

# ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

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## Week 9

# The consumer society and its institutions

## 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
- 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
- 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 ⇔ 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 ⇔ use value
  - commodity fetishism: social relations perceived as relations between things
  - more consumption ⇒ more production ⇒ 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



- 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

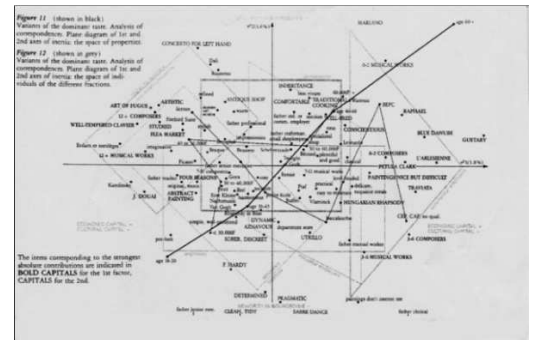
- Sahlins (1976): valuing is based on culture
- Douglas & Isherwood (1979): *The World of Goods*
  - traditional approach: individual and free from constraints
  - in reality: rule bound and communal

- 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)
- 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
- Idea of “class struggle” extended to world of consumption
- Practice:
  - class structure ⇔ individual agency of actors
  - classes are products of (everyday) actions, BUT
  - class a structure shapes individual action
- Capital classes:
  - nouveau riche ⇔ 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 ⇔ consumption: metaphor of writing ⇔ reading
  - BUT: reading is not passive, readers produces the text
    - ⇔ productive consumption
  - strategies (state, market) ⇔ 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 ⇒ Marx    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?



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