

*Consumption and political
economy; consumption in
socialist and capitalist
societies*

SAN261, week 3, 2018

Political economy

- explains mutual relations between political (political institutions, law, governance) and economic (production, trade, consumption, and distribution of resources) systems
- Themes: the role of consumption in origin and expansion of capitalism (colonialism, transatlantic trade, slavery, postsocialism); practices of consumption under various political regimes (consumption as an example of everyday life); consumption as an act of resistance

Group work:

- How can political institutions/state/governance influence consumption? Describe at least 2 mechanisms

Consumption and origin/expansion of capitalism

Mintz, Sidney W. 1986. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*

- Sugar becomes from luxury used sparsely by elites becomes everyday necessity for wide strata of society
- Increase in demand related to wider accessibility related to interests of capitalist traders
- One of commodities motivating proletariat to work
- Fast energy
- Tea as “British drink” (civilized, socially safe – it is not alcohol, it is a source of energy)

Expansion of capitalism and the birth of consumer society

McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb. 1982. The Birth of a Consumer Society.

- 2. ½ 18th Century – beginning of Consumer Revolution:
„the consumer revolution was the necessary analogue to the industrial revolution, the necessary convulsion on the demand side of the equation to match the convulsion on the supply side“ (McKendrick. 1982: 9).

Expansion of capitalism and the birth of consumer society

- The source of inspiration is not only the court, but also trade: Sophisticated methods of sale feeding status aspirations
- Wedgwood – uses aspirations of bourgeois; produces affordable but sophisticated goods; plans production according to consumers' wants



Capitalism, consumption and alienation

Marx, K. In *Capital*, but also in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*

- Human relations are organised through relations of production (not consumption)
- Follows objects within a broader theory of development of capitalism; meaning of objects depends on political economy
- To understand objects means to understand totality of human existence – commodity as basic unit of analysis: Commodity as symbol of exploitation and alienation

Capitalism, consumption and alienation

Lukács:

Reifikation – objects of consumption are bearers of capitalist ideology. Act of shopping embeds bourgeois ideology and reproduces capitalist relations.

Frankfurt school (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse):

- Consumer culture suppresses aesthetic abilities and critical thinking
- consumer desires enslave people
- new forms of social control based on controlling consumer desires

Capitalism, consumption and alienation

Miller, Daniel. 1987. Material Culture and Mass Consumption

- Material culture as „relationship through things are created as social forms“ – objectification
- Commodities and mass culture as a „dominant context through which we relate to objects “ through mass culture we become agents of historical processes
- „consumption as work may be defined as that which translates the object from an alienable to an inalienable condition; that is, from being a symbol of estrangement and price value to being an artefact invested with particular inseparable connotations“ (Miller, 1987: 190)

- **Group work:**
- How is consumption defined and organized in capitalist resp. socialist societies?

Capitalism and consumption

- Early capitalism – focus on capital goods, not on consumer goods
- Fordism – mass production and consumption, commodities are material things
- Postfordism – production and consumption of services, events and information, commodities are dematerialized, niche marketing

Socialism and consumption

- Socialism as modernisation programme – consumption as both indicator and means of modernisation
- Space for creation of relations with regime – paternalistic redistribution and dependence on state leads to resistance, desire for Western goods
- Economics of shortages
- Contributes to the fall of regime – free choice and power over goods on market

Good bye Lenin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJb4efZcFUM>