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From Consumer Problems to Consumer Anomie

ABSTRACT. At the beginning of this century consumer problems in Europe were concentrated on the economic and functional aspects of consumption. These were concrete realities which were felt so strongly that efforts were made to solve them independently, e.g., by consumer co-operation.

With steadfast extension of the market, consumer problems have become more diffuse. This is due to several circumstances: (a) the functional aspects of commodities have become more complex and their origin more difficult to identify; (b) the functional and symbolic aspects have become more entangled; (c) the traditional cultural distinction between good and bad in consumption has collapsed at the same time as new, branded products have made it more difficult to build up a new cultural code.

As a result there is a problem of how to combine — in consumer choice — the symbolic and the functional dimensions of a commodity. One may say that it is typical for modern consumption that there are no rigid choice criteria and that uncertainty is inherent in consumer choice. If this holds true one can use the Durkheimian concept of anomie in describing the main problem in modern European consumption.

How to organize work and how to enjoy its results are among the great questions of mankind that have always aroused the passions of philosophers and commoners alike. Sometimes attention has focussed on work, and sometimes on consumption, yet relative emphasis put on the two aspects at different times throughout European history is most revealing.

Contrary to what might at first be assumed, in early times in Europe one thought only about consumption and not about its prerequisites, even though these were harsh and scarce. The prevailing idea in the ancient city states was that consumption, and not work, belonged to the category of human values. Thus the utopias of antiquity were basically consumer utopias (Lafargue, 1907, pp. 9–26; Valmin, 1937, pp. 8–10).

Although utopias in the Middle Ages took new forms, consumption continued to be the main emphasis. In Thomas More’s dream world, wants are simply satisfied in a state of nature (More, 1895).

However, the utopia of classical political economy was quite different. It was no longer sufficient to enjoy the fruits of nature. The aim was to increase material wealth and satisfy growing needs (Carlsen, Schanz, Schmidt, & Thomsen, 1980, pp. 30–34). However, material welfare could not be obtained free but was achieved only by work and the ever increasing production of use-values. Characteristically, classical political economy states for the first time in the history of thought that the correlative of productivity is labour, quantitative wealth the correlative of use-value, and demand the correlative of needs (Ilmonen, 1985a, p. 34). In this way attention was transferred from the problems of consumption to those of production.
The concepts of classical political economy were not reached accidentally. Kosik states that the substitution of labour by the concept of productivity reflects changes that occurred in reality (Kosik, 1976, p. 38). The essence of this change was the evolution from an economy based on use-values and production for oneself to one based on production for exchange, viz., capitalism.

DIFFERENTIATION OF CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION AND THE PROBLEMS OF CONSUMPTION

The ever deeper penetration of capitalism into 19th century European society brought about the twin processes of differentiation and social interdependency to which social scientists and philosophers from the utopian socialists (Fourier, Proudhon) to the classical sociologists (Marx, Durkheim, Weber) have paid considerable attention. Depending on the stand taken these processes were collectively called either the birth of the "organization of needs" (Fourier, Hegel, Marx) or the deepening of the "division of labour in society" (Durkheim, Weber).

At the centre of this complex development was the gradual change in the structure of occupations and the replacement of local markets first by regional and ultimately by national markets. This firstly resulted in the differentiation of production and consumption as well as working and leisure time, and secondly, the growth and diversity of social interdependency (Braudel, 1982, pp. 231–457). Ultimately, this resulted in the appearance of the category "consumer" in economics because the formation of exchange-values in production required the existence of an agent "who was separate from the producer of the commodity or service" (Rojek, 1985, p. 38).

With the creation of national markets and the social division of labour, the relationship between production and consumption was reshaped. Production and labour gradually assumed a greater importance than consumption (Braudel, 1982, pp. 374–454). There were at least four reasons for this.

Firstly, ever less work was done for people's own needs. The main motive for work was the accumulation of capital or the earning of income by individual workers, viz., monetary wages. Secondly, the time used in wage labour — both on a day-to-day and a lifetime basis — many times exceeded the time required for production in pre-capitalist society. For example, the studies of time use in primitive societies by Lizot and Clastres show that only three to four hours a day went to work-designated tasks (Clastres, 1974; Sahlin, 1972). Thirdly, the dominant ideology that developed alongside capitalism, the Protestant ethic, legitimized the