

CONSUMPTION IN AFFLUENT SOCIETIES OF INDUSTRIALIZED NATIONS

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Contents

1. Introduction
2. The modern society
3. Models of consumption: the neo-classical framework
4. Sociology of consumption
5. Recent developments
 - 5.1. New-differentiationism
 - 5.2. The socio-cultural approach
6. From modern to postmodern society
 - 6.1. Towards a postmodern society?
 - 6.2. Leisure and globalization as postmodern phenomena

Glossary

Bibliography

Biographical Sketch

Summary

What is consumption and its relationship with the affluent society? This is the key question this article tries to answer. It will investigate how consuming practices came into being in the modern society of the twentieth century. Major contributions from economic and sociological theory will be discussed, focusing on the recent developments in the sociology of consumption. The debate arises when pundits agree that tastes and preferences are interdependent and hinge on the context they are embedded into. Important studies discover that consumption practices can be explained through a model based on competition for social status. People do have their own preferences and do make choices reflecting and characterizing the group they belong to. Moreover, the autonomous role of culture in defining consuming behavior is highlighted in parallel with a more conscious and active consumer in his decision-making process. Far away from the atomistic and utilitarian standpoint of economics, the subject of consumption is autonomous and embedded in systems of values and social relationships, which are helpful in the social construction of consumption. The last unanswered question is how the shift from modernity to postmodernity is redefining the process of consumption. It has been said that the abundance of commodities is leading towards a fragmentation of the consumption activities typical of a postmodern society. While several theaters—as symbolic space where interactions occur—are emerging, the leisure activities are gaining room and calling for attention. The redefinition of practices and time for work and leisure is suggesting a demand for a re-

enchantment of the world against the impersonal and rationalized world of labor.

1. Introduction

The “consuming society” became entrenched in the period following the Second World War and consumption has reached a central role in contemporary societies. The concepts of consumer culture, consuming activities and culture of consumption are coming to the foreground of an increasing range of social science disciplines. The shift from modernity to post-modernity, most agree, is still an open-ended process. To better understand what consumption represents nowadays and what challenging questions arise from its importance, it is worthwhile tracing back how consumption evolved in those societies known as western civilizations.

Describing the characteristics and the actors of modernity, the social construction of consumption will be outlined through the models of consumers and the patterns of consumption. Starting from the model of consumption in economics, attention will be focused on major contributions by the sociology of consumption. Furthermore, according to those who deem that contemporary society is in a transitional period from modernity to post-modernity, the major trends of the consuming society and post-modern consumption will be analyzed.

2. The modern society

The narrative of consumption in affluent societies could not be separated from the history of market in the capitalist society. Modern society is built on capitalism and scientific technology and, as this new society developed, some considerable changes occurred. One major transformation was the increasing separation between production and consumption that led to the distinction of producer and consumer. These seem to be intertwined with the growth of mass production and the legitimization of private property. While historically work and recreation had been merged, the separation of productive and consumption activities in the modern society found support in other separations that were taking place, such as the separation of the public and the private domain, of masculine and the feminine activities, of home from workplace, of time for work from time for leisure. Production was delegated to the public domain, while consumption concerned the private one. Industrialization brought wide specialization in the (increasingly) mass production of commodities. In the private domain, households started to make use of products bought in the market instead of home-made ones. On the one hand, this contributed to change the character of consumption at home from a “productive” to a “consumptive” activity. Thus, it helped to absorb the growing supply of products in the public domain. On the other hand, the social meaning of gender categories was constructed. In fact, women, as consumers, occupied the private domain while men, as producers, took over the public one. Actors were considered to achieve higher purposes through hard work in the domain of production and to keep up with them in the consumption domain.

Politics, social relationships and market can be assumed as the cultural presumptions of modernist social order. A modern world is a world where capitalist technology is associated with a progressive and democratic access to mass-produced goods. In modernity people’s lives are segmented into discrete spheres in the attempt to improve

and make progress in each.

3. Models of consumption: the neo-classical framework

In the modern society, the core of consumption's models is represented by needs that individuals attempt to satisfy. One of the aims of modernity was to improve the quality of life through the progress of scientific technical knowledge, enabling the subject to control and act upon things. Despite this centrality, needs have not been studied as much as they required. Even if the mutual relationship of influence between individuals needs and social and economic organization was recognized, needs were considered as given. An overview of modern social science suggests that the main reason for taking needs for granted is their variety and instability as they derive from human psychology and physiology. In economics, while classical thinkers were concerned about production, the neo-classical perspective was focused on consumer demand and the theory of marginal utility. Since the neo-classical model in economics was defined on such features of needs, many other models have been developed to understand consumer behavior and its social construction of consumption. When affluent society, where basic needs were satisfied, arose, the concept of want was defined along with the one of need. According to different stages in Maslow's hierarchy—from the basic and felt needs at conscious level to the unperceived and more sophisticated ones—if needs are innate, unstable and referred to the lower levels of the hierarchy, wants are considered as needs of a higher level that can be influenced and shaped by social and institutional processes. Wants are related to the cultural environment and can differ across time and societies. Despite this distinction, the terms are often used interchangeably.

The neo-classical model is based on the principle of “consumer sovereignty”, which gives consumers the power of choosing commodities they want on the marketplace. As the production activity was thought to be driven by and oriented to consumer needs and wants, the market provides goods that satisfy consumers through a mechanism of competition. In a framework of perfect, or close-to-perfect, competition, consumers, who are fully informed, express their preferences, thereby influencing the producers. Competitors, again completely informed, try to supply commodities, which respond to the needs expressed on the market and meet production's requirement. Utility and cost are the two variables that have always been included in the economic model of consumption. From a utilitarian perspective, prices reflect the degree of subjective satisfaction attributed by consumers to the different sets of products. The satisfaction, or utility, is assumed to diminish for every each additional unit of the same good. That is to say, for consumers the marginal utility is decreasing. Consequently, the price is determined by the amount of money the consumers are willing to pay for the last additional unit of the same good. The concept of utility suggests that consumers will maximize their own satisfaction, or global utility, sharing the total income between products consistently with their consumption preferences.

In social sciences other than economics, several attempts to include different variables in the consumption model have been made. Sociology, as will be discussed later, related consumption to social structure, while psychology studied the emotional impact on choice structure. Later, even economists tried to incorporate social costs and outside

factors into their analytical framework. The structure of available alternative of consumption, which consumers referred to for their choice, is no more a basic availability of alternatives, but it relates to the meanings given by the culture and the consumers' values. One of the most important outcomes of all these studies is that consumers, of course, have a rationale, but it is more complex than the classical economic rationale that focused on *Homo economicus*. Attention moves from someone who tries to minimize outlay of resources and maximizing his own utility, towards a subject that includes social, psychological and cultural utilities and costs. Consumption, as Adam Smith noted, is driven by psychological and status needs—i.e. more than economic necessity.

From the principle of consumer sovereignty and the importance of the structure of alternatives of consumption, the classical model has been developed in two directions. On the one hand, entrepreneurship and its innovative function have been studied as a quick reaction to consumers needs or as a capacity to anticipate them. On the other, the structure of alternatives of consumption has been related to the consumer's buying power, and moreover the general question of power in the market. Thus, situations in which consumers' needs and interests are in conflict, and where groups have different power, spurred studies that consider factors and variables other than the rational economic ones. If affluent consumers, generally with higher levels of satisfaction, have power to support the production, they can contribute to create new patterns of consumption.

The contributions of different approaches have highlighted that choice in consumption processes is not determined exclusively by the needs of consumers, but also by their perception of needs and buying power. Even if sociology and anthropology have enlarged the classical model of consumption, many studies have continued to work with assumptions of given needs, of innovative entrepreneurship, of choice between given sets of goods.

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Biographical Sketch

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