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Alan Warde. Consumption: a sociological analysis. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

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At the height of orthodox economics, consumption was historically seen—or, at best, conceived pejoratively—as an anomaly of economic performance. Until the 70s, a decade that saw radical shifts in economic literature, consumption was systematically vilified as a glitch that unless regulated, would lead society towards bankruptcy. In fact, the fear and self-loathing manifested to the rise and expansion of poverty in the country—a discourse that was originally introduced as a part of the left-wing view that poverty was a structural phenomenon—had condemned consumption to a necessary evil. From that moment on, the discourse began to emphasize consumption as the mechanism that could mitigate the negative effects of stock and market crises. Consumption, from that moment on, was situated as the touchstone of economic doctrine (Donohue, 2003; Korstanje, 2018). This is the point of departure for Alan Warde’s *Consumption*, in which he explains that social scientists have always shaped and defined what consumption is. The concept has historically taken many shapes and definitions and has been subject to many interpretations that vary depending on the disciplines involved, as Warde eloquently observes. Each discipline has fleshed out its own conceptual corpus revolving around consumption. Warde’s book aims to provide an all-encompassing model to expand the current understanding of consumption.

Although it is normally conceptualized as belonging to the field of economics, consumption may be framed as the anthropological need for distinction. This opens some interesting questions regarding the extent to which sociology is an appropriate lens through which to explore consumption or whether consumption should be studied interdisciplinarily. Warde—following Pierre Bourdieu—attempts to respond to these questions. Bourdieu strongly believed consumption was social in essence, and therefore, asserted that consumption could be explained by sociology. Warde, recognizing the influence of Bourdieu, organizes his book into four parts, each one discussing valuable aspects of globalization and the culture of consumption. The first section dissects the first approaches, contributions, and limitations of sociology, while the second explores a much refined technical debate around the epistemology of consumption. In the third section of the work, Warde maintains that sociology is indeed the lens through which consumption can be examined; he reiterates Bourdieu’s assertion that consumption cannot be dissociated from other derived terms such as taste, class, and social scaffolding. In view of this, it is sociology—not economy—that is the discipline that is most prepared to study the phenomenon. Complementarily, the fourth section exhibits a critical viewpoint on the role of consumption and its effects not only in daily life but on contemporary society.

It is important not to lose the sight of the fact that while there are no serious disparities among disciplines regarding the nature of consumption, there is a conflict of interest when it comes to agreeing on a consensus. Warde asserts that the act of consuming includes three clear-cut facets: *acquisition*, which denotes exchanges between two or more parties; *appropriation*, which signals the process of using the purchased object for practical purposes; and *appreciation*, which gives some insights into the emotional and psychological meanings attributed to the object. This last element is of particular importance in legitimizing social order. While some disciplines like economy stress acquisition, others, like sociology, focus on appreciation, as Warde contends. In capitalist society, the demand for goods is directly supported by production. Warde carefully reviews the major historical trends from the 1960s to date, all of which have provided varying viewpoints and understandings of consumption. From Marxism to postmodernism, as Warde explains, the sociology of consumption developed different positions,

dotted with different conceptions in any given decade or time. Equally important, as stated in the work's introduction, is that as globalization crystalized as part of culture, consumption began to be understood as something other than a problem of accumulation; it began to assume a role central to political stability. Of this transition, Warde says, "The cultural turn commuted consumption from a by-product of capitalist accumulation to a central principle of social order" (p. 44).

Unless otherwise defined, consumption should be considered an "integrative practice," which is orchestrated beyond economic theory. As a part of a much deeper process of identity, consumption—according to Bourdieu—is part of habitus. Although Warde recognizes that Bourdieu's assertion was grounded in the notion of habitus as a conceptual background, some limitations of Bourdieu's theory are placed under the critical lens of scrutiny. To some extent, says Warde, Bourdieu could not have predicted the role of globalization or the complexities of the 21st century stock market crisis that thrashed US financial markets in 2008. As such, Warde ultimately undertakes a critical sort of dialogue with Bourdieu's work in which Warde stresses Bourdieu's salient contributions to the understanding of consumption while building into Bourdieu's work the role of contemporary phenomena and developments. Specifically, Warde reviews Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, within which classes attempt to replicate the privilege of the elite, and the role of distinction (as a form of differentiation) serves to structure in-group rules. In contemporary times, Warde observes, we struggle for a more critical sociology that scrutinizes today's consumer society, in which consumption appears to be both a process of individualization and a form of hedonism. Warde asks whether a sustainable consumption is possible, a middle way between demonizing consumption and idolatrizing it.

Echoing Bauman, consumption thrives in a climate of hyper-competition or exclusion, in which case an ethical perspective should be included. Ethics serve as a catalyst for increased consumer sensitivity. For example, the problem of climate change and the ecological crisis the planet faces serves as a catalyst for more ethical consumption of resources. For Wade, the failure of behavioral models or economic-centric programs in the struggle for climate change is the blind acceptance of goal-maximization and instrumentalism as part of planning. Proponents of instrumentalism gloss over that lay people may be emotionally motivated by something other than the self-interest, as Warde brilliantly concludes.

Consumption is a valuable source of information that aims to offer a fruitful and deeper-level discussion of consumption while offering practical steps to building a fairer society.

Consumption: a sociological analysis is recommended to scholars, students, and policymakers whose focus may include the study of globalization, capitalism, or consumption.

References

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