

Focusing on the Prosumer:
On Correcting an Error in the History of Social Theory¹

George Ritzer
Distinguished University Professor
University of Maryland

A “paradigm shift” seems to be underway in thinking about the economy. It involves a movement away from thinking about separable and distinct producers and consumers and toward more of a focus on prosumers, or those who are simultaneously involved in both production and consumption.

However, there is nothing new about the prosumer (medieval peasants were the consumers of what they produced [DeVries, 1975]). Even the concept has been around and in use, if only marginally, for at least three decades. The creation of the term prosumer is generally credited to Alvin Toffler [1980] who devoted considerable attention to it in *The Third Wave* (Chapter 20 is entitled “The Rise of the Prosumer”). Among the others who have explicitly used the term is Philip Kotler (1986), “Prosumers: A New Type of Consumer.” It is also involved, at least implicitly, in work on value co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) and the service-dominant logic of marketing (Lusch, Vargo and O’Brien, 2006). Others have dealt with two or more of these phenomena in concert with one another (Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody, 2008; Humphreys and Grayson, 2008).

I began writing about the prosumer (without using the term) in my work on the “McDonaldization of society” (Ritzer, 1983; 1993/2008: 74-78) where I discussed the phenomenon of “putting the customer to work”. The “diner” at a fast food restaurant, the consumer of fast food, is also, at least to some degree, a producer of that meal. Among other things, diners are expected to serve as their own waiters carrying their meals to their tables or back to their cars, sandwich makers (by adding fixings like tomatoes, lettuce, and onions in some chains), salad makers (by creating their own salads at the salad bar), and bus persons (by disposing of their own debris after the meal is finished).

In fact, while working on McDonaldization, I toyed with the idea of creating new concepts to deal with this reality. I recombined elements of the terms “producer” and “consumer” to create two concepts- “prosumer” and “conducer”. I abandoned this effort because I felt the concepts were infelicitous even though they underscored an important point about the changing nature of the economy. While the term prosumer has certainly achieved some traction today, an argument could be made that there is a case to be made for both of my original concepts. What they point to is the fact that in some instances (e.g. creating a blog) the role of producer is more important than that of consumer (the “prosumer”), while in others (e.g. eating in the fast food restaurant) it is consumption that predominates (the “conducer”). This idea will appear in different forms later in this essay where I discuss a continuum from production to consumption with prosumption (or the

prosumer) in the middle. One who is more oriented to production would be a prosumer, while one who is more defined by consumption would be a conductor. In addition, I will discuss production in the process of consumption (conductor) and consumption in the process of production (prosumer). I don't want to push these awkward concepts, but they point to the need for a more nuanced analysis than one that focuses only on either production or consumption, or even that focuses solely and in an undifferentiated manner on the prosumer.

The case of McDonald's and other fast food restaurants, their expansion, and their influence on many other settings make it clear that the prosumer is increasingly pervasive. Of much greater importance, as I will discuss below, is the dramatic expansion of the Internet, especially Web 2.0 (Tapscott and Williams, 2006). While material realities such as fast food restaurants tend to limit the fusion of production and consumption, those limits virtually disappear on Web 2.0. I will return to these issues later, but I will take a different tack in the first part of this essay and argue that our thinking about production/consumption/prosumption has been greatly distorted by the tendency of the major classical social theorists to clearly distinguish between production and consumption; to create a (modern) binary opposition of production and consumption. That dichotomization is reflected in the tendency to define the producer as being "opposed to *consumer*" and the consumer as being "opposed to *producer*" (part of dictionary definitions cited in Humphreys and Grayson, 2008: 966).

Furthermore, in the early history of social theory there was a tendency to prioritize the producer whereas more recently the pendulum has swung the other way to an emphasis on the consumer. In either case, the prosumer was largely ignored. It may have made sense to emphasize the producer at the height of the Industrial Revolution (as, for example, Marx [1867/1967] did), or to emphasize the consumer in the post WW II decline, in the US in particular, of production (especially large-scale manufacturing) and the rise of consumption and consumer culture (as Baudrillard [1970/1998] did), but today various trends and developments (including the rise of the fast food restaurant and Web 2.0 discussed above) indicate that it is time to focus on the prosumer. Furthermore, it will be argued that *the focus always should have been on the prosumer* although at some points in history it made sense to emphasize the producer (the "pro" in prosumer), while at others the focus should have been on the consumer (the "sumer"); in other words to emphasize one end or the other of the continuum mentioned above and discussed below.

The following discussion deals with the central tendency in the major work of classical and contemporary theorists to clearly distinguish between production and consumption (and to ignore prosumption). It is important to note, however, that they and others sometimes took positions consistent with the idea of the prosumer. Marx, for example, recognized that the "means of production" were consumed in the process of production, and that people switch back and forth between being sellers and buyers. More generally, his dialectical orientation would tend to mitigate against dichotomous thinking in general, including the production-consumption duality. Among the contemporary thinkers, Baudrillard sees the distinction between production and consumption as an "artificial disjuncture" (Baudrillard, et al., 1976: 112). Other postmodernists (Firat and Venkatesh,

1993; 1995) share this view. Pietrykowski (2007: 262) argues that postmodern theory seeks to “destabilize the division in modern economics between separate spheres of consumption and production”. More generally, postmodernists are opposed to *all* modern binaries and are interested in destabilizing all of them.

Thinking About Production/Consumption in the Classical Age

Of course, theories of production/consumption/prosumption, as well as the distortions involved in the early history of social thought on these phenomena, were affected by the fact that social theory was born in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and took shape in reaction to its realities (especially its overwhelming productivism) and excesses (produced by extremes in the production process [e.g. lengthening the work day]). While it is hard to pinpoint exactly, the Industrial Revolution is usually seen as having begun in the late 18th century and to have run through much of the 19th century. It is, of course, during the latter period that the perspectives of all of the major classical social theorists were formed and much of their major work published (although some of it was not published until the early 20th century). Included in this category would be the work of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel, as well as that of Thorstein Veblen. They were preceded by the late 17th and early 18th century political economists, especially Adam Smith and David Ricardo. Both Smith and Ricardo distinguished between production and consumption (in among other ways by distinguishing between supply [production] and demand [consumption]²). Beyond making this distinction, they also (especially Ricardo) privileged production by, for example, articulating a labor theory of value.

Before turning to the latter theory in the work of Karl Marx, it is very important to note that the classical thinkers inherited and lived and worked in a world in which the whole idea of a consumer was non-existent, assumed to be a natural outcome of production (Sassatelli, 2007: 57), or largely undeveloped. In an exhaustive historical genealogy of the idea of the consumer, Frank Trentman (2006: 23; italics added) says,

The consumer was virtually absent from eighteenth-century discourse. Significantly, it only appears in seven of the 150,000 works of the eighteenth-century collections on line...Even after the French Revolution, when deputies in Restoration France considered consumers' interests, it was only to render them insignificant compared to people's social station and larger national interests represented by land, *production and trade*.

Even in the early 19th century, there was only limited use of the idea of the consumer, often to refer to “physical or metaphysical processes of use, waste and destruction” (Trentmann, 2007: 26). It was not until the 1890s that “the intellectual pursuit of the consumer took off” (Trentmann, 2007: 29). All of this is to say that the classical theorists were working in a context in which the whole idea of a consumer was un-, or at least

under-, developed. Thus, not only were they drawn to the revolutions in production taking place around them, but they lacked a strong sense of the consumer to counter-balance the inclination to emphasize production. Furthermore, lacking a sense of consumption, there was no way that the classical theorists could have developed a sense of prosumption.

The labor theory of value, used in a far more central and critical way, lay at the heart of Karl Marx's theory of capitalism. The labor theory of value means that it is production (work, labor) that gives commodities their value. Conversely, consumption, especially the "demand" of consumers, plays no role in the value of a commodity which is determined exclusively by the labor involved in it. What mattered most to Marx was the productive work, the labor, of the proletariat and the fact that they were not rewarded adequately, indeed were exploited (and alienated), by the capitalist. Writing in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, and many of its worst abuses, Marx was obsessed with capitalism as a system of production and with the workers as the most important, if not the only true, producers in the system.

That being said, as pointed out above, Marx was not oblivious to consumption. For example, he was well-aware of the fact that the consumption of various things (e.g., the raw materials, tools and machinery that allow labor power to act in the production process) needed to take place in order for production to occur ("productive consumption"). He was also aware of "individual consumption" in which people use up products in order to survive; as means of subsistence. That is, people, especially workers, need to consume them in order for them, and their families, to survive. While Marx deals with both types of consumption, his primary concern is with former. Even in the case of individual consumption, Marx's concern is with the fact that such consumption is necessary so that the laborer can produce and so that he can be replaced by other family members when he is no longer able to be productive.

It could be argued that Marx's concept of "use value" is all about consumption. To be produced, a commodity must be a use value. It would make no sense to produce something that is not a use value. A commodity can only be sold, and will only be consumed, if it is useful. Furthermore the C-M-C circuit is focally concerned with the exchange of commodities to be consumed (versus the M-C-M circuit which is more concerned with profit dynamic in capitalism that feeds continual and expanding production). Marx also dealt with the "means of consumption" (Ritzer, 2005), although he is far better known for his work on the means of production. Most generally, he saw a dialectical relationship between production and consumption.

While the labor theory of value is decisive in making the argument that Marx prioritizes production, we gain greater insight into his productivism by sorting out the relationship among the concepts of value, use value and exchange value. Value, of course is determined by labor so it, like the labor theory of value, indicates the preeminence of production in Marx's thinking. Use value, on the other hand, clearly prioritizes the consumer. The use value of a commodity is its utility to the consumer (who could also be the producer of the commodity, albeit in his role as a producer). While the use value

concept clearly prioritizes the consumer, it is of only secondary interest to Marx. It (like the consumer and consumption) is an important assumption in his theory, but it is largely unexplored in his work, at least in comparison to his far more focal interest in value and exchange value.

With value determined by production, and use value by consumption, much in our interpretation of Marx on this issue rides on what he means by exchange value, although in the end, of course, his ultimate prioritization of value and labor means that he privileges production over consumption. Exchange value assumes both value (labor time) and use value (to have exchange value, a commodity must be useful). However, there is something more to the exchange value of a commodity and that is its relationship to the exchange values of other commodities. In other words, exchange value depends on the market and as the market becomes fetishized, reified, exchange value can vary more and more greatly from the value of the commodity or even from its use value (the exchange value of a commodity can become far more or less than one would think based purely on its utility). The market assumes consumers, but when it becomes fetshized, reified, it is the market itself that comes to be seen (erroneously) as determining value and not the labor time invested in the commodity. However, even here Marx is not so much interested in the reified market as he is in the degree to which it drifted away from, and came to obscure, what is ultimately most important, and that is the labor (time) that is at the source of value.

In sum, while consumption appears in various ways in Marx's work, he clearly always prioritizes, and remains focused on, production (labor).

Max Weber is best known for his theoretical work on rationalization, especially the rationalization of the economy, in particular in the Occident. The emergence of a rational economy was associated with such things as the rise of capitalism, the factory, free labor, rational bookkeeping, and the like. Clearly, the focus in this is overwhelmingly on production. This is abundantly clear in Weber's (1905-5/1958) best-known work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (as well as companion works on other major world religions and their relationship, largely as barriers, to the rise of capitalism outside the Occident). The focus was on the role of Protestantism (especially Calvinism) in the rise of the "spirit of capitalism" and ultimately of capitalism itself (and, more generally, a rationalized economy) in the West. The concern was why the Protestants came to be so diligent in their work; to become so productivist. To the degree that there was a concern with consumption, it was ultimately on the propensity of the Protestants to value frugality, to consume as little as possible. The limitations of Weber's argument on this were pointed out by Colin Campbell (1987) who, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Modern Consumerism*, argues that Weber did not take his argument far enough historically and that over time the Protestant Ethic also gave birth to a consumerist ethic to parallel the early capitalist (productivist) ethic.

Weber's productivist bias is even clearer in his greatly underrated *General Economic History* (1927/1981). Here Weber is interested in the development of the Occident's rational capitalistic economy. He examines a number of earlier non-rational or less

rational precursors such as the economies of the household, the clan, the village and the manor. The latter, and the control of the lord, began to break down in the Middle Ages with the emergence of cities and urban industries. Free craftsmen also emerged in these cities and while they are producers, Weber does link their development to consumption. That is, greater consumptive needs, more purchasers, greater purchasing power and larger markets emerged as the economies became more urban-based. However, as he proceeds, Weber shifts back to a focus on production, especially the guilds that emerged with free craftsmen and their later disintegration. With the dissolution of the guild system came the rise of the “putting out” system in textiles with production taking place in homes while the means of production were in the hands of the owners. During the 14th -16th centuries there emerged the workshop (a central work setting without advanced machinery) and later the factory which, among other things, was characterized by free labor performing specialized and coordinated activities. Such a factory, at least in the West, became capitalistic because the entrepreneur owned the means of production. In addition, other components of a modern capitalistic economy developed such as advanced technology, transportation systems, banking, interest, and rational bookkeeping and accounting. The development of a capitalistic economic system hinged on a variety of developments within the economy as well as within the larger society. Within the larger society the prerequisites included a free market and a large and steady demand (implying consumers and consumption), as well as a money economy, inexpensive and rational technologies, a free and disciplined labor force, rational accounting techniques, and the use of shares, stocks, etc. Outside the economy, Weber identified a variety of needed developments such as the modern state, rational law, cities, modern science and technology, and a religious ethic that could form the basis for a rational way of life. The point is that the overwhelming emphasis is on production, or on factors related to production. The modern consumer is a shadowy, if not invisible, figure in Weber’s thinking who appears indirectly as part of the free market and the source of demand.

Durkheim was much more interested in issues that related to collective beliefs and collective morality than he was in the economy (for example his sense of socialism was as a movement aimed at the moral regeneration of society through scientific morality [Durkheim, 1928/1962]), but his most systematic thinking on the economy is found in the *Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim, 1893/1964). His ultimate interest is clear when he argues that “the economic services that it [the modern division of labor] can render are insignificant compared with the moral effect that it produces and its true function is to create between two or more people a feeling of solidarity” (Durkheim, 1893/1964: 17). In mechanical solidarity people were held together by the fact that they generally performed the same tasks and had the same responsibilities, whereas in organic solidarity the bond was that people needed each other because they performed different tasks and had different responsibilities. Solidarity was strong in mechanical solidarity because people tended to share a strong collective conscience, whereas it was weakened in organic solidarity because of an enfeebled collective conscience. In terms of the economy, the focus was clearly on what people did (their work) and *not* on their role as consumers. Similarly, in terms of dealing with the weakness of the collective conscience in organic solidarity, Durkheim (1893/1964: 5) proposed the occupational association, or an organization that would encompass “all the agents of the same industry united and

organized into a single group”. While others (e.g. Charles Gide; see below) proposed consumer cooperatives, Durkheim remained focused on production.

Rosalind Williams (1982) analyzes Durkheim’s work in light of her larger analysis of the “dream worlds” related to consumption. She sees Durkheim’s focus on the occupational association as emblematic of the reign of the producer in his work, which she contrasts to Gide’s orientation which involves the reign of the consumer. Consistent with the theme of this essay, she argues that to Durkheim “Occupational life is almost the whole of life” (Williams, 1982: 336). Williams interprets Durkheim’s moral crisis as one that involves the consumer, but she argues that his response to that crisis is to focus on the realm of the producer (and the role of occupational associations in resolving that crisis). Even in his later work, Durkheim turns to religion, especially the morality of religion and its asceticism as at least a constraint on consumption.

Among the classic sociologists, Simmel is unique in that he was focally interested in neither production nor consumption (although he had some things to say about both). He was interested in forms of interaction and types of interactants, and most generally in the growing gap between objective and subjective culture. He certainly touched on consumption (in his essay on fashion, in his book on money) and production (the creation of the many components of objective culture), but neither was a focal concern for Simmel.

In many ways, Thorstein Veblen’s work is the most interesting from the point of view of the argument of this essay. Of all of the classical theorists, Veblen (1899/1994) is the best known for his work on consumption, especially the famous concept of “conspicuous consumption”. However, this work occupies a unique place in Veblen’s *oeuvre* which otherwise is almost completely devoted to production-related matters. Thus, consumption and production are largely treated separately in his work. Furthermore, while Veblen’s fame today rests on his work on consumption, it clearly occupies a very minor place in the body of his work. Thus, like most of the other classic theorists, Veblen had a productivist bias.

Veblen’s prioritization of production begins with his assumptions about human nature, of which the most important is the “instinct for workmanship”. It is concerned with “practical expedients, ways and means, devices and contrivances of efficiency and economy, proficiency, creative work and technological mastery of facts...a proclivity for taking pains” (Veblen, 1922/1964:33). This instinct is manifest at the micro level in terms of the technical efficiency of the individual worker and at the macro level in the technological proficiency and accomplishments of the community as a whole (the ‘industrial arts’). Interestingly, the instinct that would seem closest to being relevant to consumption- emulation- is in fact defined more in terms of production: “Men are moved by many impulses and driven by many instinctive dispositions. Among these abiding dispositions are a strong bent to admire and defer to persons of achievement and distinction, as well as a *workmanlike* disposition to find merit in any *work* that serves the common good” (Veblen, 1923: 115; italics added).

Given these assumptions, it is no surprise to find that the bulk of Veblen's work is devoted to production, most generally the conflict between what he calls "business" and "industry". Industry in general, and those engaged in workmanship and production, are involved in "the apprehension and coordination of mechanical facts and sequences, and to their appreciation and utilisation for the purposes of human life" (Veblen, 1899/1994: 232). Those involved in industry seek to become ever-more efficient, but they tend to be thwarted by those oriented to business and their interest in money, including high profits and low costs, rather than in efficiency and workmanship. Thus, business leaders often seek to keep production low (to inhibit, even to sabotage, those associated with industry) in order to keep profits high. This is the central conflict in the economy as far as Veblen is concerned. The main point for our purposes is that it is a conflict that involves those engaged in production and its supervision and it says little or nothing about consumption.

Thus, the first part of this essay has demonstrated that the classic social theorists, strongly influenced by the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism, were heavily oriented toward the study of production and had relatively little to say about consumption. Above all, from our perspective, they tended to cleanly distinguish between production and consumption leaving relatively little possibility to examine the fact that all production involves consumption and all consumption involves production. Even Marx's, theory, which understood this best of all, was overwhelmingly weighted, in spite of this understanding, in the direction of production. Given the time in which these people wrote, it made sense to focus on production. However, what they failed to understand was that this focus was determined not once and for all, but by the particular time in history in which they worked and the overwhelming predominance of production in that era.

By the way, a much more minor figure in the history of social theory, Werner Sombart (1913/1967) devoted far more attention to consumption than his peers (except, perhaps, for Veblen), especially in *Luxury and Capitalism* where he reversed the usual argument and contended that it was the consumption of luxury goods that played a central role in the rise of capitalism. However, he, like the others, separates production from consumption in his work. Thus, for example, in *Jews and Modern Capitalism* Sombart (1951) seeks to counter the Weberian argument about the rise of capitalism by focusing on the role that the Jews played in the rise of production-oriented capitalism in northern Europe.

Thinking about Consumption and Production in the (Post-)Modern Age

We turn now to the post- WW II years when the focus in the economy, especially in the US, began to shift from production to consumption. Given the change, social theorists began to move from a productivist to a consumerist bias (e.g. Galbraith, 1958). Instead of surveying a range of thinkers as we did in the previous section, we will focus mainly on two particularly pivotal thinkers- Jean Baudrillard, especially his *Consumer Society* (1970/1998)³ and Zygmunt Bauman, including his *Consuming Life* (2007).

Interestingly, it was only *after* he wrote *Consumer Society* that Baudrillard broke with Marx and Marxism, especially its productivist orientation and its focus on the capitalist economy. Thus, in *Consumer Society*, and in spite of the title, Baudrillard continues to privilege production over consumption. For example, there remains a sense that production is the base and consumption is part of the superstructure. Furthermore, Baudrillard continues to employ a long list of Marx's concepts such as use-value and exchange-value. In many cases, Baudrillard simply extends ideas developed to analyze production into the realm of consumption (e.g. a "reserve army" of needs).

To Baudrillard, Marx was still in the thrall of the political economists. He had not gone far enough and needed to make a complete break with political economy. Interestingly, Baudrillard had made a major break in *Consumer Society* by shifting the focus from production to consumption (as had the critical theorists before him in their focus on culture, one aspect of which involves consumption), but he like (critical theorists and others) still operated from a Marxian perspective. In fact, he was more Marxian than the critical theorists. For example, he operated from a materialist base while they were more willing to focus on the immaterial, the ideational level.

In spite of the fact that he continued to operate from a materialist base in *Consumer Society*, the key point from the perspective of this essay lies in the title of that book heralding a shift in the 20th century from a society dominated by production to consumer society. Baudrillard argues that capitalists came to recognize that the 19th century focus on regulating workers was no longer sufficient. In the 20th century the view emerged that consumers could no longer be allowed to decide whether or not to consume or how much or what to consume (Bauman [1992] takes a similar view). It is this kind of thinking that marked the transition from a focus on production to a focus on consumption. While every observer recognized that production continued to exist, many shifted their focus away from production and to consumption. In many ways, a mirror image of the theories of the classical theorists emerged. While the latter focused almost exclusively on production (or did separate analyses of them [Veblen, Sombart]), many theorists and empiricists in the late 20th century came to focus almost exclusively on consumption. Indeed, a distinct field of consumer or consumption studies emerged in several disciplines (e.g. anthropology, sociology, marketing), as did journals (e.g. *Journal of Consumer Culture*; *Journal of Consumer Research*) devoted to the study of consumption (Of course, journals devoted to production [e.g. *Work and Occupations*] continued to exist and to occupy a parallel universe.)

This was related to the view that had emerged in the wake of the work of Baudrillard and others that we had moved, or were moving, from a modern to postmodern society. Among the things that were associated with the modern world was production, but the postmodern world came to be linked to consumption (Ritzer and Goodman, 2001). Thus, for example, Bauman argued that the society of concern to classical theorists such as Marx was a work-based society, one in which its members were engaged "primarily as producers", while "later-modern, or second-modern or post-modern stage...engages its members – again primarily – in their capacity as consumers" (Bauman, 1998: 24). More extremely, Bauman discusses the "passage from producer to consumer society" (Bauman,

1998: 24). Indeed, the ascendancy of consumer culture was seen as one of the hallmarks of, almost synonymous with, the postmodern world. A key example was Mike Featherstone's (1991) *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*.

Over the years, Bauman moved increasingly in the direction of the study of consumption and to the creation of a grand narrative that we had moved from a society dominated by production to one dominated by consumption. This is abundantly clear in a recent book, *Consuming Life* (Bauman, 2007). Here Bauman (2007: 61) repeatedly argues that we have witnessed the "passage from the society of producers and soldiers to the society of consumers". (That such a view is increasingly common is reflected in Sassatelli's [2007: 43; italics added] contention that "we can consider 'consumer society' an historical type of society which gradually *became prevalent* in the West from the dawn of modernity to the present".) Not only does Bauman (2007: 54) create such a grand narrative, but he also tends to draw a "sharp distinction" between "the society of producers/soldiers"⁴ and "the society of consumers". Later, he discusses "the seminal departure that sets the *consumerist* cultural syndrome most sharply apart from its *productivist* predecessor" (Bauman, 2007: 85).

Not surprisingly, Bauman links all of this to the concept that has dominated his work in the 21st century- liquidity. He argues, for example, that we live in a "liquid modern society of consumers" (Bauman, 2007: 76). Interestingly, however, the concept of liquidity would be very useful to the argument made in this paper. That is, instead of being solid and separable time periods, phenomena or ideas, production and consumption are themselves, and have always been, quite liquid flowing freely into one another. Furthermore, the prosumption is itself a highly liquid phenomenon involving a very porous relationship between production and consumption. Indeed, it could be argued that the relationship is so porous that it needs a new concept to deal with a level of liquidity that has greatly increased in recent years. That idea is, and has always been, prosumption.

The point of the above review of key theoretical texts is to argue that social theorists have tended to focus on *either* production or consumption. There were good historical and intellectual reasons for this. Production was predominant in the classical period and it made sense for social theorists to focus on it. By the late 20th century, consumption, especially in the developed world, became more prominent, arguably dominant (70% of the US economy was accounted for, at least until the current recession, by consumption), and theorists came to focus on it. However, in both periods there was a tendency to ignore the fact that production always also involved consumption and, conversely, consumption always involved production. In other words, prosumption has always been involved in both production and consumption, whichever one happens to predominate at any given point in history. It may well be that instead of shifting between production and consumption, we should have always been focusing on prosumption. With such a focus, we would have had a more sensitive indicator of how much things were shifting toward either the production or the consumption end of the continuum (the "middle" of the continuum would have been a situation in which production and consumption were more

or less evenly balanced; where “pure” presumption existed). Such an orientation would have prevented social thinkers from erring wildly and labeling societies as either a producer or a consumer society even though they *always* involved a mix of production and consumption.

However, there is a more important reason to suggest this approach and that is that a variety of ongoing changes have moved us to that middle ground; in many ways we have become neither a producer nor a consumer society, but rather a prosumer society. That is not to say that production and consumption do not exist- the term presumption assumes *both*- but they have become subordinated to presumption not only because they both presume and encompass presumption, but because presumption itself has become increasingly prominent.

The Ubiquity of Prosumption

A variety of ongoing social changes are serving to bring presumption to the fore and make its centrality clear, if it was not before.

Whatever conceptual distinctions are made, the trend toward putting the consumer to work has accelerated since the birth of the fast food restaurant in the mid-1950s (of course, it did not start there; in the supermarket, for example, the shopper was more of a prosumer than in the traditional grocery store) . Among the examples are:

- Pumping one’s own gasoline at the filling station
- Serving as a bank teller at the ATM machine
- Working at the checkout counter at the supermarket by scanning one’s own food, bagging it, and paying for it by credit card.
- Using electronic kiosks to check into a hotel and at the airport, to purchase movie tickets, etc.
- Co-creating a variety of experiences such as moving oneself through Disney World and its many attractions or serving as an “actor” in the theatre “staged” by Starbucks designed to create the image of an old-fashioned coffee house (Ritzer, 2008).

Medicine is increasingly characterized by do-it-yourself technologies (e.g., blood pressure monitors, blood glucose monitors, pregnancy tests) that allow patients to perform tasks without recompense formerly performed by paid medical professionals. Then there is the plethora of websites now available that allow people to serve as amateur diagnosticians. With this information they can also treat themselves (or at least think they can) and if they decide to see a physician, they are more likely to be co-creators (more on this idea later) of medical services by demanding specific treatments and medications. Patients (consumers of health services) have increasingly become experts on medicine, especially their own health (Clark, et al, 2003). It could be argued that in many ways they are in a better position to know more about their own medical condition (or at least think they do) than physicians and, perhaps, to treat it themselves.

This trend is also manifest in the entertainment industry. In the media (especially TV), for example, it is argued that it is part of a “major fundamental role reversal, a reordering of the centuries old relationship between who’s onstage and who’s watching, a devaluing of professionalism and a new premium on amateurism. “There’s been a kind of perverse democratization of mass media” (Shales, 2007: M7).⁵ One example is the spread of radio and television shows in which the performers are increasingly likely to be members of the audience (the audience, the consumers).⁶ We can include in this category all sorts of radio talk shows where those who call in (the members of the audience) perform (and are sometimes insulted and embarrassed) for no pay. The best-known of these are political in nature (e.g. the Rush Limbaugh Show), but increasingly ubiquitous are the call-in shows on sports radio. While they usually cannot do it from the comfort of their homes, those who participate on television talk shows (most famously, the Jerry Springer and Oprah Winfrey shows [Illouz, 2003]) also perform for little or no pay.

Then there is more recent proliferation of television shows, the so-called “reality shows”, in which members of the audience become long-term performers, perhaps for an entire season. It is far easier and much cheaper to find a format that allows the audience to be the performers (e.g. “American Idol”, “Survivor”, “So You Think You Can Dance”, “The Apprentice”, “Supernanny”) than it is to find, and to be able to afford, the creative people (writers, directors, actors) needed for a successful dramatic or comedic television series. Reality shows lead not only to lower costs but to higher profits on network TV which is embattled because of competition from both cable television and the Internet. Thus, dramatic and comedic series have declined dramatically in recent years with numerous reality shows taking their place. While actors, especially those who are famous, require high salaries, reality show performers “work” for little or nothing (although they may hope that their involvement will lead eventually to highly paid work and great fame [as it has in a few cases]).

Yet another example is in the realm of pornography. Today, the once-booming “professional” porn industry finds itself in difficulty because of competition from amateurs. Why pay a “professional” performer when numerous amateurs are eager to bare as much- or more- for no pay on such successful videos as “Girls Gone Wild” and “Guys Gone Wild”, to say nothing of more hard-core videos, Internet sites, and so on. Why pay to have access to a professional pornography website when one can find every conceivable form of pornography on amateur websites at no cost? The consumers of pornography are increasingly themselves also its producers. They may either photograph or video themselves, or use “friends” to do the “work”. In fact, many of today’s consumers of porn seem to prefer that which is clearly amateur.

Cell phones now allow “amateurs” to photograph dramatic events (e.g. the 2007 bridge collapse in Minneapolis) and then send the photos to TV networks (like CNN and its iReports) and local stations that show them on air almost immediately. Eyewitnesses are also interviewed on air, perhaps via their own cell phones, often as events are transpiring

before their eyes. Amateurs are increasingly playing the roles of photographer and reporter. This is beginning to expand with the arrival of third generation (3G) cell phones that have the capability of receiving and sending videos. This means that the layperson can become the broadcaster of streaming video of breaking news events further eroding the distinction between journalists and amateurs in the news field (Gralnick, 2006). Furthermore, this trend may mean that “amateurs” can cut out intermediaries like CNN and become their own broadcasters via the worldwide web.

Then there is a wide range of subtler and less material examples of prosumption. Consumers co-create open-source software (e.g. Linux). Consumers also get advanced versions of various software products and their work with, and feedback on, those products leads to changes in them. Consumer choices play a key role in the production of products (BMWs, Dell computers) customized to their needs and interests. All sorts of consumption “experiences” (the so-called “experience economy” [Pine and Glimore, 1999]) are being co-produced by the consumers of them. Brands are similarly co-produced as is the ongoing relationship between consumers and those brands (e.g. in “brand communities” [Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001]).

A major impetus for the increasing ubiquity of prosumption is the emergence on the Internet of Web 2.0. Web 1.0 typically involved sites that were created and managed by distinct producers and used more or less passively by separable consumers. The latter not only did not produce the websites, but usually could not alter them in any meaningful way. In contrast, Web 2.0 is defined by sites (e.g. Facebook, blogs) the contents of which are produced, wholly (blogs) or in part (Facebook), by the consumer. While everything about some 2.0 sites (a blog, for example) is likely produced by those who also consume them, on others (the Facebook page) the basic structure of the site is created by the producer, while all of the content derives from the consumer(s). Even though something of the distinction between producer and consumer remains in the latter case, it is clear that Web 2.0 is the paradigmatic domain of the prosumer. The following are among the other sites on Web 2.0 that involve prosumption:

- It is the users who generate the articles on Wikipedia and who constantly edit, revise and comment on them.
- It is the users who create the profiles (composed of videos, photos, text) and the interaction that creates communities on You Tube and the many networking sites beyond Facebook such as MySpace.
- It is the users who create the characters and virtual environments in the massively popular Second Life game.
- It is consumers rather than retailers who create the market on eBay, craigslist, etc.
- It is the users (the mostly “amateur” photographers) who upload and download the photographs on Flickr.
- It is the consumers who not only do all the work involved in ordering products on sites like Amazon.com., but they also do things like writing the “reviews” that appear there.

- It is the users of online maps who are increasingly creating them on what is known to insiders as the “GeoWeb”; Google, Microsoft, Yahoo have created tools that are now accessible to, and usable by, those with little or no technical skill (Helft, 2007). Google now lets users use Google Maps applications in many creative ways. Users can edit the maps and fix any errors they might find. Users can also make additions to the maps by adding the location of their businesses, photos of various objects, blogs describing their experiences with, or reviews of, places on the map (and thereby creating social communities), etc. In other words, the geo-environment is now being created, at least in part, by users of the GeoWeb.

Consumer as Producer/Producer as Consumer

Given a continuum ranging from consumption to production, with prosumption as the mid-point, what specifically does a consumer (as “conducer”) produce? a producer (as “prosumer”) consume? Starting with the first question, it could be argued that the consumer produces the following in the process of consumption:

- The product. In many cases, the product is not truly complete until the consumer acquires it and does some thing, or set of things, to it. One example might be a computer to which the consumer adds individualized programs, or a cell phone which must be charged and to which is added a phone book. Another, more extreme version is many Ikea products which are, in fact, not finished until various steps are taken by the consumer.
- The practical steps involved in using the product. Thus, a cell phone is useless until the consumer learns and utilizes the basic procedures involved in using it.
- The experience of and surrounding the product. Products have an experiential element that surround them (Apple products are a good example) and they are often offered for sale in settings (“cathedrals of consumption”) that are experiences in themselves. In part, those experiences are produced by others (advertisers, markets, managers of the cathedrals of consumption), but consumers are at the minimum co-producers of those experiences and, in fact, it is likely that their “work” in producing the experience is of greater importance.
- Consumers are increasingly playing a role in the design of the products they eventually consume (“cool hunting”, being part of an online community of consumers who collaborate in design).
- Consumers are producing, in interaction with various products, their own identity(ies).
- Most generally, consumers are a producing their selves in part out of what they consume and how they consume it.

Most generally, this is all part of the “reflexive”, “individualizing” society in which we live and that has attracted the attention of many social theorists (e.g. Giddens, Beck, Bauman). We are increasingly on our own in creating our selves and our worlds and a large part of that relates to the ways in which we create what we consume and the ways in which we consume those things. From this theoretical perspective, consumers are increasingly likely to produce what they consume, to be prosumers (maybe better “conducers”).

It is also the case, of course, that producers are consumers. In fact, with only slight variations, we can say just about the same things about the producers that we said about the consumers:

- Producers, of course, consume all sorts of things in the process of production; Marx’s means of production including raw materials, wear and tear on tools and machinery, as well as labor time.
- There are many practical steps in the production process, many dictated by the organization and the technology; the machines, the organization that are useless unless they are consumed by workers.
- There are certainly “experiences” to be consumed in the production process, although they are not likely to be as pleasant as those involving the consumer in, for example, a cathedral of consumption or who is using a iPod. The producers also experience the fruits of their labor, the finished product, and may feel everything from pride to mortification over what they have wrought.
- To some degree workers are consuming the way their work is designed, the production process in which they are enmeshed, and aspects of the products they produce such as their design.
- Just as they produce identities on the job, workers also consume their work-related identities, as well as those of their co-workers (“we are Microsoft computer programmers”).
- Much the same can be said about selves. Workers not only produce at least part their selves on the job, but they consume them during the workday.

¹ Paper to be presented at a conference on the prosumer at Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universitat Frankfurt am Main FB Gesellschaftswissenschaften Institut fur Gesellschafts- und Politikanalyse, March 2009.

² The issue being discussed in this essay calls this binary into question, as well. That is, are supply and demand as clearly separated as traditional economists assume, or do they need to be subject to the same kind of reexamination as is being undertaken here in the case of production and consumption?

³ It is worth noting that Baudrillard acknowledges the work of Galbraith on the “affluent society”, although he prefers to call it “growth society”. However, for Baudrillard, growth brings us no closer to affluence; growth brings with it both wealth and poverty.

⁴ He links the society of producers to the military and to the males who dominated it, while consumption, at least in the past, was seen as the domain of females.

⁵ Interestingly, Shales traces this development in the mass media, but it had- as he recognizes- other, often indigenous, roots long before the advent of the Internet.

⁶ As Shales (2007) points out, this is not new, although it has expanded greatly in recent years. An example from the early years of TV is “Ted Mack’s Amateur Hour”. Then there were the many quiz shows that once dominated network television before being brought low by scandal. Quiz shows have been revived (e.g. “Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader”) in the era of reality TV.

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