



## Consumption in Perspective

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

### Citation for published version (APA):

Welch, D. (2016). Consumption in Perspective: M. Harvey 'Drinking Water: A Socio-economic Analysis of Historical and Societal Variation'; L. Pellandini-Simányi 'Consumption Norms and Everyday Ethics'; K. Wheeler and M. Glucksmann 'Household Recycling and Consumption Work'. *Sociology*, 51(4).

### Published in:

Sociology

### Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact [uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk) providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.





# Consumption in Perspective

Sociology

1–7

© The Author(s) 2016

Reprints and permissions:

[sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)

DOI: 10.1177/0038038516656134

[soc.sagepub.com](http://soc.sagepub.com)



**Daniel Welch**

University of Manchester, UK

Mark Harvey

*Drinking Water: A Socio-Economic Analysis of Societal Variation*

Abingdon: Routledge, 2015, £85 hbk (ISBN: 9781138816978), 192 pp.

Léna Pellandini-Simányi

*Consumption Norms and Everyday Ethics*

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, £68 pbk (ISBN: 9781349437894), 218 pp.

Kathryn Wheeler and Miriam Glucksmann

*Household Recycling and Consumption Work: Social and Moral Economies*

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, £60 hbk (ISBN: 9781137440433), 235 pp.

## Introduction

In a recent review of developments in the sociology of consumption Alan Warde (2015: 129) noted that the ‘problem of the relationship between production and consumption, which was in a sense the starting point of empirical investigations of consumption, is returning to the agenda’. Acknowledging the partial autonomy of consumption, and ‘separating it out for specialized attention’ (2015: 129), has afforded multiple analytical insights. However, today, novel ‘ways to reconnect [consumption] with production and provision, and with capital and labour, are needed’ (2015: 129). Mark Harvey’s *Drinking Water* and Kathryn Wheeler and Miriam Glucksmann’s *Household Recycling and Consumption Work* do just that. Léna Pellandini-Simányi’s *Consumption Norms and Everyday Ethics* situates consumption within a wider societal context in a different way: through linking the norms enjoining everyday consumption with *Weltanschauung* that ‘integrate ethical ideas of the good life and justice as well as pragmatic beliefs concerning how the world is’ (p. 51).

In *Drinking Water* Mark Harvey deploys the neo-Polanyian ‘instituted economic process’ (IEP) approach he has spent many years developing to the political economies of drinking water as they have been configured and reconfigured in the UK (specifically

---

### Corresponding author:

Daniel Welch, University of Manchester, 188 Waterloo Place, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK.

Email: [Daniel.Welch@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Daniel.Welch@manchester.ac.uk)

London), Italy, Germany, Taiwan, Delhi and Mexico City. The book traces how drinking water is produced, owned and controlled, distributed and consumed in these settings, across public, market, informal and illegal, and above all hybrid modes of provision. Kathryn Wheeler and Miriam Glucksmann's *Household Recycling and Consumption Work* extends the IEP approach through the perspective of labour, with a comparative study of household recycling and waste in England, Sweden, Brazil and India. The book is a systematic exploration of 'consumption work', the distinctive form of labour 'necessary for the purchase, use, re-use and disposal of consumption goods and services' (Wheeler and Glucksmann, p. 37), and demonstrates how this perspective requires revision of conventional approaches to the division of labour (see also Wheeler and Glucksmann, 2013, 2015).

Harvey's work is an important contribution to an expansive economic sociology and to sociological approaches to sustainability. Wheeler and Glucksmann offer a novel and insightful articulation between the fields of work and consumption, as well as a significant contribution to the burgeoning sociology of waste. And Pellandini-Simányi provides an excellent theoretical contribution to the sociology of consumption. I approach this review, however, primarily from the perspective of the sociology of consumption. All three build on an extended definition of consumption located in social practice, which does not presuppose market exchange for the initiation of consumption and includes the use of goods and services, and their divestment and disposal.

## Consumption in Socio-Economic Configuration

Mark Harvey's *Drinking Water* explores the extraordinary diversity of the processes this most ordinary of substances undergoes 'from source to sip'. The book takes in the too easily taken for granted all-purpose tap water of London, and the highly distinctive markets for bottled water of the UK, Germany and Italy. Italians drink four times the bottled water of UK consumers, in the context of widespread distrust of the quality of their tap water. Germans drink almost as much, in the contrasting context of high quality tap water. Other chapters explore the systems of drinking water provision in which we find the 2.5 million illegal boreholes in middle class homes in Delhi, the 5000 litre domestic cisterns of Mexico City supplied by tanker, and the 'drinking water garages' of Taiwan, where water rather than petrol issues from the nozzles (p. 133). Each case study locates these systems within their own socio-economic, historical and geo-hydrological contexts. Because drinkable water is an essential good, water has had an intensely political history in all the case studies: with battles over price, its public or private provision, over rights to extraction and so on. The book is not published as an edited collection – it is far too integrated a project for that – however, four of the five case study chapters are written in collaboration with international researchers – Adrian Evans, Aviram Sharma, Daniel Figueroa and William DH Li. A multi-method approach is adopted, drawing on primary and secondary sources, including secondary survey data, qualitative consumer diary research, interviews with local experts, providers and householders, analyses of market structures and secondary historical sources.

Harvey's neo-Polanyian approach adopts an anthropological stance towards 'the economy'. 'Minimally constrained by presuppositions of any existing economic organisation'

(p. 8), it explores the variation of how economic processes are instituted in society and their relations with social, cultural, political and material contexts. Consumption is one of four processes, the others being: production, ownership/appropriation and distribution. Together their relations become stabilised into distinctive configurations which endure over spans of space and time, always only to be reconfigured. The opening case study provides a historical account of the *longue durée* of London's tapwater, explicating the approach to configurational transformation. Innovation is conditioned by prior trajectory. And 'elements of continuity [are] modified by ... new relational dynamics' (p. 40). The London case offers an unlikely example of endurance within transformation: the property-based 'water rate' pricing system, alive and well in today's private water monopolies, was born with the royal charter of the New River Company in 1614, with its 40 miles of wooden pipes appropriating the water of the river Lea for London's wealthy householders.

Consumption for Harvey is not intrinsically economic, but analytically becomes an economic process when approached as socially instituted within a configuration with the other processes. Within the IEP approach 'consumption is both a process in its own right, and, relationally, the process which both ends and initiates the cycle of production, distribution and exchange' (p. 11). And in that sense consumption ensures the reproduction of the configuration. Consumption norms and routines are thus critical to the formation of economies. The inadequacy of treating consumer demand as individualised preferences is brought to the fore here. Demand 'is generated by social practices, which in turn can only be understood in the context of relational configurations, and their historical emergence' (p. 71). *Drinking Water* demonstrates that innovation in consumption practices can only be fully understood within the context of configurational change and the complementary dynamics of each of the interrelated processes of production, ownership/exchange and distribution which that involves (p. 29).

*Drinking Water* is also an important contribution to the sociology of sustainability. Polanyi's political economy is radically historical, addressing the question of the 'shifting place of economy in society'. Harvey adds a parallel emphasis on the 'shifting place of society in nature' (p. 157). This demands we reconstrue sustainability crises not as anthropogenic but as *sociogenic*: 'consequential upon particular societal interactions and trajectories in relation to their particular environmental consequences' (p. 153; see also Harvey, 2014). Drinking water as an analytical object reflects both the socio-economic arrangements in which it is always carried and draws to view both the distinctiveness of water as material entity and the specificities of natural geographical endowments, in ways that condition the interactions of polity and economy. Harvey's work demands we take seriously *both* the socio-economic transformations of the material and the pre-social materiality of nature.

## Consumption Work

Wheeler and Glucksmann's *Household Recycling and Consumption Work* builds on Glucksmann's long-standing interest in the social division of labour and the place of domestic labour within it (see Glucksmann, 2009). The concept of *consumption work* – 'all work necessary for the purchase, use, re-use and disposal of consumption goods and services' (p. 37) – serves as an analytical bridge between the study of work and the study

of consumption. As with Harvey, the stance to theory is one of iteration between the concept under development and investigation of a particular domain of activity, rather than treating concepts as 'finished' (p. 55). And the avowed aim here is not to provide a sharp boundary between consumption work and consumption, or domestic labour; each may describe the same activity viewed through a particular analytical lens. Thus recycling may be regarded as domestic labour in order to examine the gendered division of labour in the household, but it is consumption work in relation to its role in 'the wider circuit of the waste economy' (p. 50).

Consumption work usefully opens up issues around contemporary reconfigurations of the division of labour. For example, retailers and service providers increasingly relocate labour from their own operations to the consumer, whether at the supermarket self-service check-out or in the interminable form-filling of e-commerce. In the reverse direction, the wealthy out-source personal consumption work to 'concierge services' and the precariat servicing menial online labour exchanges such as TaskRabbit.

Consumption work 'provides an analytically key entry route' (p. 203) to Wheeler and Glucksmann's highly complex schema: socio-economic frameworks of labour (SEFL). SEFL integrates Glucksmann's 'total social organisation of labour' (TSOL) with Harvey's IEP approach. (Harvey reciprocates by integrating consumption work to his own analysis.) SEFL offers three dimensions of differentiation and interaction (p. 31). First, the technical division of labour within work processes, organisations and sectors. Second, the TSOL across socio-economic modes (state, market, not-for-profit, community, household), where work undertaken in one domain interdepends with work in others. Thus the unpaid work of consumers who prepare their household recycling to the requirements of local collection systems interacts with the paid work of municipal workers and private waste companies. The third dimension is labour undertaken at different points in the IEP configuration, where work conducted in any one process configures work at any other, including consumption work. The aim of the SEFL 'is to encourage a focus on the various boundaries or continua within each dimension (between work tasks and occupations, socio-economic modes of working and phases of an economic process) and the shift of work across and along these' (p. 203). The primary research questions thus concern: first, the shift of work to and from consumers across modal socio-economic boundaries and IEP; and second, interactions between consumers and other workers across modes and phases of work (p. 37). Perhaps to avoid yet more conceptual weight, work itself is not defined here, which some may find problematic.

This is not a parsimonious framework, but it enables analysis adequate to contemporary complexities. The framework is applied comparatively between England and Sweden on the one hand and between these contexts of highly developed waste management systems, and Brazil and India on the other. Waste management in the latter is rudimentary, and there, rather than consumers enrolled in consumption work for recycling, we find the labour of the poor. The English and Swedish studies were based on interviews with experts and (in England) householders, as well as a household diary study, and in addition in Sweden secondary qualitative studies. The Brazilian and Indian cases are based largely on secondary sources.

Consumption work, then, must be understood in terms of the wider configuration of production, exchange and distribution. This reframes the economic process as

predicated on the consumer undertaking work to consume. A core contention is that ‘consumption work determines what is actually consumed’ (p. 46). Harvey’s example in *Drinking Water* of a cup of tea brewed at home in the UK, is apposite. The cup of tea hybridises nationally owned water resources, appropriated and distributed by private monopoly provision, with a globally traded commodity, its final form produced by the labour of the consumer.

Despite the analytical caveats, there seems a tension between consumption work expanded to include all sorts of enabling and coordinating activities – the example of organising a camping trip is given (p. 31) – and the consumption work of, say, scanning barcodes at a self-service check out (that completes a process of service provision), or building flat pack furniture (the activity required of the consumer to realise the utility of a commodity they have purchased). The book is the output of a wider comparative programme which addressed consumption work in the installation of home broadband and food preparation and more of that comparative perspective might be useful here (see Glucksmann, 2013). Recycling is the odd one out; voluntary labour providing the material feedstock for production processes revalorising waste. And here a further perspective is needed to explain householders’ enrolment in that process: ‘moral economy’, drawing on resources from Polanyi, EP Thomson and Andrew Sayer to analyse how the normative and the economic intertwine. The central argument here is ‘that nationally distinct moral economies of recycling are constituted through interactions between institutional systems of provision, collective customs and consumers’ everyday reflection on handling their waste’ (p. 143).

## Consumption Norms

The prescription and proscription of consumption are, as Pellandini-Simányi notes, abundantly evident from empirical research. Consumption is routinely framed by moral worries about who is consuming what, to what end and with what effects on individuals, society and the planet. But such everyday ‘consumption norms’ have been subject to surprisingly little explicit theoretical focus (with one or two notable exceptions), except in the context of explicitly ‘ethical consumption’. *Consumption Norms and Everyday Ethics* addresses this gap. Pellandini-Simányi’s concern is with the normative aspects of everyday consumption embedded in social practice, and the relationship between such everyday ethical engagements and the ‘cosmologies’ that inform them, which combine pragmatic beliefs about the way the world works and strong ethical evaluations. While such cosmologies may be explicitly, discursively articulated – such as the Soviet *kulturnost* ideal of ‘cultured living’ which informed the consumption norms of socialist Hungary – they are more commonly embedded within and enacted by social practice as ‘practical ethics’. ‘By engaging in the same practice of “respectable clothing” or “thrifty shopping” people are able to engage in a very similar cosmology, without explicitly exchanging views about it’ (p. 101).

Pellandini-Simányi argues against theories that offer general explanations for the content of consumption norms, usually based on utility, or the maintenance of cultural categories or the social order. She surveys such approaches, for example Bourdieu and Douglas, and by contrast offers the ‘more modest explanation’ (p. 51) of the historical contingency of consumption norms and of the concrete processes behind group-specific

variation. Such processes are found in groups' access to the cultural resources from which consumption norms derive, and their capacity and willingness to control the institutional sites which produce those resources. Thus to explain the historical evolution of public consumption norms involves addressing both the cultural traditions from which they emerge and struggles between groups involved in their production.

Consumption norms are both collectively reproduced and subject to appropriation by individuals, and Pellandini-Simányi equally provides a nuanced account of *personal* consumption norms (for a succinct account, based on her fieldwork with families in Budapest, see Pellandini-Simányi, 2014). She argues that social practices materialise 'cultural repertoires that people can selectively draw on in devising their personal, practical ethics' (p. 89) while also offering conventional constraint. It is not distinct practices that are most pertinent here 'but rather clusters of connected practices linked together by specific ethical and pragmatic beliefs ... sets of practices relationally defined that carry meanings and shared cosmologies' (p. 89). A strength of the concept of consumption norms is that it encompasses both the routine, non-deliberative activity that practice theoretical approaches best account for *and* deliberative activity, which is also informed by the 'pragmatic beliefs' or general assumptions about the way the world, and economy, works.

Pellandini-Simányi locates her arguments within a broad theoretical and empirical field, not only drawing on a wide range of anthropological, historical, sociological and material culture studies resources relating to consumption, but for example, dialectical theories of the subject and philosophical debates around ethics. And she is unafraid to engage innovatively with some fundamental problematics for the study of consumption – such as the role of advertising in inculcating consumer demand – which have often been marginalised by the current concerns of the 'practice turn'. The book provides a rigorous explanatory account of the economic, technological, social and institutional processes through which consumption norms change – too thorough to elucidate here. These characteristics recommend the text as an exemplary teaching resource.

Lastly, the book engages with ethical consumption movements. It presents two core arguments: that the visions of the good life and justice on which ethical consumer movements are based are shaped by local social conditions and cultural concerns; and that 'the adoption of ethical consumption objectives at the level of everyday life depends on whether they can be integrated into' local consumption ethics, practices and cosmologies (p. 142). The danger of a universalistic ethical consumption position is that it 'eliminates the diversity of ethics, ways of life and internal goods pertaining to different practices' (p. 167), a point uncritical advocates would do well to consider.

Pellandini-Simányi is critical of ethical consumption when framed in terms of individual choice as the mechanism to address systemic issues. I would suggest, however, that much under the banner of ethical consumption already conforms to the normative standpoint Pellandini-Simányi advocates: formulating aims in terms of justice and seeking to address systemic problems through democratic politics, not consumer choice.

## Conclusion

Each of these three books is a considerable contribution. Each presents a different strategy through which to advance the study of consumption. For Harvey it is to understand

the place of consumption in variegated socio-economic configurations. For Wheeler and Glucksmann it is to understand the role played by consumption in the socio-economic frameworks of labour. For Pellandini-Simányi it is to understand consumption in its everyday normativity, and in the context of the cultural cosmologies on which that draws. Each offers much to the others, for Harvey and Wheeler and Glucksmann explicitly so, but also in how concepts and insights from all three might cross-pollinate. Moral economy may be a productive starting point for analysis of the economic imaginaries that invest socio-economic configurations. Equally cosmologies may be seen to invest not only consumption, but the processes of production, exchange and distribution. Consumption norms and consumption work clearly have a complex relation which deserves exploration. We have a wealth of resources here with which to connect consumption with production and provision, and with capital and labour. Lastly, each of the three is an exemplary exposition of the variegation of socio-economic configurations, or of political economic and socio-cultural specificity. Perhaps we also need now accounts of commonalities and interdependencies.

## References

- Glucksmann M (2009) Formations, connections and divisions of labour. *Sociology* 43(5): 878–895.
- Glucksmann M (2013) Working to consume: Consumers as the missing link in the division of labour. CRESI Working Paper. Colchester: University of Essex.
- Harvey M (2014) On the horns of the food–energy–climate change trilemma: Towards a socio-economic analysis. *Theory, Culture & Society* 31(5): 155–182.
- Pellandini-Simányi L (2014) Everyday consumption norms as discourses of the good life in pre-socialist and socialist Hungary. *Journal of Consumer Culture*. Epub ahead of print 26 May 2014. DOI: 10.1177/1469540514536197.
- Warde A (2015) The sociology of consumption: Its recent development. *Annual Review of Sociology* 41: 117–134.
- Wheeler K and Glucksmann M (2013) Economies of recycling, ‘consumption work’ and divisions of labour in Sweden and England. *Sociological Research Online* 18(1). Available at: [www.socresonline.org.uk/18/1/9.html](http://www.socresonline.org.uk/18/1/9.html).
- Wheeler K and Glucksmann M (2015) ‘It’s kind of like saving them a job isn’t it?’: The consumption work of household recycling. *Sociological Review* 63(3): 551–569.

Daniel Welch is a Research Associate at the Sustainable Consumption Institute, University of Manchester, and was formerly a researcher with the Sustainable Practices Research Group. His research interests focus on novel articulations between the sociology of consumption, social theory, sustainability, cultural economy and economic sociology.