



Production and Consumption: It's All Work

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review of:

P. Ransome (2005) *Work, Consumption and Culture : Affluence and Social Change in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Sage. (PB: pp. 224, £21.99, ISBN 0761959858)

I read much of this book on the long train journeys from London to Liverpool and back. I was travelling to act as external examiner on a PhD and thought that the book would keep me happily occupied. I thus consumed the book, while I was also consuming the indifferent service of Virgin trains, along with a cup of coffee and listening to the remarkable Shostakovich violin concertos on my MP3 player. It may be thought that reading the book, like using Virgin's service, were sovereign acts of consumption, far removed from the dreary world of work and production. Far from it! Reading the book turned out to be quite hard work. Listening to Shostakovich first violin concerto at the age of nine was also very hard work. Consumption is often hard work. And consumption is also production. Without the consumption of the book, there would be no review. This is something that Marx was entirely aware of "Without production, no consumption; but also, without consumption, no production" (Marx, 1859/1973: 91). It is something that his sociological successors find difficult to understand or accept.

During my stay in Liverpool, I indulged in further consumption – a delightful hotel paid for by my generous hosts, a splendid meal accompanied, dare I say it, by a few glasses of wine, more cups of coffee and tea, and a bit of sightseeing in a city I could scarcely recognize after an absence of twenty five years. The reader will not be surprised to learn that, after such a consumer spree, I returned to my office in London thoroughly exhausted. And what was in store for me in the gleaming new palace that houses the Tanaka Business School? Further consumption, in the form of a champagne and canapé party, in honour of our recent MBA graduates with lots of joyful socializing, hearty congratulations, renewal of acquaintances and so forth. The reader will also not be surprised to know that following this two-day orgy I received a modest, though significant, 'compensation package' from my hosts at Liverpool University as well as my regular salary.

Paul Ransome, the author of this worthy book, is of course aware of the difficulties of disentangling production from consumption. He offers the under-powered example of picking an apple from a tree to eat – an act that involves simultaneous consumption and

work (production). Yet, while acknowledging that consumption and production cannot be separated, the book pursues a merciless journey addressing the question beloved of sociologists as to whether consumption has replaced production as 'the defining factor' for those living in the 'affluent West'. Ransome's core argument is that much of the industrial west has now entered an age of 'affluence', whereby most households have elevated themselves above consuming for survival. Affluence generates 'exciting and challenging kinds of consumption', introducing households to the miracles of 'choice' – choice of products, choice of lifestyles and above all choice of 'identities'. People increasingly turn to consumption for fulfilment of their 'needs', seeking 'pleasure' in 'consumption acts rather than production acts'. Far from lessening the importance of work, however, these developments accentuate it. "We are even more workerly than we were before, but always in the context of deepening consumption identity" (p.189).

Paul Ransome is too sophisticated a sociologist not to realize that every one of the words in single quotation marks above are highly contentious and problematic. Yet, in a curious way, while acknowledging these difficulties in some place of his scholarly text, he appears to build his argument as if they did not exist. Thus for example, having acknowledged the difficulty of separating consumption acts from production acts, he happily goes on to argue that the former have assumed greater identity-affirming, choice-affording, pleasure-yielding and need-fulfilling capacities than the latter. I return to my opening question of whether reading his book was an act of consumption or one of production and whether I should be correspondingly more or less fulfilled as a result.

Similar caveats can be expressed about the other core concepts of his argument. Having acknowledged that affluence is relative (in a land of BMW drivers, the Ford driver may not view him/herself as affluent), he goes on to argue that overall levels of affluence have increased, producing some dizzying statistics along the way. Yet, if affluence is relative, and if the masses compare themselves to exorbitant standards of consumption set by highly visible celebrities in the media, exactly the opposite can be argued – that the price of affluence for the few is the (perceived) deprivation for the many. Or consider his treatment of needs. Having acknowledged that needs are socially constructed (or produced) with references to Marcuse *et al.*, he proposes that there are two different types of consumption, simple and complex, each involving three sub-types of consumption acts, each characterized by a particular type of need satisfied. Necessary, elaborated and indulgent consumption acts form simple consumption, whereas affluent, conspicuous and symbolic consumption acts form complex consumption. Try as I may, my restaurant meal with my hosts in Liverpool cannot be fitted into any of the above sub-types. Or, more precisely, it can be fitted easily in all six equally comfortably.

One of the persistent difficulties of this book is the use of the word 'we', whose meaning easily shifts from "we=affluent westerners" to "we=all westerners" to "we=sociologists" or more commonly the use of passive voice that conceals the subject of the verb. For instance, "We have argued that concepts of social identity have altered to accommodate the greater variety of inputs and experiences which go towards the formation of identity in the late modern period" (p.116). Does this refer to the sociologists' concepts of social identity or to people's own concepts have altered? At times the book assumes an aggressive realism that will surprise sophisticated

organizational theorists, whereas at other times the book hedges its position by referring to putative actors and their perceptions: "Acts of consumption [solidly real] are considered [by whom?] more desirable than acts of production [dead solid] because they produce [notice how consumption 'produces'] high levels of intrinsic, spontaneous and immediate satisfaction [solid and real]. It is the immediacy of satisfaction which makes acts of consumption seem [soft-peddalling] concrete and real to the actor [back pedalling] and is in marked contrast to the more abstract [to whom? Call-centre employees?] and detached [ditto?] character of actions in the realm of production [objective]" (pp.49-50).

One of the most disappointing features of the book for me is its failure to problematize choice. Consumer choice is treated throughout as an unambiguous value, something that affluent consumers cherish and the basis of their freedom and "spontaneous satisfaction". Undoubtedly choice is an important feature of today's consumer ideology, one that extends into issues of life and death, procreation, bodily modification, spiritual transformation and so forth. Yet, choice is neither an innocent nor an untarnished entity. Going to Liverpool allowed me a choice of thirty-seven different train fares with different conditions attached to each. My generous hosts would have uncomplainingly reimbursed me whichever fare I used, but knowing the financial stringencies of our universities I felt bound to select an economical 'package'. I am sure that readers will be aware that such choices are far from pleasant. Choice, far from bringing pleasure, can generate anxiety, confusion and dissatisfaction. European visitors to the US rarely find the choice of 875 television channels stimulating or 'spontaneously satisfying'. Furthermore, choice may often be one between two lesser alternatives – in extreme cases as in William Styron's 'Sophie's Choice', choice may bring a lifetime of torment and anguish.

Critical sociologists must undoubtedly acknowledge the elevation of choice to a hegemonic consumerist ideology, but should be cautious about naturalising it or indeed fetishizing it. Choice is not a fact, but an experience. And it is an experience that is carefully and deliberately cultivated by marketers, spin-doctors, politicians and other merchandizers of meaning to pass the buck to the choice-maker, who is often left disempowered, bewildered and flumoxed. Remarkably, Paul Ransome scarcely refers in his book to any of the discourses critical of contemporary consumerism (e.g. Gabriel & Lang, 1995; Klein, 2000; Ritzer, 1999, 2001; Schor, 1998) and its brutal demands on those whose labour sustains it (e.g. Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire, & Tam, 1999; Sennett, 1998).

A final niggler. Am I alone in thinking that many of today's sociological analyses of whatever our times should be referred to as, post-modern, late-modern or whatever, construct an argument in opposition to a vulgar Marxist account of modernity – an account of uniform class identities and work-related meanings? It seems to me that it is as if all the subtleties of the Marxist argument and its numerous elaborations by authors as diverse as E. P. Thompson, Marcuse, Althusser, Gramsci (an author about whom Ransome has written in the past), and Lukacs and even non-Marxist theorists, like Weber and Veblen (of whom all but the first are cited by this author) fade into non-existence when confronted with the obliterating qualities of today's consumption. Thus, the subtle, multi-faceted, protean, complex, identity-rich, gendered, 'diversed' but stubbornly class-free consumer of today, in his full Technicolor splendour, is contrasted

to the black-and-white, class-defined, impoverished and barely subsisting subject of yesteryear. It seems to me that this caricature does as much injustice to our understanding of today as to that of yesteryear.

Consumers and consumption today are themselves not facts but ways of looking at the world. They are contested and argued over through a plethora of discourses. Whether what I am doing now is seen as consuming computing power on my desk or producing a review of a book emerges from such discourses. Whether Marx himself was consuming the midnight oil or producing some of the major works in social science also emerges from such discourses. Looking at some current explorations into the world of consumption, identities and the like I am left with the impression that Marx, living in what now seems the stone age of Victorian consumption, might have been more insightful into the dialectics of work and consumption than many of his sociological heirs.

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