2

Social mechanisms generating demand: a review and manifesto

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This chapter reflects on the development of sociological approaches to consumption and their contribution to the explanation of consumer behaviour. Tentative and programmatic, it is concerned with defining some of the ways in which sociology might proceed in analysing consumption. It offers some record of recent developments and achievements. It is cast as a reflection on the limits of a key concept, conspicuous consumption, arguing that sociological explanations have paid too much attention to the visible and the remarkable and have therefore generalised too widely from acts of conspicuous consumption. A number of mechanisms which generate ordinary and inconspicuous consumption are reviewed. This permits the identification of some important and neglected inconspicuous features of final consumption. Processes examined include habituation, routinisation, normalisation, appropriation and singularisation, putative bases for understanding the dull compulsion to consume. Asserting a distinction in the ways that economists and sociologists use the concepts of demand and consumption, the chapter contributes to interdisciplinary dialogue. In conclusion, I speculate briefly on some implications of the canvassed approach for understanding innovation and the growth of consumer demand.

Conspicuous consumption and the origins of the sociological approach

One of the distinguishing features of the sociological arsenal is its understanding of conspicuous consumption, the possession and display of goods as a means to demonstrate superiority in a system of social status. This is perhaps still the principal mechanism that scholars outside the discipline associate with the sociological understanding of consumption (e.g. Fine and Leopold, 1993).

The early, and indeed much of the later, sociology attempting to explain the role of consumption in the creation and maintenance of social boundaries and social divisions put great stress on analysing the visible and the remarkable. There was, and still is, good reason to explore conspicuous consumption.

Veblen reasoned, you will remember, that in earlier times it was conspicuous leisure that distinguished the gentleman from the rest of the society. With the collapse of local communities in which all members were familiar with one another's position, money became a more effective means of marking social superiority and inferiority. The powerful and well resourced began to demonstrate their privilege through the display of items which could be observed to be expensive. Clothing, including most particularly that of the wife of the bourgeois gentleman, was a primary mode of expression.

This basic idea was developed, without much discipline, in a variety of directions. Among the mechanisms that were added, and which actually resulted in a rather complex and contradictory series of variants, included Hirsch's notion of positional goods, emulation, the trickle-down effect, distinction, the aestheticisation of everyday life, lifestyle and neo-tribalism.

This tradition in sociology has concentrated on the visible and the remarkable, and interprets consumption behaviour largely in terms of its conspicuous attributes. It is a tradition which identifies the differences between social groups and classes and is valuable because of that. It does isolate some motives and mechanisms that we can see operating in contemporary consumption practice (see Schor, 1998, and Chapter 7 of this volume). It is also determinedly social rather than individual: consumption is about groups and the relationship between them, about belonging rather more than about individual distinction. Only in its most recent, especially postmodern, phase has it turned to individualised choice.

The approach does, however, have some deficiencies. It ineptly specifies the limitations of the central mechanisms, in that it tends to suggest that the same processes operate in all fields and affect all persons. It is forced into complete silence on that which is invisible and unremarkable. It encourages semiotic analysis of consumption at the expense of other methodological approaches. It concentrates mostly on possession through purchase. And it prioritises identity-enhancing features and possession over use.

The dull compulsion to consume

The multivalent nature of consumption is captured in Gabriel and Lang's (1995) catalogue of types of consumer whose behaviour variously appears as expressive, artistic, rebellious, manipulated, essential for survival, as well as a channel for display of social status. As a contribution to understanding the multiple roles of consumption, I want to turn attention to matters other than the visible and the remarkable. I advance, illustrating briefly, eight propositions implicit in some recent developments in sociological approaches, which I seek to promote as a manifesto for the study of inconspicuous and mundane consumption.¹

Abhor the notion of individual choice

There is now an extensive, increasingly multifaceted critique of the idea of individual choice. Sociologists traditionally were never very keen on the idea, and this maxim is perhaps the one that most strongly defines a sociological perspective. Though, as Swann (Chapter 3 of this volume) shows, there is much overlap in the understanding of consumption by sociologists and less orthodox economists, a principal difference from neoclassical economics is the ontological priority that sociology puts upon groups and social contexts. Behaviour is collective and situational, and the appropriate methodological stance is collectivist or institutional. As was said in an earlier paper with Lydia Martens (Warde and Martens, 1998, p. 130), 'Material constraints, moral codes, social pressure, aesthetic sensibilities and situational logics all steer consumer behaviour along predictable paths.'

In that paper some attempt was made to elaborate and illustrate the importance of such sociological presuppositions by explicitly examining the concept of food choice. The dictionary conveys four different shades of meaning for the term 'choice': (1) to select; (2) to pick in preference; (3) to consider fit, or suitable; (4) to will or determine. The ideological danger, ever present with respect to consumption, is to conflate the first two meanings with the fourth, which implies the existence of freedom for an individual to determine his or her own fate. These distinctions can be formalised in such a way as to eliminate from social scientific language confusion over the application of the term 'choice'.

The paper proceeded to examine some circumstances and some mechanisms which serve to restrict individual discretion in the activity of eating out. Elaborating a 'logic of restricted choice', we considered four ways in which choice is effectively limited. First, we identified the impact of limited resources upon the capacity and likelihood of any individual to eat out. Second, we isolated some social processes which restrict any individual's control over decisions regarding particular eating-out episodes. The extent to which people were often not in control was underscored in survey results, many people claiming to have had no say in whether or not to eat out. Only 45 per cent of respondents claimed to have been involved in the decision about whether to eat out on the last occasion that they had taken a main meal away from home. And the question 'Did you have any say in the decision to eat there?' elicited a negative reply in 20 per cent of instances. Third, we showed the ways in which judgements about suitability and preference operated to eliminate options. Finally, we isolated some instances of a process that might be called 'situational entailment', where every 'decision' taken narrows the range of subsequent options. We concluded that 'The term choice inflates the importance of individual decisions and conflates qualitatively different aspects and levels of discretion' and that 'Availability of resources, systemic inequalities of power in decision-making, shared cultural and aesthetic judgement, and "situational entailment", all constrain the individual' (Warde and Martens, 1998, p. 144).

Re-examine concepts of habit and routine

Consumption, because of its primary association with shopping, tends to be seen in decisionistic terms, as people making decisions about what they want. It has often been pointed out that if people were thoroughly reflexive, and pondered every act where in principle they might do one thing or another, daily life would become intolerable. In fact, there are many different points on a continuum from deeply reflected and considered selection among alternatives to unconscious replacement and repetition (see Gronow, 1998; Ilmonen, 2000; Chapter 6 of this volume). My carnivorousness, while routinely reproduced, is not consciously reaffirmed every time I go shopping for food. Much purchasing and much consumption practice have been determined at some previous juncture and remain subject to the proviso 'for the time being', 'until I reassess my principles'. Empirically, Halkier (2000) demonstrates that some decisions are more reflective than others. Some alternatives are considered, other options ignored. It is therefore incorrect to treat all consumption as decision; though nor is it right to imagine that habits had no beginning, since yesterday's decisions may become today's habits. So, while some purchasing may be reflective, other escapades occur completely without mental input. What we need to know are which is which; what proportion of purchases, and what types of purchase, follow a model of habit, as opposed to conscious reflection.

The absence of reflection is particularly marked with respect to what I would like to call 'subsidiary consumption'. Much consumption is incidental, or coincidental. If I go to a restaurant I will wear clothes, expect electric lighting, probably buy drinks that I would otherwise not, pay for a taxi to get there, eat more courses than I would at home. If I go to the cinema I will travel, eat popcorn, have bought the local newspaper to see what movies are being shown and take a pre-film snack. To imagine that the consumption moment within these activities can be reduced to the cost of the meal or cinema ticket would be naive. Moreover, I also require appropriate company and a capacity to make conversation about film afterwards.

Another aspect of subsidiary consumption is the complementary items, say in the home, that are required to be able to consume what is purchased. Cooking equipment; heat, light and electricity; comfortable surroundings; cookery books; kitchen table: all are subsidiaries, necessary supports for a trip to the shops to buy food. Of course, different groups will require different subsidiary items. Significantly, the subsidiaries (though also the context) may announce the social meanings involved, and permit social classification, more than does the apparently most central item.

Pay more attention to the inconspicuous and the unremarkable

Much of what is consumed and is generally harmful to the environment of the planet is largely impervious to mechanisms such as status enhancement or the pursuit of fashion (see Shove and Ward, 1998). It is the petrol rather than the car, the electricity rather than the light fittings, the water rather than

the new bathroom suite, which pose the major problems of waste and destruction of scarce resources. Environmentalists have measured the amount of energy consumed by central heating and air conditioning, by refrigerators and commuting by car, in the daily use of water in plumbing systems, etc. But the social aspects of concern with comfort, convenience and cleanliness (Shove, 1997) remain largely unexplored.

These ideas are particularly germane to understanding processes of normalisation. How do things come to be defined as necessities, to be expected in all households and available to all people? This is a primary way in which demand is ratcheted upwards. It is a type of change which goes unnoticed, the process is one of accretion rather than conscious acquisition, and is one almost impossible to reverse. Of course, some things which once were necessities, obligatory in daily life, are no longer: hats, coal, hot water bottles and three square meals per day are among them. Yet accretion outruns deletion.

The normalisation of items, their shifting from 'hot' to 'cold' items, is captured in the work of Pantzar (1993; Pantzar and Heiskanen, 1996). Pantzar and Heiskanen's figure 1, 'The domestication of everyday life things', neatly illustrates a way of conceptualising the changing states and statuses of goods. It identifies different motives for the possession of goods, and thus different mechanisms for their incorporation into daily life. In that matrix we can see that, at their origin, different items were expected to fill different functions – the telephone, for example, was strictly for business use. But these functions change over time and this too is mapped on to the matrix. These transformations of the role of goods in everyday life suggest that there are many possible trajectories for commodities, but that some are more probable or typical than others. Elsewhere Pantzar (1997) speculates on the tendency for new items to be invented and first utilised as playthings, then to become instrumental as technology, and finally to become subject to aesthetic reflection as art (as with enthusiasms for making collections of almost anything (see Belk, 1996)). Nevertheless, many things have their most forceful, because mass, presence in the middle phase. They then are simply unremarkable. As they become available to all, any magic, or social symbolic significance, is drained from them. For example, the telephone is almost universal in British homes. It is acutely normal, its existence probably remarkable only in its absence. Except, of course, in its reincarnation as the 'mobile', the subject of any number of conversations, jokes and complaints.

Investigate the real social processes of shopping

Shou-Cheng Lai (2000), developing a distinction between extraordinary and ordinary consumption, identifies the importance of the social relations of purchase. His evidence from Taiwan shows that for certain types of 'extraordinary' purchase people consult their extended social networks, asking for advice and relinquishing all personal discretion in making the decision to the person in the network best qualified to make a judgement. Not only are extraordinary purchases delegated, so are many routine ones, which are typically made by less

powerful social actors. Only a comparatively limited proportion of purchases (though the proportion is increasing with the extension of the practices of Western consumer culture) can actually be understood as made by an autonomous individual on his or her own behalf.

Which items are extraordinary is historically and contextually specific. It is not the item itself which is important or definitive. Rather it is its particular significance for the social relations of people in a given network. Understanding the network of social relations within which the purchaser is located is essential in order to determine the social significance of the item. So instead of doing a semiotic analysis – say, of advertisements – to determine which goods are extraordinary or socially symbolic, it is more appropriate to investigate the social relations governing their acquisition. To examine who buys particular items, after what form of consultation, and with whom, is the best means of determining an item's social meaning. An implication of this may be that in a consumer society it should be possible to predict people's friends by their purchasing patterns.

The process of shopping is probably more individualised in Western societies. Nevertheless, we know far too little about who goes shopping, with whom, for what. We would do well to consider acts of consumption in which the final consumer has no involvement in the process of securing the item consumed. One of the most insightful and interesting expressions of this maxim is Miller's (1998) development of a theory of shopping as sacrifice, which challenges the idea that, even when there is no one around to enforce a particular choice, the shopper actually consults the interests of others. Shopping is less a reflexive, proactive, self-regarding activity than a form of ritual, the elements of which are determined by notions of care, the interests of others, the integrity of the household, etc. The important point is that people mostly shop for others; if this were not the case, under current domestic institutional arrangements, most men would starve and freeze to death!

Examine appropriation through use

Debates about the social consequences of commodification have for a decade or more recognised that the specific relations of exchange do not determine the meaning or use of goods. Miller's (1987) and Appadurai's (1986) notions of appropriation and Kopytoff's (1986) concept of singularisation point out that while people buy mass-produced goods they appropriate them as their own belongings, whereupon the goods often acquire particular personal significance, either by modification, incorporation into a personalised ensemble of items, or simply through familiarity. This is less likely to occur with commodities than, for example, with gifts, but it happens very frequently nonetheless. Commodities become singularised, such that their personal or their social symbolic significance overrides, or obliterates, the fact that they were once purchased. McCracken (1988) offers the example of 'patina' on silverware in the early modern period, where tangible evidence of use by previous generations of the family was highly esteemed.

The implications of this were explored tellingly by Dant (1998), who told a story of the career of a kitchen knife which served as a mirror to personal biography – where the passage of time, altered personal relationships, different forms of domestic arrangements and changing consumer taste could be registered through this particular material artefact. His argument was for the importance of material culture as an object of sociological analysis in its own right, but made the point forcefully that this particular object carried enormous personal autobiographical meaning, none of which might be read off by semiotic analysis, since there was no mark visible to the public which could allow anyone else to diagnose its meaning. Moreover its meaning was not determined by the fact that, once upon a time, it had been purchased. Its symbolic significance was invisible. Persistent use, intermittent use, or indeed maybe just long ownership, are means by which objects accrue meaning.

It is perhaps no accident that tools become personally meaningful symbols because they involve the mingling of human skill with goods; they imply working purposefully with the tool to achieve particular ends; they are the instruments of heteronomous work; the mastery of the tools implies an accumulation of skill and knowledge and competence, which are achievements – and most people are pleased by their achievements.

The theoretical implication is that attention to purchase, if it were to be considered the sole moment of consumption, becomes transparently unsatisfactory in such instances. The personal and social meanings of things become a function of their history or biography, or arise from the intersection of a person's biography and the history of things. This has led to some valuable speculation, some in the form of actor network theory, about how objects become prostheses, extensions of the self, part of the environment of everyday life and even means to define and constrain their owners (see Munro, 1996; Shove and Southerton, 1998).

Examine consumption as practice

Sassatelli (2000) observes how apparently spectacularly deviant consumption (of drugs) is regularised and contained. Her argument draws on notions of carnival – where people can do unconventional and otherwise unacceptable things, for the duration, because the event itself gives licence. The carnival has been celebrated as a blueprint for new forms of collective behaviour, it being argued that the postmodern world is inherently carnivalesque, a social world turned upside down not just occasionally but chronically. However, the 'inventiveness' of postmodern carnival could just as easily be looked upon as ritual. As with its medieval precursors, it may be liminal if considered in relation to daily life; but it has prescribed conventions, a fixed duration, a regularity and rule-governed aspect which make it as much repetitive play as invention.

The use of drugs at a rave is a case of situational entailment, a case of appropriate things being consumed in an appropriate place. Though not exactly legitimate, and though not everyone is forced to consume, there is

permission to be deviant. The same behaviour in other contexts would be considered unacceptable, foolhardy, dangerous, and so forth. Nevertheless, in their place, inebriation and drug taking are not threatening to the social fabric or the general public. This is one of many forms of 'contained' consumption practice. If there is an autonomous decision to be made it is more whether to become an adherent of the practice – of the rave – than whether to take experience-enhancing chemicals.

Analyse collective rather than individual identity

We should also take more notice of collective, public and non-symbolic consumption. This is partly a matter of reconsidering the role of collective provision as a determinant of patterns of private and domestic consumption. As Wilska (2000) shows in a comparison of Finland and Britain, different systems of welfare provision and redistributive taxation make for fundamentally different patterns of consumption among people with basically similar levels of economic and cultural capital. It is also a matter of appreciating that much of that which is symbolic is so for the creation of collective rather than individual identity. For example, public buildings are certainly symbolic, but are not means of attributing individual identity. At the same time, it is important to observe that many public goods are unremarkable, in the sense that publicly allocated items are often judged inferior because they confer no personal distinction upon their recipients. There remains much to be done by exploring social and collective identity, identification with groups through consumption with a view to establishing collective belonging.

Avoid overestimating the social significance of consumption

Finally, consumption is often not an end in itself. While social theorists are increasingly prone to claim that consumption has become the most important integrating aspect of contemporary social life (e.g. Bauman, 1998), particularly as a substitute for the work ethic, we should remain sceptical. There are many alternative ways to evaluate the social role of consumption which do not place it (certainly not in its restricted form as the purchase of commodities) at the centre of daily life. Moreover, we should not only recognise the extent of habitual consumption, but also take into account people's reservations about consumption, as marked by indifference or dislike of shopping (Lunt and Livingstone, 1992). In many instances, consumption is itself more important as practice and use; and even then it is not self-evidently more important than work or religion or family relations. Indeed, it is probably just as plausible to claim that the primary function of consumption is to reproduce social relations in these other spheres. Theses about the 'work and spend' culture have a point when they observe that people's attachment to paid work, at least as measured by their preparedness to work long hours, seems to be increasing rather than reducing (Schor, 1992). Similarly, the role of consumption in the creation, sedimentation and reproduction of family relations has been demonstrated with great perspicacity by DeVault (1991), who shows

that making meals is coterminous with the making of families. In many respects, consumption is not so much for its own sake as a means to oil the wheels of social interaction, a claim which analysis of the pleasures of eating out demonstrates (Warde and Martens, 2000).

Conclusion

The propositions of my 'manifesto' suggest that there is much to be gained from training the sociological eye on matters other than conspicuous consumption and exercises of individual decision making in the market place. This is not to advocate abandoning sociological concern with conspicuous consumption and its role in establishing social distinction and displaying social status; social classificatory schemes continue to function as tools of social recognition, with the role of bad taste and cultural hostility particularly important. Rather it is to make the claim that much consumption is surreptitious, highly constrained and unremarkable. Everyone's consumption is characterised, among other things, by acquiescence to external pressures, routinisation, normalised expectations, various acquisition, personalised appropriation, the dictates of convention and framing by public provision. These are processes which cannot be grasped, and indeed would normally be considered irrelevant, in economists' accounts of demand. For while demand concerns selection, in accordance with preferences, among commodities, consumption addresses in addition the appropriation, through multiple and social uses, of goods and services emanating from non-market as well as market sources. The range of concepts and the methodologies appropriate to investigating consumption are many and various.

The concept of inconspicuous consumption highlights many neglected aspects of behaviour. It raises issues of environmental sustainability. It emphasises the way in which demand for particular items depends on both technical and social infrastructures. It registers the central importance of habitual, repetitive and routine behaviour; recall that economic competition is as often about preventing as promoting innovation, for much demand is repetitive. Also it restores a focus on the use values of consumption. In sum, it redresses excessive contemporary emphasis on individual choice and the role of consumption in the formation of personal identity.

Attention to these aspects suggests the importance of the concept of practice for analysing consumption. Collective practices, reproduced and improvised upon by the agents conducting them, lie at the centre of the recommended approach of consumption. Many things can be meaningfully consumed only within the boundaries of practices which are social, cumulative and governed by convention. Outside of social practices, much consumer behaviour does not make sense. The collective development of a practice is a source of innovation in demand. As Swann (Chapter 3 of this volume) notes, Alfred Marshall conceived of the expansion of demand as a process whereby activities generated wants, rather than vice versa. Progressively, practices

generate new wants which, often, come to be satisfied through commercial channels. Practices, by definition inventive, result in objects developing uses and meanings that were never intended by their designers and manufacturers. Further adaptation brings forth yet more new products, sometimes commercially sourced, sometimes the outcome of private and communal endeavour.

Anticipating future demand, a profoundly difficult task, requires insight into the development and logic of social practices. Several of the mechanisms identified elaborate on the accretive aspects of practices. Much consumption is situationally entailed, where convention requires a particular elaborate course of action. Demand will often be generated indirectly, as when new tools require complementary products for their effective adoption. Modern domestic appliances imply an infrastructure of water and electricity supply, fast cars beg for motorways, electronic retailing requires an extensive network of reception equipment. Subsidiary consumption also escalates general demand. Demand increases as the social rules governing subsidiary consumption change; for instance, when different forms of sport and exercise each require special clothing, participation entails new types and levels of purchasing of garments. Another source of increasing demand is the insertion of old or established products into practices which previously had no place for them. The instalment of radios, cassette players and CDs into automobiles incorporated cultural consumption into the practice of motoring. The enhanced compatibility between personal mobility and telecommunication, permitted by the mobile phone, has transformed expectations regarding where and when people make and receive telephone calls. This is part of the intensification of simultaneous consumption, an inescapably normal process because people typically engage in several consumption practices at the same time, but one which helps explain the vast expansion of the items conventionally defined as necessary for anyone to live a normal life.

Practices are fed by social interaction. Mundane shopping behaviour, purchasing on behalf of others, the giving of gifts, and so forth, are far removed from the model of behaviour associated with the sovereign, self-regarding, individual consumer. In this regard, we might usefully consider more carefully the interdependence among and across groups of people in the determination of consumption patterns. One merit of the study of conspicuous consumption was its recognition of the place of consumption in group dynamics. Now additional ways to approach the collective behaviour of consumption are required. One such is to consider social networks as incubators of demand.

It is banal to claim that interpersonal contacts influence consumption behaviour, that friends, colleagues and family shape tastes. Yet this aspect of the explanation of consumption is comparatively underdeveloped, especially given the availability of sophisticated techniques of network analysis. Network analysis might restore a social and structural perspective to the study of consumption (see Wellman, 1997), particularly valuable because of the greater than average likelihood that analysis will operate with voluntaristic models of action. Social networks might explain preferences, why people

select what they select. This is demonstrated by Erickson's (1996) estimation of the role of social capital – an indicator of who knows whom, one key feature of a social network – as a determinant of knowledge of consumption options. Arguably, different types of network, and certainly different networks of acquaintances, will result in different patterns of consumption. They might also explain the diffusion of innovations. It probably depends on which network a person belongs to how quickly he or she may adopt a particular innovative item, the take-up of the telephone being an obvious case in point. Both avenues of inquiry might improve understandings of the importance of interpersonal connections. Networks exert social closure, sometimes enhancing competitive capacity while on other occasions encouraging collaboration and mutual support. A study of the networks of connections used in consumption decisions promises to increase the explanatory power of models of aggregate and groups explanations of preferences and tastes. Understanding the complexities of social networks may explain how the people you know influence your taste.

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