Contemporary social theory is dominated by two alternative concepts of rationality, associated with different forms of social explanation, and with competing views of consumption and citizenship. Both of the two dominant concepts of rationality arose as part of a general modernist culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The economic concept of rationality privileges utility maximization; it arose with neoclassical theorists, and has spread through rational choice theory. The sociological concept of rationality privileges appropriateness given social norms; it arose with modern functionalism, and today is associated with communitarianism.

This chapter begins by challenging both the economic and sociological concepts of rationality. The economic concept neglects culture. The sociological one neglects agency. Recognition of culture and agency requires us to pay attention to local reasoning and the diverse and contingent practices to which it gives rise. Consumption, like other practices, thus expresses diverse forms of rationality. Consumption includes, at least in some settings, those forms of rationality postulated by economists and sociologists, but it is not limited to them. Critics would over-react if they simply turned their back on economic and sociological ideas, failing to engage with them in fruitful dialogue. The problem is not that economic and sociological concepts are completely flawed. The problem is that economic and sociological theories capture only one form of reasoning from among many. Hence, instead of proposing yet another type of methodological imperialism, we appeal to plural forms of reasoning. In our view, neither utility-maximization, nor organizational rules and norms, operate throughout society. Society consists, rather, of the circulation, modification, and contestation of plural rationalities.
Debates about consumption and citizenship have largely been conducted in the two rival modernist languages of rationality. Consumption and citizenship appear as competing domains, as if they were grounded in mutually exclusive rationalities. Neoclassical economics and rational choice theory take consumers to be utility-maximizers. Neoliberals extend this concept of the consumer to devise and legitimate public sector and welfare reforms based on an idealized concept of the market-citizen. Communitarians and other sociologists are among the most vociferous critics of neoliberalism. They often argue that the spread of markets, choice, and consumerism occurs at the expense of community, social engagement, and citizenship. In the United Kingdom, New Labour has drawn on communitarianism to devise and to legitimate an alternative set of public sector and welfare reforms. Much current debate and public policy is thus conducted in terms of a series of dichotomies: markets vs. communities, choice vs. social justice, consumers vs. citizens.

The aim of this chapter is to disturb these dichotomies by drawing on the concept of local reasoning. An emphasis on the plural and contingent nature of local reasoning provides grounds for rethinking the politics of choice and consumption. Consumption and citizenship do not express uniform, rigid modes of rationality. They embody a range of different, fluid rationalities located across diverse practices. Some of these rationalities may be harmful to civic life, but others may be creative and enabling. Indeed, treating consumption and citizenship as separate domains – a divide reinforced by the academic divide between studies of citizenship/politics and studies of material culture/consumption – may do violence to the ways in which they are enmeshed in everyday life. Instead of jettisoning choice and consumption as terrain occupied by neoliberals, then, we want to revisit and develop alternative social and political traditions of choice. Choice and consumption have not been grounded in one universal tradition of rationality, as both current advocates of neoliberalism and their critics tend to presume. Neglected traditions of social analysis in the nineteenth century, and related traditions of democratic social action in the early twentieth century, approached choice from historical, social, and moral perspectives. These neglected traditions remind us that consumption is not just about realizing given preferences; it is also a way of forging and confirming personal and public identities.

A presumption of rationality

The human sciences have long debated the content and role of a concept of rationality. Today the concept is associated most closely