

Where are the boundaries of consumption?

Javier Lloveras

PhD Student at the MMU Business School (Marketing and Retail)

Once the summer school concluded, I returned home with a notebook full of notes and reflections about the important issues covered during these three days. Among many other themes, some time was dedicated to explore the relationship between practices and consumption. This was a topic I found extremely interesting. In this regard, Prof. Alan Warde delivered a thought-provoking presentation, in which he elaborated a number of ideas from his superb article "Consumption and Theories of Practice". For reasons of space, I have to leave aside some of Warde's key arguments such as the embodied, unconscious and routinised nature of consumption and the need to revisit Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Therefore, I will exclusively focus the present comment on his suggestion that consumption should be conceptualized as a moment in almost every practice, rather than a practice in itself.

At risk of simplification, Prof. Warde's arguments could be summarized as follows:

1. Human beings are carriers of practices and thus, human action is necessarily framed within more or less specific practice-bundles rather than being a pure manifestation of individual desires, attitudes, values, etc.
2. Such engagement in practice always involves the appropriation, appreciation, use and display of products/services - to a different degree.
3. Therefore, from this view, the phenomenon of consumption, traditionally understood as either one or various elements of the following, purchase/appropriation, appreciation, use, display or disposal of products and services, become "a moment in every practice" rather than a practice in itself.

In my view, these arguments pose researchers some challenges to delimitate the theoretical boundaries of the notion of practice in its relation to consumption. Moreover, these arguments invite us to ask questions about the (perhaps) excessively ubiquitous role given to consumption by Warde's practice approach. If, as Warde suggests, consumption is a moment in almost every practice and practices have a temporal dimension – in the sense that their continuity is necessarily sustained by many "specific moments" -, there is a high risk of conflating the notion of consumption and that of practice. In other words, it could be the case that, by adopting such a broad definition, consumption becomes an all-encompassing term to signify human action in industrialized societies, inseparable from others such as purchasing, contemplating, displaying, using, etc.

Given these arguments, I am not sure how the boundaries of consumption and practice can be delimited. If we assume that consumption is simply a moment in almost every practice, one might ask if it is still reasonable to think about the concept

of practices as something different from that of consumption. I believe that this is not a trivial question as far as sustainability is concerned, and the purported ubiquity of consumption in practice theory can turn to be a problematic issue. In this regard, the difficulty to trace the boundaries of consumption could lead to a view of consumption as a universal rather than a particular instance of human action. I believe that, by defining consumption as a moment in almost every practice, there is a risk of treating consumption as a sort of inescapable destiny of the human kind. Indeed, not clarifying the boundaries of consumption can make extremely difficult, if not impossible, to conceptualize (and promote) “non-consumption” alternatives. To conclude, one might ask a number of questions concerning the role of non-consumption in practice theory:

- Is there such a thing as “non-consumption” for practice-oriented approaches to consumption?
- Is it possible to define non-consumption as a moment in every practice, whilst still maintaining the view of consumption as “a moment in every practice”?
- Is it possible that both consumption and non-consumption are coexisting moments in every practice?
- Is it necessary to delimitate the boundaries of consumption more clearly if we want to preserve a separate conceptual space to study non-consumption phenomena?
- If so, how do we, as researchers, carry out this task?