



# The three sociological types of consumer work

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## Abstract

This article deals with the productive activities carried out by consumers, supervised by the suppliers for their profit, in the market economy. There is abundant managerial literature on this topic. A corpus of marketing texts shows that putting consumers to work is a specific aim of those responsible for organizing work in companies. Sociological studies followed, but in unsystematic and sectorized ways. This article analyses consumer activity itself, using the concepts and tools of the sociology of work. The four aspects of consumer activity are described: the way it is prescribed and organized, the actual work done, the output, and the meaning it has for those who carry it out. With this theoretical frame and an empirical survey, I identify three ways in which the consumer is put to work: in addition to the forms of work that have already been clearly identified, that is, self-service and collaborative coproduction, which I discuss here, I consider “organizational work.”

## Keywords

Work, consumer, prosumer, sociology of marketing, organizational work

## Introduction

This article examines the work-like activities carried out by consumers, which are supervised by and for the profit of suppliers. The literature has signaled the emergence of this phenomenon since the 1980s with the “prosumer” (Ritzer, 1998; Toffler, 1980), who is a consumer *and* a producer. He “works, either in supermarkets (Humphreys and Grayson, 2008), in innovation processes (Grabher et al., 2008), or on the Web 2.0 (Newman, 2010; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). The aim of this article is to look beyond the variety of economic fields and products and propose a sociological typology of the social processes and social configurations of putting consumers to work in contemporary capitalism.

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Consumer “management” is analyzed here from the perspective of a marketing sociologist (Cochoy, 1998), taking as our *object* the discourse and practices of managers (Foucault, 2010). I take a theoretical and methodological approach to the sociology of work, so as to observe and interpret the work carried out by consumers. I examine the ways in which work is prescribed, and what is actually carried out, achieved, and experienced, based on a series of case studies.

We demonstrate that there are three social configurations in which the consumer is put to work: directed self-production, which externalizes simple tasks onto consumers, is already known, as well as the more recent collaborative coproduction. I discuss these two forms and add a third one called organizational work. I conclude by discussing the concept of “work” and its relevance for consumers’ productive activity.

### **The work of the consumer seen from the sociological viewpoint**

European and American sociological literature about the “work” of the consumer has been preceded by other concepts. As early as 1815, an economist observed that *cooperation* was necessary between producer and consumer in service operations (Storch, 1815). This hypothesis was taken up to show the operational *participation* of the consumer in service production (Barnard, 1938; Parsons, 1970). The consumer is a “factor of production” (Fuch, 1968) and influences productivity. European and American sociologists of work continued to study “coproduction” in the service sector (Bell, 1976), in hospitals (Album, 1989; Goffman, 1991; Hugues, 1976), transport (Hochschild, 1983), call centers (Abraham, 2008), and supermarkets (Cochoy, 2007), to name just a few areas. Note that here the activity of the consumer is mostly observed from the perspective of the professional. Note also that in a sociological appraisal of service interactions, the activity of the consumer *beyond* these boundaries, in non-relational services, cannot be observed, even though this type of service is becoming increasingly common.

Toffler (1980) observed the phenomenon of active participation on the part of consumers and introduced, with little – theoretical specification – the neologism “prosumer,” to suggest the synthesis between production and consumption when consumers customize the products, and sometime design it. While Italian autonomists (Negri, 1989; Virno and Hardt, 1996) analyzed the displacement of production from the factory toward society, with the concept of the “social factory,” Ritzer (1998), using the case of McDonald’s, showed that the customer carried out a number of productive tasks to obtain his meal, which thus benefited the company. For him, consumers do work. This observation has also been made in Europe, by French (Dujarier, 2008; Tiffon, 2012) and German sociologists, who refer to consumers’ “poor working conditions” (Dunkel and Voß, 2004).

Sociological analysis of consumers’ activity has been revitalized since 2000, in relation to Web 2.0 practices. Authors note the growth in immaterial organizations

that persuade Internet users to carry out productive activities, without paying them (Arvidsson, 2006). The changing relations between the production and the consumption of Internet content in Web 2.0 (Beer and Burrow, 2007; Newman, 2010; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Scholtz, 2013) mark the arrival of a new capitalism. It is a “fundamental change” in economic organization (Humphreys and Grayson, 2008). Other authors speak of “free labor” (Terranova, 2000), “working consumers” (Kleemann et al., 2008; Rieder and Voß, 2010; Voß and Rieder, 2005), “voluntary workers” (Dujarier, 2008), or more recently “unpaid labor” (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

From a sociology of work viewpoint, the merging concept of “work consumer” suffers from two uncertainties. First, various such activities and social division of tasks make it necessary to create “sociological types” (Weber, 1978) of work consumers. Second, it questions the concept of “work” and the pertinence of using it in this context.

### *Theoretical frame and research method*

Sociological observation of consumption poses a methodological problem from the outset due to the empirical scale that the subject has now acquired with the expansion of commodification. As Warde (2005) noticed, before arguing for an analysis of practices, in sociology “output seems to have been bi-polar, generating either abstract and speculative social theory or detailed case studies” (Warde, 2005: 131–132). On the one hand, generalizations are mainly based on “examples”; on the other hand, they seem very daring. Our sociological approach tries to resolve this dilemma by paying specific attention to the social *processes* at work in production relations between firms and consumers, where the theoretical frame is based on consumers’ productive activity.

More than the sociology of consumption, I make reference here to the theories and methodologies of the sociology of work as used by French-speaking ergonomists (Daniellou, 2005), paying specific attention to *activity*, in other words, to what the consumer *does*. I describe and analyze its four analytical dimensions: prescribed work (what consumers are asked to do, and how: the social division of tasks, “management”), the actual work (what he actually does in order to produce/consume), the work carried out (what he ultimately achieves, output), and finally, the work experience (the meaning given to the situation and to his activity). In addition, discourse (even scientific discourse) and managerial practices are studied sociologically, as social practices and as work.

In this qualitative research using multiple case studies, I applied two traditional sampling criteria: empirical and theoretical diversification and saturation (Denzin, 1970; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). I therefore endeavored to increase the number of observations and interviews in cases where consumers coproduce, and I closed the survey when all new elements simply confirmed previous observations in terms of social processes and typology, and provided no new properties to the concept of “work.”

Three survey methods were used to define the consumer's prescribed work. Applying the same method used by Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) to capture the spirit of contemporary capitalism, I carried out a sociological analysis of contemporary discourse in management field. This sample of "indigenous" discourse was selected for its proximity to the subject (work consumer), taken from marketing and management journals published in English, from the 1980s to 2013. Using this search criterion, I compiled a corpus of 60 documents<sup>1</sup> dealing with the activity of the consumer in production. I extracted technical aspects (organization of the work of the consumer seen from the management side) and also normative and prescriptive sections. I then carried out comprehensive interviews with 12 marketing managers so as to understand the viewpoint of the professionals in charge of organizing consumer work. Finally, I carried out a systematic observation of the actual prescriptions given to consumers in a range of situations.

The method also took on an ethnographic element when observing and characterizing consumers' prescribed, actual, and achieved activity. For 5 years, I systematically took notes as a "participating observer" (Brewer, 2000) in a wide range of sectors (large and small retailers, transport, medicine, telecommunications, tourism, administration, insurance, culture, and website) in these activity dimensions. I therefore used an existing social role (being a consumer) as a resource for the research (Brewer, 2000). I did this in 10 major cities in western Europe (the Hague, Berlin, Brussels, Paris, Geneva, London, Madrid, Athens, Rome, Lisbon) and in the United States (Los Angeles, New York). In my observations, I systematically noted the form of the work prescribed by both written (on screens, stickers, displays, etc.) and verbal discourse, also the visible and audible behavior of the professionals and the consumers in the situation: I noted the way they went about the task, their comments, their behavior, and the relations (conflicts, cooperation, coordination) that were involved. After observing them, I questioned them about their interpretation of the productive configuration and their activity (83 interviews) to obtain some more probing empirical data on the work consumers actually carried out and their experience of it. Afterward, I broadened my consumption habits in order to test a wider range of suppliers and products. Although not claiming to be exhaustive (our sample is concentrated on urban, middle-class, and daily consumptions), this approach nevertheless provided me with thousands of pages of empirical observations. It covered most of the acts of consumption by a citizen for his daily needs. I then chose typical situations (supermarket, railway station, post office and websites using Web 2.0) for case analyses: for these four situations, I carried out longer observations (28 hours in all, at supermarkets, self-service ticket machines in railway stations, "automatic" pay stations, and post offices, in urban areas selected specifically to create a diversified sociological sample) and which were more in depth (reading all the "general conditions" on eBay).

This corpus of data (documents, observations, and interviews) was analyzed by first placing the activities carried out by the consumer on a productive value chain, divided into 12 generic stages, from product design to waste recycling. From this

socio-economic objectification, it was possible to catch the main social processes at stake, as well as highlight three typical configurations.

## **Analysis of marketing professionals' discourse: The consumer as employee**

### *Free labor, motivated and docile: Every employer's dream*

So as to fully understand the consumers' prescribed work, I considered management discourses *and* practices (Foucault, 2010) in sociological terms. I established that since the 1980s, marketing professionals have explicitly prescribed putting the consumer to work. Whereas 20th-century consumers were described as and treated like passive beings, today's consumers are now apparently "active." Marketing professionals now advocate "customer empowerment," [12]<sup>2</sup> which consists, they say, of "giving power" to the consumer [4]. From now on, the goal that marketing sets itself is to make the consumer the actor in production, a worker [8], to the extent that one can imagine the roles of producer and consumer being reversed [11]. The customer now willingly performs effectively [3]. According to this discourse, coproduction is now at the heart of the strategies of major transnational businesses: it must be encouraged, promoted, and organized [2]. The consumer must become a producer but also a co-creator of the market, co-developer of products, and co-producer of services and strategies [28].

Marketing specialists also point out the many advantages (for the supplier) of putting consumers to work in this way. First, they can replace employees [1, 6], and even be described as "quasi employees" or "partial employees" [16, 19, 21, 22]. Their skills and talents can be exploited to increase the level of service and the value that is created [26, 29] or "co-created" [24]. According to the analyses, consumers are "motivated" by the results of coproduction, both in quality and productivity. In addition, they know better than anyone what they want. Marketing specialists suggest that operations to "customize" the product should now be handed over to them. Finally, marketers stress that a consumer who is involved in production becomes more "loyal" to the brand [13], to the extent that there will be a "double exploitation of working consumers" [9]. They will recommend the product so much better [16], and at the same time cause no trouble in relations with the supplier. Making the consumer work is therefore presented, in these management reviews as a means of achieving the enduring desire of any employer: having a plentiful, motivated, free, and docile workforce.

### *Guiding the activity of the consumer*

The corpus also indicates that the attention of marketers is now turning to how to ensure that consumers act correctly. The consumer's "involvement" is not guaranteed as he is, by nature, capricious and emotional [14], they say. He is not employed and is "categorically indifferent" to the firm's objective, which is profit [14].

In addition, he has only an occasional relationship with the task, with varying levels of competence and skills. Consumers are therefore seen as a source of considerable uncertainty [18] and variability [14] for the company, impacting on quality, safety, and productivity — including that of the paid workers.

There is considerable marketing literature which describes how common “management” issues have had to shift onto the activity of the consumer. Marketing specialists explain that consumers have to be selected and trained to ensure that they will work productively, and they recommend setting up human resource management for consumers [5, 7, 18] to strengthen the capabilities of the client [23]. It is also recommended that consumers’ activity should be monitored and assessed, as is the case for the employees [20], that job descriptions should be produced [26] and that they should be socialized for better efficiency [16], especially when the use of new technologies is involved.

From this documentary analysis, it can be clearly seen that putting the consumer to work as a “quasi-employee” has been described and sometimes prescribed by marketing. The consumer management that we see in our corpus is very similar to the 1980s and 1990s “participative” management applied to employees (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). Their involvement in work was described in the same way, as an indisputable source of personal benefit, while at the same time serving the interests of the company. The same “responsibility and autonomy” argument predominates. The notion of “empowerment” might suggest that power is being handed to the consumer in his relationship with suppliers (on their initiative, strangely). However, the actual measures taken show that it is more a matter of externalizing productive tasks and socio-organizational inconsistencies onto him while at the same time weakening his ability to question this division of labor. Beyond these discursive aims, empirical observations lead us to identify three types of process by which consumers are put to work.

### **Three types of consumer work**

Seen from the perspective of the sociology of work, three ways in which consumers are put to work can be distinguished. Each one differs from the others by the social division of labor at stake, the “management” of the prosumer, what he does, and the meaning it has for him. Socialization also differs.

#### *Directed self-production: An extension of self-service*

The first configuration for putting consumers to work concerns all situations in which they produce for themselves (self-production), with a tool and support from the supplier (directed).

Directed self-production refers to petrol pumps, automated teller machines (ATMs), automated postal services (mailing machine, stamp dispensers, etc.), e-ticketing, culture and leisure services, mail order selling on Internet, tourist information terminals, vending machines for all sorts of goods (coffee, food, social

benefits, contact lenses, DVDs, etc.), self-scanning at the supermarket, eating from a tray in a fast food restaurant or canteen, and so on. Directed self-production also concerns after-sales service, where a company does not itself carry out repairs on defective or dysfunctional products. It puts the responsibility back onto customers, by asking that they help them in this task by means of automated options on telephone-answering services or computer systems. The burden is then on the consumer (in time, money, phone calls, travel, waiting, etc.).

These coproduction systems automate the tasks of the front office, in other words, the service relation itself. Options are standardized in the form of modules that can then be selected in combination by the consumer, what managers call "mass customization." Human conversations, including all the elements of civility ("welcome," "thank you," etc.), technical aspects ("please put in your credit card"), and marketing options ("Do you have a discount? Loyalty card?", etc.), are dealt with by a machine. It also contains all the instructions the consumer needs for carrying out his task. In this organizational process, suppliers insist that they take great care over man-machine interfaces to ensure that any novice can successfully complete the task. They add what designers call "collaboration marketing," to get the consumer to understand the new division of labor and agree to carry out the task.

By analyzing the communication that is sent out, the prescribed work can be defined: first, messages try to "motivate" the worker-consumers. Firms tend systematically to focus on benefits in terms of "speed," "autonomy," and "personalization." Next, the message is prescriptive. It tells the consumer what he must do and how he must do it: "Press this button," "Check your information," "Select." These procedures, standards, and injunctions are often incorporated into the information systems themselves or are expressed in the form of stickers, papers, posters, or an electronic voice. Next, just as he would do with an employee, the supplier will encourage the consumer to be productive by applying a compliance and speed check to the task. Any deviation from the designated procedure or rate can be flagged and may be punished by an interruption in production, forcing the consumer to start the task again from the beginning. Finally, the consumer is invited to cooperate with other "peers," so as to overcome any difficulties in production which may arise. Suppliers invite the "good" consumers to become trainers. Thus, to some extent, in addition to production tasks, consumers are being asked to carry out managerial work too.

Observation of real situations shows that the vast majority of consumers eventually learn to carry out these tasks successfully without too much protest. Steps in the work process are visible. First, consumers have to understand that they must perform the service themselves, when they realize that no professional person is available to serve them. They express their fear that they will not be able to do it, that they will make a fool of themselves, that they will lose face, that it will be a waste of time, and that they will be too clumsy or inept. But once they have accepted the idea and found the right machine that will help them to coproduce, they make an effort to understand what is offered and the language in which it

is expressed. Reversing the traditional business transaction, they try to match their request to the standard offers available, even if this means adjusting, reducing, extending, or modifying it substantially. Like a salaried worker, they too will really “give it their all” to overcome all the unexpected incidents and dead ends that they might meet: they read, interpret, key in, confirm, correct, hesitate, start again, feel their way, manipulate, print, control, and so on. They resort to consulting their “peers,” other consumers, in order to overcome difficulties. Those who have reason to carry out this task frequently, gradually acquire the necessary skill (Warde, 2005), and eventually it becomes a routine, to the extent that they perform the actions without thinking, like an experienced professional. They can then say that this skill “comes naturally” to them.

The way the activity is carried out varies noticeably depending on the skills the consumer has to have to perform the required task. The most skillful (depending on the task) show interest, even have a “fascination” for the automated systems. The discovery of new technology, the beauty of the interface, or its fun aspect make directed self-production an attractive proposition, they say. They may even become experts in coproduction and, just like an employee, take pleasure from it and social recognition. Conversely, each time consumers have a setback, get into difficulty, waste time, feel that they are overwhelmed, or even humiliated, then the coproduction situation is experienced in terms of anger, helplessness, and dependency.

In this first configuration, the aim of the supplier is to explicitly reduce manpower costs, by externalizing productive tasks onto consumers. Investment in the production tool is also pushed back onto the consumer to a phenomenal extent with Internet. Directed self-production is usually imposed on consumers. Thus, they are working *in order* to be able to consume. They do this under duress, or, in the rare cases, where they have a choice, for the feeling of autonomy that this gives. They do not feel as if they are working unless you suggest it, but the majority say that this is “tough.”

This first process of putting consumers to work confirms the sociologists’ analysis about the exploitation of this free work force (if we adopt a Marxist theoretical viewpoint on “value”), the change in professions (Ritzer, 1998), and the surprising consent of “alienated” consumers (Zwick et al., 2008) to work freely.

A second process of putting consumers to work can be distinguished, which coexists with the first.

### *Collaborative coproduction: Unpaid profit-making work*

As indicated in the literature review, since the 1990s, we have seen a rapid expansion in a second configuration that puts the consumer to work, but in a very different way. This is a collaborative model where the company captures a number of free activities, thus generating income for itself. Digital and network technologies have made it possible to implement extensive “crowdsourcing.” This neologism, proposed by Jeff Howe in 2006 in *Wired* [15], describes outsourcing tasks to crowds of people scattered across the whole world who can therefore be

considered as the “workforce,” able to carry out work remotely. Whereas directed self-production consisted of pushing standardized and repetitive tasks onto the consumer, crowdsourcing in contrast, consists of “drawing up” immaterial marketable data from the crowd of consumers. Howe specifies that these “new workers,” who receive no payment (or at least very little), cost less than the least well-paid employees, whether they be Indian or Chinese [15].

Collaborative coproduction is a typical division of labor that can take various observable forms. First and foremost, it involves the capture and market exploitation of information about individuals and their marketing “profiles.” This may be traces left on websites,<sup>3</sup> mobile phones, global positioning system, or chip cards (credit cards, loyalty cards, etc.). Whether the data are left passively, deliberately (replying to customer satisfaction questionnaires, leaving messages on social network sites, filling in identification forms, etc.), or conditionally (for access to a service or to make a purchase), they have a value in the datamining market. They are sold on, sometimes in real time, to advertisers who can then target their messages with great precision.

In addition to this information, consumers also supply free of charge and often with great enjoyment immaterial productions which have required a more substantial and autonomous effort. This is “user generated content” (UGC). Websites take photos, videos, blogs, vlogs, films, articles, mapping information, and music produced free of charge by the crowd of keen amateurs. When these are put online, they generate audience and hence advertising revenue for the company. In this division of labor and value, production is outside the labor market (unpaid contributions) and product markets (free access) and is characterized by abundance (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). In our analysis, however, this collaborative production generates a hidden market: the audience. It plays on rational control of a scarce resource and has to face resistance and competition. We also have to differentiate between collaborative coproduction in profit organizations (eBay, Facebook, Google, etc.) and in those that stay outside the market (Wikipedia, Linux, free blog, public services, etc.) and do not convert production into audience and audience into business. The former are clearly major actors in the market economy (and are, in that sense, putting consumers to work), while the latter are working to escape from it (and do not enter into our scope of study as they activity does not profit to any supplier).

Collaborative coproduction also concerns managerial functions, such as marketing or innovation. Specialists in what is called “buzz marketing” work to make the consumers the instrument of a subtle, discreet, and virtually painless type of advertising: word of mouth. They are asked to carry out unpaid work on promotional advertising in their own social and geographic environment. Some famous brands are using social links as a means of taking advertising even further by creating “brand communities” [10, 25]. Here, social links are seen as markets, as proclaimed by the founder of Facebook. Collaborative coproduction has also become a technique for producing commercials. Consumers are invited to enter by sending in their ideas and productions, based on a set of given specifications. Collaborative coproduction also extends in a very visible way to innovative functions (Grabher

et al., 2008). Consumers are called on more and more often to taste, try, experiment, and select new products. They are invited to participate in strategic activities, evaluation, and testing before the launch of a new company or the release of an innovative product, software, or design. Their ideas, opinions, and suggestions are all sucked in via dedicated websites. Purchase intentions that are captured in this way can reduce the financial risk for investors and contribute to the work of producing the market. Finally, consumers contribute, for no pay (Arvidsson, 2006), to creating confidence in the markets, by taking note of buyers and sellers, by classifying products and drawing up “lists of favorites.” Note that entertainment is also being created more and more by means of collaborative coproduction. Typically, consumers of reality TV shows can be signed on for nothing to help with production (Andrejevic, 2003). In all these situations, the consumer produces voluntarily and for no pay immaterial goods that create value for the company.

When the consumer is put to work in this way, he says that he has given his prior consent and that he is eager to produce. We observe that he is using his skills to carry out this work, and often his own tools too (computers, cameras, video cameras, graphics software, clothes, etc.), his time, his space, and his social links. From interviews, we can understand their reasons for agreeing to supply these valuable productions without expecting to be paid. These reasons fall into the context of a non-utilitarian logic: consumers coproduce specifically to have the pleasure of carrying out this activity, or to “work” in the way they choose. Like a volunteer, the amateur “gives it his all” for the pleasure of doing something interesting or useful, something that may bring him social and professional recognition. The work of the consumer is a reminder of the ambiguity of work: it can be such a great source of socialization and subjective development that some agree to produce economic value through their work, without being paid. In this way, consumers develop experience and skill, as well as gain a source of socialization. Unlike the previous case, the company does not “ask” the consumers to work, but offers it to them as an opportunity. They agree to work for nothing and take pleasure in being exploited (Zwick et al., 2008). They are “simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited” (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Terranova, 2000). Seeing consumers as “alienated” is therefore a correct interpretation from an economic point of view, if we adopt the Marxist theory of value. However, our survey shows that they are not necessarily alienated psychologically. These activities make sense within broader frames of practices (Miller, 1995). They are freely undertaken and can operate on health and socialization.

In addition to these two forms of putting consumers to work on production tasks, I identified a third, more subtle category, which concerns “organizational work.”

### *Organizational work: Resolving the contradictions of consumption*

In observation and interviews, consumers flag up numerous activities that they describe as very intense and “heavy.” They say that choosing the right product

from a wide and clearly directed range (Schwartz, 2004), changing telecom operator, stopping a subscription, finding the best airline tariff for a destination, buying a PC without the software already installed, or purchasing clothes not produced by child labor, and so on, are “real work.” The activities that must be deployed in order to succeed in all these tasks do not match the first two types described above. They are not directly productive but aim to produce a practical response, one which is also subjectively and socially acceptable. I call this “organizational work.” The sociology of work shows that it is spread across the entire organization, from the CEO to the bottom level, as each worker actively creates rules and responses to the contradictions. Here, we observe that consumers too are involved in this invisible but tough activity. Three main contradictions emerge from their daily consumption activity.

First, consumers have to face the contradiction between marketing discourse and practice. From the 1980s onward, marketing has taken on a new role in the organization of work, as the corpus indicates. “Quality” procedures promote a new representation of the customer, with management declaring him to be a “king” (Grabher et al., 2008), at the “center of the organization.” All employees, whatever their rank or their job, now have to be “customer-oriented.” In the name of the customer (i.e. in the name of each and every one of us) and the absolute need to “satisfy” him, the company hierarchy demands more speed, quality, productivity, and innovation from employees. Marketing sees itself as a fairly assertive “benefactor” with a consumer who is presented as versatile and tyrannical. Publicity material describes him as free and even reigning supreme: he therefore can and must choose to consume unhindered.

However, marketing also has a “hidden facet,” beyond the “virtuous” one (Cherrier and Murray, 2004). When the marketing department is addressing managers (service offer) or management students (training manuals), the consumer’s image is quite different: instead, marketing promises to control customer behavior in order to serve the interests of the firm, using merchandising techniques, advertising, loyalty programs, spear phishing, confusing tariffs, yield, tied selling, or the construction of “exit barriers.” In this case, marketing is true to its name in wanting to create markets by acting on the consumer (Cochoy, 2007) using seduction and constraint. In this paradigm, which could almost be called “predatory,” the consumer is perceived as a “target” to be reached. So while he has to use a discourse that declares him to be “king,” at the same time a proliferation of marketing ploys are being used to try and cajole him into adopting specific behaviors.

As the consumers testify, if they are to use their freedom as a consumer intelligently, they must be wary and must investigate, test, compare, simulate expenditure, master the legal rules, write, negotiate, and so on. The most basic everyday situations begin to accumulate, requiring them to carry out what are virtually the activities of a professional purchaser. This status of a “king in chains” has ultimately become a real “job”: consumers have to become aware of and give a name to these contradictions, then produce a practical response, one which is also subjectively and socially acceptable.

A second main contradiction drives this organizational work. Consumers often cite the one that arises between the consumer and the citizen, in the same individual, as they do not exist in separate space and are both sustained by “issues of trust” (Couldry, 2004). The consumer wants to buy products and services that represent good value for money, but at the same time do not clash with the ethical and ecological values of the citizen. The consumer has to seek out information, compare, interpret, and check. As he says, “this is a hard job!” From our study, anyone who refuses to carry out this organizational work has two possible outcomes: either he takes the moral cost of his purchase upon himself when this goes against his own values as a citizen, and this tension will prey on his mind, or he will hand over the work to professional associations or consumerists, who put a great deal of effort into producing quality labels. “Clean” products, like those that promise fair trade, are more expensive than the others as if this were the cost for not working.

The same process can be observed surrounding a range of contradictions: we observe that when a firm is badly organized, or when its professionals are not sufficiently skilled (be it in a bank, a hospital, or an airplane), consumers have to compensate for it. They must be aware, think, analyze, learn, and act beyond their role of consumer, so as to get their money, and be cured or transported despite the disorganization of the provider.

All these contradictions benefit the firms that create them (voluntarily or not) and are demanding on the customer in terms of activities. In putting the consumers to work in this way, social differentiations also arise as we observe a great inequality between individuals’ ability to cope with this vague but unavoidable task. From a qualitative point of view, there is a clear distribution of competencies correlated with social class. This result opens a new field of research for quantitative sociologists, who could measure the level of competence of the consumers, in relation to social parameters such as age, gender, class, qualifications, and socialization.

## **Conclusion: Can we call it “work”?**

We have shown that consumers assume an increasing share of productive tasks that derive from three social configurations. Each configuration responds to a specific division of labor, with precise prescriptions and “management of the consumer” and actual work. In addition to all the relational service jobs (salesperson, counter clerk, travel agent, repairman, etc.), the consumer also produces value as a marketer, designer, influencer, advertiser, trainer, manager, and skilled purchaser. All these activities require some effort, enthusiasm, skill, and compliance. Like salaried work, these activities exist within a framework of social relationships which imposes a vertical, functional, and topographical division of tasks and regulate distribution of wealth. In the three configurations, firms take advantage of the consumers’ activities: consumers create *value* for them, by reducing costs or producing revenue. Far from seeing those configurations as successive steps in capitalism, we show that they coexist. This typology can then be useful for thinking the

changes in work and consumption, by sectors (services, Web 2.0, commodification, etc.), but as part of a more global shift. So political issues are at stake, as well as conceptual ones (Foster, 2011), since the terms of “work” and “consumption” are called into question.

From a conceptual viewpoint, there is discussion as to whether we can call this productive and profitable activity “work.” Most researchers, be they from the management field or sociologists, do use the term. Managers speak favorably of this “work,” and tend to prescribe it, whereas sociologists are mainly critical (Arvidsson, 2006; Humphreys and Grayson, 2008; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Terranova, 2000; Zwick et al., 2008; [9]) of this social trend.

To maintain that this activity can be qualified as “work” supposes that there is a predetermined agreement on the meaning of this concept. The difficulty lies in the fact that work has no universal or substantial fixed definition on which we can rely in any consensual way (Méda, 1996). If we are aware of making a conceptual difference between “employment” and “work,” and if we avoid thinking of work as synonymous with pain or divine punishment, then the current criteria fade away. It goes without saying that male factory activity is work. Other activities border on this notion and have earned recognition as work, as was the case for some domestic activities, or for care, for example. To say that a human activity is “work” relates to a contingent historic social construction. The status of many activities could be said to be uncertain in this respect (domestic activities, militancy, etc.). When an activity is named “work,” it is performative as it is then related to all the institutions dealing with it, and with the labor law in particular.

The activity of consumers, beyond its three different configurations, opens up a social debate (more than a sociological one) on whether it will eventually gain recognition institutionally as “work.” The relationship between firms, consumers and their representatives, and the State shall determine the destiny of this three unqualified but central activities in contemporary capitalism.

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### **Notes**

1. Of these, 29 were selected for this article. The criterion for closing the corpus was saturation and redundancy of information.
2. Numbers refer to the corpus, listed below.
3. Websites explicitly announce their intention to make commercial use of data in the “general conditions of sale.”

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