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Consumption as a Social Process within Social Provisioning and Capitalism: Implications for Heterodox Economics

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The article discusses consumption as a social process that is a part of social provisioning and is in an evolutionary interplay with other social processes. The discussion is grounded in, but is not limited to the contributions of Thorstein Veblen. The first section delineates social provisioning as a framework for consumption inquiry. This section emphasizes that social provisioning is a part of collective life process embedded in culture and nature, and that it is comprised by two general sets of activities – those motivated by money and those that are not motivated by making money. The second section delineates features of capitalism as a system, so that it provides a social context for consumption inquiry. The third section formulates a categorization of social processes, one of which is the consumption process. Further, the section delineates the meaning and components of the concepts: social activities, institutions, and habits of life and thought. The fourth section applies these concepts to consumption social process in the specific context of capitalism. The section discusses consumption activities; institutions and systems of provision; and habits of life and thought – illustrating with examples obtained from various disciplines. The section introduces “gated consumption” as an example of a habit of life and thought. It is argued that the formulated analysis transcends the cultural-material dualism. Finally, the article draws implications of the offered analysis, concluding that the category of “consumers” is of little use to heterodox economics.

Keywords: Consumption Process; Social Process; Institutions; Consumption Activities; Social Provisioning; Habits of Life and Thought; Heterodox Economics; Class; Thorstein Veblen

JEL codes: B 52; B 54; D11; D30; Z 13
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Introduction

The general research agenda of Heterodox Economics can be described as a historical study and explanation of the social provisioning process¹. Heterodox economic analyses of contemporary economies are concerned with explanation of the historical process of social provisioning within the context of capitalism². Consumption is one of the elements of social provisioning, and it is more than its most visible outcomes – purchases that are usually formulated and observed as consumer choices and aggregate demand.

The present article offers a formulation of consumption process that transcends dualisms such as macro-micro economics, market-society, culture-economy, and society-nature. For the purpose the article locates consumption activities, institutions, and habits of life and thought within the broader social provisioning process, within capitalist relations, and within a system of processes that form a culture-nature life process. The analysis is grounded in, but not limited to the works of Thorstein Veblen, and seeks to contribute to the literature on social provisioning as an organizing concept in heterodox economics.

The first section emphasizes that social provisioning is a part of collective life process embedded in culture and nature, and that it is comprised by two general sets of activities – those motivated by money and those that are not motivated by making money. The second section delineates features of capitalism as a system, so that it provides a social context for consumption inquiry. The third section formulates a categorization of social processes, one of which is the consumption process. Further, the section delineates the meaning and components of the concepts: social activities, institutions, and habits of life and thought. The fourth section applies these concepts to consumption social process in the specific context of capitalism. The section discusses consumption activities; institutions and systems of provision; and habits of life and thought – providing examples obtained from various disciplines. Finally, the article draws implications of the offered analysis for heterodox economics

1. A Social Provisioning Frame of Consumption

Consumption inquiry ought to start with society for three main reasons. First, individuals are born and raised within a given to them (albeit non-static) circumstances. Second, no individual/group action takes place outside of a community. Third, no socio-economic outcome can be exclusively attributed to one individual or group.

The concept of social provisioning has been put forward by heterodox economists in efforts to offer a social, historical, open-ended, evolutionary analysis of the economy. Social provisioning opens avenues to explore varieties of contexts, social divisions, conflicts, and hierarchical power relations. The continuation of the life-process, human well-being, and ethical judgment are central to the concept. Since it encompasses non-market activities, culture, and ecosystems,

¹ For a bibliography on debates about heterodox economics, its history, and definitions see: <http://heterodoxnews.com/hed/works/>.

² This includes also contemporary societies whose social provisioning is not organized in a capitalist way, but who do have to deal with the global expansion of capitalism. Furthermore, while capitalism is not a monolithic system without variations, there are elements that make it a distinctive system, albeit an evolutionary one and geographically specific.

social provisioning allows for a broader and deeper formulation of economic activity, beyond the most visible occurrence of “market exchange” and beyond monetary production (Gruchy 1987; Nelson 1993; Dugger 1996; Power 2004; Lee 2009, 2011 a, b; Jo 2011; Lee and Jo 2011; Todorova 2013 a, b).

The inter-relational and historical content of the concept of social provisioning helps articulate how markets are constituted in social relations, culture and values, and nature, and how various activities of the economy are interconnected and evolve in a cumulative way. Provisioning is *social* because economic activities are based on social relations and socially generated knowledge that enables the creation of resources. That is, material provisioning is simultaneously social, and there is no real distinction between material and the cultural realms. Provisioning is a *process* because it involves continuous social activities that take place in a historical time.

At a most basic level the economy is founded by the interdependent production of inputs and outputs that provide for the material means of life. The social provisioning process gives rise to a total *social product*. At any point of time the system replaces the existing output, and produces more intermediate inputs and final goods and services, which is *social surplus* that goes to household social activities, private investment and government provision of goods and services (Lee and Jo 2011; Lee 2011b). Inputs and outputs are specific to the production of differentiated goods and services, and thus cannot be aggregated. Similarly, labor power embodies differentiated skills, and biological bodies and that ought to be reproduced, maintained, cultivated, and applied in the production of the various inputs and outputs; and consequently, it cannot be aggregated into a labor supply, and cannot be increased or withdrawn at will.

The social surplus is produced by all aspects of the economy involved in production. Thus, households are also producers of social surplus. They produce goods and services for consumption, and reproduce labor power which enters the production of social product, and thus of social surplus, a portion of which again goes to support households’ social activities. Consequently, everybody engaged in production contributes to the social surplus.

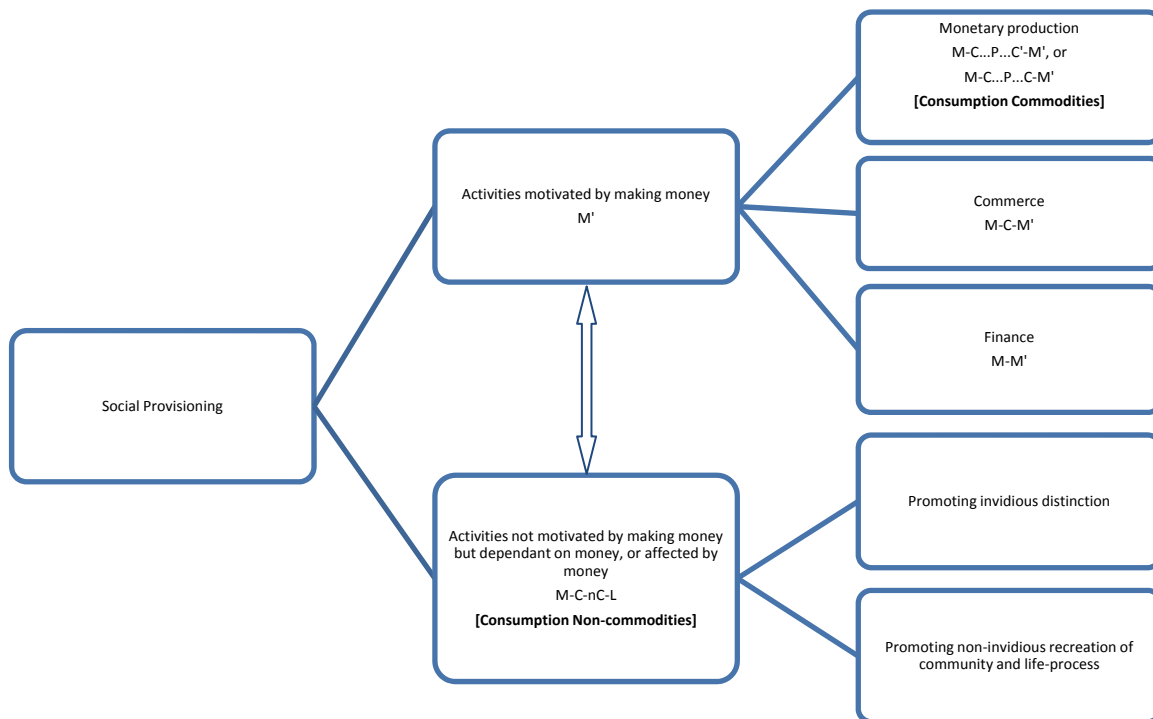
The social surplus is produced by all involved in production, but it is directed through *monetary activities*. These include monetary *production* and *finance*. In monetary production the central motive of undertaking production is salesmanship, or making money. Making goods that service livelihood is incidental to the monetary production process. Further, production need not occur in money-making activities (Veblen 1919: 97; Keynes 1933 [1983]; Dillard 1980; Henry 2003; Lee 2009)³. Finance on the other hand is not engaged in production, but in activities that secure “vested interest,” or *claims on the social surplus* (Veblen 1904; 1919; 1923; Hudson 2010).

Social provisioning is a broader category than monetary (market/commodity) production and finance. Specifically, as noted, non-waged caring and domestic labor is an integral part of social provisioning, and ought to be acknowledged from the beginning of analysis (Power 2004). Total social product includes commodity (produced for market exchange and driven by the motive of making money) and non-commodity (not for market) output. Categorization of the activities of

³ Keynes’s explicit concern and formulation of the tension between production and speculation deals only with production for the market, Veblen’s formulation of the economy is more readily accommodating to including goods and services generated through non-market activities as part of the social product. These are “industrial” in the sense that they further the life-process.

social provisioning is depicted by **Figure 1**. Marx’s notation is used to depict that money (M) purchases commodities (C) in order to engage in production and accumulate more money (M') through production (P). This can take two forms: $M-C...P...C'-M'$ or $M-C...P...C-M'$ where production actually does not increase the available commodity output, but still results in more money income to producers and sellers. This depiction of overall monetary production does not imply that at any one point of time a business enterprise ought to maximize profits. Financial activities skip production (M-M'). Activities that are not motivated by making money need money to buy commodities. Further, they produce non-commodities (nC) that sustain labor (L) as well as other aspects of human life. Consequently, “monetary” and “non-monetary” are not two separate spheres of production, but nonetheless are two distinctive types of activities with respect to motivation.

Figure 1. Categorization of Social Provisioning Activities within Capitalism



There are two distinct methods of valuation and criteria for determining efficiency that constitute social provisioning process. The instrumental (industrial) aspects of activities are based in “non-invidious” “workmanship,” “idle curiosity,” and “parental bent” including birthing, raising, and transferring knowledge (Veblen 1901; Todorova 2009; Sturgeon 2010; Waller 2013). Similarly, with respect to goods and services, instrumental attributes of outputs and inputs include durability, instrumental efficiency, safety, recreational capacity (Sturgeon 2010: 30-31). Ceremonial aspects on the other hand are demonstrated by “invidious distinction,” “salesmanship,” “pecuniary emulation,” “pecuniary canons of taste and beauty,” “conspicuous waste,” “conspicuous leisure,” and “conspicuous consumption,” “predation” – getting something for nothing (Veblen 1899; 1901; 1904; 1919; 1921; 1923).

Consequently, there is diversity within the social surplus, as there are two different methods of valuation that cause social activities, inputs and outputs have both industrial (serviceable) aspects that are oriented towards supporting the life process; and ceremonial aspects that promote invidious distinction and predation. This means that only a part of the total social product is oriented towards supporting the life-process⁴. **Table 1** depicts the nexus of motivation and valuation within social provisioning in classifying social activities⁵.

Table 1. Social Provisioning Activities within Capitalism: Motivation and Valuation

Motivation		Valuation	
		ceremonial	instrumental
Activities motivated by making money	<i>Production:</i>	business concern vendibility salesmanship invidious distinction	industrial concern engineering making “goods” non-invidious distinction
	<i>Finance:</i>	speculation vendibility salesmanship invidious distinction	
Activities not motivated by money (but dependant on/affected by money)		Invidious distinction	non-invidious recreation of community and life process

The “instrumental” quadrant of valuation includes “non-invidious distinction” – to note that distinction is necessary in evaluating workmanship. However, distinction can be used based solely on ceremonial valuation - “invidious”. To complicate further matters, workmanship can also be part of invidious distinction. An activity could be primarily organized for the purpose of

⁴ The ceremonial-instrumental dichotomy should not be conflated with the (problematic) productive-unproductive distinction made in classical political economy. The productive-unproductive distinction has been framed with respect to capital accumulation, however since here we are looking at a broader conception of the economy as a social provisioning process (which includes capital accumulation) embedded in culture and nature, this *dualism* is not useful within a social provisioning framework because it ultimately presumes that there are separate market and non-market *spheres* of society with clear-cut and sealed boundaries. On the other hand, ceremonial and instrumental aspects could be articulated both in market and in non-market activities, so this *dichotomy* has a broader application and does not preclude the conceptualization of the economy as a social provisioning process, while in fact it illuminates its conflicts (Todorova 2009).

⁵ Note that the Instrumental quadrant of valuation includes “non-invidious distinction” – to note that distinction is necessary in evaluating workmanship. However, distinction can be used based solely on ceremonial valuation - “invidious”. To complicate further matters, workmanship can also be part of invidious distinction. An activity could be primarily organized for the purpose of invidious distinction, and be executed very well with high degree of workmanship (see Veblen 1898; and Todorova 2009).

invidious distinction, and be executed very well with high degree of workmanship (see Veblen 1898; and Todorova 2009).

Household consumption includes commodities produced through monetary production, as well as goods and activities that are not commodities, but the provision of which may necessitate commodities (Charusheela and Danby 2006; Todorova 2009). “Non-market” activities such as domestic work and care contribute to the survival of households as going concerns and to the social product, and consequently are part of the social provisioning process and production of social surplus. They are organized with the use of labor power and (commodity and non-commodity) inputs. “Non-market” “outputs” do not generate income flows and are qualitatively different from market goods and services. However, their “production” requires the purchase of commodities and thus of income flows⁶. Thus, “non-market” refers to motivation, and does not mean that this sort of production takes place in a separate sphere, and that it has no relation to market production and money⁷.

The concept of social provisioning is in contrast to analyses based on market exchange, which construct harmony and symmetry between supply and demand, and (while allowing for market imperfections) do not theorize of classes and conflict (Bharadwaj 1986). The conceptual symmetry between production and demand allows for the formulation of the mainstream notions of “consumer surplus” and “producer surplus” that replace “social surplus,” conceive of “consumer sovereignty,” and consequently circumvent discussion of class, conflict, *and* social provisioning.

Finally, social provisioning is evolutionary – meaning that there is no pre-determined “optimal” end. The focus then is on what Veblen called the *collective life process*, rather than on allocation and individual choices. “... [T]he phenomena of human life occur only as phenomena of the life of a group or community” (Veblen 1909, 629; Hayden, 2006, 21). “Community” or “collective” does not imply “harmonious” relations. Agency within collective/communal life gives rise to power relations, hierarchies and social conflicts. Rather, “collective” means that there are no factors of production denoting individual marginal productivity. Distribution is determined outside of market exchange - by institutions rooted in class-oriented values. Markets, public policy, and the incomes that they generate, are only manifestations of these values, meaning that distribution of consumption goods among households, and of income flows is not determined by productivity. Consequently, analysis of consumption ought to unveil its underlining social context. To that end, the following section delineates defining features of a capitalist social context.

2. The Capitalist Social Context of Consumption

This section delineates features of a *capitalist social context* of consumption inquiry. The outlined features are some of the basic elements that distinguish a capitalist system; additional

⁶ Households engage in production, but they are institutionally different than firms (Todorova 2009).

⁷ It should be noted that activities not motivated by money can promote “invidious distinction” – such as nationalism, conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure; as well as non-invidious recreation of community and life process (see discussion on “feminine aggression” and ceremonial aspects of households in Todorova 2009).

characteristics could introduce context-specific variations. The premise is that while capitalism is not a monolithic system without variations, there are elements that make it a distinctive system, albeit an evolutionary and geographically specific one.

First, economic activities are based on *class* relations stemming from private ownership of assets that represent claims on social product. Society's usage of tools, skills, labor, and knowledge is always communally generated, and as delineated, the entire social provisioning process gives rise to the social surplus. However, private ownership of assets secures individualized income streams that claim social product and restrain or preclude access to means of livelihood. Consequently, economic class ought to be an analytical category of consumption inquiry. Consumption patterns emerge out of the effort to establish and maintain households as going concerns and social networks within the existing class relations and institutions. With respect to economic activity there are two broad classes: those who do not own or control assets, and hence do not receive income flows, and those who receive such incomes.

There are varieties of ways to frame class relations. Veblen's class categorization - 'the kept classes' and the 'common man' - is not identical to, but has an affinity to that of Marx⁸. The *common men* are "common" in the respect that they are not vested with right to "get something for nothing" - what Veblen (2005 [1919]: 162) calls "free income."

The *kept classes* are: capitalists, rentier/leisure class, elite professionals, and political elite, who are the *ruling class* actively seeking to preserve their social power through collectively engaging in various economic, political, and social activities. They exercise agency through the institutions of the business enterprise, non-governmental organizations, the media, and state, schools, think-tanks, foundations, and international organizations. Further, the lives of working class households are affected and largely directed by the ruling class households not only by decisions about production and distribution of the social surplus, but also by the cultural influence of the "kept classes." This includes the evolution and emulation of reputable consumption patterns and discourses.

Individuals and households who have no choice but to sell their labor power are part of the working class, or "common men" as they could not decide at a whim to stop selling their labor power for two main reasons. First, their financial positions are not sufficiently liquid, and if they stop selling their labor for wages they could not maintain their households as going concerns. The result will be poverty - financial, social, psychological, and biological trauma, and death. Second, in order to be able to live without selling their labor, workers would need sufficient collateral or other ways to finance the purchase of capital goods and financial assets. Alternatively, those households would need a significant bequest of asset portfolio to join the *rentier (leisure) class*. However, their class mobility is inhibited⁹. Some members of the

⁸ "It is a division between those who control the conditions of work and the rate and volume of output and to whom the net output of industry goes as free income, on the one hand, and those others who have the work to do and to whom a livelihood is allowed by these persons in control, on the other hand" (Veblen 2005 [1919]: 161). Thus, it ought to be reminded that *radical class analyses* need not be Marxist, but they need not be anti-Marxist either. Institutionalism is a case in point.

⁹ For analysis of intergenerational and short term income mobility in the USA see: Hertz (2006), and The State of Working America, Mobility, *Economic Policy Institute*, available at: <http://stateofworkingamerica.org/subjects/mobility/>

working class receive income flows generated from capital gains – but these are not sufficient to maintain them, so they have to continue on selling their labor power, and thus are categorized as workers. Also, small family business enterprises are part of the working class – since they provide mostly subsistence for their households.

The *leisure class* is constituted by those who are financially liquid so they could choose not to work and still have a (pecuniary) superior life-style, and freedom of action. Veblen’s definition of the leisure class as engaged in acquisition rather than in production can include today’s money managers and those who rely largely on income from speculation. To the extent that the leisure class engages in work in a permanent manner, it is in the occupations characterized by “a complex and varied abstract manipulation of symbols”¹⁰. Since wage earnings are not essential for the leisure class this work can be treated as a consumption activity.

The leisure/rentier class is not to be conflated with the *financially dependent class* - children, disabled, retired persons, and some partners who are supported by spouses engaged in market work. Those who are financially dependent need to consume a portion of the social surplus in order to survive, but do not participate currently in monetary production. Some of that population may be a part of the future labor force (children), others have contributed to the generation of the social surplus and knowledge in the past (retirees), and yet others are engaged in household activities that support the social provisioning process in the present, and are working but are not wage workers. The commonality among these segments of the population is that at a given point of time they need to be financially supported by those who currently are paid to produce the current social surplus. This support can be through allotment of workers’ wages, or through various transfers (government, donations, kin and other networks).

Unemployment insurance recipients are part of the working class who were unable to sell their labor power, but have participated and could eventually be engaged in paid production. Welfare recipients are also part of the working class since they are also required to work for pay. In cases where this requirement is absent – they are part of the financially dependent class – for example receiving payments from the state to fund the purchase of inputs needed for providing care for household members such as children. Whenever providing care for their household members, these workers are in fact participating in the current production of the social surplus. Similarly, spouses/partners who engage in domestic non-waged production are financially dependent, but currently participate in the production of surplus. This is also valid for children in the case of child labor.

Spouses/partners who do not participate in domestic non-waged production fall into two categories. First, members of ruling class households who are maintained by another household member’s capital gains proceeds are part of the capitalists’ or rentiers’ “vicarious consumption activities” (Veblen 1899). The second category would be those who do not participate in domestic non-waged production, but who cannot be classified as leisure class because they do not have a superior life-style. Thus, it is important to note that the leisure class includes those who have a claim on social surplus without having to work, can engage in a superior life-style, and have freedom of action allowed them by liquidity.

¹⁰ This is an occupational characteristic identified in Bowles (2013). He offers a categorization of class that includes also a “skill matrix” that specifies further differentiations among workers based on labor.

The ruling class directs the generation and distribution of the social surplus, greatly affects public policy, and influences the broader culture through a greater access to the workings of media, education, policymaking, among others, and through *control* over employment, production, and salesmanship decisions. While business, administrators, academics, and policy-makers use the notion of “stakeholders” to allude to the possibility of “agency,” it should be noted that given capitalist class relations, unions, consumer organizations, and community groups are only in the position to *respond* to business decisions¹¹. Consequently, workers do participate in various degrees in political processes, but their power with respect to direction of the social surplus in terms of its level and composition and the corresponding income flows is very limited.

The economic necessity to sell labor power impacts significantly the daily activities of households, as well as their livelihood, lifestyles, and identities. However, class does not preclude a further elaboration of social complexity, cultural and other variations among people and localities, and other ways of stratification. Consequently, the category of class need not strip individuality, variety of identities, and agency from inquiry. On the other hand, without the notion of class, social conflicts and hierarchical power relations within the capitalist social provisioning system would be underexplored.

Second, the capitalist class, the state, and global financial institutions control the *volume and composition of the social product*. In addition, they simultaneously determine the level and composition of employment, wage rates, and profit mark-ups, and thus control access to much of the social product. One implication is that the social product is not a given entity in search of realization, rather it is determined by effective demand together with creation and articulation of consumer needs (Lee 2011b; Jo and Lee 2011). A second implication is that production of social surplus is not constrained by households’ savings. On the contrary, households’ activities and their financial positions - ability to save - are constrained by the desire of the business enterprises and the state for social surplus. Commodity production emerges out of effective demand, and non-commodity production is affected by effective demand.

Consequently, in the capitalist economy reciprocal relations within and among households (such as cooking and care for family members) cannot be sustained without access to commodities obtained through money. Non-market activities could serve as a buffer to partially offset worsened households’ financial positions, and livelihood, but only to a point, because households must obtain money through participation in the market process (Todorova 2009). Further, labor power is itself a socially produced “input” – it is not produced within a private domain of a household. Individual households are financially responsible for, and emotionally vested in raising children. However, their reproductive activities are affected and constrained by monetary production and state output both of which determine the level and composition of income and employment. This is valid even to a higher degree when households undertake and service debt. In the process of market expansion, business enterprises, particularly their financial branches, and financial institutions, enable households to temporarily circumvent that constraint and to ameliorate the accompanying inequalities. As a result, households become indebted and

¹¹ Responses are the function of collective action, such as unionization. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2012, the union membership rate was 11.3 %; in 1983, the first year for which comparable union data are available, the union membership rate was 20.1 %.

financially fragile in order to meet socially evolving needs that cannot be supported fully by their incomes (Parenteau 2006; Brown 2008; Pressman and Scott 2009; Todorova 2009).

Working and dependent classes demand consumption goods out of evolving sets of *commodities*; they do not command their level and composition, as well as the development and usage of resources. Management goals formed in a particular regulatory and institutional context (both of which are politically influenced by the business enterprises' activities) determine the available commodities for household activities. Consequently, a critique of consumer sovereignty is not about constructing consumers as passive victims of persuasion, but about the practice of obscuring the fact that market governance and power relations describe the normal functioning of capitalism rather than exceptional "market failures". Consumer sovereignty is the conventional wisdom that workers (re-imagined as consumers) could equally partake in the direction of social provisioning that in turn is appropriately re-formulated as an asocial allocation of resources¹².

However, the working and financially dependent classes have a room for *agency* in consumption through collectively organizing social activities of provisioning that attempt to reduce the reliance on commodities by cultivating non-market forms of social relations. Consequently, within the social provisioning framework, agency exists in the possibility of "*non-invidious recreation of community*" (Tool 1985 [1979], 299). *The possibility for such agency can be articulated only if it is recognized that the social product is comprised both by commodities and by goods and services produced outside of monetary motive (including but not limited to households and states).*

Third, *chronic dissatisfaction* is cultivated, and together with invidious distinction and emulation generate *systemic and growing waste* – a concept referring not only to unused by-products, but to "expenditure that does not serve human life or human well-being on the whole...and occurs on the ground of an invidious pecuniary comparison" (Veblen 1996 [1899] 60), and represents an income, or a vested interest. Individuals and going concerns deem such incomes, products and activities necessary, deserving, and worth, rather than wasteful, since they help secure status. For that reason, waste can be discussed and addressed only at the level of social provisioning and not at the level of individual choices¹³.

The expansion of monetary production depends on the generation of "*conspicuous waste*". "If production is to increase, the wants must be effectively contrived." (Galbraith 1958, 129) Business enterprises do not respond passively to autonomous consumer needs, but actively seek to create wants and needs through development of new products and marketing campaigns. In doing so they are not acting independently from the rest of society, thus they seek to incorporate and respond in various ways to social attitudes, beliefs, and events. However, these responses are compatible with the business goals and the logic of monetary production¹⁴. The problem is that

¹² For a critiques of consumer sovereignty and the use of "the imagery of choice" see for example Joan Robinson (1969 [1933], xii; and J. K. Galbraith (1973, 223).

¹³ This is also valid for the special form of waste "conspicuous consumption" (Todorova 2013b).

¹⁴ That is, business enterprises engage in "corporate social responsibility" as part of their market governance strategy (Jo 2011; Brei and Böhm 2011).

the continuation of the business enterprise as a going concern need not be guided by goals of sustaining the life process, as it thrives on the expansion of conspicuous waste.

Fourth, class power relations are masked by *inequality of life-styles* within the working class¹⁵; as well as by the notions of *consumer* and *tax-payer* as central organizing categories of discourse. Socio-economic distinctions within the working class obscure the similarities in position as workers. Social categories such as “middle class” and “upper middle class,” “professionals,” and “the creative class” emerge to denote belonging to life-styles. They are reference categories that signify *groups* of people on the basis of consumption patterns, education, living quarters, neighborhoods, and occupations – in other words *social class*, but not based on *economic class* relations. The consequence is that consumption-based distinction among such socio-cultural characterizations disarticulates the fundamental commonality within the working class – a common necessity to sell their labor power in order to obtain money wages, and creates a group of “consumers”.

The notions of the consumer and the taxpayer have the same effect of obscuring economic, as well as social class relations. The emergence of consumers and taxpayers as analytical categories are historically specific phenomena (Perelman 2005; Trantmann and Taylor 2006). Contemporary framing of issues in terms of these categories redirects discourse away from class relations and towards market exchange; away from collective life process, and towards privatization and concerns about individual cost; and away from social provisioning and towards *neoliberal subjectivity*.

Fifth, the state is active in creating and organizing markets that support the existing power relations. One method is the creation of mass consumers, or “middle-class” with expanding purchasing ability through growth of the wage bill - including public goods and services that reduce household expenditures (Glickman 1997). Another method is through privatization and marketization of space, resources, social activities, and institutions such as media and education, and financialization resulting in growing household indebtedness and precarious wages (Galbraith 2008; Wray 2008; Hudson 2010; Bayliss, Fine, and Robertson 2013). Neither entails maintaining full employment, and both sustain existing power relations.¹⁶

While the first method has disappeared through “the Keynesian devolution” (Galbraith 2008), the second is contributing to the expansion and entrenchment of capitalist relations in all elements of life. The state adopts pecuniary criteria of valuation, which leads to what J. K. Galbraith called *social imbalance* – a hyper growth in commodities and a restriction of the public. “Every corner of the public psyche is canvassed by some of the nation’s most talented citizens to see if the desire for some merchantable product can be cultivated. No similar process operates on behalf of the non-merchantable services of the state.” (Galbraith 1958, 205) Indeed these non-commodities are restricted and gutted out from within the state in a predatory fashion.

¹⁵See Assena and Wolf (2004) for distribution of wealth in the USA; Wolf (2007) for wealth inequality and rising US household debt; Ajit Zacharias, Wolf, and Masterson (2009) on estimates of income inequality; and Allegretto (2011) on widening wealth gap.

¹⁶ For explanation of why full employment is not maintained see Kalecki 1943 [1990]; Todorova 2013a). For that reason some prefer the term capitalist state (Lee and Jo 2011). My problem with that term is that it seems to rule out any non-capitalist agency through the state.

Predation and aggression underline and enhance monetary pursuit. As far the existence of the ruling class is supported, these are normalized, cultivated, and elevated as morally right personal attitudes and as criteria for social practices and policies that promote invidious distinction, acquisition, and dominance (Veblen 1899). Rent, profits, and wages are claims on the social surplus, and are distributed based on pecuniary valuation, and not based on a technological measurement. These socially determined claims are possible however only because of the application of *industrial valuation* in society as a whole, which gives the technological (industrial) grounds of social provisioning, including birthing, raising, and educating people (Veblen 1921 p. 43). Both market and non-market output generate social surplus. Furthermore, the generation of monetary flows is supported by relations and matter outside of markets. In efforts to secure its position the ruling class seeks to control these by continuous enclosures, extraction, and marketization (Marx 1990 [1976]; Veblen 1923; Polanyi 1957 [1944]; Galbraith 2008; Robertson 2008; LeBaron 2010; Nadal 2011). Consequently, a social provisioning view of the economy does not demarcate separate spheres of social life – private, public, the market, the social, and nature. Further, all social activities are interconnected and simultaneously form, and are influenced by, institutions and habits of life and thought.

The delineated features of capitalism provide a context for consumption inquiry. Each of these features has a bearing on analyzing consumption, and results from historically specific interplay of social processes. The following section delineates categories of social processes that constitute a culture-nature life-process. That sets the grounds for a section that zooms in on consumption as a social process.

3. Social Processes

A social process denotes continuous interconnected activities, evolution, and agency through collective action. The interplay of social processes in historical time gives rise to a *culture-nature life-process* that has a spatial specificity. The section locates the process of social provisioning within a system of processes. Four categories of processes are identified. One of them contains social processes that constitute social provisioning (**Table 2**).

First, the two interrelated components of social provisioning (monetary production and not-for-money activities) are underlined by evolution of geographies and by biological life-processes (bodies and ecosystems). These are also affected by the social provisioning process (for example by deforestation; suburban sprawl; tourism; contraception). Geographies and biological systems are integral part of social processes and the formation of institutions and habits of life and thought.

The **second** type includes social processes that constitute *social provisioning* and include: care; labor; recreation; consumption; mobility and residence; communication; expression and persuasion; cultivation and transmission of knowledge, memories and tools; undertaking; resource creation and usage; machine process; supervision, surveillance and direction; threat and punishment; distribution; deprivation; waste; exchange/gift; debt-credit; and violence. The listed processes are delineated on the basis of distinctive social activities in social provisioning, which may be organized differently whenever motivated or not by money, and may take an altogether

different form in each one of the two methods of social provisioning (e.g. wage labor vs. unpaid domestic work, or public good).

Table 2. Social Processes: Categorization

geographies and biological life-processes	[Social Provisioning] Can be identified as distinct activities at the individual level	Not based on a distinct social activity	
		Affected by, but do not operate through specific going concerns	Operate through going concerns
ecosystems	care	gender	citizenship and legal residence
bodies	labor	<i>social</i> class	<i>economic</i> class
landscapes	recreation	race, ethnicity, and nation	ownership
physical spaces/buildings	consumption	language	contracts
	mobility and residence		worship
	communication, expression, and persuasion		kinship
	cultivation and transmission of knowledge, memories, tools		
	undertaking		
	resource creation and usage		
	machine process		
	supervision, surveillance, and direction		
	threat and punishment		
	distribution		
	deprivation		
	waste		
	exchange/gift		
	debt-credit		
violence			

The **third** type of processes are: gender; race, ethnicity, and nation; social class, and language, which are social processes that do not have a specific institutional setting but influence and are being influenced by institutional settings. Some of these processes also have various biological components whose meaning in turn could be socially (re)constructed (and prescribed whenever such may not exist). Those are not merely given demographic characteristics that could be modeled as dummy variables, but social processes involving specific habits of life and thought, conventions, various social activities, social beliefs, discourse, and symbols. Consequently, the proposed categories are not fixed and given, but historically specific and emergent.

The **fourth** type of social processes includes: economic class; citizenship and legal residency; ownership; contracts; worship; and kinship. These are processes that exist through specific institutional settings that vary in form through time and space - business enterprise, state, religious authorities, courts, and households. For example, citizenship is a process that unfolds through the institution of the state, and involves habits of life and thought such as borders and passports; and social beliefs, personal attitudes, and conventions of superiority. Within capitalism economic class is structured by the business enterprise and the state that direct and control the production of social surplus. Kinship is structured around various forms of tribal, familial and household institutions, and may be sanctioned by a state.

All of these processes are evolutionary and intersected in various ways and degrees. Further, social processes do not emerge simultaneously at one point of time, and do not evolve in the same pace and direction. Their evolution is multilineal and non-teleological. Using Veblen's evolutionary model, emerging and evolving social processes can be seen as based on the following *human proclivities* (or "*instincts*"): "parental bent", "idle curiosity", "workmanship", "predation", "invidious distinction," and "emulation".¹⁷ Workmanship is a sense of "the demerit of futility, waste, or incapacity," and a concern for continuation of the group life process (Veblen 1899 [1944]: 29). Human proclivities that reinforce the instinct of workmanship include the "innate predisposition to parental bent" (a "resilient solicitude for the welfare of the young and the prospective fortunes of the group" (1914 [1964]: 48) and "idle curiosity" (a drive to seek knowledge apart from any ulterior vested interest (Veblen 1914 [1964]: 5; Edgell 2001: 81). Predation is an exploit by acquisition and seizure (Veblen 1899 [1994]: 10), and gives rise to invidious distinction that is hierarchical in nature and supports predatory activities. There are various methods of invidious distinction – such as through employments and hierarchical division of labor, wealth, and consumption (Veblen 1899 [1994]). Various expressions of human proclivities can be deduced from social processes by studying social activities, identifying habits of life and thought, and analyzing institutions, thus providing insights about the character and direction of a particular institutional change.

A social process is most generally comprised by the interplay of habits of life and thought, social activities, and institutions. In the present formulation, *habits of life and thought* are based in social processes, as well as indicate the emergence of a new social process. For example, colonization is an observable historically specific habit of life and thought that is connected to the evolution of the social process of "race." Furthermore, a habit of life and thought means evolution of existing social processes – for example colonization had bearing on consumption process. Thus, habits of life and thought are specific expressions of the social processes. The

¹⁷ See Waller (2013) for a concise discussion of Veblen's formulation of instincts.

concept indicates that practice and ideas are inseparable. Habits of *life* and thought emphasizes that Veblen's "habits of thought" do not exist only in individuals' minds and are constituted in social practices. For example, racism, sexism, nationalism, and conspicuous consumption are habits of life and thought comprised not only by personal attitudes and behavior, but by institutionalized practices, symbols, and discourse. They cannot be explained by individual acts of violence, discrimination, and consumers' preferences.

Personal attitudes are only components of habits of life and thought, and may or may not result in individual action and social activities. One may have sexist personal attitudes and still may apply restraints (entirely or in certain degrees and contexts as a result of socialization into manners) and not engage in sexist behavior. However, this does not make sexism as a habit of life and thought non-existent. Infact, by engaging in social activities, an individual could be part of sexism in ways that he/she does not conceive. Sexism, racism, and nationalism have their origins in, as well as manifest evolution of gender, race, and citizenship processes. Further, their complex interplay and interaction with class and other processes give rise to various historically specific conventions (for example, raced/classed/gendered paid domestic work; and advertising promoting sexism) and habits of life and thought (segregation).

Habits of life and thought are formed through a complex of context-specific and evolving *conventions* – how things are done and evaluated. Conventions are elements of institutions and include procedures and practices that are formulated on the bases of working rules. The interplay of conventions, personal attitudes, action, patterns of behavior, social activities organized by or mediated through going concerns and discourse give rise to habits of life and thought. For example, the conventions of "reduced margins of safety" in lending and borrowing, and the shorter planning span of business enterprises are based on the *procedures* of: securitization; bank fees, commissions, and trading as sources of profits; flexibility of labor and subcontracting; reliance on credit scoring in lending; and the switch to define contribute retirement plans (Kregel Brown 2008; Kregel 2008). The second component of conventions is *working rules* that include legal statutes, contracts, legislation, tax codes, and regulations (such as consumer protection provisions; financial regulation; and tax exemptions). For example, one of the working rules that allowed for the financialization of non-financial corporations and households' balance sheets was global financial deregulation. Financialization as a habit of life and thought constitutes evolution of the debt-credit social process, but also of class, labor, production, innovation, race, and consumption processes¹⁸. Importantly, explorations into this habit of thought could mean identifying other connections. The implication is that a habit of life and thought is part of the evolution of multiple social processes.

Conventions are based on values, as well as convey values to individuals who have *perceptions*. Habits control perceptions (Sturgeon 2010, 14). In turn habits are based on interaction of experience, human proclivities, and the social and natural environment that are also affected by social processes. Perceptions are the foundation of formulating problems and action. When reflective thought occurs due to doubt or available alternatives, action departs from habit, and

¹⁸ For example see: Parenteau (2001); Orhangazi (2007); Cohen (2008); Hudson (2010); and Bayliss, Fine and Robertson (2013).

involves deliberation - inquiry and judgment (Sturgeon 2010: 16). Both are based on the existing “social fabric matrix” that emerges out of the evolution of social processes¹⁹.

Judgment is based upon a *conventional wisdom* (Galbraith 1958) – a knowledge claim and a widely accepted matter of fact understanding of how things work based on “myth”. Collective actions based on conventional wisdom support the interests of the ruling class. For example, it is a conventional wisdom that financial markets are instrumental for efficient allocation of resources; and that sovereign governments borrow their own currencies, and can run out of money, while consumers are sovereign and determine production. All of these are contested by economic inquiry. Conventional wisdom is reinforced by academic theories and concepts – for example: efficient market hypothesis; consumer sovereignty; commodity theory of money; that is why it is a knowledge claim. Conventional wisdom and discourse express cultural values and social beliefs.

A *social belief*, is a shared conviction that does not necessarily make knowledge claims, rather it serves as a center of gravity for a sense of unity among people, as mechanism of coping, and as motivation and justification for (in)action. A social belief could be interpreted and acted upon in varieties of ways. For example, the American Dream is a social belief that has been articulated in a particular way in the politics of “the ownership society,”²⁰ – a *rhetorical construct* used as a justification for financial deregulation and privatization. The difference between habits of life and thought and a rhetorical construct is that rhetorical constructs are discourse that do not describe reality but create a vision, or a frame of perceiving. An effective rhetorical construct may encompass an amalgamation of conventional wisdoms, social beliefs, expert language, as well as facts.

Symbols, norms, networks, and conventions (including working rules and procedures) are put forward by the social activities of going concerns. All of these together constitute *institutions*. All elements of institutions are connected to discourses that in turn affect thought and action. Business enterprises, households, the state, global organizations, religion, schooling and research, media, foundations, and fashion are examples of institutions. Institutions represent “...collective action in control and liberation of individual action” (Commons 1931: 648) that gives rise to conventions, symbols, norms, discourses, and habits of life and thought. Institutions involve valuation - instrumental (based on “tools” and inquiry), and ceremonial (based on “myth” and judgment). Further, institutions are characterized by patterns of social activities and social relations that are based on habit and repetitive social activities resulting in some degree of stability. Deliberation in terms of judgment and inquiry breaks the patterns, and is an expression of agency that could result in progressive or regressive institutional change (Bush 1987; Todorova 2009; Sturgeon 2010).

Institutions emerge out of social processes as answers to questions of social provisioning. For example, one way to direct production is through the activities of the business enterprise. Corporate media is one way to communicate events and to construct meanings. Beauty pageants

¹⁹ See chart presented by Sturgeon (2010: 16). For a formulation of the social fabric matrix see Hayden (2006). The formulation here differs slightly, as my objective is to connect an existing social fabric matrix to the evolution of historical social processes.

²⁰ See Wray (2005) for a detailed discussion of the politics of ownership society.

are one way to assign worth to people. Schooling in exchange for money is one way to transmit knowledge and conventional wisdom. Some institutions are unique to capitalism – such as the business enterprise²¹ and stock exchange trading. Others take a specific form within capitalism (capitalist) state; and (corporate) media. Still, others are present in various, but not in all systems and not in a uniform way (households; religion; beauty pageants). Schooling as an institution varies in forms but has a universal presence in all systems – people ought to be cared for and taught as they grow. None of these refer just to organizations, while all involve some institutional settings and the maintenance of going concerns.

Going concerns engage in continuous, relatively stable *social activities* organized around habit. Social activities are the ways through which a going concern achieves viable association. A difficulty in carrying on a social activity could mean a threat to the going concern, or a change in its characteristics through habit adjustment²².

Humans experience viable association through common beliefs and symbols (Hayden 2006, 21; Hall, 1997, 4-5). Institutions encompass going concerns with social activities, networks, and conventions (including working rules and procedures), as well as symbols, norms, and discourses that they help create. For example, the institution of the household is comprised by going concerns; varieties of acceptable norms of internal relations; external networks; social activities; conventions (including obligations and practices); and various symbols of morality and success that are connected to social beliefs and the activities of other institutions. Discourses explain and justify the activities and relations of one or more institutions.

Common socialization is what makes symbols recognizable (Hayden 2006: 22). Common socialization does not imply homogeneity but enough shared elements, so that common symbols emerge. Further, rather than blank slates, or empty minds, socialization involves human predispositions (as delineated above). Socialization takes place through the activities of going concerns and the presence of specific habits of life and thought such as conspicuous consumption and financialization.

To identify an institution, one has to identify going concerns with social activities that help create symbols and discourse, and that promote norms, social beliefs, and personal attitudes. Mutually recognized *symbols* are part of collective action. An expensive product is a symbol of success; specific (and varied) body measurements or manner of dress are symbols of beauty. Within capitalist provisioning systems symbols are constructed in terms of monetary valuation as “pecuniary strength” and “pecuniary beauty,” and are part of “pecuniary canons of taste” and serve as moral *norms* – “canons of decency” in their particular form of “pecuniary standards”

²¹ As noted, institution refers not just to an organization. For example, the business enterprise as an institution includes various types of organizations with particular ownership and control, motivation, managerial and administrative structure, long range planning including pricing, product design and differentiation, market governance, corporate image building, and accounting and other informational flows. Further, the institution of the business enterprise includes business infrastructure including lobbying and non-governmental organizations, technocrats and their constructed discourse, government agencies concerned with business interests. The business enterprise as an institution is then a mechanism for capitalists and rentiers to direct the social surplus and obtain wealth and power and thus their reproduction as economic classes (Lee 1998; 2009).

²² Households as going concerns stand out as having biological constraints that clearly are crucial for viable association. Could then the notion of going concern be extended also to ecosystems?

(Veblen 1899). The formulation and establishment of norms is through institutions. For example, beauty pageants and stock exchange trading are institutions – they are not only going concerns that seek viable association (through lobbying or promotional activities), but they put forward and promote norms of social worthiness, prescribe appropriate behavior and personal attitudes, and create/reinforce symbols.

Social provisioning implies creation and maintenance of social relations, and thus certain stability of social activities. Through *deliberation*, social activities could be altered or organized to change or establish working rules and procedures. Individuals may direct social activities and participate in formulating rules and procedures of the institutional settings. However, there are *degrees of agency* – some individuals make decisions that direct the social surplus, and others choose between paper or plastic bags at the cash registry; set prices; select who to hire; dress provocatively; vote; or a combination of these, among others. Individuals may have many *identities*, and engage in various *behavior* to express these identities, but at any point of time they occupy a position in the economic class structure which determines *the extent* of their actions. Consequently, the role of economic class process cannot be understated especially with respect to determination and directing of the social surplus, and the economic compulsion, pointed out by Marx, to sell ones' labor. This does not mean that individuals' lives are predetermined, but that individual actions (expressed for example by choices and patterns of behavior) are always in the context of working rules and institutions that precede the particular individual(s), and thus individuals are socialized. People participate in communities, networks, organizations and are part of going concerns, albeit in various degrees and manner. They are *agents with standing*²³ who occupy certain positions that are related to their economic class, and act within a culture-nature life-process. Individuals can contribute to changes in norms by their behavior in social activities. However, in order to change working rules and procedures within institutional settings they have to engage in a collective action.

Consequently, none of the following categories – symbols, identities, organizations, (systems of) rules, personal attitudes, social beliefs, (social) preferences, social activities, individual/group behavior, tastes, and choices are adequate as categories of analysis standing on their own and outside of social processes. In order to discuss concrete issues of consumption, particular habits of life and thought ought to be identified. Habits of life and thought come to be through collective action – institutions and can be discerned through inquiry into social activities. Habits of life and thought are grounded in social processes and represent an evolution of social processes. Next, we zoom on consumption as a social process and identify a number of habits of life and thought that are part of this process.

4. Consumption Process

Consumption process is a part of the production and reproduction of the outlined social provisioning process and of a culture-nature life-process. It is connected to the rest of social processes listed above. This section delineates consumption activities, institutions, systems of provision of goods and services, and specific habits of life and thought as parts of consumption process. The objective is to provide the grounds for a context-specific research that explores the

²³ This concept is used by Edward Nell (1998).

social provisioning process. Each one of the elements of consumption process could serve as a starting point for formulation of a specific research question.

4.1. Consumption Social Activities

The starting point for formulating a social process is *activity*. Acts are only a part of activities, as there are always arrangements of the way acts are conducted. These arrangements precede the act and are the result of collective action. Consequently, activities are always social – meaning not only that people are connected, but also that activities are historical in nature. In other words, acts are conducted by individuals; but activities are organized by going concerns on the basis of historically established institutional settings.

Consequently, consumption activities cannot be reduced to individual acts, such as choices/purchases. Then, there is the question of demarcating various social activities. If activities are not to be reduced to acts, than how are they different from each other? Specific answers to problems that emerge out of the life process demarcate social activities. Caring, working, recreation, studying, exploration, organizing, aggression, lending/borrowing, traveling/migration/transportation, consumption, and disposal are all social activities that address the continuation of life-process in particular and non-interchangeable ways. For example, one cannot fully replace caring for somebody by purchasing commodities. Neither could one care for somebody without commodities (given a capitalist context). Similarly, borrowing cannot completely replace wage incomes from work; and studying a doctrine does not replace exploration. Consequently, these are different, albeit related activities.

The relatedness among social activities is one of the reasons they should be viewed as parts of social processes. For example, consumption of a good is related most obviously to the activities of transportation, work, recreation, and disposal, but possibly in various contexts and degrees to aggression and borrowing/lending. All of these are socially organized in a specific manner, which leads us to the second reason for locating social activities within social processes. As noted, social activities are not isolated occurrences, and take place within institutional settings that are established over time as a result of addressing various problems emerging out of the life-process.

A *consumption act* such as eating could be a part of various consumption activities – eating out; preparing food at home; eating at a soup kitchen, a fair, or at a celebration. The consumption act itself is often not the sole purpose and meaning of the consumption activity. Even when a consumption act is a lone event, it could be viewed as a part of consumption social activities. Consumed products had to be purchased from a shared space that in itself is socially organized. Individuals may be part of consumption activities even if they do not engage in consumption acts. They could participate in a consumption activity - shopping - without actually purchasing a product. Further, there is diversity within general consumption activities (shopping; eating and drinking). Shopping online or at various venues are two different experiences that are directly connected to other activities and to habits of life and thought within the economy. Furthermore, interplay with other processes, for example with social and economic class, results in various and contrasting experiences of “eating out” (Bourdieu 1984; Warde and Martens 2000; Wurgaft 2008). Consumption activities define various lifestyles and are central to the process of invidious

distinction while being part of other processes such as gender and production (Hesse-Biber et. al. 2006; Veblen 1899; Todorova 2009).

Further, consumption activities are contingent on infrastructure and other social activities such as: schooling, work, recreation, and networking. First, the provision of commodities is intrinsically connected to the provision of public goods. An expenditure on public infrastructure could be prompted by the desire to sell commodities; and the existing public infrastructure enables and affects consumption activities of commodities (Galbraith 1958). Second, because of the interconnectedness of all social processes, a social activity need not be exclusively defined as a consumption activity. For example, leisure activities (wine tasting, restaurant tours, practicing various sports, traveling, and craft-making) are recreation as well as consumption activities. Recreational activities could take on a commoditized (and potentially exclusive) character by involving the purchase of differentiated products (which is also a part of social class and gender processes) (Veblen 1899). Similarly, public schooling is intertwined with commodity consumption (for example public university campuses create facilities and spaces designed for commodity consumption which makes them also sites of consumption activities, as well as sites of education and research). Going to work²⁴ and business expenditures also involve consumption activities.

The point is not to narrow explanations of social phenomena to occurrences of consumption activities but to acknowledge that consumption activities are part of other social activities and of institutions. The project of conceptualizing consumption as a process is to broaden the view of the economy, rather than to compress it through the viewpoint of “consumers.” This can be achieved by connecting the acts of consumption to social consumption activities in relation to other social activities, institutions, habits of life and thought, and social processes in the specific context of social provisioning and capitalism.

The concept of consumption activity has two main advantages over that of consumer choice. First, it allows drawing connections among consumption and other social processes. For one, production and consumption are continuous processes that are contingent to developments in other social processes. Second, the concept of consumption activity need not separate consumption of commodities from that of the consumption of public goods, or non-commodities produced at home, thus it enables a broader and more realistic view of the economy as a social provisioning process.

4.2. Institutions and Systems of Provision

I define institutions as constituted by going concerns with social activities and networks; conventions (including working rules and procedures); symbols; norms; and discourses. They represent collective actions that are undertaken and perceived by individuals. Out of collective action social beliefs emerge. The household, the state, the business enterprise, schooling, religion, media, global organizations, and fashion, are institutions each comprised by varieties of going concerns with social activities and networks that help create symbols of social worthiness, norms of decent consumption, and discourses that help new products emerge. Going concerns try to reinforce and/or alter various social beliefs.

²⁴ See Hopkins and Todorova (2013).

“Systems of provision” are created as a result of collective actions. Fine and Leopold (1993) and Fine, Heasman, and Wright (1996) delineate “systems of provision” of specific goods and services tracing the interconnected practices associated with them, thus connecting consumption and production. Analyses of systems of social provision are not merely filling ready-made and fixed slots of activities along a supply and consumption chains, and allow for variations prompted by the specific context²⁵. The systems of provision analysis allows for connecting commodity and/or non-commodity provision to specific issues. For example, consumption of sugar has been connected to its colonial and slave trade history, as well as to contemporary health problems (see Fine 2002: 98-9).

Systems of provision are connected to a complex of historically specific technologies, discourses, and social beliefs. For example, various sizes of packaging and individual item wrapping are enabled by technological innovations, as well as by social processes. From an individually wrapped prune to bottled water, *individualized packaging* is a convention. It is a marketing procedure with working rules - a way of creating discrete units of commodities while reinforcing the *symbol* or image that is conveyed through advertising on the packaging itself²⁶. Individualized packaging involves more waste and resources; affects consumption activities; and accommodates the labor process and related fragmentation of social life. Thus, individualized packaging is a production and consumption convention with broader meaning.

Similarly, the emergence of mass consumption of bottled water represents a *convention* – comprised by specific water laws (*working rules*) and pumping and packaging (*procedures*) (Chappelle 2005; Hall 2009); to *social beliefs* such as media publicized uneasiness about public water sources (Holt 2012); and to the strategic *social activities* of business enterprises as going concerns, such as advertising.

Introduction of a new commodity goes together with an establishment of a *discourse* and practice of an “industry” (such as the “bottled water industry”) that affects perceptions. This involves social activities and *networks* including associations at domestic and global levels, membership, fairs, corporate environmental-social responsibility activities, educational campaigns and

²⁵ See Fine (2012) for contrasting systems of provision approach to the literature on global commodity chain.

²⁶ A case in point is the individually wrapped Sunsweet Ones prunes. A product manager explains:

"For a while, the individual Ones packages were so well-sealed, they were hard to open. We experimented with different types of serrated [film-cutoff] blades to alleviate this problem. After a few iterations, we not only improved the serration, but added a tear notch...Manual filling allows our Quality Assurance department to check each prune packed into the canister." ...

“Prunes are not just for grandparents. The Ones canister fits into backpacks, into car cupholders, and because of its upscale look, you can even leave the canister out on your countertop or desk. Plus, the little individually wrapped prunes can go anywhere, purse, pocket, lunch bag” (quoted in Lingle 2007).

Thus, the product’s ceremonial aspects address social beliefs by sleeker and “youthful” design, enabling consumption in public; changes in the labor and mobility processes that prompt a need for a snack on the go or in front of a computer. The instrumental characteristic of the product – nutrition and necessary intake of fruit and fiber addresses adverse changes in diets that are also a result of social processes.

cultivation of research and expert advice (such as on hydration)²⁷. The state and global organizations are also part of consumption process²⁸. For example, Food and Drug Administration's regulation and delineation of various types of bottled water and labeling regulation²⁹ facilitate product differentiation. Tax exemption of bottled water as a food product not only reduces the cost of production, but is also a symbol of normalizing bottled water in everyday life³⁰. Working rules such as water laws and court rulings allow for the pumping, bottling, and selling of water (Holt 2012).

Mass production of bottled water represents a transformation of the provision of a more general good – water into a private system of provision. However, each water bottle is a private commodity created on the basis of public resources and nature. As Ben Fine (2002, 178) notes, the boundaries between public and private goods are blurry – “...we are driving private cars as individuals on public highways”. Any high consumption cosmopolitan center is based on infrastructure, public resources, and natural-cultural histories.

The public/private good blurriness echoes the interconnectedness of market-non-market production and activities, and the nature-culture continuum, thus warranting conceptualization of consumption as a social process. Consequently, in the context of interconnected institutions, households are not the only sites of consumption. The implication is that an inquiry about consumption as a process could start with any institution; there is no primary institution or a social process.

4.3.Habits of Life and Thought

Habit of life and thought is a concept that allows streamlining a complex of occurrences (conventions, symbols, social activities, discourse, and personal attitudes) that merge and constitute an evolution of one or more social process. To discern an evolution of consumption as a process it is necessary to identify not just new conventions, but a complex of related occurrences - the emergence of specific habits of life and thought. This section introduces *gated consumption* as a habit of life and thought, and briefly outlines other examples informed by the US economy.

Connections among mass consumption, the construction of the interstate high way system, the emergence of suburban sprawl, malls, and the fragmentation of nature, spaces and social activities have been well documented in varieties of fields and approaches (Knox 2008; Russell 2000; Schwarzer 2000). So are the associated inequities related to zoning and schooling, public finance, infrastructure, exclusiveness, as well as “New Urbanism” and gentrification (e.g. Cohen 2003; Harvey 1997); and the conventions of privatization and marketisation (Galbraith 2008). Put together these streams of occurrences indicate a habit of life and thought that I call *gated*

²⁷ Business enterprises engage in “corporate social responsibility” as part of their market governance strategy (Jo 2011). For the context of bottled water see Brei and BÖhm (2011) and the International Bottled Water Association's website: <http://www.bottledwater.org/public/hydcap/input1.html>.

²⁸ See S. Charusheela (2010) for a discussion of the state's role in instituting and regulating norms of consumption patterns and household relations.

²⁹ See U.S. Food and Drug Administration, “Regulation of Bottled Water.”

³⁰ See Internatioinal Bottled Water Association, <http://www.bottledwater.org/newsroom/policy-statement/taxation>.

consumption – consumption activities that center on privacy, safety, (degrees of) exclusivity and control. Gated consumption has spatial, cultural, environmental, psychological, political, and economic dimensions and consequences, and takes various forms across social and economic classes.

The most evident signifiers of gated consumption are the gated communities and the literal gate keeping and surveillance of stores. However, gated consumption as a habit of life and thought encompasses also various conventions, practices, symbols, social beliefs, and personal attitudes. For example, in the case of social class sanctioned housing, conventions include yard size restrictions, fence type prescriptions, and landscaping monitoring. Further, gated consumption is a retreat to individualized as well as to communitarian activities and lifestyles (we can call them *lifestyle bubbles*). Gated consumption thus is broader than “privatism,³¹” as I mean it to signify any communitarian exclusion built around patterns of consumption, including those deemed “progressive”.

Gated consumption habit of life and thought is a manifestation of fragmentation of social activities, and is thus promoted by undeveloped and fragmented public transportation and infrastructure. The convention of complete reliance on individualized means of mobility is also connected to the car and the home (subject to specific norms) as *symbols* of social worth and freedom. These symbols emerge out of the activities of institutions such as the state, households, business enterprise, and the media, reinforce gated consumption and are part of *social beliefs* such as the American Dream.

Corporate fees and entrance charges mitigate much of the spaces and means for recreation and regeneration of human life. This means that the life process is largely organized by vested interests, or the extraction of “free income” (Veblen 1919). The mirror image is privatization and austerity covered with veil of the rhetorical construct of an ownership society. Consequently, consumption of “private goods” is really inseparable from that of “public goods”. Gated consumption is promoted by policies and discourse of austerity and privatization that are in a complete synergy with discourses of (“non-sovereign”) governments “running out of money” and (“sovereign”) “consumers” bursting with agency and subjectivity.

Additional examples of habits of life and thought that embody particular conventions, symbols, discourses, social beliefs, norms, and personal attitudes include: tourism; standardization of consumption; and conspicuous consumption. *Tourism* represents an evolution of the process of mobility, consumption, production, labor, gender, citizenship, and race, as well as evolution of ecosystems and geographies³².

Standardization of consumption involves uniformity of products and their delivery ensuring no surprise consumption experience that in turn accommodates fragmented social life and work schedules. This habit of life and thought is partially captured by Ritzer’s “McDonaldization” (2013). However, standardized consumption also includes uniform and predictable images, including symbols of success, happiness and beauty that are flat and easy to comprehend.

³¹ Knox (2008).

³² See Corrigan for a survey discussion on tourism as a part of the sociology of consumption (1997) and Swords and Mize (2008) for a discussion of the specific case U.S tourism in Puerto Rico and Mexico, to gain further insight why I call tourism a habit of life and thought.

Further, it is connected to the standardization of production in the machine process discussed by Veblen (1904).

Conspicuous consumption - a term widely used outside of the Veblenian *concept* (1899) - signifies a particular expression of the predatory practice of pecuniary invidious distinction, rather than an exceptional individual behavior (Hamilton 1987; Todorova 2013). Within the proposed framework conspicuous consumption can be best described as a habit of life and thought that represents the evolution of consumption, ownership, religion, gender, labor, and waste processes, among others.

Finally, monetary production gives rise to *growth of needs* (Veblen 1923; Galbraith 1958; Hamilton 1987), not only for products but for life-styles (Earl 1986), resulting in chronic dissatisfaction – a social habit of life and thought in corporate capitalism rather than purely an individual attitude (See also Perelman 2005 and Veblen 1923).

Each one of these habits of life and thought is based on findings in the existing literature in various fields and could serve as grounds for further consumption inquiry. The offered list is not meant to be exhaustive but illustrative. The open-endedness is necessary since there is a multiplicity of contexts that warrant various formulations. This allows for explorations into potential evolution of social processes³³.

The outlined habits of life and thought emerge out of interplay of social processes *and* represent evolution of social processes. Each one has *recognizable symbols*. Each has *objective consequences* (identifiable by instrumental valuation) for the life process in terms of ecology and health³⁴. All habits of life and thought indicate simultaneously practices and ideas; action and valuation; subjectivity and objectivity, thus transcending the distinction between material and cultural.

To the extent that non-commodity habits of life and thought are cultivated through collective action, consumption activities are to a lesser degree based on pecuniary valuation. Such non-invidious recreation of communities would be based on the described proclivities of parental bent, workmanship, and idle curiosity whose cultivation is persistent since they are *essential* for the continuation of the life process. However, this persistence is in constant tension with the predation (in its specific forms of capitalist institutions). This would be a fruitful area for exploring *agency* in addition to exploring the agency exercised to expand and preserve capital's power.

³³ For example, in the USA *sexualized salesmanship* is an established convention (see Reichart 2003) that selects one dimension of human life as a method of creating vendibility for all sorts of products. In what ways is it coming together with other conventions, symbols, social activities, and discourses, and are these forming a habit of life and thought? In what ways sexualized advertising or product design could be related to recurring social activities and to institutions beyond the business enterprise, such as fashion, media, education, and households, as well as to discernible beauty and fitness norms, and to symbols of worthiness? Are there consequences to the life process which could be identified?

³⁴ See for example Swaney and Olson (1992); Hesse-Biber et al. (2006); and Hayden (2006).

Conclusion: Implications for Heterodox Economics

The approach put forward by the article conceptualizes consumption as a social process that together with other social processes constitutes the social provisioning process. All processes are in an evolutionary interplay that constitutes an evolving *culture-nature life process*. The offered approach thus allows for context-specific, non-reductionist consumption inquiry where both subjectivity and objectivity are present, and transcends dualisms such as culture-economy, society-nature, market-society, and macro-microeconomics. The analysis has the following implications.

One of the implications is that heterodox economics should draw from social theory and analysis developed in other disciplines but cautiously so. Generic and often interchangeable usage of terms like “institutions,” “norms,” and “beliefs” should be avoided by specifying what exactly is meant. History of economic thought shows that terms originating from heterodox economic traditions are habitually appropriated, gutted out of their conceptual content, and used in a way that inhibits inquiry into social conflicts and social provisioning – which arguably are the center of heterodox economic inquiry. Then the danger is one of dilution of concepts within heterodox economics - as heterodox economists find themselves compelled to engage in some degrees with the mainstream. “Institution” is one of these terms generically and widely used; yet we are not really all Institutionalists now. Consequently, heterodox economics ought to continue specifying and elaborating in depth its analytical categories, making available antidotes to now generic terms like institutions. The present article offers such a conceptual specification. The article is not a call for an absolute unity, but a call for a further and continuous development of a distinctively heterodox economics that is versatile enough to treat social provisioning as culture and matter.

Another implication of the offered analysis is that households are not *the* sites of consumption. An inquiry about consumption as a process could start with any institution. The formulation of the social provisioning process cannot be done at two separate levels – micro and macro. Consequently, there are no micro and macro topics. The approach emerging out of this article is that there should not be a separation between heterodox micro economics and a heterodox macro economics - there should only be heterodox economics that studies contexts and components of the social provisioning process. This is not to dismiss previous work conceiving of micro and macro realms, but to urge exploring how these contributions could be properly incorporated into a broader inquiry of social provisioning.

A further implication of conceptualizing consumption as a social process is that behavior and identity are only parts of the picture and they could lead analysis straight into subjectivism and relativism on which neoliberalism thrives. If heterodox economists are interested in social provisioning with its conflicts and power relations, they should not take exclusively the behavioral and identities turns whose *raison d'etre* is to abandon material relations. *Agency* can be explored through studying the activities of the business enterprise and the state in determining the social product; as well as through the persistence and recreation of non-commodified social relations, rather than through the *neoliberal construct of “consumer choice”* – a concept that I argue has little significance for the development of heterodox economics.

Finally, the concept of consumption process allows for analyses of production and consumption as connected but not symmetrical to each other. Any time the “consumer” is deployed as an analytical category it is hard to leave behind the symmetry of exchange that was constructed for the purpose of obscuring social conflict and the existence of distinct economic classes. While historically the discourse of consumers has been used to generate collective actions of consumer groups, women’s movements, and unions, today it is entirely neoliberal, and thus it proves limiting for heterodox economics. People engage in consumption as well as in a multiplicity of other activities. Still, they cannot escape the economic compulsion pointed out by Marx, why would we describe them/us as consumers?! Consequently, one task for heterodox economists is to bring back “labor” (in its broadest form) into the popular and academic discourse through a non-universalizing formulation of social provisioning as a cultural-material process.

The proposition of this article is that “consumers” is a *rhetorical construct* and *not* an *analytical category* suitable for heterodox economics. Perhaps abandoning the concept of “consumers” altogether, would have a liberating potential for heterodox economics, consumption inquiry, and beyond.

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