Abstract
This essay is a response to Askegaard and Linnet’s (2011) call for a greater epistemological plurality within consumer culture theory (CCT). The paper begins with a brief review of what these authors refer to as the dominant existential-phenomenological perspective and their Morinian alternative, and then presents contemporary political philosophy as another alternative. Political philosophy has experienced quite a renaissance in recent years, and the school of thought has inspired major epistemological and ontological interventions throughout the academy. Here, I provide a general introduction to this field of social inquiry, and then focus specifically on the contributions of French philosopher Alain Badiou. Badiou’s work is particularly valuable for fields such as consumer culture theory, as it presents a unified epistemological framework for developing knowledge of social structures, cultural forms, and subjectivities. The utility of political philosophy in general as well as the Badiouian framework is then demonstrated with recourse to the extant consumer culture theory literature. Ultimately, a Badiouian perspective has the potential to fulfill Askegaard and Linnet’s call for epistemologies that can attend to everyday experience while also considering the operation of cultural, political, and sociological forces.

Keywords
Epistemology, ontology, political philosophy, political theory, Badiou, existential-phenomenology, ethnography, consumer culture theory (CCT)
Connecting contexts
A Badiouian epistemology for Consumer Culture Theory

Introduction

In their assessment of the state of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), Arnould and Thompson (2005) put forth that CCT projects should ‘systematically link individual (or idiographic) meanings to different levels of cultural processes and structure’ situated ‘within historical and marketplace contexts’ (p. 875). Building on this call for integrative theorizing, Askegaard and Linnet (2011) presented a critique of dominant epistemologies in the discipline, which they contend fail to meet this ideal. They argue that individualism has become endemic to existential-phenomenological consumer research, and that contextualism has limited the potential of ethnography within our field. The authors contend that while these epistemologies have yielded a wealth of useful knowledge of the phenomenological experience of consumption, greater theoretical depth and meaning can only be achieved if these context-dependent findings can be conceptualized with recourse to the surrounding sociological milieu. Here, the authors propose that for the field to advance, consumer culture theorists must work harder to develop adequate theoretical frameworks that attend to the ‘systemic and structuring influences of market and social systems’, (p. 381) as well the everyday lived experience of consumers.

Building on the imperative put forth by Cova, Maclaran, and Bradshaw (2012), this paper considers how contemporary political philosophy, and specifically the work of Alain Badiou, can fulfill this role. Political philosophy takes the relationship between social structures and political subjects as its object. As such, it has been incredibly useful for reconciling questions of structure and agency across the social sciences. Badiou, in particular, provides a powerful and clear theorization of the relationship between sociohistoric conditions, knowledge structures, subjectivity, ethics, and behavior, through his focus on the possibility for resistance and change within the world as it is.

Here, I consider the implications of this emerging epistemological perspective for the discipline of consumer culture theory. The essay begins with a brief recapitulation of the dominant epistemological position of consumer culture theorists, as described by Askegaard and Linnet (2011), as well as a summary of their alternative epistemological proposal, which is grounded in the thought of British anthropologist Roy Dilley and French sociologist Edgar Morin. Next, I provide a brief introduction to political philosophy and the framework of Alain Badiou. The remainder of the essay is spent considering the implications of political philosophy in general, and then the Badiouian epistemology specifically, for the consumer culture theory canon, as demarcated by Askegaard and Linnet (2011) and Arnould and Thompson (2005). Ultimately, I find that a Badiouian perspective has the potential to powerfully integrate extant findings within our research community, as well as offering guidance for researchers engaging in new empirical projects.

Dominant epistemologies in Consumer Culture Theory

Existential-phenomenology and the limits of psychologism
Askegaard and Linnet identify two epistemological trends that have dominated the state of knowledge development in consumer culture theory. First, following Tadajewski (2006), they argue that psychological perspectives and a corresponding emphasis on the individual level of analysis have long dominated consumer research. In the case of interpretive consumer research, they find that the spectre of psychology has led to a dominance of existential-phenomenological epistemologies and methodologies.

Askegaard and Linnet’s (2011) contend that the dominance of the individual level of analysis in the existential-phenomenological tradition has had the unintended consequence of privileging the minutiae of everyday consumer experience over sociological forces which may shape consumer behaviour beyond the level of conscious awareness. Askegaard and Linnet argue that this is not a pitfall of phenomenology in general, so much as how it is employed within CCT. They note that ‘some currents of phenomenological thinking distinguish themselves by taking as their point of departure the fundamentally social nature of human existence, analyzing how individuals merge their worldviews and participate in each other’s experiences’ (p. 394), such as the intersubjective tradition in phenomenological anthropology. Furthermore, they find that hermeneutic approaches to phenomenology are much more attuned to the holistic picture of social phenomena, not just individual experience. Indeed, such a balance can be seen in the main treatises on hermeneutics within our field (Thompson, 1997; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander, 1994; Arnold and Fischer, 1994).

Ethnography and the limits of relativism
The second problematic epistemological trend that they identify is the contextualism that commonly accompanies ethnographic perspectives. Beginning with the consumer behaviour Odyssey and continuing through most naturalistic consumer research, they find a tendency to reify the contextually-dependent meanings created by cultures and communities. In other words, Askegaard and Linnet (2011) are expressing a concern that CCT scholars are too quick to treat field-specific findings as if they are necessarily widely-experienced sociological phenomena. Again, this is not an intellectual trend specific to consumer culture theory, so much as an artifact from the ethnographic tradition’s parent discipline, anthropology. Indeed, drawing on the work of Marilyn Strathern (1995), Dilley (1999) notes that the epistemological project of that discipline has been the ‘contextualization of knowledge’ (32). The challenge for anthropologists and consumer culture theorists alike is to theorize the meaning of context, or as Askegaard and Linnet describe it, the ‘context of context’.

Towards an epistemology of CCT: Theorizing context through Dilley and Morin
In the paper, Askegaard and Linnet (2011) begin the work of elucidating the meaning of context, as it relates to the study of consumer culture. First, they turn to Roy Dilley, who has capably synthesized work on the meaning of context within philosophy as well as social anthropology. While there is a great deal of disagreement on the subject, Dilley (1999) finds that common ground can be found when researchers consider contextualization as a practice of making connections—and, implicitly, making arguments about phenomena that are not connected. He argues that most of these
practices can be described as one of three contextualizing moves: (1) appeals to *external context*, or the real world surrounding a phenomenon; (2) focus on *internal context*, or connections within the world of the phenomena like culture and language; or (3) studies of *psychological contexts*, or the way in which the mental worlds of individuals itself functions as a context.

Askegaard and Linnet use this framework to argue that the existential-phenomenological tradition of CCT has focused disproportionately on psychological contexts. They find that this influence frequently extends to ethnography within consumer culture theory, despite the fact that such a perspective may be inappropriate for fieldwork-based disciplines concerned with the social and cultural nature of behaviour. According to the authors and Dilley (1999), ethnography at its best tends to be preoccupied with internal context, or connections within the lifeworlds of informants. Building on Dilley’s work, Askegaard and Linnet (2011) argue that a knowledge system can only be complete when it considers the dialogic relationship that exists between all three levels of context. The individual subjectivity of mental contexts must connect to the intersubjectivity of communities; from there, communal experiences must be connected to the social, cultural, political, and institutional environment that surrounds and defines them. This is because meaning is co-constituted between these levels of analysis; without consideration of all of these levels, we cannot make statements about meaning and knowledge at any one level.

From this point, the authors turn to the work of French philosopher of science Edgar Morin. Morin’s main contribution to the field of epistemology is considered to be the theorization of the interconnectedness of these levels of knowledge production (Hawkins, 1997; Kofman, 1996). Morin criticizes both the subjectivism of the humanities and much of the social sciences as well as the objectivism of the hard sciences; as with Dilley (1999), he finds that absolutism and relativism can only exist and have meaning with recourse to each other. As noted by Askegaard and Linnet (2011), Morin also theorizes how knowledge emerges dialogically between these levels of analysis, and through other complementary/antagonistic systems such as the dualism of the mind/body. Here, subjectivity and structures are found to be mutually co-constituitive; consequently, the study of one level of analysis without the other is not only incomplete, but also incomprehensible. Ultimately, the dialogic of comprehension, which Askegaard and Linnet explain is rooted in the Weberian and phenomenological concept of *verstehen*, emerges as the central dialogic through which knowledge is produced.

Based on this framework, Askegaard and Linnet present an assessment of consumer culture theory. They find that the field has gone too far to one side of such dialogics, emphasizing subjectivism over objectivism, and emic detail rather than theoretical abstraction. The authors conclude by advocating for work that takes up the challenge facing fieldwork-based disciplines—the need for epistemologies which consider both emic lifeworld experiences and etic forces, operating beyond the level of conscious awareness.

**Beyond Morin: Political philosophy as an alternative theoretical framework**
While Askegaard and Linnet (2011) provide a provocative and challenging starting point for future research in consumer culture theory, many questions remain regarding what such an epistemology would look like in practice. As such, one must consider other developments within contemporary epistemology and social theory to answer Askegaard and Linnet’s call for synthesizing, sociologically-sensitive theoretical frameworks. The authors argue that CCT research grounded in theories of institutional agency (as explicated by Giddens and Bourdieu) have come the closest to realizing this potential, but find that much remains to be done in terms of identifying unifying epistemological perspectives that could lead to a cohesive body of knowledge. Dilley (1999), on the other hand, contends that Foucauldian epistemologies may have the greatest potential for elucidating the connections between contexts, thus uniting the various horizons at which meaning is produced.

Here, I expand upon both of these suggestions by considering the epistemological position of contemporary political philosophy, which can be characterized as the ‘next generation’ of social theories that attempt to simultaneously grapple with questions of structure and agency. As argued by Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998), contemporary political philosophy begins with Foucault’s unfinished work, aiming to elucidate connections between political technologies (e.g. exercises of state power) and technologies of the self, processes by which we become both individuated and subjugated. Starting with a focus on the relationship between powerful agents and meaning-making—or as Askegaard and Linnet (2011) would say, ‘searching for [the] agents who construct meaning’ (p. 387)—contemporary political philosophers build on Foucault (1980, 1979), examining how meaning-making within external, internal, and psychological contexts is largely influenced by power dynamics.

By following the impact of power across all three levels of context, an enhanced understanding of the co-constitution of social structures, cultural forms, and subjectivities can be revealed. Indeed, given the common constituting role of power, analyses in political philosophy do not focus on subjects, agents, or their co-constitution, as much as how power is antecedent to and constitutes both structures and subjectivity. Working from the assumption that power is the common constitutive factor across these levels of analysis, political philosophy is consequently as a radical re-assessment of the relationship between structure and agency. As with Askegaard and Linnet (2011), this theoretical frame raises serious questions about the agentic consumer and his desires.

To facilitate a dialogue between this tradition; the existential-phenomenological tradition within consumer culture theory; and the Morinian alternative as formulated by Askegaard and Linnet (2011), I provide a brief introduction to political philosophy and the work of Badiou below. The paper then proceeds to a comparison of these epistemological systems. Next, I examine how political philosophy generally and a Badiouian epistemology in particular could be applied to the field of consumer culture theory. Given the interest in simultaneously attending to internal, external, and psychological contexts, French philosopher Alain Badiou’s project is arguably the most appropriate. Badiou provides a new, powerful framework for examining the co-constitution of social structures, knowledge, and subjectivity. Ultimately, I argue that this approach reflects a new generation of work that attempts to synthesize knowledge produced across universalist and subjectivist frontiers. As we will see in the following sections, Badiou’s philosophy provides new insights on the operations of power, the
production of individual subjects, and the possibility of resistance in societies, despite the overdetermination of power.

*A brief introduction to political philosophy*

As noted previously, political philosophy is a promising field which has experienced a significant resurgence in recent years (Pluth, 2010; Dean, 2009; Riera, 2005; Hallward, 2003, 2001). It is one of the oldest traditions in philosophical inquiry, dating back to the political and ethical dialogues of Socrates (Plato, 387 B.C.), and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 B.C. a) and *Politics* (350 B. C. b). These works were concerned with the nature of virtue and the good life, and in the case of Aristotle, democracy and model citizenship.

Political philosophy is not only a long-established field, but also a diverse and heterogeneous field of social inquiry. Later political philosophers include Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Bentham, and Mill, as well as moral philosophers such as Ricardo, Smith, Proudhon, and Marx (Wolff, 2006; Miller, 2003). Despite this stately provenance, however, political philosophy faded from prominence in North America during much of the 20th century, as politics became the domain of political science departments, which in turn concerned themselves with micro-level concerns rather than a balance between localized politics and macro-level questions (Dahl, 2002, 1970). Nevertheless, it was a 20th century political scientist who provided one of the most succinct definitions of politics; Harold Lasswell explained that politics refers to ‘who gets what, when, and how’, (1936).

In the last ten years, political philosophy has re-emerged as a *tour de force* in social theory and philosophy. This return has been attributed to the irreconcilability of postmodern philosophies with questions of meaning and value (Riera, 2005), which Peter Hallward (2003, 2001) argues is epitomized by the nihilism of traditional Derridean deconstruction. As noted above (Agamben, 1998), modern-day political theorists frequently begin with a reconsideration of Foucault’s works on power (1980, 1979, 1975). Philosophers such as Jacques Rancière (2010, 1992), Chantal Mouffe (2005, 1993), and Alain Badiou (2006, 2005, 2001) share Foucault’s (1982) concern with how social change may be possible, even if it is not probable. Indeed, many contemporary political philosophers begin with Foucault’s imperative that we must critique power and identify sites of resistance, movement, and change within such systems, despite the strictures of existing political and social structures (1982, 1980). In this way, contemporary political philosophy can be seen as a new iteration of the ongoing debate surrounding the constitution of structure and agency within society.

As noted previously, Foucault is not the only theorist who has been revived by contemporary political philosophy. In essence, this project reinvestigates the place of politics in 20th century social theory, beginning with a return to the critical theory project, from the early days of the Frankfurt School to Habermas’s work on democracy (1981) and the public sphere (1962). The more political projects of Bourdieu (2005, 2001, 1993) could also be read into this tradition, as he attends to the influence of powerful actors within fields of cultural production. Finally, while institutional theory has its roots in sociology, and is best understood with recourse to that discipline, the works of institutional theorists (e.g. Giddens, 2009, 1984; DiMaggio and Powell 1983) have much in common with political philosophy, to the degree to which they are interested in power
dynamics within institutional fields. To conclude, and summarize this school of thought in the terms of the foregoing epistemological discussion, contemporary political philosophy should be of interest to CCT scholars as it elucidates ‘key intersections between the agentic and the structural that could further illuminate the consumer phenomenon under study’ (Thompson, Arnould, and Giesler, 2012), and indeed, has the potential to integrate knowledge formed across these levels of context.

A brief introduction to Badiou

Within the frame of political theory, Alain Badiou’s work is arguably the most appropriate for synthesizing the traditions of consumer culture theory. Throughout a series of major philosophical treatises (Badiou 2006, 2005, 2001, 1982), Badiou theorizes not only how sociohistoric conditions structure knowledge and subjectivity, but also thoroughly explicates how this shapes individuals’ ethics, actions, and especially opportunities for resistance. While Badiou maintains a critical interest in cultural hegemony (along the lines of Gramsci, 1971, and Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947), Badiou diverges from these earlier thinkers by focusing on how resistant subjects can emerge, despite the tremendous influence of the powerful within society. In other words, while he would agree with Foucault (1980), Giddens (1984), and the final work of Baudrillard (2010), that social action is largely controlled by the most powerful actors in a society (which Nitzan and Bichler 2009 demonstrate is synonymous to those with the most capital), Badiou devotes his full energy to understanding the gaps and potentialities for change within such rigid structures. His theory can thus be characterized as one of social change.

Again, following Foucault (1980), Badiou does agree that discourse and social action are generally structured by the interests of powerful actors (2006, 2001). He refers to this as the state of the situation or the status quo. Put differently, the state of the situation can be described as the sociohistoric conditions in place at a given time. Here, and in the work of Rancière (2010, 2006, 1992) and Žižek (2011, 2000), the status quo of contemporary consumer culture is characterized as a post-political consensus. Emerging after the fall of the Soviet Union, the post-political consensus is a state of affairs that exists in most capitalist nations, whereby major issues of political economy have been put to rest (e.g. whether alternative economic systems such as communism should be considered; see Cova, Maclaran, and Bradshaw, 2012, for further discussion of this phenomenon). In other words, these theorists argue that major transformations of political economy are incomprehensible to the majority of the population at any given time, and thereby incredibly improbable.

Badiou contends that the knowledge structure which accompanies the state of the situation is ideology, which he defines as knowledge that serves the interests of those in power. This is a major divergence from dominant usages of ideology in cultural studies, anthropology, and post-structuralist social theory, which takes a relativist stance and uses the term to describe the belief structure of a social group (Eagleton, 2007; Dilley, 1999). Rather than seeing all knowledge production as a politically-neutral discursive game, Badiou reanimates critical theory conceptualizations of knowledge, emphasizing the role of power in intellectual production and culture creation. In essence, Badiou and his contemporaries are calling for a reconsideration of this distinction, and the depoliticization inherent in the breakdown of this usage.
Again, tacitly building on Gramscian notions of cultural hegemony (1971), Badiou argues that the dominant knowledge structure, or ideology, surrounding an individual has a powerful structuring influence on subjectivity. In his early work, Badiou argued that the subjects produced by ideology were not subjects at all, as they were not truly involved or conversant in the political matters of society (1982). More recently, Badiou theorizes that individuals become *subjects of the state of the situation* in the absence of other knowledge structures. In turn, their *ethics*, defined as duty to society (following Aristotle, 350a B.C., 350b B.C.), are guided by the state of the situation. Within a capitalist consumer culture, most subjects are thus socialized into an individualist, value-maximizing ethic. For example, the subject may be more concerned with his/her own employability, rather than labour politics more broadly; or with their own access to resources and consumer goods, rather than in social welfare.

Nevertheless, there are rare moments when the state of the situation is called into question, and Badiou refers to such a moment as an *event*. Following Lacan (1966), the event can be anything that ‘punches a hole’ in existing knowledge structures, allowing for the formation of counter-ideological understandings of power relations in society. Badiou goes even farther than his Marxist forebears, calling these understandings *truth* rather than knowledge. Indeed, this is where Badiou departs from Foucault, for whom nothing of meaning is said to exist outside of discourse, and thus all meaning is produced by power in some way or another. As such, for Foucault, claims to truth are nothing more than ideology, with ‘regimes of truth’ used to create subjects and control populations in the interests of those in power (2013, 1980).

For Badiou, *truth* is that which contests power, and is thus in the interests of all those subjugated by those in power. Moreover, and building on Hegel (1807), Badiou’s theorization implies that freedom from rule and discipline would even be of interest to those in power, as they would be freed from their dependence on those they oppress. As such, truth is defined in terms of universals that would hold true for all people, regardless of differences in social class, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. Truth can be known *collectively* through *politics*; dyadically through the experience of *love*, and the creation of a subjectivity which exceeds the sum of its two component people; and either *collectively or individually*, as the result of *artistic or scientific discovery*. Again, in any of these fields, truth is that which contests and elucidates structures of power, and with it the dominant discourses of the field. Such a truth is consequently so irreconcilable with dominant knowledge that it requires new discourse, and commands radical changes in personal ethics and behaviour. Badiou describes the individuals created through such transformations as *subjects of truth* (2006, 2005, 2001, 1982), or *political subjects*.

Ultimately, this is not a radical turn from Foucault so much as a critical extension of his project. Indeed, Foucault also contends that analyzing exercises of subjection (and thereby practices of power) is the obligation of ethical individuals (1994, 1982); he just does not refer to the final product of such analysis as truth. Moreover, Badiou maintains Foucault’s interest in processes of subject formation; he simply begins with a different foundation (truth vs. ideology, as opposed to regimes of truth; and the event, as opposed to privileged knowledge of power), and devotes the majority of his project to resistant subjects, rather than dominated subjects.

Taken together, Badiou’s oeuvre forms a general theory of social action (Figure 1), as well as a theory of the status quo (Figure 2) and resistance (Figure 3). With a hefty,
tacit debt to Foucault, his theory of social action posits that sociohistoric conditions influence knowledge structures and discourse, which in turn create subjects, influencing their ethics and action. The critical departures come in his theories of the status quo and of resistance. In terms of the status quo, he argues that existing power structures and relations produce ideology (‘regimes of truth’ in Foucauldian parlance), which creates apolitical subjects who generally do not challenge the status quo in either ethics or actions. Once again, returning to the Frankfurt School, Badiou contends that the majority of people within a society ‘go with the flow’, at any particular point in time. Nevertheless, there exist moments where social change is, in fact, possible, which Badiou refers to as the event. This can be viewed as an alternative set of sociohistoric conditions which produces a truth (a.k.a. knowledge of power structures), and this radical knowledge creates revolutionary subjects who are ethically bound to this knowledge, and thereby change their actions.

**Figure 1.** Badiou’s General Theory of Social Action

![Diagram of General Theory of Social Action]

**Figure 2.** Badiou’s Theory of the Status Quo

![Diagram of Theory of the Status Quo]

**Figure 3.** Badiou’s Theory of Political Action

![Diagram of Theory of Political Action]

Ultimately, Badiou’s intervention in social theory is nothing short of a fresh attempt to reconcile universalist and contextualist approaches to knowledge production. On the one hand, Badiou argues that there are objectively-existing power structures, whose interests are well-known and communicated through ideology. With this in mind, he reopens the question of universal truth, which he defines as critique of ideology. At the same time, Badiou maintains a continuity with 20th century phenomenology (especially Heidegger 1927), arguing that the experience of such a truth is always subjective; located within the situation; and inextricable from the eccentricities and personal history of a particular human being. As such, the exact nature of the ethics and
action resulting from the experience of truth is always locally- and personally-specific. Taken together, this means that an individual has their own subjective experience of politics, coupled with an understanding of how this has meaning beyond his or her own life.

Building on this epistemological foundation, Badiou’s perspective also offers a radical new ontology. Again, following Heidegger (1927), Badiou is concerned with the nature and meaning of being for various subjects, within different social contexts. Within his philosophy, social contexts (the status quo and the event), knowledge (ideology and truth), and subjectivity are all defined in terms of relationships to power; as such, the very nature of being is revealed to be defined by politics. This is a major ontological development, and is frequently considered to be the most important intervention of Badiou’s project (Riera, 2005; Beistegui, 2005; Hallward 2003, 2001).

Comparing epistemologies

In many ways, contemporary political philosophy shares many of the assumptions of Askegaard and Linnet’s (2011) Morinian epistemology. First, and perhaps most importantly, the current generation of political philosophers are interested in the intersection between objectivism and subjectivism. Specifically, they are interested in the juncture between objectively-existing power structures; subjective, individual experiences of domination in these systems; and localized strategies of resistance. In the work of Badiou, this takes the form of a shared understanding of dominance and power, developed in spite of the fact that subjects differ infinitely in their experiences. As with Askegaard and Linnet’s Morinian epistemology, Badiou’s work re-invigorates hermeneutic phenomenology’s (Dilthey, 1923; Weber, 1913) concern with verstehen, or intersubjective understanding.

Badiou differs, however, on a number of essential parameters. First, and perhaps most importantly, while Askegaard and Linnet’s epistemology would be more attentive to cognitive, psychological processes of knowledge formation, Badiou’s epistemology is in and of itself more sociological. Badiou is concerned with where knowledge comes from and what kind of knowledge is formed. Rather than entertain phenomenological preoccupations with individuals’ perception and sensation, Badiou questions the genesis and importance of the individual subject at all. As indicated by the distinction between truth and ideology, the two forms of knowledge in Badiou’s philosophy can be described as knowledge created by subjects of truth, and knowledge created by the dominant society. Both kinds of knowledge are always socially defined, and the individual simply adapts them to his or her individual experience. Compared to the epistemology presented by Askegaard and Linnet, then, a Badiouian perspective would be much more critical of the co-constitution of subjects and structures of power. This is because the central dialogic for Badiou is not between subjectivism and objectivism, but between dominance and resistance.

For Badiou, this is not the case only for political knowledge, but knowledge production in general. In a Kuhnian move, Badiou is interested in power dynamics within the domains of science, art, and love as well as politics, arguing that in each case there exists a dominant social logic, and the truth developed and held by subjects that resist.
Ultimately, this means that epistemology itself is never politically neutral, and reminds us that researchers necessarily make ethical decisions when developing projects (e.g. to produce knowledge in the interests of power, or that critique those in power). Finally, Badiou differs from traditional perspectives in CCT, as well as the Morinian alternative, in his central focus on how ontology itself is politically defined.

With this final critical intervention in mind, Table 1 presents a comparison of the philosophical assumptions of the three epistemologies discussed herein. Building on these distinctions, the next section will explain how a Badiouian epistemology could be applied to consumer culture theory, and how it differs from the extant dominant epistemologies of the field.

**Table 1. Comparison of Philosophical Assumptions Across Perspectives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Existential-Phenomenology (as per Askegaard and Linnet, 2011)</th>
<th>The Morinian Alternative (as per Askegaard and Linnet, 2011)</th>
<th>Badiouian Political Philosophy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Epistemology (nature of knowledge)</strong></td>
<td>Subjective</td>
<td>Intersection between universals and subjective experience</td>
<td>Intersection between universals and subjective experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ontology (nature of being)</strong></td>
<td>Socially-constituted</td>
<td>Precedes knowledge</td>
<td>Politically-constituted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Axiology (nature of value)</strong></td>
<td>Value of fidelity to subjects’ subjective experience</td>
<td>Values determined by the world as it is</td>
<td>Value defined in relation to power/politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context of interest</strong></td>
<td>Mental context</td>
<td>Brings together mental, internal, and external contexts</td>
<td>Brings together mental, internal, and external contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure and Agency</strong></td>
<td>Analyzed to the degree to which subjects are conscious of it. Can be phenomenologically described.</td>
<td>Co-constituted, dialogically defined.</td>
<td>Defined by power, which in turn defines knowledge and subjectivity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Political philosophy for CCT: Consumer culture as a political system**

Despite its marketing origins, early leaders in the consumer behavior field desired to establish an independent field, one that would break free from marketing and not be beholden to a marketing perspective… The distancing from marketing also emanated from a growing disdain of big business during the late 1960s and a disquieting recognition of the...
potential negative societal consequences wrought by advertising and marketing in action…

MacInnis and Folkes (2010), p. 900-901

As noted previously, political scientist Harold Lasswell famously defined politics as ‘who gets what, when, and how’ (1936). In more concrete, sociological terms, politics refers to structures and exercises of power within any economy, with economy defined here as the system of resource distribution that exists in almost all human societies (Swedberg, 2003; Carruthers and Babb, 2000). Within the contemporary world system, defined by the aforementioned post-political consensus, politics in this sense have not disappeared so much as been relegated to markets—the distribution systems whose logics ultimately determine ‘who gets what, when, and how’. As such, the study of market systems is necessarily a study of political systems, defined as ‘pattern[s] of human relationships that involve, to a significant extent, power, rule, or authority’ (Dahl, 1970). Indeed, revisiting the quote above from MacInnis and Folkes (2010) with this in mind reminds us that politics has been a chief concern of consumer researchers from the inception of the Association for Consumer Research.

Despite the centrality of politics to all marketing phenomena, and the political constitution of social phenomena more generally, the topic is rarely explicitly addressed in the mainstream consumer research literature. Here, I consider the implications of political philosophy for the field of consumer culture theory. For the sake of continuity and comparability, I follow Askegaard and Linnet (2011) in taking the four research programs enumerated by Arnould and Thompson (2005) as a starting point. While their presentation was not meant to be normative (Arnould and Thompson 2007, 2005), the pillars nevertheless can be viewed as an analytically useful conceptualization of dominant levels of analysis within the field of consumer culture theory. Here, I draw on the political philosophy literature very broadly, to provide a general exposition on the meaning of politics at each level of analysis. Importantly, this is so that scholars interested in other analytical and epistemological projects within political philosophy (e.g. drawing on Foucault, Bourdieu, and Giddens, or possibly Rancière, Žižek, Habermas, Marx, and other critical theorists) can have a starting point for further work in this vein. Starting from this general review of politics and political philosophy in CCT, the following section demonstrates how a Badiouian epistemology, in particular, can synthesize knowledge across these variegated traditions. Ultimately, the goal of this theorizing process is not to make a normative statement about the supremacy of a Badiouian epistemology, so much as to reveal the clarifying potential inherent in contemporary social theory, which is increasingly dominated by political philosophy.

Identity

According to Arnould and Thompson (2005), the first major theorization of consumer identity comes with Russell Belk’s (1988) ‘Possessions and the Extended Self’, which argues that members of most human societies come to express and understand themselves through their production and consumption of material objects. Subjectivity is produced from a variety of consumer practices, from merely ‘contaminating’ an object by possession and simply ‘being’ a person in possession of a particular body, to creating archives of one’s life and displaying one’s status through conspicuous consumption. Belk
supports his formulation with a formidable theoretical arsenal, ranging from the psychology of William James and Gordon Allport to Sartrean existentialism. Nevertheless, the approach is essentially psychological and sociological, with Belk noting that ‘[f]uture research seeking a broader perspective would benefit from consulting the additional literatures in Marxism and neo-Marxism, critical theory, folklore, political philosophy, environmental psychology, macromarketing, semiotics, impression management, and collective memory’ (p. 145).

Later work has continued this interest in how identity projects are constructed through consumption. Examples include studies of consumers’ beloved belongings (Ahuvia, 2005; Curasi, Price, and Arnould, 2004; Price, Arnould, and Curasi, 2000); the stabilizing effect of possessions for immigrants and migrants (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould, 2012; Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard, 2005; Thompson and Tambyah, 1999; Oswold, 1999; Peñaloza, 1994; Belk, 1992; Mehta and Belk, 1991; Wallendorf and Reilly, 1983); and the inescapable patterning resulting from social structures such as class (Marcoux, 2009; Coleman, 1983) and family (e.g. studies of mothers’ identities, Epp and Price, 2008; Thompson, 1996). Indeed, possessions are valued for their identity stabilizing potential even in squatter communities (Üstüner and Holt, 2007) and amongst the homeless (Hill, 1991; Hill and Stamey, 1990). With the advent of social media, it has been found that consumers are increasingly producing and managing multiple selves, which they nevertheless see as consistent with an integrated whole (Schau and Gilly, 2003).

One older, traditional way of studying the politics of identity would be to consider whether or not one holds a ‘politicized’ identity. Following the work of anthropologist Ralph Linton (1936), and as per traditional definitions in sociology, this can come by one of two routes. The first are achieved identities, which consumers work towards. Perhaps the best example of an attained politicized identity in the consumer research literature would be an activist identity, again best explicated by Kozinets and Handelman’s (2004) study of anti-consumerists. The notion of an identity attained through participation in an activist group is key to their analysis. Many of the consumer activists they interviewed explained that they had experienced some sort of ‘revelation’, or consciousness-raising experience, that drove them to adopt an activist identity. They reported identifying as ‘people who care’ about important social issues, and often joined organizations to reinforce these identities. In the end, it is notable that an activist identity is something to be achieved, which ultimately implies that depoliticized consumer subjectivity is the norm, and that assuming an alternative subjectivity requires significant identity work.

The second route is through possession of an ascribed identity—one that is not chosen, but rather assigned as a result of one’s place in a given social order. The extant consumer research literature on subjectivity, elaborated above, has frequently addressed the subject of ascribed politicized identities. Examples include the class-defined identities of affluent (Hirschman, 1990) and marginalized consumers (e.g. Üstüner and Holt’s work on quatters and Hill (1990) and Hill and Stamey’s (1991) work on the homeless). Others involve the differential valuation of racial, gendered, or sexual identities, for example in the work of Crockett and Wallendorf (2004), Thompson (with Hirschman, 1995) and Kates (2004, 2002), respectively.

Contemporary political philosophy provides a radically different perspective on traditional conceptions of identity. From Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, to Foucault
and Bourdieu, to Butler, Žižek, and Badiou, thinkers from this school of social theory would contend that such identities are largely the result of sociohistoric patterns and forces. In a way, they are not so much identities as social and material conditions under which individuals are forced to live. Consequently, scholars in this tradition more frequently speak in terms of subjectivity than identity, and are interested in the processes by which particular subjects are inspired and encouraged, while others are forgotten, discouraged, and even punished. In Askegaard and Linnet’s (2011) terminology, political theorists would call for work on identity that moves beyond the psychological context to understand how mental landscapes and social identities are constituted by structural factors and sociological phenomena.

With these considerations in mind, sociohistoric approaches become favoured methods for studying the individual and the meaning of subjectivity. Thus, the line between this pillar of CCT, and work on the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, becomes blurred within the lens of political philosophy. As such, I will return to these questions about identity in greater detail in the section on sociohistory below.

**Cultures, subcultures, and communities of consumption**

Arnould and Thompson (2005) describe the key objective of this research program as illuminating ‘how… the emergence of consumption as a dominant human practice reconfigure[s] cultural blueprints for action and interpretation, and vice versa…’ (p. 873). They consider crosscultural research as a key tradition within this program, as well as work on communities of consumption (Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001); subcultures of consumption (Belk and Costa, 1998; McAlexander and Schouten, 1995); and projects on consumer tribes (as reviewed in Cova, Kožinets, and Shankar’s edited collection on the subject).

Within anthropological and cultural studies of consumption, politics are discussed in terms of the politics of inclusion, exclusion, and status within a given cultural grouping. An example of this can be seen in Schouten and McAlexander’s (1995) study of Harley Davidson enthusiasts, where status-seeking and the demonstration of expertise was an incredibly political matter within the subculture. Indeed, in both their literature review and empirical findings, the authors contend that authority and power structures are essential components of subcultures, even those that are seen as ‘deviant’ departures from the hegemony of everyday life. Established members of the biker community would even actively create barriers to entry, and engaged in activities that demeaned more casual members. As such, leaders of subcultures have power over desired resources such as belonging and knowledge. Ultimately, Schouten and McAlexander find that while Harley owners are strongly devoted to an ideology of ‘freedom’, this is not freedom in a macropolitical sense of the term (e.g. freedom from structures of oppression, authority, and work). Indeed, here, and in other work on consumer subcultures (Goulding, Shankar, Elliott, and Canniford, 2009; Belk and Costa, 1998), participation in the mainstream economy is actually necessary to fund the leisure activity, and ‘getting away’ may actually reinvigorate one as a worker (see Fleming, 2009, for a theorization of this relationship between labour and leisure).

A political philosophy intervention in this tradition would consequently argue that one cannot understand a culture without understanding its relationship to other cultures, and to the greater social milieu. The emphasis would be on dynamics between different
groups within a larger cultural field, or, following Immanuel Wallerstein (2004), in an integrated world system. In other words, the account would be considered incomplete without a consideration of the sociohistoric patterning that underlies the consumer tribe, culture, subculture, or community. This is in line with Askegaard and Linnet’s (2011) idea that internal contexts of cultures, communities, and subcultures (as well as subjective, mental experiences of life in cultures) must be contextualized with recourse to surrounding social phenomena, if they are to have meaning.

Scholars interested in the politics of a subculture might also critically examine the sociohistoric structures that influence who achieves power within the group, and would consider the experience of those who are dominated by higher-status members. There are a number of examples of such work within the literature on the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, so with that, I turn to this research program next.

Sociohistoric patterning of consumption
As noted by Askegaard and Linnet (2011), the extant literature on the sociohistoric patterning of consumption provides some of the most concrete studies of politics within consumer research, and is also one of the perspectives most amenable to extension via political philosophy. This research program concerns how social, historical, and political forces influence consumer practices, and is thus directly applicable for scholars working with critical and political theory. Indeed, the dominant theoretical programs within this tradition—Bourdieuian work on cultural capital and Foucauldian analyses of power and domination—are forebears or (retrospectively-included members) of the project of contemporary political philosophy itself. This section considers these traditions one by one, and theorizes the role of politics in each.

Bourdieu and Capital in Fields. Bourdieuan perspectives on the sociohistoric patterning of consumption have been productively applied by consumer culture theorists for quite some time. Within this tradition, Douglas Holt’s work is perhaps the best known, beginning with his adaptation of Bourdieu’s work on cultural capital in an American context (1998). In contrast with sociologist Michelle Lamont, he finds that cultural capital does structure American consumption, much as it does French consumption; the nature and composition of the cultural capital, however, is quite different in the American context. Üstüner and Holt have studied this localization of cultural capital in Turkish squatter communities (2007) and amongst status-conscious consumers in Turkey (2010). In 2012, Üstüner and Thompson presented a major extension of this work in their study of interdependent status games—actual dyadic enactments of class socialization—observed in interactions between hair stylists and their clients.

Bourdieu’s work as a political philosopher can be seen in his essay ‘Structures, Habitus, Practices’ (1993). Here, he illuminates the relationship between cultural capital and economic capital, revealing how finance fuels the world of cultural capital production. Bourdieu critiques the drive to dominate in both spheres of capital accumulation, and the differential social valuation of actors based on arbitrary markers of cultural capital. It is in these later projects spearheaded by Tuba Üstüner that we come the closest to employing the political philosophy of Pierre Bourdieu. In Üstüner and Holt’s (2007, 2010) work, and Üstüner and Thompson’s article, for example, the authors
seriously consider the experience of domination and critique the sociohistoric structures that lead to such experiences. Another successful Bourdieuan political analysis can be found in Douglas Allen’s (2002) study of the sociohistoric patterning of higher education choices, as he explains how seemingly-personal decisions are shaped by larger political structures. Allen ultimately criticizes the social structures that subconsciously track lower-class individuals into less desirable schools and professions.

_Foucault on Power and Domination._ Craig Thompson has long been a popularizer of Foucauldian traditions in consumer research. He and Elizabeth Hirschman explicated the hegemonic nature of dominant knowledges in their work on the beauty myth and the sociohistoric conditioning of women’s bodies through the gaze (1995). Thompson and Tambyah (1999) developed a sociohistorically-informed genealogy of the idea of cosmopolitanism, critiquing the colonialist assumptions inherent in the concept. Later, in a study of the natural health market (2004), Thompson found that complementary medicine discourses served multiple ideological purposes simultaneously—namely, the profit-motive of companies involved, as well as consumers’ desire for alternatives to mainstream health care.

Finally, in his work with Diana Haytko on fashion, Foucault’s ‘technologies of the self’ (techniques of self-governance through which individuals conform to cultural ideals) take center stage. Techniques of the self are an essential element of contemporary social control systems, as individuals do not realize that they are being socialized to a certain standard, and feel a (false) sense of control in the situation. Jeff Murray replicated this analysis with informants who were middle-aged, rather than college-aged, and found much the same results: dominant discourses powerfully shaped consumers’ sense of style (2002). Even escape comes in socially-structured channels; in Murray’s words, “What started out as an ‘emancipated space’ ended up just another packaged, historical identity” (p. 439).

Foucauldian sociohistoric analysis has been used productively in several recent studies, including Goulding, Shankar, Elliot, and Canniford’s (2009) exploration of rave culture in the United Kingdom. The authors found that the state was somewhat agnostic to whether or not ecstasy was taken in clubs; here, drug laws are shown to be differentially enforced, based on the social status of the group engaging in the activity. The authors ultimately take a critical position on the blatantly classist approach to drug policy, and the notion that resistance to such policy is what is punished, rather than particular behaviors. Karababa and Ger (2011) found that consumers actively attempted to resist official prohibitions against coffee-drinking and drug-taking in the context of Ottoman coffeehouses. They found that coffeehouses created spaces where social class boundaries could be transgressed, and a wide variety of individuals could be exposed to critique of the authorities. In these empirical examples, and in Foucault’s own theory (1975, 1988), the structuring and oppressing functions of power are a central concern. Consequently, Foucauldian consumer research is immanently applicable to political theories of consumer culture.

**Ideology**

The fourth major research program in consumer culture theory, as outlined by Arnould and Thompson, is the study of ideology. While there are many senses of the term
ideology, as elucidated by Terry Eagleton (2007, 1991), the predominant uses of the term within CCT can be described as falling into one of two categories. The first contends that ideology is the belief structure of any group, and hence is not necessarily political (Williams, 1976). The second approach starts from the premise that ideology is knowledge that serves the interests of those in power. This distinction between ideology and other forms of knowledge dates back to The German Ideology (Marx and Engels, 1846), and is a central assumption of critical theory, from the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947) to Althusser (1971) and continuing into the work of Habermas (1989).

This is the perspective adopted by most contemporary political philosophers. It is an important intervention, as it re-opens the door to intellectual inquiry on questions of truth, value, and ethics. Nevertheless, it stops short of the heavy-handed, top-down, authoritative definition of truth advocated by traditional Marxist political economy. Once again building on Foucault, political philosophers such as Agamben and Badiou remind us that truth and ethics can only exist with recourse to local conditions and subjective experience. In Badiou’s philosophy, this would take the form of a subjective experience of a commonly-held truth that goes beyond the individual—a realization of the universally oppressive force of power. Taken together, such a theorization of knowledge and ideology is in line with Askegaard and Linnet’s (2011) call for perspectives on knowledge that take into account the structuring influence of society.

Within the extant consumer culture theory literature, ideology more frequently refers to the belief structure of any social group. For example, in Spiggle’s (1986) study of underground comics, she refers to the ‘ideology’ of the consumer counterculture. In Tse, Belk, and Zhou’s (1989) study of political ideology in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, ideology refers to the political philosophy of any of the nations; a similar approach was employed in Zhao and Belk’s (2008) semiotic analysis of how ‘anti-consumerist political ideology’ is co-opted by advertisers in modern day China. Hirschman’s study of the ‘ideology of affluence’ was an analysis of belief structures held by the affluent, and promoted through mass media (1990). In his work on technology, Kozinets (2008) uses ‘ideology’ to refer to a consumers’ belief structure about technology.

This is not to say, however, that all consumer researchers have worked with the more apolitical, decontextualized usages of the term ideology. Building on Terry Eagleton’s theorization of ideology (1991), Elizabeth Hirschman turned toward a critical theory definition of the term in her 1993 Marxist-feminist critique of dominant masculine ideologies in the consumer research literature. Here, ideology is presented as a form of knowledge used to exert power and discipline subjects, in line with Gramscian conceptions of cultural hegemony. In her work on the social sculpting of the body, ideology is once again defined as a force of social control exerted in the name of profit (with Thompson, 1995). Later, David Mick (2003) argued that the omnipresence of consumerist ideology is a central facet of contemporary life, and suggests that the study of ideology may be a unifying interest for consumer researchers. Coulter, Price, and Feick (2003) do much to address questions of politics, contrasting ‘socialist’ and ‘consumerist’ ideologies in Eastern European consumer culture, and allowing for the possibility that both can be hegemonic. Finally, what is arguably the most rigorous theorization of ideology in mainstream CCT research can be found in Crockett and
Wallendorf’s (2004) study of the normative political ideology of consumerism, and alternative ideological stances such as black nationalism. In their ethnographic study of consumer strategies in an under-served urban center, they found that sociohistoric forces shaped consumers’ ideological positions, and that ideology then guided behavior.

**Synthesis: A Badiouian theorization of consumer culture**

*Found, in translation: Badiou for CCT*

Badiou’s general theory of social action is eminently applicable to these four dominant paradigms within consumer culture theory (see Figure 1). Each of the four pillars of CCT have a place within his conceptualization: sociohistoric conditions subsume the (1) sociohistoric patterning of consumption and (2) cultural membership; (3) marketplace ideologies line up with Badiou’s concept of knowledge structures; and (4) identity is cast in terms of subjectivity. As such, his framework has the potential to synthesize knowledge created across these paradigms and levels of context. Moreover, it implies that knowledge produced with recourse to only one level of context is incomplete, given the co-constitution of these factors within society. Finally, building on his radical reconsideration of identity-qua-subjectivity, Badiou’s work on subjects of the status quo and subjects of truth can be directly translated onto consumer culture theory notions of ‘the consumer’ and ‘the activist.’ This is illustrated in Figures 4 and 5.

![Figure 4. A Badiouian theorization of consumer culture and subjectivity](image1)

![Figure 5. A Badiouian theorization of resistant subjectivity](image2)

In the end, a Badiouian conceptualization of consumer culture and resistance raises serious questions about fundamental assumptions within CCT research. In order to compare, it may be helpful to first summarize Badiou’s assumptions, once again. Badiou takes power to be his central analytic category, and other concepts are defined in terms of their relationship to power. Moreover, these other categories are theorized as a product and consequences of power relations—power structures social forms, which in turn produces specific knowledge forms, which lead to the development of different subjectivities. This, in turn, influences the politics of participation—as well as resistance.
As power structures both knowledge and subjectivity, Badiou’s philosophy is both an epistemological and ontological intervention.

**Epistemological implications**

Askegaard and Linnet (2011) made a powerful observation about consumer culture theory when they noted that dominant epistemologies of the field emphasize certain contexts over others, and frequently fail to provide a uniting vision that could lead to a comprehensive body of knowledge. They argue that in order for the field to advance, consumer culture theorists must take up Morin’s (2008; 1992; 1986) call for epistemologies capable of balancing objective and subjective forms of knowledge production.

Political theory is nothing if not a radical reconsideration of epistemology, as political theory argues that the meaning of information can only be known with recourse to its conditions of production—in other words, whether it was produced by those in power, or those that resist power. As noted in the foregoing discussion, the emergence of political theory reflects a major paradigm shift within social research more broadly, away from postmodern, relativistic, linguistic theories of culture, toward theories that are capable of considering the intersection between objective power structures and subjective experience. The concept of the event, moreover, presents a novel model of how knowledge is produced within society, which is of great importance to social researchers. In light of such a seismic shift in parent disciplines, consumer culture theorists would be wise to apprise themselves of these developments.

Perhaps most importantly, for scholars of our field, are the implications about consumer consciousness—or how little consciousness consumers really have about factors that influence their behaviour. While this may seem like a major, negative critique of the notion of ‘the consumer’, or a blind return to older critical theory perspectives on false consciousness, a Badiouian epistemology would in fact be more positive. Once scholars have a firm understanding of what consumers do and do not know, they can gain a greater understanding of what can be learned from existential-phenomenological perspectives, which operate at the level of conscious awareness. Moreover, it provides a refined understanding of consumer ethics and responsibility, seen below, by raising questions about the information that consumers actually have, and the options that consumers are really available to them within contemporary market systems.

**Ontological implications**

Starting from contemporary political philosophy, and Badiou’s philosophy in particular, it can be argued that knowledge and subjectivity are always politically constituted. From this perspective, an understanding of power is a pre-requisite for analyzing how meaning is made within the consumer contexts we study, much less comprehending macro-theoretical concepts like context. With Badiou’s ontological intervention in mind, I contend that the charge to theorize ‘the context of contexts’ is truly a call to analyze the ‘meaning of contexts’ such as society; culture and community; and subjectivity. Here, I consider the meaning of these context, as well as other key constructs within the study of consumer culture.
First, a Badiouian analysis would argue that there is no such thing as a consumer. Much as *on ne naît pas femme: on le devient* (de Beauvoir, 1949), ‘consumer’ is not a natural category of being. From the perspective of political philosophy, the unexamined use of such a category in our research is a bias, and such use risks obfuscating the actual political connotations of such a subject position. Political events such as the global financial crisis restructure who is and is not a consumer, and also provide new opportunities for understanding how such subjects were constituted in the first place.

Political theory would also critique the notions of consumer agency and choice, arguing that ‘real choice’ means having actual control and influence over the means of production. It highlights the absurdity of constructed choices like Coca-Cola vs. Pepsi (which, in political economy, would be considered as relatively identical products whose value comes from the power imbued in the product by its producers). As such, ‘marketing’ is still relevant, if we question current theories of value (e.g. Vargo and Lusch’s 2004 theory of co-production) and focus on how marketing is a political communication technology (Kotler and Levy, 1969). Consequently, the epistemological and ontological implications of a Badiouian perspective have meaning and resonance even for those who want to do managerialist research, as it focuses on what matters, and what is knowable.

Last but certainly not least, the work of Badiou and his contemporaries provides us with fresh thinking on the nature of the ethical subject. This especially has implications for scholars interested in social problems that will require a massive restructuring of ethics (e.g. combating global warming). In turn, this provides us with an important new theorization of consumer agency, as political philosophy would say that consumers only have agency to the degree to which they can affect structures of power. Consequently, Badiouian analysis urges us to focus on ‘differences that matter’, such as the difference between ‘agents who make meaning’ (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011), and consumers who are subject to their choices. In more concrete terms, it would raise questions about the agency and ethics of consumers who have had no choice but to make poor dietary decisions, and who find themselves to be morbidly obese; or who have had no choice but to enter into crippling debt in the markets for health or education. Rather than question why bands of powerless activists fail to transform power structures, it would direct our attention toward those who suppress dissent to preserve the status quo. Ultimately, Badiou’s theory on ethics is a fundamental reconsideration of the concept of responsibility, and who actually holds it within a society.

**Discussion: Putting new epistemologies into practice**

As researchers, our choice of conceptual tools cannot be separated from questions of ontology and even ideology. … Overly individualist epistemologies in consumption research may be influenced by a liberalist ideology of self-emancipation. With each analytical concept that one employs, one also implies an answer to fundamental questions such as:

---

1 Translation: ‘One is not born a woman; one becomes [a woman]’.
What is the ‘state of nature’ of man as a social animal? How does the self develop? How does human cognition work? Is there free will?


The goal of this article is to demonstrate how political philosophy, and specifically a Badiouian epistemology, can synthesize knowledge derived from the study of mental, internal, and external contexts. Based on the arguments and illustrations made in the preceding sections, I argue that a Badiouian perspective has this potential. In the previous section, I considered the epistemological and ontological implications of such an intervention. Here, I begin the work of determining what it would take to put Badiouian epistemology into practice, in a fieldwork-based discipline.

First, since knowledge is partial if it does not consider structures of power, methodologies that do not take into account structures of power (or at least state assumptions about power relations) are inadequate or inaccurate. Social inquiry that fails to do this risks becoming no more than social constructions about social construction—all of which are, of course, meaningless except in their relationships to power. In other words, the purpose of social inquiry should be studying ideology, not producing or administering it.

As such, political methods such as rhetorical analysis, critical discourse analysis, political economy, political science, and critical/political theory have an important role in social inquiry (Fairclough, 2011), even though they have been traditionally underestimated in consumer research. The suggestion that we should consider the place of economic analysis may come as a shock to a community of cultural researchers, but we must remember that if culture is defined in terms of power, enacted largely through economic means (as noted by Bourdieu, 1993), ignorance of economic phenomena constitutes a major disservice to the field. Moreover, it reminds us of the economic factors that motivate participation in consumer culture phenomena such as brand communities. It reminds us that when we do research on such topics, we are always taking an ethical position when we analyze (or ‘forget’ to analyze) the economics and politics of who benefits from such participation. That said, there is no reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater. While existential-phenomenology as it is practiced in CCT has the potential to reify the individual and the consumer subject, a Badiouian scholar would argue that the investigation of mental contexts is nevertheless an integral part of the study of subject formation and the subjective experience of domination.

Following Foucault, as well as Askegaard and Linnet (2011), a Badiouian perspective would also encourage scholars not to limit themselves to verbatim quotes conscious experience, conducting supplementary historical research on the influence of social forces in everyday life. Ethnography should once again be considered a broad study of not only personal and intersubjective experience, documented in interview transcripts, but also the relationship between cultural contexts and larger social phenomena (Madison, 2011; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011). We should be encouraged to move beyond individual accounts to study intersubjective understanding, and finally how intersubjective knowledge in one context relates to phenomena in others. Most of all, as noted by Askegaard and Linnet (2011), we cannot do this work ‘in an extremely cursory manner that rarely adds societal and cultural perspectives to the analysis but
merely suggestive hints’ (p. 393). To advance the field, we must now do the work of making connections.

**Conclusion: The silver lining**
The point of this essay, Askegaard and Linnet’s (2011), and the political theory project is not to downplay the importance or the rigor of prior research. The intention is to push knowledge production beyond a seemingly-intractable postmodern impasse on questions of value. Additionally, while it affords an even larger role to power than theory by Foucault, Bourdieu, and Giddens, it does so to illuminate the conditions of possibility within society, and thereby elucidate what would actually have to happen to make social change possible. Badiou’s promise is that another world is possible, and that it has the potential to counteract the impossibility of the present. Much as we created this world against all odds, and with access to different information, we can create another with what we know now.

Despite the tremendous differences between political epistemologies and traditional consumer research epistemologies, consumer culture theory still rests on excellent intellectual territory, as the study of consumption is an ideal site for researching these dynamics of power, knowledge, and subjectivity. With a concentrated focus on a small, well-defined unifying set of constructs (e.g. power, subjectivity, ethics), the possibility of advancing knowledge on subjects ranging from piracy to obesity to resistance is renewed, as is the potential for synthesis within and across disciplines.

Finally, there has never been a better time to adopt such a perspective. Amidst a global financial crisis, an era of austerity, and new waves of resistance, it is essential that consumer culture theorists integrate knowledge about sociological phenomena into our understandings of collective and individual experience. As noted by Cova, Maclaran, and Bradshaw (2012), “the ‘context of contexts’ has transformed around us” (p. 221). Political philosophy provides the best available set of tools for contending with the economic changes of the present, which are already radically restructuring consumer culture.
References


