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# Budgetary Units: A Weberian Approach to Consumption<sup>1</sup>

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Established consumption theory relies heavily on application of individualistic frames and market models of behavior. A framework built around consumption-oriented groups would facilitate progress toward a more general theory of consumption. This article reintroduces and extends Weber's "budgetary unit" concept to address this gap, correcting key problems dogging the consumption literature. The budgetary unit concept (1) offers a new framework for theorizing and better accounting for observed consumption patterns, (2) reveals how consumption units have organizational logics, preferences, strengths, and vulnerabilities that are consequentially distinct from market logic of production and profit, and (3) focuses attention on social processes and features enabling theorization of general social patterns of consumption across diverse contexts. This article highlights the explanatory power and broad applicability of Weber's budgetary unit approach using the conventionally dissimilar cases of Russian organized crime, Catholic nuns, immigrant remittances, and low-income families' child support.

## INTRODUCTION

From Boy Scouts to babysitting cooperatives, families to voluntary associations, many groups that structure social life focus on consumption. These consumption-oriented groups are at the foundation of social order

<sup>1</sup> I thank James Mahoney for his remarkable mentorship in all matters of scholarship and specifically for his generous reading and advice on this article. My sincere appreciation also goes out to Charles Camic; his encouragement, keen insight, and knowledge of Weber have made an immeasurable contribution to my development as a scholar, and to this

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and mediate the relationship between individual and market. Yet, compared to the vast corpus of generalizable research on market-based firms, we know little about such consumption-oriented units and their distinctive social logic. How do they grow and thrive? What conditions explain their organizational demise? Indeed, it is difficult to discuss commonalities among such collectives without talking about them in the negative: they are not organized like firms nor motivated by profit. This article begins to address this gap by reintroducing the Weberian concept of the budgetary unit. Weber conceives of consumption as constituted by meaningfully patterned social collectives, not atomistic individuals. These consumption collectives, what Weber calls “budgetary units,” are relatively durable social groups oriented to providing for the needs and wants of members, and—I will argue—they differ systematically and significantly from the capitalist organizations that have heretofore dominated organizational theory. Weber’s general conception provides a much-needed foundation for the construction of midlevel consumption theory.

Sociologists lack a useful concept for discussing social units where consumption is at work. Existing concepts are narrowly focused and segregated by subdisciplinary field: churches, families, or hometown associations for the sociologies of religion, family, or immigration, for example. Researchers studying middle-income African-American families may compare middle-income white American families, or low-income African-American families (Pattillo-McCoy 2000; Conley 2001) but rarely cross boundaries to draw insights, for example, from findings on immigrant remittances. This segregation precludes meaningful examination of patterns of economic organization across diverse social contexts, which is the foundation of robust social theory.

Moreover, even within subdisciplinary boundaries, social changes have stretched many current concepts beyond their analytic capacity. “Household” and “family” are conventional units for studying the social foundations of economic behavior. These analytic units were useful inasmuch as sociospatial and economic boundaries overlapped. But recent research suggests these presumed overlaps are dissipating (or perhaps were never so neat as scholars assumed), and therefore conventional categories confound more

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than they reveal. Patterns in the creation and distribution of economic resources have been disrupted by demographic shifts in gendered earnings (Raley, Mattingly, and Bianchi 2006), increasing cohabitation (Seltzer 2000), rising nonmarital childbearing and multipartner fertility (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Harknett and Knab 2006), and an increasing appreciation of the socioeconomic role of extended family and elective kin (Muraco 2006). These trends undermine the assumption that biological relations (family) or domestic proximity (household) are the most meaningful boundaries for organizing economic life. Weber's concept improves on these approaches by beginning analysis with the budgetary unit—a unit defined by observable economic practices, rather than inferred from biological relations.

There are several problems with the current approaches to consumption that arise from the lack of a general social unit in consumption theory. First, markets and pricing intersect, but do not wholly subsume, the social domain of consumption. Scholars cannot understand how goods, services, and experiences affect social interaction and human well-being without understanding how people organize socially to select, acquire, possess, and use such things. Second, the self-identified study of consumption tends to focus on subjective disposition and constructions ("meanings"). A myopic focus on meaning misses how such meaning-making individuals structure and organize the economic activities of consumption. Third, the consumption literature presently conceives of individuals as the locus of consumption, which neglects highly sociological group-level processes. Finally, in the absence of a coherent overarching conceptualization of consumption units, theories derived from market-based firms have been overextended and inappropriately applied to consumption.

Revisiting and extending Weber's concept of budgetary units reorients the consumption literature from individuals to social collectives as the locus of consumption. Weber defines budgetary units as groups oriented to providing consumption, characterized by some collective consumption within a relatively durable group of individuals who are known to each other. Building on Weber, I define budgetary units as relatively durable social collectives where a substantial portion of collective activity is devoted to consumption—the selection, procurement, or enjoyment of goods, services, or experiences valued for their nonpecuniary benefits. Budgetary units are composed of members with some intersubjective orientation to each other, possessing a minimal collective identity and norms for enforcing group behavior. This framing incorporates evidence of the power of familiar personal relations, shifts focus from acts of purchase to activities of consumption, enables ignored questions about the apportionment of resources across consumption genres, and begins to identify structures of social organization affecting consumption choices. Unlike conventional approaches to consumption (for review, see Zukin and Maguire 2004), budgetary units focus neither on indi-

vidual level analysis (e.g., why individuals purchase particular products or brands) nor structural changes in the economy as a whole (e.g., why mass consumption has increased). Instead, the budgetary units concept operates at a midlevel of aggregation, which is especially fruitful for theorizing.

This article shows that varied social collectives are oriented to consumption, and these groups constitute an underexplored social unit. Consumption-oriented groups differ in social organization, decision logics, and practices from those that have dominated organizational theory: capitalist firms oriented to securing profit through market advantages. As such, budgetary units offer several related broad theoretical contributions. First, they contribute to economic sociology—and consumption theory specifically—by opening up new space for exploring consumption processes internal to consumption groups, including how group structures, interpersonal relations, cultural schema of nonpecuniary valuation, and dynamics of social interactions affect decisions about the allocation of resources, selection, acquisition, or use of consumption objects. Second, budgetary units contribute to organizational theory more broadly by introducing consumption-oriented groups as an overlooked organizational form that may challenge and refine our understanding of canonical organizational outcomes, such as organizational collapse, thereby further illuminating the mechanics of organizational change and the boundary conditions of existing theories. Finally, budgetary units also put these two theoretical contributions into conversation, enabling a new set of questions about how the internal characteristics and the distinct positioning of budgetary units vis-à-vis their consumption environment affect organizational change outcomes. The article examines Weber's original theorizing on budgetary units, extends Weber's theory, and then applies budgetary units to examine how the conceptual framework can generate new insights and resolve theoretical inconsistencies in four empirical cases. The article concludes by suggesting how future empirical research might further extend and apply the concept in a variety of sociological domains.

#### CONSUMPTION AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

Present conceptualizations of consumption as a social phenomenon suffer from four interrelated problems. First, consumption theories assume individuals, rather than groups, are the locus of consumption. This misses sociological processes and patterns at the group level. Second, conceptions privilege market spaces and actions to the neglect of broader processes of consumption. Third, analysis of the motives and effects of consumption focuses too heavily on meaning and symbolism, to the exclusion of broader categories of usefulness. Finally, most theorists are too concerned with strangers as the audience motivating consumption and therefore miss how social intimates structure consumption.

## Weberian Approach to Consumption

Weber's budgetary units help scholars rethink consumption by orienting analysis on groups. This reframing incorporates evidence of the power of familiar social relations, shifts focus from acts of purchase to activities of consumption, highlights ignored questions about the apportionment of resources across genres of consumption, and begins to identify the structures of social organization that shape consumption.

### The Individual and the Market in Consumption Theory

Since the 1950s, studies of consumption have taken one of three forms, all of which downplay concrete social units. First, explicit consumption research emerged in the 1950s with an applied and behavioral focus on the pragmatics of selling, wedded to psychology's individualist frame (Belk 1995). A second, more theoretical strain of research emphasized the exploitative, stratifying, and wasteful nature of consumption (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2000; Belk 1995; Miller 1995; Stearns 2001). This perspective focused on an aggregate "consumer culture" associating commodification with modernity (Slater 1997; Benjamin 2002; Arnould and Thompson 2005). These theories took society as the unit of analysis and focused on aggregate—and mostly negative—effects of consumption: the creation of an "exploitative, alienating, modern, capitalist culture, and regarded as embodying selfish, dehumanizing and materialist values" (Campbell 1995).

In response, a third wave of research emerged in which mostly ethnographic studies identified consumer subcultures constructed around objects of fashion, music, literature, or vehicles, in which consumers were active agents (Moorhouse 1991; Radway 1991; Hebdige 2000; O'Guinn 2000). Instead of manipulated dupes of capitalism, consumers creatively repurposed objects to craft meanings in resistance to elitist, dominant culture (Campbell 1995; Kates 2002; Kozinets 2002). In reclaiming the agency of social actors, this countermovement further ensconced the individual as the locus of consumption and symbolism as the core focus of consumption.

Swinging from *individual pragmatic* to *macroexploitative* to *individual empowered* bypassed the middle-range organization of consumption. The residual focus on the individual has also left researchers overly concerned with retail environments as the sites where individuals gather for consumption activities. The retail focus is present in early roots in consumption theory (Benjamin 2002) and is still reflected today in studies of "consumer spaces" (Miller 1981; Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Humphery 1998; Johnston 2008). This orientation privileges purchasing (as the nexus between production and consumption) over consumption—the uses and experiences derived by the consuming unit.

Economists following the work of Gary Becker (1973, 1974) have examined individual consumption interests within families. Household bar-

gaining models focus on the relative point at which a marriage partner would dissolve the relationship because marriage was no longer more beneficial than alternatives. Scholars assert this “threat point” determines each member’s relative power over the composition of goods (McElroy 1990). The “separate spheres” approach (Lundberg and Pollak 1993) modifies household bargaining theory by suggesting that, before divorce, the “threat point” in relationships is a retreat to mutually exclusive domains of authority over consumption based on culturally idealized gender roles—for example, women have authority over children’s toys and kitchen tools, men over cars and lawn mowers.

However, these models are based on several core assumptions that make them poor foundations for application to a broader category of consumption units. First, household bargaining models assume that the family has an infinitely pliable set of potential consumption options, constrained only by finances. However, the family is an extreme case of multifocality in consumption. Typically, social groups provide a more limited range of consumption opportunities: a golf club provides golf, a babysitting co-op provides childcare. Second, the family-marriage model assumes membership is mutually exclusive (McElroy 1990): it does not allow for membership in multiple simultaneous groups. Though exclusivity reflects Western marriage laws, this assumption does not apply to consumption units broadly. Finally, it is sociologically difficult to accept the unproblematic assertion of a singular schema for gender roles, but it is nearly impossible to conceive of how such a widely shared model might be found for every instance of socially organized consumption. Serious variations in availability of functional alternatives, a paucity of schemas analogous to hegemonic “gender roles,” combined with a narrower range of consumption outcomes for each group and the possibility of multiple memberships theoretically reduces the efficacy of these approaches for understanding socially organized consumption more broadly.

### Symbols, Meanings, Status, and Identities

Cultural studies of consumption are deeply interested in the symbolic content of consumption (Zukin and Maguire 2004). Within consumption theory, Baudrillard popularized an approach that detached the commodity sign from the commodity manifest ([1969] 2000). Baudrillard argued a consumption object exists only when the object is freed from cognitive schemata of use to become pure sign and situated in a field of signs, making the sign capable of discriminating. Subsequent work popularized this perspective (Featherstone 1991), and even among theorists not consciously postmodern, theory came to focus on consumption as “a symbolic rather than an instrumental activity” (Campbell 1995, p. 98).

## Weberian Approach to Consumption

The foremost signals that consumption goods convey include meanings about status and identities, including racial, national, gender, and age-related identities (Belk 1988; Lamont and Molnar 2001; Pugh 2005). The connection between consumption and status has august theoretical roots; both Bourdieu (1984) and Veblen ([1899] 1912) are centrally concerned with questions of status. Both theorists conceive of status as a scarce resource in a hierarchical system in which individuals compete to acquire “high” status.

However, in reacting to an earlier body of work, conceptions of consumption have gone too far in the opposite direction, and broader usefulness has been theoretically reduced to status. This is a problem because interest in status has tended, in turn, to limit thinking about the consumer’s socialness to how purchased goods enable her to signal identity cues to undifferentiated social strangers—she drives a restyled Italian Vespa; therefore, strangers on the street know she is a “Mod” (Hebdige 2000). Discussions of social community within this brand and status conception of consumption focus on consumption objects as the nexus of community, rather than community as the nexus of consumption. Thus, analysis of tangible social interactions address “*temporary* consumption communities” (Arnould and Thompson 2005, p. 874; emphasis added)—such as participants at Burning Man Festival (Kozinets 2002) or mountain men re-enactors (Belk and Costa 1998)—or “brand communities” of those presumed to be bonded by concurrent consumption of brands like Apple computers or Harley-Davidson motorcycles (Cova 1997; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002).

An interest in meanings has led researchers to control for other forms of heterogeneity and, therefore, often to reduce analysis of decision making to trade-offs within categories of functional equivalents, for example, among kinds of wines (Benjamin and Podolny 1999) or motorscooters (Hebdige 2000). Presently, the consumption literature cannot account for variation in choices among functional nonequivalents because it has taken the consumption object as the object of study, rather than the consuming social unit. But before such specific application of resources can take place, consumers make critical decisions about the apportionment of resources among the universe of needs and wants collectively confronting a group.

I do not mean to suggest that meaning and status are not relevant outcomes of consumption. But I want to reclaim interest in usefulness as a broader category that has been too quickly tossed aside in our zeal for meaning and the sign values of objects. Reclaiming broader usefulness is important, in part, because how people make decisions about objects that are valued apart from their display value is empirically significant and an appreciable proportion of economic activity. Viewed from the perspective of a social group confronting countless nonequivalent potential consumption choices, usefulness is a powerful consideration: a golf club interested in

the quality of greens may consider consuming Zoysia grass or bentgrass but likely not diapers.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the field has been overly focused on the sociality of consumption—evaluating the symbolic power of purchases on strangers and acquaintances. The literature in general has therefore often overlooked the deeper socialness of consumption—the ways consumption decisions are undertaken within social units that determine—through influence, negotiation, permission, or acquiescence—the consumption possibilities for any individual. The vast majority of consumers only appear atomistic and autonomous. A large proportion of consumption acts are socially situated, entangled not only in relational structures but in formal and informal rules, logics, systems of meaning, shared resources, contestation, and negotiation with which collectives of individuals organize their consumption activity.

### Consumption in Weber's Corpus

Consumption theory draws from classical theorists. Marx and Durkheim are associated with the exploitative, alienating, asocial side of consumption (Campbell 1995; Slater 1997), and Simmel with the positive and empowered perspective (Simmel 1957; Zukin and Maguire 2004). Weber contributed through two works. Weber's (1930) analysis of protestant consumption is a touchstone for scholars evoking the hedonistic aspects of consumption (Zukin and Maguire 2004). Theorists of "consumption identities" use Weber's "status groups": groups of individuals within a larger group who successfully claim particular esteem, formed around lifestyle, heredity, and occupation (Weber 1978, p. 306). Yet Weber's most powerful and explicit contribution to sociology of consumption is his forgotten work on budgetary units. Revisiting this neglected aspect of Weber's work holds the promise for creating new directions for consumption research and correcting existing shortcomings in consumption theory.

Budgetary units are the culmination of a theoretical interest—how social logics underpin collective resource management in social units—present from Weber's earliest work. His 1889 dissertation examined the importance of legal and social logics in the budgetary management of familial resources, particularly land and gains from land (Weber 2003). Similarly, the central causal mechanism for the development of capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic* focused on how religious logics shaped the allocation and

<sup>2</sup> The significance of usefulness is opaque in the classic market perspective, where "market" is defined by functionally equivalent or "substitutable" goods. Thus defined, the usefulness of diapers qua diapers pales next to price competition or brand loyalty for explaining choices within the "market." This diminution of usefulness is an artifact of the definition.

accumulation of wealth within Protestant families (Weber [1930] 1992). In both works, Weber examined how social units manage resources in particular ways, employing social logics to negotiate present and future consumption needs. In other words, both focus on the role of budgetary units in historical transformations; however, Weber's most extensive and explicit theorizing on budgetary units appears in *Economy and Society*.

The part of *Economy and Society* focused on budgetary units was among the last writing Weber completed before his death. *Economy and Society* began as part of a larger textbook project titled *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik*. In 1908 Weber agreed to edit the textbook, with chapters written by him and other well-known social scientists (Swedberg and Agevall 2005). The project was not completed in his lifetime. Thus, the majority of *Economy and Society* is composed of notes found in Weber's desk after his death, written between 1909 and 1914 and posthumously compiled (Mommssen 2000).

The first four chapters, written as an introduction, are the only manuscripts Weber brought to the publisher, suggesting he considered them finished. Moreover, these introductory chapters were written after the notes that comprise the body of *Economy and Society* and therefore capture the most recent changes in Weber's thinking before his death. These four chapters—including the chapter where budgetary units appear—differ from former drafts by displaying “a systematic presentation of different types of social conduct . . . by employing combinations of ideal-types, which often are arranged in such a way as to represent diametrically opposed positions” (Mommssen 2000, p. 382). The budgetary unit plays a critical role in such a conceptual scheme: Weber presents budgetary units as diametrically opposed to capitalist firms.

Although subsequently neglected by most scholars, budgetary units are not a trivial element of Weber's work. In Weber's introduction, he accords the distinction between budgetary units and capitalist enterprises historical causal significance: “This distinction between private resources and capital, between the budgetary unit and the profit-making enterprise, is of far-reaching importance. In particular, without it, it is impossible to understand the economic development of the ancient world and the limitations on the development of capitalism in those times” (Weber 1978, p. 98).

Likely, budgetary units were overlooked in subsequent analyses of Max Weber's work because contemporary scholars are not familiar with the sections in which it appears. The majority of subsequent scholarship relied on “Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology” (Swedberg 2003), which ends before the section addressing budgetary units.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>The terms “budgetary unit” or “budgetary management” occur 64 times in *Economy and Society* between the first mention on page 87 and the last on page 196.

BUDGETARY UNITS: A WEBERIAN APPROACH TO CONSUMPTION

Weber's "budgetary unit" concept offers a framework for comparative analysis of diverse social collectives oriented to consumption. In contrast to individualistic conceptions of consumption, Weber is explicitly collective. Weber defines the budgetary unit as any economic organization primarily concerned with the satisfaction of needs and wants (Weber 1978).<sup>4</sup> Budgetary units, like capitalist enterprises, have both income and expenditures. Budgetary units may derive income from labor (p. 97), loans (pp. 96, 159), trading (p. 143), investments (pp. 134, 139), or production (p. 87). However, these income activities are primarily concerned with satisfying present and future consumption. A budgetary unit is thus animated by non-pecuniary, social logics, in contrast to capitalist enterprises dominated by rational, calculated, profit seeking. Ultimately, Weber argues consumption is constituted by patterned social collectives, which are conceptually antithetical to capitalist enterprises, but just as analytically rich. He writes, "The satisfaction of needs is not something more 'primitive' than profit seeking; 'wealth' is not necessarily a more primitive category than capital; 'income,' than profit" (p. 90).

Examination of Weber's original terminology can provide additional clarification on conceptual definition of "budgetary unit." The translator's note clarifies the English translation: "The concept *Haushalt*, as distinguished from *Erwerb*, is central to Weber's analysis in this context. He means by it essentially what Aristotle meant by the 'management of a household' . . . the rational allocation of resources in providing for a given set of needs" (1978, p. 207).

At times Weber contrasts the budgetary unit with "*vermögens (bzw. Kapitals)*" or capital assets (Weber and Winckelmann 1980, p. 126). Elsewhere Weber contrasts it with the bureau, as in "*trennung des 'bureau' von 'haushalt' (der Mitglieder)*" (p. 165). Weber's use of "members" (*mitglieder*) implies a considerably different vision of the relationship of individuals to the social unit than is embodied in that of a customer to a retailer in a market exchange. Just as the "bureau" is composed of the body of officials, material apparatuses, and files (p. 957), the budgetary unit is composed of members and shared resources.

Weber also implies a certain coterminality of place (*stätte*) and historical contingency, as when Weber notes the historical change whereby collective production and consumption came to occupy distinct places (Weber and

<sup>4</sup>Sociology of consumption has illuminated the social construction of "needs" as distinct from "wants" (Campbell 1998; Schor and Holt 2000). Weber uses both the satisfaction of wants (p. 87) and needs (p. 89) but notes that wants are constructed, historically contingent, and influenced by advertising (pp. 99–100). Hereafter, stand-alone page citations are from *Economy and Society* (Weber 1978) unless otherwise noted.

Winckelmann 1980, p. 226). Weber argues production and consumption historically occurred in the same social unit and location. As the two processes increasingly occupied distinct sociospatial domains, distinct processes of reasoning and organizing came to characterize the two, each with a distinct ethos and technical processes. Weber saw this historical disentangling had so progressed that by his time the two were not only distinct but conceptually antithetical.

Budgetary units and capitalist enterprises are subtypes of acquisitive activity—arguably Weber sees them as the primary subtypes cleaving the modern economic sphere. Under the broad umbrella of acquisitive activity (*Erwerbstätigkeit*), acquisition for consumption (even deferred consumption) belongs to the category of budgetary units. Weber makes a more precise distinction between acquisitive activity in general, and the specific subset of profit-making enterprises (*Erwerbsbetrieb*): “Anyone is engaged in acquisitive activity so far as he seeks, among other things, in given ways to acquire goods—money or others—which he does not yet possess. . . . But the term ‘profit-making enterprise’ will be confined to those types of acquisitive activity which are continually oriented to market advantages, using goods as a means to secure profit either (a) through the production and sale of goods in demand, or (b) through the offer of services in demand in exchange for money” (p. 99).

Weber lays out a specific tripartite test for distinguishing the profit-making enterprise subtype. To be capitalistic, economic activity must be (1) rational, (2) calculated, and (3) oriented toward securing profit through market advantages. A venture failing to meet any of these conditions is not categorized as a profit-seeking enterprise. In contrast to capitalist enterprises, where rational calculation partly defines the category—embedded in its ethos and technical processes—budgetary units *may* be rational or calculating.<sup>5</sup> Budgetary units may be oriented to maximizing “the marginal utility of money holdings” for consumption (p. 109)—but the presence or absence of rationality is not a defining characteristic. This is evident in Weber’s example of “the trade engaged in by an *oikos*, like that of the Pharaohs” (p. 155), categorized as neither budgetary unit nor capitalist

<sup>5</sup> If rationality is conceived as the classical *Homo economicus*, (maximizing material self-interest, with consistent preferences, no temporal biases and unfettered cognitive capacity to pursue methodical evaluation among a known set of options), then most budgetary units are nonrational. However, since the peak of rationality debates in sociology, economic approaches have become more malleable, incorporating the most robust criticisms. If rational choice models admit such flexibility to their core assumptions, then this is more a question of empirical support than of theoretical compatibility. The more standard assumptions of rationality are relaxed, the more the question of rationality in budgetary units becomes a question of whether socially situated consumption behavior can be adequately modeled using parsimonious mathematical techniques, within an acceptable margin of error.

enterprise. The economic activity's orientation is the foremost consideration: the *oikos* is not a budgetary unit because it is "not concerned solely with provision for need" but rather acts "as one oriented to profit" (p. 155). Next, Weber concludes the *oikos* is not a capitalist enterprise because it lacks capital accounting and thereby rational calculability. This illustrates the specificity of Weber's definition of a capitalist firm in both orientation (production for profit) and practices (accounting for rationality), whereas budgetary units are defined primarily by an orientation to the provision of needs.

### The Orientation to Consumption

Though both budgetary units and enterprises have income and expenditures, Weber argues they should be distinguished because their economic actions have antithetical orientations: "The administration of budgetary 'wealth' and profit making enterprises may be outwardly so similar as to appear identical. They are in fact in the analysis only distinguishable in terms of the difference in meaningful orientation of the corresponding economic activities. In the one case, it is oriented to maintaining and improving profitability and the market position of the enterprise; in the other, to the security and increase of wealth and income" (p. 98; emphasis added).

Weber defines budgetary units as social collectives that are "oriented to" consumption. Yet "orientation" is conceptually underspecified by Weber and remains an understudied topic (Swedberg 2007).<sup>6</sup> I suggest an orientation exists inasmuch as actors take account of particular ends, means, or social others in the course of forming understanding and making choices. The most basic is the orientation to others (broadly), which Weber argues distinguishes meaningful social action—the purview of sociology—from purely instinctual responses: "Action is social insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course" (p. 4).

An *orientation to consumption* focuses action on the satisfaction of the needs and wants of budgetary unit members. It is simultaneously an orientation for acquisitive activity (*Erwerbstätigkeit*), and a social orientation to members (*mitglieder*). An orientation to consumption is present inasmuch as the social unit evidences time, attention, and artifacts of collective organizing (e.g., rules) focused on consumption. An orientation must be manifest in social action, but it need not be either (1) the espoused "pur-

<sup>6</sup> For a recent use of "orientation" see Knorr Cetina and Bruegger (2002), who leverage "orientation to a common object" in the development of a theory of global microstructures.

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pose” or “identity” of the organization or its members, nor (2) the motivation for organizing (“genesis”).<sup>7</sup>

Weber distinguishes between organizations oriented to “fiscal” versus “substantive ends” (p. 123). Weber argues being oriented to “substantive ends” leads social collectives to make different decisions than organizations orientated to profit. Weber contends this is the chief reason why the operations of enterprises should be differentiated from the personal funds of entrepreneurs: “from the point of view of the business interest, the interest in maintaining the private wealth of the owner is often irrational, as is his interest in income receipts at any given time from the point of view of the profitability of the enterprise” (p. 98). Here Weber recognizes, empirically, profit and consumption orientations may be copresent in an organization, evidenced by the entrepreneur whose interest in immediate income for consumption competes with the enterprise’s interest in maximizing ongoing profitability. However, Weber maintains the conceptual clarity between the ideal-typical orientations, arguing they are inimical such that what is logical within one is “irrational” to the other. In Weberian sociology, such ideal-typical clarity is critical for identifying more complicated combinations in empirical cases.

In distinguishing the fiscal and the substantive, the profit- and consumption-orientations, Weber leverages Aristotle’s (1885, p. 12) observation that moneymaking is “instrumental” for households and subordinate to providing for household needs. The reverse is true for enterprises, where material inputs are subordinate to the production of profit. Here Weber, uncharacteristically, is consonant with Marx, who writes, “In the first place, no capitalist produces in order to consume his product” (1978, p. 445).<sup>8</sup> The

<sup>7</sup> Swedberg calls this “the habitus question” of Weberian sociology, that “the meaning that actors ascribe to what they do is to some extent always dependent on their background” (2007, p. 1042). The habitus question complicates relying on subjects’ espoused meaning. Available frameworks for subjects to draw on to make sense of their action and express it with labels tend to have very specific and value-laden folk meanings for “consumption,” which differ significantly from the academic definition. Yogis living in a commune sharing ayurvedic meals would observably meet the definition of a budgetary unit sharing consumption, yet the individuals might not use the label “consumption” because of inimical folk meanings.

<sup>8</sup> Another way of expressing this distinction, with which Weber was likely familiar, is through Marx’s writing on use-value and exchange-value. Marx’s use-value is “the satisfaction of any system whatever of human needs” (2005, p. 881) and is determined by the good’s material properties and the social context. In Marx’s language, budgetary units are concerned primarily with use-values, whereas capitalists are concerned primarily with exchange-values. Capitalists are only indirectly interested in use-values, as Marx notes: “Use-value is, by no means, the thing ‘qu’on aime pour lui-même’ in the production of commodities. Use-values are only produced by capitalists, because, and

sentiment would be echoed again in the 20th century by John Maynard Keynes, who noted the critical distinction between “the love of money as a possession” and “the love of money as a means to the enjoyments and realities of life” ([1930] 1963, pp. 369–70). The instrumental nature of income for budgetary units is in tension with capitalist enterprises’ orientation to moneymaking as *raison d’être*.<sup>9</sup>

A capitalistic economic unit is a golem, animated by organizational survival, increase, and perpetuation apart from the material outcomes for any particular humans who comprise the organization. From the perspective of capitalism, these are all “‘outside interests’ those which are not primarily oriented to the long-run profitability of the enterprise. This may be true of any kind of budgetary ‘wealth’ interests” (p. 139). Capitalist, profit-seeking production units are oriented toward production for profit qua profit. They consume inasmuch as they need inputs for the further production of profit. By contrast, budgetary units are primarily oriented toward acquisition of resources to satisfy members’ present or future consumption needs.

Weber further clarifies the analytical and empirical distinction between capitalist enterprise and budgetary management by giving the examples of a consumers’ cooperative and an individual entrepreneur, employing these cases to highlight the importance of the animating orientation. The business of a consumers’ cooperative, for instance, “is normally oriented to the economic provision for wants, but in the *form of its activity* it is a ‘profit-making organization’ without being oriented to profit” (p. 90; emphasis added). For the individual, further, “the two elements may be so intimately intertwined, and in the past have typically been so, that only the concluding act—namely, the sale or the consumption of a product—can serve as the basis for interpreting the meaning of the action” (p. 90). The consumer’s co-op may resemble a retail environment, and its actions may include production as a social activity, but the co-op remains a budgetary unit inasmuch as it is oriented to providing consumption for its members.

This example has important implications. First, groups should be categorized as budgetary units because they are oriented to provide for members’ consumption, not on the particulars of how they secure funds. Second, budgetary units may produce for their own consumption. Third, although budgetary units may typically display different technical processes

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insofar as, they are the material substratum, the depositaries of exchange-value” (Marx 1906, p. 207).

<sup>9</sup>Instrumental moneymaking in budgetary units recalls Weber’s explanation of why piece rates fail to increase worker productivity among “traditional” workers (Weber [1930] 1992).

and organizational forms than capitalist enterprises, exceptions and hybridizations exist.<sup>10</sup>

### Technical Processes

Weber's writing on technical processes of budgetary units is less explicit than his writing on the orientation to consumption. Weber asserts that the technical processes of budgetary units differ from those of capitalist enterprises, yet he does not provide a neat listing of the ideal-typical features of budgetary units, as he does in his famous conceptualizations of firms or bureaucracies. The totality of Weber's writing on budgetary units suggests he believes variations in technical processes, together with the distinct orientation, affect how collectives make decisions and respond to their environment. Weber is most explicit in his writing on how prototypical technical processes constrain the practice of rationality within budgetary units.

Weber's thinking on the technical processes of budgetary units may be understood primarily through his work on in-kind accounting: "Calculation in kind is in its essence oriented to consumption, the satisfaction of wants" (p. 101). Weber sees the varied and nonuniform character of material goods as the primary challenge of in-kind calculation. Only in instances of homogenous commodities "is it possible to use numerical terms unambiguously and without a wholly subjective valuation" (p. 101). Here Weber highlights an important source of variation among budgetary units with implications for technical processes and rationality: the extent to which they are organized to provide a single, relatively homogenous consumption good (unifocal) or, at the other extreme, multiple and nonhomogeneous goods (multifocal).

Where the primary orientation is to profit, organizations can compare different processes, inputs, and products "by making a calculation of comparative profitability in terms of money costs. For accounting in kind, on the other hand, there are formidable problems involved here which are

<sup>10</sup> Weber alludes to but does not articulate how hybridizations between profit and consumption orientation manifest. Working from Weber's examples, several possibilities for hybridization emerge. Weber evokes a patchwork hybridity in his example of Fordist workers' kitchens (or Google with its sumptuous free food and entertainment). In patchwork hybridity, both consumption and profit orientations exist but are unevenly distributed such that the orientations predominate in different parts of a formal organization. We might hypothesize that Google's sales team is largely profit oriented and Google's "Workplace Services Team" is largely consumption oriented. Alternately, organizations (or decisions) can blend profit and consumption orientations. For example, a family buying a new home balances consumption-oriented considerations of personal idiosyncratic comfort and aesthetic preferences against market-based considerations of the home's probable resale value.

incapable of objective solution” (p. 102). Enterprises can identify areas for cost saving and reallocate resources by accounting for costs and returns all in monetary units. But the same choices about the allocation of resources “are exceedingly difficult to do . . . entirely in terms of an in-kind calculation” (p. 102).

The central difficulty is that for consumption there is no equivalent metric to price or profit: “In order to make possible a rational utilization of the means of production, a system of in-kind accounting would have to determine ‘value’ indicators of some kind for the individual capital goods which could take over the role of the ‘prices’ used in book valuation in modern business accounting” (p. 103). Weber believes this inability to make rational, objective decisions about the allocation of resources is a technically intractable problem: “This, one may believe, is not a matter of circumstances which could be over come by technical improvements in the methods of calculation, but of fundamental limitations, which make really exact accounting in terms of calculations in kind impossible in principle” (p. 102). Broadly, Weber argues the process of accounting in physical units rather than fungible “rational” money is technically challenging. Moreover, compared to capitalist production for profit, consumption is characterized by less determinate “wants” and more heterogeneous uses, which pose technical problems for calculating estimates of comparative “utility” among choices (p. 88).

Beyond Weber’s explicit theoretical contributions, the examples employed throughout his writing on budgetary units—a landed lord’s estate, housing and eating facilities within an enterprise, the family household (p. 89)—reveal several things about budgetary units that Weber fails to articulate. First, in contrast to present conceptions of consumption, Weber focused on concrete *social units* rather than individuals. Second, these units are composed of individuals who are typically familiar to each other, not strangers. Third, as implied by the term “members,” the examples all represent relatively durable social collectives, rather than fleeting gatherings. Finally, the examples suggest budgetary units have discernible boundaries, though Weber does not articulate precise boundary conditions. Ultimately, the foundational assertion of Weber’s writing on budgetary units is this: the orientation to acquisition for consumption is coconstitutive with distinct technical processes and organizational features that render social organization and choice in the area of consumption distinct from organization for profit-oriented production and market sale.

#### WEBER EXTENDED

Weber provides a fruitful concept for contemporary sociology, but several aspects require further definition to avoid conceptual confusion. I first

build on Weber by articulating a more specific definition of budgetary units and consumption. I then expand on Weber's arguments in three broad directions: boundaries, consumption ethos, and technical processes.

### Clarifying Definitions

I define consumption as the process of selecting, acquiring, and using goods, services, or experiences for the purposes of receiving nonpecuniary benefits from their possession or expenditure. Thus, not every act of "use" is an act of consumption (obviously excluded are objects used in production for eventual sale) and not every "purchaser" is a consumer. For example, in the recent financial meltdown, organizations that purchased mortgage-backed securities were oriented to producing profit through market advantages, even if they spectacularly failed at that goal. The purchase was not consumption because it was not oriented to deriving nonpecuniary benefit.

I argue that a Weberian approach to "ethos" and "orientation" does not require scholars to ask subjects about their subjective meanings to define a case as a budgetary unit. Meaning matters inasmuch as it is consequential for observable social action, an orientation made manifest. Thus, a Weberian approach calls for discerning analytically significant orientations that are manifest in the sequential unfolding of social action. For consumption, this includes how subjects make decisions about, evaluate, procure, and use objects. Consider the purchase of stock in a sports franchise. An organization oriented to market advantage—for example, a mutual fund—that considers this an act of investment for financial gain might examine price-to-equity ratio or dividend levels relative to reinvestments. However, if a group—like a fan club—wants to purchase stock because they delight in its possession apart from financial gain, and if that difference in the meaning of that item causes the club to follow a different decision-making process, proceed differently in acquiring that object, or use the item differently, then the meaning was *observably consequential*.<sup>11</sup> Thus, budgetary units exist where actions show collective time, attention, and organizational artifacts focused on the process of selecting, acquiring, and using goods, services, or experiences to receive primarily nonpecuniary benefits.

<sup>11</sup>Indeed, stock recently issued by the Green Bay Packers, the only publicly owned American football team, explicitly has no financial value and may not be sold or transferred. The official notification cautions, "Anyone considering the purchase of Packers stock should not purchase the stock to make a profit or to receive a dividend or tax deduction or any other economic benefits" (Green Bay Packers 2011).

## Boundaries

Weber's approach contextualizes economic choices in relatively durable social units. But Weber leaves unresolved what delimits the boundaries of any given budgetary unit. Budgetary units are not coterminous with physical buildings—residential dwellings, departmental offices, and so forth—nor with any particular configuration of biological relations. Neither is it necessary for a budgetary unit to produce a formal accounting budget; many families, a prototypical budgetary unit, do not produce such an economic artifact.

I suggest the distribution of authority defines the boundaries of the budgetary unit: a cluster of individuals with some form of shared consumption, including those who solely or jointly exercise authority over their consumption (e.g., parents) and those whose authority over consumption is abdicated to the former (e.g., children).<sup>12</sup> Thus, any budgetary unit has a knowable and finite conglomeration of members, while an individual may belong to multiple budgetary units. The boundary also involves recognition of mutual interest and the extent to which actors make decisions that consider the effects on specific others (“orientation to members”).

## Consumption Ethos

The consumption “ethos” is the observable manifestation of an orientation to consumption.<sup>13</sup> Scholars argue Weber's use of “ethos” has cognitive overtones, implying a disposition (*Gesinnung*), spirit (*Geist*), and Weberian habitus, or “a disposition to behave and view the world in a particular and distinctive manner” (Swedberg and Agevall 2005, p. 109). Thus, a Weberian consumption ethos captures characteristic tendencies to perceive the world, think, decide, act, and appear in characteristic and distinctive ways that are driven by an orientation to consumption.<sup>14</sup>

Just as a “bureaucratic ethos” marks a bureaucratic organization, the consumption ethos marks and distinguishes budgetary units. In particular, the consumption ethos distinguishes budgetary units from the capitalist market ethos. Therefore, I examine how a consumption ethos differs from production and profit-based ethos to clarify theoretically why and where the application of a market model will incorrectly specify outcomes for budgetary units.

<sup>12</sup> This definition is crafted in Weberian “ideal-typical” style, recognizing relationships in practice are more complicated. For example, although children do not typically exercise “authority,” they are not powerless in consumption (Schor 2004; Pugh 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Weber applies the concept of “ethos” widely: in *Economy and Society*, Weber writes of nine kinds of ethos (pp. 1050–404).

<sup>14</sup> I use “logics” to refer to the thinking, evaluating, and deciding components of an ethos. Logics may exist at different levels of scale and specificity such that the consumption ethos broadly encompasses a number of different logics.

*Utility and shared consumption.*—The consumption ethos is distinct from a profit-oriented market ethos, with implications for canonical organizational outcomes. In this section I elaborate on the consumption ethos and its divergences from the capitalist ethos to establish the budgetary unit as a distinct object worthy of sociological inquiry, and to delineate resources and threats particular to budgetary units.

Consumption-oriented budgetary units explicitly violate canonical assumptions of markets, undermining the ability of market-based organizational models to explain behavior in budgetary units. The canonical assumptions of neoclassical economic theory are that market actors are rational, self-interested, and self-acting (or atomistic), with exogenous tastes.<sup>15</sup> These assumptions imply that interpersonal utility is impossible to model (England and Budig 1998). In contrast to these market axioms, the consumption ethos of budgetary units is characterized by collective orientation, shared benefits, and multiple rationalities.

Budgetary units perceive, evaluate, and make choices based on consumption rather than profit logics. In economic theory “utility” is a reified, quantified value supposed to index desire and subsequent satisfaction. The analytical construct of “utility” attempts to be for consumption what price is to capitalist production units, yet Weber states clearly that price has no true analogue in consumption. “Utility” may be an analytically helpful construct, but that should not be confused with suggesting it appears in an empirical form that mirrors the analytical construct. In the lived practice of budgetary units, no singular “utility” with discrete, standardized units exists. Rather we find Weber’s asserted less determinate wants and more heterogeneous uses. There are multiple, potentially conflicting, benefits and logics of usefulness: multiple members, with various desires for different objects, and various uses, outcomes, or functions of any given object. Unlike capitalist production—where goals may be subsumed hierarchically within the master goal of profit (indeed, derived from it)—the multiple logics of usefulness in the budgetary unit are copresent but not stably ordered because they are not derivative of a single concrete master “utility.”

Moreover, budgetary units have some degree of collective consumption and therefore shared benefits. By contrast, exchange is the central interpersonal action of capitalist production, driving many theoretical implications of market-based models. Where exchange is less relevant as a mode of interaction, market-based theories have less explanatory power. The central action of typical budgetary units is sharing—although certainly exchange also occurs. A household shares the shelter of a home, an equestrian club shares horses, and Russian gangsters share burlesque entertainment smug-

<sup>15</sup> Scholars question whether even capitalist markets are composed of fully independent actors.

gled into a gulag. This does not imply a naive vision of social collectives devoid of power imbalances. Rather, it suggests shared benefits and usefulness—however unequal the power in selection, however uneven the distribution of benefits—should be considered a modal outcome in budgetary units. Where exchange and profit matter, classical economic theory suggests organizational fates respond to economic pressures of supply, demand, and competition. Therefore, inasmuch as sharing—not exchange and competition—is the central activity of budgetary units, I hypothesize that standard explanations of supply, demand, and interorganizational competition will have less explanatory power for change in budgetary units. This idea is explored in the empirical section by examining one of the more extreme manifestations of organizational change—organizational demise—through the historical cases of Russian gangsters and an order of Catholic nuns.

#### Addressing the Social Costs of Shared Consumption

*Idiologics.*—Sharing consumption and resolving multiple conflicting logics produces social tensions. The strategies that budgetary units employ to address those tensions partly comprise the consumption ethos. For example, budgetary units in diverse settings tend to craft “idiologics” or particular narratives that actors in budgetary units express about how justly consumption is distributed. Such idiologics are a manifestation of Weber’s substantive rationality, which concerns the justness of distribution (of which variations on “equality” are but a subset). The justness of distribution is an observably consequential adjudication that social actors make in context. Though the content of justifying idiologics is particular to a budgetary unit, the practice of constructing and attempting to maintain some justifying narrative is a more general feature of budgetary units and the consumption ethos. For example, families, however unequal their observable consumption, tend to express idiologics about the justness of the distribution of contributions and consumption in the budgetary unit (e.g., Hochschild 1989). This feature of the consumption ethos specifies a concrete hazard for organizational demise: the budgetary unit’s organizational survival is threatened by challenges to either (1) the ability to share consumption or (2) maintain the idiologics of just distribution and threaten the budgetary unit’s organizational survival. These two ideas will be explored in the empirical section with application to Russian gangsters, Catholic nuns, and low-income child support.

*Orientation to members.*—Another way budgetary units mitigate tensions of managing shared consumption and reconciling multiple, sometimes conflicting desires for consumption is through their characteristic “orientation to members.” This Weberian orientation invokes mutual regard: the extent to which actors make decisions that consider the effects on other

members.<sup>16</sup> Here I elaborate on the idea, implicit in some of Weber's writing, that budgetary units are composed of individuals who are typically known to each other, not strangers. Interpersonal familiarity, cultivated through face-to-face contact, is one particular, widely present manifestation of the orientation to members.<sup>17</sup> Familiarity may be a common manifestation because of a Weberian "elective affinity" between familiarity and the consumption orientation: within a budgetary unit, familiarity benefits the consumption orientation, and sharing consumption likewise increases familiarity.<sup>18</sup> The more actors expect repeated interactions in the future, have a history of interactions in the past, and are not "lost in a sea of anonymous others," the more likely the emergence of other-regarding behaviors (Coleman 1991). Familiarity facilitates mutual regard and intersubjective orientation, an understanding of and accounting for the needs of others in the budgetary unit. This allows "skilled" social action whereby actors are better able to provide others with reasons to cooperate (Fligstein 2001), creating an environment where actors derive greater personal benefit where there is collective benefit. Actors so situated "behave more or less with the opposite motivations of rational actors who are narrowly pursuing their interests and goals in some contest with others" (p. 113).

Large-scale budgetary units are not excluded from Weber's theoretical definition of budgetary units, yet large-scale cases appear to be rare. States are the foremost contemporary example. Weber, following Aristotle, regarded states as organizations whose "acquisitive activity" (*Erwerbstätigkeit*) was primarily oriented to satisfying the needs and wants of members and therefore as budgetary units (Weber 1978, p. 89). The welfare state literature observes that states utilize modern bureaucracy as "a means for managing collective goods" (Esping-Andersen 1990). I would hypothesize the far more bureaucratized (formalized, hierarchical, reliant on explicit rules, and codified categories) organization of states will condition how states manifest the consumption ethos and deal with challenges to sharing consumption. However, even with bureaucracy, it is difficult to achieve consensus around

<sup>16</sup> Recent research suggests potential synthesis between rationality and an orientation to members. When actors incorporate the utility curves of others into their own utility curve, outcomes more closely approach Pareto optimal results (Tao 2010). Better understanding of budgetary units may thereby help researchers understand the conditions under which individuals consider the preferences and outcomes of particular others.

<sup>17</sup> Familiarity within small-scale units is a common feature of contemporary budgetary units but not a theoretical requirement. It remains an open question whether the same is true elsewhere or in different historical epochs.

<sup>18</sup> An elective affinity is an attraction between two structural or ideological features, generally resulting from shared historical causal conditions or common conditions of operation. For example, Weber famously asserted that capitalism and bureaucracy had an elective affinity because they share characteristics of routinization and rationalization and each, in turn, thrive in an increasingly rationalized environment.

idiologies of just distribution with increasing scale of membership. States attempt to cultivate an orientation to members through “nationalism” rather than personal familiarity. Problems of resolving the tensions of sharing consumption in the face of factionalized subgroups of members and under the weaker socializing force of nationalism are well documented in the welfare state literature on targeted versus universal benefits programs (Quadagno 1996; Korpi and Palme 1998). However, this example should be interpreted cautiously because states, as monopolists of coercion within mutually exclusive territories, possess structural and material resources that reduce member attrition but are not generally available to other large-scale budgetary units. Ultimately, it remains an open question, beyond the scope of this article, to determine how states and other large-scale budgetary units facilitate intersubjective orientation to members and mitigate strains of sharing of consumption.

*Conditions of membership.*—The classic image of ideal-typical market exchange is the fleeting immediacy of exchange between autonomous and atomistic strangers, where any individual with money can become a customer.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, because budgetary units are relatively durable, members are engaged in repeated interactions. Budgetary units therefore impose some conditions of membership to control entry into the space of repeated interaction and help manage the social difficulties of sharing consumption by shaping the body of concurrent consumers. As with the idiologies above, the content of conditions may be particular—Boy Scouts explicitly require boys between ages 11 and 18 who can tie a square knot, the International MOMS Club implies members should be women who stay at home with their children—but having conditions of membership is characteristic of budgetary units. Conditions of membership are entangled in ongoing boundary work of clarifying who is included and excluded. These conditions (1) may govern both the prerequisites of becoming a member and ongoing expectations for maintaining membership, (2) vary in how and by whom they are enforced, and (3) the extent to which they are explicit. For example, some conditions of membership are so deeply socialized that they rarely rise to conscious consideration unless violated, as anyone who has tried to walk into a stranger’s house and join the family knows. Finally, (4) the conditions of membership vary in the extent to which people consider membership as constituted by ties apart from the act of

<sup>19</sup> Scholars have made important sociological contributions by highlighting how some forms of capitalist economic activity are embedded within social relations; however, many of these have focused on the embeddedness of relations among firms within the production chain (e.g., Uzzi 1996; Uzzi and Spiro 2005), rather than on social relations within the end-consumer retail exchange that has been the focus of consumption theory (cf. DiMaggio and Louch 1998).

consumption—for example, families based on what actors consider “primordial” bonds of kinship and marriage.

I will briefly discuss a subset of budgetary units in which membership categories are defined by roles and activities that originate outside the domain of consumption because, like familiarity above, it appears to be a common manifestation. Exogenous membership categories are antithetical to capitalist market categories, where primary roles are defined by relatively narrow market-based activities like “salesperson.” Instead of defining roles in budgetary units by their consumption activity, such as “chief selector,” we find “mothers.” Parents and children consume together and comprise the family budgetary unit, but are not primarily or exclusively defined by consumption roles, relations, or activities. Budgetary unit membership categories like “mother,” “nun,” or “outlaw” are (1) socially constructed outside of any particular budgetary unit, (2) not derived primarily from activities in the domain of consumption, and (3) thickly defined and multidimensional. Such membership categories are entangled in cognitive schema of behaviors, practices, and relational obligations, which partially order authority and decision making according to logics exogenous to consumption. To the extent that budgetary units are organized around exogenous social categories, they negotiate with preestablished, often institutionalized, schema, norms, and practices. These broadly constructed categories are cognitive resources for interaction that affect sources of authority, conditions for membership entry, and organizational durability.

The exogenous social construction of role categories in a budgetary unit is hypothesized to have two seemingly contradictory effects on the budgetary unit durability. First, when the category is stable but consumption is threatened, exogenously defined categories may convey protection against threats to consumption. That is, even when there are failures of collective consumption, a budgetary unit may be able to endure a longer period of threat to the core consumption activity because the categories—such as “mother” and “father”—imply more than shared consumption. A salesperson failing to sell will not long remain in the position, but a father who fails to provide consumption may. These budgetary units possess resource endowments in the classical sense (Stinchcombe 1965) but also possess social endowments derived from the familiarity of members, schema for interactions, social cohesion, and commitment. Such social endowments may supplement resource endowments to sustain viability through periods of scarcity or instability. I will later explore how the exogenous construction of parental roles affects practices of in-kind child support in low-income families.

Second, exogenous definition of social categories conveys an organizational liability on budgetary units because the category itself may become unstable. Changes in how the category is defined—or how category mem-

bers are “produced”—can create instability for budgetary units that depend on an exogenous category as a condition of membership. For example, “outlaw” is a category dependent on the rule of law. If the state does not enforce the rule of law, it decreases the production of “outlaws” as a social category. Similarly, “nun” is a category bestowed by the Catholic Church. If, as we see later, “outlaw” is a condition of membership for a budgetary unit, or if “nun” defines the schema of material distribution and economic interaction, changes in the role category may contribute to destabilizing the budgetary unit’s organization.

### Technical Processes

Weber alludes to distinct technical processes of budgetary units but does not develop a typically Weberian enumeration of those processes as he does with the organizational processes of capitalist enterprises or bureaucracies. Budgetary units must structure contributions to collective expenses and provision for individual needs. This basic insight is obvious when viewing consumption through a collective lens but obscured when the individual is the locus of consumption. Viewing consumption as situated in durable social units with shared consumption—and, therefore, some degree of shared resources—raises questions about how group-level processes affect meaning making, information flows, and organizational change within such units.

*Contribution and provision.*—Budgetary unit members may contribute to and benefit from the collective to different degrees, and at different times. The budgetary unit provides a durable lens to observe how provision and contribution are processes marked by sequential time and situated in place. For example, resources associated with particular members may be distributed either before or after collectivization. Typical models of sequencing are (1) pooling resources (collectivized first) and then distributing for collective and individual provision or (2) withholding for individual provision and then contributing toward shared consumption elements (collectivized later). For example, a wife may contribute her entire paycheck to a joint fund and then withdraw some amount for personal consumption, or she could withhold a sum for personal consumption and contribute the rest to a collective account.

In the budgetary units framework, variation between receiving and retaining resources for individual provision affects the potential for irregularities or changes to established patterns because the two processes represent different situated possibilities for negotiation, meaning making, information flow, power, and change in the system. The two processes have different effects on the social unit, even if (in terms of accounting) they may result in

numerically identical amounts allocated for shared and personal consumption. Situating consumption in the budgetary unit highlights how these socioeconomic activities take place in times and spaces with varying degrees of collective participation. This points analytical attention to aspects of consumption that are nonobvious in market approaches, namely, that unique threats to budgetary units' organizational viability may arise from changes in the sequence of contributions and provisions, or how contributions and provisions are situated in shared social times and places.

*Materiality, valuation, and goal incongruity.*—Weber observes the technical processes of budgetary units—particularly “in-kind accounting”—are entangled in problems arising from the material variety of consumption objects, “indeterminacy of wants” and “heterogeneity of uses.” For a capitalist firm pursuing profit, the ultimate value of an object is concisely represented in the pecuniary market value. Material or symbolic qualities are of interest insofar as they affect price. In capitalist market logic, an object's material and symbolic qualities are a means to an end; in consumption logic such features are the ends themselves.

The orientation to a single, quantified, and agreed-upon goal of profit underpins the characteristic rationality and calculability of ideal-typical capitalist enterprises. This provides capitalist logic, relative to consumption logic, with greater consensus on a more uniform outcome metric of interest. Disagreement focuses on which means will best achieve the goal of profit. By contrast, budgetary units have more pronounced problems of goal incongruence—imperfectly overlapping expectations or desires for outcomes—such that members may contest the means and goals for the group's consumption.

The process of consumption affects the consumption ethos to make budgetary units more amendable to in-kind exchange than are enterprises. Capitalist production may be spread among various producer enterprises in a production chain. These relations of production are typically sequential: Microsoft depends on processors from Intel, which depends on components from a company in China. Thus, material dependencies run in one direction, while the money moves in the other. These chained interdependencies of production make mutually advantageous in-kind exchange less likely than within the multifaceted, nonsequential process of consumption. Further, capitalist enterprises must perform cumbersome (technical) valuation exercises to evaluate the profitability of an in-kind exchange, involving analysis of the equivalent market value of a good that has been traded rather than sold. By contrast, budgetary units evaluate the material and symbolic characteristics of a good without employing complex metrics because value is internal in the domain of consumption. An internal locus of value makes it cheaper—in terms of time and resources—for a budget-

ary unit to figure out if an in-kind exchange is advantageous.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Weber's work suggests a higher incidence of in-kind exchange in budgetary units than conventional market-based organizational theory predicts.

#### EMPIRICAL APPLICATIONS

This section applies the extended Weberian framework to cases of immigrant remittances, child support among low-income unmarried couples, Russian gangsters, and an order of Catholic nuns. None of these cases alone suffice to demonstrate the entire depth and breadth of what Weber's framework can add to analysis of consumption-oriented social organization. Rather, these cases serve as a first step for illustrating how scholars can begin to apply Weber's framework to generate insights into a variety of areas and outcomes of sociological interest. Therefore, cases are selected from four rarely overlapping subfields of sociology to reexamine outcomes and subjects that have been analyzed using market-based models. These cases demonstrate the capacity of budgetary units to identify commonalities across conventionally dissimilar cases, apply to historically specific organizational cases as well as contemporary general trends, and examine how consumption orientation can manifest in numbers, as well as interview comments and historical case secondary literature.

#### Budgetary Units and Migrant Remittances

Examining migrant remittances highlights how budgetary units, and particularly an authority-focused boundary condition, can bring new insight to contemporary theoretical puzzles. Tracing authority through enacted structures of economic provision and decision making may clarify a puzzle dogging immigration research: Why do the vast sums remitted each year from migrants to poor sending regions have such varying effects on the welfare of recipients? Remittances—monies sent from migrants working abroad—are empirically significant because they are the greatest flow of resources to developing nations, exceeding official development aid and amounting to nearly half of all foreign direct investment (Yang and Martinez 2006). Some families use remittances for social infrastructure expenditures and education with enduring positive impacts on well-being,

<sup>20</sup> Research on mental accounting imposes valuation in price as a study condition (Camerer, Loewenstein, and Rabin 2004). Therefore, such studies are unable to distinguish the cognitive foundations of reasoning from compliance with instructions and verbal shorthand of relative prices. Understanding materiality differently within consumption logic suggests individuals may think about commensuration as real alternative units of consumption goods or services. This raises the hypothesis that material or symbolic similarity of in-kind comparisons facilitates retrievability and affects the selection of goods.

particularly for children, while others do not (Adams 2006). Researchers have yet to find a cohesive explanation for the conditions under which remittances are used to create enduring positive welfare effects (Sander and Maimbo 2003; Adams 2006; Yang and Martinez 2006).

The budgetary units framework suggests this explanation is elusive because conventional approaches take “family” as the relevant category for analyzing remittances, obscuring variation in the extent to which some biological families constitute a single budgetary unit bounded by shared authority structures, while others are instead multiple intersecting budgetary units that contribute resources to the focal unit but do not share authority over resource use. Budgetary units thereby provide new traction to this puzzle by differently specifying the social unit, focusing on observable practices and the boundaries of authority. If researchers study the “household” unit, the category assumes spatial proximity, including all people under the roof but excluding an emigrant father who regularly sends remittances and shares authority over how they will be used. If the unit is the “family,” it assumes biological relations are economic relations: it includes a nonresident father who is neither materially nor socially involved and excludes unrelated members who live in the same house and routinely contribute to its socioeconomic life. The budgetary units framework—constituted by shared consumption and employing authority as a boundary condition—would include household members, related or not, as well as nonresident members who exercise authority over the conversion of resources to consumption. It would exclude a nonresident father who is neither materially nor socially involved. Similarly, much like an employer or the welfare state, a nonresident father who sends remittances but is not socially involved (i.e., does not share in his children’s consumption) and exercises no shared authority over the conversion of resources to consumption is a revenue stream for the focal budgetary unit but is not a member.

Applying the budgetary units framework to this problem may help clarify considerably different socioeconomic arrangements previously confounded under the terms “family” or “household.” Better clarity, in turn, may generate new hypotheses, for example, that when transnational non-present actors regularly exercise shared authority, such resources have a tendency to be employed into the subset of consumption that is observable and shared from afar—in this case, long-term benefits to children, like education—rather than on short-term ephemeral consumption—like entertainment—or on difficult-to-observe consumption.

### The Enigma of Materiality in Child Support

Contemporary families are a particularly important case to reexamine as budgetary units because the market model is well represented in the analy-

sis of families (Becker 1973, 1974). Here, I examine a subset of families—low-income unmarried parents with children—as a theoretical test case for demonstrating the validity and usefulness of budgetary units, because child support is one area that has seemed particularly amenable to interpretation through market models. This focus is also empirically critical because, since welfare reform, child support has received increasing attention as a means to mitigate endemic childhood poverty. Specifically, in-kind or material contributions are crucial for closing the gap between what poor families earn and what they must spend to meet their needs (Edin and Lein 1996) and are associated with better well-being for children (Greene and Moore 2000). Therefore, an adequate theory of the socioeconomic relations of child support should explain the observed prevalence of material support.

However, material transfers are an enigma within a market model of exchange. In the market-rational view, recipients should always prefer cash to in-kind transfers (Munro 1992; Jacoby 1997), as should altruistic givers (Bruce and Waldman 1991). If poor noncustodial fathers are not altruistic but merely indifferent, we might still have reason to expect them to prefer cash transfers. Focusing on poor noncustodial fathers’ “ability to pay” (Sorensen 1997; Garfinkel, Gleib, and McLanahan 2002; Huang, Mincy, and Garfinkel 2005) is a sociologically popular offshoot of market logic of supply. But, focusing on ability to pay, a poor father should either be indifferent between giving \$20 in cash or a \$20 material contribution or should *prefer* cash because material contributions take time (shopping) and include transportation costs that are nontrivial for low-income fathers.

Ultimately, rationality-based explanations typically explain the persistence of in-kind transfers by claiming fathers, as “donors,” are paternalistic. Thus, this view claims “in-kind aid can be used to influence individuals to make those decisions that [the donor] thinks they would be making if they were ‘competent’” (Thurow 1974, p. 193). When applied to the family, the market view suggests fathers should only prefer in-kind child support when they do not trust mothers to make “good” decisions with cash.<sup>21</sup> This perspective resonates throughout Willis’s (1999) widely cited market approach to the family. To explain child support patterns, Weiss and Willis (1985) argue children are public goods whose joint governance is only made possible by proximity and altruism within marriage. After separation, fathers cannot control expenditure choices and respond by reducing contributions or earmarking funds through material transfers.

If this market model of the family were true, when applied to child support between separated parents we should expect data to show (1) high use of in-kind transfers associated with low quality of mother-father relation-

<sup>21</sup> I use “mother” instead of “custodial parent” because approximately 85% of child support relationships involve custodial mothers (Grall 2003).

ship, (2) in-kind transfers as an alternative (rather than supplement) to monetary transfers, and (3) no conditions under which recipients prefer in-kind transfers to cash. All three conditions are contradicted by evidence. First, research shows that in-kind transfers are associated with positive relationships between fathers and mothers. The margin by which in-kind support is preferred to informal cash support is largest among fathers who visit most often (Rangarajan and Gleason 1998). Frequency of visitation, in turn, is associated with a more positive coparent relationship, even after romantic dissolution (Carlson, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2008). Moreover, the presence of a new romantic partner in the household is a strong test case. If paternalism via the market model were operative, the presence of a new partner should have a stronger negative effect on cash than in-kind contributions because fungible cash could be used for expenses enjoyed by the partner. Instead, data show a new partner has a significant negative effect on both forms of support, but contrary to expectations, the reduction is 38% greater for in-kind support (Rangarajan and Gleason 1998).

Second, research increasingly suggests monetary and material forms of child support are complements rather than substitutes (Rangarajan and Gleason 1998; Waller and Plotnick 1999). For example, in the Fragile Families data set, fathers who very frequently gave in-kind support averaged \$1,456.73 in informal cash transfers in the child's first year of life, compared to \$1,232.26 among the average in-kind group, and \$988.37 among fathers who never gave any in-kind support.<sup>22</sup> The same complementary relationship holds for formal child support payments: fathers who gave in-kind support with average or better frequency paid \$458.56 in formal child support compared to \$262.35 for those who never gave in-kind support. This relationship persists even when including a wide array of control variables (Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel 2007).

Finally, a subset of mothers expressed preference for receiving in-kind contributions because material contributions indexed good fathering and involvement (Metz 2005).<sup>23</sup> By contributing material things, some mothers felt fathers demonstrated knowledge about the baby's needs. Mothers exercising multiple rationalities enjoyed consuming the material contribution for its usefulness but also enjoyed consuming the experience of paternal engagement that was materially comingled. Moreover, because material transfers are more publicly visible, and the symbolic significance of material transfers was widely shared in the local community, mothers valued the status of

<sup>22</sup> Author's calculations based on Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study data; please refer to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu> for more information on this data source.

<sup>23</sup> See Shafer (2007) for more information on the TLC3 qualitative data set, associated with the Fragile Families study, from which these qualitative data are drawn.

having an active and engaged coparent. These relationships of father, mother, and child are socially constructed outside of any particular familial budgetary unit and deeply entangled in cognitive schema of appropriate behavior and action. These externally defined schema affect how mothers evaluate the budgetary actions of fathers. For example, unlike a market-based salesman with unreliable sales, some mothers made great allowances for infrequent or insufficient provision by fathers who manifested at least some other evidence of "good fathering" (Metz 2005). The cognitive schema and category of "father" was stable, and the exogenously defined membership categories conveyed protection against consumption instability.

Many fathers similarly saw in-kind contributions as an embodiment of their fathering.<sup>24</sup> One respondent, a 23-year-old father, claimed: "'Now if you're involved, I'll buy him what he needs and I'll be present when I buy it. . . . I think it better that way because you see the kid and you be involved. That's advantage right there, for the kid's sake'" (Metz 2005). In this statement, the father highlights two features of material contributions redolent with consumption. First, material contributions reflect paternal engagement, because the father must be engaged and aware enough of the child to decide what is needed and select how to materially meet those needs. Second, material contributions are also constitutive of paternal engagement, because in this case, purchasing involves spending time with the child. This echoes issues of authority and boundaries mentioned previously. The technical requirements of deciding, selecting, and providing in-kind support cultivate and constitute social involvement and shared authority over resources that keep those nonresident fathers an ongoing part of the mother and child's budgetary unit. This reinforcing cycle may partly explain the complementarity between material and monetary support noted above.

The predictions of a market lens on child support are contradicted by empirical observations. The budgetary unit framework better specifies the observed patterns. It also opens up space for theorizing how people carefully manage the mutually constitutive relationship between social relations and economic practices (Zelizer 1996).<sup>25</sup> First, these families are composed of individuals with interpersonal familiarity, not strangers in the market. Second, the core emphasis on consumption correctly anticipates the nature of disagreements, which focus not on the moment of exchange

<sup>24</sup> Some other fathers expressed paternalistic sentiments behind their material contributions.

<sup>25</sup> Recent work claims a particular kind of budgetary management is a critical step in the path from cohabitation to marriage (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005). This suggests "family" does not dictate configurations of budgetary management. Rather, configurations of budgetary management cue schema for and affect patterns of social relations.

so elevated in market theories but on goal incongruity and the implications of how resources are selected and used, how much, and by whom. Yet in a strict market model, the retailer cares not for how the purchased good will be subsequently used, so long as the trade terms are agreeable. Further, budgetary unit's emphasis on sharing correctly identifies problems that arise over the use of fungible child support payments to pay for shared household consumption goods—such as rent or heating bills. Debates also focus on the technical processes of negotiation over resources (in contrast to the specter of institutionalized transfer via the state system), and the sequence of contribution and provision—whether resources will be shared before or after the father's subjective needs are met. The importance of idiologics of “justness” in the substantive rationality of budgetary units is found in the extensive negotiation mothers and fathers engage in to justify the appropriateness of either the amount or regularity of child support (Metz 2005). Finally, givers and recipients evoke multiple rationalities and exhibit a preference for material contributions, which is puzzling within a market model but coherent within a budgetary unit lens.

*The shortcomings of market models and the historical dissolution of Russian gangsters.*—Organizational sociologists are concerned with explaining when organizations thrive or dissolve, such that a theory that cannot explain the nature and timing of organizational collapse must be questioned. Organizational dissolution is important also because it predetermines other interesting outcomes—the organization that dissolves does not go on to be effective, efficient, innovative, isomorphic, or any of the other things that organizational sociologists often care about. Moreover, there is a well-enumerated theoretical position on the mechanics of organizational mortality for profit-oriented firms, allowing a more crisp contrast with the differing mechanics of budgetary units. In particular, as the following cases demonstrate, budgetary units can be threatened by changes in the environment, but which are not the result of challenges from competing, analogous organizations.

Market models have been overextended to try to explain continuity or failure in consumption-oriented organizations. However, engaging the idea of a consumption ethos explains the core processes of consumption-oriented budgetary units better than alternative theories based only on competitive market firms. Consider the historical case of *Vory-v-Zakone*, a powerful Russian organized crime unit from the early Soviet period until they suddenly collapsed during the Khrushchev era.<sup>26</sup> Traditional market models of organized crime fail to explain the organizational collapse of the *Vory*. Worse, market-based models predict the *Vory* should have been gaining in power and scope when instead they dissolved.

<sup>26</sup> I thank Brad Epperly for bringing the *Vory-v-Zakone* to my attention.

The sociologist Diego Gambetta, a prominent theorist of mafia, espouses a market-based model for organized crime, viewing mafia as “an industry which produces, promotes and sells private protection” (1993, p. 1). Gambetta’s market model has been subsequently applied broadly in sociological studies of organized crime around the world (Hill 2003). In this market model, protection is the commodity, with violence as one means to produce it. Like capitalist enterprises, criminal groups form, grow, or die in response to market-based laws of supply and demand for their commodity. Thus, criminal groups grow in response to a weaker, less penetrating or repressive state, because it signals lack of competition from the state as a supplier of protection. Even where the state is not weak or disordered, organized crime should flourish whenever it can provide certain goods or services less expensively than the state (Gambetta 1993). For these and other reasons, market models of organized crime predict organized crime increases where state power is low or waning (Williams and Godson 2002).

The ironclad fist of state control eased during the Khrushchev era, which according to market theories should have presented increased opportunities to the *Vory* that enhanced their organization. Moreover, as Khrushchev dismantled the gulag prison system, thousands of previously incarcerated *Vory*—nonproductive members drawing on the organization’s resources without contributing—were suddenly released back into productive activity. This is akin to a firm having its workforce suddenly double. According to market-based theories, this too should strengthen the *Vory*. But it had the opposite effect: as its nonproductive members were released from gulags, the *Vory* began to disintegrate.<sup>27</sup> The most rigorous sources—those relying on extensive historical documentation from gulag or Soviet archives and interviews with gulag inmates from the era—agree: with the dismantling of the gulag system came bitter infighting and by the late 1950s the *Vory* numbered no more than a “few dozen” (Varese 2001, p. 145). In the 20 years following the gulag closures, there were perhaps as few as two dozen acting under the name *Vory* anywhere in the Soviet Union (Varese

<sup>27</sup> The *Vory*, like many budgetary units, are not formal organizations; therefore, it is difficult to define organizational collapse using conventional corporate measures like the termination of the legal entity. In the 1980s a small group emerged, repurposing the symbolically significant label *Vory-v-Zakone*, but the new organization differed in the nature of criminal activities, relations among members, conditions of membership, rituals of initiation, rules governing the *obshchak*, and the centrality of the *obshchak* and criminals’ “code.” For example, new *Vory* criminality includes greater reliance on protection rackets [*krysha*], violent crime, and collusion with bureaucrats and business leaders—previously prohibited activities (Handelman 1994; Finckenauer and Waring 1998; Varese 2001). Conditions of membership changed radically, eliminating compulsory prison time and allowing lavish donations to secure membership. Even writers suggesting modest continuity between the two agree the new *Vory* bear little organizational resemblance to the old (Handelman 1994; Cheloukhine 2008).

1998). A market-based model does not adequately account for the timing of organizational dissolution.

Analyzing the *Vory* as a budgetary unit, rather than a market enterprise, illuminates why dismantling the gulags precipitated the fall of the *Vory*. The midcentury *Vory* were predominantly a budgetary unit rather than a market enterprise: the collective elements were primarily oriented to consumption rather than market-based production. The central feature of the *Vory* collective social organization was the *obshchak*, a pool of resources members contributed to out of earnings from illicit activity (Varese 2001). Members then received their share from the *obshchak* in return as personal income (Handelman 1994). The *obshchak* provided consumption for families of imprisoned members and for *Vory* in gulags—bribing officials and buying goods and services that would otherwise not have been available (Finckenauer and Waring 1998).

Though there was some patchwork hybridity (see note 10) in the *Vory* case—members engaged in criminal activities to make money—the collective or shared aspects of the *Vory* organization were not primarily oriented to collaborating to enhance earnings or create new markets. The extent of collaboration in the production of criminality was usually minor and limited to small subsets of the organization, *kodla* of thieves—“communes” of *Vory* living together outside of prison—which were between six and 30 members, who often practiced different criminal arts in loose concert (Varese 2001). Rather, the collective, shared endeavors of the *Vory* organization—the time, attention, rules, and sanctioning of the organization—were oriented to collective provision and consumption via the *obshchak*. Contributing to the communal fund was an explicit condition of membership and a key part of the initiation of new members; candidates for membership (*patsany*) were tasked with raising funds for the *obshchak* (Varese 2001). The force implicitly driving the collective organizational effort—manifest in the development and enforcement of rules of conduct and processes of resource division—was for consumption, not for profit.<sup>28</sup> For example, the *Vory* had few inviolable rules, but some of the most important and heavily enforced rules governed treatment of the *obshchak*. Some scholars list only six overarching rules of the *Vory* as a collective; two of these dealt with *obshchak* organization and use (Cheloukhine 2008). Members who cheated or stole from the *obshchak* were dealt harsh punishments, including death (Varese 2001).

<sup>28</sup> The *Vory* case highlights the importance of distinguishing initial motives for a group’s genesis from the subsequent orientation. Individuals’ criminal activity preexisted *Vory* membership, and that criminal activity, rather than organizational membership per se, caused their imprisonment. Indeed, time served in prison was a prerequisite for full membership as a *Vor* (Cheloukhine 2008).

The dismantling of the gulag system did not disrupt the *Vory's* capacity to earn in a market-based model, but it completely restructured the social place where shared consumption was situated. The concentration of members in gulags had facilitated sharing goods and services, such as liquor or burlesque entertainment, because members were physically copresent to collectively consume. After members were not spatially concentrated within gulags, the *Vory* were less able to utilize economies of scale to provide for collective consumption of goods and services to members.

The *Vory* further exhibit the features of a consumption ethos. The *Vory* were known for familiarity among members and strong demarcations between insiders and outsiders. The conditions of membership for new and ongoing members relied on external categories: in part, their strong anti-state, "outlaw" requirement paradoxically made them beholden to the state to "produce" outlaws via state persecution. Therefore, when the Khrushchev state decreased persecution, it simultaneously decreased the production of the label "outlaw" upon which the *Vory* based their membership, creating instability.

*Vory* resources were group-oriented: individuals contributed to the *obshchak* even though it meant fewer current personal resources. The technical processes ritualized contribution and collectivized resources first before distributing for individual or shared provision. Resources were collected and distributed at large ritualized gatherings. The *Vory* paired egalitarian contribution with temporally disproportionate distribution. But over time, each member could expect to cycle through the gulag system and enjoy the greater consumption benefits of *Vory* membership, because the harshness of pre-Khrushchev Soviet policing made incarceration a near certainty. Thus, removing the gulag not only disrupted the practical benefits of collective consumption for those spatially clustered within the gulags and reduced the cultural "production" of "outlaws" upon which membership was based, but it also destroyed the predictability of expected long-term egalitarian provision for those outside the prison system.

### Of Nuns and Gangsters

Beyond idiosyncratic and historical specifics, the general pattern of the *Vory* organizational failure is strikingly similar to the historical case of an order of Catholic nuns—the Glenmary Sisters—though conventional theoretical divides relegate their study to different fields. Many Glenmary Sisters left the Catholic Church en masse in the 1960s to form a secular organization: the Federation of Communities in Service (FOCIS; see Lewis and Appleby 2003). FOCIS began as a nonprofit modeled on collective sharing of resources, communal living, and collective consumption. As Glen-

mary Sisters, the women had been spatially concentrated members of a group who did not bring in financial resources but depended on a common fund (provided externally) to meet their consumption needs—akin to the *Vory* in gulags. The definition of themselves as “nuns” and “sisters” was exogenous to the domain of consumption but replete with normative values about consumption, and—like the *Vory* who depended on the state to produce “outlaws”—was conveyed by an external authority: the Catholic Church. Like the *Vory*, the Glenmary Sisters manifested the consumption ethos by ritualizing personal familiarity in kinlike relationships, dressing distinctively, and observing strict codes governing behaviors toward outsiders and insiders. The experience of prison and the religious order, respectively, segregated them from the “normal world,” provided discipline, inculcated distinctive group values, and fostered solidarity (Lewis and Appleby 2003). Though the surroundings and cultural influences of the *Vory* were different in content from those of the Glenmary Sisters, viewing them as budgetary units highlights the commonalities of form (Zerubavel 2007). Individuals of both groups were surrounded by comembers with shared conditions structuring their needs and shared sets of culturally available ideas about appropriate levels and types of consumption. Together, these shared conditions and idiologics formed a foundation for shared resources and consumption.

The departure of nuns from the order is similar in form to the dissolution of the gulag system for the *Vory*. In both cases, the structural conditions that had partly constructed common needs changed dramatically. As Glenmary nuns, the nature of their charitable work meant the sisters had similar consumption requirements for clothing, travel, and food. Also, both *Vory* and Glenmary Sisters operated under well-defined rules dictating their socioeconomic relation to each other, with penalties for violation, including expulsion. Like the *obshchak* providing for incarcerated members, the Church provided resources to the Glenmary nuns as a collective. Thus, under either the gulag or convent system, the loss of benefits from membership left an individual immediately unable to secure consumption.

By contrast, despite their intention to continue to live communally, the meaningful socioeconomic interdependencies rapidly frayed when the structure of the Church no longer established their joint revenue, constrained their consumption needs, and provided a shared, externally defined categorization of their roles, the meaningful socioeconomic interdependencies rapidly frayed. After the nuns left the order, resources came to FOCIS through individual earners. Some former nuns got paying jobs, budgeted for personal consumption needs, and contributed the remainder to a common pool—like the *obshchak*—to support members who were doing unpaid mission work (Lewis and Appleby 2003). In FOCIS, the bifurcated

nature of their work meant the women no longer had common consumption needs. For example, some working members needed individual transport or more professional clothes than volunteers working on farms. Collectivizing resources after individual provision obscured information about individual's incomes and, together with differing individual needs, eroded the sense of commonality in economic provision.

For the *Vory*, massive changes to the prison system made periods of incarceration less predictable, thereby undermining the incentives and ability to share resources in ways members believed would be credibly just in the long term. This destabilized the *obshchak* and ultimately changed the nature of *Vory* socioeconomic organization. Similarly, the sisters losing the foundation for their collective consumption altered the socioeconomic interdependencies that had supported their social organization. Like *Vory* that exist today in a different organizational form (see note 27), FOCIS continued but in dramatically altered form, absent the meaningful economic interdependencies. FOCIS became an informal group of friends who lived apart, managed resources separately, did no extensive collaborations on projects, but had occasional social gatherings. Ultimately, both the *Vory* and FOCIS were not driven apart by competition in the field of functionally equivalent organizations or by faltering demand for their "products." Rather, both organizations fell prey to distinct vulnerabilities of budgetary units: changes in the definitions of membership, economic requirements, and the timing and locations of their copresence unraveled their idiologies and undermined their ability to collectively consume.

## CONCLUSION

Consumption is a theoretically and empirically important phenomenon in modern society. This article lays a foundation for how a more deeply sociological conception of consumption grounded in budgetary units can better understand this phenomenon. Consumption, I have argued, is best understood as situated in social units rather than individuals. Locating the nexus of consumption in budgetary units facilitates exploration of observable group-level patterns in the processes of decision making and the organization of consumption resources and practices. This theoretical move contributes to consumption theory by (1) rescuing it from narrow focus on retail spaces, (2) reintroducing usefulness as a broad category beyond symbol and status, and (3) reorienting attention to the power of social intimates in consumption. Thus, budgetary units improve on present weaknesses in the conceptualization of consumption by focusing on how relatively durable social collectives make consumption decisions in which multiple actors simultaneously seek to have desires met, and status accumulation is but one social motivation among many.

Bringing the concept of budgetary units into sociological approaches to economic action—including those that do not conventionally identify as “consumption theory”—strengthens theoretical capacity in four ways. First, it facilitates comparisons across diverse social contexts, giving researchers concerned with economic behavior a way to theorize across sometimes stark interdisciplinary divides. Second, it provides a dynamic unit of analysis that draws attention to how social logics structure distribution of resources and provision for needs within economic units defined by enacted socioeconomic practices. Third, budgetary units provide a foundation for synthesizing cultural findings about meaning making and boundary work with the structural foundations that enable and constrain such practices. Referencing historical, survey, and interview data, I argued budgetary units have particular organizational preferences, strengths, and vulnerabilities that can best be understood by focusing on consumption, rather than treating them as analogous to the profit-oriented organizations that have been the backbone of organizational theory.

Future research might examine how budgetary units differ from market organizations on other canonical organizational outcomes, including how discipline is enacted and the role of legitimacy in organizational founding. For example, we might hypothesize that the nature of discipline (by members) within budgetary units conveys more detailed information, enhancing opportunities to anticipate or adjust to challenges. In contrast, capitalist marketplace discipline relies on more distant monitoring, with information “encoded” in the price mechanism, with attendant distortions and lag time. Cast in terms of Hirschman’s (1970) exit, voice, and loyalty, research could explore whether budgetary units are more likely to experience voice and less likely to experience exit than their capitalist counterparts, with consequences for organizational change and survival. If future research examines instead organizational founding, we might hypothesize that legitimacy affects budgetary units differently because it is relatively more endogenous to the unit, resulting in less institutional isomorphism even within a field of similar budgetary units. Capitalist enterprises always take some risk that they will not be seen as legitimate by key external actors or target customers because firms have only indirect knowledge of those groups. By contrast, prototypical budgetary units are formed by the same consuming members they serve, who also provide access to needed resources. Therefore, many of the most relevant adjudicators of legitimacy are within the budgetary unit. Future empirical study could examine whether this gives budgetary units greater likelihood of accommodating practices that are accepted by members through unconventional in the broader organizational field, and nonconforming niche consumption activities, such as nudist colonies or ascetic communes. Finally, while this article has demonstrated how applying budgetary units can uncover unconven-

tional similarities between cases, future research could employ the concept to discern and resolve inconsistencies between literatures, for example, how scholars of immigration and those interested in wealth accrual in middle-income African-American families have different conclusions about the effects of connections to extended family on budgetary units' economic outcomes.

Scholars of class and inequality might investigate class differences in budgetary unit membership, and the consequences of budgetary unit memberships for mitigating or exacerbating social inequalities. For example, investigating whether upper-class individuals participate in more budgetary units, and how the organization of those budgetary units varies. Research could investigate the hypothesis that upper-class individuals tend to participate in budgetary units with distributed authority structures, giving them greater voice, and that are more unifocal, creating greater freedom of exit and substitution. By contrast, lower-class individuals may be exposed to more multifocal budgetary units and subject to structures where authority is designated to a few (members or nonmembers), giving less voice and making exit more costly.

Future research is also needed on variation within the category of budgetary units, including differences in scale, distribution of authority, broad or narrow consumption focus, hybridity of consumption and profit orientations, conditions of membership, and the structure of costs of membership, among others. I will elaborate briefly on how some of these ideas could be pursued. For example, further work is needed to document large-scale, especially nonstate, cases of budgetary units to discern how characteristics of budgetary units change with substantial increases in scale. Other work could explore the causes and consequences of the broad or narrow composition of consumption provided by a given budgetary unit, or the conditions under which budgetary units change focus from a narrow to broad (multifocal) consumption and the culture work contesting and managing those changes.

This article has focused on elucidating profit- and consumption-orientations as conceptually distinct, but future research could build on that conceptual distinction to examine hybridity. Contemporary thinking typically conflates production and profit-orientation as both contrasted to consumption. Yet Weber notes groups can provide consumption for members through self-production, and these groups seem particularly likely to exhibit forms of hybridity. Understanding such hybridities would contribute to interest in nonprofit organizations and so-called production communities—like Burning Man or open source movements—both of which provide consumption for members through production. Comparisons between these cases, or even within the diverse domain of nonprofit organizations, would be ideal for investigating differences in the distribution of budgetary authority,

including the hypothesis that, compared to diffuse authority exercised by coconsuming members, an authority structure in which prominent decisions about consumption are designated to individuals who are not coconsuming members may have a greater propensity to adopt profit-like logics and practices.

Close comparative analysis of budgetary units has the potential to yield observed regularities of practice and choice across contexts that may become critical inputs into improving theory, whether enhancing the predictive functionality of rational actor models, or informing more parsed network approaches to social action. Just as intense comparative observation of markets has yielded an increasing set of insights into “lex mercatoria,” or rules of conduct that systematically structure market behavior, Weber’s budgetary units provide scholars a framework to build understanding of “lex consumptio,” patterns of behavior induced by social orientation to consumption.

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