
5 Provisioning

Susana Narotzky

This chapter is about the different forms that provisioning for goods and services can take. Often provisioning is through the market, but in many cases the market is involved only partially, or not at all. Generally, in any society there are several possible paths for the provision of similar goods or services, as when medical care is available from the state, private practitioners, private corporations or a doctor friend. This situation might mean a wider choice for the consumer, or it might express social differentiation and limited access regarding a basic good such as health care. I want to stress the fact that provisioning is a complex process where production, distribution, appropriation and consumption relations all have to be taken into account and where history defines particular available paths for obtaining goods and services. Provisioning is also a useful way to understand social differentiation, the construction of particular meanings and identities and the reproduction of the social and economic system as a whole.

The provisioning perspective in its present form stems from the perceived need to link the consumption and the production ends of economic life in order to address vital issues such as food security, housing, health care, education and, more generally, public or collective consumption. Development agencies in the 1980s, and particularly anthropologists, economists and sociologists working for the Food and Agriculture Organization, made the link between food consumption and particular 'food paths' (Carloni 1981), which Boserup (1965) had highlighted in her work on the crucial role of women in subsistence agriculture and the disastrous effects for food security of development policies that targeted males for agricultural development. The food path is the different steps and agents involved in making food available to particular domestic groups and getting it to effectively nourish people in those groups. Things like access to land and other means of production (including credit), local 'traditional' knowledge regarding the environment and its use, distribution patterns and practices, and cultural views of appropriate food intake along age and gender divides were all discovered to be crucial in determining food security levels.

In the 1990s the provisioning approach was revised by Warde (1992) and Fine and Leopold (1993; also Fine 2002). They contributed useful tools of analysis through their theories about different 'modes of provision' (Warde 1992) and distinct 'systems of provisioning' (Fine 2002).

Provisioning, two examples

Anthropologists, like many social scientists, have increasingly concentrated on individual consumption decisions, and seen them as expressions of individual agency and identity. In focusing on what takes place at the consumption end of the provisioning process, they have often forgotten the economic and political forces that constrain people's consumption. Let me provide two examples that point out some of the important issues.

Child care

Imagine you need someone to take care of your children for a couple of hours a day, three days a week. How will you provide for it? Several possibilities come to mind immediately: (1) the government might have a day-care system that you can use, (2) there is an ample supply of private companies and self-employed people that will provide for babysitting at different market prices, (3) one of your relatives may be able to provide the care and (4) you may have friends or neighbours with whom you can organise a child-care pool system or a cooperative (Brandon 2000; Stack 1974).

Of these four possibilities, only (2) involves provisioning through the market. But even here, we do not choose freely among the available providers. Our decision will be shaped by our income, our willingness to trust strangers with our children, and our own and the babysitter's social network, which is how we are likely to learn about what child care is available. Equally, we cannot choose freely among other possible sources of child care. We may live too far from our relatives to make arrangements with them. We may have recently moved, and not have friends nearby or know how to gain access to neighbourhood child-care groups. We may live where there is no government child-care service, or live too far from that service to be able to use it.

Even if we were in a position to choose freely, our decision would be influenced by our judgement of the care provided, and that means our judgement of how it is produced. After all, not all child care is alike, and a child-care company's premises may look run-down and dirty, not suitable for our children. But also, our cultural understanding of how it is produced can be important. The facility may be neat and clean, but we may be put off by seeing that the staff are primarily from an ethnic group we do not trust. State child-care provision may be of good quality, but we may worry that it would make people think we are poor, or unwilling to spend money on 'proper' commercial child care.

Food

Let's say we are used to drinking coffee at breakfast, and we generally get it in the market. We can go to a supermarket and choose among the various brands, mostly blends of vaguely defined origin (Brazil, Colombia and so on)

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traditionally catering to a mass market. Behind each brand there is an entire set of social relations of production and distribution that we can hardly follow. Generally, we cannot know how the particular relations involved in the production and distribution of that coffee affect the quality of the product. Also we are unaware of how our consumption contributes to particular forms of disempowerment and deprivation among the producers. The provisioning approach will help us discover a history of connections among economic, social and political forms of organising the coffee food path along different geographical locations (Jimenez 1995; Roseberry 1996; Stolcke 1984, 1988).

We may choose to go to a specialist 'independent' roaster where we trust that we get particular coffees produced in particular places that result in particular qualities and tastes. Our trust is based on the belief that the connection between distribution, retailing and production is more direct with such independent roasters, and thus control of the quality of the product at origin is possible. This type of outlet, in turn, caters to a presumably more sophisticated and knowledgeable consumer. We should bear in mind, however, that this form of provisioning is tied to technological innovations such as the use of containers that speed up transport and the use of computers for the control of stocks that dramatically shorten the time between production and final distribution, thereby increasing freshness. Marketing practices that define and target particular groups of consumers using identity and quality discourses are also involved in our decision to choose the independent roaster when getting our coffee (Roseberry 1996; Roseberry, Gudmundson and Samper Kutschbach 1995).

Increasingly we have yet another option for our coffee provisioning: Fair Trade. Through our coffee consumption practices we try to benefit particular forms of production, generally small producers who sell their coffee through Fair Trade cooperative systems (Whatmore and Thorne 1997). Fair Trade is based on enhancing the 'connectivity' of production and consumption agents' decisions as well as on marketing that connectivity as 'fair' and 'sustainable'. Although often the connection between both ends of the provisioning chain appears as linear and forthright, this is hardly the case. Decisions affecting production and sale are dependent on institutions such as the Cocoa, Sugar, Coffee Exchange in New York, which affects prices and sets the standard for fair trade agreements (Whatmore and Thorne 1997: 297).

On the other hand, the pressure for 'high quality' coffee justifying higher retail prices creates a pressure on farmers to change their practices. This generally means introducing organic forms of agriculture (more labour intensive) that meet the standards of certification of European Union legislation. The 'quality' factor, however, is a tricky one that often will push producers away from the Fair Trade network and back into more conventional

commercial channels and the uncertainties that affect them (Whatmore and Thorne 1997: 299).

Thus, along the provisioning path of Fair Trade coffee, actors have different capacities to decide about the values they can produce, exchange and consume, and about the social relationships associated with their different choices. As consumers, our ability to select one or the other way of getting our coffee will depend on our income, outlet convenience, general information of the different options available and ideological positioning. It will depend as well on the production relations at origin, on the systems of distribution and commercialisation, the coffee market and technological innovation. These various factors will affect not just the quality, price and circulation of the object, but also its meaning for us and our willingness and ability to buy it.

The provisioning approach

Goods and services such as food, clothes, water, shelter, sanitation, electricity, care and the like appear different and are materially different according to the social relations that have been involved in their production, distribution, circulation and consumption. The provisioning approach follows the path of provisioning in order to understand how the content and the meaning of goods and services are produced and how, in turn, they produce social differentiation. It also pays attention to factors such as income availability and its form (for example, cash, credit), which are significant and differentiating links throughout the various stages of the chain of provisioning. Sharing and pooling systems among individuals embedded in long-term reciprocal relationships such as those obtaining in the domestic group, peer groups, informal credit circles, neighbourhoods, interest groups and the like are also important and need to be taken into account.

An aspect of this perspective is that it takes into account the simultaneous provisioning of particular goods through different paths – market, state, community, domestic group – and the articulation of market and non-market regimes along each path. Indeed, most goods shift through different phases along their path and most goods and services can be obtained through market and non-market ways. The interaction between these factors will affect both the symbolic and the economic value of the goods and services available in a society. More and more, this means paying attention to globalised processes of production and circulation not only of material objects but also of people and values.

The state is often a determining factor regarding the orientation of social actors towards more or less market-led processes of provisioning. This is salient in the provisioning of public services such as caring facilities, for example. Systems of provisioning are historically grounded and power, the capacity that people or institutions have to make decisions that affect others'

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livelihoods, is a crucial element in the shifts and articulations along the chains of provisioning.

This approach also emphasises the political character of the production of meaning along these paths. It stresses the unequal power to create and institute particular meanings as cultural values that have wide impact. Moreover, the differential attribution of meaning and value to goods and services appears as a salient motive for discriminating among people, based on their consumption habits. This highlights the complexity and ambivalence of the meanings incorporated in goods and available to social actors as raw materials for their identity construction through consumption practices. It also stresses the relationship between the production of meaning and systems of exploitation and domination.

Table 5.1 Modes of provision, social relations and axes of meaning

<i>Mode</i>	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Relationship</i>	<i>Identity</i>
Market	Interest	Exchange	Client, buyer
State	Justice	Civil right	Citizen
Community	Solidarity	Balanced reciprocity	Neighbour
Domestic group	Love	Generalised reciprocity	Family, kin

Source: Adapted from Edgell and Hetherington 1996; Warde 1992.

Table 5.1 is an attempt to abstract the elements that, in Western societies, interact in a particular mode of provision. Following a Weberian tradition, we might interpret these modes as ranging from the 'natural' (domestic group) to the 'social' (market) forms of relation or from emotion to reason as motivators for action. However, we should be aware that this intellectual tradition has developed historically in the context of particular political and economic transformations that had particular results in the psychology of motivation, the social production of mutual responsibility, the interpretation of experience and the construction of identity.

When thinking of actual practices of provisioning it is often useful to think of social actors as enmeshed in networks of provisioning. Carol Stack, in her classic *All our kin* (1974), gives a telling example in her description of strategies of survival in a black neighbourhood in the United States. She speaks of 'domestic networks' instead of 'domestic groups', in order to show the fluidity of the social relations that surround the provisioning and final consumption of subsistence needs such as food, shelter, clothing and care. Moreover, each path of provisioning is forged through a complex network of

social relationships that branch at the points where certain options become impossible or improbable for certain social actors and where, generally, tensions and power are concentrated and differentiation takes place.

From what I have said thus far, it should be clear that the provisioning approach can be summarised in terms of the following points.

First, different paths for obtaining goods and services are possible, using diverse modes of provisioning (market, state, community, domestic group). People will have different opportunities regarding their access to the various paths, opportunities that may shift at certain stages along the chain and at different points in the life cycle of the individual or the domestic group involved.

Second, different people or groups will be positioned differently as to their general ability to use market paths, as distinct from non-market paths (state, community, kinship).

Third, concerning non-market provisioning, people have different abilities to use institutionalised formal provisioning (unemployment aid, pensions, welfare, non-government organization (NGO) help) and informal provisioning (kin networks, ethnic ties, religious affinities, political ideology, shared location of origin, and so on). Illegal immigrants in Europe, for example, do not have the same access as regular citizens to state welfare provision but have often better access to community-organised services through NGOs or religious charities. Even with extreme informal provisioning (for example, urban foraging practices such as garbage collecting, begging, petty theft and so on) not everyone has the same opportunity of access.

Following the provisioning paths

There is an increasing interest in consumption in anthropology. We seem to think that consumption patterns can tell us more about contemporary social relations (social differentiation, identity construction, agency, power) than production patterns. Often the argument is that empowerment can only come from consumption practices, as a precarious and segmented labour market and flexible and informal production processes have rendered empowerment in the workplace obsolete (Miller 1987, 1995). Consumption seems to address both material needs and the production of meaning. Much of this emphasis is linked to the stress on 'agency' and on individual autonomy or self-construction in Western societies, where social scientists have perceived a de-institutionalisation of social action. From this perspective, traditional corporate identity frameworks (for example, the family or class-based interaction through long-term employment patterns and union organisations) have given way to a 'freer', 'disentangled', 'flexible' individual who constructs her or his own identity through consumption choices about and with 'meaning'.

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As Carrier and Heyman (1997: 361) have put it:

Such an approach ignores the fact that the people who confront, use and respond to objects and their meanings do so in terms of the material, social and cultural constraints of their own personal situations. The ways in which people respond to and use meanings have material, social and cultural consequences for themselves and for those meanings.

However, we need to go further than this. We cannot understand patterns of consumption, social relations in consumption or the construction of social meaning and forms of distinction and differentiation through consumption, if we do not address the complexity of the systems of provisioning as a whole.

It is important to consider the social relations that exist from production through distribution, appropriation and final consumption, for these are important in themselves and because they affect options at the next stage in the chain. We can see this importance in subsistence self-provisioning of food through forest products. In most regions that consume forest products, alternative paths of food provisioning exist, whether local peasant markets or agribusiness-led expanding markets for foreign goods. However, forest self-provisioning is still important for many people and enhances their food security. Nevertheless, there seems to be a declining trend in forest food consumption. Although changing tastes may have an influence, the most important factors seem to be linked to economic and political transformations. Some of these illustrate the complexities of provisioning networks: international food aid intervention, expanding distribution channels of agribusiness firms, privatisation of formerly common land, forest degradation through overexploitation for non-food purposes or commercial farming, loss of traditional resource and management knowledge (Falconer 1990–91). The social relations in these various factors will create particular topographies of food provisioning, as people deal with the options at hand from within their (and their household's) position in the economic and political structure.

The task of analysing paths of provisioning benefits from two important perspectives coming from the work of anthropologists. Both can be helpful in different ways to the understanding of provisioning processes.

Political economy perspectives

The political economy perspective developed through the 1970s and 1980s (Roseberry 1988) in anthropology, elaborating dependency and world-system theories. One important work here is Eric Wolf's *Europe and the people without history* (1982), which provides a detailed analysis of the connections and developments between world regions that affected the livelihoods of local people who are involved in producing, distributing and consuming particular goods. His example of the fur trade (1982: 158–94) is a masterful account of

the intricacies of the multiple and interacting paths of provisioning forming the system of provisioning of fur. He shows how social relations in the production and distribution stages of fur provisioning (in Russia, North America and western Europe) created goods that circulated along unevenly-commodified paths. At the same time, Wolf shows how the changing position of native American groups in fur provisioning affected their own patterns of consumption and provisioning for food, tools and weapons.

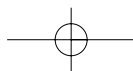
Another important work in this perspective is Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and power* (1985). He shows how a particular production system, the plantation system, transformed the availability of sugar and changed its meaning from a rare luxury item into a common necessity. He also shows how the expansion of this particular consumption good was related to industrialisation in England, for sugar was a cheap nutrient that could be produced in the colonies at very low cost, and so helped reduce the cost of reproducing the English labour force. At many points in the provisioning chain, access to sugar and the desire to get it were forged differently for different groups of people.¹ And he argues that the desire for sugar, like its supply, was effectively beyond the control of many of its consumers.

The uses to which it was put and its place in the diet changed and proliferated; it grew more important in people's consciousness, in family budgets, and in the economic, social, and political life of the nation ... These changes have to do with 'outside' meaning – the place of sucrose in the history of colonies, commerce, political intrigue, the making of policy and law – but they have to do with 'inside' meaning as well, because the meaning people gave to sugar arose under conditions prescribed or determined not so much by the consumers as by those who made the product available. (1985: 167)

And what he has to say about that 'outside' meaning illustrates the complex ways that power and interest can shape a provisioning chain.

The political and economic influence of the governing strata set the terms by which increasing quantities of sugar and like commodities became available throughout English society. This influence took the form of specific legislative initiatives affecting duties and tariffs, or the purchase of supplies of sugar, molasses and rum for dispensing through government agencies, like the navy and the almshouses; or regulations affecting matters of purity, standards of quality, etc. But it also involved the informal exercise of power: a combination of official prerogatives with the use of pressures made possible through cliques, family connections, university and public-school contracts, covert coercion, friendship, club membership, the strategic application of wealth, job promises, cajolery and much else. (1985: 171)

His analysis points to the dangers in stressing consumption and consumer choice as a key point of entry in our efforts to understand societies. 'The proclaimed freedom to choose meant freedom only within a range of



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possibilities laid down by forces over which those who were, supposedly, freely choosing exercised no control at all' (Mintz 1985: 183).

Transactional and cultural perspectives

The second perspective is framed in transactional and cultural terms. In his introduction to *The social life of things*, Arjun Appadurai points out that while some objects 'make only *one* journey from production to consumption' (Appadurai 1986: 23; original emphasis), others can follow paths that take them in and out of commodity status, being consumed many times over in different forms in different cultural contexts by different people (see also Kopytoff 1986: 73–7; more generally, see Godelier 1996). For Appadurai (1986: 34–6), the value of such an object thus depends both on its individual 'cultural biography', its movement and 'life history', and on its 'social history', which can be traced for classes of objects in a society and which creates the large-scale dynamics that constrain the 'intimate trajectories' of things.

An important part of Appadurai's perspective is its concern with people's understandings of the commodity as it moves along its path, and how these contribute to the value of the commodity in particular exchanges. He notes that such understandings are common in all societies, but that they 'acquire especially intense, new, and striking qualities when the spatial, cognitive or institutional distances between production, distribution, and consumption are great ... The institutionalised divorce (in knowledge, interest, and role) between persons involved in various aspects of the flow of commodities generated specialised mythologies' (Appadurai 1986: 48). And he divides these mythologies into three sorts:

- (1) Mythologies produced by traders and speculators who are largely indifferent to both the production origins and the consumption destination of commodities ...
- (2) Mythologies produced by consumers (or potential consumers) alienated from the production and distribution process of key commodities ... and
- (3) mythologies produced by workers in the production process who are completely divorced from the distribution and consumption logics of the commodities they produce. (1986: 48)

The intersection of these mythologies as the object moves along the provisioning path shapes the value of the object all along the way. The example of the construction of authenticity of oriental carpets described by Spooner (1986) in the same volume is particularly telling in this regard.

Connecting paths of provision with processes of power

Systems of domination are linked to the processes of provisioning both locally and in their wider articulation and interaction with other systems of

domination.² Consequently, understanding provisioning requires addressing how the various stages of the process are institutionalised through the state, law, custom, religious practice and other pertinent structures of domination. The degree of institutionalisation in turn will affect the effective availability of objects for, and decision-making possibilities of, particular social groups.

Geographers have produced extremely provocative work in this regard concerning collective consumption issues regarding public goods and the institutionalisation of their provision in welfare systems of different sorts (Harvey 1973; Pinch 1989). They have shown how the spatial location of public goods (for example, water pipes, sewerage infrastructure, electricity cabling, road and railroad systems, hospitals, schools, parks) is crucial for generating differences in consumption. The political aspect of this differentiation is apparent in the direct provision of public goods and services. The political aspect is no less important when certain uses of public resources are banned. Thus, Mitchell (1997) has analysed the effect of laws that prohibit the use of public space (sidewalks, subways, hydrants, public fountains) for private activities such as sleeping, washing or eating. These laws penalise those who have been made homeless because of the restructuring processes of capital (unemployment) and the shrinking and changing nature of welfare, and hence who lack 'private' (home) or 'public' (welfare provision) spaces they can use. They favour an aestheticised urban landscape that enhances 'gentrification', capital investment and speculation.

The increased awareness of environmental issues together with the political saliency of public-goods provision has further stressed the need to view the *entire* provisioning process, including the 'after consumption' stage of waste disposal. The disposal of toxic, domestic and industrial waste, and the involuntary consumption of the negative consequences of industrial production and compulsive overconsumption have all been addressed in different ways by state agencies, political activists, academic analysts and grassroots movements. Some have stressed the need to increase local participation in decisions about the location of waste landfills or toxic dumps, pointing to discriminatory policies that result in the inequitable distribution of pollution, of the negative externalities of the production and consumption process. Others stress the need to strengthen channels for public participation in decisions about the production process itself; that is, the origin of negative externalities in production: 'Pollution prevention ultimately requires production control' (Heinman 1996: 113). This perspective allows the extension of the provisioning approach, with its concern with power, into new areas. As Lake (1996: 169) has asserted: 'Both the inequitable distribution of environmental burdens and the inequitable production of those burdens arise from the unequal power relations controlling the organization of production in capitalist societies'.

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The connection between systems of power and systems of provisioning are a crucial aspect of the mode of governance of any particular society. One aspect of this is people's agency, which is shaped by systems of provisioning, systems of power and systems of meaning that affect people in different ways. This shaping of agency is what Pierre Bourdieu termed 'habitus' and was a key element in the processes of social reproduction of the material and power structures in any society (Bourdieu 1979).

In sum, we get three dialectically-intertwined axes from the provisioning perspective: power, meaning and material provisioning, illustrated in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 *The dialectics of provisioning*

THINGS: Provisioning System	POWER: Domination System	MEANING: Cultural System
Technology	Institutions	Mutual responsibility
Production relations	Differentiation	Presentation of self
Distribution (allocation)	Coercion	Forms of belonging
Circulation (movement)	Consent	Identity construction

Distribution and circulation in the paths of provisioning

Distribution describes the process by which things produced get to the hands of consumers, and it is a central aspect of the provisioning perspective. Except in the case of completely autonomous self-provisioning, distribution requires movement and allocation. Commonly this movement and allocation is through market systems, and in theory these systems are governed by supply and demand free from political or social constraints. In practice, however, often this freedom is absent. If we consider the different modes of provision possible at every stage of a particular path, we can see that allocation is, in important ways, both politically conditioned and socially embedded in multiple and complex social relations (for example, Carrier 1995; Miller 1997).

The economics of the movement of goods and services through particular distribution channels and retailing outlets is in itself a major way in which the process of differentiation in provisioning takes place. Movement in distribution seeks to bridge the space and time between the when and where of production on the one hand, and on the other the when and where of final consumption. This bridging can take place in different ways. In the market fairs of medieval Europe, producers and consumers moved to a privileged space of encounter, and this is still the case for commercial fairs. With local artisanal products (for example, food, pottery, cloth) and with exotic tourist

goods, the consumer may move toward the producer. However, often, a complex chain of intermediaries completes the movements required in a path of provisioning.

Issues such as the available technologies of storage and preservation, transport and the like are significant influences on distribution and circulation, and will affect what is available to consumers at the retailing end. The state can be significant here, not only through things like health and safety regulation, but also because the state sets the criteria by which alternative, public distribution processes are available to particular groups of people. Other distribution processes outside of markets exist in communal or kin-oriented provisioning along complex paths that are affected by things like domestic or local networks, cultural patterns of mutual responsibility and the position in the production system of network members. And for those members, as for others in the network, a member's wealth can be important: having work or a car can determine participation in distribution processes.

Thus, while the market may be the most visible, in every society alternative forms of distribution for goods and services exist. A number of factors influence just which of these forms of distribution people will use in their own provisioning. One of these factors is the degree of regulation of the chain of provisioning: the forms of control and regulation of the various distribution channels (market and non-market, formal and informal) and of the various sites of transaction with consumers. In Western societies, institutional control by the state and by producers' and consumers' associations, together with media that exposes breaches in the system of regulation, help create trust in the formal market and state-led systems of provisioning. In the more informal, non-market paths, however, control is produced through networks of trust, based on first-hand knowledge of the nature and origin of the goods or service and of the person distributing it at each stage.

In his analysis of the transformations of circulation relations in Western countries, Carrier (1995: 61–105) shows that there was a growing impersonality in the social relations of retail trade, which 'affected people's experience with objects' (1995: 104). Thus, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a double alienation of people from objects occurred. People became alienated as producers, who did not own the means of production, and as consumers, who were increasingly separated from the personal, trust relationship that existed between customer and shopkeeper.³ And it is worth noting that changes in final distribution in the retail trade often were induced by economic strategies at the stage of production, (for example, manufacturers pre-selling to the customer through creating and advertising branded goods).

Provisioning crises, such as cases of large-scale food poisoning or impurity, are leading consumers to lose confidence in the formal means of controlling

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the paths of provisioning, as is a growing awareness of the conflicting interests of those holding institutional power in regulatory agencies and the like. The 'mad cow' (bovine spongiform encephalopathy: BSE) disease panic, for example, was not a scandal only because of the accumulated errors in the formal control of the system of provisioning. It was a scandal also because government officials, apparently wanting to protect important commercial and political interests, withheld crucial information for a long time, putting people's health at risk and impeding informed decision making. One reaction by commercial organisations to this loss of trust has been to present their wares in ways that satisfy consumers of the soundness of the entire path of provisioning. This is done mainly for food, illustrated by the spread of 'Fair Trade' products, but increasingly is done for more virtual goods, such as investment vehicles, as with the advertising of 'ethical' funds.

A second factor influencing people's use of any given form of distribution is their ability to know about and take advantage of it. A range of issues are important here, and I shall mention some of them briefly. The most obvious issue is people's income. The amount of their income influences what they can buy in the commercial sector and their access to welfare systems. As well, though, the way that they earn their income can affect their ability to participate in informal social provisioning networks. Another issue here is people's knowledge of alternative provisioning paths and products, special sales and retail outlets and the like. This knowledge in turn is shaped by their level of literacy; not just literacy in the conventional sense, but also electronic literacy, the ability to use computer resources to gain pertinent knowledge. A third issue is people's health and physical condition. This affects their movement, and hence the provisioning channels they can use, as well as their ability to gather pertinent information, which can be hindered by an impairment of their sight or hearing. Particular groups of people are strongly affected by this: elderly people, pregnant women, the chronically ill and the disabled. The final issue I shall mention is people's domestic equipment, the resources that allow them to acquire, store and process goods and services to provision their household. Having access to electricity, water and telephone services is important, as is the ownership of a refrigerator, freezer, automobile, storage space and the like, as well as the time necessary to acquire, store and process those goods and services.

Conclusion

As I have presented it here, a concern with provisioning has some important attributes. First and foremost, it integrates many of the different aspects of people's lives. Often our experience is fragmented and partial, based on the separate parts of the entire provisioning process as we experience them in our work, when we shop and when we consume. A concern with provisioning

encourages us to see the connections between these individual parts, see how they form the complex paths of social relations that are necessary to make goods and services available. By joining this integrated view with the ways that power and meaning affect the provisioning process, we are better equipped to understand what leads different people to acquire different goods and services through different channels, and how meaning is produced along the different paths available.

Second, the provisioning approach highlights the importance of the institutions that regulate flows of goods and services: the state (both as regulator and as welfare provider), the market, the neighbourhood, the family. The play between the different institutions involved in provisioning and the informal provisioning paths that emerge (especially in crisis situations) is important for understanding how people provide for themselves and others, and for understanding the social meaning of different provisioning paths.

Finally, this approach encourages us to understand the significance of historical forces in shaping our economic lives. The complex connections and processes of differentiation in provisioning that are simultaneously material, political and cultural are a product of the intersections of regional and global histories, and of the capabilities for action that are opened or closed to different social agents. While this is often recognised for the production, distribution and consumption aspects of provision when analysed as distinct realms of economic activities, it is rarely taken into account when envisaging the entire provisioning process.

In describing the provisioning approach in this chapter, I have stressed the material paths of the production of meaning in the goods and services that different people consume. The market-exchange model has made us think of consumables mainly as commodities, detached from the social relations that surround their production; that is, as separated from the power and meaning involved in the process of making them available. However, if we focus on the entire process of making goods and services available, we can see how the different social relations existing at the different stages of the process, in different locations and historical moments, are crucial to the understanding of who gets what, and what the things, the getting and the people all mean.

Notes

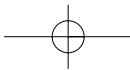
1. See also Schneider (1978) for an early anthropological linking of the consumption of particular types of cloth in Europe to the historical development of economic and political processes both at the regional and global levels.
2. Addressing this topic entails addressing the ways that systems of credit and finance, and systems for generating and distributing information are shaped by systems of domination and so restrict the access of some sorts of people rather than others.
3. If 'commodity fetishism' is an appropriate metaphor that Karl Marx used to highlight alienation in production, it is also a useful metaphor to stress alienation in distribution processes, where the decreasing involvement of human actors in trade, mainly retailing,

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increases the appearance that objects can be abstracted from the social relations that make them available, and even 'have a life of their own'.

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