Chapter 2

SUSAN STRASSER

THE ALIEN PAST
Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective[1]

SUSAN STRASSER, AN AMERICAN HISTORIAN, argues in this essay that the introduction of consumer culture was a radical shift in our society. It was so radical, in fact, that many elements of a pre-consumer society would seem extremely strange—even alien—to us. We have experienced a major shift not just in our society (how goods are produced and distributed), but also in our culture (how we think about products—how we interpret them), including shifts in our value systems, which is what Strasser emphasizes. Strasser notes that "common sense" modern values like efficiency, convenience, and obsolescence were greatly enhanced—if not created—by consumer culture. For example, in pre-industrial America, especially for the non-wealthy, people's work lives were often inseparable from their family and social lives. The idea of "convenience" made very little sense in this social context. As modern products and modern ways of selling these products developed, convenience became a major value in modern consumer culture. But it is not a neutral term; it assumes that time is valuable, that there is a separation of our labor and leisure time, that leisure time is desirable and often involves consumption of goods and services, that life does not mean labor, and that leisure is desirable. Through advertising, leisure becomes a *goal* of modern living, not just an attribute used to sell a product.

The same modern emphasis applies to the concept of obsolescence. Originally a concept only for fashion, obsolescence refers to replacing old goods with new goods even if the old goods are still functional: this year's latest fashion replaces last year's "old" fashion. Consumer culture applied obsolescence to nearly all product categories as a way to regulate market demand. And so we think of products beyond their material function, as a fashionable accessory. New lines of cars come out ever year, even if no new technological advance is implemented. Electronics like MP3 players are released in different colors and designs that do not enhance functioning, but instead are "fashionable electronics." Such value systems would be strange indeed to the average person living in pre-1850s America.

The perspective of historical change is intrinsically complicated, and the development of consumer society has proceeded unevenly. Even in a given city or region, there have been many kinds of consuming households at any historical moment, thanks to the multiplicity of personal tastes and of cultural and class lifestyles. Within households, generations understand consumption issues quite differently (and often come into conflict about them), for the new is normal to the young. Interacting with the many kinds of households and the many kinds of individual consumers have been many kinds of businesses, large and small, both making and distributing many kinds of goods, services, and marketing materials.

As if this multiplicity were not complication enough, new ways have coexisted with old ones. Rich people have usually bought new products before poor people did, people in the city before their country cousins, and teenagers before their grandmothers. People who have bought new products have also kept some of their old things and maintained some of their old ways. Early-twentieth-century American farmers both ordered from the Sears catalogue *and* bartered eggs at the crossroads general store; housewives kept chickens *and* lit their homes with electricity during the depression of the 1930s: children of the 1950s jumped rope *and* watched television; shoppers today use credit cards for internet shopping *and* bargain with cash at yard sales.

Even the most significant cultural shifts, then, happen piecemeal. People create historical change by living their lives, making decisions that they may consider trivial or wholly personal but that have critical effects in the aggregate. Individuals' lives transform incrementally, in response to new technologies, new opportunities, new attitudes formed in interaction with neighbors as well as with the popular media, and their own stages in the life cycle. Over the long run, bit by bit, seemingly unconnected and unprofound events in millions of lives form patterns, but new developments interact in complex ways and exhibit contradictions and incongruities that frustrate the historian's effort to tell a clear story of cause and effect or even to provide accurate generalizations. Nor may consumers perceive changes in production and distribution even as they help make them. Over the course of a long transition, they might recognize new practices and routines only in retrospect.

The Household and the Industrial Order

Even when they have discerned trends, consumers generally have not changed their ways in response to that awareness. More often, they made practical decisions. People chose plumbing to make their lives easier; they preferred electric lights to kerosene lamps because electricity gave more light with none of the dirty work; they bought ready-made clothing because they wanted to spend their time on other things besides sewing. Shorter hours and better working conditions – less hard physical labor, in safer and more comfortable circumstances – distinguish twentieth-century housework as they distinguish other twentieth-century labor in industrialized countries. Like other workers, the housewife lost control of her work process; manufacturers exerted their control on her through product design and advertising rather than through direct supervision. The clock and the calendar replaced the sun as arbiter of everyone's time. But, while other workers labored in groups, housewives lost the growing daughters and full-time servants who worked with them at home, the iceman and the street vendors who came to their houses, the sewing circle and the group of women around the well.

That isolation, combined with the illusory individualism of consumerism, intensified the notion that people could control their private lives at home, protected behind the portals of their houses from the domination of others.

That idea was a central legacy of the industrial order, which – in theory, at least – separated the home from the rest of society. Entrepreneurs gathered workers together in factories to produce goods for profit, equipping them with machines and raw materials, and supervising their labor to ensure peak production. At first, many people still made their livings from agriculture and home-based handcrafts, and by modern standards the early factories look small and inefficient. But working in a factory was different, indeed, from working at home, where women continued to supervise themselves, isolated from the dominant trends of the new society in what American popular writers, around 1825, began to call their own "sphere." In its most extreme form, this doctrine of separate spheres conceptualized a private realm – the arena of consumption and of leisure, the domain of women – that stood apart from and even opposed a public sphere of men, work, and production.

But the distinctions between the sphere of the household and the world of industry were always blurry. Families had to adapt to industrial workers' new schedules; natural cycles of light and dark could not dictate routine when some family members lived by the clock. The very relationships of production and consumption presupposed some connections between homes and businesses. Factories produced goods that helped people adapt to urban industrial life: soap for urban dwellers who had no reserves of fat left from slaughtering, lamps and lamp oils to brighten the time left after work. Indeed, historians have amassed considerable evidence about topics that show the separate spheres idea to have been primarily ideological, describing the productive work women did both in factories and in homes, as well as public leisure activities at dance halls, saloons, and sporting events.

Toward a Consumer Culture

Eventually, mass production and mass distribution amplified industrialization and industrial culture, bringing large numbers of people many more new products and services: gas, electricity, running water, prepared foods, ready-made clothes, and factory-made furniture and utensils. The decisive changes happened between about 1890 and 1920 in the United States; the timing was different in other countries, and the process is still going on in some parts of the world. With these products, households became the direct beneficiaries of a profound economic transformation, led by large corporations that sold goods over long distances. Standardized, uniform products that cost money were manufactured in highly mechanized factories, organized for efficiency as defined by Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford. The new products transformed the texture of daily life. They replaced the various makeshifts that had constituted most people's subsistence, and began to substitute for much of the massive productive and maintenance work once done by housewives and servants. Mass communications brought information about the rest of the world, and new ideas about doing household work, as well as advertisements. Electric and telephone wires, water and gas pipes literally joined the private household to the public world.[2]

The foundation for the rapid cultural transformation that accompanied mass production had been laid throughout a long period of change. Beginning a century before with the textiles of the industrial revolution, new products had come sooner to the cities than to the countryside, while in both rural and urban environments, wealthy people enjoyed more benefits from economic growth than did the poor. Business cycles brought depressions regularly, each graver than the one before as more people depended on wages and manufactured products and as more businesses engaged in trade over longer distances. As production moved out of households and artisans' shops, an ever-expanding market for manufactured goods was not only an economic abstraction. Whether they bargained with rural peddlers or shopped at big-city department stores with fixed prices, customers traded in an environment of constant change. New products from new companies – indeed, new kinds of products from new kinds of companies – found their way into those stores, and into people's homes and daily routines.

Branded, standardized products came to represent and embody the new networks and systems of mass production and distribution, the social relationships that brought people the things they used. Household routines involved making fewer things and purchasing more; consumption became a major part of everyday life and of household work. Formerly customers – purchasing the objects of daily life from familiar craftspeople and storekeepers in networks of relationships based in villages, small towns, and big-city neighborhoods – people became consumers. They bought and used mass-produced goods as participants in a developing global market composed of masses of people associating with big, centrally organized companies. Decision-making at those companies was increasingly driven by marketing rather than production; they aimed to create markets, not merely to satisfy them. As consumers came to depend on complex goods from distant sources, they came to understand less about how things were made, how they worked, how they could be fixed.

New ways of relating to the objects of everyday life – the material culture of a developing consumer society – developed along with the new physical and economic landscape. Everyday objects are artifacts of culture; they represent and are embedded in human relationships. The plastic takeout food container is analogous to the Indian tiffin, the Japanese bento box, and the leaves that people in less industrialized cultures wrap food in. Everyday objects embody both the relationships and routines of private life and the social relationships of production and distribution. Though both will wash, a chunk of soap handmade from wood ashes and animal fat, to be used by its maker, is an artifact distinct from a bar of Ivory Soap, labeled with its Universal Product Code and sold at a supermarket. Chemically dissimilar and made with tools and processes from separate eras, the two soaps incorporate quantitatively different amounts of human labor in qualitatively different forms: the handmade soap produced for use, the factory-made manufactured in order to generate wages and profits. The uniformity of the modern soap hides the human involvement in its production. Its distribution depends on telephones, computers, refined fossil fuels, and the people who make those technologies possible. Cost accounting, corporate law, stock-market fluctuations, and the whole panoply of contemporary financial procedures and government policies regulate both production and distribution of every bar.

Many public events, then, coincided with the private behavior of consumers to create the shift from a production-driven to a consumption-driven culture. New needs surfaced in tandem with new products and with the new habits that characterized urban industrial society. Unprecedented changes in daily routines were entangled with new and old customs, ideas, attitudes, social organization, religion, environment, and economic organization – in short, the elements of culture. Markets *per se* were certainly not new; in America, even so-called subsistence farmers had always done some trading for goods such as salt and tools. But now the market came to be understood as the only way of satisfying needs, wants, and desires. As a global consumer culture developed, daily life underwent profound changes that truly rendered the past as alien, changing consumers' fundamental relationships with their bodies and with the material world.

The Ideal of Convenience

Convenience, for example, because a feature of products advertised as worth paying for, a value expounded by the advertising for a wide range of products.[3] Like efficiency in the factory, convenience in the home was intended to save time and reduce wasted effort, but the concept went further. Factory efficiency offered the "one best way" to do a job from the employer's point of view. It never promised freedom from work itself. The concept of convenience, on the other hand, was used in marketing to suggest that products could liberate housewives from troubles ranging from annoyance to hard labor. Modern products offered release from the responsibility of caring for material goods, the stewardship of objects and materials that characterized relationships to the material world throughout the nineteenth century, when even factory-made goods were cleaned, mended, sharpened, and used over and over. By the 1920s, advertising proposed that purchasing rust-free aluminium pans or throwaway paper handkerchiefs offered consumers the leisured lifestyles once accessible only to wealthy people with servants.

The American philosopher Thomas F. Tierney writes that convenience is central to "the hold which technology has on modernity . . . an integral part of the modern self." Assisted by technology, Tierney suggests, the modern household focuses not merely on satisfying the demands of the body for food, clothing, and shelter, but on satisfying them quickly. The needs of the body are understood as limits: "inconveniences, obstacles, or annoyances" that impinge on time. The products of modern technology appeal to consumers because they alleviate inconvenience by helping them satisfy their bodies' needs in as little time as possible, according to Tierney (1993, pp. 6, 30, 36).

Certainly time was central to convenience as it was interpreted by American advertising of the 1920s. "Women, whose time must not be wasted, value the simplicity and reliability of the Hotpoint Vacuum Cleaner," that company declared in a 1923 advertisement. Packaged food ads counted minutes. Wheatena cereal could be prepared in "just 2 minutes of boiling and bubbling"; consumers of Borden's condensed milk could whip up a snack of hot chocolate and macaroons "in just nineteen minutes." Grape Nuts cereal did not have to be cooked at all, a welcome solution for the special problem that breakfast posed in the modern household. A 1927 ad for the product depicted the chaos of morning with a Cubist-inspired drawing juxtaposing a frantic couple at the table with fragments of clock faces. "Is there no hope?" read the copy.[4]

One way to save time was by saving steps to make things accessible or handy, an approach suggested by industrial time and motion studies. This aspect of convenience sometimes had the particularly profitable feature of requiring that consumers purchase duplicates of a product. "Telephones near at hand," suggested an advertisement for the American Telephone and Telegraph Company in the late 1920s, "for Comfort and

Convenience." The company's campaign for extension phones sought to break down an attitude that the telephone was a utility, not to be used for frivolous conversation. The text of this ad recommended extra phones in rooms that most people didn't even have: the dressing-room, the library, and the sun porch. Like so many other advertisements for household products, this one showed a well dressed woman with a servant near at hand (Marchand, 1985, pp. 177–219).

Many advertisements used such upper-class imagery, implying that products could stand in for the servants that most American women could only wish for. The Edison Electric Appliance Company actually called its line of small appliances—iron, toaster, curling iron, chafing dish, and the like—"Hotpoint Servants." The naphtha in Pels-Naptha soap made it seem "as if you had hundreds of tiny helpers doing the rubbing for you." Procter and Gamble's laundry soap could be thought of "as a laundress—not merely as soap." Laundry product advertising promised emancipation from the care and responsibility that washing clothes had required in a previous era. Women whose mothers had made their own soap, and heated washwater on the stove after carrying it from wells or creeks, might well regard running water and commercial laundry products as liberating.[5]

Beyond efficiency, then, convenience was a synonym and a metaphor for freedom, a form of well-being that products could provide, an amalgam of luxury, comfort, and emancipation from worries. In this sense, convenience was much like the satisfaction that consumers were expected to derive from the service offered by the turn-of-the-century department store. "Give your home the convenience of Frigidaire," the refrigerator subsidiary of General Motors recommended in 1925. "It is entirely automatic – nothing to replenish, nothing to worry about." The Frigidaire offered "freedom from the possible annoyance of outside ice supply – automatic day-after-day, week-after-week operation, without any attention on your part."[6]

Indeed, convenience meant freedom from work itself. The general claim was applied to all kinds of products. "What a convenience electric light is," General Electric captioned a picture of an 18th century woman dipping candles in a 1925 ad. "The early settlers had to learn to make candles themselves – the most arduous of their women's tasks. *Your* light comes at a finger touch."[7] Candle-making had actually not been so arduous two centuries earlier as the ad implied – it was done infrequently, and many households purchased their candles. But this history lesson seemed credible because the readers of American women's magazines ran their households with a wide range of technology in the mid-1920s. Nobody dipped candles anymore, but everybody understood that most household tasks could be done with more or less labor. Floors might be swept with brooms, carpet sweepers, or vacuum cleaners. The advertising for laundry products made washday look easy and pleasant whether a woman labored over a washboard or used the hand-cranked machines of the day. Chipso, a flaked soap that Procter & Gamble introduced with considerable fanfare in 1925, "cuts work in half," bringing "washday relief" to women whether or not they used a washing machine. "Please don't make a mistake," one ad insisted. "CHIPSO is not a special soap for a *special* method. It doesn't say 'Change your method and I will help you.' It says, 'Wash as you like – I will make your work easier.' "[8]

The point of the ads was that every woman should have her work cut in half – indeed, that no woman should really have to work very hard, whatever her laundry technology. The fundamental assumptions about life and labor that had prevailed everywhere before the twentieth century, for all but the aristocracy, were now regarded as arguments for drudgery, a word repeated endlessly in the ads. "Free from the drudgery of 'oven watching,' " promised a company that made thermostats for gas ranges, as if checking the oven temperature had once been seriously burdensome or time-consuming. "The woman of today has far too much use for her time and strength to waste it watching an oven in a hot kitchen."[9]

The "convenience" of modern products took many forms; the word was used in advertising and in marketing literature to cover a multitude of positive attributes, especially savings in labor and time, and freedom from attention, care, and responsibility. Convenience was promoted as a potential benefit of so many products that it became one of the aims of modern living, an attribute of the modern lifestyle and of the entire panoply of consumer goods that modern life required. It joined cleanliness among the selling points for a wide variety of products that transformed Americans' relationship to the material world. In a few decades, the ideal of the durable and reusable was displaced by aspirations of leisure and luxury. A level of ease and cleanliness that had once been attainable only with many servants – if at all – could now be achieved by buying things, and even by throwing things away. With Kleenex, you could always have a clean handkerchief with no work.

Obsolescence as a Marketing Tool

"Convenience" was only one of the enticements for American consumers of the 1920s. Technological improvements made many new products work better than their predecessors. Radios provide a historical example of technological obsolescence that seems familiar to those of us who have by now owned and discarded several computers. In automobile sales, the technological advances symbolized by the Model T Ford were giving way to fashion – style changes made independent of utility – symbolized by the General Motors cars that eventually forced Ford, too, to change styles. Many other products as well brought fashion into their sales strategies during the period after World War I. More and more things were made and sold with an expectation that they would soon be worthless or obsolete.

The French social critic Gilles Lipovetsky calls contemporary consumer culture an "empire of the ephemeral."[10] He argues that its central feature is the extension of the principle of fashion – obsolescence on the basis of style – to material goods other than clothing and to a broad spectrum of people, "a society restructured from top to bottom by the attractive and the ephemeral." Fashion's "abbreviated time span and its systematic obsolescence have become characteristics inherent in mass production and consumption," he writes, and "consumers spontaneously hold that the new is by nature superior to the old." In Lipovetsky's view, this generalization of the fashion process defines consumer society, which depends on the expansion of needs and "reorganizes mass production and consumption according to the law of *obsolescence, seduction*, and *diversification*" (Lipovetsky, 1994, pp. 5, 134–135).

The expansion of fashion into new realms was part of a more general development in the history of marketing. In the decades before World War I, American manufacturers came to understand that markets were not shaped by pre-existing supply and demand, but could be developed and extended. In the pages of their trade journals, marketers spelled out the principles for selling more. Repositioning a product could increase the market; thus Carnation canned milk, once sold to mining expeditions, moved into the home. Markets could be expanded by suggesting more uses for products: Nearly every successful food company gave away recipe booklets full of ideas for using more of its product, while Procter and Gamble advertised that Ivory soap could be used both in the bath and the laundry. Year-round demand was created for products previously considered seasonal. And manufacturers found that they could sell more of products as different as phonographs and canned foods if they offered a range of options, different grades at different prices.[11]

Encouraging people to replace goods before the old ones were used up was another strategy for increasing markets, and fashion a means for doing so. A wide range of consumer goods could be sold according to the principles that French critic Roland Barthes describes as fundamental to fashion. "If the garment is replaced as soon as it is worn out," he explains, "there is no Fashion; . . . if the garment is worn beyond its natural replacement time, there is pauperization; . . . if a person buys more than he wears, there is Fashion, and the more the rhythm of purchase exceeds the rhythm of dilapidation, the stronger the submission to Fashion" (Barthes, 1983, pp. 297–298). Lipovetsky adds that manufacturers convince consumers to buy more of what they already have by offering more options. Products "are never offered in just one unique form; increasingly, the consumer is invited to choose between one variant and another, between one set of accessories, or gamuts, or programs, and another, and to combine the elements of each more or less freely. Like haute couture, mass consumption implies the increasing of models, the diversification of series, the production of optional differences, the stimulation of a personalized demand" (Lipovetsky, 1994, p. 80).

No Limits to Fashion

By the 1920s, American academic analysts of household life noted that modern fashion went well beyond the wardrobe. In his 1923 text *Economics of the Household*, Benjamin R. Andrews listed its characteristics: "(1) The immense number of objects to which it extends; (2) the uniformity of fashion, which knows no territorial or class limit; and (3) the maddening tempo of the changes of fashion" (p. 384). Economist Hazel Kyrk attributed the extension of fashion to technological change – decreasing production costs and new materials. Manufacturers could not be blamed for the maddening tempo or for their desire to change styles, she explained. Some innovated, evaluating the potential profits and risks that accrued from being the first to introduce new fashions. But others chose not to, fearful of failure or because postponing change allowed them to dispose of stock on hand or to utilize dies or patterns to their fullest (Kyrk, 1923, p. 267).

Historian Roland Marchand has shown that the process of extending fashion to a wide variety of objects was well under way in the 1920s, especially with respect to color, which could be varied without redesigning products or retooling factories. Marchand explains that color offered manufacturers a way of converting staple goods, purchased according to Barthes' "rhythm of dilapidation," into fashion goods, purchased on the basis of desire. Many products that had once come in standard black or white were now available in rainbow hues. Parker offered a pen with a red barrel: Willys-Overland pioneered the colored automobile during the early 1920s. By 1927, Marchand writes, "a writer in *Printers' Ink* had enthroned color as 'the sex appeal of business' " (1985, pp. 122, 123).

Color fashions were marketed for every room in the house, to people of all classes. The Montgomery Ward company – which served a rural and working class market with its mail order catalog and a few urban stores – advertised bathroom sinks, tubs, and toilets that met "the modern demand for COLOR in Bathroom Fixtures." So did the more expensive Crane company. To coordinate with the plumbing – or for those who wanted to spruce up their bathrooms but could not afford new fixtures – textile manufacturers introduced colored towels, previously available only in white. "The plain vanilla, so to speak, of the modern bathroom is turning pistachio and orange!" one of those manufacturers rejoiced in the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1927, recommending towels to match the soap. "If you are fond of color schemes – and what woman is not? – try having the bathroom appear in towels bordered with blue and orange one week, lavender and green the next." The ad claimed that accommodating to seasonal and weekly rhythms in bathroom fashion "costs no more money," but of course it did.[12]

There were other voices besides those of the advertisers. Most women could never afford new bathroom fixtures, and many continued to equip their houses with hand-embroidered kitchen towels made out of flour sacks rather than colored bath towels from the department store. Academics still read the work of Thorstein Veblen, whose *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) had analyzed and satirized the rise of consumerism. Engineers promoted standardization, insisting that vast resources were being wasted because products came in too many styles and sizes. The American Society for Thrift, established in 1914 and active well into the 1920s, organized school lessons on saving (American Society for Thrift, 1915; Chamberlain, 1928). And in *Middletown*, their best-selling study of Muncie, Indiana, the sociologists Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd (1929) observed the emerging consumer culture with a critical eye.

A Cultural Juggernaut

But savings lessons represented an old ethic, and even the strongest advocates of standardization and thrift had to make those concepts palatable to readers steeped in the new consumer culture. Nearly every discussion of standardization included an obligatory explanation that nobody was advocating standardized sofas or women's hats. In 1925, the editor of the *Journal of Home Economics* even redefined thrift to mean "wise spending of money" (Tucker, 1991, p. 69).[13] Despite the complaints of the critics, the development of a consumer culture was changing the relationships of the market, the activities of the household, and the meanings of work.

And they have continued to change. In the United States between the world wars, some clothes were made at home; most women bought coats, for example, but many made and mended their housedresses and their children's clothes. Canned food was widely available, but restaurants were for traveling and special occasions; most meals were prepared in private kitchens, from scratch. Except in the South, where African American women tended small children of both races, infants and toddlers were generally cared for by family members.

Since World War II, the production of clothing and food have become more public affairs, increasingly fulfilled by machines and systems designed by corporations for their own profit. Even childcare has taken on market overtones. Religious organizations and political parties employ marketing techniques developed for toothpaste. The services of doctors and educators are construed as commodities. Everyone is defined as a consumer; even presidents are not exempt, as the senior George Bush learned during his presidency when he was ridiculed for never having seen the automatic checkout scanners common in American supermarkets. Consumption is the reason people work, and equal opportunity to consume is entangled with concepts of citizenship. American consumption is shaped by persistent, well-crafted indoctrination, created in the interests of increasingly concentrated economic, political, and cultural power. For more than a century, advertisers, marketers, and the developers of retail space have diverted consumers from that reality by associating buying itself with leisure, pleasure and fantasy.

But we do our critique a disservice if we narrate history as a tale of conspiracy. The process that makes people into consumers amalgamates changing ideas, habits, technology, demographic trends, and many other facets of culture that even the most powerful marketers cannot control. Corporate managers did not necessarily set out to create needs, nor did they do so in any straightforward way. They made products in order to sell them. Their goal, in Thorstein Veblen's words, was the "quantity-production of customers," the making of consumer markets (1923, p. 305). The manipulative power of even the largest and most expensive marketing efforts was limited by ethnic, regional, and personal preferences. If marketing could turn consumer desire into necessity, so much the better, but if it could not, manufacturers generated more new products, and cultivated consumer desire for the next thing.

Critiques of Consumer Culture

In the United States, the historical study of consumption was at first a contribution to critical discussions of contemporary political issues as well as historical ones. Critiques of consumer culture were grounded in the multifaceted social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the broad sense of "political" that prevailed at that time. Feminists plastered billboards with "this ad degrades women" stickers; they debated the importance of consumerism to women's oppression and, more generally, the relationship of consumption to women's unpaid household labor. Hippies promoted dropping out: working as little and spending as little as possible. Leftists sought to interpret Marx's writings on commodity fetishism and the analyses of the Frankfurt School.

In recent years, in my country, these political viewpoints have declined. Beyond the academy, an apolitical or celebratory stance towards consumer culture has been fortified by the fall of communism; among some intellectuals, cultural studies has dared to suggest that consumption may actually have liberatory potential. Yet after all these years, and despite substantial changes in women's lives, feminist analyses of marketing retain their vitality. Regionalist and aesthetic cases against homogenized culture have gone on the global stage. Social injustice becomes ever more compelling, and not simply because the rich have more stuff, or because private extravagance ties up money that could be given to charity or taxed for public use. In contemporary culture, consumption reproduces inequality, a task accomplished in traditional cultures by birth and caste. Individualism and the decline of social values and social space foster the idea that satisfying personal needs and desires takes precedence over the values of tribe, religion, or nature.

But of all the critiques of consumer culture, the environmental one is, I believe, the least debatable; as global warming becomes more obvious and oil wars proliferate, it becomes ever more potent. We are literally consumers: Few of us sew clothes, build houses, or make music. We don't know how to get clean water or how to make gasoline, and the systems that comprise daily life are too complex for most of us to comprehend at all, and for any of us to comprehend completely. Our dissociation from our bodies and the planet may be regarded as a function of widespread self-indulgence or as an understandable response to the pressures of modern and postmodern life. But even those who glorify first-world consumer culture must regard it as reasonable for people elsewhere to want an equivalent level of convenience and comfort, and must question whether the planet can provide sufficient resources.

An understanding of history does not contribute in any straightforward way to environmental solutions. Indeed, understanding and embracing the concept of change over time complicates the issues. But, like foreign travel, the historical perspective provides us with a viewpoint from which we may observe some other way to be human, and where we may ask heretical but important questions: Is everything a commodity? How might we go about reassociating ourselves with our bodies and the planet? What are the costs of commercial values framing all facets of life? What, to use the words of the organizers of this conference, do the economic and social well-being of consumers and families mean in light of the pressing issues of the global environment, the global labor force, and human rights?

Above all, the historical perspective tells us that things change. With it, we can regard artifacts and institutions as ephemeral. Transitory phenomena, they come and go; McDonald's is no more eternal than the Sears catalogue, which dominated American merchandising in its day. Like travel in distant lands, travel in the foreign country that is the past highlights both advantages and drawbacks of contemporary consumer culture. Keeping it in mind inevitably enriches our awareness of market behavior.

Questions

1. What does Strasser mean when she says that a pre-consumer culture seems alien to us now?
2. Why is the change from "customer" to "consumer" significant for the author?
3. How do a chunk of handmade soap and a bar of Ivory embody different social relationships?
4. How did "convenience" become a modern value, and what were its meanings?
5. What are some of the relationships of fashion, obsolescence, and consumer culture?
6. How do modern advertisements use convenience and fashionable obsolescence to sell brands?