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## Capitalism, Consumption, and the Transformation of Everyday Life: The Political Economy of Social Practices

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The task of simultaneously tackling underconsumption and overconsumption of resources represents the world's main global sustainability challenge.<sup>1</sup> While large parts of the global population survive on a bare minimum, the resource intensive everyday practices of rich societies—including car dependency, frequent flying and high levels of meat consumption—and the fact that there is seemingly no endpoint to the increasing consumption of, for example, clothing and technological appliances are at the core of the unsustainabilities embedded in the 'Capitalocene' (Moore, 2016). Although in variegated ways, similar consumption patterns develop alongside increasing affluence in otherwise highly different contexts. As the 'global consumer class' expands, understanding how to confront unsustainable consumption patterns is more urgent than ever.

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According to a recent Lancet report, we are facing a global ‘syndemic’ of undernutrition, obesity and climate change (Swinburn et al., 2019). Many more people are now overweight than underweight globally, and overweight and obesity continue to increase in all the world’s regions (FAO et al., 2021). Furthermore, the demand for water by far outpaces population growth (UN, 2020a), and much of the global freshwater reserves are under serious stress. In many affluent societies, house sizes have grown dramatically, and many own several houses, something that in turn requires vast amounts of energy (Wilhite, 2016). Meanwhile, the number of people without adequate housing is increasing, and more than 1 billion people lived in urban slums in 2018 (UN, 2020b). More than 10 per cent of the global population, most of them living in rural areas, do not have access to electricity (World Bank, 2020). Furthermore, in 2017, 785 million people still lacked even basic drinking water services (UN, 2020a). And despite all the talk about alleviating hunger, the prevalence of food insecurity increases, which is connected to a range of adverse consequences (Rudolfson, 2021). According to FAO (2020), 690 million people, 8.9 per cent of the world population, were undernourished in 2019, a situation worsened dramatically by the Covid-19 pandemic (FAO et al., 2021).

Traditionally, the unevenness of global resource consumption has been understood alongside dichotomies such as ‘North-South’ or ‘developed and developing countries’. While these remain popular, they were never particularly accurate and depend on simplifications that have long exceeded their expiration date. The most obvious reason is found in the rapidly escalating levels of household consumption in so-called emerging economies (Hansen & Wethal, 2015), most notably in Asia (see Hansen, 2020; Kharas, 2017). As Asia has moved beyond its role as factory of the world to also become the leading consumer market, the region has become home to booming markets within virtually all consumer domains, from frozen chicken and instant noodles through washing machines to flights and luxury goods. At the centre of such trends are large and rapidly expanding urban middle classes. While Asia is currently home to more than half of the 3.2 billion people estimated to comprise the ‘global middle class’, the Asian middle classes keep expanding rapidly (Kharas, 2017).<sup>2</sup> These middle classes, sometimes also labelled as ‘consumer classes’

(e.g. World Bank, 2018), are seen to play a defining role in a range of development processes (see Melber, 2015; Wiemann, 2015a, b).<sup>3</sup> As consumers, they represent demand for more goods and services and are seen as pivotal for building a strong domestic economy. At the same time, however, and rather optimistically (Hansen and Wethal, In press), they are also expected to be more environmentally conscious and take the lead in reducing resource use and overconsumption (Wiemann, 2015a, b).

Understanding escalating levels of household consumption is a complex task. Consumption is shaped by a wide range of factors concerning how our stuff is produced, how we live and work, how we eat and how we move around. However, this complexity, I argue, is often ignored when consumption outside high-income countries is discussed. Indeed, a range of simplifications—ranging from the little helpful rational consumer of mainstream economics to explaining rising consumption primarily as the outcome of ‘Westernisation’—tend to dominate discussions surrounding the ‘new consumers’ of global capitalism (see Hansen, 2021). Rather surprisingly given the profound impacts they are having and will have on global consumption patterns and resource use, these new consumers have been subject to relatively little attention in the by now large field of consumption research. This field has had a tendency to focus on affluent societies, a tendency strengthened during the ‘practice turn’ of the past couple of decades (although see Rinkinen et al., 2019; Hansen, 2017a, 2018; Hansen & Jakobsen, 2020a; Sahakian et al., 2016). This is perhaps not surprising, but given the speed at which the emerging middle classes and their consumption levels are growing (see Kharas, 2017), it represents a significant lacuna in the literature.

The starting point of this chapter is that a broader research agenda to make sense of consumption among new middle classes is needed (see also Hansen and Wethal, In press). Specifically, I argue that such an agenda need to approach changing consumption patterns as the outcome of both large-scale societal transformations and local-scale changes in how people carry out mundane activities. In the following section, I discuss the theoretical position guiding this chapter, focusing on the political economy of everyday practices. My main point is that theories of practice, now dominant in consumption research, are well-suited to make sense of consumption transformations and new middle classes. However, I argue, this

requires bringing political economy into the analysis, something practice approaches have been labelled as so far unable or even ill-suited for doing. I engage with this critique and suggest ways forward, focusing in particular on the fundamentally structuring role that capitalism has on consumption patterns. I illustrate this with the case of the radical changes in consumption patterns in China and Vietnam in the past decades. The dramatic consumption booms these countries have seen under communist regimes traditionally highly sceptical towards a wide range of consumer goods, represent an excellent case for discussing the conditioning effects of political-economic context on consumption patterns.

## Systems and Practice Turns: The Political Economy of Practices

The ‘practice turn’ in the social sciences has had a strong impact on consumption research and is discussed throughout this book (see the previous chapter for an overview). From this perspective, consumption is understood as ‘moments’ in social practice and is fundamentally shaped by social and material contexts (Warde, 2005, 2014). In this chapter, I will focus on what has been located as a main weakness of practice approaches to consumption; their blind spot towards the political economy and the broader systemic context within which consumption takes place (Welch et al., 2020; Evans, 2019, 2020; Hansen, 2017a, 2018, 2022). While the criticism is in many ways justified, I will argue that it is not entirely fair. That is, there are, as I will show, many ways in which practice theorists have engaged with provision and political economies. However, there is significant potential for improvement, particularly when it comes to engaging directly with capitalism as a social and economic system.

First of all, some practice approaches obviously do take production and provision into account. Gert Spaargaren’s (2013) work on ‘consumption junctions’, analysing demand and provision through specific sites (such as supermarkets) where practices of consumption and production meet is one example (see also Oosterveer et al., 2007). Demand is a good

place to start for making the connection between consumption and the systems within which it takes place. Elizabeth Shove and colleagues have been central in theorising the connection between provision, practice and demand, both in their work on the relationship between infrastructure and practices (Shove & Trentmann, 2019; Cass et al., 2018) and in their work specifically on where demand comes from (Rinkinen et al., 2021). We must understand demand to understand consumption, yet, as Appadurai (1986) has pointed out, too often demand is treated as an outcome of infinite and transcultural *desire* or fixed *needs* that are somehow natural to us. Mainstream economics is of course the usual suspect here (see McNeill, this volume), but across the board of sciences and policymaking, the idea of demand as something that exists out there and has to be met is powerful (see Rinkinen et al., 2021). But where does demand come from? Appadurai (1986: 29) pointed out that demand ‘emerges as a function of a variety of social practices and classifications, rather than a mysterious emanation of human needs, a mechanical response to social manipulation [...], or the narrowing down of a universal and voracious desire for objects to whatever happens to be available’. Relatedly, Wilhite et al. (2000: 123) concluded that (energy) demand is the ‘result of interactions in the social, cultural and technical contexts in which individual lives are played out’, and Rinkinen et al. (2021) hold that demand is derived from social practices. As they explain, ‘demand is an outcome of the social, infrastructural and institutional constitution of society and [...] resources such as energy are consumed and transformed in accomplishing a huge range of social practices including those involved in heating, commuting, laundering, cooling and so forth’ (p. 8). Such an approach involves provisioning actors. As put by Shove and Pantzar (2005: 62) in their classic text on the invention and reinvention of Nordic walking, ‘consumers and producers are *both* involved in constituting and reproducing practices, the successful accomplishment of which entails specific forms of consumption’ (italics in original). Rinkinen et al. (2021) expand on this and argue that demand is ‘made, not simply met’ and tie the creation of demand directly to policymaking and how infrastructure and systems of provision are ‘designed and sized to enable certain ways of life’ (p. 6), and to businesses and how supply ‘breeds’, and not only meets,

demand (a proposition not unknown to economists, with classical treatises such as Say's law).

These approaches certainly take us a long way in connecting practices and provision. They also involve clear nods towards what Ben Fine (2002) conceptualises as 'systems of provision', or 'the inclusive chain of activity that attaches consumption to the production that makes it possible' (Fine, 2002: 79; see also Bayliss & Fine, 2020). But practice approaches tend to have a very instrumental approach to systems of provision, using the concept to unveil specific connections, for example between power grids and household energy practices. The work discussed above takes us in the direction of how practices are enabled and 'constrained by material circumstances' (Fine et al., 2018: 27), but do not live up to Ben Fine's original intention of bringing capitalism into the study of consumption. Leaving out capitalism means also leaving out crucial questions of power. While power, and particularly in terms of class, is in different ways central to classic practice theory (see Ortner, 2006), it has been less pronounced in 'second-generation' work (see previous chapter). And neither classic nor contemporary practice approaches have engaged much with power in the sense of the accumulation strategies of capital and the ways in which these co-shape demand, practices and consumption. So the concrete outcomes of political-economic processes are introduced and the influence of a range of actors mentioned, but the structuring effects of capital and capitalism are mostly left untouched. This can be partly explained by the flat ontology that dominates much of practice theory and which complicates engagement with large-scale phenomena unless studied through their concrete manifestations (Nicolini, 2017; Hansen, 2022). But the repeated calls for closer engagement with the systemic conditions in which practices take place (e.g. Warde, 2014, 2015; Evans, 2020) may open for new ways of understanding the structuring effects of capital and capitalism on consumption. Representing a rare example of contemporary practice-theoretical engagement with capitalism, Harold Wilhite's work is a good place to start. Although always grounded in everyday life, his approach to practice engaged directly with economic and cultural supra-practice configurations—what we in one instance referred to as 'meta-practice' (Wilhite & Hansen, 2015). To him, and to me, understanding capitalism is fundamental to understanding

unsustainable consumption. He thus places capitalism at the centre of the analysis in his 2016 book *The Political Economy of Low Carbon Transformation*. Drawing on a range of sources from Marx to Harvey and Piketty, he focuses on how the ‘pillars of capitalism’—economic growth, individual ownership, marketisation, product differentiation and turnover—complicate sustainability transformations and drive escalating consumption. He goes deeper to analyse the larger societal impacts of capitalism’s growth imperative and argues that capitalism creates not only specific systems of provision but cultures and habits of growth (Wilhite, 2016),

Influenced by Wilhite and drawing on the groundbreaking work of the many other scholars introduced above, I believe the development of a ‘political economy of practices’ is warranted. What I argue for is an approach that manages the balancing act of taking capitalism as a social and economic system into account *without* the production centrism that tends to dominate political economy work. It is a study of social practices that takes political and corporate power into account as at least co-shaping and at times also fundamentally structuring consumption and practices. This happens for example through limiting possible ways of action and through limiting consumption options, such as when only Coke is available or only unhealthy food is affordable to consumers (Wilk, 2018; Otero, 2018). The definitional power of business actors needs to be included in holistic practice approaches. Capitalism is designed to provide a wide array of consumer goods, yet, and particularly among poorer segments of the population, capitalist societies are also defined by a lack of alternatives. Capitalism, and perhaps even more so in its contemporary shape, is also geared towards creating often extreme forms of inequality through a consumer society where cheap goods are produced (and discarded) through the exploitation of workers and the environment and where the quality of products one can buy is defined by purchasing power. The environmental footprint of the consumption patterns of the world’s richest people is a highly visible illustration of the inequalities embedded in global capitalism (Barros & Wilk, 2021). Taking into account the political economy of practices should thus also lead to a study of the exploitation on which consumption patterns tend to be based, since, as put by Brand and Wissen (2021: 5), ‘normality is

produced [...] by masking the destruction in which it is rooted' (see also Anantharaman, 2018).

To stay within the realm of food, Otero (2018) has introduced the idea of the 'neoliberal diet'. Take the example of food shopping. The expansion of supermarkets in many parts of the world, often known as supermarketisation, deeply influences what we buy and eat (Demmler et al., 2018) and is an example of the forms of structural change Shove (2003) has located as critical avenues for consumption research: 'the big, and in some cases, global swing of ordinary, routinized and taken-for granted practice' (Shove, 2003: 9). This is a typical example of interlinked changes in systems of provision and everyday shopping practices, often combined with other systemic changes, such as an increasing dominance of the 'system of automobility' (Urry, 2004). Such food transformations are quite obviously driven by much more than individual consumers making new choices, but also more than infrastructure and policy. They represent changes in the total system of how food is produced and consumed, from farms to the everyday geographies of consumption (Clapp, 2016; Hansen & Jakobsen, 2020a). While a practice approach offers a highly useful way for investigating the intersections between everyday geographies, infrastructure and changes in everyday life that such food transformations represent, it needs to be accompanied by a dynamic approach to political economy in order to provide a holistic account of changing consumption patterns (Hansen, 2022).

In order to illustrate the fundamentally conditioning role of capitalism on consumption patterns, I use the case of two recent 'capitalist transformations'. In the following, I turn to how consumption has represented an integral part of capitalist development in China and Vietnam.

## Consumer Revolutions in China and Vietnam<sup>4</sup>

China in 2017 became the world's largest retail market, surpassing the United States (Fickling, 2018). This was made possible by a quarter-billion people strong Chinese middle class (The Economist, 2016). While much smaller in size and global impact, the 'socialist' neighbour to the south Vietnam is home to rapidly expanding middle classes with



increasing purchasing power and has seen dramatic increases in consumption over the past decades. In other words, large parts of the new 'consumer classes' of global capitalism are found in nominally socialist countries. Interestingly, the consumption booms these countries have been home to have taken place within regimes that have traditionally been, and to some extent still are, strongly opposed to the Western consumer society.

## Conflicted Consumerism

Although economic openness became the mantra in both China and Vietnam following market reforms in the 1970s (China) and 80s (Vietnam), there was much worry within the ruling communist parties regarding the culturally and morally eroding impacts of embracing globalisation. One of the main concerns regarded the consequences of 'Western consumerism'. The fear was that integration with the capitalist world would lead to an increased desire for unnecessary consumer items, which came along with a consumer culture that was seen as a threat to socialist values. For Chinese leaders, consumerism was seen as 'the defining element of cultural and moral degradation in the contemporary global era', and linked to 'materialism, hedonism, and worship of money' (Davis, 2011: 339). Vietnamese leaders had similar worries. According to Taylor (2003: 139), in the 1990s, state officials talked of a crisis to Vietnamese culture and society brought along by deeper integration with the non-communist world. The main negative effects were more borrowing of money and the emergence of consumerism, alongside 'a *cult* of exotic taste' and 'the resurgence of a cultural inferiority complex'. Given the efforts placed on building a strong identity in opposition to capitalism, this was a worry to be taken seriously. Thus, while the official slogans talked about openness to trade, leaders in both China and Vietnam started campaigning for the necessity of restrictions on imports and were particularly worried about the effects foreign influences would have on youth (Marr & Rosen, 1998). According to the communist leaders, foreign influences in the realm of consumption could lead to all sorts of negative influences, including spikes in crime and violence due to an

alleged impact of movies from Hollywood and elsewhere in Asia (Marr & Rosen, 1998). But an increasing trend towards conspicuous consumption was also seen as a considerable problem. The private car, as probably the most conspicuous consumer item there is, is a telling example. In both China and Vietnam, there had been little room for private automobility in the decades of planned economy that preceded the socialist market economy. While modern China's founding father Sun Yat-sen had dreamt of a car for every man in the 1920s, the communists under Mao banned private cars altogether, with the exception of high-ranking cadres (Notar, 2017). In Vietnam, as late as during the 2000s, government officials worried about the appropriateness of owning a car (Hansen, 2017b).

A capitalist economy depends on increasing consumption (see Wilhite & Hansen, 2015 for discussion). Alongside a scepticism towards the perils of consumerism, the communist regimes have thus focused on developing domestic markets. The Chinese government has been particularly clear in this regard, with a consensus among policymakers on the importance of developing so-called consumption-led growth through an internal market as the new engine for long-term growth (Croll, 2006). The capitalist transformation has indeed, broadly speaking, brought along fundamental changes in the party-states' approach to consumption. Due to high saving rates and an overdependence on exports, Chinese politicians have moved from consumption scepticism to actually pushing people to consume more (Gerth, 2010). This is quite succinctly captured by then-premier Zhu Rongji's report to the Ninth People's Congress in 2002:

We need to eliminate all barriers to consumption by deepening reform and adjusting policies. We need to encourage people to spend more on housing, tourism, automobiles, telecommunications, cultural activities, sports and other services and develop new focuses of consumer spending' (in Otis, 2012: 43).

The US-China trade war has unsurprisingly strengthened the perceived need to boost consumption at home (Tang, 2019). There are of course many ways to boost consumption. In both China and Vietnam, access to credit and reduction of tariffs on imported consumer goods are important economic factors. More leisure time and public holidays contribute

as social factors. And, crucially, the most dramatic change is in the cultural and ideological spheres, where middle-class lifestyles (although not labelled as such) are considered ‘modern’ and ‘civilized’, or, in China, as ‘high-*suzhi*’ or higher quality (Kipnis, 2006; Miao, 2017). This does not mean all forms of consumption, however. With freedom comes responsibility, and just like the New Socialist Man in the past was expected to be selfless and always put the collective first, the New Socialist Consumer must act ‘civilized’ and ‘modern’ while at the same time stay in line with national culture. As Gillen (2016: 41) has argued, the state still ‘uses culture as a means to caution Vietnamese society against consumerism and the perils of individual wealth’. While consuming goods can now be a good thing, this should not go on accord with the culture of the socialist market economy. While deciphering what exactly that means is hard, morality is central. Indeed, prosperity is now a moral issue. And according to communist party rhetoric, the values of socialism will counter the negative effects of mass consumption. In China, the party embraces and promotes high-*suzhi* lifestyles. Xi Jinping’s ‘Chinese Dream’ involves ‘an infusion of cultural values to balance materialism’. As put by China Daily USA (2014, n.p.):

For the past 30 years Chinese have been manufacturing and exporting products to meet the materialistic aspirations of consumers in the West. Chinese are now ready to consume what they produce, to realize the materialistic aspect of the Chinese Dream. The only question is whether this acquisition of material goods will unfold as Western-style conspicuous consumption in China or in a more considered way, informed by a Chinese cultural appreciation for keeping life in balance.

While there is a large dose of party propaganda in such statements, it clearly reflects the ongoing worry concerning the perils of consumer society. These gain importance in Xi Jiping’s aims to develop an ‘ecological civilization’ that is to restore a harmony between human and nature, and where sustainable—or high quality, healthy and eco-friendly—consumption is central (Pan, 2016).

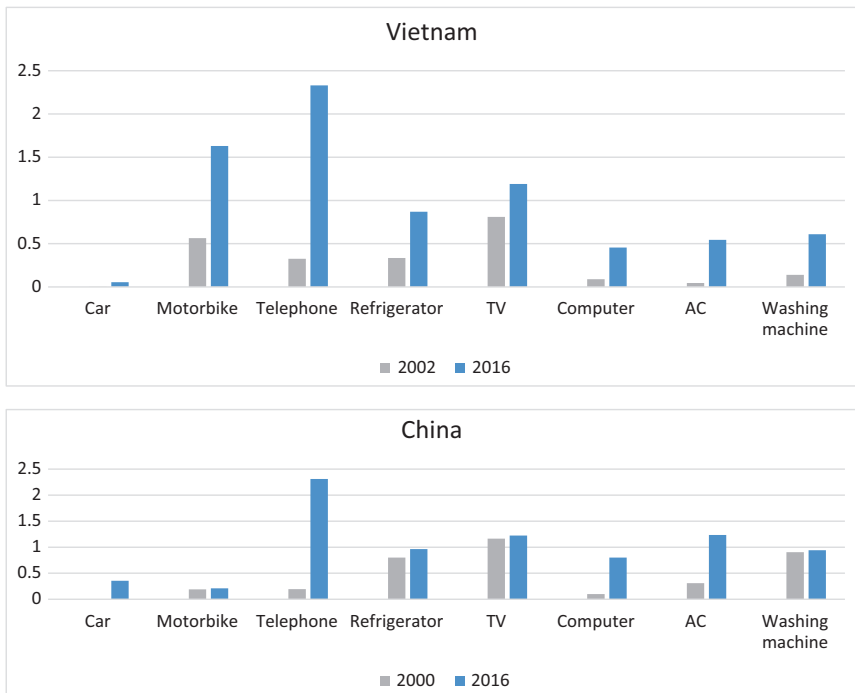
That said, anyone familiar with China, or Vietnam for that sake, knows that conspicuous consumption is not necessarily a Western

thing. At least, conspicuous consumer trends have long been important, some even argue that owning the right kind of brands is a 'national obsession' in China (Yu, 2014). Although such processes take place in different ways depending on the context, conspicuous consumption is a typical trait in the development of consumer society. Just ask Thorstein Veblen (2005 [1899]) or Pierre Bourdieu (1984), who in quite different and highly influential ways have shown how positional consumption is naturalised through class relations. Veblen is perhaps particularly to the point for these cases. His study of the purchase and display of luxury goods among the new rich in the United States after the second industrial revolution showed how expensive material goods gained particular value in terms of their capacity to evidence wealth and power in context where inherited social positions were losing the monopoly on hierarchically structuring society (see also the previous chapter). Broadly speaking, this is quite easily transferred to China and Vietnam, where the hierarchies of the Leninist party-state have been, to certain extents at least, challenged by the hierarchies of success in the market economy (see Hansen, 2017b). There is indeed an interesting inclination towards showing-off expensive new belongings among the well-off in both China and Vietnam. China is indeed vital to the world of luxury, closing in on 40 per cent of the total global market for luxury goods (Asia Times, 2018). Also in Vietnam, the high-end market is booming. Furthermore, in both countries, the consumption of luxury products is not just about displaying wealth but is closely related to a culture of gift-giving, related both to ways of showing respect and to 'greasing' of contacts. Under the market economy, the gifts have become more luxurious and the 'need' for and potential gains from corruption much larger. As part of anti-corruption policies, the Chinese state thus in the early 2010s started cracking down on gift giving, causing a temporary slump in sales of luxury products.

While luxury brands represent a particularly conspicuous and contradictory element of 'consumer socialism' (Hansen, 2020, 2022), however, the capitalist transformations in China and Vietnam have first and foremost led to increased consumption of a wide range of consumer goods.

## Consumption Booms

Ideological scepticism is only one part of the story of why consumption boomed after economic reforms. Planned economies have often struggled to keep up with demand for consumer goods, even of the most basic kind. In China and Vietnam, both factors have lost importance. China indeed produces a large part of the world's consumer goods, and Vietnam has also seen considerable industrial development. The openness for trade and investments, combined with increased purchasing power and an increased willingness to spend money, has led to an extraordinary increase in the consumption of consumer goods in both countries (see Fig. 2.1).



**Fig. 2.1** Consumption booms: number of consumer goods per urban households. Note: Compiled by the author based on Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey (various years) and China Statistical Yearbook (various years)

While large parts of society in both countries contribute to this boom, it is particularly the upper parts of urban middle classes that are high consumers. For example, there are still many households in Vietnam that cannot afford owning a motorbike. So the fact that there is now on average about one motorbike per person in Vietnam's largest cities (Hansen, 2022) is due to the fact that many well-off households own at least one motorbike per household member. Motorbikes in Vietnam, and the development of a 'system of moto-mobility' is also a very good example of how the interaction of political economy and everyday practices can co-shape rather unique consumption patterns (Hansen, 2017a, b). So are cars and the system of automobility, although this is a more expected development. Urban car ownership has boomed in China, where annual car sales reached 29 million in 2017, a more than five-fold increase compared to a decade earlier (OICA, 2020). Importantly, this happened despite considerable restrictions on urban car ownership (Liu et al., 2020). Since then, however, car sales have stabilised and even declined, and only the electric vehicle segment is experiencing growth (OICA, 2020). In Vietnam, there are no electric cars, but plenty of electric scooters. While the Vietnamese middle classes are predominantly driving motorbikes, car sales have boomed also there, and it is not uncommon to own both a car and a motorbike.

Fuelled by rising incomes and—more recently—soaring household debt (Tang, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018), particularly the upper parts of the urban middle classes in China and Vietnam have started to spend more money and are adopting lifestyles and consumption patterns that can be recognised as 'middle class' globally. Young, fashionable urbanites have become emblematic of this class, with clothing styles, hairdos and eating and drinking habits to match their status. Niche stores and hip, quality-oriented cafés and coffee shops are examples of the urban spaces frequented by this segment of the middle classes. More generally, housing practices are changing towards smaller households in increasingly air-conditioned environments, the entertainment industry is booming, smartphones have become normal, shopping malls and supermarkets are popping up and so are restaurants and fast food chains, while travelling within or outside one's country for tourism purposes is becoming a normal leisure activity. The middle classes live in larger and more solid

houses, often equipped with modern appliances, and spend much more on non-food items than the rest of society (see World Bank, 2018). But they also spend more on food items. While traditional 'wet markets' have long represented the norm for food shopping in China and Vietnam, both countries are witnessing rapid processes of supermarketisation. Importantly, this is an intended development by the governments in the two countries, who tend to view traditional markets as outdated and unhygienic. While it could be argued that supermarkets emerge as a response to demand from emerging middle classes, they also co-create this demand (Qaim, 2017). It is indeed well established that changing from market to supermarket affects what consumers purchase, particularly towards more processed food (Demmler et al., 2018). These major changes in systems of provision profoundly affect everyday practices, in combination with other structural changes, such as the development of a system of automobility. It also moves power and profit from small-scale vendors to large corporations and domestic and regional capital. Interestingly, and somewhat ironically, these corporations are able to benefit from a series of food scandals and scares which has made food safety a main concern among consumers in both countries (see Ehlert & Faltmann, 2019). This trend is further strengthened by the Covid-19 pandemic. Small-scale producers and local markets are under increased pressure due to the pandemics (Wertheim-Heck, 2020), while large businesses in the food industry are well placed to increase their market control through stricter quality controls (Hansen & Jakobsen, 2020b).

Similar trends are visible within other parts of the food systems in both countries. For example, both countries have seen a rapid increase in the prevalence of eating out. Eating out as a practice has been co-shaped by urban foodscapes consisting of a plethora of restaurants and street kitchens. Increasingly, these are challenged by food franchises, many of which are owned by large corporations. Both globally dominating brands such as McDonald's and KFC, Asian brands such as Lotteria from Korea and Jollibee from the Philippines, and a range of domestic varieties exist. These have however not outcompeted street kitchens. In Vietnam, the global franchises in particular have developed at a much slower speed than they expected, and are mostly popular among young people and children (Hansen, 2021). But many of them are growing, often through

adapting to local food practices and for example offering affordable rice lunches. Furthermore, governments support a move away from the unruly street kitchens and supports investments by large capital in domestic food systems from farm to fork. Again, this shifts power towards big capital. It also changes how food is produced, provided and consumed. This does not necessarily imply a ‘Westernisation’ of diets, but globally it does imply a dramatic homogenisation in terms of contributing towards diets consisting of more animal source food, more fat and sugar and more highly processed food (Hansen & Jakobsen, 2020a). This is referred to as a Western diet in the nutrition literature (see Kearney, 2010; Popkin et al., 2012), but, I argue, should rather be seen as a capitalist diet (see Otero, 2018). Globally, the increasing dominance of supermarkets and fast food chains involve corporate power over the food options of consumers, often shaping food practices towards less healthy and low-quality food. Richard Wilk (2018) blames the global obesity epidemic on this expansion of ‘global junk’. It is indeed an excellent and disturbing example of the impact of political economy on everyday practices.

## **Consumption, Capitalism and the Transformation of Everyday Life**

The cases of consumer revolutions in China and Vietnam illustrate some of the complexity of consumption. Practice approaches can go a long way in explaining how more goods and services gradually become normal, and how different consumer items move from luxury to necessity. They can also show how such processes co-develop with infrastructure and policy-making. But the focus on carefully unpacking the fabric of normality, one of the key strengths of practice approaches, tends to make them lose sight of the structural conditions within which consumption takes place. The cases of China and Vietnam illustrate how important systemic changes and ‘supra-practice configurations’ are for understanding consumption. The fact that these two countries have gone through a fascinating combination of capitalist transformation and communist-rule continuity makes them particularly useful as illustrations of the importance of governance, ideology and political economy. Quite simply, the change from a planned



economy to a market economy involves a change from a system striving to deliver enough goods to one where the expansion of production and consumption is fundamental to the functioning of the economy. Even the most conservative communists have to allow for an expansion of private consumption when the growth of the domestic economy is at play. Thus, capitalist transformations have seen the communist regimes gradually loosen the scepticism towards 'consumerism' and somewhat hesitantly embracing consumer society. In turn, then, capitalist development comes with certain macro-infrastructures of consumption, what Ritzer (2010) has dubbed 'the means of consumption', such as supermarkets, fast food restaurants and shopping malls. These are in turn part of certain systemic complexes of practice, such as housing, leisure and work arrangements or the system of automobility, which are shaped through both political regulation and the accumulation strategies of businesses. While these developments take different forms in different contexts (see Hansen et al., 2016), I do understand them as certain 'blueprints of modernity' that are embedded in capitalism. The main point here, however, is that these large processes must be understood if we are to make sense of unsustainable consumption patterns. I think the most useful way of going about doing this is to introduce capitalism to practice approaches' sophisticated understanding of everyday life.

## The Political Economy of Everyday Practices

The discussion above has highlighted the importance of understanding the macro-systemic context within which consumption takes place. Without capitalist transformation and integration into global networks of production, trade and investments, neither the new middle classes nor their consumption patterns would be possible. The discussion also touches on the role of businesses in co-shaping demand. Whether through marketing, infrastructure and spatial arrangements or through partly dictating consumption through systems of provision, many businesses are immensely powerful in shaping consumption patterns. In order to fully understand consumption, practice approaches need to re-engage with power and to somehow deal with both the overall growth imperative of

capitalism and the direct impact of capitalist accumulation strategies on everyday practice (Wilhite, 2016).

A political economy of practice also needs to take into account inequality. Consumption research tends to focus on relatively affluent people. It also tends to view goods as inherently bad for people, something that, as Daniel Miller has argued, often turns it into ‘a literature that allows the anxieties of the rich to obscure the suffering of the poor’ (Miller, 2001: 241). The consumption literature certainly tends to neglect the emerging middle classes and their aspirations as consumers, and how increasing access to consumer goods in many ways represent progress and development for people. This is perhaps particularly the case within practice approaches and sustainable consumption, where the fact that billions of people aspire to increase their material footprints receives negligible attention compared to the high-consuming lifestyles and often rather negligible attempts at consumption alterations among the well-off in affluent societies.

Until we start asking uncomfortable questions about the limits of wealth, Wilk (2014: 332) argues, ‘a sustainable consumer culture remains an oxymoron’. In a utopian world, we could have agreed to lower the consumption of the rich and raise the living standards of the poor to create a more sustainable world. In reality, dealing with overconsumption is at least as hard as dealing with underconsumption. Interestingly, there is seemingly no endpoint to how much households can consume. If we go back to the 1950s and 1960s, leading economists thought that affluent societies were reaching a limit where there was no need for new consumption. Walt Rostow’s (1960) for some reason overlooked ‘sixth stage of economic growth’ was titled ‘beyond consumption’, and speculated what would happen once households had all the goods they needed, when increasing income would lose its appeal and the pursuit of material goods would no longer dominate people’s lives. What would US households use money on when they already had a TV, a car and a washing machine? I raise this point because Rostow was a highly influential, leading mainstream economist who was a direct advisor to US President Lyndon B. Johnson. The thought of an economist in a similar position today posing such questions seems unlikely, to say the least. The closest we get is lofty words about a circular economy, the idea of which tends to almost

completely ignore the complexity of consumption and the efforts required to consume more sustainably (Hobson et al., 2021). Instead, consumer society has continued expanding, consumers buy more and more stuff, and circular visions at best resulting in upwards spiralling resource use (Wilhite, 2016). This cannot, I argue, be explained by a natural insatiable appetite for as much stuff as possible, nor by individuals making a wide range of very similar choices towards purchasing more things. Importantly, while I think practice theories are in a better position than most theories to explain overconsumption, a sole focus on social practices can only take us some of the way. It can help explain how higher levels of consumption are normalised through what Shove (2003: 3) has called a ‘ratcheting up of demand’. But in order to fully understand these developments, we need to take into account the political economy of capitalism within which social practice takes place. Capitalism, as a social and economic system built around economic growth for the sake of accumulation, will always favour increasing overall consumption. As Wilhite (2016: 17) argues, this in turn normalises excess as the ideology, institutions and incentives of capitalism have ‘fostered practices that over time have embodied and habituated expansive consumption’.

## Conclusions

There are many and complex reasons for both underconsumption and overconsumption. Underconsumption is caused by poverty, marginalisation and inequality, often intensified by environmental hazards and climate change. Overconsumption is intrinsically linked to underconsumption. The high consumption of the rich is in many ways built on the underpaid labour of the poor, an injustice further entrenched by overconsumption being a central cause of climate change and many of the environmental hazards that hit the poor hardest. In other words, modern consumption patterns depend fundamentally on the exploitation of people and nature (Brand and Wissen, 2021).

Although much popular attention tends to be on the extraordinary and conspicuous sides of consumption, most consumption is mundane and inconspicuous. Consumption levels are fundamentally shaped by what is

considered normal, and by how and where people live their lives and how and where they acquire their stuff and access to services. It is, in short, shaped by how normality is organised (e.g. Shove, 2003). One of the profound challenges the world is facing, is that normality keeps getting increasingly resource intensive. This process takes place constantly in rich countries, enabled by growth, increasing incomes, and global capitalist production networks that allow for a seemingly never-ending access to cheap goods and labour. But perhaps even more dramatically, higher levels of consumption are increasingly normalised in a wide range of emerging economies, particularly in Asia. This chapter has used the cases of two of the fastest growing economies in the world, China and Vietnam, to discuss the complexity of consumption and argue for the importance of political economy for understanding everyday practices. By studying consumption booms in these two 'socialist market economies', I have sought to illustrate how the growth imperative of capitalism translates to an imperative for increasing consumption, forcing even conservative communists to embrace capitalist consumer society (although they may not admit to doing so).

The impact of increased affluence on consumption patterns is at the same time predictable and unpredictable. Different countries have different versions of modernity, and novelties like whole societies built around motorbikes emerge. But it is predictable in the sense that there are certain blueprints of modernity that seemingly every country follows, although with significant local variation. In this chapter, I have used supermarketisation, fast food franchises and the system of automobility as examples. Many more could be added, within all spheres of consumption. These develop through the fundamental logics of capitalism and its systems of accumulation. In turn, they form the contextual configurations within which everyday practices take place. They are part of co-shaping all elements of social practices, and in many ways influence or even dictate the moments of consumption that take place within them. Any attempt to understand and ultimately confront unsustainable consumption, thus needs to factor in capitalism. Taking capitalism seriously involves asking uncomfortable questions about growth, profit, inequality and individual ownership (see Wilhite & Hansen, 2015). In this chapter, I have suggested that studying the political economy of practices may be the way forward as consumption research hopefully re-engages with these

questions and fulfil Daniel Miller's (1995: 16) call from the early years of the field: 'the new study of consumption should lead inexorably to the direct study of capitalism'.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank Ulrikke Wethal and Johannes Volden for highly constructive feedback on an earlier draft of this chapter. The title of this chapter is partly inspired by Wilhite (2008, 2016)
2. Estimates such as these obviously group together highly diverse groups of people (see Koo, 2016), but remain useful for understanding the magnitude of this second domain of what Dicken (2015) has dubbed a 'global shift' towards Asia.
3. We should keep in mind that most of the 'new Asian middle classes' are far from rich. Indeed most of them are, as Trentmann (2017: 374) has put it, 'anxious consumers on a budget'. Indeed, he argues, '[f]or most people in China, as in India and Asia more generally, being middle class does not mean going to the mall but living on the edge in a daily struggle to pay the bills for schools and hospitals' (Trentmann, 2017: 374). Nevertheless, they do contribute to significant consumption booms through their increasing purchases of consumer goods. The same goes for middle classes in China and Vietnam.
4. This section draws on Hansen (2020).

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