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The Systems of Provision Approach to Understanding Consumption[1]

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Introduction

It is now over twenty years since Fine and Leopold (1993) first detailed the systems of provision (SoP) approach. Developed as a response to traditional 'horizontal' views of consumption, whereby discipline-specific factors were used to explain consumption across a range of goods and contexts, the approach seeks to examine consumption vertically and in its concrete specificity by looking at the full chain of activities underpinning the material production and cultural significance of different goods. As such, the approach avoids over-generalising the relevance of particular factors, instead recognising that any instance of consumption is shaped by a shifting array of context-specific determinants. This requires a fundamentally interdisciplinary outlook, eclectically but systematically drawing on concepts and theories from different disciplines in an inductive fashion determined by the issue at hand.

In addition to seeking a vertical and genuinely interdisciplinary perspective on consumption, the SoP approach was motivated by a perceived need to bridge the material and the cultural, by acknowledging that discursive practices are constitutive of consumption, but that such practices are in turn constrained by material circumstances. This outlook was

originally driven by dissatisfaction with both neoclassical utility theory and postmodernism, with each being overly subjectivist in its own peculiar ways. However, the approach has since been developed as part of a broader interest in material cultures and the co-constitution of consumption practices and meanings through material and cultural determinants. The SoP approach defines such determinants broadly, encompassing not just the circumstances of material production, but also the social characteristics of different consumers and the broader context within which consumption takes place. The suggestion is that the material culture of consumption needs to be located in terms of the modes of provision as a whole and not simply by virtue of the more immediate relationship between consumer and consumed. Accordingly, what was eventually to become the 10Cs approach to the material culture of consumption was developed.

This chapter elaborates on the development of the SoP approach in terms of these specific theoretical stances. But this contribution is also concerned to push the study of consumption further in two otherwise heavily neglected areas. One is to branch out to incorporate public consumption, an area traditionally neglected in consumption studies, though achieving growing prominence by virtue of the spread of commodification through privatisation in the neoliberal period. The other – also a product of the neoliberal era – is to address the increasing influence of finance and financialisation on consumption practices and consumers. For, whilst the impact of financialisation has not been overlooked in the literature, its analysis has tended to be situated at a general level, emphasising consumption on credit (cards or mortgages, for example), or the creation or consolidation of new neoliberal subjectivities around the financial (mis)calculations of households in pursuit of aspirations to consume – admirably summed up in the notion of privatised Keynesianism by Crouch (2009). Unsurprisingly, we take a more nuanced view in light of the SoP approach, viewing the impact

of financialisation on (the material culture of) consumption as highly differentiated from one item of consumption to another (and, indeed, from one country to another).

This chapter is structured as follows. In the next section we set out the origins and content of the approach, emphasising its development from critique of rational choice theory and postmodernism to become a framework for investigating material cultures. In the subsequent section we outline how the approach is applied in practice, incorporating a discussion of what we have termed the 10Cs, showing how these are used to characterise consumption cultures. In the penultimate section we look at some existing applications of the approach and make the case for extending it to public consumption and financialisation. The final section concludes.

Elaborating the SoP Approach

Background

The SoP approach was in part a response to the perceived collective failings of consumer theory across the social sciences. For example, the longstanding analysis of consumption around mainstream economics, based on utility-maximising individuals, was rejected by Fine and Leopold (1993) for its narrowness and reductionism. Differences in consumption across goods were at most accounted for by derived elasticities of income and demand but without otherwise explaining why variations occur or how they change over time and place. Producers (and production) might be deemed to play an independent role in consumption through manipulative advertising in shaping consumer preferences, or through imperfectly competitive pricing in distorting their fulfilment. But the burgeoning concerns over postmodernist subjectivities, let alone more traditional determinants of consumption across the social sciences, such as emulation and distinction, remained notable for their absence.

These were taken as a critical point of departure by Fine and Leopold. Whilst for neoclassical economics, the subjectivity of the consumer has been tied to a mechanically applied optimisation of a given utility function (across objects of consumption with given meanings), the postmodern consumer is subjectively capable of endless and unlimited reinvention of the objects of consumption and the subject's own identity. In this parallel universe to orthodox economics, reference to the material properties (and provisioning) of commodities tends to evaporate by giving way to deconstruction of the meanings of consumption to consumers created through their own inventiveness in construal. But, for Fine and Leopold, the subjective interpretations of consumption associated with the rampant postmodernist attention to symbolic meanings were themselves interpreted as being negligent of both material and social determinants of those meanings.

This, then, sets the background in general terms of the state of consumer theory in the early 1990s when the SoP approach was initiated. Across the two extremes of neoclassical economics and postmodernism, Fine and Leopold also found a common set of deficiencies shared by consumer theory more generally. First, the study of consumption had been heavily organised around a disciplinary division of labour to the extent that one or more 'horizontal' theories were applied within each discipline – utility theory for economics, semiotics for postmodernist study, emulation and distinction for sociology, and so on, usually with specific examples of consumption taken as a universal analytical norm. It was no accident, for example, that the postmodernist invention of the deconstructing consumer should focus on the more fantastic as opposed to the more mundane items of consumption and those subject to heavy advertising or cultural prominence, the better to be able to provide the raw materials for deconstruction. Other approaches also tended to presume that specific factors of interest would be of general applicability across consumption instead of asking whether some factors are significant for some consumption goods and consumers in some instances but not in

others (although this was, unsurprisingly, a key element for those engaged practically in studying consumer behaviour in general and the impact of advertising and marketing in particular). In formulating the SoP approach, the idea was rejected that these separate, generally mutually inconsistent (by method and concept), and unworldly, horizontal theories could be stacked to give a general theory universally applicable to all goods.

Second, then, it was recognised that the varieties of factors that make up the study of consumption across the social sciences could be integrated, if not, as previously indicated, as a general all-encompassing theory (in some respects, the dream of those engaging practically or academically in consumer studies in management, business and commerce). Instead, focusing on particular commodities, the SoP approach proceeds inductively according to the weight of presence, mode of combination and specific (historical and social) context involved. There are, for example, different issues for consumption by reference to gender, not least in clothing, and the factor of fashion correspondingly has a different presence for men than for women. Further, the water system is different from the housing system by virtue of what is provided as well as by national and other contextual considerations.

The idea that consumption needed to be understood more closely in relation to its attachment to production was beginning to emerge across different fields in the late 1980s. In the production of food, the notion of commodity chains that linked consumption to food processing, distribution and agriculture was developing as a way to make sense of the food industry (Lang and Wiggins 1985, cited in Jackson et al. 2004). This chain approach could be extended beyond simple producer–consumer relationships to a wider exploration of corporate power and agricultural production systems.

In housing in the UK, the work of Michael Ball (1983) established a link between the role of landed property and housing tenure. Ball persuasively argued that these issues needed to be located in relation not only to one another but also to the chain of activity running from

access to landed property through the processes underpinning provision of, and access to, housing by consumers. Ball's structures of provision approach originally served to argue that researchers interested in the incidence and impact of state subsidies on housing outcomes, especially distribution, needed to take into account considerations beyond tenure balance because the way that housing was provided determined the characteristics of different tenures. Such an approach to the housing system suggested that other items of consumption should be similarly regarded as belonging to integral chains of activity that were specific to themselves.

The diverse elements that combine to shape consumption are brought together for the SoP approach. By adopting a 'vertical' analytical framework, the chain of activity connecting production to consumption for particular commodities becomes decisive in differentiating between items of consumption. Distinctions need to be made not only in their material properties and meanings to consumers, but also in how they are provided. In a nutshell, energy, housing, fashion and food *systems* are all distinctive by virtue of the structures, relations, processes and agencies of provision of which they are comprised.

Systems of Provision in Detail

Each SoP consists of the multiplicity of factors that lead to and shape consumption. These are wide-ranging and will vary across commodities, locations and over time. More specifically, a SoP can be specified as the combination of the material processes of provision and the material cultures associated with the commodity, which uniquely engage with one another in specific instances, making context paramount in specifying SoPs.

Consumers enter SoPs not as the representative agents found in neoclassical economics, nor as limitlessly versatile postmodern subjectivities; rather, consumers are differentiated by social characteristics that have a bearing on consumption. Thus, patterns of

consumption will be affected by gender, age, income level, location, occupation and (un)employment, race and ethnicity, and so on, but in different ways and with different outcomes according to the specific SoP itself. We need to bring such social categories to bear in identifying norms of consumption specific to each SoP, and in explaining how they are reproduced or transformed.

One aspect of such norms is systematic patterns of consumption themselves, by level and quality of consumption across different social, and not just income, strata. This involves what might otherwise be called a standard of living or, more exactly, livings, contingent upon who gets how much of what. Standards of living and consumption both rise and shift with affluence and other factors, with the latter demonstrated in the wake of technological change (and electronic goods, for example, not least mobile phones and the like).

A second aspect is the material culture of consumption attached to each SoP with, once again, like levels and quality of the consumed itself and to the consumer as with the meanings of consumption, variously distributed across different social strata, etc. One of the purposes of the SoP approach is to draw out how these two different aspects of consumption norms are related to one another. Examples include questions such as: Why are there gender differences in what is consumed and how it is interpreted? Why does owner-occupation become the preferred form of housing tenure? And what are the implications for the provisioning and meaning of consumption with the privatisation of public services, on the one hand, not least as they become purchased through credit, on the other?

Of course, such questions are far from new and were, to some extent, the meat and drink, of postmodernist studies in deconstructing the meanings of consumption. Significantly, Fine (2002), in thoroughly extending Fine and Leopold (1993), takes account of developments in the field of consumer studies, with the SoP approach increasingly influenced by, and contributing to, what can be termed the study of the material culture of consumption. For

this, how consumption is furnished is perceived to interact with how it is interpreted.[2] With reference to the study of consumption, material culture has emerged as in other fields, not least in response to the rise of the material practices and consequences of neoliberalism and a corresponding waning of the influence of postmodernism. Discursive practices have become increasingly perceived to be a consequence of material circumstances (although also giving rise to a proliferation and sequence of post-postmodernisms of various hues). As a consequence, the SoP approach has no longer relied upon its origins by simply presenting itself in terms of departure from the two subjectivist extremes of rational choice and postmodernism. It has also focused on how to address the relationship between the material and the cultural in terms of the practices and meanings associated with consumption and the relationships between the two. It is not just the factors involved in the delivery of a service or the inputs into a good that constitute the SoP; also relevant is the culture and meaning with which a good or commodity is associated, for both consumers and providers alike. Goods and services have cultural significance associated with modes of provision, as has been readily recognised, for example, in terms of the meanings of water contingent upon public or private delivery systems (which are themselves each subject to considerable variation). Thus, water provision sits astride discourses around basic needs, human rights and poverty alleviation as well as cost recovery, commercialisation and privatisation (see for example Ahlers, 2010; Bakker, 2007; Swyngedouw, 2005; UN-Water, 2012; UNDP, 2006).

A key example of the way in which our relationship with goods, services and commodities is culturally and socially mutually dependent is illustrated in the paradox of the recent parallel expansion of both unhealthy diets and healthy eating campaigns, not least in light of the 'epidemic' of obesity. This demonstrates that there is considerable complexity in the way in which information is translated into 'knowledge' and culture, and the ways in which these turn into behaviour. The provision of a good or a service or of information does not

necessarily mean these will be used as intended or anticipated. The SoP approach recognises that the cultural perceptions and identities of the users will be significant in the consumption and production processes, and these are heavily influenced if not rigidly determined by the material practices attached to the corresponding SoP, and not simply at the point of consumption itself.

The cultural content, or system, attached to a good is related not only to the material system of provision but also to wider cultural influences (for example, gender, class, age and nationality). Each SoP is attached to its own integral cultural system and this cultural system derives content from each and every material aspect of the SoP but in ways that are not rigidly predetermined nor necessarily immediately obvious. What is absented can be as striking as, for example, the simple knowledge in the case of water in England and Wales that almost as much as one-third of bills go towards paying interest and dividends (Bayliss, 2014). Indeed, much consumer politics targets bringing knowledge of the how of production (such as sweated or child labour) to the attention of the consumer!

In such analysis, consumers are acknowledged to be reflexive. They are not passive recipients either of what they consume or how they perceive it. As a way of engaging with the material culture of consumption Fine (2013b) grouped the characteristics of material culture under ten headings (known as the 10Cs) as follows, with these being mutually constitutive of corresponding cultural systems of SoPs in diverse and specific ways.

1. *Constructed* – the cultural systems attached to consumption are constructed in that they are influenced by the material practices of the SoP. Commodities have associated meanings for consumers, which may be variably responsive to what they know of the chain of provision, and its distinctive material properties. These may also be subject to change and to manipulation (for example, drinking a particular brand of bottled water may project a certain image as well as quenching

one's thirst; buying a house in some locations may be a financial investment as well as a place to live).

2. *Construed* – objects of consumption are endowed with qualities construed by consumers. These can float free from the material properties of the (provision of the) objects of consumption themselves but are framed by the SoP. The process of construal is influenced by a multiplicity of factors and these are contextually driven. Sources of experience and knowledge are reacted to or against and imbued with meaning rather than simply received passively by the consumer. Status, emulation and distinction are longstanding examples of socially-determined construal of consumption, but these wax and wane with material provision itself.

3. *Commodified* – to greater or lesser degrees, cultures may be influenced by commodification, even if the good is not. In the UK, even supposedly non-commodified provision, such as the health service, may be understood in commodified terms with, for example, pressure for greater cost efficiency. Either non-commercialised aspects of a good can be used as a selling point (for example, good as home-made) or, the opposite, in claiming to be at the forefront of technology (currently common in motor cars). Thus, the processes of commodification serve to frame how the commodity is construed (for example, value for money) as well as alternative ways of thinking and interpreting what is consumed (as in some sense embodying qualities that are removed from the market pursuit of profitability).

4. *Conforming* – regardless of what choices the consumer makes, meanings to them are influenced by the circumstances of provision, whether social, as opposed to

private, housing is seen as a right or as a dependency for example. To coin a phrase, consumers construe but not in circumstances made by themselves.

5. *Contextual* – cultures of consumption differ in time and place, and what is consumed is not only located in specific circumstances (high or low price, good or bad quality) but are associated with particular and variable meanings to the consumer (for example, an item of clothing may have different significance depending on the situation). One person's necessity may be another's luxury and the distinction may change over time, location and across income levels.

6. *Contradictory* – different agents and forces compete to give content to the cultural systems and these may provide a stimulus in opposite directions (for example, compulsions to spend and to save; to eat and to diet).

7. *Chaotic* – material cultures draw together (or not) a multiplicity of practices and influences across a multiplicity of dimensions which are reflected on by households going about their daily life, and so will be riddled with inconsistencies if not incoherence. This does not mean that there is no rationale but that these may differ and lead to tensions with unpredictable, occasionally extreme, outcomes, as with eating disorders, credit card abuse, addiction, and so on.

8. *Closed* – there is unequal participation in SoPs and unequal and differentiated roles in constructing cultures (for example, in the financial sector, while everyone may be involved, the process of intervention is both by and for an increasingly powerful financial elite with a corresponding loss of democratic accountability and rise in inequality; and for trade-marking, standards, branding, regulations, etc., all shape cultures, but only a select few are involved in their making).

9. *Contested* – different cultures of consumption may come into conflict, for example with the Occupy movement or with global protests against the privatisation of water. Contestation may also occur in terms of the conditions attached to the material practices along the SoP chain.

10. *Collective* – contestation, like provision, is usually collective. While individuals may carry out acts of dissent, collective action is likely to be a more successful form of contestation but, more generally, consumption is not a simple act of individual subjectivity.

The relevance and usefulness of the different 10Cs for dissecting material cultures will vary depending on the type of good, the SoP and the reason for which it is being investigated.

Applying the SoP Approach

While the SoP approach offers advantages over traditional approaches to consumer theory, by virtue of being firmly anchored in real-world practices, it is also demanding in requiring the specification of the complexity and diversity of goods and of the societies in which they are consumed. When it comes to practical application, the SoP approach does not offer a blueprint because, by their nature, SoPs are unique. The SoP approach, then, is necessarily heavily inductive in application, leaving researchers to identify the nature, scope and content of particular SoPs in practice – do we have a food system and, if so, at regional, national or global levels, or separate food systems across these locations and different foods?

Given its inductive nature, the application of the SoP approach in practice is not simple, not least in identifying where one SoP begins and another ends. Indeed, it is possible to question whether the approach is legitimate at all given the interactions across different SoPs, whether within broader groups, such as food systems, or narrower groups, for example sugar,

meat and dairy systems. In a sense, though, this is to revisit the horizontal/vertical dualism in the study of consumption. This is itself acknowledged within the SoP approach that both seeks to identify integral forms of provisioning whilst also acknowledging that these interact with one another. SoPs also share common horizontal factors, even if integrating them differently in extent and manner, at both national and international levels and across conditions such as equity and quality of provision, labour market conditions and macroeconomic impacts.

In principle, each SoP needs to be addressed by reference to the material and cultural specificities that take full account of the whole chain of activity, bringing together production, distribution (and access), and the nature and influence of the conditions under which these occur. This is not to say that *every* element in the chain of provision plus every relevant contextual or 'horizontal' factor needs to be thoroughly investigated before SoPs can be identified and specified. In practice, the way SoPs are identified will depend on the question at hand. Investigating sources of salmonella in chicken points to the poultry system, whereas diet as a contributory factor to an epidemic of obesity suggests attention to the food system as a whole.

For research purposes it is usually necessary to shine a spotlight on the elements of the SoP that are of particular relevance to the issue under consideration. Recent applications of the approach, for example to housing, Robertson (2014) and water, Bayliss (2014), have focused on finance and financialisation, attempting to redress the relative neglect of the growing encroachment of these on social and economic life in analyses of consumption, although there is a healthy new field studying the financialisation of everyday life (Bayliss et al., 2017; Fine, 2013a; Langley, 2008; van der Zwan, 2014). In investigating housing and financialisation, some elements of the housing SoP will be more relevant than others (which is compatible with recognising interlinkages and mutual determination), while other important elements of the SoP (such as Housing Associations, DIY, repair and maintenance,

architecture, etc.) are less relevant for many issues. Similarly, an assessment of the financialisation of water will focus on the relations between agents in the context of the flow of funds, including investment, pricing, debt and dividends. In contrast, an investigation into, say, environmental issues relating to water would focus on different elements of the SoP.

In specifying SoPs, we draw freely upon standard ways of conceptualising and theorising across the social sciences by appeal to the following general, overlapping categories:

a. *Structures* – broadly, this includes the historically evolved and socially specific institutional forms of provisioning, not least patterns of ownership, control and delivery. There may be structural divisions between public and private supply as well as demand, structures in access by price and quality, and so on. Other elements that shape the structures of provision include the institutional mechanisms of provision including the regulatory and legal framework.

b. *Processes* – each SoP is shaped by the interaction of the activities of labour and consumers, of service providers, of the state, but also by wider processes such as commodification, decentralisation, globalisation, commercialisation, and so on. It may be that a public sector structure of provision is subject to the process of privatisation so it is important to specify the dynamics of each SoP, how its structures and processes interact and may be in tension across one another.

c. *Agents/agencies* – SoPs are determined by the participants in the processes of production through to consumption. Incorporated are those who produce and those who consume, but also wider bodies such as trade unions, consumer groups, regulators and those who affect delivery of finance, investment, technology, and so on. Agencies reflect and interact with both structures and processes, again either reproducing or transforming in tension or conformity with one another. The entry point for analysing the SoP is typically the

consumer who will engage with other agents in diverse ways, depending on the good or service in question. For example, the way a consumer buys food will be different from purchasing a house or paying a water bill. And these will vary across location and over time.

d. *Relations* – structures, processes and agents/agencies are necessarily far from neutral, contingent upon who exercises power, and how, and with what purpose (and meaning to participants). So the relations upon which SoPs are founded are differentiated by the roles of capital (or state as employer) and labour in production and other commercial (or non-commercial) operations through to the relational norms by social characteristics that are attached to levels and meanings of consumption. Significantly, the relations attached to and underpinning SoPs are crucial in understanding what and how conflicts arise and how they are or are not resolved. For example, the pricing decisions of a private producer will be shaped by the activities of competitors, by labour issues, the regulatory framework and, as a condition of survival, the imperative of profitability. The same criteria do not always apply in the case of public provision, and the ways in which the criteria are specified and contested are also different.

Applications and Extensions

Existing Applications and Support

Over a decade ago the SoP approach was described by Leslie and Reimer (1999, p. 405) as 'perhaps the most comprehensive elaboration of production-consumption relations', and has also been seen as one of the main approaches to the study of consumption, and cited as such

in Jackson et al. (2004, p. 8). Early applications of the approach to food and fashion (Fine and Leopold, 1993; Fine et al., 1996; Fine, 1998) have, for example, been supplemented by work on home furnishings by Leslie and Reimer (1999), fur coats by Skov (2005), denim jeans by Brooks (2015), boy's clothes in late-Victorian England by Rose (2010), food supply chains by Seyfang (2008) and obesity by Greenhalgh (2014).

The framework was also adopted, and succinctly summarised, in a report by the OECD (2002) in analysing consumption patterns of energy, water and waste management, with a view to improving sustainability. The study aimed to approach environmental policy by considering the whole system of provision rather than simply looking at adjusting consumption patterns, stating:

> The systems of provision approach analyses consumption as an active process, with actors seeking certain lifestyles, and constructing their identity by selective consumption and practices. The 'systems of provision' is defined as the chain that unites particular systems of production with particular systems of consumption, focusing on the dynamics of the different actors (producers, distributors, retailers as well as consumers). In this light, it becomes clear that by the way governments design and transform energy, water and waste systems can either enable or obstruct household behaviour towards sustainable consumption. (p. 8)

For the OECD, consumer behaviour regarding the environmental impact is shaped by beliefs, norms and values within households and embedded in social practices. The 2002 Report continues:

> The *systems of provision* framework for understanding consumption patterns stresses the importance of exploring the mechanisms that shape everyday practices related to commodities and services and the extent to which they can be seen to

> support or impede sustainable consumption behaviour. In this light, household consumption is not the sum of individual behavioural patterns, each consciously motivated and evaluated by the actor. Instead, household consumption is a whole set of behavioural practices that are common to other households … They are social practices carried out by applying sets of rules and shared norms. They are also connected to production and distribution systems (technological and infrastructure network) that enable certain lifestyles that connect consumers to one another.

This application of the SoP approach to understanding the environmental impacts of energy and consumption is taken further in the work of Van Vliet, Chappells and Shove (2005) and is also a theme of the work of DEMAND, one of six centres funded by UK Research Councils to address end-use energy demand reduction.[3] Other emerging applications include infrastructure (Brown and Robertson, 2014), transport (Williams, 2014) and sustainable consumption (Spaargarn, 2003).

Incorporating the Public Sector

Evidently, the remit of the SoP approach is expanding from its initial focus on the provision of food, clothing and other sectors and issues in the context of capitalist commodity production for private consumption. The earlier narrowness of the application of the SoP approach in part reflected the limitations of consumer theory in its overgeneralisation from particular types or aspects of consumption and a tendency to exclude consumption deriving from state-provided services. These traditionally were seen as part of social policy or the welfare state and, hence, distinct from consumption as such.

More recently, the application of the SoP approach has been expanded to include the provision of public goods and services, dubbed public sector SoPs (PSSoPs). The innovation in

this approach is the application of SoP to areas which do not traditionally form part of consumption studies and which have often been provided by the state. Public or collective consumption, addressed in Fine (2002), has to some degree been overlooked because it did not meet the ethos of the subjectivities of the postmodern consumer. This is in part because it raises particular challenges where consumption is not necessarily commodified (and extension of the SoP approach to non-commodity production is itself engaged cautiously), and in part because of the paradoxical consequence of consumption becoming public, leading to it no longer being seen as consumption as such, most notably in its becoming part of the welfare state (as with health, education, public housing, etc.) (Fine, 2005).

However, to some extent, the latter aspect has been thrust into prominence with the privatisation of PSSoPs, the commercialisation and (re)commodification of state provision, and the neo-liberalisation of consumption, indeed of everyday life, often with a corresponding recasting of the patient, student, tenant, etc., as client or consumer. Clearly, consumer studies cannot broach such issues unless it allows for transitions between forms of consumption (from the public to the private sector, for example, against the erstwhile movement in the opposite direction with welfarism), both materially (how provision occurs) and culturally (how provision is understood). This is all itself part and parcel of a deeper transformation in modern capitalism, associated with the neo-liberal period (and consumer) in which *financialisation* has come to the fore (see below).

For orthodox consumer theory, effectively all government provision tends to be seen as equivalent to private provision or seen as distinct from (private) consumption altogether by being alternatively designated as social policy and/or as belonging to the welfare state. But such goods and services can also be understood as being attached to their own SoPs. A theory of social policy must accommodate a variety of structural determinants and how they interact

across structures, agencies, processes, relations and institutions to give rise to a diversity of shifting outcomes.

However, virtually all SoPs necessarily incorporate some element of state involvement or regulation as even private provision cannot prevail in a totally disembodied market. The extent of public sector involvement varies considerably across countries even for the same good. Thus, for example, water is provided entirely by private companies at present in England and Wales but is subject to state regulation of tariffs and quality. Other countries have water delivery services that remain entirely within the public domain.

The extent of state involvement varies, then, not just in terms of provision but also with the state as regulator and/or provider of finance. The state can be involved in a variety of ways along the chain of provision, reflecting both material and cultural, including political, factors. These have been expressed traditionally in terms such as aspirations for universal coverage (as with health, education and housing) or as a response to market imperfections whether as externalities or economies of scale and scope. For many (PS)SoPs, with the objective of universal access or provision, there are significant issues of production and distribution, concerning, for example, spatial differentiation in provision.

The essence of the SoP approach can be applied to public as with private consumption in that each of the elements of a SoP is attached to an integral and distinctive system – the health system, the education system, and so on. Modes of provision themselves are attached to particular cultural associations and predispositions, with, for example, certain preconceptions associated with the suitability or otherwise of privately provided education or health services (attitudes that do themselves have to be contextualised and explained).

Recognising diversity allows for greater understanding of the issues which are historically specific and depend on comparative location. This stands in stark contrast with orthodox economics, which interprets decisions over the respective roles of the public and

private sectors in terms of market and state failures. In orthodox economics, for example, the supposed presence of what may be termed externalities may be deemed to require state regulation. However, the nature of such 'failures' is itself sector-specific and requires a deconstruction of the nature and attributes of a good or service. Also needed is an understanding of the structures, relations, processes and agencies from production through to consumption that give rise to what are, or are not, deemed to be or to count as externalities (see below).

Finance, Financialisation and (PS)SoPs

If the provision of public goods and services has been significantly altered in recent years by privatisation, with consequent and varied impacts on consumption, one pervasive, though differentiated, attribute of privatisation has been the increased role and influence of finance in social and economic provisioning – a phenomenon captured by the term 'financialisation' – for details on financialisation and its material culture, see Fine (2013a.) The SoP approach, by incorporating analysis of structures and processes, is well equipped to address these changing modes and patterns of production and consumption, and the interaction between them.

With neoliberalism in general, and privatisation in different forms in particular, finance has become increasingly prominent in accounts of SoPs, affecting private consumption (not least in theuse of credit as a means to fund) and state provision (extent and forms of state financing, for example). Where there is a perceived welfare element to delivery, the issue of finance inevitably raises corresponding issues of subsidy and equity that are liable to be contested. But it would be inappropriate to confine such issues to their redistributive role alone. As is readily apparent, the extent of privatisation and financialisation of state provision is highly diverse across sectors and countries. So there is differentiation by these factors alone in the SoPs. But, equally, how such differences in these factors affect outcomes is diverse,

contingent upon how they are located within the SoP as a whole. There have been, for example, differences in mortgage finance across countries and differences in how these have affected overall levels of, and access to, housing provision. Locating SoPs within the context of social policy brings in wider issues, such as income transfers (or subsidies including tax relief and means tests), but state financing features in the delivery of many goods, not just social policy, including, for example, agriculture. Bringing SoP analysis into areas with state financing and subsidy requires inquiry into the role of the state and the nature of its redistributive and other functions.

Along with chains of production, the chains of finance are also significant within SoPs. For example, privatisation has been promoted as a source of additional investment finance. However, private investment can be costly for the state due to the need to repay private financiers with a profit margin. The UK experience of the Private Finance Initiative shows how private capital has benefitted greatly from the subcontracting of services that were previously provided by the state (Vecchi et al., 2013). Finance is a major factor in the relations within and across the different elements of SoPs. The presence or intervention of finance shapes processes of provision and the behaviour of other agents. More than this, however, financial agencies are often proactive in trying to shape SoPs in favourable directions, as is most obviously demonstrated by the aggressive promotion of owner-occupation and mortgages by the US subprime mortgage lenders.

Financialisation in the past three decades has transformed public provision in many sectors and locations into a private asset, from the sale of social housing to the privatisation of water. The result is that provision is subject to the vagaries of stockholder and asset value, which has encouraged speculation, sell-offs, and sub-contracting at the expense of direct production. Nonetheless, the impact of financialisation has been different across and within SoPs. For housing for example, the rise of mortgage finance and owner-occupation has been

pervasive, although the extent has been uneven in itself and in its impact upon forms, levels and distribution of housing. With the supply of water in England and Wales, the financialisation of ownership of provision has gone more or less unnoticed by consumers. The commodity-specific outlook of the SoP approach makes it well equipped to comprehend such variegation.

There is, furthermore, some purchase in addressing social policy (and its privatisation) not only where there is material provision (as with education, housing, etc.) but also where there is not, other than indirectly, as with pension funds and social security for example. This can be done, though, in a sense, by 'top-slicing' the SoP approach and applying it without the underpinnings of the sectorally-specific system of provision itself. This depends on whether two crucial but mutually dependent elements of the (PS)SoP approach can be deployed in isolation from consumption itself. These are the appeal to consumption 'norms' and the application of the 10Cs in addressing the cultures of social policy. In the case of pensions, for example, although not directly related to consumption as opposed to sources of revenue to fund it, pension norms and pension cultures can both be examined through the SoP approach, not least as state and collective forms of provision have given way to the private and individualised (and the corresponding creation of financial citizens and responsibilities). Pensions shift in how they are provided, who gets what and how this is perceived in terms of collective and individual responsibilities.[4]

Such an emphasis upon the SoP approach for social policy, especially pension provision, has the advantage of critically departing from the two main ways of approaching social policy currently – the welfare regime approach of Esping-Andersen (1990) and the new welfare economics arising out of mainstream, imperfect-information economics (with each emphasising risk in its own way).[5] From the perspective of the SoP approach to social policy, both of these suffer, if in very different ways, from unduly homogenising over contextually-

specific policies and practices that are differentiated by programme and country. This is so whether by appeal to ill-fitting ideal types of welfare regimes or more or less efficient incorporation of marginalised if optimising individuals into a situation of one type of market imperfection or another. Moreover, both implicitly eschew earlier political economy approaches to social policy and the welfare state that locate it in terms of the contradictory tensions between and within economic and social reproduction.

Conclusion

The SoP approach encompasses a considerably broader frame of analysis for consumption than most sector-specific research (and, in many ways, the approach offers a synthesis of such research, or at least of the factors covered by it, in focusing upon the rooted realities underpinning consumption and its cultures). It places consumption on the broader terrain of provisioning, where it belongs, particularly if we are to understand the shifting incidence and integration of the public and the private in norms of consumption and the corresponding impact of financialisation on who gets to consume what, how and with what meanings.

By locating consumption in the context of a chain of processes and structures brought about by relations between agents, the SoP approach opens the way for a more grounded interpretation of consumption, including policy impact/outcomes. First, SoPs are complex and they are context- and sector-specific, integrating relations across a multiplicity of agents with a diversity of structures, relations and processes. Each SoP is unique but that is not to say that there are not cross-cutting themes that can be observed, for example, in relation to financialisation. Although, in principle, the SoP approach displays some degree of neutrality towards the theory that should be deployed, and allows for theoretical differences across those who deploy it, the approach is not without theoretical implications. These include a

commitment to systemic, interdisciplinary analysis that is able to finesse the relationship between theory and specificity.

Second, the material culture of a commodity clearly affects consumption patterns due to the different material nature of different goods as well as the cultural values attached to them. Yet, major ideological shifts, for example, towards greater individualisation of society and expanded presence and influence of finance have influence across numbers of SoPs.

Third, policy outcomes are case-specific. The complex web of structures, agents, processes and relations means that the same policy will lead to different outcomes in each context, depending on the prevailing SoP in which it is implemented.

Fourth, history is significant. The prevailing state of affairs rests heavily on past forms of provision and the way in which these have informed the continuing evolution of both material and cultural aspects of provision.

Fifth, the state has a multi-faceted role in incorporating diverse agencies including branches of government, from central to local. Its influence goes beyond the obvious interventions such as sector policy, encompassing a range of policy channels, including environmental and financial legislation. Privatisation does not reduce the role of the state but changes it, usually from that of direct provider to regulator and enabler. State subsidies and cross-subsidies, sometimes implicit, affect the social equity of policy outcomes.

Finally, privatisation and financialisation are transforming consumption in the UK and elsewhere, making their incorporation into consumption studies imperative. Goods production and service delivery are now subject to the vagaries of shareholders that are interested in asset values, from the sale of social housing to the privatisation of water. Rather than serving consumption as such, pursuit of profitability is diverted towards financial engineering.

The SoP approach received considerable critical acclaim when first applied to the food and clothing sectors in the 1990s. Broadening the scope to what is traditionally known as the public sector can further our understanding of the parameters that shape the SoPs, with significant insight into the way in which these affect outcomes, particularly with regard to social equity, with implications for social policy. Application of the approach can be used to deepen understanding of the profound implications for consumption of privatisation and financialisation and situate these in the wider context of economic and social reproduction.

Notes

[TS: Insert End notes here]

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[2] For more on the material culture of financialisation, see the Special Issue introduced by Bayliss et al. (2017).

[3] www.demand.ac.uk

[4] Note that, despite being vital to the consumption of a major section of the population, pensions have been too mundane to be the subject of consumer theory!

[5] See Fine (2014).