically assigned do-it-yourself tasks. As Gershen's has demonstrated in his piece of a study in Battersea the electric drill, electric saw and hand saw are the domestic items most exclusively male-associated (Wallace 1982: 165).

Males may show more initiative in expressing themselves in other rooms which are not so strongly female-associated, but the evidence of my survey was that among the white population, physical labour was subverted to design. The most extreme cases showed the impotence of single males to enact any changes. Women were more flexible, in that they would undertake physical changes. Women were more flexible, in that they would undertake physical changes. When no male was available for such work, in the main, however, females transformed their environment using aesthetic rather than physically expressive media.

The small group of replacement or near-replacement kitchens were again instructive here. There was a strong kin and gender complementarity, with the females both directing and being seen as the recipients of this expenditure (i.e. it was done for them), and the males as physically undertaking the transformation. In two cases it was particularly clear that the couples were seen as coming together to overcome their status as tenants, and affirming the power of kinship and marriage in this struggle.

The situation could be described as the emergence of a neo-traditionalism. Despite the presence of modernist philosophies of equality and feminism which promoted the diminution of sexual distinctions, and the increasing presence of women in the home, the evidence suggests that men did not take on any greater share of household responsibilities. Rather the older use of the public-private division to express gender had been renegotiated as a formal symbolic complementarity between what was seen as the appropriate gendered spheres within the home. As in many anthropological studies gender is perhaps best seen not from the perspective of an essentialist division from which two prior categories of male and female come to the world with specific interests, but rather as being constructed through the cultural development of relational forms.

Gender on the estate might not be a simple continuation of some 'traditional' family order (which may have tended to a simpler segregation e.g. Whitehead 1976), but an emergent construction which could evoke such traditions.
Women as housewives defined themselves in relation to households, but this category could remain unrealised unless the marital couple had a mechanism relevant to their contemporary conditions through which they constructed the household as an activity. The result was a denial of the integrity of the female housewife, and especially the single male, and a stress on the necessity of a complementary and dynamic relationship which was brought together in the practice of 'baird' in the transformation of an alienating environment into an appropriated form. In this case the kitchen, although occupied by only one individual, was an objectification of the gender relationship and the incompleteness of its constitutive elements in themselves. What this implies is that even under present conditions, gender may in certain circumstances be best understood as a genuine dialectic.

The black population clearly did not conform to these generalisations. The interviews and the transformations indicated that there was not the same gender split. Single black men showed a passive attitude to their kitchen and produced elaborate decorations and tiling (and discussions of cooking) without female guidance. The background to this may well be the strong gender autonomy observed in studies of West Indian societies, associated with a high incidence of female-headed households (e.g. Massiah 1983). A tradition which asserts the separate viability of households without a resident male is in a sense less debilitating for the male who has to construct a male centred domestic sphere, since each sex may define itself with a relative degree of autonomous control.

Within these gender relations: further expressive dichotomy has arisen in the distinction between modernistic 'kitchen-bird' homogenisation and the nostalgic bricolage of the cover-up aesthetic. Similar divisions have been shown in other studies to relate to the relative importance of kinship as against friendship and length of time spent in the area, with modernist style being used to build new communities, nostalgia to cement older ones (compare especially Pratt 1981). These differences should not be viewed as superficial or inauthentic. As Williams has shown, the parallel evocation of a country and city polarity in literature may be equally far from the actual historical construction of these domains under modern capitalism, but this does not prevent them from being powerful media for the representation of ideal worlds, marking or highlighting particular historical conjunctures (R. Williams 1973: 189–300).

Underlying relations of gender and tenancy is a more general argument about the linkage between work done on the kitchen and the nature of the social relations of consumption. One of the clearest generalisations to emerge from my study was the link between people who seemed lonely, depressed and isolated, and the lack of decorative development. By contrast, contrasting as objectification of the household and its relationships through creative activity appeared a strong signifier of an active social involvement. Though this was generally based on kin outside the estate or intra-household, it was often the relationships of affection between, for example, husband–wife and parent–child which were expressed (by this I do not mean the relation of equality implied in the term symmetry as in Young & Willmott 1973) since there was little evidence for these on the estate.

The replacement and near-replacement kitchens and their link with social involvement represented the extreme cases. One household was almost the only couple that effectively lived (or at least were continually to be seen) on the border outside their flat, and used the estate as though it was a classic East End neighbourhood (Young & Willmott 1957). Another was head and active participant in the newly reforming tenants' association was also amongst the most socially inclined. By contrast, the two clusters of entirely or largely unaltered activities were of a very different condition. The isolation of one of the single males was described above. In the other cluster, although the housewives were mainly members of households, what was registered in their material world was precisely the isolation and lack of valuation which is often the experience of housewifery as a core of identity. The ideal objectified as an ex-traditionalist family may often remain unrealised. It demands a responsive attitude to the male, and this cluster conformed closely to the image of the housewife evoked by Oakley (1974) in her classic critique of this form of labour.

The background to this was the evidence for high valium intake and constant licking. The antipathy to neighbours as against the high regard for privacy which was evident from interviews was itself, however, hardly new. The close neighbourhoods of the Ealing film studios of the 1940s were by no means an accurate reflection of actual social interaction in working class districts (1947: 208). It was made abundantly clear by the surveys made in the same period (Mass Observation 1947: 208). Apart from an antipathy to one's immediate neighbours, less than 1 in 100 expressed any interest in community involvement.

The more important factor behind any deterioration in conditions for housewives is evident from various sociological studies is likely to be the relative absence of close kin.

This division in consumption relations such that in some households gender became the basis of an isolated alienation and in others was constitutive of cultural dynamics expressed in the activity of appropriation, finds an interesting parallel with the much more developed sociology of the division of labour. In Pahl's recent work (1984; Pahl & Wallace 1983) as in most of the work. In Pahl's recent work (1984; Pahl & Wallace 1983) as in most of the work, in which he is in the book Beyond employment (Redcliff & Mingione 1982), it is shown that informal labour and exchanges of labour are not an alternative to formal waged employment but rather an additional resource which may be exploited once a foundation of financial resources is secured. Transformation of kitchens once a foundation of resources and capital is secured. Transformation of kitchens may be used by the household identity which in turn provides a foundation for the formation of larger networks.

It is, however, difficult to determine social networks from the kind of verbal information I recovered. Gullstrand (1984) noted in her Norwegian case that informants claimed to have little concern with what other people thought, but their actions were highly normative and gregarious. In the case of the present survey people indicated a great deal of such concern with what other people might say and yet may rarely have had experience of any actual evaluation. 'Neighbours' became a kind of collective super-ego in which normative order
was interiorised and expressed itself internally. Once this was established, there was little need for the assertion of actual external authority.

Conclusion

If the most widely used critical perspective on production is that which refuses to accept that work is other than a social activity (since commodities are the result of labour and not merely self-producing), then the same may be said of consumption, which is also sometimes mystified by being regarded as merely vicarious or passive. Despite the specific nature of the problems faced by council tenants (the focus of this article), the same overall problematics would be encountered in both private housing and under an equitable socialism. In all these cases, householders must enter into creative strategies of consumption to appropriate that which they have not themselves created, even if they feel far more positive about the corporate body that built their home.

To see this, however, we have to regard apparently trivial activities as deriving from profound concerns. The failure of most current social theories to have regard to consumption activities such as home decoration has its roots in the more general denigration of consumption and other such ‘women’s work’ if housewifery is to be condemned for its lack of possibilities of self-actualisation (Oakley 1976: 222–3), it is not so much because of its objective nature (it is not a priori less susceptible than industrial work for appropriation through social labour), but because of our refusal at both ordinary and academic levels to regard it as other than trivial. The results of Guillstedt’s (1984) study argue strongly against the common assumption that the material conditions of housework make it perform an individualising and private form of work.

This argument is not intended to romanticise the strategies employed in mass activity. The evidence from this case study is that for a complementarity closely linked to inequality. Potentially difference and hierarchy could be disregarded, but it would be unreasonable to expect a clear model of ideal consumption, extricated from the conditions under which actual consumption strategies must be developed. Equally work done on kitchens may have quite different implications when performed in some other cultural context. It has been argued, however, that a general principle of significance for the contradictions intrinsic to industrial society may be recovered from the observation of some strategies underlying such activities. When recognised as a legitimate form of consumption they indicate that this may be an important social arena whose goal is the production of inalienable culture through dialectics, that is socially productive labour. This indelibility derives from an activity in which objects become integral aspects of processes which are constructive of social relations.

NOTE

The survey on the council was aided by a grant from the London University Central Research Fund. I am grateful to J. Affield, F. Edholm, M. Jolly and M. Rowlands for comments on a drafted this article and to M. Strathern whose recent papers on gender in New Guinea proved an important stimulus to the analysis.

REFERENCES


S'approprier l'état dans la cité de H.L.M.

Résumé

Cet article s'efforce de décrire les conséquences d'un système de consommation dans la société industrielle. Il examine comment les consommateurs de la classe moyenne inférieure en Angleterre et autres pays du monde occidental, principalement en fonction du genre, de l'éthique et de divers autres éléments, conditionnent la société. Cela met également en relief le potentiel dynamique de la consommation à long terme, comme une source de la transformation de l'environnement dans la culture. Cependant, il est souvent incapable d'expliquer les besoins vitaux dans un contexte moderne.

CORRESPONDENCE

Archaeology and theory

I am grateful to the editor of MAN for allowing me to respond to Blinford (1996, 22, 219-227). A response seems particularly appropriate given the wider public debate about his article (Times Higher Educational Supplement, 10.18.1995). At the end of the TSE report of 2.10.1997 is a conclusion, which perhaps, according to Blinford, 'archaeology is a single-shot process, not to be taken as things and nothing more'. This may be an inaccurate summary of Blinford's position.

After all, he has elsewhere made a strong case for the idea that building and testing of theory against evidence. But on the other hand, the consistent use of some of the implications of Blinford's position. Amongst archaeologists, still heavily influenced by the direction of the New Archaeology of the 1960's and in which Blinford played a role important role, the over-riding emphasis is on methodology—statistics, sampling, formation processes, settlement patterns and the like. There is agreement with Blinford that one must remain objective, explicit and rigorous. There is a belief that it does not matter what the theory comes from, as long as one gets the methodology right, all will be well.

At least in the early days of New Archaeology it was claimed that archaeology was anthropology, and as a result interesting attempts at generalisation were made. Because constructed within a narrow, ecological and functional view of cultural diversity, these generalisations tended to fail or appear trivial. The retreat was into methodology; in accordance with the view that the 'external world exists in its own right, and that includes the properties of the archaeological record' (p. 219), it is entirely consistent with his retreat that Blinford should now be retracting: 'ethnography as well— indeed from all the social sciences. According to Blinford, many of the major debates in the social sciences are "metaphysical issues that are not really appropri-ate to science in fundamental ways" (p. 390). The data of social scientists (except archaeologists) are "not really operat-ive in a scientific role" (p. 390). This is a sorry state of affairs for the rest of the social sciences, perhaps. But it is even sadder for those archaeologists who expose Blinford's views. For archaeology to be a science it must dissociate itself from ethnography and the social sciences. Archaeology is reduced to dry methodology, isolated from the great contemporary debates in social theory, unable to contribute to our understanding of history, culture and the construction of meaning. Indeed the extent to which Blinford's programme for archaeology has diverged from anthropological concerns is distinctive. On the anthropological side there is human agency, structure and event, culture and economy, the reactions to deconstruc-tion and critical perspectives. On Blinford's side there is bone taphonomy, traces of use wear on flint, and hunter-gatherer foraging strategies. In fact Blinford, in other works (e.g. 1993), has shown how careful study of these latter middle level concerns can produce important implications for our understanding of early humanity. On the other hand, as soon as one gets beyond the purview of primary decon-servational arguments, there is little that can be contributed to broader debates by adhering to the rigid view of science advocated by Blinford. As a result of the failure of that view to deal with complex contemporary issues, many archaeologists are beginning to seek alternatives.

Blinford seems unclear about these alternatives. He lumps divergent positions in contemporary archaeology together. I do not know what a 'Marxist contextual' (p. 405) approach is, for example. However, underlying his criticisms is a general misunderstanding of which I presume results from an assumption that in discussing cultural meanings, what people say is of primary importance, Blinford privileges speech. The first result of this assumption is that all ethnographies are condemned because Blinford sees the ethnographer dependent on information received from informants. The anthropologist can thus never explain, only understanding in others' terms. It is certainly true that some ethnographies can be criticized for over-reliance on authoritative informants. But most contemporary ethnography goes beyond what is said by informants to structures or systems of meaning, which make sense of what is said. Certainly in many modern material