# *Towards a Useful Multigenic Theory of Consumption*

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## 1 - SYNOPSIS

Theories of consumption from the social sciences have not been particularly useful to policy makers. This paper suggests some ways to bridge the gap between disciplines, and between theory and practice.

## 2 - ABSTRACT

Consumption is still a poorly understood phenomenon, and the social, cultural, economic, and psychological variables that determine consumption have not been clearly identified. Effective policymaking and prediction is impossible without knowing what determines and changes consumption levels.

This paper argues that the lack of a useful theory of consumption results directly from paradigmatic incoherence within and between the social sciences. Theorists have championed single variables, or have embedded their analysis within larger theoretical constructs like utility, modernity, individuation, or romanticism. The consequence is partial models that cannot be empirically tested, cannot be reconciled, or even brought into productive engagement or dialogue because they are based on incommensurate models of human nature, recent history, and political economy.

Rather than argue for one fundamental cause, this author reviews a number of alternative theoretical approaches, and then proposes a heterodox "multigenic" theory based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Such a theory accepts multiple types of causes of consumption, operating at different analytical levels, from the individual, through household, community, and ultimately to nations and other groups. Factors impelling and restraining consumption can therefore be balanced or unbalanced by relatively minor changes in a large number of interrelated variables.

## 3 - INTRODUCTION

Every beast that strays beside me has the same corporal necessities with myself; he is hungry and crops the grass, he is thirsty and drinks the stream, his thirst and hunger are appeased, he is satisfied and sleeps…I am hungry and thirsty like him, but when thirst or hunger cease, I am not at rest; I am like him pained with want, but am not, like him, satisfied with fulness. Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas* (cited in Hirschman 1970)

"People are flexible enough to make any theory look good for a while." Lanier, 1994

Social science has wrestled with the problems of human needs and wants from the very beginnings of the modern era, yet in many ways the causes of the impulses which lead us into ever-expanding levels of need and consumption are as murky today as they were at the beginning of the enlightenment. This confusion is hardly the result of a lack of interest, research, or publication. Indeed the causes of expanding consumption have been researched, theorized, and debated in every social science as well as in fields of the humanities as diverse as theology and fashion design. Despite this sustained research effort, theories of consumption still do not offer robust predictions based on diverse data, of the kind that could offer useful options for policy and action for a variety of activist, legislative, educational, and policy-making communities.

This paper asks some very broad and general questions about the status of consumer theory, based on reading work in a wide variety of disciplines, as well as my own empirical and theoretical work, drawing on my training as an economic anthropologist. My goal is to suggest some ways that different disciplines might usefully work together, to forge more robust and cross-culturally useful theoretical premises. For reasons of brevity I cannot present here an extended example, or develop further policy implications.

In this paper I point out several reasons why existing theories of the dynamics of increased consumption are incomplete at best. Next, I argue for a cross-disciplinary approach that may eventually transcend some of these limitations. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory, I then sketch outlines for a multigenic model, which acknowledges a diversity of causes that both impel and restrain the expansion of consumption. Such a model provides a number of opportunities for regulation, activism, and communication that can change the direction of change in consumption behavior.

## 4 - THEORETICAL FUNDAMENTALISM AND PLURALISM

There are several possible reasons for the intractability of the issue of consumption in the social and behavioral sciences. Some are extrinsic products of the fragmented and partial nature of the social sciences themselves, and others may be found in the intrinsic nature of consumption as an empirical phenomenon.

### 4.1. Moralism

Among the extrinsic problems for the sciences, one of the most fundamental is the way that issues of morality have constantly been interwoven with research on consumption, in ways that are not often explicit. All of the world's great religions make fundamental moral judgments about matters such as greed, gluttony, selfishness, envy, and desire (Belk 1983). Ethnography is full of accounts of ways that different cultures try to teach their children to restrain their desires, and control their envy. Drawing on this very common ethical and moral heritage, most modern academic and philosophical discourse about consumption has an underlying subtext that desire is socially destructive, "true" needs must be distinguished from "false" luxuries, and that modern unconstrained materialism is morally untenable and socially destructive (Miller 1995:144)

Moral discourse about consumption was one of the key themes of the enlightenment critique of modernity, technological progress, and the monetary economy. Jean-Jacques Rousseau for example, thought that natural humans had few needs that were easily satisfied, while modern humans are on a treadmill of ever increasing wants. New innovations gradually "lost with use almost all their power to please, and even degenerated into real needs, till the want of them became far more disagreeable than the possession of them had been pleasant. Men would have been unhappy at the loss of them, though the possessions did not make them happy." (1950[1755]: 240.

### 4.2. The Critique of Modernity

By the 19th century, consumerism became the major theme of a general critique of modernity, especially in the hands of conservative sociologists like Carl Zimmerman, who contrasted the empty modern life of "egoistic sensation, "immediate rather than deferred consumption," "direct sensory experience," and selfish "hedonic pleasure," with that of traditional and isolated people who had "social stability, deferred gratification, altruism, and a commitment to community." (Horowitz 1985:154, Zimmerman 1936). On the other side, proponents of capitalism, conventional economic development and technological progress have tended to turn consumption into the most central measure of the *success* of modernity. If people have and consume more of what they want, then ipso facto, they are better off and happier than those living in poverty and want. The notion that human well-being can be measured by rising incomes, an abundance of possessions, or other objective "standards of living," is an equally moralist argument, though it's assumptions and conclusions are quite opposite to those of the anti-modernist critique. I would argue that for both positions, the moral goal of deciding what is good or bad for society is ontologically prior to theoretical or empirical research on consumption. In other words, much of the social science ultimately makes or supports moral positions about consumption. Their goal is therefore partially moral persuasion, and while this does not necessarily invalidate research findings, it should lead us to question them closely and treat their conclusions with skepticism.

### 4.3. Alternative Paradigms

Each social science and a number of humanities have all contributed to the study of consumption, but largely within their own traditions of research. In each, studies of consumption are carried out with disparate sets of assumptions, research tools, methods, and types of empirical evidence. Research results are presented in discipline-specific formats, using language and conventions which may not be understood by non-specialists, in journals, gray literature, and other publications which may have only a specialist audience. The result is a divided discourse where scholars and practitioners are often unaware of each other's research. When they are, they have trouble translating the results into a framework that holds validity for their own practice.

The lack of dialogue between the social sciences studying consumption results in explanatory models that incorporate basic assumptions without questioning them. For example, an evolutionary psychologist begins research with the assumption that any consistent behavioral trait has adaptive significance. Then they search for the reasons why such a trait evolved in human history; so the expansive nature of human consumption must have conferred a reproductive advantage on those exhibiting the trait some time in the past. A political scientist, on the other hand, begins with other assumptions, and does not accept the tacit premise that common traits have either a genetic basis or confer an adaptive advantage. The opportunity for dialogue is limited because the assumptions intrude, even when disciplinary barriers of language, tradition, and methodology can be overcome.

### 4.4. Theoretical Fundamentalism

Ultimately, as I have argued elsewhere (Wilk 1996), major paradigmatic differences between the social sciences stem from radically different notions of human nature, which can be traced back to the different streams of Western thought about the human condition that emerged from the enlightenment. Within and between social sciences, we are divided on the most fundamental issues of why human beings behave the way they do. Are people dominated by fundamental biological needs, by unconscious psychological drives, by cognition and rational choice, or moral, cultural or ethical precepts and teachings?

Within each discipline there are fundamentalist theorists who are willing to insist on the encompassing and totalizing nature of a single model of human nature. Fundamentalists argue that everything significant about consumption (or any other topic) can be explained by a single model of human nature, for example rational choice, or the ego's need for self-actualization. On the other side, many social scientists are actually *pluralist* in practice. The pluralist premise, rarely articulated as clearly or dogmatically as any fundamentalism, is that human beings are capable of many sorts of behavior, driven by diverse and shifting causes. For some pluralists, there is no intrinsic human nature at all, and the causes of behavior must be sought in social, historical, or cultural contexts.

### 4.5 The Search for Consistency

The distinguishing feature of any kind of fundamentalism in social science is the search for *consistency*, for an encompassing theoretical frame that can be applied to any setting or scale of phenomenon. Pluralism, on the contrary is primarily driven by specific empirical cases, and theoretical and methodological tools are chosen which have power or utility in the specific case, regardless of consistency. While fundamentalism treats consumption as a discrete type of human behavior with a unified explanation, pluralism approaches consumption as a heterogeneous analytical category, with many possible valid explanations.

My argument in this paper is that the empirical study of consumption, particularly the expansive and environmentally harmful consumption in affluent market economies, has been the victim of fundamentalism. Competition between disciplines, and the desire for consistent explanatory models, along with pervasive moralism, has left consumption theory in a sad state. The various kinds of fundamentalism are inherently in conflict; each offers a partial explanation for consumer behavior, but cannot specify how this part might fit into a larger whole. When such theories purport to be consistent and encompassing, they cannot be tested, reconciled, or brought into productive engagement with each other.

From the standpoint of pluralism, on the other hand, any explanation for consumption may be true in the right circumstances. If our explanatory models do not have to carry the weight of consistency, a philosophical position on human nature, or a moral agenda, the problems of consumer behavior are much more tractable.

Some empirical studies of consumer behavior, especially those done by historians and in marketing, abjure any explicit theory, and instead claim a sort of inductive empiricism. Rather than reject theory, and adopt purely inductive approaches, I would argue it is far better to develop meta-theoretical rules or guidelines that would specify which models are useful in which empirical situations. The result would be a heterodox *multigenic* theory, which accepts that there are multiple determinants of consumption, operating at different conceptual and analytical levels, from the individual, through the household, community, and ultimately to nations and larger groups.

## 5 - EXISTING THEORIES OF CONSUMPTION

A key ethical issue in early research on consumption was the dividing line between fundamental or biological needs and the inauthentic “wants” produced by modernity. Many of the early utilitarians condemned excessive luxury as wasteful, while recognizing that the desire for comfort was a “natural” force that drove economic competition and ultimately growth. Marx criticized this confused position, and provided a basis for distinguishing needs from wants in the first chapter of Capital, where he divides “use values” from “exchange values.” Once a capitalist market economy separates the worker from the product of labor, we are in the realm of commodities, whose values are no longer associated with labor, but are magical and fetishized (though the magic is hidden and naturalized by the market). This is the conceptual foundation for the “production of consumption” theorists, such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. For them, as for other social critics on the left, modern culture is a tool that injects false desires into the dehumanized capitalist worker (Miller 1987, Mackay 1997: 86-88, Illich 1977).

While later neoclassical economists enshrined unlimited wants as a fundamental principle of all economies, Marxist and socialist economists continue to treat consumption with great suspicion, a form of false consciousness that holds workers and the bourgeoisie in a work-and-spend cycle. The historical and institutional critique of neoclassical economics, in the hands of Karl Polanyi and others, also saw unlimited wants as a product of the capitalist marketplace. Before capitalism there were only use-values, reciprocity, and social integrative forms of consumption, rather than the open and bottomless need cultivated by the marketplace (Wilk 1996).

### 5.1. Naturalistic and situational theories

Theories of consumption can therefore be divided into two main groups, naturalistic and situational. The first seek the impulse for expansive consumption in basic biological propensities of human beings, like Adam Smith's natural propensity for "truck and barter." In this naturalistic category we find both Neoclassical economists' assumption that people have unlimited wants subject only to the limits of the market and pocketbook, and the Catholic theologian’s proposition that only discipline and devotion can master the animal impulse to greed, envy, and gluttony (Wilber 1998). A different kind of naturalism emerges in semiotic work on material culture, based on the proposition that humans are signifying animals, universally using objects and goods as a means of social communication and the creation of identity (Miller 1987, Holbrook 1993).

Unlike naturalism, a situational theory begins from the premise that consumption is the product of specific historical moments, geographies, cultures, and economies. Any pattern of consumption must be explained by reference to the context or situation in which it occurs. Situational social science holds out the prospect for regular linkages to emerge between particular contexts and patterns of consumption. Situational theories can be divided into three groups, based on the kinds of contexts that they consider to have explanatory power (see Berger 1982 and Miller 1995 for alternative ways to divide this terrain). These can be labeled psychological, social, and cultural.

### 5.2. Psychological approaches

These seek desire and need within the process of personality formation, early family interactions, and the actualization of the individual. Consumption may be cast as either pathological aberration or healthy means of objectification and individuation. A classic example is the work of Csikszentimihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) which assigns a number of psychological functions to middle-class consumer goods, including self-expression, making a personal history, and providing security. Consumption continually reflects the balance between a person's need for individuation (difference), and their need for social similarity and group membership. Other scholars have used similar psychological theories to develop a distinction between individualist and collectivist cultures (e.g. Hofstede 1980, Aaker et al. 1998), and have speculated that consumption serves different social purposes in contrasting settings. This work converges with the recent spate of postmodern and reflexive theories of consumption, which concentrate on subjectivity, experience, identity and selfhood, and the creative and playful potential of consumer culture (e.g. Brown et al. 1997, Lash et al. 1994).

### 5.3. Social theories

Psychological models of consumerism seek the key to consumer behavior in dimensions of personality, impulse, and desire that are largely internal and individual. In contrast, social and cultural approaches to consumption are concerned primarily with group and interpersonal phenomena. Social approaches find a basic motive for consumption in social interactions, especially competition and group affiliation (Burrows et al. 1992). Many social theories can be traced back to Thorstein Veblen, who proposed in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) that consumption was motivated by social competition and emulation. People use goods for display in modern society because their social roles are no longer strictly prescribed by birth, class, and social standing. In traditional society people knew their place, and the currency of social relations was rights, duties and obligations, not material wealth. Goods were signs of stable status relations, rather than tools in status competition. Free of ascribed social positions, people consume in order to obtain position in new ways, endlessly trying to acquire status by competing with and emulating those with more wealth and power.

The underlying assumption is that in modern societies people's need for social distinction, or social solidarity within a group, is satisfied through consumption and display. When social structure changes, so will needs. Bourdieu (1984) has done the most to develop social theories of consumption, arguing that consumption reflects underlying structures of taste and predispositions which hold class fractions together, as they distinguish each from the others. Logically, in any society where there is social differentiation, consumption will have an important role in asserting or challenging rank and status (Holt 1998). Another important strain of social theorizing emphasizes the role that consumption plays in the integration of families and kin groups (Simpson 1998, Miller 1998)

### 5.4. Culture and consumption

Cultural theorists instead see consumption as a form of symbolic behavior that creates and expresses intersubjective meaning and identity (Holbrook 1993, Douglas et al. 1979). Some cultural theorists, particularly in cultural studies, emphasize the playful, oppositional, and resistant aspects of consumption (Mackay 1997). Others are far more critical of the role consumption plays in culture, emphasizing the ways that consumer culture displaces traditional forms of cultural integration, leading consumers into endless spirals of unhappiness and narcissistic spending (Ewen 1988, Schor 1992, Lash et al. 1994). A broader comparative cultural approach argues that people in all societies consume because it creates cultural order, expresses ideas, or helps make sense out of novel circumstances, marking cosmological and temporal categories that make sense from the blur of experience (Weiss 1996, Seremetakis 1994).

Some cultural theories are highly particularistic; if no two cultures are truly alike, there may be no consistent patterns or trends. Other cultural critics see an historical trajectory in which symbols, and meanings proliferate in modern society to the point where objects may be overloaded with meaning, lose their other uses, and become entirely self-referential (Baudrillard 1998). Those who are less alarmist are skeptical of evolutionary schemes and fundamental divisions between traditional, modern, and postmodern forms of consumption (Pyburn 1998).

## 6 - TOWARDS SYNTHESIS

Confusion and conflict among theories of consumption is much more than an intellectual puzzle. Each theory prescribes very different kinds of methodological and practical approaches to understanding the basis of consumption, and finds different solutions to economic, social, and environmental problems that involve consumption. For example, a psychological approach forces us to focus on individuals, and leads us to education, advertising, and communication as relevant policy tools. A social theory of consumption concentrates our attention on politics and market institutions, on powerful interests, prices, and policy solutions (e.g. Schnaiberg 1980). The grass-roots movements to control consumerism in the United States draws heavily on cultural theories, linking consumption to values, religion, and community (Blix et al. 1999). A truly synthetic theory of consumption, on the other hand, instead of adhering to a narrow range of analytical and applied tools ("one theory fits all"), would specify what kind of theoretical approach is going to work in specific situations ("the right tool for the job").

How could these very diverse ideas about human beings and the proliferation of their material culture be reconciled or synthesized, especially given their deep philosophical and epistemological differences? Trying to find chronological or evolutionary order was a favorite method of 19th century social science, defining some kinds of consumption as primitive and others as modern. Empirical evidence for such evolution, is now widely rejected by historians and anthropologists who find instances of expanding and luxury consumption in other cultures and eras (e.g. Mukerji 1983, Hamilton et al. 1989).

### 6.1. Wants and needs

Another common approach to ordering types of consumption with different causes is a division between basic human *needs*, presumably with a biological basis, and more elaborated social, cultural, and personal *wants* which are cultivated after needs have been satisfied. The absolute boundary between needs and wants, however, has turned out to be very difficult to locate, as needs have always been a matter of political debate, posing difficult moral choices (Horowitz 1988). Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" attempts to solve the boundary problem by creating a continuum from biological to spiritual needs. Though some social scientists continue to find it useful (Etzioni 1998), others reject it as a political ideology masquerading as science (Slater 1997:129). In any case, it has proven extremely difficult in empirical practice to distinguish what specific needs a particular form of consumption is meeting. Instead consuming always seems to entail multiple motives (and habits, impulses, and understandings), and has multiple effects at various levels from the individual to the largest collective (Warde 1997).

This implies that consumption is the complex product of balances between very diverse forces. It must be *multigenic* in the sense of having many causes, and *dynamic* in that these diverse causes are linked in multiple and complex ways. To recognize this we must also accept that consuming behavior also involves constraints and limits. To a large extent these have been invisible in literature on modern consumerism, except in the gross and inadequate form of wages or income, which are treated as the only absolute constraint on consumption.

Because critics have been preoccupied with the historical transformation of the west into modernity, their fundamental goal is to identify the forces that promote and continually expand consumption. In the process they rarely recognize that non-consumption, restraint, distaste, or refusal is equally problematic, and may not be explained by the simple absence of incentives or pressure (Wilk 1997). A theory of consumption must account for periods of relative stasis in needs (and technology), as well as the times when consumption expanded impelled by new needs. The prevailing model is one of stasis (primitive precapitalist consumption) followed by rapid and infinite expansion under specific causes during the modern period. I argue instead for a model that recognizes 1) that consumption has diverse causes rather than being the product of a single historical event and 2) that consuming behavior is always the result of balances between factors that promote, and those which inhibit or restrain perceived needs and wants (*push* and *pull*).

### 6.2. Restraints

Restraints on consumption are an everyday experience, though they rarely appear in consumer theory. In my rural neighborhood, certain forms of competition and display, Christmas lights for example, are quite acceptable and are even considered sociable. Other forms of consumption, for example of alcohol in outdoor parties, are unacceptable and would be greeted with social approbation or a visit by the sheriff. The Mayan village where I have lived in the Central American rainforest worked in exactly the same way to shape consumption with both incentives and disincentives. Anthropologists working in rural communities often discuss the balance between ambition and fear of envy (or witchcraft and other social sanctions) in constraining both consumption and work effort. While community restrictions and other public social controls on incentives and allocation of resources are certainly different in urban industrialized societies, they are hardly absent. Instead they may well have shifted into the household and family, where sociologists find powerful restraints on spending and consumption within the dynamics of gender and kinship in marriage and parental relationships (Zelizer 1994, Folbre 1994).

Restraints have tended to be a silent shadow of consumption in modern theory, partially because of the common perception that consumer society is somehow 'out of control" and unregulated. Yet the majority still tend to live in orderly communities, and consume within relatively narrow limits, constrained by subtle pressures and constraints that appear externally only as the failure or refusal to consider alternatives. Studies of decision-making in the purchase of houses, for example, show that the majority of choices are *exclusions*, as consumers jointly decide what kinds of features are unacceptable (Park 1982). A dynamic theory of consumption would focus more attention on limits, and on the institutions, impulses, understandings, and meanings that enforce or sustain them. The most fertile ground for intervention and policy making may well lie in finding ways to elaborate or bolster existing constraints on consumption, rather than in creating new ones or manipulating incentives. Encouraging aversions and distastes may be more effective than changing desires or perceptions of need (Wilk 1997).

### 6.2. General Dynamics of Change

One convenient shorthand for thinking about the dynamics of consumerism, is to use the existing terms of "needs" and "wants" in a relative fashion to define consumption frontiers. The area between wants and needs comprises conceivable or desirable practices and objects that have not yet been absorbed into the taken for granted of daily life. If needs are accepted social standards of living, wants are types of consumption which diverse groups consider beyond that frontier. We can then usefully map the dynamics of consumption as the transformation of wants into needs, and the elimination of needs (following Sanne 1995).

Social standards of consumption are analogous to other kinds of social rules, like those of kinship, which do not determine behavior in a rigid or programmed way. They may be either explicit or unconscious, or following Bourdieu (1977) they range from deeply unconscious "doxic" habits of bodily practice and the taken-for-granted of common sense, all the way to explicitly stated norms and rules of conduct which are subject to dispute and manipulation ("heterodoxy" or "orthodoxy"), or are written into law. Social limits and standards are taken for granted, and only change through being brought out of the doxic realm of the unconscious habitus, into the discursive sphere of heterodoxy where they are subject to manipulation, evasion, and multiple interpretation. Eventually, through the exercise of power, they can become re-established as orthodoxy, and eventually sink back into the accepted daily practice of the habitus. This cycle between conscious and unconscious is an essential aspect of all consumption systems.

Again starting with the practice theory of Bourdieu and related work by Falk (1994), an individual experiences needs as part of the habitus, the taken-for-granted of nature and cosmology. Thus, when a Hawaiian "needs" fish and poi at a meal in order to feel satisfied, she is drawing on the bodily experience of doxa. But when the same Hawaiian sings a song on a CD about the importance of Hawaiian food to her identity, fish and poi have passed from the realm of the habitus into the conscious and contested space of heterodoxy. It can only be discussed, and it only needs to be said, because Hawaiians actually eat a lot more canned Spam than poi these days. In the space of heterodoxy, we are in the realm of "wants" rather than needs, where desire has a distinctly political and instrumental aspect. Luxury occupies the space of heterodoxy, while needs reside in the habitus.

### 6.3. The habitus

A theory of consumption has to consider the cycle in which needs are questioned or challenged, emerging from the space of the habitus into heterodoxy, where they can be debated, expanded, modified, and reframed as "wants," before becoming established in the habitus as new needs (or rejected in favor of old standards). While generations of social scientists have remarked on the ratchet-like way that wants gradually become emplaced as needs, they have given the process little serious empirical study (though see Sanne 1995). Instead they focus on the way that new wants are generated and cultivated in a marketplace through advertising, spectacle, and mass media, as a consequence of modernity. Therefore they miss the key counter-movement that naturalizes wants as needs, takes them out of contention, and embodies them as taste, urge, and impulse, sometimes reducing or eliminating needs.

While the pace and expanse of the cycle of habitus and heterodoxy has certainly increased dramatically under "modern" conditions, there is no reason to believe that the underlying process has changed. Instead we can think of the rate of expansion of existing needs, and the generation of new ones as a product of the changing balance between two general processes.

### 6.4. Naturalization

The first can be called "naturalization," encompassing many forms of social control. For analytical purposes, it comes in two characteristic forms. The first, submersive naturalization maintains the status quo by keeping needs submerged ("inscribed") in the habitus where they are only partially accessible, by continually asserting that the existing order is natural. It is not hard to see how ritual, group work experience, and child socialization, as well as silencing acts and emotions of embarrassment or shame can naturalize particular needs. When you cannot even express your desire, much less act on it, or where there seems to be no name for what you want, you are facing submersive naturalization.[1]

Repressive naturalization is the second kind; it pushes wants and desires back into the status of needs, by legitimizing them, linking them to existing needs, or stigmatizing alternatives. Acts of aggression or violence may accompany repressive naturalization, but the more pervasive forms include displays of power, gossip and slander, and repetition. The goal is to make some existing practice unthinkable, while making others "normal." Fear certainly plays a role in repression, but often pressures are much more subtle and pervasive or are instilled through habit. A Maya man once told me about his first encounter with shoes when he went to school in a nearby town where he was the only Indian. His schoolmates laughed at his bare feet, and gradually he got into the habit of wearing shoes; by the time I met him he thought that going barefoot was unhealthy and disgusting.

### 6.5. Cultivation

The opposite process to naturalization is cultivation, which extends, and expands existing needs in new directions, bringing bodily experience into the realm of discourse, display, debate and contention. Some cultivation takes place in every society as an aspect of socialization and aging, as children learn new tastes and needs for each stage of life, social position, and gender role. Some forms of ritual, for example rites of passage, cultivate new needs at the same time as they repress old ones.

Other kinds of cultivation emerge from what Bourdieu calls 'praxis,' the improvisational and pragmatic action of everyday life faced with constant problem solving. Most praxis plays within established cultural rules, poses no challenge to the established order, and passes unremarked. In this realm, most actions can be explained within a utility-maximizing paradigm based on rational choice and transaction costs (as in recent institutional economics). But some new ways of doing things - changing the way a tool is used, or making a new kind of hammer, challenge prevailing common sense. In these, changing behavior involves more than choice and decision; it requires change in the habitus.

This is merely a sketch of how a dynamic and multigenic theory of consumption might be constructed. Bourdieu's theory of practice is a starting point for considering the interaction between processes embedded in individual psychology and rationality, in cultural systems of meaning and communication, and social institutions and economic structures. One can see how, starting with this perspective, it would be possible to trace the ways a policy intervention, for example improved appliance labeling, leads to a change in peoples' habits and culture, as well as (or instead of) in their immediate purchasing behavior. It suggests further that long-term effective solutions to environmental problems caused by consumption have to take place at the level of the habitus, on perceived needs rather than in daily praxis. Strategies for such change have to follow cycles of cultivation and naturalization. Unfortunately at this point we have little systematic knowledge of the social, psychological, and communicative practices that naturalize new practices and understandings.

## 7 - IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

What does this mean for the practitioner, particularly those engaged with energy policy, and interested in finding ways to reduce energy and material consumption? On one hand my arguments may seem to make the prospect of effective intervention far more complex and difficult. Seen in another way, however, the ideas of a dynamic of pushes and pulls, of interplay between habitus and praxis, could be an opportunity to find new kinds of policy tools and means of influencing behavior. One could, for example, think about ways to strengthen existing restraints (which often take the form of subtle social pressure), rather than providing overt disincentives like tax increases, or legal restrictions, which often do not effectively limit consumption. A multigenic model makes available to policy makers a much broader range of tools, that do not just operate by affecting individual choices, but also through changing social groups and boundaries, and cultural systems of meaning and value.

### 7.1. An Example

Bank (1997) provides an example that can be used to show the importance of a multigenic approach to energy consumption. In dense townships of South African cities, paraffin (kerosene) continues to be the principal fuel used for cooking, despite frequent dangerous fires and the availability of safer gas and electricity.[2] Bank connects the choice to continue to use paraffin, despite its costs and dangers, to a wide range of cultural, social, and economic aspects of the townships where she worked. In local culture, for example, buying, selling and using paraffin are considered women's work, while men are more involved in providing and paying for electricity and gas. Men resist a shift away from paraffin because it increases their obligation to the family budget; many women prefer paraffin because they can obtain it informally through exchange relationships when cash is short. Paraffin is culturally embedded through the local cuisine, in which the favorite staple dishes are cooked slowly over a very low flame. Economic aspects other than total cost also favor paraffin, since it can be burned in cheaper stoves, and it can be bought and stored in small units, fitting well into a cash-poor economy with irregular employment opportunities.

Bank's analysis makes a clear distinction between the kinds of *tactical* choices people make in their everyday lives, within the constraints of gender, social organization, and ideology, and their *strategic* efforts to change what I have called the habitus, the taken-for-granted arrangements that structure choice. While the paper stops short of making useful policy recommendations, it does point to changes in marriage practices and household budget arrangements that are providing openings for changes from paraffin to electricity in cooking. From the same analysis, it is not hard to see how technical changes in stoves and appliances, pricing of fuels, or the provision of day-care facilities could all be incentives to reduce the use of paraffin. In its analytical breadth, the study invites creative thinking about a wide variety of linkages between fuel use and other social activities.

### 7.2. Linkages

A multigenic model therefore offers the prospect of linking energy policy, often confined to practical realms of price and utility, to much broader social and political policy issues. Within a specific empirical context, a multigenic analysis could justify connecting energy consumption behavior, to gender relations within the family, community governance institutions, health and nutrition, or property development regulations. While many may consider such interventions to be outside the range of energy policy interventions, governments are already deeply involved in consumer policy-making in all of these areas. They just do not usually consider these sorts of policies to have any relevance to energy, waste, or the environment.

Because of the theoretical fundamentalism I have criticized, and also because of poor communication among disciplines and approaches, practitioners tend to ignore or criticize theories or methodologies with which they are unfamiliar or uncomfortable. It is easier to reject other approaches than it is to acknowledge the importance of areas outside one's own expertise, or problems that are not answerable with the kinds of data that one is used to working with. But as I have argued, the reality of consumer behavior requires broad approaches that do not assume, *a priori*, what kinds of variables and what kinds of knowledge or data or analyses are going to be fruitful. Instead of contending paradigms, we have to work to find out how different social sciences can truly complement each other.

Only multi-disciplinary teams with broad mandates to gather diverse kinds of data, able to work together using a variety of analytical models and theoretical tools would be capable of carrying out such applied research. Rather that beginning with a narrow definition of a problem to be solved with a pre-selected policy intervention, they would have to progressively redefine their problem and consider a broad range of policy alternatives. Such a team would have to include quantitative and qualitative researchers, willing to do multi-level research, and spend a great deal of time learning to effectively communicate with each other.

Ultimately, a multigenic theory such as the one I have outlined above provides a basis for broad multi-stranded policy solutions to conserving and lowering consumption of energy. While many countries and international organizations have in practice adopted such mixed strategies, in practice they are often seen as contending methods, rather than complementary or even synthetic. While the development and testing of multigenic theories is sure to be complex and difficult, the rewards could therefore be substantial.

## 8 - ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## 9 - ENDNOTES

(1) When I tried to explain that I needed privacy to my Mayan neighbors, I was faced with total incomprehension; there is no word or concept in their language with which to express such a need. Japanese carpenters find it completely "natural" that a saw should cut on the up-stroke instead of the down-stroke; this predisposition embedded deeply in bodily practice and habit, profoundly shapes their sense of the possibilities of any new tool, and new options are never seriously considered.

(2) Bank asserts that electric and gas fuels are cheaper than paraffin, as part of her argument against economic rationality. Yet she does not consider the costs of appliances or transactions costs, so this assertion remains weak. But why does an argument *for* the importance of culture and social factors have to be built on an argument *against* economic rationality? They are not mutually exclusive, except from the standpoint of theoretical fundamentalism.

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