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INTRODUCTION

Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History

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"The American Dream is a vision of men as consumers, and the American story is the story of an inveterate struggle to embody this dream in the institutions of American life."

—Horace Kallen, 1936

"The basic myth of our culture is that consumption is the goal of life."

—Dallas Smythe, 1972

Consumption has long been central to American identity, culture, economic development, and politics. More than one commentator has called consumption the "national pastime" of the United States.¹ But America's long engagement with consumption has not been unchanging. The term itself has undergone a significant transformation. Once "consumption" was synonymous with wastefulness—a meaning that has not completely disappeared among critics, as several essays in this volume reveal. Over the course of the industrial revolution, however, consumption came to take on the more neutral, or even positive, connotation of productive social activity in a market economy. Even within any given era, "consumerism" has had a plurality of distinct and not always consistent significations: sometimes defined as excessive materialism, sometimes as a political movement of organized consumers.² It has been treated as moral danger, popular culture, economic policy, political activity, and as a symbol of modernity itself. The tension among these meanings throughout American history is emblematic of the ambivalence that Americans have felt—and continue to feel—about the part consumption plays in their lives. As James Gilbert has observed, "While American society is the most consumer-oriented in the world (in terms of the sheer number of material objects), it is also a society that quizzes itself endlessly about the effects of materialism, of inauthenticity, of defining oneself in terms of consumer objects."³

Despite transformations in both its significance and its sites of practice (consumption has shifted from the trading post to the internet, from the corner store to the department store, from the farm to the factory), consumption has been central to American national identity from the period of European

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exploration to the present. Equally important have been the longstanding, and unresolved, debates about the moral, economic, and political consequences of consumption, and the near constant stream of consumer philosophizing. For every advocate of the idea that simple living is the embodiment of the American spirit, there have been as many proponents of the contention that a deep and abiding materialism is the root of the nation's unique greatness. This is why both epigraphs at the beginning of this introduction are apt: consumption is central to both the material and ideological components of American identity; it is simultaneously a concrete institution and a guiding myth.⁴

A synopsis of consumption in American history suggests the important, if continually changing, place it holds.

- Commercial exchange was central to the earliest colonial encounters between Europeans and native Americans and transformed both cultures in what James Axtell calls "The First Consumer Revolution." Well before the industrial revolution made mass consumption possible, a commercial and nascent global economy placed consumption at the center of the cross-cultural exchange in the "Age of Exploration."
- During the colonial period, as the American population doubled every twenty-five years, the growing "middling classes" in the colonies began to purchase manufactured goods which they proudly displayed in their homes. Growing demand, a result of a marked increase in per capita wealth among colonists, spurred the industrial revolution, first in England and eventually in the United States.
- American religious leaders expressed concern about the potential for commercial avarice in the New World. New England Puritan ministers strove to ensure that merchants charged only "just prices," not market prices, for their ever-expanding array of imported goods. Yet at the same time the language of the market began to creep into religious discourse—a tension that has continued into the twentieth century as churches have aimed for limits on consumption while embracing parishioners as consumers.
- The American Revolution was in part a consumer revolution. The identity of the colonies as a nation, an "imagined community" to borrow Benedict R. O'G Anderson's phrase, grew out of the practices of wearing homespun clothing and boycotting British goods, most notoriously during the Boston Tea Party. The revolutionaries became the first in a long line of Americans to link consumption—or its withdrawal—and politics.
- The market revolution of the early nineteenth century brought mass-produced goods first to the urban, middle-classes and eventually to small-town America. As America shifted economically (in an uneven process) from a rural, subsistence society to an urbanizing, market-based one, the meaning of what constituted "necessities" changed. Rather than consuming only what was needed, Americans began to raise their standards of consumption.
- In the shorter hours movement, begun in antebellum America and intensifying with the eight-hour movement of the 1870s and 1880s, workers de-

manded more leisure. They argued that, to the extent that they produced the nation's goods, they deserved to enjoy their fair share of the fruits of their labor. For most American workers the work week steadily declined: from sixty-four hours in 1850, to sixty by 1890, to fifty-five by 1914, to forty by the 1930s.

- Along with the shorter hours movement, workers' demand for "living wages" (defined as reward for consumption needs rather than simply a productive equivalence) became central to organized labor's "consumerist turn" in the late nineteenth century. Thus the store and the cash register joined the shop floor as a place of labor struggle and activism.
- With the rise of the union label, first popularized in the immediate post-Civil War years, workers and labor reformers developed a model of solidarity based on consumption. The idea that consumption was not merely an individualist activity had already been argued by the American revolutionaries who ascribed social meaning to market activities; but in the late nineteenth century, consumerist solidarity began to take on its characteristically modern form. The twentieth century has seen it become one of America's dominant modes of political activism.
- Following the Revolution, but particularly after the Civil War, minority peoples frequently used boycotts and consumer activism as a political tactic to make claims for justice in the public sphere. Emboldened by a demand for what the historian Robin D. G. Kelley calls "consumer entitlement" through activism, African Americans, for example, boycotted Jim Crow streetcars in southern towns and cities in the 1890s when segregation was applied to the public transportation systems.⁵
- Through criticism by those identifying themselves as "white," of the standard of consumption of others (often in derogatory-gendered or racial language), consumption has also been a tool for injustice and discrimination, a way of marking outsiders. Even as the purchase of goods was being acclaimed as a key to American identity and citizenship, the business practices of "red lining" (keeping stores away from minority neighborhoods) and of making products and services unavailable to blacks served to exclude racial minorities from consumption. A 1906 pamphlet by Samuel Gompers and Herman Gustadt, *Meat vs. Rice: American Manhood against Asiatic Coolieism. Which Shall Survive?* made a consumerist argument for resuming the practice of legally preventing Chinese immigration.
- N. W. Ayer & Son, the first advertising agency, was created in 1877. By the end of the century, advertising had become a big business, a linchpin of the new corporate economy and a crucial purveyor of the American Dream. By 1900, corporations spent \$95 million a year on advertisements; by the end of World War I, American advertising had become a half a billion dollar a year industry.⁶
- In the nineteenth century, mail order catalogs led to the creation of what Daniel Boorstin calls "consumption communities," groups of Americans

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united by their purchases into the web of consumer culture. This form of purchase, which allowed anyone to buy national brands at standard prices through the anonymity of the postal system, appealed to African Americans and others who often faced maltreatment at the local store. Rural Americans, who lived far from stores able to offer them a big selection, also became enthusiastic catalog shoppers, especially after the late nineteenth-century advent of Rural Free Delivery.

• In the nineteenth century, consumption became what it continues to be today: a central part of American commercial and popular culture. "Cheap amusements"—commercial entertainments such as amusement parks, theaters, and dance halls—transformed the urban landscape, providing the arena for a new heterosocial public life and the abandonment of Victorian culture. Department stores, palaces of consumption, created a new consumer landscape for the largely female middle-class shoppers and working-class clerks: John Wanamaker's, A. T. Stewart's, R. H. Macy's, Gimbels, Jordon Marsh, and Filene's included amenities such as restaurants, electric displays, and wide varieties of merchandise. The new disease of "kleptomania" arose during this period as Victorian middle-class women faced the social pressures of the new consumer culture.

• Immigrants and urban newcomers, while continuing to assert their ethnic identity, also assimilated through what Andrew Heinze calls the "bridge" of consumer culture. It enabled the immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (whether Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, Jews in the metropolises of the Northeast, or Central Europeans in Chicago) to Americanize on their own terms, carving out identities as hyphenated Americans neither inhabiting the cultural world of the old country nor leaving behind their culture for an American one.

• Consumption became a gendered phenomenon, particularly in the late nineteenth century. For many families, shopping was a form of women's work; at the same time, the new commercial world afforded women new opportunities in the worlds of work and leisure.

• Two works of turn-of-the-century fiction politicized the meaning of "consumer society." Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1887) depicted an American utopia in which widespread consumerism obviated the need for class conflict. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) popularized the consumer movement and, with its stomach-turning depictions of the meatpacking industry, gave impetus to the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.

• In the most influential critique of the decadent consumer culture of the Gilded Age upper class, Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) brought the phrase "conspicuous consumption" into the national vocabulary.

• At the turn of the twentieth century a new kind of politicized consumption emerged. Known as the "consumer movement," it was a characteristically Progressive Era form of middle-class political engagement, with a special ap-

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peal for women. The founding of the New York Consumers League (1890) and the National Consumers League (1899) were key to the politicization of middle-class consumers. As Kathryn Kish Sklar notes in discussing women's political activism in the nineteenth century, it has often been the case that "consumer consciousness built political consciousness." In 1914, at the peak of the Progressive Era, Walter Lippmann wrote, "We hear a great deal about the class-consciousness of labor; my own observation is that, in America, today's consumer's consciousness is growing much faster."⁷

• During the Progressive Era, another facet of modern consumer society emerged: the assembly line. Henry Ford mass-produced the reasonably priced Model T and paid his workers \$5 per day so they could afford his cars and other fruits of mass production. The automobile became, in Daniel Boorstin's words, "the omnipresent symbol of American consumption communities" and the leading edge of the "Fordist" mass production/mass consumption model that dominated American business practices until the late twentieth century.⁸

• In 1927, the consumer movement, dormant in the immediate postwar years, was revived with the publication of Stuart Chase's and F. J. Schlink's *Your Money's Worth*. It became known as the "Uncle Tom's Cabin" of the consumer movement, a best seller, and a selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club.

• The 1930s saw the proliferation of a wide range of consumer organizations ranging from the Consumers Union to the League of Women Shoppers (slogan: "Use your buying power for justice") to consumer cooperatives. In addition to formal organizations, a number of grassroots movements emerged—including the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign of African American city dwellers. During this decade, the politicians and economists came to agree that underconsumption played a significant role in setting off the Great Depression. The New Deal responded with a host of measures aimed at bolstering the purchasing power of ordinary Americans. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union Address laid out "Four Freedoms," one of which was "freedom from want." In the speech, FDR called for "the enjoyment of the fruits of scientific progress in a wider and constantly rising standard of living."⁹

• The 1950s witnessed a new kind of American affluence dominated by suburbs and automobiles. Shopping malls proliferated from eight in 1945 to 3,840 by 1960. In two articles in the late 1950s, "Rocketing Births: Business Bonanza" and "A New, \$10-Billion Power: The U.S. Teen-Age Consumer," *Life* magazine argued that the baby boom generation—both infants and teens—was leading America to new levels of consumption, some of it family oriented (diaper services, clothing, food) and much of it individual (automobiles, record purchases, beauty care products).¹⁰

• In the mid-1950s, a new phase of consumerist protest, starting with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, launched the modern Civil Rights Movement.

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Several years later, sit-ins in Greensboro, Nashville, and elsewhere expanded the connection between consumption and civil rights. "Close your charge account with segregation, open up your account with freedom" was one of the slogans of the drive to integrate the lunch counter at Rich's department store in Atlanta.¹¹

- With the 1959 "kitchen debate," consumption entered foreign policy as Vice President Richard Nixon used the presence of modern appliances in American homes to make the case for the superiority of free market capitalism and Western democracy.
- President John F. Kennedy's 1962 message to Congress called for a "Consumer's Bill of Rights" which included the right to safety, the right to be informed, the right to choose, and the right to be heard in governmental decision making.
- David Caplowitz's *The Poor Pay More* (1963) brought national attention to the high cost of consumption for impoverished Americans.
- Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1964) revived national concern about the environmental consequences of mass consumption.
- In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson created the White House post of Special Assistant for Consumer Affairs and selected longtime consumer activist Esther Peterson to serve in the position.
- Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1965) launched the contemporary consumer movement with his claim that consumers were "manipulated, defrauded, and injured not just by 'fly-by-night' hucksters but by blue-chip business firms." Nader suggested that, "Giving consumers the know-how to help themselves is one of the most creative functions of government." The next year, Senator Philip Hart's (D-MI) "Truth in Packaging" bill was passed and signed into law.¹²
- Beginning in the late 1960s, the United Farm Workers brought consumption into the labor struggle once again. Agricultural workers urged middle-class consumers to refrain from purchasing grapes, so long as growers resisted union organizing campaigns and industry conditions remained dangerous.
- Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, apostles of the "simple life" revived this old American ideal even as the counterculture became a source of profits for big business.
- President Jimmy Carter's 1979 "Crisis of Confidence" speech warned Americans that "too many of us now worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things do not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence and purpose."¹³
- In the 1980s, critiques of Yuppie consumerism were outweighed by celebrations of American affluence. Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* (1985) parodied the emptiness—and danger—of American affluence by depicting trips

to the supermarket in competition with an "airborne toxic event" for the attention of the townspeople.

- Even as the 1990s witness new levels of consumer spending, marketing, and advertising, the decade also brings a revival of older notions of consumerism. Scorning companies that produce goods with cheap labor abroad and sweat shop labor at home, many critics have been led to call for a revival of consumer responsibility. Calling for a "Civic Consumers Coalition," the political theorist Benjamin Barber argues that consumers "can do plenty of things . . . to nurture greater corporate virtue."¹⁴ Concern about long work hours and declining real wages are also leading Americans to ponder once again the relationship between work and leisure.

The History of American Consumer History

The preceding capsule summary demonstrates that throughout American history, consumption has been widely practiced and encouraged. Consumerism (the various ideologies and movements built around consumption) has been central to economics and politics—hence the description of the United States as a "consumer society." Yet what exactly do these phrases mean? Despite the endless labeling of America as being a consumer society—sometimes with praise, other times with blame—until recently there were few serious analyses of the meaning and history of America's consumer society. Although central to the American experience, consumption has not been central to our frameworks for interpreting that experience.

The result has been a rather stale view of the history of America's consumer society: it appeared briefly in most textbooks as a phenomenon emerging alongside mass production in the 1920s; it then reappeared in these same texts as a part of the discussion of post-World War II affluence. These mentions in textbooks notwithstanding, few scholars treated the origins and development of a consumer society as a topic worthy of historical inquiry. (The "Classics" section of the "Bibliographic Essay" at the end of this collection lists a number of important works on the subject, many of them best sellers, written in early- and mid-twentieth century America; but rarely were these treatments historical in approach.)

For much of the twentieth century, intellectuals either celebrated or derided America's consumer society. What they rarely did was to treat it as a serious object of study. There were a few exceptions to this rule, such as David Potter's *People of Plenty* (1954). Yet even Potter held a curiously static view of consumption. Consumption to Potter was what the frontier was to Frederick Jackson Turner: the defining component of national character.¹⁵ (The difference was that whereas Turner worried about the declining frontier, Potter was made uneasy by the increasing flood of affluence.) In arguing that Americans were fundamentally a people of plenty and that the only variable that changed over

time was how much “plenty” the people had, Potter understated the transformations in the meaning and practice of consumption over the course of American history.

Dominated by the pious celebrations of cold war politicians—who conflated consumption and capitalism as the hallmark of the free world—and the moralistic and sometimes elitist dismissals by most scholars and public intellectuals—who denigrated consumer society for producing robotic suburban conformity—public discourse about consumption was equally impoverished. During the 1950s, Americans learned from Vice President Nixon, in the famous “kitchen debate,” that modern, affordable appliances were proof of the superiority of the West. (Nixon had not been the first to invoke consumption in the battle against communism. Two decades earlier, Franklin D. Roosevelt had claimed that if he could give one book to the Soviets to teach them about the West, it would be the Sears Catalog.) From intellectuals they heard complaints that the consumer society was making them corporate drones inordinately susceptible to peer pressure. They learned about the degrading character of the books they read, the movies they watched, and the music to which they listened. Interestingly, radicals and conservatives, who could agree on little else, found common ground on this issue: the left worried about the anaesthetizing impact of the consumer society on the masses and the right worried about the tendency of mass culture to level society to the lowest common denominator. Those with unconventional views advocating neither of these extremes—for example, the popular writer Vance Packard—were drowned out by convergence of the mass culture critique and the jingoistic celebration.¹⁶

The 1960s changed the nature of public discussion but had little discernable impact on scholarly treatments of consumerism. During this period, serious criticism of the meaning of consumer society emerged from a variety of quarters, alongside transformations in practices of consumption. Many counterculturalists challenged the consensus view that affluence was altogether a good thing. Hippies “dropped out,” leaving behind the superficial pleasures of the world of material goods for what they claimed was a deeper, purer, and simpler existence. Environmentalists warned against the dangers of overconsumption. During the Vietnam War era, the imperial relation between the developed world and the so-called Third World was scrutinized, particularly as it related to the West’s use of the raw materials of the non-Western World. The fact that the United States held six percent of the world’s population but used approximately forty percent of its resources ceased to be proof of American greatness and came to be seen as a serious problem. Ralph Nader’s consumer movement called on ordinary citizens to check the power of large corporations; ecologists challenged Americans to take into account the longterm effects of their consumption; Civil Rights activists made some of their most powerful claims for justice in the realm of consumption. “Every human has a vote every time he makes a purchase,” is how the ex-athlete and Civil Rights activist Jackie Robinson linked consumer and citizen.¹⁷

Yet the 1960s also produced countervailing forces that reinforced and greatly extended consumer society. Baby boomers became a huge niche audience for corporations producing magazines, records, films, foods, and restaurants that appealed to their countercultural sensibilities. Notwithstanding these crosscurrents, scholars examining these movements did not place consumption at the center of their analyses, nor did they produce a vocabulary or mode of analysis for understanding consumption.

It was only in the late 1970s and 1980s that historians began to treat consumption as an important part of the fabric of American life, one worthy of serious study. Attempting to move beyond the clichés of the survey textbook and the Manichean public discourse, many young scholars began to look anew at the meaning of consumption and to explore how consumption was interwoven with the American experience. Alongside this phenomenon came a recognition that an adequate understanding of consumer society required more than studying those who vocally opposed it. The area most fruitfully reconsidered in this pioneering consumer scholarship was popular culture, especially commercialized leisure. The scholarship examined consumption’s more visible cultural manifestations—the amusement park, the department store, advertising—attending to the inequalities of power based on class, race, and gender. At the same time, it pointed out the sometimes surprising tpsyturviness of the new commercial world in which, for example, working-class female clerks in department stores gained power from their interactions with middle-class female customers due to their insiders’ taste.¹⁸ This scholarship produced more complicated frameworks and nuanced views. Showing the limits of the binarism that had long dominated the discourse of consumerism, it demonstrated that unlike the intellectuals and politicians who tended to declare themselves for or against consumer society, most Americans lived, however ambivalently, firmly within consumer society. Their experiences could not be reduced to a simple thumbs up or down: they negotiated with consumer society; were occasionally seduced by it; and sometimes found ways to use it to increase their power.

Many of the authors in this collection treat consumerism as a problem even as they posit, however uneasily, its centrality to the American economy and identity. Building on the recognition that the actual behavior of Americans has conformed neither to moralistic mass culture criticism nor to cold war celebration, the current wave of consumer history scholarship—as represented in this collection—broadens the domain of inquiry beyond mass culture and commercial leisure. In the process, it discovers ranges of activity and thought that make consumption central not only to the history of mass consumption, but to American history more generally—including labor, environmental, gender, African American, political, business, immigration, religious, and intellectual history. Many of the scholars included here uncover the roots of current consumer practices in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries not by invoking mythic—and largely untested—ideas about American abundance, but by

studying nitty-gritty social and cultural history. The study of consumer society now extends to the examination of working-class families and budgets, labor ideology and practice, immigrant life, gender relations, the discourse of religious leaders, political activism, and many other aspects of life that for a long time had seemed far removed from consumer culture.

These scholars do not take the meaning of consumer society for granted. Showing that it is an essentially contested concept, they explore the question of whether consumer society should be understood as a level of material wealth; an infrastructure (i.e., corporations, advertisers, public relations agents, department stores, mail order catalogs, and gourmet coffee bars); a mindset that includes both self-description and self-consciousness as consumers; an economy in which mass production and mass consumption predominate; a political tactic; or a national identity. Collectively, the answer proposed in this volume is: all of the above. Rather than treating consumer society as an object of moral judgment (although, as Part V shows, it will, and should, remain subject to normative scrutiny), the new consumer historians use it as a window into understanding a broad range of issues in American history.

Consumer Society in American History is organized into six sections: Part I “Frameworks and Definitions”; Part II “Roots of American Consumer Society”; Part III “Class, Gender and Modernity, 1880–1940”; Part IV “Consumerism Since World War II”; Part V “Critiques and Celebrations”; and “Bibliographic Essay.” The book begins with definitions and theories, and concludes with assessments of the meaning of American consumer society. The middle three historical sections move chronologically from colonial America to the present, with an emphasis on the period from the end of the Civil War through the present. Addressing, from a historical point of view, the ways Americans in a wide range of contexts and time periods have talked about consumption and practiced it, this reader presents a number of scholarly frameworks (not all of them American) available for studying it. In an etymological analysis, Raymond Williams charts the history of the word “consumer” in Chapter 1, linking the change in the connotation of the word to the economic transformations of the industrial revolution. Colin Campbell suggests in Chapter 2 that consumption, which we tend to think of as one of our basest material activities, has an ethical, indeed idealistic, dimension. Individual pleasure has little to do with the real meaning of consumer society, Jean Baudrillard claims in Chapter 3. Rather, consumers society makes “pleasure a duty,” and consumption a “system of needs” in which we are surrounded by, but cannot appreciate, objects. In Chapter 4 James Fallows shows, in a comparison of Japan and the United States, that cultural explanations cannot fully explain how consumer societies emerge—that social policy affects consumer practices. In the final chapter of Part I, environmentalist Alan Durning harkens back to the older meaning of consumption as he warns of the ecological dangers of overconsumption.

In Part II, Chapter 6, James Axtell shows that consumption played a significant role in New World encounters between Native Americans and Europeans. T. H. Breen then argues in Chapter 7 that consumption played a role in forging American identity during the revolutionary era. Chapter 8 is devoted to Joyce Appleby’s exploration of the reason consumption has been the “linchpin of our modern social system,” though it has “never been the linchpin of our theories to explain modernity.” As Elizabeth Cohen, George Sanchez, and Andrew Heinze demonstrate in Chapters 9, 10, and 11 of Part III, immigrants have used consumer society to help them Americanize while maintaining their ethnic identities. Then Mark Swencicki explains, in Chapter 12, that nineteenth-century men, despite their attempt to pin the label of “consumer” on women, spent a good deal of money on consumer activities. In Chapter 13 Cheryl Greenberg shows that the less powerful can use consumption to make claims, in her analysis of the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaigns organized by Harlem’s African American community during the 1930s.

Part IV opens with H. F. Moorhouse arguing, in Chapter 14, that although it was a form of leisure, the culture of hot rodders was one that stressed hard work and despised convenient commercial short cuts. In Chapter 15 Elaine Tyler May links consumption and domestic ideology to the Cold War. Then, in Chapter 16, Robert E. Weems, Jr., examines the phenomenon of corporations taking advantage of racial identities to sell products. Chapter 17 by Juliet B. Schor and Chapter 18 by Kim Moody note that time and money, key aspects of consumer society, are intimately connected to the quality of workers’ lives. John Elkington, Julia Hailes, and Joel Makower advocate market-based environmentalism in Chapter 19.

The contention of Michael Schudson in Part V, Chapter 20 is that analysts of consumer society have repeatedly echoed three persistent lines of criticism: Puritan, Quaker, and Republican. In Chapter 21 and 22, Steven Waldman and Wendell Berry extend the tradition of the jeremiad in forceful critiques of the political and moral consequences of modern consumer culture. Jean-Christophe Agnew postulates in Chapter 23 that perhaps the most salient characteristic of American consumer society is the continually debated significance of that society.

As the essays in this collection reveal, to say that America is a “consumer society” is to say many things. Key issues that emerge from this collection include:

America’s long engagement with consumption. Obviously, the practices of consumption and the ideologies of consumerism have changed dramatically over time; but they are not recent phenomena. They are deeply-rooted, if constantly changing, components of American society.

The transition question. Is there a “critical point,” as David Potter posited, when “society shifts from production to consumption”? When did the United States become a consumer society? Has it always been one? Were Americans born to shop? Did they learn to do so? Or were they coerced?

These are questions for history as well as politics, questions about when the transition occurred and about national identity. For every Horace Kallen who argued in 1936 that consumption was an American "birthright," meaning a fundamental and original characteristic of national identity, there is a William Leach who argued that Americans were forcibly "enticed into consumer pleasure and indulgence" by the new corporate culture of the twentieth century. No longer is consumer society automatically equated with a particular era or set of economic or technological features. Rather than a single transition, there has been a continuous tension in American history between consumer and producer values.¹⁹

Work. While labor and consumption are opposites in common parlance, consumption is frequently described as a form of work or an unworthy replacement for work. Indeed, American consumer scholarship began with Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) which expressed the view that consumer society undermined the "instinct of workmanship." It valorized *homo consumens* rather than *homo faber* when, Veblen believed, it is the latter that gives humanity true happiness and satisfaction. In consumer society, many critics argue, echoing Jean Baudrillard, play becomes work as it turns pleasure into a product that we are rather joylessly compelled to seek and buy. "In the modern world," John Lukacs writes, "the production of consumption has become more important than the consumption of production."²⁰ The movement of goods, in the view of these writers, becomes more important than the making or the enjoyment of them; the "good life" has become confused with the "goods life." So while work and consumption seem to be worlds apart, in consumer society the two become linked in a variety of ways.

Gender. Consumption has always been a gendered phenomenon. That is to say, men and women have experienced consumption differently. Women's consumption (i.e., grocery shopping) has often been a form of unpaid labor. In addition, as the Victorian era waned, one of the ways in which women entered the public sphere was through the commercialized world of consumption—the department store, the amusement park, the movie theater; all became acceptable sites for middle-class women to appear.

Discourse. The practices of consumption have contributed to the making of the United States as a consumer society, but equally important—perhaps more so—has been the constant stream of talk about consumption. This discourse has taken many forms, from acute anxiety (owing to concern about the moral damage done by consumption) to boisterous celebration (because widespread consumption has been seen as proof of freedom). Indeed, from the beginning, America's relation to consumption has been profoundly ambivalent. While it has been consistently linked to personal and political freedom in addition to the health of the economy, it has also been deemed central to economic inequality, the eclipse of traditional values, and the valorization of artifice.

Incorporation and Difference. Consumption is often described as a homogenizing force (the gist of the "mass culture critique" that reigned as the primary mode of analysis of consumer society for much of the twentieth century), or as a trivializing force which reduces politics to shallow materialism. As one historian has recently written, "At its root, twentieth-century consumer capitalism stood for a new kind of equality . . . the right of every American to push a shopping cart and to decide what brought happiness."²¹ Yet consumption is also a site at which matters of power and difference are played out. Gender, class, ethnicity, and nationhood have all been heavily shaped by consumption.

Freedom. Consumption and freedom have long been linked; to some the linkage is illusory and to others it is very real. Marketplace choice, personal fulfillment, and political justice have all been connected to consumption, as has the corresponding critique that these values can never be gained through the commercial nexus of consumption. Consumption has been closely linked to the crusade for social justice in the following variations: 1) all Americans have a right to the bounty that the American people create—to a so-called American standard of living; 2) justice demands that one person's money is as good as another's; 3) the right to consumption, in a capitalist democracy, should not be restricted to particular groups.

Organized non-consumption. As many of these essays note, in American history the withdrawal of consumption has occasionally been as important as the act of consumption. In a consumer society, choosing not to consume—and encouraging or forcing others not to do so—has been claimed as a political act by Americans from the Revolution to the present day.

Consumption is woven into the fabric of American life—it is bound up with national unity as well as fragmentation; democracy as well as inequality; conformity but also protest; work and play. Through their explorations of these tensions in consumer society, the essays in this volume help explain American history itself.

Notes

1. Alan Stein Durning *How Much is Enough: The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth*, (New York: Norton, 1992): 8; Barry Schwartz, *The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life* (New York: Norton, 1994): 162. Durning notes: "In the perception of most of the world's people, the consumer life-style is made in America." (8)
2. Roger Swagler, "Evolution and Application of the Term Consumerism: Themes and Variations," *Journal of Consumer Policy* 18 (1995): 347–60. For other helpful attempts to define these terms see, Juliet B. Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting and the New Consumer*, (New York: Basic Books, 1998): 224; Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Buckingham, U.K.: Open University Press, 1998): 23–6; and, in this book, Mark A. Swencicki, "Consuming Brotherhood."
3. James B. Gilbert, "Introduction: From Power to Culture," *The Maryland Historian* 19 (Spring-Summer 1988): 2–3.

4. The epigraphs are drawn from the following sources: Horace Kallen, *The Decline and Rise of the Consumer: A Philosophy of Consumer Cooperation* (New York: Appleton, 1936): 198; Dallas Smythe, "Buy Something," in *In the Marketplace: Consumerism in America*, ed. Frank Browning et al. (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1972): 167.
5. August Meter and Elliot Rudwick, "Negro Boycotts of Jim Crow Streetcars in Tennessee," *American Quarterly* 21 (Winter 1969), 755-63; Robin D. G. Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem": Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History* 80 (June 1993): 75-112. Quotation 104.
6. Figures cited in Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations of Everyday Life, 1876-1915*, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991): 157.
7. Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995): 23; Lippmann quoted in *Encyclopedia of the Consumer Movement*, ed. Stephen Brobeck et al. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1998): 586.
8. Daniel J. Boorstin quoted in James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1990): 168.
9. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, State of the Union Address, January 6, 1941.
10. "Rocketing Births: Business Bonanza," *Life* (June 15, 1958): 83-9; "A New, \$10-Billion Power: The U.S. Teen-Age Consumer," *Life* (August 31, 1959): 78-85.
11. See the recollections of Julian Bond and Lonnie King in Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York: Penguin, 1977): 88.
12. Ralph Nader, *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1972; New York: Grossman, 1965): xxvi.
13. Jimmy Carter, "The Crisis of Confidence," July 15, 1979.
14. Benjamin R. Barber, *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998): 101-4.
15. For a recent version of Turner's famous 1893 address, see *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," and Other Essays*, with commentary by John Mack Faragher (New York: Henry Holt, 1994).
16. Jackson Lears writes in a review of Daniel Horowitz's *Vance Packard and American Social Criticism*, "the major critics of consumption failed to see how consumption and display can play crucial roles in any society's development of art, ritual, and shared social meaning." See "The Hidden Persuader," *New Republic* (October 3, 1994): 32-6.
17. Jackie Robinson, "Must Project a More Realistic Image of Negro," *Advertising Age* (July 1964): 84.
18. Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).
19. Kallen, *Decline and Rise of the Consumer*: 94; William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1993): 3-4. See also Jackson Lears, "Beyond Veblen: Rethinking Consumer Culture in America," in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York: Norton, 1989): 73-97. Lears writes on p. 77, "it may be a mistake to argue a shift from the plodding nineteenth century to the carnivalesque twentieth: the carnival may have been in town all the time."
20. Quoted in Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989): 36.
21. David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s*, (Hill and Wang: New York, 1994): 64. But Farber points out on the very next page that African Americans were justifiably angry about their exclusion from the bounty that came to see as a birthright of those born in the "American Century."