



“Summary of article by Alan Warde: Notes on the Relationship Between Production and Consumption” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. 58-61.

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## **“Summary of article by Alan Warde: Notes on the Relationship Between Production and Consumption”**

No longer is it possible to think of consumption in a simple, one-dimensional way. It is not just something that happens within the household contributing to the reproduction of labor power, nor can it be reduced to the distribution of assets, nor simply treated as an area of choice and taste. (28)

Research on the sociology of consumption has recently challenged the traditional view that consumption is simply a consequence of production. Even so, current sociological views lack a coherent approach to the multi-faceted character of consumption. This paper argues for an analytical framework that develops "a set of concepts for understanding consumption in all spheres that can support a sociological appreciation of production and the experience of consumption." (17)

Recent sociological approaches to consumption have focused on consumerism, consumption sector cleavages, and household dynamics. Each type of analysis, however, oversimplifies its intended subject matter. For example, analyses connected with consumerism address taste formation, status, and consumption experience, but fail to elaborate on the relationship between production and consumption. Alternatively, some British analyses examine the "cleavage" in consumption of services such as health care, i.e. the differential social advantage gained from access to private market goods rather than from the provision of state services. While this approach acknowledges the importance of the mode of provisioning goods and services, it fails to adequately address the role of domestic allocation. The significance of household dynamics is elaborated by feminist scholars who assert that an understanding of power distribution within households must be part of any adequate theory of consumption.

### **Conceptual Synthesis**

There are three sorts of values that people seek in consumption. Exchange value, or price, is important when buying something that may later be resold, such as a house or an antique. Use values are achieved in the process of "final consumption," as when food is eaten or services are delivered. Finally, identity value is provided by styles and status-oriented consumption, when an object or activity places the consumer in a desired social circle. These are irreducible, distinct values; analysis of consumption should concern the ways in which people achieve the three types of values.

Consumption is best understood as a process in which functional values are obtained from goods and services. The process is characterized by modes of provision, or "distinctive ways of producing the good which embodies the value to be obtained at the end of any [consumption] episode and by the social relations governing access to the fruits of labor." (19) In contemporary society, market, domestic, state, and communal provision are the principal modes, typically governed "by relations of market exchange, familial obligation, citizenship right and reciprocity. It is because services are provided under distinctive conditions and access to them is regulated accordingly, and because this subsequently has consequences for their enjoyment, that the substitution of services between modes is so important socially and politically." (19) The shift between modes that has attracted the most attention is that from state to market provision; however, services have also moved from the state to the household (e.g., British community care policies) and from the household to the market (e.g., child care services).

Production and consumption occur in cyclical episodes which include four distinct phases: the process of production; the conditions of access; the manner of delivery; and the environment in which final consumption is experienced. Changes in the mode of provision of goods and services can affect all four phases, with important implications for the values derived from consumption. For example, a meal can be produced by an employee of a private firm (restaurant), oneself or a family member, or a public sector employee; access can be based on payment, family membership, or status in a public or communal institution; delivery, even within the category of marketed meals, can range from cafeteria self-service to impersonal fast-food service to highly personal table service in a fancy restaurant; and the social environment for final consumption, i.e. the company at the table, exerts a separate influence on the enjoyment of a meal.

### **Enjoyment: Analyzing the Experience of Consuming**

Final values are obtained from goods through the creation of use- and identity-values during the consumption experience. Research in this area has attempted to understand consumption as pleasure, examining exceptional consumption events such as carnivals and tourism. However, this approach has little to offer for analyses of average consumer behavior. Interestingly, Hirschman suggests that only non-durable goods are sources of pleasure. For example, the pleasure of eating when hungry can be constantly recreated, while durable goods such as housing cannot change as often as one's wants, and are therefore prone to induce disappointment. This perspective makes sense of the increased interest in packaged experiences such as theme parks and package tours: the experience of pleasure is ephemeral, and often depends on the presence of crowds; hence it is potentially profitable to reproduce the experience for another crowd tomorrow.

Consumers, as suggested above, may seek use-value, exchange-value, or identity-value in consumption. All three may be provided at once, as with the purchase of a house in a fashionable neighborhood. On the other hand, many everyday acts of consumption yield no exchange (or resale) value; perishable foods and most services fall into this category. Can items of consumption lack the other two values? Youth subcultures have been known to give distinctive identity values to a wide range of mundane objects; nothing is intrinsically too humble for this role. However, purely routine consumption items and low-status state services

may be lacking in identity value. Finally, while it is of course possible to purchase status symbols that are devoid of use value, it is rare. Far more common is the expression of identity value through carefully chosen purchases of items that have a use value as well, such as clothing, cars, and home furnishings.

## **Discussion**

Examining consumption in this way emphasizes its complex, multi-faceted nature. It demonstrates that work is involved in every episode of consumption; often the work is informal, voluntary, or domestic, and happens outside of formal employment relations. The disaggregation of consumption episodes makes it clear that production and consumption form a cycle, involving many values and objectives in addition to maximization of consumer satisfaction.

The categorization of modes of provision and phases of consumption episodes establishes a framework against which existing theories can be evaluated. Most can be seen to have omitted one or more of the central issues. For example, debates about state versus market provision of services typically overlook the role of domestic provisioning. Accounts of housing problems that focus only on housing production overlook the importance of the ways in which people gain access to, and derive pleasure from living in, various types of dwellings. The separation of use-, exchange- and identity-values allows a more integrated appreciation of the role of consumption in social changes such as gentrification.

Above all, the approach suggested here mitigates against one-sided and partial theoretical accounts of consumption.