Collective consumption, urban segregation, and social classes†

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Abstract. Although collective consumption is recognized as a major issue for urban research, the specificity of the urban field should not be limited to it, thus reproducing theoretically the dominant separation enforced ideologically and practically between production and reproduction. Production, and more generally work relations and practices, should be considered as basic determinants of the urban, not only because of their direct spatial dimensions and implications, but also because of their relations to reproduction practices.

These relations are not mechanistic determinations but complex, contradictory, mediated, and retroactive processes. Therefore social differentiations or cleavages related to consumption practices, like urban social segregation and unequal access to collective consumption, are not simple translations of class structure in the most general and abstract sense. They contribute both to the strengthening of class identities and social solidarities in certain situations, areas and conjunctures, and to class fragmentation and competition or conflict in others.

Nevertheless, they are but another aspect of the complexity of class structures and not an independent mode of social cleavage. This can be seen in class differentiations of consumption practices as well as in the related stakes for urban social struggles.

There has been a growing consensus in recent years that recognizes collective consumption as a key issue in urban analysis, both as a major aspect of state intervention, and as a central aim for urban social movements. But this line of thinking has posed new problems and opened up new debates that should not be stifled by the greater actuality and pressure of privatization and austerity policies. Indeed, on the contrary, these debates are probably necessary steps to a better understanding of such policies. In this paper, I will discuss a number of theoretical issues about the relations between collective consumption and urban contradictions, social classes, and political processes, in the light of results of research recently completed on collective consumption and social segregation in the Paris region, and ongoing research on local policies in the present economic crisis.

Collective consumption and the urban system

Should the importance of collective consumption be acknowledged to the point where it becomes the sole determining element of the specificity of the urban system, in the manner of Castells(1) or, more recently, of Dunleavy and his 'content definition of the urban field'?(2)?

Various criticisms of such a restricted definition have already been put forward, for example, by many French researchers ever since the definition was first made and later by others such as Harvey and Harloe. Saunders (1979) has summarized

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(1) A position he seems to have kept to from The Urban Question (1972) to the recent The City and the Grassroots (1983), where it is expanded but also blurred into the notion of 'urban meaning'.

(2) See Dunleavy (1980, page 50): "... a definition of urban politics in terms of the study of decision-making on collective consumption processes".
some of these criticisms, concluding that they had not proved the inadequacy of the definition and commenting that they did not "bear directly on the issue of urban social movements" (page 113). I feel, on the contrary, that much has been established in favor of the necessity of analyzing the economic dimensions and economic stakes of the urban system, some of it by Castells himself (for example, Castells and Godard, 1979). For many years now urban researchers have discussed and studied the urban dimensions and impacts of changes in the technical, social, and international division of labor, industrial restructuring, etc. Could it be just a matter of words, then? I do not think so, and I wish to show that the restricted definition is inadequate and misleading, even from the limited point of view of collective consumption issues. Indeed, I also wish to show that it has negative consequences for the analysis of urban social movements.

The separation between production, or, in a more general way, between work processes (where a salaried labor force is consumed to answer the needs of capital or the state) and consumption (which includes the process of reproduction of that labor force) is a material, economic, and ideological reality of capitalist societies. But one should immediately add two remarks. First of all, it is not necessarily an absolute separation: in France the works committees in many large firms have for many years provided some of the services of collective consumption in fields such as food, health, creches, sports, culture, and holidays, and have relatively large budgets to draw on. Second, this separation is not just a common structural feature of the capitalist system. It varies from one city to another—from the company town to the large metropolitan area—and from one country to another. The United States of America is one of those countries where the separation has been established most rigidly, according to Katzenelson's (1981) analysis where he insists quite convincingly on the historical and political production of the form and intensity of the separation between work and residence.

This separation is not a given fact that has to be taken for granted. It is, in itself, at stake in class relations. It is produced and reproduced, particularly through the individual commodity mode of reproduction of the labor force, and it is contested and challenged by working-class demands and initiatives in favor of forms of socialization of consumption articulated to work situations, among other processes. Therefore the separation should neither be underestimated—which is, I feel, the case with some recent analyses of 'capitalist regulation' and 'global salary relations' (for example, Aglietta and Brender, 1984)—nor simply reproduced, in the traditional academic division of labor between economics and sociology or in a conceptualization of the urban that excessively isolates collective consumption from work processes.

A major debate among French urban sociologists in the late 1970s focused on the necessity of a deeper understanding of the meanings and determinants of social practices of urban citizens, their 'ways of life' considered as a whole (3). The general feeling was that the strong and necessary emphasis on state intervention and capitalist production and use of the city had led to a consideration of those social practices as univocal effects of the dominant pressure, and to oscillation in the analysis of urban social movements between a deterministic deduction from the structural contradictions of capital and a 'spontaneist' view of their actual occurrence.

The study of state definition, funding, and management of institutions delivering services for collective consumption is a major field of urban analysis, although, as I have discussed elsewhere, it should be studied as only one (even if it has tended to become dominant) of the various competing modes of socialization of consumption,

(3) Echoes of some of those debates can be found in the two reports: "Réseau 'modes de vie'", Approches Sociologiques des Modes de Vie (CSU, volume 1, 1981; volume 2, 1982).
Collectivo consumption, urban segregation, and social classes

and as itself the locus of contradictory practices and the complex result of class conflicts (Preteceille, 1981a). Too often, collective consumption is equated with public funding of social expenditures, without further discussion. But the very consumption processes and their social outcomes cannot be understood without taking into consideration who are the consumers and nonconsumers, what are their roles, their interests, their needs, and their contributions in processes of consumptions, and what are the consequences on and for their lives.

Thus we are brought back to the separation between production and reproduction. The theoretical reproduction of this separation that is being criticized here leads to an analysis of 'urbanites' as fragmented beings; their practices as collective consumers are considered to have no connections, or only vague and very general ones, with the rest of their lives, and particularly their lives at work. But what are these connections, and how should they be studied? It is clear that the consequences of the definition of the urban system or field are intimately linked with the conceptualization of the social structure of that system. These consequences will be discussed more specifically now.

Social classes and collective consumption
Is social class a relevant concept with which to analyze collective consumption, urban contradictions, and urban social movements, or should it be left aside in favor of 'new' concepts specific to the field: housing classes, sectoral cleavages (Dunleavy, 1979, page 70), community interests, or cultural communities (Castells, 1983, page 320)?

The first step in the answer from Marxist urban analysis of the late 1960s and early 1970s was made through the concept of reproduction of the labor force: urban residential issues such as housing, transportation, and other facilities are class issues because they express the inability of capital to satisfy all the needs of the labor force through commodity production, circulation, and consumption (as determined by the level of wages), and the necessity for the state to answer the resultant demands, under the pressure of social movements and on behalf of the collective interests of the capitalist class.

This rough sketch was progressively questioned by the results of many empirical studies. A first shortcoming was shown to be the fact that the labor force could not be considered as a homogeneous whole, either from its work positions or from its living conditions. A tentative solution was the idea that the reproduction of the labor force was in fact organized through many specialized channels corresponding to as many different types of labor force, in terms of skills and situation, as there were in the production process (4). But, again, the diversity of consumption situations and practices inside many groups of workers that were homogeneous from the work-place point of view (particularly in large cities) made such a theoretical scheme difficult to generalize. The solution was also too functionalist a view of processes of reproduction, not only because state-provided collective consumption cannot, in most cases, be considered as an adequate answer to workers' needs, for quantitative, qualitative, and ideological reasons, but also because the determination of those needs is itself a contradictory process, where the workers' autonomous needs of self-fulfillment and development are mixed with the capitalist determinations of reproduction and consumption that they cannot avoid interiorizing, at least partly (5).

(4) One of the best attempts to develop such an approach was made by Godard with his idea of 'filières complexes de consommation' (1975) and developed empirically by Castells and Godard (1974) in a partly successful way, but on a rather special case.

(5) For more extended discussions of these points, see my book with Terrail, Capitalism, Consumption and Needs. See also Pinçon-Charlot et al (1986, part 2, chapter 2).
Thus, later research results and debates have not led to the abandonment of the idea of ‘class determination’ of collective consumption, but rather to its development in a much more complex way. Class determination, in the later sense, does not mean that consumption practices should be the same for all manual workers, and specific to them, but that the position of each individual in the actual work processes, in the division of labor and power structures, has major consequences on his or her life outside work, consequences which include the contradictory determination of needs mentioned earlier. To summarize this point in a different way, the critique of the mechanistic and functionalist view of the reproduction of the labor force does not have to lead to the loosening of the links between collective consumption and economic processes. It can lead to their development, thanks to a less economicist view of the economy and of capitalist relations of production and actual class conflicts in the work process, which have to do with much more than just “to share the product” as Castells (1983, page 320) claims to justify his rediscovery of the meaning of residents’ communities as opposed to class interests.

In the later perspective, class analysis means considering class relations from the point where they are constantly produced and reproduced, that is, relations of production and the work process, in their most concrete and varied ways, and not just in their most general and abstract form. The emergence of that common form potentially defining each social class from the fragmented variety of real situations and its expression in converging trends in the objective situation and consciousness and mobilization of its members are not automatic, in collective consumption even less than in production. That process towards class unity can only be conquered as the result of specific political processes, since class fragmentation is also a major political issue. It should not be dogmatically postulated by the researcher, but sought for as a tendency conflicting with others.

The insistence on the links to be investigated between work processes and their concrete divisions of labor, and the ways of collective consumption, is not a disguised attempt to reintroduce a mechanistic determination of life outside work by work itself. Further, to the essential element of the contradictory determination of needs already mentioned (a contradiction whose outcome is closely linked to political practices), other elements have to be added to the picture. I will mention just two.

The first element is the historical dimension of the social determination and trajectory of individuals and families. It is not only present relations of production that tend to organize life, but also the past ones of the individual and of his or her parents and relatives. They influence the present through the possible social trajectories they have determined, through accumulated wealth and goods, through the language, culture, know-how, etc, acquired in past situations. This point has been particularly debated in relation to the theory of ‘habitus’ proposed by Bourdieu (for example, 1979). Bourdieu is insistent on the importance of past social situations in understanding present social practices where the same social hierarchies seem to be reproduced naturally, even without visible mechanisms to enforce them. However, the weakness of his approach is that through ‘habitus’ the past can only reproduce the past, making people eternally run to catch up with the present. Because Bourdieu overlooks the contradictory determination of needs and abilities by social experiences, he cannot account for the innovative abilities and practices coming out of them in his theory, and therefore leaves the question of social change, the dynamics of producing the present, to external factors. Nevertheless, his work has stimulated many interesting pieces of research, some dealing partly with our problem of the class analysis of urban consumption (Desrosières and Gollac, 1982). And the same line of concern has been taken up, with a more
intense effort to investigate social practices at work and outside, in a recent collective study (Bouffartigue et al., 1986).

The second element that makes the class picture more complex is the fact that, if one considers individual practices, determinations work both ways between work and consumption processes. This is where we come to the discussion of 'sectoral cleavages'.

To consider consumption differences as mere reflections, direct consequences, of class situation is a gross oversimplification. First of all, as I have discussed elsewhere from a theoretical point of view (Pinçon-Charlort et al., 1986), consumption, and life outside work more generally, cannot be reduced solely to the reproduction of the labor force. Second, not only are there important differences in consumption conditions of the members of each class, but some consumption processes are particularly active components of the (re)production of class differences in the social structure, and of various social practices from which either class consciousness and mobilization or class fragmentation and acceptance of domination may emerge. This point has been thoroughly analyzed, for example, in the working of the education system as actively reproducing social hierarchies, not just reflecting them [see the works of Bourdieu reproducing social hierarchies, not just reflecting them [see the works of Bourdieu (1964), Baudelot and Establet (1971), and many others]. And similar results have been established for the health system, cultural institutions, etc.

Social segregation and reproduction of inequality do not result only from a logic of the institutions, but also from the specific structure of the spatial relations between facilities and classes. The results of our research on collective consumption and social segregation in the region of Paris (Preteceille, 1981b; Pinçon-Charlort et al., 1986) show that the spatial accessibility to the means of collective consumption is greater for the upper classes and lower for the working class (figure 1).

The class bias is indisputable. It is particularly strong for the accessibility of most private profit-making services, but it is also quite clear, even if weaker, for most

![Figure 1. Average situation of various social categories on two factors, from a principal components analysis of 178 indicators of accessibility to services. (Factor 1—20% of the total inertia of a cloud of 498 points, that is, 418 suburban municipalities and 80 Parisian quartiers—is linked negatively to almost all indicators, and represents particularly well the indicators related to transport, large public services, such as hospitals, universities, or secondary schools, and private commercial services. Factor 2—7% of the inertia—is positively linked to indicators related to large shopping centers, the proximity of local public facilities, such as sports centers, music schools, secondary schools, social security, etc., and negatively to those related to entertainment places, department stores, and private services.)](image-url)
public services. Should we stop there and conclude that this is enough to prove that collective consumption is just another expression of class hierarchy, and that sectoral cleavages are irrelevant? The situation is in fact quite complex if we make the effort to look at the data in greater detail, the average being an aggregation of quite different spatial situations and quite different subcategories in each social category. Briefly summarized, what we find is that the categories which are closest to services are in fact the higher bourgeoisie and the more 'intellectual' parts of the middle classes. And what we also find is that, except for the upper part of the last group which is essentially located in the urban areas with the highest level of facilities, all other categories are present, in varying proportions, in all urban situations.

Figure 2 shows both the percentage and the number of members of the groups of subcategories of people with a similar distribution throughout thirteen types of areas computed to describe the different urban situations relative to the distribution of services.

The level of all services tends to decrease from left to right in figure 2 (that is, from the city center outwards), except for the second group of types, 'near suburbs' 1, 2, and 3, where the general level of service is good in all three types, but is a balanced mixture of public and private in type 1, and depends mainly on municipal public services in type 3. Manual workers and technicians are less likely to be present in the best-serviced first seven types of area, but quite a large proportion of them reside there nevertheless. So that in fact, the 'urban collective consumption' situation of the working class, as represented by the categories measured by our indicators, is quite heterogeneous.

The working class present in the different situations is itself relatively heterogeneous in terms of skills, type of industrial activity, gender, ethnicity, age, and household structure. But large groups are nevertheless quite similar, and differ

![Figure 2](image_url)  

**Figure 2.** Distribution and weight of social categories in thirteen main types of urban areas in Paris.
mainly because of residential conditions, plus housing conditions in most cases. It is my conclusion that such urban collective consumption differences should be considered and investigated, as important elements of the fragmentation of the working class or, in other words, of the definition of specific working-class identities and ways of life (though neither exclusive nor even dominant factors). Particularly when they are stable and lasting, such different residential conditions as small old degraded housing inside Paris, as relatively large and comfortable public housing in longtime communist municipalities which have created numerous facilities, as degraded public housing in distant grands ensembles (large suburban developments) with poor services, as owner-occupied cottages in semirural areas almost devoid of services, cannot but influence all aspects of the life of working-class groups experiencing them, including political alignment and union mobilization, and contribute to the definition of specific social trajectories. And similar hypotheses can be considered simultaneously for other classes, such as the salaried middle classes and the small and middle bourgeoisie, with their combination of different housing and urban conditions, at least in terms of relative distribution.

The upper classes seem to be less fragmented from that point of view, having extremely specific and concentrated residential locations (Pinçon-Charlot et al., 1986; Bourdieu and de Saint Martin, 1978).

None of those differences, however, can be considered as a variable independent from class relations. Each of them, on the contrary, is produced by a specific set of social processes which are structured by and express, in different ways, capitalist relations of production. It is the case for the housing situation in each class, which results from central and local housing policies, capitalist production of housing, wage structure, etc. It is the case for transport, education, cultural facilities, etc (the bibliography supporting this would be much too long to include here). With all their complexities, even the spatial structure of distribution of means of collective consumption and the related spatial distribution of social classes, categories, and subcategories, are products of class interests and conflicts, played out through the historical intertwining of land and housing markets, competing interests on the uses of urban space, and central and local urban policies. All these elements are related to specific aspects of the class structure of society. Thus it is only by isolating the observed conditions of consumption from the social processes which determine and produce them that one can claim them to be stratification or differentiation variables independent from class.

But conversely, this last statement does not, in any way, mean that the ‘class variable’ is sufficient and explains everything directly. For all the reasons mentioned above, class situation in the most global sense—belonging to the working class or to the capitalist class—determines, and explains, directly, very little, and becomes an efficient concept only when it is developed into the specific analysis of the various social processes converging to produce one particular situation, raising from the abstract to the concrete, to indulge, just for once, in a quotation from Marx.

One question I have left aside is the discussion of sectoral cleavages, the structure of interests determined by consumption differences penetrating each class, and whether this ends up in objective solidarities of interest cutting across class boundaries. I shall take this question up now, in relation to the theme of urban social movements.

Social classes, urban social movements, and the crisis
Are the common interests of people renting public housing, instead of owning their home, or who use public transport instead of using their car, etc, strong enough to divert them from class alignment, eventually into sectoral alignment? Are people
living in the same area who are confronted with the same problems and who share
common urban interests that make them a community, whatever their job elsewhere,
able to mobilize efficiently as an urban social movement on the basis of only that
(spatial) community membership?

The first difficulty with the thesis of sectoral cleavage alignment is that it is
based on an oversimplified dichotomy model of modes of consumption: "public and
private (broadly speaking collective and individualised, and often also service and
commodity) modes of consumption" (Dunleavy, 1980, page 70). The dichotomy may
have some relevance as far as financing problems are concerned, but it leaves aside
too many major issues and contradictions when it comes to the actual modes of
consumption. I will only mention the internal diversity of both public and private
commodity consumption (Preteceille, 1977; Preteceille and Terrail, 1985). The
public-housing sector displays great differences in quality and location, and these
are, not surprisingly, correlated with social categories (Pinçon, 1976)\(^6\). The
problems, as well as the social class situation, of the inhabitants of extremely
degraded 'grands ensembles' like the '4000' in La Courneuve or the 'Grande Borne'
in Grigny have little to do with those of Sarcelles, of the center of Ivry, not to
speak of many *habitations à loyer modéré* (public housing) inside Paris. Similar
diversity in quality, location, and use, as well as in exchange values, is observed in
the owner-occupied sector (Topalov, 1981, pages 25–35), where working-class
homeowners can hardly be considered as possessing a "potential source of wealth
accumulation" (Saunders, 1979, page 18) in most cases, because of the low quality
of many of the houses they have had access to in recent years (in France the
'Chalandonnettes'\(^7\) are a well-known case) and because of their location in urban
areas which most often makes neither the building nor the land desirable for any
kind of speculation. Our research shows that the best-off part of the working class
who have obtained access to homeownership in the Ile-de-France region only did
so by moving to the farthest suburbs with the poorest level of facilities of all kinds,
or into areas where deindustrialization had sterilized value. The same kind of
statements can be developed for all other sectors.

Furthermore, the same public services do not consider members of different
social classes in the same way: the social selectivity of the education system is a
well-known example already referred to. Conversely, different social groups do not
have the same needs, expectations, and practices with respect to the same public
services. These needs are different; they may be competing or even conflicting.
Take the example of education again. Members of salaried upper and middle
classes, the reproduction of whose social situation and status is strongly dependent
on education and degrees tend, especially in the present economic crisis, to ask for
competitive and selective schools to give their children the maximum impetus,
building on the educational resources already provided by the family. Many
manual workers would want school to give their children at least some of what the
family does not provide, but also to recognize the positive elements of working-
class identity and culture and to develop real technical training.

Therefore, community of interests of different social groups cannot be assumed
on a sectoral basis nor on a local basis. And the basic source of diversity in
needs lies in the situation of those groups in the production process, in the
division of labor and in related power structures.

\(^6\) And there is some evidence that social selectivity inside public-housing stock has been
increasing in the last ten years.

\(^7\) 'Chalandonnettes' are low-cost and low-quality individual houses built in implementation of a
program launched by a famous Minister of Housing and Urban Affairs, Mr A. Chalandon,
former banker and developer.
This is the point where we can come back to the problem of the definition of the urban: if it is separated from economic processes, that source is obliterated, and it becomes all the easier to consider class as either irrelevant or secondary since its mainspring has been isolated.

I have stressed differences and divergences to support my argument that sectoral and community alignments cannot be analyzed as independent from the complex set of processes which is the concrete reality of class structure. But I do not wish to turn the argument the other way around. Consumption conditions are factors of fragmentation inside one class, as we have seen earlier, and may produce differences in political alignment in some cases. Working-class homeowners, for example, have been shown in a very interesting study to be politically more sympathetic to the Right (44%) than working-class tenants (29%). But these differences are limited: they are still much less sympathetic to the Right than the average middle-class executives (cadres moyens) (63%), and even quite less than tenants in that category (55%) (Capdeveille et al, 1981).

Similar modes of consumption (truly similar, not just 'public sector' or 'private commodity'), or sharing a common residential space, are potential bases for the development of converging needs, demands, and practices, particularly in collective consumption. The problem is whether this potential will actually develop into such real processes, or whether fragmentation will overcome it. In other words, are urban contradictions the objective source of development of urban social movements with a multiclasses base, contributing to the challenge to capitalist domination, or the locus of emergence of new social divisions tending to paralyze the dynamics of class struggle?

My answer is simply that there is no automatic determination one way or the other. Needs, because of their contradictory determinations by production relations, are always shaped, oriented, censored, or developed, by political processes and experiences in the widest sense. The convergence of needs of different social groups, inside one class or even more between classes, cannot go very far spontaneously, since the organization of social division and fragmentation is a basic and constant task of the dominant class in order to reproduce its hegemony. Past the point of common experiences, it takes political processes to produce class consciousness on a large scale, as well as to organize the convergence of needs between dominated classes. And it is my opinion—a hypothesis to work on in subsequent research—that, even in the specific field of collective consumption, these social processes cannot develop without major contributions from working-class organizations and the autonomous mobilization of the working class to develop its needs. For all the reasons mentioned already, no “non-class” (Castells, 1983, page 27) social movement can develop and answer them, particularly today. Whether existing working-class organizations have been, are, or will be able to make that contribution is a quite different question. The answer depends upon the facts at a particular time. Therefore it is more complex than simply yes or no. It implies the need to look at working-class social practices of all kinds and not just at central statements of the leadership. It implies the need also, again and to conclude, for a less restricted definition of the urban. The key practices for urban social change regarding the working class and the development of its alliances, even at the level of consumption practices, are today struggles challenging capitalist domination of the economy, from the place of work but with enlarged perspectives of change in the division of labor, in power relations, in the relations of work processes to society, and in the urban systems of which they are part.

Urban social movements aimed at collective consumption demands, and particularly their working-class segments, have receded in France in the last ten
years, as a result of the political crisis, the pressure of more urgent survival problems like unemployment and wage levels and also, paradoxically, the political success of the Left in the 1977 municipal elections which resulted in many local demands being positively considered by the new local authorities, and many local activists being co-opted into local public management. The more conservative right-wing policy developed in many localities taken back by the Right in 1983 may stimulate these social movements again. Meanwhile the developing local struggles against capitalist economic restructuring have become more and more open to taking into account all the local consequences of economic changes, all the interactions between production organization and housing, cultural life, local services, training, and education. In this way, perhaps, working-class movements will be able to contribute to a more radical perspective on urban change: there can be no better city for the working class as long as the workplace is not changed. But they cannot do it alone. It requires alliances, in economic struggles as well as in collective consumption-focused social movements.

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