

ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY





NEW

SZÉCHENYI PLAN

ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Sponsored by a Grant TÁMOP-4.1.2-08/2/A/KMR-2009-0041

Course Material Developed by Department of Economics,

Faculty of Social Sciences, Eötvös Loránd University Budapest (ELTE)

Department of Economics, Eötvös Loránd University Budapest

Institute of Economics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences

Balassi Kiadó, Budapest



The project is supported
by the European Union.

National Development Agency
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The projects have been supported
by the European Union.

ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Economics

ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Authors: Tamás Dombos, Viola Zentai

Supervised by Viola Zentai

June 2011

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Week 9

The consumer society and its institutions

Tamás Dombos, Viola Zentai

On consumption

- The selection, purchase, use and disposal of goods (and services)
- Earlier: secondary role in anthropology to production and exchange
- Consumer society:
 - topos, part of popular discussions
 - high volume of goods consumed
 - specific consumer culture

Consumer revolutions

- Industrial revolution: transformation of production
- Who buys industrial products? A consumer revolution was also needed
- McKendrick (1982):
 - natural propensity to consume
 - emulation of upper classes (Veblen)
 - trickle down effect (Simmel)
 - social environment lifts constraints (18th century England)
 - mobile social structure
 - increase in wages
 - urbanisation
 - social attitudes more permissive of individual gain

Consumer revolutions

- Colin Campbell (1987): *The Romantic Ethic and The Spirit of Modern Consumerism*
 - following Weber: ethos giving rise to economic change
 - ethos of consumption: modern autonomous hedonism
 - sociology of religion: focus on Pietism instead of Calvinism (emotions!)
 - sentimentalism, romanticism:
 - egoistic hedonism and romantic idealism two sides of the same coin
 - cult of emotions
 - desire, yearning
 - analysis: novels (e.g. Jane Austen), essays, pamphlets

Consumer revolutions

- Rosalind Williams (1982):
 - 19th c. France: department store, world fairs, advertising are crucial in creation of modern consumer
- Jackson Lears (1983):
 - therapeutic ethos
 - consumption as a response to alienation experienced by people living in large cities
- consumer revolution \Rightarrow consumer revolutions
 - moments, booms
 - McCracken (1988)
 - 16th c.: competitive consumption of the aristocracy
 - 18th c.: increase in wide availability of goods
 - 19-20th c.: infrastructure of modern consumption

Consumer revolutions in Hungary

- Early 19th century:
 - Agricultural boom, differentiation of peasantry
 - greater reliance on goods from the market
- End of 19th century:
 - urbanisation: corso, cafe, newspaper
 - popular literature
- 1960-80s:
 - significant increase in standard of living
 - durable goods: fridge, car, TV
 - moralising debates
- 1990s:
 - “institutional explosion”: advertisement + shopping malls



Critiques of consumer society

- Marx
 - alienation: workers have no control over the production process
 - exchange value \Leftrightarrow use value
 - commodity fetishism: social relations perceived as relations between things
 - more consumption \Rightarrow more production \Rightarrow more alienation
- Frankfurt School (Adorno & Horkheimer 1944)
 - cultural industry: industrialisation and commercialisation of culture
 - cultural homogeneity, passive reception
 - advertisement and mass culture intertwined: arousing desire
 - deception and pacification of the masses
 - beating up Donald Duck: getting people accustomed to everyday humiliation



Critiques of consumer society

- Baudrillard (1968, 1972)
 - use, exchange, symbolic and sign value
 - we consume goods not because of use, but sign value
 - actual object irrelevant: what matters is its role in the hierarchy of meanings
 - advertisement:
 - production of signs
 - vicious circle of frustration and fulfilment
 - simulacrum:
 - world of false appearances
 - e.g.: internal spaces of shopping malls



Myths of consumption

- Miller (1995): lot of discussion on consumption: ideological, not empirical
- Mass consumption causes global homogeneity / heterogeneity
- Consumption is opposed to sociality
- Consumption is opposed to authenticity
- Consumption creates particular types of social beings

Consumption and culture

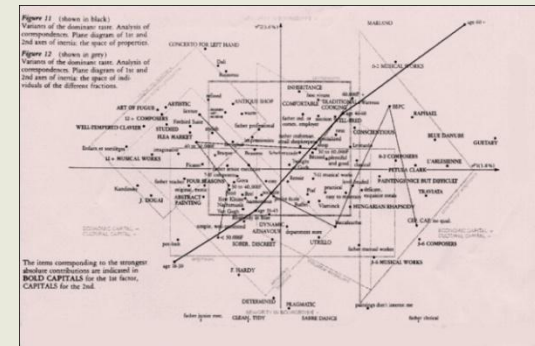
- Sahlins (1976): valuing is based on culture
- Douglas & Isherwood (1979): *The World of Goods*
 - traditional approach: individual and free from constraints
 - in reality: rule bound and communal
 - goods = communication
 - “non-verbal medium of human creativity”
 - how does meaning become communal? rituals
 - expressing individual, family, communal or local identity
 - making the evaluation of people and events visible
 - constant redefinition of social categories

Bourdieu

- Consumption: judgements of taste over goods
- Taste:
 - classifying things and classifies the classifier
 - can be estimated based on class position
 - no “pure aesthetics”: influenced by social position
- Habitus:
 - system stable dispositions aligned to objective situations
 - objective situations : position of individuals within objective social structure (level of economic cultural and social capital)

Bourdieu

- Questions in survey questionnaire:
 - With the following subjects, is a photographer more likely to produce a beautiful, interesting, meaningless or ugly photo?
 - a sunset over the sea, the bark of a tree, a snake, a first communion, cabbages, a folk dance, a little girl playing with a cat, a metal structure etc.
 - When you have guests for a meal, what kind of meals do you prefer to serve?
 - appetizing and economical, plentiful and good, original and exotic, traditional French cuisine, simple but well-presented, delicate and exquisite
 - What interests you most in a film?
 - the actors, the director, the plot
 - Where did you get your furniture?
 - department store, flea market, auction, antique dealer, inherited, specialised shop, rented, craftsman



Bourdieu

- Idea of “class struggle” extended to world of consumption
- Practice:
 - class structure \Leftrightarrow individual agency of actors
 - classes are products of (everyday) actions, BUT
 - class a structure shapes individual action
- Capital classes:
 - nouveau riche \Leftrightarrow intelligentsia
 - struggle for which capital matters more
 - possibility to convert capitals
- Symbolic violence:
 - tacit almost unconscious modes of cultural/social domination

Consumption as resistance

- De Certeau (1984)
 - non-proper use: against rules set by state and market
 - production \Leftrightarrow consumption: metaphor of writing \Leftrightarrow reading
 - BUT: reading is not passive, readers produces the text
 - \Rightarrow productive consumption
 - strategies (state, market) \Leftrightarrow tactics (consumers)
 - examples:
 - decorating block flats
 - cooking from cookbooks
 - metaphor:
 - walking seen from above
 - walking from “inside”



Consumption as reappropriation

- Miller (1987)
- Objectification:
 - production = alienation
 - personal investment (work) transformed into an impersonal object
 - Hegel \Rightarrow Marx \Rightarrow Simmel: different moral evaluation
 - Marx: can be overcome only by overthrowing capitalism
 - Simmel: ambivalent: emancipation from social constraints
- Re-appropriation:
 - making impersonal goods personal
 - goods as means for establishing/ maintaining social relations
- Consumption as the “vanguard of history”

Shopping

- Miller (1998, 2001)
- Fieldwork: (most) inhabitants of a North London street
- Everyday consumption
 - ↔ desire
 - ↔ ideological reading
- Main moral principle: thrift
- Consumption as sacrifice for the family
- Shaping social relations:
 - mediation between real and ideal relations through buying goods
 - what would s/he want? what should s/he want?