

Abstract

Why do prosumers prosume?

Sociological reflections on market and consumption

Patrick Linnebach (Essen)

In this paper, I propose to consider the phenomenon of consumers participating in the production process, whether it be in forms of “open innovation” (H. Chesbrough), “mass customization” (J. Pine II), or as a ‘working client’ (G. Voß/K. Rieder)—since Alvin Toffler’s *The Third Wave* (1980), these forms are well known as prosumption—, as a substantial part of what I call conversational markets (compare the first thesis of the Cluetrain Manifesto: “markets are conversations”, see: www.cluetrain.com). This perspective on markets enables us to understand markets as places in which the *communication* between the market participants is getting more important—and it seems to imply as well that Toffler’s prosumer can be seen as an emancipated, and therefore collaborating, i.e. co-working, consumer.

Taking a cue from Niklas Luhmann’s (1988) work on exchange, competition, and cooperation within markets, I propose to view *modern* markets, in contrast to *traditional* ones—or rather *next* markets, according to Dirk Baecker’s (2007) ‘Studies on the Next Society’, in contrast to *modern* ones—, in terms of cooperation rather than in terms of competition (or indifference). Therefore, the concept of “mutual adjustment”, coined by Toffler as well (in his book *Future Shock* (1970)), will provide a better (more sophisticated) understanding of modern primarily ‘cooperative markets’, since the phenomenon of prosumption (i.e. productive consumption) seems to constitute an essential part of mutual adjustment by communication. My argument follows the logic of functional analysis: Which *social* problem could the phenomenon in question offer a solution to?

In the first part of the paper, I will outline the social problem which ‘cooperative markets’ could refer to—or to put it differently: I try to figure out why prosumers prosume. In a still-preliminary approach, there is some empirical evidence that the problem of reference should be treated as a problem of *trust*—a problem that used to be resolved successfully by the mechanism of prices. As a first step, I try to identify main reasons for the assumed (increasing) need for cooperation with regard to current market transactions. As a second step, I will discuss the assumption that all forms of market exchange can be interpreted sociologically in terms of double contingency, as—according to sociological systems theory—both consumers (i.e. persons) as well as companies (i.e. organizations) are so-called “addressable systems” (Fuchs 2002), that is to say: actors to whom behavioural expectations are directed. Three constellations can be distinguished: a) the relationship between business and business, b) the relationship between consumer and consumer, and c) the relationship between business and consumer. I will argue that the latter allows us to deal theoretically with the concept of the prosumer (respectively the phenomenon of prosumption)—more precisely, it seems to be instructive to theorize prosumption as a constellation of asymmetric double contingency.

In the second part, I would like to draw on the above-mentioned suggestion that prosumption can be seen—in analogy to theoretical considerations of Henry Mintzberg (1979)—as a relationship operated (structurally equivalent to the organizational form of “adhocracy”) through the mechanism of *mutual adjustment*. I intend to outline a response to the question whether—complementary to the common state-of-the-art in organizational sociology—a *symbolization of markets* can be stated. Or to put it differently: Could it be of heuristic value to consider ‘cooperative markets’ as adhocracy markets? Recent sociological considerations on brands (Hellmann 2003) as well as the increasing importance of the category of responsibility (Heidbrink 2003) may suggest this *solution* to our problem: the social order of markets.