

Applying a Systems of Provision approach: moral economies and consumption work

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The System of Provision (SoP) approach has provided an important analytical lens for exploring how consumption is shaped by varied systems of production, distribution and exchange. The approach offers an important corrective to economic accounts which view individual consumer choice as the key mechanism that regulates markets in predictable and homogenous ways and some sociological/anthropological accounts which pay attention to communicative aspects of consumer culture and their performance by diverse social groups. The SoP approach calls for a wide-angle focus which draws together economic and sociological perspectives to explore the ways structures, agents, processes, relations and material cultures interact within distinctive systems tied to specific products or sectors.

Taking a sector-specific and/or product focus, the approach first developed by Fine & Leopold (1993) and subsequent development by Fine (2002) and by Bayliss and Fine (2021) led the way for the myriad commodity tales or ‘follow the thing’ approaches we see today that aim to embed consumers’ practices within geographically connected chains of provision (see for example, Cook, 2004; Evans, 2018; Harvey, 2015). In the context of concerns about sustainability and climate change, the approach encourages us to consider the links between people, places and things and offers a framework to interrogate where interventions within a system might need to be directed – importantly, once an SoP perspective is enabled it becomes apparent that the individual consumer is not the key agent of political and system change. Such insights are valuable for both research and teaching on sustainable consumption. For example, in the field of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), systems-thinking and critical thinking are highlighted as key competencies that need to be fostered within students and the analytical framework and commodity/sector focus offered by SoP provides just this opportunity (Sahakian & Seyfang, 2018).

My own work has been influenced by their concept (Wheeler, 2018, 2019), though I have not engaged directly with the 5 elements within their framework, but have rather drawn together elements from SoP with economic sociology (Callon, Millo, & Muniesa, 2007; Harvey, 2007; Polanyi, 1957) and moral theory (Bolton & Laaser, 2013; Sayer, 2011; Thompson, 1971). My approach has argued that moral understandings of consumer behaviour must be understood as co-constituted within broader institutional SoPs which operate at different scales and across different sectors. The SoP within my work acts as the overarching context which takes account of how different sectors like food and waste are organised ‘vertically’ through spheres of production, distribution, exchange and consumption (shortened to PDEC to stand for the economic processes that scaffold the SoP). Within these SoPs, ‘horizontal’ moral understandings of appropriate consumer behaviour are negotiated, contested and appropriated via interactions at the everyday level of consumer practice, the ‘meso’ level of consumer activism, private sector lobbying and civil society and a macro level of market regulation via

the state. To understand why people feel guilty about eating ready-made foods at the same time as they regularly use these products, or why they wash their waste for recycling yet are not always convinced of its efficacy, an SoP approach is needed. For example, using such an approach we learn how public health guidance, regulation of ‘junk’ foods, marketing, product development and celebrity chefs shape our everyday cooking and provision practices at a household level and how in turn these household practices co-evolve to influence how markets, civil society and states respond to consumers. It is imperative to interrogate interactions within institutional SoPs and across different levels of society so that we can appreciate how economic processes and consumer morality are co-constituted. So, I share Fine and Bayliss’ (2022) vision of consumer practices shaped within a complex and interdependent system which comprise interactions between economic processes (PDEC), material cultures and different actors operating at varying geographical scales of influence.

As for the critique that consumption has become too multifarious to define, I also concur with Fine and Bayliss’ piece that the boundaries between the spheres of production, distribution, exchange and consumption are analytical questions to be explored in relation to distinctive SoPs. Indeed this was the thinking behind the concept of ‘consumption work’ (Glucksmann, 2016; Wheeler & Glucksmann, 2015). Building on her longstanding interest in the sociology of work and how work is organised and divided within society, Miriam Glucksmann (2016: 878) developed the concept of ‘consumption work’ - defined as ‘all work undertaken by consumers necessary for the purchase, use, re-use and disposal of consumption goods’. Recognising these actions as ‘work’ rather than leisure or consumption requires a relational socio-economic perspective which places this work into its associated SoP. For instance, we found that once the washing, storing and delivering of recycling materials to kerbside/bring centres were placed into a waste management SoP, it was apparent that these behaviours were better understood as work than consumption – though they occurred in the household domain and were a result of consumption. The boundaries between work and consumption are becoming blurred and are shifting within different sectors and this is subject to change over time. Ready-made food is a case in point, where food once prepared in households is shifting from consumers back to market. Therefore, what it means to consume, perform ‘consumption work’ or produce must be explored through research and analysis rather than determined a priori across diverse systems.

The main critique I see of an SoP perspective is that because it offers a wide-angled lens which recognises the complexity of political economies of consumption, it can feel disempowering for consumers who want to influence these systems. When faced with sustainability challenges for instance, consumers are repeatedly told that they hold the power to transform current systems through their exercise of consumer choice. Yet once an SoP perspective is enabled, we learn that consumers are often the least powerful actors within a chain of provision. From speaking to and engaging with committed citizen-consumers, we know that participation in recycling schemes or eco-labelling are understood by many as their way of making a difference. So, the challenge becomes how we can find ways to show how consumer activism can have transformative potential within SoPs – which is often not through individualised choice but collective community participation.

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