



Consumption matters

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Somewhat indulgently, I have met the request both to explain my approach to consumption *and* how it came about. I do so by first indicating the origins of the system of provision [SOP], approach to consumption and, then, its attachment to cultural systems. I follow this by attending to some debates around the SOP approach and close by seeking to bring out some implications for the nature of consumer politics.

To and from systems of provision...¹

My concerted interest in consumption, beyond academic disciplinary duties within economics, came about by accident. I am a mathematician by first degree and mathematical economist by training, having gained a PhD in social choice theory that seeks to derive social from individual preferences over alternatives (Fine, 1974). In the late 1980s, serving on an appointments panel at Birkbeck College, University of London, one applicant had done research on the priority order of acquisition of consumer durables. I found the standard approach to be unacceptable², and, through lateral thinking, realised that my earlier social choice

¹ The first extensive presentation of the SOP approach is to be found in Fine and Leopold (1993) with my co-author playing a critical role in developing the notion and furnishing case studies. Whilst Fine (2002) is dubbed a second edition, it is primarily a different book with little overlap with the original text. It was inspired by a reassessment of the literature on consumption for a conference panel organised by Roy Church, Fine (2000), and upon learning that the first edition had sold out and would not be reprinted. At this time, I had already embarked upon what has proven an unsuccessful attempt to ease out of consumption studies in light of the burden of other research interests.

work offered an alternative though ready application of more or less identical techniques. I applied successfully to the ESRC for funding to use this new method, with the added wrinkle of setting acquisition of consumer durables against the fashionable hypothesis of them serving as mutually reinforcing both (female) domestic labour-saving devices and female labour market participation.

I am pleased to report that my initial prejudices against the presumption of such crude comparative advantage (save domestic labour through purchase of consumer durables that cost less than wages earned, sticky or otherwise) proved well-founded. Much more important was to establish the presence of consumer *norms* around particular durables. These are to be understood as greater or lesser disposition to own consumer durables according to socio-economic characteristics such as household composition, employment status, income, etc., without otherwise necessarily casting aside narrowly conceived economic factors such as price and income. In addition, and significantly for future work, the research on consumer durables allowed for a considerable review of labour market theory, the family and female labour market participation³, see below, and, inevitably, consumer theory as a whole.

For the latter, I found myself caught between the devil of neoclassical economics and the deep blue sea of postmodernism. For the former, consumer theory since the 1870s had been based upon the idea of fixed preferences, for fixed individuals, with a fixed and sole motive – utility maximisation – over fixed goods effectively defined by physical properties ‘subjectively’ enjoyed⁴. In addition, despite its limited and questionable principles, consumer theory was in the process of being extended across all areas of economic *and* social life in light of (the first phase of) economics imperialism⁵, for which for example choosing

2 Violating the reasonable axiom of monotonicity – if a durable became ranked higher by individuals, it ought to become ranked higher in the derived priority order, see Fine and Simister (1995).

3 See Fine (1992) and arising in part from the research but completed much later, Fine (1998b). On durables themselves, see also the primarily unpublished Fine et al (1992a-e and 1993).

4 Note that the subjectivity of the neoclassical consumer is illusory since the individual is bound by given preferences mechanically applied. See Wade Hands (2010) for the problems this creates for economists in terms of the illusory market freedom of an individual who is already predetermined apart from calculation of choices themselves.

5 For first contribution on economics imperialism, see Fine (1997) ultimately leading to Fine and Milonakis (2009) with many other contributions along the way and subsequently. See <http://www.soas.ac.uk/staff/staff30940.php>.

between war and peace is seen as akin to choosing between apples and pears⁶. By contrast, postmodernism had (re)constructed the consumer as subjectively flexible, inventive and more or less unbound by the material properties of the consumer and consumed itself.

Whether by virtue of the familiarity of, and contempt for, the treatment of consumption within my own disciplinary origins or because of postmodernism's restless conceptual criticism, my sympathies lay much more with the latter than its parallel complement within neoclassical economics⁷. But, not least by literature review across the social sciences, it was apparent that consumer theory had a more or less unlimited array of theories and variables upon which to draw, especially once incorporating psychology, market and business studies, and the burgeoning field of consumer studies itself, especially prominent in the USA, and much too naïve and grounded in business, management and marketing studies to take much notice of postmodernism (or vice-versa – what did producing and selling things have to do with the deconstruction of meaning?) other than at its radical fringes (where it reaped an exotic flavour). What did emerge, however, was the extent of 'horizontal' theories, most typically bound within particular disciplines and marked by their methods and subject matter.

An obvious example is immediately given by neoclassical economics and the idea that consumption can be reduced to the conditions under which utility is maximised; from sociology, we have emulation and distinction; and, from psychology, we have any number of horizontal perspectives from expression of identity to neural responses to stimuli. Could all such horizontal theories be stacked to give some sort of comprehensive synthesis, possibly the dream of consumer and marketing studies other than its schizophrenic predilection for both standard models and intellectual fashions? I considered not, other than in accumulating a sack of determining variables, in part because the horizontal factors are mutually incompatible methodologically, conceptually and theoretically, and, in addition, or by way of corollary, there is a need not just to stack the theories but also the structures, agencies, processes, and relations to which consumption and the consumer are attached. Further, are we addressing

6 As was (in)famously and typically put by the Nobel prizewinner for economics, James Buchanan (1984: 14):

We commence with individuals as utility maximizers ... his utility function. This function defines or describes a set of possible trade-offs among alternatives for potential choice, whether the latter be those between apples and oranges at the fruit stand or between peace and war for the nation.

7 See Fine (1998a). For an account of how the consumer and consumption got to be the way it is in within economics, see Fine (2008a).

consumption in general, human presumably, or consumption historically tied to capitalism and, hence, commodity production primarily for profit?

I am already in danger of constructing an *ex post* narrative and rationale for what became the SOP approach to consumption. Certainly, these considerations and the SOP approach emerged in tandem to focus upon the vertical approach to consumption, specifying the chain of activities connecting production to consumption (and even disposal) with the commodity as meeting point along the way. The commodity form itself structures provision in this way, even if horizontal factors, whether attached to production or consumption, also prevail alongside the imperatives of profitability. However, and heavily influenced by the work on the (UK) housing system by a colleague, Michael Ball (1983 and 1988), consumption could be usefully (if not fully) addressed through identification of different and differentiated SOPs organised along specific commodity lines. Such specifics involve tracing back from consumption and consumer through the material practices by which they are reproduced and transformed as an integral whole, or system.

These insights informed the co-authored Fine and Leopold (1993) that, in addition, offered case studies (especially of clothing and food), historical controversy (over the putative consumer revolution of the eighteenth century or, indeed, of any period)⁸, and the reconstruction of the horizontal from the SOP perspective, especially for advertising, for example. Here a deliberate assault was made upon the postmodern current of celebrating and deconstructing the meaning of (usually exotic) ads such as the woman bathing in a standalone bath with Cadbury's flake for company. Did this have anything to do with Ghanaian cocoa farmers? Apparently not, but such ads are self-selecting for the fanatics of deconstruction. But, at the time, the most important source of advertising revenue in the UK came from supermarkets engaging in 'store wars' along the lines – come to us for your weekly shop, we are cheaper, not exactly rich pickings for deconstruction, Fine (1996).

This could itself be explained by the collapse in the then property boom which had rendered the major retailers on the verge of bankruptcy, so committed had they been in purchasing out-of-town sites for hype-market development. The competition for the weekly shop became correspondingly intense. Further, supermarkets needed to balance the attraction of cheaper own brands against consumer satisfaction geared towards branded goods. For these themselves to be granted a place on supermarket shelves, alongside the less glamorous own-labels, required the fantasy brand advertising so beloved of postmodernist reading of the

8 See also Fine and Leopold (1990).

signs if not those of the major retailers at that time. To get product placement within supermarkets, branded goods had to be sufficiently high in demand to command the weekly shop at the expense of, or alongside, branded goods. Equally, supermarkets needed to choose judiciously between offering branded goods to attract shoppers and its own-label products for cheapness. In this sense, and ironically, fantasy advertising offered a misleading clue to its origins in the more mundane matters of property markets and the weekly shop⁹.

In short, the SOP approach allowed, and deliberately intended, the strengthening if not the (re)introduction of the material to the (cultural) study of consumption. As chance would have it, just as the durable/labour market study came to a close, so an ESRC programme was launched to research the (UK) Nation's Diet in order to understand why consumers did not follow healthy eating guidelines (Murcott, 1998). I applied to study food norms using the same techniques as for consumer durables. Attention focused, for example on the meat, sugar and dairy systems. For the latter, the rise of supermarket retailing had ensured the availability of a wider range of healthier low fat milks, once the uniquely protected doorstep delivery was effectively abandoned. But with the agricultural system supporting production of high fat milk, the cream had to go somewhere. And so it did, into fancy cheeses and desserts, and manufactured foods, all equally readily available in the multi-product supermarkets. Indeed, those at the forefront in the purchase of healthy milk tend to be equally prominent in the consumption of high cream products as well!

A similar story can be told for sugar, with reduction in direct consumption from the sugar bowl or in home-baking being compensated for by its incorporation within manufactured foods (alongside salt and unhealthy fats), sustaining its level of consumption per capita. Thus, analysis of the dairy and sugar systems indicated that healthy eating programmes for the consumer would tend at most to redistribute consumption, and most likely towards those on low incomes, poor diets in the first place, and least able or willing to respond to health messages, Fine et al (1996 and 1998) and Fine (1998c) for these and other studies and their many implications.

This summary crudely simplifies the results of the studies but acutely indicates the limits within which consumption, and its meanings to consumers in terms of health beliefs (and action upon them), are bound by the functioning of the respective food systems. There are also implications for definition of the boundaries of the food systems themselves, with dairy taken as a whole and not

9 This is not to deny that supermarket advertising had subsequently moved on, with greater emphasis now upon quality of own-brand, a sort of Marks and Spencer effect.

just milk, but sugar narrower than the market for sweetness and not incorporating artificial sweeteners for example, see below for boundaries. Crucially, the nature of, and boundaries between, SOPs should not be defined at the level of consumption itself (a horizontal bread and butter approach, as it were) but by tracing out the backward linkages to, and determinants of, consumption¹⁰.

Pre-occupation with (improvement of) the Nation's Diet inevitably placed the culture of consumption back on the agenda but, in the first instance, on the relatively narrow terrain of what impact healthy eating campaigns could have on what were rapidly becoming or, had already become, the dietary diseases of affluence associated primarily with overeating (itself and other syndromes, admittedly, as with obesity, constituting socially constructed labels variously interpreted)¹¹ and poor diet (salt, fat and sugar, etc.) with, for example, onset of middle-age diabetes, high blood pressure, cancers, and so on, more or less unavoidably disastrous from social and individual perspectives. Most campaigns for promoting healthier consumption sought to close the gap between the ideal and actual diets through publicising the former and, possibly, the deleterious effects of the latter. And these had failed miserably in part for systemic reasons outlined previously – what gets produced must more or less get consumed, and can be more a matter of redistributing the burden. In general, the producer dominates over consumer (health) policy, one significant exception being Norway in the interwar period when it was presumed that dairy products were good for you and, of course, the farming lobby as well, providing a rare case of synergy between the two¹².

10 I am acutely aware, and this has been raised by others and discussed in passing across my own contributions, that where one SOP ends and another begins is controversial and can only be answered empirically through identification of integral structures themselves in practice. Put another way, when does interaction at any point between SOPs lead to the formation of a single combined SOP. Posing the question in this way is, to some degree, a de facto acceptance of the SOP approach (you cannot have interaction without prior separate existence). More significantly, the confinement of the SOP approach to analysis of commodities and to consumption does involve sectorally delineated structures at the point of exchange and what comes both before and after. On all of this, see Fine (2002, Chapter 6) where the SOP approach has to address the historical (non-commodity consumption), consumer society and the culture of consumption which is not in and of itself single-commodity bound.

11 Pirie (2011) and Guthman and DuPuis (2006).

12 It will be worth following the consequences of the recently introduced tax on fat in Denmark.

... To cultural systems

But how do healthy eating campaigns affect food beliefs and behaviour? Here, I began with a number of critical points of departure. First is to reject the notion of a targeted ideal diet as motivating consumers. Rather the determinants of consumption are as varied as the SOPs to which they are attached, and dietary ideals play at most one part amongst many in determining what is consumed. Indeed, it is far from clear that consumers know what they consume however much they count calories, pieces of fruit and veg and the like. Second is to reject the notion that consumers are uninformed because, in some nostalgic and romantic fashion, they are much further distant from knowledge of food as producers, rural inhabitants or whatever. Indeed, the modern schoolchild knows much more, if different, about food than most peasants that have ever lived, since many of food's properties (and effects) are now common knowledge having only been subject to recent discovery. These two points of departure led me both to reject Fischler's renowned omnivore's paradox (as we can eat everything how do we know what is safe to eat) and to replace it by the 'diet paradox' instead (Fine, 1993, 1998c). We all have a diet but it is not and, indeed, cannot be a targeted diet other than *in extremis* of measuring whatever passes our lips, and is absorbed or excreted.

Third, then, as critical point of departure if verging on the mundane, food beliefs derive not exclusively nor even primarily from struggling with deviations from a targeted diet which would themselves have been explained (inevitably by some sort of pathology of lack of understanding combined with lack of self-control) but from a multiplicity of sources of knowledge and experiences (including goods not nutritious to eat or drink as anthropologists would remind us). Food both constitutes and reflects social relations, processes, structures and agencies. But how, what and why? A starting point was made, in deference to healthy eating campaigns, with the idea of an information system attached to each food SOP (Fine, 1998c). In the context of broader sources of information, not least corporate and brand advertising, for example, it seeks to locate the favourable or unfavourable promotion of foods (or, as often as not, ingredients of foods, indicative of the diet paradox – eat less salt, people do not eat salt and decreasingly sugar and fat, etc., as they increasingly figure as ingredients).

It does not take much to realise that reducing food beliefs to information systems is at the very least terminologically inadequate. The pushing for this conclusion through an already open door came by yet another accident, the request to contribute a paper on gender and consumption. A literature research revealed a predominance of contributions, to some extent unexpected given anticipated emphasis on gendered goods, around alcoholism, smoking and eating disorders.

The latter in particular sparked my interest, leading me to find both sociological and psychological literatures to be informative but inadequate for their failure to confront the decisive role played by food systems in their modern form. In particular, I posed a political economy of eating disorders in which, it was argued, all individuals in at least advanced capitalism need to negotiate the simultaneous, unavoidable and increasingly powerful tensions both to diet and to eat, a decisive factor being the capacity of food systems to promote both of these not necessarily at one another's expense (Fine, 1995b, 1998c). This is not to reduce food beliefs, in the context of eating disorders or more generally, to these contradictory tensions, only to set a context for other factors, themselves contingent upon, but not reducible to, the food systems with which they interact or to which they are attached. The tensions to eat and to diet do not derive exclusively from food systems as such, individually and collectively, but each SOP has a very different relationship to these tensions that shifts over time.

If we are to take this any further, other than for those subject to some sort of reductionism to predetermined and located variables, it is necessary to commit to some sort of theory of the commodity. Up to this point, the SOP approach has in major part been presented in more or less neutral methodological and theoretical terms and was, indeed, deliberately designed to be of appeal as a malleable synthesis across diverse approaches, forging together particular contributions by fitting them within the frame of SOPs – as single horizontal factors variously distributed across SOPs or as, possibly unwitting and very common especially in historical work, vertical narratives of particular SOPs. After all, the first and main messages were vertical as opposed to horizontal framing of consumption and appropriate balance between material and cultural factors, meaning relatively less of the latter in isolation. But such factors have to be properly conceived and debated.

Given my own methodological predispositions, it is hardly surprising that I should turn to Marxist value theory, especially in its qualitative dimensions, with attention focused on commodity fetishism. For Marx, the commodity form fails to reveal directly the social relations of its production. Indeed, it reifies them as a relationship between things or, more exactly, as a price or quantity of money. More generally, though, the life of the commodity prior to sale is at most partially revealed in the act of sale, purchase and use in terms of materials and technology used, and the social and material environment and character of provision along the chain as a whole. It follows that the commodity is fetishised in every aspect of its use value and not just in the labour (as value) relations underpinning its production. Of course, this has induced the high priests of sign value to suggest that use value can float entirely free from material properties (of what and how provided), the polar opposite of the notion that use value is merely a fixed

physical property beloved of neoclassical economics. Neither extreme can be so, for consumers engage in more or less conscious material practices with the use values purchased in the activities of and surrounding consumption which are not merely symbolic.

The issue, then, is how use values are created materially and culturally through the consumption that is remote from economic circulation and reproduction as a whole. The latter qualification is important because, whilst meaning is equally endowed to means of production, their consumption remains subordinate to continued incorporation within a value-producing context. This is not so for the consumer and, as with commodity fetishism in the narrow sense, it is a matter of what and how material practices of provision and use are culturally represented and received. In this respect, there are two classic approaches, and oppositions, that have fallen into disrepute, if making something of a comeback in more refined form (e.g. Schor, 2007). These are to appeal to hidden persuaders as opposed to consumer sovereignty, and to false as opposed to genuine needs. Both approaches are now accepted to be methodologically limited and oversimplified. In addition, although each does reflect material practices, they are lacking in dynamism.

Here, Haug's (1986) notion of aesthetic illusion is salient since it suggests that the *degradation* of use values that accompanies capitalist production is compensated for to sustain sales by endowing them with a sexual content, not least through advertising. The SOP approach to consumption takes Haug's notion of aesthetic illusion (the gap between what the use value is and how it is presented) as another critical point of departure in three ways. *First*, the material transformation of commodities through capitalist accumulation is vital but it is not confined to, nor even predominantly, degradation of given products either through the production process or raw materials used. These can also be enhanced unless we fall victims of nostalgia for an idealised craftwork (as opposed to the historical realities of adulterated commodities, poor raw materials, and antediluvian technologies). *Second*, each element along the chain of provision, and not just production and retailing, has an influence on the nature of the product (transport and storage – and corresponding freshness – for example, quite apart from design and advertising in the very broadest sense). *Third*, the potential filling out of the aesthetic illusion is equally by no means confined either to compensating for changes in production alone or to dependence upon sexuality alone as any number of qualities can be assigned to use values by numbers of agents, nor does the aesthetic illusion draw exclusively from advertising.

Of course, the cultural content of the commodity is not only related to the material system of provision but also to wider cultural influences such as gender, class, and nationality. How do these all fit together? One answer has been to appeal to the notion of a 'circuit' of culture, originally deriving from du Gay et al (1996). This does incorporate the important insight that the origins of influence on the cultural content of commodities are multiple, and derive from each and every aspect connected to the provisioning of the commodity (and not just advertising and the shifting material nature of the commodity). But it is not clear why the metaphor of a circuit is justified, and none has been offered. Does culture come and go, or simply return for reworking at a later date having been transformed by others?

Rather than a *circuit* of culture as organising principle, the SOP approach has suggested that each SOP is also attached to its own integral cultural *system*. The cultural system derives content from each and every material aspect of the SOP, although it does so in ways that are not rigidly predetermined. This is to move from the material structures and processes that condition the cultural system attached to commodities to the nature of that culture itself. In part, this is because consumers are not passive recipients of the culture attached to commodities (or anything else for that matter) but are what might be termed reflexive. But to coin a phrase, they are not reflexive in circumstances chosen by themselves. The most immediate, if not exclusive, external determinant of that reflexivity is the SOP itself. But, clearly, it cannot dictate how consumers reflect upon what they consume although its agents are usually determined to exercise an influence in pursuit of successful sales. Further, consumers engage in a variety of practices around consumption that are not necessarily reducible to consumption itself, as in family meals, display, emulation and distinction, and so on (Warde, 2005). Thus, the provisioning of a commodity is not the sole determinant of its attributes, those that make up its aesthetic content, illusory or otherwise (Fine, 2007b).

This is already to have entered the huge domain of the study of ideology, culture and so on. The SOP approach to consumption has done so by characterising the cultural systems attached to commodities as incorporating ten Cs (initially five but incrementally expanded)¹³. The culture of consumption is Constructed,

13 I have added two from before the conference, Commodified and Conforming, on my own initiative. Others were suggested such as Chimerical, Markus Walz, Communicative, Community-substituting, Colonising, Conquering, Corporate, Concealing, Catastrophic, Congressional, Conciliatory, Cathartic, Constricted, Alan Bradshaw, and Coercive, Conventional, and Commonsensical from myself. Even where these Cs are not Covered by, or the Consequences, of others, or not generally applicable to all cultural systems attached to systems of provision, I have to stop

Construed, Conforming, Commodified, Contextual, Contradictory, Chaotic, Closed, Contested and Collective¹⁴.

That the cultural systems attached to consumption are Constructed is probably uncontroversial in view of the postmodernist inclination to deconstruct them. The issue is what is constructed and how and with what effects, and especially the incorporation of the interaction between material and reflexive content. The latter implies that the culture system can never be the pure product of external forces upon the manipulated consumer (nor vice-versa). But, once again, what are the material and cultural boundaries which constrain reflexivity? Such reflexivity always involves individual responses so that the cultural system is Construed at that level.

Even in dream worlds, the culture of consumption is Conforming. This is not necessarily, or even primarily, a matter of the manipulated consumer, weaned off 'true' to false needs. Rather whether and how consumers make choices, and the meanings of these and their consumption to them, are not in circumstances of their choosing. So the culture of consumption is not fixed, nor selected from a fixed menu, as consumption and its purveyance are endlessly inventive. But this does not mean that anything goes, not least with anti-consumerism itself drawn out of an alter ego to consumerism. And, in particular in these terms although there are many other origins and forms of conforming, consumer culture is Commodified. Again, this is not a rigid determination with the commodity form of consumption dictating flexibility around what is consumed and with what meaning but equally constrained by the imperatives of profit-making along the system of provision. And, even where consumption is not commercialised, its culture again tends to be constructed in relation to its opposition to commerce – as in home-made which, of course, can be used as a selling point itself.

Further, as each SOP and its associated cultural system are contingently formed, both their material content and associated meanings are Contextual, the same object of consumption, such as a McDonald's hamburger, can have both different material and cultural content in different situations, and these be differently determined too. Cultural systems are also Contradictory in the dialectical sense of being subject to underlying tensions that need to be resolved

somewhere and ten Cs seems to round things off. Otherwise, subject to alphabetical limitations, there is a danger of reproducing all the elements that go into (the psychology) of marketing and more.

¹⁴ I have somewhat cautiously and reluctantly extended this approach from consumption to identity, uncertain of the scope of application of what was then the 8Cs beyond consumption, Fine (2009b). See also Fine (2012b) for the full ten Cs applied to ethical systems (in the context of economics).

at a more complex level and that drive change. In the SOP study of food systems, as mentioned, it was found that eating disorders are a consequence of its success in creating a symbiosis between the compulsions to eat and to diet, see above. How these and other tensions are resolved, for both other foods and for other SOPs, is equally differentiated. Fashion in contemporary capitalism is, for example, always caught between the demands for novelty, differentiation, emulation and cheap mass production.

Correspondingly and not surprisingly, cultural systems are Chaotic in the sense of being riddled with inconsistency of belief and action although not, thereby, arbitrary. This is inevitable given, for example, compulsions to eat and to diet as far as food systems are concerned (not least with the 'heavy/lite' syndrome in which health and unhealthy food feed off one another – a diet coke justifies a hamburger). A cultural system is also Closed in the sense that its ways of constructing meanings, beliefs and actions tend to preclude but not necessarily to prohibit others. Just think of trade-marking, standards, branding, regulations, and so on, not just what they are but how they are made and who gets to make them. Nonetheless, cultural systems are Contested both indirectly in terms of the conditions attached to the material practices along the chain as well as directly over the way in which these are endowed with meaning. What do we mean by fair trade for example? Each cultural system is Collective, despite individual reflexivity, in the sense of reflecting social practices that are themselves communicated through meaning.

It might at this point be thought attractive to add an eleventh C, Class. But this should not be privileged as an element in cultural systems of consumption any more than gender, ethnicity or whatever. As consumption is driven by the commodity form, it is the capacity and willingness to pay that is the most important proximate quantitative determinant. Whilst income, and lifestyle, do have some correspondence to class position, this is sufficiently loose and variable across SOPs that class as such is not an immediate determinate of corresponding cultural systems or even patterns of consumption¹⁵. In short, although class is an important determinant of consumption, it is at most, and not inevitably, a proximate determinant of corresponding cultural systems. Think TVs, washing machines, haircuts, phones, and so on. It would be hard to find a class culture in these that prevails, like writing in a stick of rock, especially distinctive from income levels and other determinants.

15 See Fine et al (1996) in critique of Tomlinson and Warde (1993), and see Friedland et al. (2007).

And from ANT to ...

Although described over a decade ago by Leslie and Reimer (1999: 405) as ‘perhaps the most comprehensive elaboration of production-consumption relations’, and as one of three approaches to the study of consumption, and cited as such in Jackson et al. (2004: 8), the SOP approach is more marked by its limited application and profile. It has, though, prompted criticism from time-to-time. The food systems literature, especially associated with Friedman and McMichael for example, was earlier established than the SOP approach and offered some inspiration for it. But it experienced a crisis of confidence in the early 1990s because of the failure of the empirical evidence to conform to a few, relatively fixed ideal-types of globalised commodity systems around wheat and beef for example. This, alongside the anticipated fracturing of food systems with the emergence of bio-technology, threw the whole approach into disarray. The less rigid SOP approach, which did allow for differences in national and product food systems, was roundly condemned by erstwhile global ‘foodies’¹⁶. Whilst some have now tempered this initially extreme reaction to the diversity and increasing complexity of food systems, others, led by David Goodman, sought refuge in the greater methodological openness of social theory and especially actor-network theory, accusing the SOP approach of undue reliance upon a social/natural dualism (Fine, 2003a, 2003b, 2004 and 2005b).

Significantly, the inspiration for the ANT assault on the SOP approach derives from Callon, who has long and explicitly rejected the notion of capitalism itself as an ideological construct of political economists (Fine, 2003b). More recently, ANT itself has been discarded in deference to performativity. In a paper on the anthropology of markets running to over sixty pages, but marked not for publication, Callon and Caliskan (2005) make no reference whatsoever to ANT, although it essentially reads and reduces contributions surveyed, however accurately and both positively and negatively, through that perspective. This is true of the formalist/substantivist debate within anthropology as well as commentary on the relative merits of the GCC/GVC, see below, and SOP approaches:

The rigidity of commodity chains approach is broken by Fine and Leopold’s systems of provision perspective (Fine and Leopold, 1993; Fine, 2002). Their research focuses on the world of consumption and simultaneously studies the relations of production and exchange in sectorally specific systems of provision like those of food and garments. Although corrective of the over-simplification of commodity chains approach, and careful in not assuming that the disciplinary

¹⁶ See debate in special issue of *Review of International Political Economy*, 1994, 1(3): 519–86.

taxonomy of the social sciences are not necessarily followed by the agents of these systems of provisions, the approach still limits itself in registering what it calls the material limits defining the world of the system in individual sectors. What happens in the sector itself, how its markets are organized, its prices are set, networks built, research carried out are still left untouched in the systems of provision approach. (ibid.)

The last criticism is incomprehensible in terms of the 150 pages or so specifically devoted to the food and clothing systems in Fine and Leopold, and the subsequent work on sugar, meat and dairy systems, for example, referenced and drawn upon in Fine (2002).

...Through GCC/GVC...

There would, however, appear to be a close affinity between the global commodity chain, now global value chain, GCC/GVC and SOP approaches. Each emphasises attention to the chain of activities connecting production to consumption and how such a chain offers an integral form of commodity supply. But each approach has also evolved from different origins and with a different dynamic, with little or no dialogue between them let alone convergence.

The story of the GCC/GVC approach can be told in a number of ways, especially in light of what it excludes as opposed to what it includes, see Bair (2005) and special issue of *Economy and Society* (Gibbon et al., 2008) and, for critique, Bernstein and Campling (2006a and b). GCC/GVC began with an attempt to situate sector-specific production within world system theory. It did so through suggesting ideal-types of chains, initially buyer- and retailer-driven, highlighting an abiding concern with power and governance along chains. Inevitably, this two-fold classification proved inadequate to the empirical diversity of chains themselves, and the typology has been extended accordingly, with Gereffi et al (2005) an exemplary illustration in which five chains are teased out of the eight possibilities around the 2x2x2 classification of governance across high or low complexity, codification and capabilities along the chain. Thus, GCC/GVC research has been driven by an evolving classificatory scheme to accommodate the burgeoning case study evidence that otherwise fails to fit.

The commitment to empirical case study is the strong and driving factor in GCC/GVC research – follow the chain. Its counterpart is an extraordinary weakness in theory – in depth, consistency and rationale. No doubt its practitioners would strenuously disagree but they seem to have been subject to a syndrome of off-the-shelf appropriation of whatever theoretical fragments suit shifting empirical needs or intellectual fashions. Indeed, tongue in cheek, it is tempting to see the GCC/GVC approach as a reflection in its own mirror,

imposing theoretical governance over its unruly case studies by a chaotic assemblage of concepts. From the abstract of Gereffi et al (2005: 78), we get a clear idea of this¹⁷:

This article builds a theoretical framework to help explain governance patterns in global value chains. It draws on three streams of literature – transaction costs economics, production networks, and technological capability and firm-level learning – to identify three variables that play a large role in determining how global value chains are governed and change. These are: (1) the complexity of transactions, (2) the ability to codify transactions, and (3) the capabilities in the supply-base. The theory generates five types of global value chain governance – hierarchy, captive, relational, modular, and market – which range from high to low levels of explicit coordination and power asymmetry.

Thus, although not arbitrary, the choice and use of supportive theory are accidental, generally reflecting the idiosyncratic character of individual contributors and the rapidly changing fashions across social theory itself¹⁸. This begins with Gereffi and world systems theory but rapidly became captured by the flec-spec post-Fordism of those such as Kaplinsky and Humphrey for whom chain as *filière* proved irresistible. From there, we have witnessed various opportunistic attachments to those theories that uncomfortably weld the rigidity of ideal-type chains to flexible analytical frames to preclude charges of excessive determinism (and to fit the evolving evidence and analytical concerns such as governance). The result has been to place GCC/GVC in an analytical ghetto of its own making. Its practitioners have been highly active and with high profile but have increasingly collaborated rather than attracting an expanding band of followers and subject matter. On the one hand, the core determinism within the chains themselves, and corresponding case studies, deter those who would reject any model imposed on history – whether it be the dogged anything-could-have-been-small-scale openness but for history of Sabel and Zeitlin (2004) or the various post-postmodernisms of convention, performativity, and ANT. On the other hand, increasing sensibility of the GCC/GVC approach to the latter has deterred those who are attracted by the determinism of the chains, whether these be conventional or heterodox economists or economic sociologists¹⁹.

17 The GCC/GVC approach has also increasingly become policy-oriented, from World Systems to World Bank as it were. See Gereffi and Frederick (2010).

18 Although there is some attempt at convergence and consistency made through the GCC/GVC working group, www.globalvaluechains.org.

19 Note that the superficial appeal by Gereffi et al. (2005) to transaction costs, a flawed and limited approach to economic organisation, is an ideal illustration of many of the points offered here. Note also the corresponding lack of critical reflection on the GVC website in defining governance as non-market forms of coordination, counterposing market to non-market – where does ‘capital(ism)’ fit in this schema?

Such antipathy across the social sciences to the GCC/GVC approach, more by way of benign neglect than active critique, is reinforced by two further factors. First, the scope of the approach has been extremely limited by the nature and number of the case studies, a few sectors globally organised for final consumption. Despite origins in world systems theory, implications for the world system (and in the age of 'globalisation') have been notable for their absence not only in the systemic sense but also in implications for other sectors, from raw materials through to finance, e.g. those not destined for final consumption, and for the role of the state. As Bernstein and Campling (2006a: 240) put it²⁰:

the commodities on which current 'commodity studies' concentrate are above all those in the *realms of personal consumption*. In short, there is little interest in capital or producers' goods and intermediate goods, which are no less commodities than 'exotic' fruits air-freighted from the tropics to Northern supermarkets, branded coffees or clothing, or eco-tourism²¹.

Second, the GCC/GVC literature has been both parasitical and superficial in relation to the social theories on which it has drawn and has, consequently, had little to offer them in return. A particularly acute example of the lack of such broader self-reflection on the part of the GCC/GVC approach is its failure to examine what defines and determines the chains themselves with this generally taken as self-evident by virtue of case studies. This follows from an almost exclusive pre-occupation with 'vertical', follow-the-chain analysis, to which is added the coordination/governance of the given chain. But what of horizontal factors, both within and beyond the chains? Thus, not only no chains for steel, energy, transport and finance, etc, let alone health, education and welfare, but these also potentially fracture the integral nature of the chains that can be identified. For finance or, more exactly, financialisation for example, the rise of equity finance and of futures markets for commodities not only brings into question the functioning but also the definition of chains. Is it possible that along the chain factors may have become subordinate to across-chain financialisation?²² Similar considerations are raised by the attachment of chains to the horizontal factors attached to consumption and the consumer.

20 This limitation of the GCC/GVC approach was strong if implicit in the stand-off in policy analysis and debate for South Africa between Kaplinsky and others in ISP (1995) and Fine and Rustomjee (1997) and Fine (1995a).

21 Fine (2002) extends this point in relation to the wider domains of public sector systems of (state) provision in transport, energy, housing, and so on, see below.

22 As Rossman and Greenfield (2006: 2) put it, cited in Fine (2007a):

Of course, companies have always sought to maximize profit. What is new is the drive for profit through the elimination of productive capacity and employment. Transnational food processors, for example, now invest a significantly lower

This all explains why the use of social theory by the GCC/GVC approach must always be on the theoretical move, since if any element were more fully embraced it would expose the approach's limitations and/or ambiguities and inconsistencies. Whether it be convention, actor-network or other theory, it is only possible to anticipate frustration by their proponents, rather than delight, at the piecemeal and tardy fashion in which a particular stance has been adopted and applied. In this light, it is hardly surprising that consumption should have remained off the GCC/GVC agenda for so long despite the early incursions of the flec-spec/*filière* approach. For, whilst its post-Fordism emphasised small-batch production serving consumption in niche markets, it moved no further than this, certainly relative to the explosion of consumption studies inspired by postmodernism. Had such a cultural turn in consumption been adopted by the GCC/GVC approach, it would have swept away and not just been subordinated to what would have been perceived to be the economistic and reductionist attachment to ideal-type chains.

In contrast to GCC/GVC, then, the SOP approach originates with the study of consumption itself and, in this sense, traverses an analytical route in the opposite direction albeit very much more quickly if not instantaneously. As mentioned, Fine and Leopold (1993) argued that theories of consumption had developed in a horizontal fashion within disciplines and across variables (utility maximisation for economics, emulation and distinction for sociology, deconstruction of meaning for cultural studies and so on) and across commodities. Further, to integrate the various analyses together and the corresponding factors involved requires attention to specific commodity chains designated for consumption. Thus, from the outset, the SOP approach took consumption as its object of study, a vertical as opposed to a horizontal approach and, in addition, as a conscious reaction against postmodernist confinement of the study of consumption to the meaning of the consumed and to the consumer. These needed to be situated in relation to the whole chain of activity sourcing provision and, to that extent, restoring production to a position of prominence. Significantly, as observed earlier, the SOP approach had itself been prompted by an entirely different issue, the relationship between rising female labour market participation and patterns of ownership of putatively labour-saving consumer durables. The idea of one to fund the other through some consumerist logic was theoretically and empirically rejected for a complex understanding of the diverse nature and determination of

proportion of their profits in expanding productive capacity. Financial markets today directly reward companies for reducing payroll through closures, restructuring and outsourcing. This reflects the way in which financialization has driven the management of non-financial companies to 'act more like financial market players'.

See also Newman (2009).

consumption norms, and their attachment to the economic and social reproduction of the workforce (Fine, 1992).

In other words, the SOP approach sought both to identify complex patterns of consumption and to link them to systems of provision. Unlike the GCC/GVC approach, it rejected ideal-types to specify chains. Rather, the integral nature of individual SOPs, global or otherwise, is seen as contingent upon the socially and historically specific form taken by the accumulation of capital on which they are based and which give them their dynamic. This is not to abandon theory altogether nor to revert to a notion of Fordist mass production as the only model (nor the presumption that anything that is not Fordist in every respect must be post-Fordist). In contrast to the unambiguous departure of the GCC/GVC approach from Marxist value theory – ironic in view of the shift of nomenclature from commodity to value – the SOP approach retained Marxist value theory, and its theory of production. For this, though, Marxist theory places emphasis upon the drive either to fragment or to consolidate across sectors (economies of scale and scope, respectively, in orthodox terminology) dependent upon how competition is engaged. And the process of competition is itself structured according to access to finance, markets, design, technology, labour markets, and so on, and is historically contingent in how specific sectors evolve in relation to one another. Thus, to repeat, it is the structuring of accumulation in production and through to consumption in practice that is perceived to create SOPs, rather than these corresponding to ideal-types as for the GCC/GVC approach, thereby realising recognisable clothing (and fashion), food, housing, and transport systems²³.

...To the value of labour power

Whilst, then, emerging at much the same time, the GCC/GVC and SOP approaches have had little or no point of contact other than through the intermediary of food. But I now (re)turn to an entirely different issue, the relationship between the study of consumption and Marxist value theory that has erupted through a debate with Lebowitz²⁴. This debate focuses on the nature and determinants of the value of labour power, a topic that has immediate

23 And also, with Fine and Leopold (1993) noting the failure of postmodernist studies to address public consumption, seeking a corrective in terms of public sector systems of provision (PSSOPs) offered in Fine (2002). See also Bayliss and Fine (eds) (2008) for this in the context of, and in opposition to, privatisation.

24 This debate is one of three with Kincaid (2007, 2008 and 2009), Lapavistas (2009) and dos Santos (2009) and Lebowitz (2003, 2006 and 2010). See Fine (2008b, 2009a and 2010) and Fine and Saad-Filho (2008, 2009 and 2010).

connections to the study of consumption even though these have rarely been taken up if at all. Indeed, and it is a point of difference in the debate, for Lebowitz, the key issue and starting point is to emphasise how insufficient attention has been given to class struggle, especially at the point of production, both by Marx himself and Marxism, and that this is crucial in understanding the dynamics of capitalism in general and of the evolution of the rate of exploitation. For him, *Capital* is an account of what capital does, and not how labour resists and, thereby, influences outcomes. This leads him to put forward the concept of the 'degree of separation', to incorporate the notion that capitalists must divide and rule workers in order to prevent them from appropriating the surplus produced. The degree of separation is also decisive in determining the extent to which the productivity increase associated with capital accumulation is appropriated by capitalists (as relative surplus value) or by workers in defence of the value of labour power (which would imply higher levels of real consumption).

There is an issue, here, of whether this fairly represents Marx and Marxism in terms of the neglect of class struggle, especially in light of the labour process literature that has, admittedly gone into decline over the period of neo-liberalism, most notably through the twin assault on industrial relations and sociology (by human relations and resource management) in particular and political economy in general. But my starting point has been different. It has been to address more closely the determination of the value of labour-power, something that, as already indicated, has been sorely neglected in the Marxist tradition despite its importance, with almost absolute reliance upon Marx's own reference to moral and historical elements without going into further elaboration. Even on this narrow basis, however, there have been two different approaches to the value of labour power (although they are perceived to be equivalent within an inappropriately static equilibrium framework). One is to refer to the value of labour power as a value as with variable capital, most immediately as reflected in a quantity of money, with the value of wages oscillating around the value of labour power in practice. The other is to refer to a bundle of goods as standard, and their corresponding socially necessary labour-time of production. These are, of course, very different conceptualisations of the value of labour power as is sharply revealed by any increase in productivity. The first would lead to a reduction in the rate of profit since the wage as a bundle of use values would increase in proportion as values of commodities decrease other than labour power itself. The second would be at the opposite extreme, with the value of labour power reducing in proportion to productivity increase as the wage bundle remains unchanged. For Lebowitz, the degree of separation is decisive in determining where the outcome lies between these two extremes.

My position is different and differently motivated and tends to view Lebowitz's stance as bordering upon a tautology – the more the working class is united in struggle as represented in the 'degree of separation', the more it has to gain from productivity increase. There is also a dual aspect involved in my approach, corresponding to the two different ways of interpreting the value of labour power – as values or as use values. The first aspect concerns differentiation across labour markets. Without going into detail, there are a number different economic and social processes that differentiate the creation and occupation of positions within the production process (and the labour market more generally), and these flow in part from the imperatives of capitalist accumulation itself in terms of skills, hierarchies, and oppositional and organisational conflict in response to (re)organisation of the work process. Such differentiation, or segmentation as it is usually termed, is variously situated within and across firms, sectors, and occupations. At the very least, this means that the form taken by the value of labour power is not simply a standard enjoyed by all, but one that is determined according to the processes of, and responses to, the restructuring of employment. The value of labour power is not even an average from which there are divergences either side, in anything other than a numerical sense. Rather, the value of labour power is the result of a deeply structured and differentiated (re)positioning of the workforce in its economic and social relations as well as in its more narrowly defined rewards in terms of wage differentiation. Indeed, as argued in Fine (1998b)²⁵, labour market segmentation is not merely a matter of different segments of the workforce but differentially organised functioning *within* those segments by comparison with one another.

Before proceeding to the second aspect of how the value of labour power is to be interpreted, it is worth emphasising on the first aspect alone how difference with Lebowitz is generated. We do agree that I place class struggle at a lower level of abstraction than he does. For he sees it as located at the level of capital and labour as a whole, with the degree of separation reflecting, in aggregate or balance, the struggle at this level albeit made up of the varieties of more complex struggles across the economy. As a result, I am interpreted as denying the primacy of class struggle, and of deeming it to be contingent rather than necessary. This is not so for the following reasons. First, it is necessary to unpick the notion of abstraction into at least two different aspects²⁶ which often, but do not always, coincide²⁷.

25 See also debate with Fleetwood (2006) and Fine (2007c).

26 In addition, there are differences in the order of exposition and of investigation.

27 This is more fully explored in the debate with Kincaid with, for example, the law of the tendency of the rate of profit more abstract but of equal causal status to the counteracting tendencies (since both are systematic consequences of accumulation and production of relative surplus value).

One is the logical movement from more abstract or simple concepts to the more complex and concrete. We cannot have profit or price before we have surplus value and value, for example. The other is the causal relations between categories or factors. Here, irrespective of the causal status of class struggle, we can identify it as being differentially determined within production processes, across the economy, and in social and ideological contestation as well. Again, this is not at issue as could not be put clearer by Lebowitz (2010: 140):

I have no difficulty thinking about individual capitalists trying to divide and thereby weaken the workers they employ by, for example, using racism and sexism or by moving to greenfields or regions where trade unionism is constrained if not illegal; nor, are we lacking for examples of particular workers who struggle to reduce the degree of separation among themselves in complex and differentiated ways. Accordingly, there would seem to be a *prima facie* case for accepting that the degree of separation among workers (this inner abstraction meant to capture the balance of class forces) is realized through the daily struggles of capitalists and workers.

But it is the last sentence where we depart analytical company. For this inner abstraction is not one that is reproduced through material processes, and so is ideal. It is, to coin a phrase, a sack of potatoes of struggles that may or may not have any reinforcing solidarity so that there is no reason why the degree of separation should be reproduced as an abstract (that is simple, underlying) category. This is quite distinct from the determining role played by class struggle. Indeed, it is precisely because of the separation of the working class (and divide and rule across the organisation of production) emphasised by Lebowitz that means the degree of separation is both in form *and* essence, a complex category. There is a difference here with the rate of surplus value which can legitimately be taken to be an aggregate (and simple) social category. For it does offer a 'centre of gravity' around which there tends to be equalisation. This derives precisely from the unity displayed, inadvertently, by capital in its total circulation, in which capital would move to wherever individual rates of exploitation were higher than normal, even whilst reproducing a differentiated workforce. But there is no such equalising tendency amongst labour market conditions themselves (just as what makes for differences in labour markets in one place does not tend to have them replicated elsewhere – as if militancy were evened out across the economy by labour as opposed to capital, and otherwise there would be no discrimination in the labour market, for example, by gender and race and so on).

The second aspect in the determination of the value of labour power concerns the wage as a bundle of use values, commonly perceived as a material standard of living. Here, I have emphasised three points. *First*, the way in which that standard is established is different from one commodity to another (and in relation to elements of economic and social reproduction that are not produced

by capital directly whether provided by the state or in commodity form outside of capitalist production). More specifically, as above, I have argued that the wage bundle is comprised of a number of separate systems of provision, such as the food, health, housing and transport systems, with these complemented by what I have termed public sector systems of provision, Fine and Leopold (1993), Fine (2002, 2005a and c, 2009c and 2012a), Bayliss and Fine (eds) (2008) and Fine and Hall (2012). *Second*, within each system of provision, norms are established which are neither the same for all nor even an average, but a distinctive mode of provision with corresponding incidence of levels and quality of consumption across different social groups. So, the nature of the moral and historical element is different both within and between different items within the consumption bundle.

Third, then, the way in which the different systems of provision establish the moral and historical element is certainly contingent upon class struggle, and upon the overall value of labour power as it evolves over time. But it is not reducible to, even if stretched beyond class conflict at the point of production, as a causal role is played by elements along each of the systems of provision as a whole, along which (in the links between production and consumption) influence is exerted upon, and interacts with, the levels and incidence of norms for consumption and associated cultural systems. Thus, whilst the value of labour power is given at any moment as an abstract and simple determinant, as accumulation proceeds, so the reproduction and transformation of that value of labour power is determined at the more complex level of differentially segmented and functioning labour markets and the differentiated systems of provision attached to differentiated standards of consumption.

In short, the moral and historical element in the value of labour power as a material standard of living – as opposed to a level of social necessary labour-time – is not determined by class struggle alone, not by production alone, not by conflict between capital and labour alone, and is differentially determined across different elements of consumption (and labour markets). Consequently, it follows that, if the degree of separation is taken as the measure of the extent to which productivity increase is appropriated by the working class, it is an extremely complex and concrete determinant and not one that is logically located at a high level of abstraction such as the value of labour power itself around which, to reiterate, the circulation of (surplus) value revolves and, from which, the complex determinants of the moral and historical elements can be abstracted.

From consumption to consumer politics?

Are these debates merely academic? The answer is no to the extent that theory sheds light on consumer politics, itself a tricky notion ranging from bread riots to anxieties over quality testing of consumer products. At one extreme, it is more closely aligned to notions of regulation in the narrow and traditional sense, with consumer protection sought through the intervention of the state, even more so with the privatisation and consumerising of public services (although there are claims that highly concentrated retailers now serve as regulatory gatekeepers on behalf of consumers). As Hilton (2007a) has suggested, such regulation has been inspired, at least in principle, by different models according to the perceived degree and scope of activism of consumers. The minimalist, economic model directs itself at restoring consumer sovereignty through correcting market failures. More extensive is the model of consumers as an interest group, capable of being represented in negotiations. This, in turn, can be taken further with consumer groups actively engaging in political campaigning.

In practice, whatever model is adopted in principle, it is highly conditioned by other forms of state regulation, itself uneven within and across countries. Further, across the European Union, apart from greater or lesser regulation of safety and standards, the tendency has been to harmonise across the lowest common denominator in consumer participation, with consumer (i.e. market, i.e. producer) choice prevailing over wider considerations in creating a 'single market'. But, according to the SOP approach, the cultures, practices and causes and consequences of consumer politics will be as diverse as the SOPs themselves. It follows, then, that state regulation of and through consumption is both diverse and not rigidly determined in light of the politics of consumption, especially in the United States, with increasing emphasis there and elsewhere being placed on both corporate and consumerist deployment of the media and communication for which high profile US branding and campaigning are universally unavoidable²⁸.

28 See especially Shah et al. (2007) and Livingstone and Lunt (2007). For this and more on a wider terrain, see for example the special issues in *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 2007, 7(2), Bevir and Trentmann (eds.) and *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611, May, 2007. For critique of ethical consumption from a GCC/GVC perspective, see Richey and Ponte (2011). And for a recent diverse set of contributions to consumer studies, see results of the ESRC/AHRB *Cultures of Consumption Programme*, www.consume.bbk.ac.uk, for which I served under various capacities prompted by Frank Trentmann. This, in turn, kept my interest in consumption ticking over, subsequently reinforced by joining the Social Science Research Committee of the UK's Food Standards Agency.

What these approaches seem to share in common is the idea that if only there were more consumer activism of the right type, outcomes could be manipulated from bad or good to better, with the politics of consumption as a lever, most overt in the campaign for example, even literally, to get shit out of hamburgers, Thompson (2007). But elsewhere, Fine (2005a), I have argued that the latter is self-limiting for the following reasons. *First*, as we are all consumers, consumer politics is caught in the contradiction of presenting particular interests as if they were general, and this cannot be sustained the more effective the politics becomes and particular interests are promoted, defended or contested. Of course, this is not unique to *consumer* politics as the same is true of citizenship, human rights, and, within and even across borders, nationality, and so on. Thus, the most basic consumer politics of campaigning against higher prices tends to identify manufacturers, retailers, even government as purveyor of taxes and subsidies, as 'the other'. But to be defined as opposition is equally to fragment the universal category of the consumer and to open up the need for a unity of organisation and purpose that includes some and excludes others, and which will give consumer campaigns their constituencies, content and meanings.

A prominent way of addressing the impact of consumer politics and campaigns is by reference to a dualism between consumer and citizen, and the extent to which and ways in which the concerns of the latter are brought to bear upon the hedonistic self-interest of the former. Of course, the citizen is as much a general category as the consumer and is bedevilled by the same issue of whom and in whose interests. At one extreme, higher income does allow for a continued ethical and/or selective hedonism for the concerned consumer (Soper, 2007). At the other extreme, it can lead to active political campaigning that reaches back along the chain of material and cultural provision. As we are all consumers and citizens, so whom and what are *we* seeking to change? On the one hand, as the determinants of consumption are traced back to their origins and confronted by campaigning, so the nature of the politics is transformed into something else. The focus shifts from consumption as such to different and possibly wider concerns for the labour market and exploitation, or for the precedence of profit over the environment. The most notable, but unnoticed, example of this is the conversion of private into public consumption at which point the politics becomes one no longer of consumption but of the welfare state. It is significant that the contemporary process of privatisation of public services is one based upon not only recommodifying but also of what might be termed consumerising²⁹.

29 It is also arguable that the idea of the public (and hence collective) interest, although itself problematic, is being diluted by the notion of citizen-consumer. For the latter,

On the other hand, engaging the issues that underpin the politics of consumption also changes the constituencies that are prepared to be involved. In other words, to the extent that the politics of consumption moves beyond consumption as such, it not only becomes the politics of something else (as well), it also fractures the cosy unanimity of the consumer-citizen for a more focused and contested political constituency. The history of consumer politics is one of trading universal appeal against broader objectives and narrower interest groups³⁰. And so it must remain although where and how that trade-off remains is almost inevitably commodity-specific. Even for trade boycotts (and 'buycotts'), for example, as in anti-apartheid (and ethical goods), issues arise of how readily country of origin can be identified and acted upon, with corresponding trade-offs between ethics, convenience and effectiveness for the consumer.

Thus, whilst it might be agreed with Arnould (2007: 108) in closing that, 'to engage in progressive political action, consumer citizens need to escape neither consumption nor the market', Micheletti and Stolle (2007: 172) suggest in offering a survey of anti-sweatshop movements that, 'The question is how sharp antisweatshop's teeth are and how big of a bite it really can make into corporations'. Their answer immediately follows,

To succeed, the movement must continue to mobilize consumers as supporters, as critical shopping mass, as a spearhead force of corporate change, and as ontological agents of deeper structural change. (ibid.)

But, once the appeal is made to the consumer-citizen as an ontological agent of deeper structural change, this is surely an expression of the limitations, not of the scope, of consumerism (and citizenship) as agent in and against the market!

Second, then, consumer politics is not only about price and quality but also concerns the ethics of consumption itself, ranging from sustainability of the environment to the working conditions and wages of sweatshops and child labour. This implies, once again, not only that the consumer's politics are differentiated by issue and constituency but, even if not recognised as such, the

citizenship becomes better consumption by means other than through the market alone. For the public interest and citizenship as such, there is a potentially stronger attachment to notions of rights and equity, Livingstone and Lunt (2007).

³⁰ One of the author's uncle was instrumental in founding the UK Consumers Association, now known for its testing of, and advising on, products for its members, and reporting as such through its magazine Which. At its outset, that it should even challenge the quality of products and the domain of producers was seen as an assault on corporations tantamount to communism. This had a profound impact on its (contested) depoliticisation towards consumer testing as opposed to even campaigning as an advocate of consumer rights. See Hilton (2007b).

consumer is also prised away from the market and attached to social issues more generally. The consumer becomes a citizen and, correspondingly, the politics becomes broader and different, not least attaching itself to a discourse of rights and needs as opposed to equality (and inequality) before the market alone.

Third, as consumer politics evolves, it inevitably traces its concerns not only across the broader terrain of citizenship but also backwards to the origins of products in the systems of production, distribution and exchange. This can lead to, or even be inspired by, antipathy to private provision, with demand for public provision instead as with health, education, and so on. It can depart the narrow focus on the product and its terms of availability to address, as mentioned, conditions of work and concern for the environment. The result is to reinforce the tensions across the consumer/citizen and universal/particular interests and divides and to transform consumer politics into something else that further reinforces those tensions and divides. For, in case of *public* consumption (notably absent from postmodernist, discursive accounts of *private* consumption), the issue becomes one of the welfare state (and, not surprisingly, commercialisation of public services is concerned to present citizens as consumers and not vice-versa). Otherwise, it is a matter of, for example, trade unionism and the environmental movement. Consumer politics is limited in practice not only in what it does but in its very existence because it becomes different and something else the more it is collectively pursued and succeeds. An analogy, not identity, with trade union economism is striking and should lead to an acknowledgement of both the significance and limitations of consumer politics for prompting broader economic and social change.

Much the same must be true of the struggles and conflicts that will arise in the wake of the current crisis of neoliberalism with these not necessarily originating with, but ranging beyond and dominating, consumer concerns to address employment, wages, social provision, and so on. Of necessity, progress requires framing the way in which strategic alliances might be formed that strengthen, broaden, unify and transform such individualised struggles not only for more provision but also for different modes of provision that reach beyond the market to the conscious, collective and social control of production itself. In this respect, there are developments that have been overwhelmingly significant at both global and systemic levels. Two striking markers of these are, for example, the extreme shifts in the redistribution of income across the USA over the last thirty years, whereby the share of the top 1% has risen from well under 10% to well over 20% whilst real wages have stagnated. The implications for levels and details of

consumption are profound, not least in rendering the notion of trickle-down somewhat questionable to say the least³¹.

This period has also witnessed the growth in the ratio of global financial assets to global GDP by a factor of three, a symbol of the process of financialisation with its proliferation of quantities and types of financial assets. This, too, has had profound implications for consumption, not least through the penetration of finance into economic and social reproduction (consumer credit as a form of access to consumer goods as such as well as health, education, welfare and pensions as forms of erstwhile public provision). For Lapavistas (2009) and dos Santos (2009), this signifies a supplementary form of exploitation within exchange as banks unduly profit from (interest) charges of wage revenue. I disagree, seeing this instead, in line with the earlier arguments presented here, as a form of redefining the value of labour power in which finance is a more prominent factor in the constituency of SOPs. Of necessity, how finance intervenes is differentiated both by commodity and time and place. Thus, sub-prime in the USA is both indicative and exceptional in terms of both how finance has been integrated into housing provision and the impact it has had on housing provision itself (who gets access to what housing). By the same token, SOPs across various commodities, such as food and energy, have been subject to the volatilities of futures markets with corresponding consequences for access to consumption.

In short, just as consumer politics needs to reach back through the SOP to the realm of production, so it needs to address the systemic role of finance – not simply as a consumed service but as a decisive determinant in the levels, modes and means of consuming itself. But, as already emphasised, such demands upon consumer politics transform it into something else.

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