Miles adopts what has become a fairly typical structure for sociological texts on consumption and consumer culture. The priority of the first chapter is given to a short but now reasonably well rehearsed history of consumer society, beginning with its European (English) bourgeois roots and eventually emerging as a key force in post-war mass society. After this considerate introduction, Chapter two sets out to provide a brief historical overview of consumption thought, beginning with the moderns Weber, Veblen and Simmel and moving on to Baudrillard and Bourdieu. To some extent the chapter mirrors, both in style and content, aspects of Miller’s (1987) Material Culture and Mass Consumption, although in far less depth but with consideration of additional contributors to the field.

It is perhaps ironic that texts on consumer society seem to be gradually commodifying the very subject matter under discussion. The reviews of Weber, Baudrillard and Gabriel and Lang are delivered in neat three quarter page packages, with each now commonplace interpretation well contained and clearly differentiated from the next. As an introduction to the field such summaries are no doubt invaluable even if they do tend towards simplification.

Having undertaken a necessary if somewhat standardised review of the state of consumption studies in the first two chapters, Miles moves on to consider some interesting applications of the consumer ideology thesis, namely the relationship between consumption and design, consumption and technology, fashion, popular music and sport.

Throughout the book Miles consistently raises and considers what has become a central debate in the study of the sociology of consumption – the tension between consumers as expressive, active
agencies and the consumer as a being manipulated and exploited by social structures and power. Whilst this debate is well explored in other areas of the social sciences it now seems to be gaining particular attention in the field of consumption studies. The reasons for this are no doubt complex but it can in part be attributed to the waning of post-Marxist readings of consumption generally and the demise of overt (post) structuralist interpretations in particular. Such readings tend to explore the hegemony of consumer culture and only granted individual consumers marginal or limited capacity for independent action.

Much of Miles’ discussion examines whether there is any scope in corporate, commodity dominated consumer societies for individuals to find legitimate and worthwhile forms of expression. For example, Chapter five considers the relationship between technology and consumption, concluding that whilst technological forces command a “powerful influence on consumer society” (p. 87) they also furnish consumers with higher standards of living, and in some regards greater modes of expression. In Chapter six Miles states, “. . . fashion can in some ways be regarded as an irresistible social force . . . a tool of consumer capitalism, but it also gives consumers something that they want and in this respect the fashion arena is an arena that gives and takes” (p. 114). In Chapter seven Miles discusses the relationship between consumerism and popular music and concludes, “a key issue here, then, can consumers construct their own meanings in the context of the music produced for them by the music industry?” (p. 113).

The chapter on consuming sport is well written and descriptively rich exploring and illustrating the process of commodification in this rarely examined context. The discussion of the Olympics as global commodity exposes how the commercial and market ethic exists side by side with the ideal of amateurism and individual sporting achievement albeit with truly “postmodern” contradiction and juxtaposition. The example of sport illustrates the fact that the title of “consumer” is more appropriate in some contexts than others, and that when applied to activities such as supporting a football or baseball team, the individual as consumer is in certain ways disadvantaged.

Although Miles does a great deal to consider the potential of an active and free consumer who expresses a clear sense of will, he ultimately accepts and promotes a revised ideological argument, namely, the consumer has free will but only because by expressing it freely within the context of consumption can the ideology of con-