Consumerism in World History

The global transformation of desire

Peter N. Stearns

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Chapter 6

The dark side of Western consumerism

Thus far the story of consumerism may seem like a record of steady advance (whether you judge this a good thing or not). Except for the lull in the early nineteenth century, and apart from briefer interruptions caused by economic recession or war, consumerism has seemed to gain ground with every passing decade.

Yet consumerism also prompted doubts in every phase. These emerged by the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and (not surprisingly) an even greater array greeted the expansion of consumerism around 1900. This chapter deals with the critics of consumerism, important in Western society as a counterpoint to the larger development. Even more, it tackles some of the wider guilts these critics could reflect and encourage.

Consumerism has always been hard to protest against. Its manifestations are amorphous. Many people seemed to like some features of consumerism, from the first, even if they hesitated about the larger phenomenon. How can the idea of a better material life be attacked? What's wrong with consumerist leisure forms that almost everyone seems to enjoy? Individual critics of consumerism can easily sound like elitist grumps.

Collective action against consumerism has proved even more difficult, at least in the Western world. Before modern times, people often protested high prices, particularly of basic necessities like bread; this was a consumer, but not a consumerist protest. Some bread riots continued in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By this point, however, popular protest most commonly seized on issues at work or in politics: strikes and ptotest voting represented these grievances. Of course consumer anxieties might play into these protests, when people thought they lacked enough money to meet their expectations. But consumerism was not the tatget. Very occasionally, as before the American Revolution, boycotts used consumerism as a more direct vehicle, withdrawing purchases to protest some other target. Consumer boycotts have historically been hard to pull off, because they depend on an elusive loyalty; many people break the boycott precisely because they yearn to buy. The boycotts do assume that consumerism is not life's most important goal, that it can be interrupted in pursuit of some

higher purpose. But even boycotts do not call consumerism per se into question. Only in the twentieth century, in fact, do mass protests against consumerism emerge, and then most commonly outside the West.

But difficulties and absence of clear collective protest should not suggest that consumerism was home free in the modern West. A host of groups did include attacks on consumerism at least as part of other grievances. Still more important, though harder to pin down, many ordinary individuals worried about their own engagement in consumerism, seeking to find some outlet for real guilt about indulgence even as they continued to indulge.

This chapter deals with these undercurrents to modern consumerism, which altered life and outlook even as consumerism worked its own magic. It also shows how different cultures, within the transatlantic orbit, generated somewhat different reactions. Consumerism was not monolithic, and reactions to it varied as well. This was a story that would be played out in a still larger framework as the twentieth century advanced and the phenomenon took hold worldwide.

Early comment

Initial reactions to consumerism, in the first, eighteenth-century phase, typically picked up traditional Christian moral themes, in attacks on greed and gluttony and about pursuing false gods. Because consumerism was so new, more specific themes did not initially emerge. Criticism of the disruption of proper social hierarchy, with lower classes taking on life styles appropriately confined to their social superiors, allowed expression of other concerns. By the early nineteenth century, this commentary was supplemented by frequent laments about how poor people were driving themselves deeper into poverty by buying things they did not need. This argument could also be applied to immigrants and African Americans, in the United States, and to women.

Moralists were certainly aware of the scope and danger of change. As early as 1711, an English writer, John Dennis, deemed "Luxury" the "spreading Contagion which is the greatest Corruption of Publick Manners and the greatest Extinguisher of Publick Spirit." A great deal of attention was devoted to what critics claimed was a growing level of illness associated with overindulgence. There were two points here. In the first place, the word consumption itself at this point had two meanings: the buying of goods, but also respiratory disease including tuberculosis. In this latter sense, it was possible to die of consumption. Some writers deliberately punned on the double meaning as a way of attacking consumerism: "Consumption may be regarded as a vast pit-fall, situated on the high road of life, which we have not sense enough of our common interest to agree to fill up, or fence round." A second way to attack consumerism through illness was to focus on diseases of the stomach, or appetite, where overindulgence could literally affect the body. Many eighteenth-century critics in England thus urged the importance of plain food, using this as a symbol of self restraint more generally.

Sickness became associated, in this early commentary, with growing ease and city ways, a linkage that would persist into later periods. The commentator who argued that "consumption prevails more in England than in any other part of the world" was thus explicitly claiming that there were more indulgence-related illnesses, but also sought to imply that England suffered generally from exceptionally high, and harmful, levels of consumerism.

Not surprisingly, criticisms of this sort arose in the United States by the early nineteenth century. Previously, as we have seen, consumerism could be attacked as foreign – British, and then French; and it could be subjected to the baleful comments by Protestant preachers attacking distractions from awareness of mortal sin and from devotion to spiritual goals. These attacks first surfacing in the later eighteenth century, continued into the 1850s. A new element arose in the 1830s, with a series of purification movements directed against the twin evils of commercialism and sexuality. Particularly interesting and influential was the campaign of Sylvester Graham, in the 1840s, to wean Americans from the excesses of a market society. His focus was not consumerism alone, but also the broader engagement with commercial mechanisms and what he saw as undue sexuality. His remedy, however was revealing, as he urged pure food and plain diets, as against standard commercial products and also excessive fats. Vegetarianism, concentrated on healthy grains such as those contained in his new graham cracker, would prevent over stimulation both in the sexual and the consumer arenas. Graham's message of simple foods, temperance and chastity won many converts for a time, particularly among young, urban men. And there were other crusaders for pure food products, including Kellogg, as part of the same general reaction to an increasingly commercial economy. The linkage between restraint of consumerism and both moral and physical health was an urgent one.

Phase II: new critical approaches

The escalation of consumerism in the second phase, from the late nineteenth into the early twentieth centuries, brought a renewed round of reaction which proved to be far broader, and less dependent on purely traditional morality, than the initial set. Clearly, consumerism's earlier development had not produced enough concurrence to prevent a new round of attack. And on the whole, the attacks were wider ranging than before, in terms of argument and audience alike. Moralistic comment continued, to be sure. Children's reading matter in the United States and England, for example, maintained traditional attacks on envy, in favor of being resigned to one's lot in life and taking pleasure in God, until about 1920. A typical poem, in

a literature book for children, thus intoned:

> Let us work! We only ask
> Reward proportioned to our task;
> We have no quarrel with the great
> No feud with rank – with mill or bank.

Another earlier theme extended attacks on people who consumed at the expense of appropriate saving or class distinctions. Workers could still be blasted for delighting in items they could not really afford. Women came in for more adverse comment than ever before. In France, novelist Emile Zola wrote a whole book about department stores and their lures to flighty, frivolous women. Zola could not decide which was more at fault, the store-owners for setting out temptations or women for being so empty-headed as to succumb. Doctors' discovery of klepromania was widely publicized, on both sides of the Atlantic, occasioning another round of attacks on women for being such ready victims.

But there were important new themes in the attacks on the consumer advance. Blasts at consumerism were much more politicized in this period, and here several groups and targets might be involved. In Europe, a new kind of anti-Semitism developed in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Jews were attacked for many things, but their role as owners of department stores loomed large in the new movement. This was in part an expression of dismay by shopkeepers, in countries like France and Germany, about new levels of competition. But some slaps at consumerism were involved as well, as Jewish owners could be seen as provoking the appetites of otherwise reasonable Christians.

By the 1920s, Nazism, in part an extension of the earlier anti-Semitism, also harbored a pronounced anti-consumerist element. Nazis wanted people to value the state, the race and the leader, not to be distracted by individual consumerist goals. They specifically attacked fashion, in the name of more traditional costumes – like the flowered skirts and aprons for women known in Austria and southern Germany as *dirndls*. All sort of motives flowed into Nazism of course, of which uneasiness with consumerism was not a trivial component.

Socialists also attacked consumerism, though there were ambiguities here. Socialist leaders were obviously hostile to capitalism, and therefore to the inequalities of consumerism under capitalism. Many hoped for a purified, moral working class that would rise above consumer lures. Some actually repeated a certain element of the bourgeois critique about frivolous spending. Many hoped that workers could be taught to value good literature rather than consumerist trash. But the fact was that most workers seemed to prefer the trash. Their quarrel with capitalism involved poor working conditions and inadequate wages, more than consumerism. So over time, socialist attacks on shallow consumerism tended to decline in favor of vigorous advocacy of greater equality. In the 1930s, even the French communist movement would join in encouraging young workers to take an interest in fashion and cosmetics, as part of enticing more youth into communist ranks.

Along with conservative anti-Semites and a number of labor leaders, many intellectuals also picked on consumerism. Motives were mixed: some attacked shallowness and misplaced values, while others, blasting debased mass taste, were also concerned about the destruction of conventional social hierarchy. The opening of giant department stores in German cities, in the 1890s, triggered sweeping commentary. Particular attention focussed on the moral decline of the middle class, as it became increasingly involved with consumerism. Thomas Mann's classic *Buddenbrooks*, the most famous German novel of the period, traced a middle class dynasty brought low by loss of self-restraint amid increasingly posh surroundings. The family ends with a prodigal son who turns from simplicity to dandyism and dies, appropriately enough, of consumption (again, the play on words). Sociologists also attacked the lack of taste and character involved in vulgar displays of wealth. Historians demonstrated that whole societies declined when people turned from virtue to a devotion to material affluence; the fall of Rome was frequently invoked. Another common criticism, recalling the blasts against women, held the growth of consumerism to be a sign of effeminacy in German culture. Finally, consumerism was seen as foreign, if not Jewish, at least French: as one writer put it, "the department store has nothing to do with German culture." Others lamented the "thoughtless import of foreign fashions... we see our German women squeezed into French fashion clothing which was cut for the bodies of a differently built race."

These attacks were not without response. Other German writers praised the growth of prosperity and argued that lower-class tastes were improved through contact with better styles and department stores. On the nationalist front, some urged that German fashions be sold worldwide, establishing a lead in global consumerism while doing away with unneeded foreign influence at home. But debate continued, as many German intellectuals, and their middle-class and aristocratic audience, clearly felt uncomfortable with the growing consumerism around them and what it implied for the future of their society.

Nor were Germans alone in the discussion. In the United States, economist Thorstein Veblen wrote a widely-read study of the unnecessary luxury of upper-class business magnates, coining the term "conspicuous consumption" to highlight spending that merely served as show, meeting neither real needs nor genuine aesthetic standards. Veblen was not calling ordinary consumerism into question, but some of his commentary could be more widely applied.

Critique did not end with World War I. The 1920s saw renewed sneers against women, Jews, capitalists and the deteriorating standards of mass

society, coming again from a variety of sources from fascism through traditionalist intellectuals to communism. This was of course the period when Nazis touted devotion to leader and nation over corrupting consumer influences. Nazi leaders (who themselves indulged in various consumer pleasures, including fashion shows) obviously hoped to channel resources toward military preparation, but they also professed to prefer peasant simplicity on moral and racial grounds.

And a new element was now added in: anti-Americanism. Reacting to growing United States influence, attacks on the foreign qualities of consumerism in Europe increasingly focussed on American extensions, both because American stores and standards were gaining ground abroad and because the United States could serve as a symbol of consumerism more generally, a target for all that was disliked in modern consumer life. The Dutch historian Johann Huizinga thus wrote of a visit to the United States: "Your instruments of civilization and progress....only make us nostalgic for what is old and quaint, and sometimes your life seems hatdly to be worth living." More abruptly, the German Oswald Spengler simply opined, "Life in America is exclusively economic in structure and lacks depth." French writer Georges Duhamel held American materialism up as a beacon of mediocrity that threatened to eclipse French civilization, imposing worthless "needs and appetites" on humanity at large. Anti-American anti-consumerism became something of a national hobby in France. During the 1930s debate focussed on whether cheap-goods outlets like Woolworth's, called dime stores in the United States, should be copied in France. Opponents claimed that dime stores debased women and workers by inducing them to spend heedlessly. They argued that real Frenchness was hostile to mass consumerism on grounds of inherent French taste and quality. The French parliament, in 1936, banned American-style outlets for a year on the grounds that they "fooled" their customers and constituted a foreign intrusion against the virtues of French style. The practical result was at most a compromise: new outlets did spread, offering cheap goods in chain stores like Monoprix, but with some greater effort to offer a veneer of craftsmanship. Debate resumed after World War II, when American consumer influence expanded even further; it was a French intellectual who coined the clever critical phrase to describe Amerıcan cultural control, "cocacolonisation."

American guilt: a special case?

Explicit attacks on consumerism became more common in Western Europe than in the United States, during the decades around 1900. One difference is immediately obvious: anti-Americanism was irrelevant within the United States, and there was no comparable foreign symbol as a critical target against consumerism. Americans had earlier condemned Britain or France as sources of undesirable luxury and softness, but by 1900 the American lead

in consumerism outweighed importation. If consumerism was a fault, it was now a domestic fault. It was now the West Europeans who could claim foreign corruption, however unfairly.

This did not mean that Americans failed to worry about consumerism. We will see that they worried quite a bit, even as they participated, but the more common villains were less available, even aside from the anti-foreign angle. For example: turn-of-the-century Americans were often anti-Semitic, but their anti-Semitism was less extreme than that which developed among some Europeans, and it did not focus on Jews as consumer leaders; at most, Jewish bad taste and garishness might be a small part of this particular racial bias. The more virulent kinds of American racism did not release consumerist anxiety. Consumerism did not figure among the leading African American faults, in the racist vision. Even the Ku Klux Klan, which revived in the 1920s to attack both racial minorities and some of the flaws of modern life, did not seize on consumerism with any coherence. It was true that Americans recurrently attacked African Americans for wearing unduly flashy clothes or buying expensive cars. As in European attacks on the working class, this reflected a sense that certain groups did not "deserve" showy consumerism and that they were wasting their money and displaying a lack of good character and restraint. These complaints could even feed racial rioting, as when Americans in World War II attacked "zoot-suited" African Americans (and Mexican Americans) who seemed to be enjoying consumer pleasures while white men served in the military. But this racist component was not an attack on consumerism per se, but a focus on a suspect racial group. It may have released various tensions, but not the anxieties that consumerism itself provoked.

Nor was American socialism well enough developed to serve as a major outlet for critiques of consumerism. Here was another contrast with Europe, where socialist movements gained ground steadily. American trade unionism was better developed, but for the most part trade union attacks either ignored consumerism, in their focus on working conditions, or sought better wages that would allow fuller worker participation.

Even attacks on women were milder in the United States. American commentary on kleptomania might note that some ladies had a "mania for pretty things", but the scathing commentary on female frivolity and vulnerability so common in countries like France was largely missing. And while some American intellectuals worried about mass taste, their concerns were far less frenzied than those of their European counterparts.

There were two related reasons for the softer tone of American reactions. First, the nation prided itself on the absence of political extremes, which worked against fervent rightwing anti-Semitism or leftwing socialism or communism. Second, lacking traditional social hierarchy and the same hallowed position for intellectuals that Europe could offer, Americans found it more difficult to develop a clear and durable basis for anti-consumerist critiques.

There was no well-established aristocratic taste to refer to. It was harder for intellectuals to excoriate mass taste without seeming like undemocratic, irrelevant snobs.

On the surface, then, consumerism had smoother sailing in the United States than in Western Europe, once it reached the second, turn-of-the-century phase. The nation's huge market, its outpouring of products, led to the seeming triumph of consumer values that European observers often feared.

Surfaces can be deceiving. American anxieties about consumerism existed, but they had to be sought with greater subtlety. We have already seen, in Chapter 5, how proponents of consumerism had to invoke sounder values, even in the United States, to draw middle-class favor. Crass appeals were often masked by references to health or family, which suggests that even Americans might grow uncomfortable with unmitigated materialism. Even without a tradition of aristocratic taste, there were bases for collective comment. Religion of course was one, and while its service had been modified by the adjustments of mainstream Protestantism, Americans could still wonder about consumer values in relation to higher, spiritual goals. Discomfort with the commercialization of Christmas provided a prosaic but regular focus for some of these comparisons. Newer movements picked up other uneasiness. By the early twentieth century some Americans were swept up by concerns about the environment, which could offer an alternative to consumerist priorities. The middle and upper class also developed a clear sense of highbrow culture – opera, symphonies, and Shakespearean plays – which it newly contrasted with mass taste. Even more broadly, distrust of city life and urban values (even by Americans who did not really want to live outside the city) could include some hesitations about consumerist gains.

Americans also expressed concerns about consumerism in terms of personal ethics. The same decades that saw the triumph of American consumer values and the onset of international leadership in consumer institutions, saw several new counterthrusts in the name of personal discipline. Temperance was one. Attacks on excessive consumption of alcohol had begun earlier in American history, but it was in the first part of the twentieth century that they won through in the form of Prohibition. Americans might be indulgent in some respects, but they would also vote for movements that pulled them back in others. Efforts to outlaw cigarette smoking surfaced at the same time. Both these movements dwindled by the 1930s, of course, but they served as important moralistic vehicles for a time.

Americans also worried about commercial films and other consumer outcroppings like comic books. Even as the nation led the world in consumer leisure, moralists attacked open sexuality or media violence. Divisions among groups, for example between more and less religious observers, but also tensions within individuals, generated recurrent anxiety.

A less political but vigorous crusade for better posture was another explicit reaction to advanced consumerism. Here too, standards had been set earlier, but in the nineteenth century few groups worried greatly about posture training. The situation changed by 1900. Various reformers began to mount posture training programs for schools. A National Posture League formed. Colleges starting testing students for posture, instituting remedial courses for those who failed. Parents were urged to discipline their children's posture, and kits were available to provide appropriate standards. Two concerns prompted the program, both related to consumerism. First, posture advocates noted the growing reliance on comfort, in furnishings and clothing; posture now had to be taught, because clothing and chairs did not provide automatic support. Second, posture became an emblem of the growing softness and temptation of life in consumer society. Too much ease might undermine moral fiber, and posture was a symbol of rigorous response.

Over time, by the 1940s and 1950s, the posture crusade receded, but the idea of moral antidote did not. Dieting and attacking weight centered another campaign for self-criticism and discipline clearly related to consumerism, and the movement took on particular moral overtones in the United States. Efforts to stay thin or become more slender began to develop in the 1890s, and accelerated fairly steadily from that point onward. Reasons included increasingly abundant food and increasingly sedentary jobs, along with changes in disease patterns that countered more traditional beliefs that plumpness was a sign of health, but many diet gurus also argued that keeping weight off signaled strength of character in an indulgent consumer society. Foods had already been identified as a key consumer symbol. What changed was the urgency and wide appeal of pleas for restraint in eating.

Fat became a clear sign of laziness and bad character. Doctors, urging weight loss, frequently commented more widely on the relationship between fat and "the changes in the mode of living that characterize present-day urban existence." Simon Patten, an economist who praised consumer progress in many respects, also urged control of "crude appetites", and the key was moderation in eating. Writing between 1895 and 1910, he repeatedly invoked the "steady improvement of appetite control." Increasingly, attacks on fat took on the characteristics of a moral crusade, particularly applicable to women but relevant to men as well.

The United States proved capable of generating additional campaigns to demonstrate moral control, in the cause of health but also to demonstrate good character in an age of abundance. Strongly moralistic attacks on smoking, in the 1970s, showed the eagerness with which many Americans could turn to new or renewed targets for abstinence, to show that they were not helpless victims of consumerism.

Conclusion: undercurrents of anxiety

The development and expansion of consumerism raised issues of personal goals and social purpose. At various times and places, many people expressed concern, and many more felt it, however obscurely. People who cherished more traditional values, including religious values, could not help but feel some tension with advancing consumerism. Consumer society also raised other issues, about relationships among social groups and between genders, that could sput dismay. People who benefited from one phase of consumerism, like shopkeepers, might suffer from a subsequent phase that featured other consumer apparatus such as department stores, and they would not be silent.

Like the development of consumer society itself, expressions of anxiety varied somewhat from one region to the next. The United States had produced fewer direct or political attacks on consumerism than other societies by 1900, but many Americans did generate a moral uneasiness that may have surpassed comparable developments in Western Europe. Certainly, all through the twentieth century, many Europeans found Americans' personal moralism distinctly odd. French doctors, to take one specific example, were just as eager to urge weight loss as their American counterparts, but they talked in terms of health and beauty alone, not morality; and they specifically condemned American tendencies to make overweight people feel they were deficient in character. In comparative terms, the United States by the 1900s had established both the most extensive consumer apparatus, and some of the most unabashed consumer interest, while also producing some distinctive signs of individual guilt and compensation. Even within the Western world, consumer societies and the responses they generated were not all the same.

Whether personal or political, attacks on consumerism rarely slowed the advance of consumer behavior in Western Europe or the United States. Only extreme situations, like Nazism in Germany, where anti-consumerism was part of a larger political tide, saw significant modifications – and even here, Hitler catered to some consumer impulses. Simply put, in most situations, from the eighteenth century onward, the forces propelling consumerism were stronger than those opposing it in the Western world. Criticisms of other people's consumer behavior, relatedly, proved easier than criticisms of one's own. Yet the anxieties consumerism caused were part of real history as well, even if they were not triumphant. Individuals and groups had mixed feelings, even as they increasingly indulged. Consumer society, even in its Western birthplace, was inherently complex, precisely because it challenged widely accepted norms. Had the anxieties about consumerism disappeared, in the Western world, by the advent of the twenty-first century?

Further reading

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