

Preface

Economics leads us to believe that the consumption of large quantities benefits us – more of everything is the source of our happiness. That’s why we strive for ever more of the same, and more of all that’s new. And that’s why we are expected to be buying like mad for ever greater satisfaction – in absolute or relative terms. No branch of economics is more mistaken than consumer theory. At its core, it remains a theory of the relationship between things and people (via the relationship between quantities and prices), and not one between people.

Of course, we also consume quantities: however many calories of food, square metres of our homes – just as people in hunter-gatherer economies did, whose consumption remains the blueprint for economics to this day. But today we are deriving less and less utility from quantities consumed per se. Instead, and increasingly so, the consumption of social differences – of social distance and social proximity – generates utility for us. We strive for more of the same, only as far as it helps create that social distance or proximity – as today we seldom succeed at this by merely striving for this goal. Much more conducive to utility is the consumption of quality: “Yes to this, no to that!”. This is the point of departure in this book.

We consume in ways that certain people are not consuming, and consume roughly the same as others. In this way we produce social distance and proximity, distance from one and proximity to the other. This is the source of our happiness. We use consumer goods for our benefit – here I agree with economic orthodoxy. But we don’t succeed by piling up mountains of them, which we then devour and otherwise exploit, but rather by opening up divides between people and thereby manifesting distance, as well as building bridges to other people and thereby expressing proximity to them. This production view of social distance and proximity opens up a consumer theory, the core of which is not the relationship between things and people, but between people and people, a view that is presented here.

But how exactly do we produce social distance and proximity as we consume? Non-trivial answers beyond “Yes to this, no to that!” are not evident. The economic orthodoxy remains silent here, except perhaps for the assertion that “Yes to this, no to that!” depends on which goods convey information a consumer wants other consumers to know. But what the desired information should be remains obscure or a communicative primitive (like ‘being rich’, understood as communicable simply by high consumer spending). Sociology is hardly doing any better. There, “Yes to this, no to that!” is understood as being the consequence of interpersonal differences in financial and non-financial (human and social) capital stocks. Although these are regarded as the source of social distance and proximity, sociology has little more to offer than a tautology as to how the latter are created: social distance and proximity are created by (the production of) social distance and proximity. Psychology, on the other hand, lacks the systematic consideration of the material, and material culture research lacks the broader view. And semiotics concerns itself with the relationship between symbols, but it remains all the more silent on the relationship between distance and proximity, which are themselves also symbols. And as a result, it also remains silent on the relationship between people, who with their “Yes to this, no to that!”, move closer to some and further away from others. The goal of the following is to close these gaps a bit.

It will be shown how social distance and proximity are communicated by consumption and produced by communication. The approach taken can be regarded as a (material) cultural-economic one. The world of things (augmented by matching behaviours) provides the ‘material’ for opening up interpersonal divides on the one hand and building bridges on the other. Culture provides the classification system that turns “Yes to this, no to that!” into a communicative activity, and the economy opens up the sphere of activity for consumers, confronting them with the consequences of their actions. Consumption, understood as the consumption of social distance and proximity rather than quantities of goods, closes the production-consumption circuit. But not, as in economic orthodoxy, in a self-referential economic system, but rather via culture. Culture is not an addendum to the economic circuit, but central to it.