



Kate Bayliss · Ben Fine

A Guide to the Systems of Provision Approach

Who Gets What,
How and Why

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“Bayliss and Fine’s book on the theory and application of the “systems of provision” approach is a social science tour-de-force, reconnecting production and consumption well beyond the over simplistic supply and demand of neoclassical economics. In our time of climate crisis, the insights arising from systems of provision are not just illuminating: they may prove crucial to spur the necessary transformation of our economies.”

—Julia Steinberger, *Professor of Political Ecology, University of Leeds.*

“The climate crisis has now arrived, and it will require radical changes in consumption patterns, especially in a context of steady erosion of public goods and services. These changes in consumption cannot be understood with mainstream models of supply and demand; instead, they involve complex interactions all along supply chains, whilst practices of consumption involve not only market signals but cultural understandings. In this path breaking book, Kate Bayliss and Ben Fine draw from decades of rich empirical case studies to synthesize lessons into a comprehensive method for understanding consumption. Their concept of ‘systems of provision’ breaks new theoretical ground, offering social scientists and policymakers a way forward for comprehensively understanding and better shaping systems of provision in contemporary capitalism. Social policy experts and scholars in particular now have a powerful analytical key to new insights into who wins and who loses from the (re-)commodification of the sphere of social reproduction.”

—Lena Lavinias, *Professor of Welfare Economics, Institute of Economics, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.*

“Consumption is too important a topic to be left to economists, but can the other social sciences come up with something as all-embracing and coherent? The Systems of Provision approach claims to provide this alternative framework. Consumption in all its complexity can only be understood in a disaggregated way: the energy system differs from the fashion system, the food system from transport, the hospitality system from health care. This book provides a rich application of these ideas and a guide to policy making and activism, all the more important as runaway consumption in the rich world threatens all our futures.”

—Ian Gough, *Visiting Professor, London School of Economics and Emeritus Professor, University of Bath.*

“Who consumes how much of what, and why? This is not really about “individual preferences”, but rather is critically determined by how goods and services are provided, and how integrated chains of provisioning are intertwined with material cultures. This important book will revolutionise how you think about the consumption of items as disparate as food, consumer durables, or education.”

—Jayati Ghosh, *Professor of Economics, Jawaharlal
Nehru University, New Delhi.*

“This is a must-read for anyone interested in consumption studies. Empirically based and theoretically rigorous, it provides a comprehensive but accessible account of the SOP approach—which has established itself as the most truly interdisciplinary approach to understanding consumption in all its diverse and complex contexts.”

—Desmond McNeill, *Centre for Development and
the Environment, University of Oslo.*

“Bayliss and Fine’s systems of provision (SoP) approach offers a useful grand framework for the social analysis of consumption. They go beyond what is consumed and provided to recognize various rationales for consumption. These include norms, incorporating socially and culturally determined propensities to consume, and the spectrum of provisioning, ranging from public goods to private suppliers. As their book includes both theorization and wide-ranging case studies, the approach offers alternative economic theory and analysis of consumption, besides informing related analyses.”

—Jomo Kwame Sundaram, *Visiting Senior Fellow at Khazanah Research
Institute, Visiting Fellow at the Initiative for Policy Dialogue, Columbia
University, and Adjunct Professor at the International
Islamic University in Malaysia.*

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PREFACE

We are often asked in casual conversation and even more in scholarly exchanges to sum up in a sound bite or three what is a system of provision and what is the systems of provision approach. This foreword offers some sort of response, but it is more of a bite than a light snack, giving some sort of flavour of the heavier meal or, more exactly, comprehensive diet and cuisine, that follows in this book. So, here goes.

“Systems of provision (SoP)” is an approach to the study of consumption that synthesises core elements from across the social sciences in a coherent and manageable framework. This is important because the question of “who has what, how and why” is central to human existence. Fundamental aspects of our everyday lives, such as access to food, water, shelter, schools and health services, hinge on such issues. Pressing global concerns such as climate change, inequality and public health drill down to these core themes which are all the more pressing in light of the emerging global coronavirus pandemic.

Across the social sciences different disciplines have applied their own slant to try to explain what it is that determines what we consume. This is particularly significant for much of modern economics where consumption outcomes continue to be seen to revolve around the hypothetical actions of atomistic, utility-maximizing individuals, operating in the context of more or less perfectly functioning markets.

Other disciplines approach the causes of consumption differently, more closely linked to what it is that is being consumed, who is consuming and in light of culture and context. For example, anthropology focuses on the associations and meanings of objects and the ways that societies interact

with these. Sociology sees consumption as related to identity and social order and is concerned with the role played by social class, race and income levels as a marker of stratification. Psychology plays a role in modern marketing studies which are interested in how shopping habits can be influenced. Scholars of feminist theory work across social science disciplines, for example on how consumption links to the gender division of labour or how advertising shapes notions of gender.

Clearly, then, the range of factors that determine who has what is huge. And will vary depending on the person, the object and the context. How then can we capture the range and complexity of these multifarious factors? The SoP approach was devised in the 1990s in response to the failings of the social sciences individually and collectively to provide a coherent understanding of consumption. The approach has evolved into a structured framework that draws on the scope of social sciences with the notable exception of mainstream economics, of which the SoP approach has been heavily critical.

The essence of the SoP approach is that consumption outcomes depend on the system by which a good or service is provided. This in turn is shaped by the nature of the good itself and the context in which both production and consumption, and the connections between them, are situated. The approach highlights the importance of the specific context. Put simply, the factors which shape consumption of peanut butter will be different from those for education or motor vehicles which will be different again across countries and different today from a century ago. In contrast with mainstream economics, and in line with other social sciences, consuming is seen as a social rather than an individual practice oriented around what are often well-established patterns of consumption, or consumption norms. At the simplest level (sound bite even), and as the starting point for much complexity, the SoP approach is driven by the notion, prominent in popular understanding, that there is an energy system and this is different from the health system that is, in turn, different from the transport system, the fashion system, the food systems and so on, and each needs to be acknowledged as such on its own merits or flaws.

But how to understand these different systems and the differences between them? The SoP approach synthesises the complex drivers of consumption into five broad themes, which are discussed below. It is important to note that these themes are interrelated and the boundaries between them are blurred. This should not be considered as a methodological framework, so much as guide to core issues to bear in mind.

Agents—SoPs are determined by the participants in the system. This includes (individual) consumers themselves but equally producers and other bodies that might be involved such as trade unions, consumer groups and the state. There will be sub-groups within these so that producers might include financiers, shareholders, management and workers. Consumers might be differentiated according to different strata depending on what is being analysed. The state will also have different functions, possibly as regulator, policy maker or even provider. SoP analysis needs to map the agents involved in the system and to consider their role, including their motives and rationales for engaging within or with the SoP. These factors will inevitably be contested, with conflict across different categories of agents—see *relations* below—rather than be harmoniously integrated and coordinated through some amorphous market (or other institutions).

Structures—The SoP will be situated within a wider context which will shape the way that goods are produced and consumed. Structures take different forms such as organizational, institutional and social, formal or informal. There may be legal structures, for example, that shape the SoP. Examples of social structures that would impact on a SoP might be along the lines of income levels, race and/or gender. Structures will intersect. In the housing sector, for example, the institutional structures such as different forms of housing tenure (owner-occupied, private rental, social housing) combine with social structures to lead to social outcomes which might take the form of inequalities in levels of, and access to, housing. SoP analysis can consider how consumption might vary across different structural components and what the impact of these might be. SoP studies may also be concerned with the origins of such structures, which could be connected with other SoP themes such as *material culture*; see below for some light coverage of some examples considered in depth in the main text of this book.

Processes—These can relate to specific activities in the SoP such as how labour is employed, how advertising is used. Other more abstract processes will also shape the SoP such as processes of globalisation, privatisation and financialisation. Processes link to the other SoP elements, for example, privatisation may change the nature of the *agents* and/or the *structures* of provisioning as the state/market *relation* is reconfigured.

Relations—On one level, the SoP analysis will be concerned with the relations between the *agents*. The priorities of the different groups may be conflicting which means that the way the SoP operates will be contingent

on who exercises power and how. At a broader level, relations in society may be shaped by its *structures* such as social class, gender and race. The SoP approach in part derives from the observation that consumption tends to happen in clustered patterns rather than on an individual basis, and corresponding consumption norms are often segregated along these structural formations. SoP analysis, therefore, will be concerned with the role played by social norms and the way that agents, relations and structures shape these.

Material cultures—Each SoP will also be characterized by different meanings for the *agents* who are involved with it in whatever way, including producers and consumers as well as citizens, policymakers, the media and scholars. Systems are reproduced, or not, by prevailing narratives. The SoP approach seeks to unpack what these narratives are and who or what leads to them being created, sustained or contested and transformed. The *agents* in the SoP will have different associations with it. For example, when it comes to infrastructure (such as roads and rail tracks, water pipes and electricity lines), this is seen differently by those who build and finance it, governments who sponsor it, people who use it and people who oppose its construction. And these meanings will change over time as, for example, a new airport runway, which might once have been seen as the height of modernity, can now be considered an environmental disaster. Material cultures are often so deeply ingrained that they can be difficult to identify. Corresponding meanings can also be malleable and fleeting, hence the heavy presence of advertising, and control of, and influence over, the material culture of consumption plays an important role in the shaping of the SoP more broadly—whether it be the construction of owner-occupation as the ideal form of housing or the private motor car as that for transport.

Clearly it will be beyond the scope of most research projects and activist literature to capture each and every element of the SoP. The researcher will need to narrow down to the specific aspects that are of interest. When it comes to methodology, research using the SoP approach tends to be qualitative, oriented around specific case studies but that is not to say that more quantitative methods could not be used. An ever-present challenge in conducting SoP research is that it is not clear from the outset where one SoP ends and another begins as ultimately everything connects to everything else. There will be a SoP for food in general, but also for dairy and even for cheese in particular. Boundaries cannot be set in advance but emerge inductively as part of the research process.

The approach provides a way to unpack the opaque workings of who gets what and how, as well as why. Equally significant is who is excluded from consumption and with what effects. This book contains numerous examples of research studies that have drawn on the SoP approach. These range in scale and scope from health services in England to international supply chains for orange juice. The approach has been shown to be durable and versatile, with varieties of applications. Some studies have followed the approach in detail, examining the structures, processes, agents and relations which underpin provisioning as well as the material cultures that shape consumption decisions. Others have taken the SoP approach as one of a group of approaches on which to draw when considering consumption. Still others just use some core elements of the approach selectively, as for example, when the focus is on material cultures.

Applying this framework draws attention to the systemic factors that determine who gets what, not just in terms of end consumption but also how value is distributed in the chain of provisioning. Given the importance of specificity, each study raises different issues but these are often linked by systemic processes and conceptualisations, such as neoliberalism and globalisation. Two examples are briefly highlighted as tasters for what is to come.

In *housing* in the UK the superficial explanation of who has what is one of a shortage of housing supply pushing up prices thereby lowering affordability. The policy response is to increase housebuilding. SoP analyses, in contrast, unpack the agents and the history of housing, linking the current structure to the past dismantling of social housing and to a financial system that has instilled a speculative nature in housing production and ownership. In addition, SoP studies emphasise the changing material culture of housing where home ownership has since the 1980s been represented as innately preferable to other types of tenure, and housing has been constructed as a financial asset. This cultural shift links to a broader neoliberal understanding where individuals bear responsibility for their own welfare. Through the SoP lens, the policy response of increasing housing construction risks increasing speculative activity in the housing market, and ownership ending up in the hands of financial investors. Instead, to alleviate the increasing vulnerability of low-income households, attention is needed to social housing and to alternative systems of finance which are oriented around social provision.

When it comes to *food*, the world faces major health risks due to over consumption. The incidence of obesity has doubled in the past three

decades. The mainstream approach has been to address the consumer, as if the cause was a sudden lack of knowledge and will power. Public health initiatives to encourage healthy eating are commonplace but have had little success. SoP takes a different approach. First is to look at the production of food. The food SoP rewards ever-expanding food production, with profits to be made from dysfunctional practices such as land grabbing and speculation in agricultural commodity prices. Expanding production needs to be consumed, so providers have a compulsion to create a need to eat that goes far beyond physiological need. Producers make use of advertising as well as changing distribution systems, from out-of-town supermarkets to ubiquitous snack retail outlets to push food sales. The second part of the SoP approach to understanding food consumption is to examine the way in which the consumer engages with this provisioning system, facing pressure both to eat and to diet. The SoP approach is concerned with the cultures that have grown up around food, viewing the epidemic of obesity emerging as in part due to the systemic imperative to accommodate profitable supply.

These and other examples in this book, such as the SoPs for water and “fast” fashion, demonstrate that the act of consumption connects the consumer, usually unwittingly, with the underlying social relations of production. These can be extensive. In fashion for example, the range of agents in the SoP reaches across continents from agricultural workers and machinists usually from the Global South to retailers, designers, models and advertisers often in the North. In water in England, the apparently mundane act of turning on the tap, ostensibly unchanged for decades, is now in some cases to connect to a world of private equity and off shore finance. These social relations can be exploitative and this comes to light in SoP studies. Clothes, for example, are constructed through a web of relationships which draw upon and reproduce positions of power and dependency emerging from decades, even centuries, of uneven development.

The mainstream narrative of markets and individual choice leads to consumer-oriented interventions to promote change. But rather than alleviating the adverse social effects these can further embed inequality. Campaigns around ethical consumption such as Fairtrade, for example, may bring some slight improvements to the conditions of wage labour but the underlying conditions are unchanged. Individual adjustments do not lead to widespread change. In road transport, SoP analysis has shown that persistent car use results from the intersection of a number of dynamics including the industrial structure of the automotive industry, the nature of

the built environment and cultures of car consumption. As with food, scale economies in car production create an inherent tendency to overproduction which then needs to be consumed. A culture of economic growth presents greater car consumption as inherently a good thing.

Thus, the SoP approach can draw attention to the extensive and complex channels which underpin specific social, environmental and economic outcomes, and can therefore be helpful in identifying “leverage points” for interventions and pressure for change. But it is also instructive in pinpointing the challenges involved. Transformational change is likely hindered by a reluctance to relinquish home comforts and is also impeded by deeply embedded narratives and structures that lock in the status quo.

SoPs themselves as well as their core elements are often under the radar. The studies cited in this book show that the consumer is often distanced from the social relations that underpin provisioning both in policy and mainstream narratives. Such distancings or, more exactly, concealments serve to focus attention on the commodity and on the capacities of the consuming individual. With a focus on individuals and markets, the underlying systems and the cultures by which these are sustained are rendered almost invisible.

The SoP approach aims to shine a light on these opaque issues. It provides a systematic framework to address the extensive and diverse factors that shape provisioning outcomes. When the SoP approach lifts the lid on the production system, and its connections to consumption, the ways that agents are competing to capture value in the system are revealed. Outcomes emerge from contested social relations embedded in longstanding structures and processes. The approach goes beyond the simple tracking of value chains and agents, to consider how these interact and how the state is involved in promoting specific outcomes.

The approach has proven to be remarkably durable, offering an open, flexible, if uncompromisingly grounded, analytical framing. It provides insights at the grand scale, for example, relating to inequality, the environment, the pandemic and the crisis of dietary diseases as well as the everyday access to health, water, housing and so on. As such, the SoP approach has much to offer for the challenges ahead in the worlds of scholarship, popular discourse, policymaking and activism.

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction and Background to the SoP Approach	1
1.1	<i>Introduction</i>	1
1.2	<i>The Changing State of Consumption Studies</i>	3
1.3	<i>Evolution of the SoP Approach</i>	6
1.3.1	<i>Phase 1: Consumption Norms</i>	6
1.3.2	<i>Phase 2: Food Systems</i>	11
1.3.3	<i>Phase 3: PSSoP</i>	13
1.4	<i>The SoP Approach's Durability</i>	17
1.5	<i>Conclusion</i>	21
	<i>References</i>	23
2	The SoP Approach: Theoretical Background and Empirical Practice	29
2.1	<i>Introduction</i>	29
2.2	<i>Theoretical Underpinnings</i>	31
2.3	<i>Fundamentals for a SoP Analysis</i>	38
2.4	<i>The SoP Approach: Challenges in Practice</i>	42
2.5	<i>The SoP Approach Compared to GCC Approaches</i>	44
2.6	<i>Conclusion</i>	48
	<i>References</i>	50
3	Understanding Material Cultures	53
3.1	<i>Introduction</i>	53
3.2	<i>The Importance of Material Cultures</i>	55

3.3	<i>Social Reproduction, Financialization and Material Cultures</i>	59
3.4	<i>Framing Material Culture—The 10Cs</i>	62
3.5	<i>Conclusion</i>	68
	<i>References</i>	70
4	Insights from Operationalizing the Systems of Provision Approach	73
4.1	<i>Introduction</i>	73
4.2	<i>Addressing the Horizontal and Scholarship</i>	75
4.3	<i>Operationalizing the SoP Approach: Social Reproduction in Practice</i>	79
4.3.1	<i>Consumption Norms in Housing</i>	80
4.3.2	<i>Water</i>	87
4.3.3	<i>Health</i>	92
4.3.4	<i>Clothing and Fashion</i>	94
4.4	<i>Conclusion</i>	97
	<i>References</i>	100
5	A SoP Approach to Understanding Food Consumption	107
5.1	<i>Introduction</i>	107
5.2	<i>Food Production Systems: Tell Me What You (Do Not) Eat</i>	109
5.3	<i>Processes: Food Production, Financialization and Neoliberalism</i>	112
5.3.1	<i>Pressure to Increase Consumption</i>	115
5.3.2	<i>Compulsions to Eat and Diet</i>	116
5.4	<i>From Financialization to Food Cultures</i>	117
5.5	<i>Material Cultures of Foods</i>	120
5.5.1	<i>10Cs and Food Consumption Cultures</i>	120
5.5.2	<i>How (Not) to Promote Healthy Eating Habits?</i>	126
5.6	<i>Conclusion</i>	129
	<i>References</i>	136
6	Conclusion: The Contribution of the SoP Approach	143
6.1	<i>Introduction</i>	143
6.2	<i>The SoP Approach in Context</i>	145
6.3	<i>Future Directions</i>	153

6.3.1	<i>Social Policy and Social Reproduction</i>	154
6.3.2	<i>Sustainability and SoP</i>	156
6.3.3	<i>Consumption, Consumer Politics and Activism</i>	158
6.4	<i>Conclusion</i>	160
	<i>References</i>	169
Author Index		177
Subject Index		183

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANC	African National Congress
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
EU	European Union
EW	England and Wales
FESSUD	Financialisation, Economy, Society and Sustainable Development
FTEPR	Fair Trade, Employment and Poverty Reduction
GCC	Global Commodity Chains
GFC	Global Financial Crisis
GPN	Global Production Networks
GVC	Global Value Chains
IFI	International Financial Institution
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISP	Industrial Strategy Project
MC	Material Culture
MPE	Marxist political economy
NHS	National Health Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PPPs	Public private partnerships
PSSoP	Public Sector System(s) of Provision
SoP	System(s) of Provision
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
WHO	World Health Organization
WRA	Welfare Regimes Approach



Introduction and Background to the SoP Approach

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Across the social sciences, academics have long grappled with the question of what drives consumption. Economics has jostled with anthropology, sociology, psychology and other disciplines to account for who gets what, how and why and with what significance. These questions are important. Consumption relates not just to more or less optimal decisions about shopping habits but also to the way in which people's basic needs are met. Consumption of (and, indeed, access to) essential services such as health-care, education, housing, transport and water has profound effects on human welfare. Food consumption affects public health but also intersects with mental health and is at the heart of many social interactions. The meanings and understandings attached to different forms of consumption are at the core of our engagement with the world. Consumption is therefore fundamental to our social as well as our economic and environmental development. What, then, determines what we consume? While neoclassical economics suggests that consumption decisions are individual, there is a wealth of theory and evidence to indicate that what is consumed, as well as how and why it is consumed, is associated with an extensive range of influences that shape what might be termed consumption norms, themselves embedded in societal dynamics, rooted in historical and geographical context.

The systems of provision (SoP) approach was developed thirty or more years ago in response to what were perceived to be the limitations of

consumption studies across the social sciences whether taken individually or in conjunction with one another. The starting point for the approach is that the drivers of consumption are diverse, and outcomes derive from the details of the system within which specific commodities in particular, are both produced and consumed—whilst acknowledging that not all consumption derives from market access alone. There are distinctive systems, for example, for fashion and food, alongside those for housing and energy, and so on, each subject to its own specific mode of provisioning, distinct from others. It is the elements of these systems, and their intersections, which shape consumption outcomes. The SoP approach, therefore, sees consumption of particular commodities as a component of an integrated ‘vertical’ system, relating to the particular item of consumption under consideration, linked to processes of production, distribution and exchange (and sometimes disposal) as well as to ‘horizontal’ socio-economic variables such as income and gender. Also significant for consumption are the material cultures, or meanings, associated with commodities and these are also specific not just to the commodity but in time and place. They will be affected by the mode of provisioning, as for example, when it comes to designer versus popular high street fashion, even if the item is otherwise the same. The commodity in question is itself also significant, not subject to sweeping generalizations, theoretical or otherwise. Cultures, and so choices and meanings, associated with food, for example, will be different from those for water or housing. Context is also important. Water, for example, has different meanings for consumers in a flood as compared with a drought.

A penetrating understanding of who gets what and why would need to incorporate all of these elements. But complex conceptualizations are involved. The SoP approach has been refined over three decades drawing on academic disciplines across the social sciences to devise a framework for analyzing the elements that shape consumption outcomes. The theoretical framing and the empirical applications are the subject of this book. This chapter sets out the trajectory of the approach, from its initial conception, in accounting for the relatively narrow focus upon the widening use of consumer durables, to more recent applications in social policy and the grander issues of material cultures of financialization. The chapter shows that over time, the approach has proven to be remarkably robust. Moreover, there is potential for further contributions as the challenges we face appear increasingly to be systemic, from the multidimensional issues posed by climate change through to the more general prospects of what

has come to be known as social reproduction, as shown in the chapters that follow.

1.2 THE CHANGING STATE OF CONSUMPTION STUDIES

Interest in the study of consumption has been prospering over the past thirty years across the social sciences. For example, postmodernist deconstruction, especially with its application to consumption within cultural studies and with Baudrillard (1981, 1988) to the fore, was positively thriving in interpreting the meanings of the consumed to consumers and the corresponding constructions of their individual identities. Such approaches were complemented by more longstanding, more broadly cast, and possibly more inflexible, approaches from within other disciplines—whether it be, for example, the utility maximization of homo economicus of mainstream economics, the emulation and distinction of sociology, the ethnographies of anthropology, the potential affects derived from psychology. The ‘social’ nature of consumption came into the study of marketing, management, business and advertising (Robertson 2020). For, alongside the more ‘academic’ perspectives sat what might previously be seen as the more or less mundane studies driven by the wide-ranging imperatives to produce, distribute and sell to consumers at a profit, in part by the moulding and manipulation of desires.

Subsequently, at one extreme of consumption studies stood the excitements and novelties of postmodernist deconstruction and, at the other, the dull insights from traditional social sciences. Inevitably, a middle road emerged, giving rise to attention to the ways we live our lives in general and how we consume in our everyday lives in particular. This brought, for example, globalization (McDonaldisation¹ even (Ritzer 1993)) of both consumption and its cultures to a position of prominence as an important theme, soon to be followed by neoliberalism and, most recently, financialization. Iconically prominent in both scholarship and everyday life came the temporarily ubiquitous Walkman (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus 1997). It served as the erstwhile symbol of the evolving state of consumption and consumer studies. Today, no doubt its counterpart is Apple for which its dependence on cheap, low wage electronic component manufacture (Albergotti 2019) is considerably less observed than the symbolic bitten apple itself. Indeed, as consumption itself was, as always, changing, so consumption studies began to move rapidly and fully away from postmodernist, discursive deconstruction to the reconstruction in light of

the whos, the hows, the whys and the where froms of the provisioning of consumption, not just the meanings of the consumed to the consumer.

In the intervening years since consumer studies took off, then, there has been something of a reaction against the postmodernist approach, not so much to set aside an understanding of the cultures of consumption but more to root them in, and through interaction with, the material practices to which they are attached. Such changes have given rise to a field of study that can be termed the material culture of consumption. It is concerned with the ways in which consumption is shaped by the associations and meanings attached to specific commodities and with the origins and transformations of such cultures, discussed in detail in Chap. 3. An example of the changing nature of material cultures is the gentrification of beer in the UK and elsewhere, which began as a campaign for 'real' as opposed to mass-produced beer. Whilst it has embodied the proliferation of local breweries, it has increasingly steered towards the embourgeoisement of drinking practices and cultures, not unlike those associated with fine wines just as wine as mass-produced plonk has become universal, (Thurnell-Read 2018).

Of course, the gentrification of beer (and wine in its own way as it always was, as opposed to beer, gentrified previously in the UK), has its counterparts in other such gentrifications, not least housing. However, we begin to see that gentrification, in consumption or otherwise, tends to have its counterpart in the non-gentrified, as different types of housing tenure, for example, have developed their own material cultures from (the generally preferred) owner occupation through to social housing, discussed in more detail in Chap. 4. Across these examples and more, there has increasingly been a reaction against, or alongside, the cultural turn in the study of consumption. It reflects at least in major part a response to much wider contemporary developments and structural shifts themselves, with the notions and practices of globalization and neoliberalism increasingly being seen as coming to fore as major factors impinging upon our everyday, including our consuming, lives. Consumption studies in general turned towards the material from the postmodern, both reflected in and, in its own way, through the SoP approach. The shift to the material culture of consumption was, then, in major part prompted by both the acknowledgement of globalized neoliberalism and a reaction against the failures of postmodernism in this regard (although other post-postmodernisms were waiting in the wings ready to fly). The major exception has been mainstream, and much heterodox, economics in which the