

CONSUMERISM

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Human instincts. Historians, and others, debate whether consumerism – the desire to acquire goods not needed for basic subsistence – is a “natural” impulse, visible whenever economic conditions permit, or whether it is a major innovation particularly in modern times. There is evidence in both directions. On the one hand, graves discovered from hunting and gathering societies show that members of elite families might have jewelry or other adornments. Consumerism to reflect status was not a modern invention. On the other hand, many traditional societies frowned on consumerism that might reflect too much social inequality – this was a common target of regulations by artisan guilds, for examples. Punishments for consumerism were not uncommon, through sumptuary laws. Many societies were far more comfortable using excess production for new public expenditures – for example, on religious buildings – rather than encouraging individual display. The debate remains interesting.

Consumerism in the Agricultural Age. Aristocracies, emerging in most complex societies, used consumerism as a sign of or reward for status. They might originate through military leadership or landownership or both, but as aristocracies matured they always identified themselves through more lavish houses, furnishing and clothing. They provided the market for Chinese silks in the Roman Empire, to take one example. Not all nobles had access to much luxury – there were some modest, even impoverished settings for lesser nobility for example in Eastern Europe – but aristocracies generally set a consumerist tone. This might in turn inspire successful urban business folk to develop consumer interests of their own, though some might prefer to save in favor of investing in the business itself. Marco Polo, traveling among Chinese cities in the 14th century, was amazed at urban luxury; and the same reactions marked many Europeans visiting Middle Eastern cities. But there were constraints as well. Most religions, and particularly both Christianity and Buddhism, warned against excess, arguing that the poor would have easier access to spiritual reward. Aristocrats often encouraged laws that would punish other groups that tried to emulate their styles of dress. Sumptuary laws emerged periodically, for example in the European Renaissance in reaction to urban wealth. In China officials in the later Tang dynasty actually put a fashion leader, a non-aristocrat, to death for inappropriate display.

Innovations in the Early Modern Period. This interesting ambivalence began to change in the 17th and 18th centuries, particularly initially in the West. One of the great discoveries by social historians of the past generation was the realization that modern-style consumerism developed before outright industrialization, and indeed helped promote it by creating new demands for brightly-colored clothing and other items. Large numbers of people throughout the West, including North America – though not, to be sure, the very poor – gained new interest in clothing, furnishings and other items – even tulips, which created a first consumer craze in the Netherlands in the 17th century. Global trade and contact encouraged this substantial change. Access to consumer goods like coffee or tea also created demand for better serving items – Chinese porcelain or china as it began to be called. Population growth and rising commerce blurred traditional signs of social status, such as access to inheritance in land; many people used consumer acquisition to prove their social worth and success in new ways. Possibly also a growing interest in romantic love also fueled consumerism as part of courtship. Signs of consumerism included the spread of shops and advertising, increased thefts of clothing, careful attention to bequests of consumer items to family members in wills.

Industrialization. The industrial revolution might disrupt consumerism for some groups, by creating additional pockets of poverty, but on the whole the lower prices of factory goods encouraged the process in the Western world in the 19th century. Further, pressures of work prompted many people to look for consumer gains to compensate, a process known as “instrumentalism”. A key sign of mounting consumerism was the emergence of the department stores as a new means of encouraging buying and shopping – the first effort took shape in Paris in the 1830s. By the later 19th century consumer interests expanded to more expensive items, like bicycles and, soon, automobiles. As animals became less useful, pets became a consumer outlet, and this process would intensify later on as the birth rate declines and surrogates for children became increasingly sought – as in contemporary Japan. A new disease emerged by the 1870s: kleptomania, or the compulsion to steal consumer goods that were not really needed. By the later 19th century the new forms of consumerism were spreading beyond the West. Department stores opened in Moscow, Tokyo and Shanghai. They might be criticized as “foreign”, and not everyone liked the new wares and faddism; but they gained ground.

Evaluation. The spread of modern consumerism created all sorts of critiques, at the time and since. Poor people were criticized for spending money they could be saving. Women were criticized, unfairly because men were ardent consumers as well, for their susceptibility to advertising. Many movements – including aspects of communism, and more recently environmentalism – have attacked consumer motives and results. On the other hand, consumerism did reflect some new opportunities. As consumerism spread young people found new ways to express themselves, against parental authority: consumerism often played to youth. Women might find outlets in consumerism, amid restrictions on other activities. The need to compensate for drawbacks in modern work affected people of various sorts. And consumerism did create opportunities to challenge social status and barriers in other respects. As critics lamented, in consumer societies it becomes harder to determine social position by styles of dress.

The Contemporary Period Consumerism posed a problem for communist societies, initially in the Soviet Union. On the one hand consumerism was wasteful and a sign of middle-class taste. On the other, workers and others might seek consumer gains, particularly as they learned about standards in other, capitalist societies. On the whole the Soviet Union discouraged consumerism, criticizing Western-style dress, like blue jeans, and creating rather drab department stores. Religious concerns also challenged consumerism, in many regions. A key source of Islamic critiques of the West, for example in revolutionary Iran, involved attacks on the frivolity and sexuality of Western styles. On the whole, however, consumerism continued to gain in contemporary world history, becoming a key manifestation of globalization – constrained only by continued poverty. Shared consumer styles, including blue jeans, spread to many regions. Consumer goods for children, like Barbie dolls or their equivalents, or the Japanese-created Hello Dolly, and consumer oriented holidays like Christmas or birthdays, became global phenomena as well – in the case of Christmas, even in non-Christian societies. Not only department stores but also shopping malls, and accompanying advertising, became global phenomena as well. Consumerism in the process became a vital source of demand in modern economies, fueling many Asian exports to the West, for example. There were even arguments that consumer interests might overtake war as a human impulse – though results were admittedly inconclusive at best. Comparisons remain complex: not all societies shared United States enthusiasm for private spending; even Western Europe turned out to favor more vacations over maximum opportunities to purchase goods, while East Asians continued to allocate more family funds to saving. Still, contemporary global consumerism compels attention as a major recent-historical pattern, whose implications go beyond the economy itself.

Sources

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And "Migration of Chinese Consumption Values: Traditions, Modernization, and Cultural Renaissance." By Cheng Lu Wang and Xiaohua Lin. From *Journal of Business Ethics*. Volume 88 (2009). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27749716>
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"The Theory of the Leisure Class" (1899) and "Conspicuous Consumption" (1902).

Suggested Reading:

Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire. By Peter N. Stearns (Routledge, 2006).

The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World. By Frank Trentmann (Bloomsbury Academic, 2006).

A History of Global Consumption: 1500 – 1800. By Ina Baghdiantz McCabe (Routledge, 2014).

Discussion

1. What purpose did consumerism serve in agricultural societies? What were the main limits on it? What concerns did sumptuary laws reflect?
2. What role did consumption play in identity in the Ottoman Empire? What debates over consumption occurred and what can they tell you about this society?
3. What caused the changes in consumerism in early modern Europe? What roles did various social classes play? What was the role of women?
4. Discuss the relationship between consumerism and industrialization in the West.
5. How did Western consumer values spread globally? In what ways did Chinese consumers react to this spread in the 20th century?
6. How did communist regimes handle consumerism?
7. Discuss the political ramifications of consumerism in contemporary world history.
8. Discuss current trends and issues in the scholarship on consumerism in world history.