

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

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 topsyturviness 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

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 advertising; 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

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, Gimbel's, 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-

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.

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

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 Swenciki 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 Thein 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. Swiencicki, "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 Meier 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.
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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 Lonnice 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 be seen as a birthright of those born in the "American Century."

P A R T I

Frameworks and Definitions

CHAPTER 1

Consumer

Raymond Williams

In modern English **consumer** and **consumption** are the predominant descriptive nouns of all kinds of use of goods and services. The predominance is significant in that it relates to a particular version of economic activity, derived from the character of a particular economic system, as the history of the word shows.

Consume has been in English since C14, from *fw consumer*, F, and the variant *consommer*, F (these variants have a complicated but eventually distinct history in French), *rw consumere*, L—to take up completely, devour, waste, spend. In almost all its early English uses, **consume** had an unfavourable sense; it meant to destroy, to use up, to waste, to exhaust. This sense is still present in ‘consumed by the fire’ and in the popular description of pulmonary phthisis as **consumption**. Early uses of **consumer**, from C16, had the same general sense of destruction or waste.

It was from mC18 that **consumer** began to emerge in a neutral sense in descriptions of bourgeois political economy. In the new predominance of an organized market, the acts of making and of using goods and services were newly defined in the increasingly abstract pairings of *producer* and **consumer**, *production* and **consumption**.

Yet the unfavourable connotations of **consume** persisted, at least until lC19, and it was really only in mC20 that the word passed from specialized use in political economy to general and popular use. The relative decline of *customer*, used from C15 to describe a buyer or purchaser, is significant here, in that *customer* had always implied some degree of regular and continuing relationship to a supplier, whereas **consumer** indicates the more abstract figure in a more abstract market.

The modern development has been primarily American but has spread very quickly. The dominance of the term has been so great that even groups of in-

formed and discriminating purchasers and users have formed *Consumer's Associations*. The development relates primarily to the planning and attempted control of markets which is inherent in large-scale industrial capitalist (and state-capitalist) production, where, especially after the depression of 1919, manufacture was related not only to the supply of known needs (which *customer* or *user* would adequately describe) but to the planning of given kinds and quantities of production which required large investment at an early and often predictive stage. The development of modern commercial *advertising* (persuasion, or *penetration* of a market) is related to the same stage of capitalism: the creation of needs and wants and of particular ways of satisfying them, as distinct from and in addition to the notification of available supply which had been the main earlier function of *advertising* (where that kind of persuasion could be seen as *puff* and *puffery*). *Consumer* as a predominant term was the creation of such manufacturers and their agents. It implies, ironically as in the earliest senses, the using-up of what is going to be produced, though once the term was established it was given some appearance of autonomy (as in the curious phrase *consumer choice*). It is appropriate in terms of the history of the word that criticism of a wasteful and 'throw-away' society was expressed, somewhat later, by the description *consumer society*. Yet the predominance of the capitalist model ensured its widespread and often overwhelming extension to such fields as politics, education and health. In any of these fields, but also in the ordinary field of goods and services, to say *user* rather than *consumer* is still to express a relevant distinction.

CHAPTER 2

Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming

Colin Campbell

There has long been a tendency in both academic and intellectual circles to devalue, and often to denigrate, that field of human conduct which falls under the heading of "consumption." This is due to the existence of a powerful tradition of thought that generally regards consumption with some suspicion, inclining us to believe that, even if it is not exactly "bad," it can have nothing whatever to do with that which is good, true, noble, or beautiful.

Two factors can be identified as largely responsible for this attitude of suspicion. One is the discipline with which the term "consumption" is most commonly associated: economics. For it is inherent in the basic paradigm adopted by economists that *production* is singled out as the activity that matters. Although in theory consumption is the sole end and justification for all production, it is quite clear that production, not consumption, is the more valued and morally justifiable activity. A second reason for the bias in favor of production is to be found in that Puritan inheritance which itself gave rise to modern economics (if indirectly, via utilitarianism), and that, more pertinently, also encouraged successive generations to place work above leisure, thrift above spending, and deferred above immediate gratification. It is this generalized asceticism that is largely responsible for the contemporary denigration of consumption.¹

However, even the Puritans did not condemn all consumption; what they accepted as legitimate was consumption directed at satisfying needs, while fiercely condemning any expenditure in excess of what was deemed necessary to meet these needs. In other words, it was luxury consumption which was roundly condemned, not consumption in general. One of the main reasons modern consumption has such a bad press is that it is generally seen to be mainly "luxury" or "want-based" in character. Consequently, even the little moral legitimacy consumption once possessed has today largely been swept away.²

¹"Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming" by Colin Campbell reprinted from *Critical Review* 8 (Fall 1994). Used by permission of *Critical Review* and Colin Campbell.

In contemporary society, then, there are essentially two attitudes toward consumption. First, it may be viewed as a matter of satisfying "genuine" needs (what we may call "basic provisioning"), in which case, even if this is considered a mundane matter of routine, day-to-day decision-making and habit, it is at least seen as a legitimate activity by most intellectuals. Alternatively, consumption is viewed as largely a matter of gratifying wants and desires by means of goods and services that are viewed as nonessential (that is, luxuries), in which case it is typically regarded as an arena of superficial activity prompted by ethically dubious motives and directed toward trivial, ephemeral, and essentially worthless goals.

Now there are two distinct yet closely associated points to note about this latter attitude. The first concerns the idea that want-driven consumption concerns the "unnecessary" and hence the unimportant things in life; this leads to condemnations of consumption on the grounds that it involves people in superficial or frivolous activities. Consumption is thus contrasted with "real," significant activities such as work, religion, or politics. The second and related point is that involvement in trivial activities, and especially the tendency to take them seriously, is assumed to stem from questionable motives: no one guided by high-minded or noble concerns, it is assumed, would ever become involved in such dubious pursuits. Consequently, consumption is viewed as the realm in which the worst of human motives prevail—motives such as pride, greed, and envy. Any social scientist who wishes to understand consumption is forced to confront both of these moral judgments, since they are central to most theories of consumption.³

The question, therefore, is whether our understanding of the activities of consumption does indeed justify the condemnation with which it generally meets. In short, is consumption bad for us? In addressing this question, one is not concerned with whether consuming is harmful in the literal sense that our health or well-being is threatened by the nature of the items we consume. Rather, the focus is on the claim that consuming is deleterious because it is an activity (or a set of activities) that "brings out the worst in us"; that is to say, because it encourages us to behave in morally reprehensible ways. Does consumption lead us to be greedy, materialistic, avaricious, or envious? The predominant concern is with the motives (and to a lesser extent the goals) that are presumed to underlie modern consumption behavior.⁴

The thesis advanced here will be that the usual antipathy toward the motives of consumption is, if not entirely without justification, extremely one-sided, if only because the social science theories that buttress it are hardly plausible. Close attention to why people actually do consume goods suggests the presence of an idealistic, if not exactly ethical, dimension. Therefore, we must first outline a somewhat different view of the nature of consuming in contemporary industrial (or postindustrial) society from those which currently prevail.

Modern Consumption

Why people consume goods is understandably a central question for social science. Essentially, there have been two general answers to this question—one economic, the other sociological. The inadequacies of the economic paradigm (in which the origin of wants is simply not explored) have been well documented elsewhere and will not be pursued here. On the other hand, the sociological model, which in practice means Thorstein Veblen's model, is still widely employed and its inadequacies are rarely noted.

In essence, Veblen's model assumes that consumption is a form of communication in which "signals" concerning the wealth (and thus, it is argued, the social status) of the consumer are telegraphed to others. In addition, it is assumed that individuals seek to use such "conspicuous consumption" as a way of improving their social standing, aiming ultimately to "emulate" that "leisure class" which, it is claimed, stands at the pinnacle of the class system. This view of consumption links it directly with an ethically dubious activity, social climbing. In assuming that consumers' main interest in goods is as symbols of status, Veblen asserts that consumers are motivated by a mixture of anxiety (over how others may view them) and envy (of those in a superior position). It is hardly surprising that, with the widespread acceptance of such a theory, consuming is commonly viewed as ethically suspect.

There are, however, many problems with Veblen's model, which generally can be said to be theoretically incoherent where it is not empirically false.⁵ The key deficiency is that it does not account for the dynamism that is so typical of modern consumption. Status competition through conspicuous display does not require novel products; it coexists happily with an unchanging, traditional way of life.⁶ In this respect, both the economic and the sociological models have the same central failing: they attempt to provide an ahistorical general theory that fails to recognize crucial differences between traditional and modern consumption. The question is not. Why do people consume? Rather it is, Why do we consume as we do? That is to say, why do *modern* individuals consume as they do?

The Problem of Consumerism

It is a fundamental mistake to imagine that modern consumption, or consumerism, is simply traditional consumption writ large, as if all that separates the two phenomena was a question of scale. Therefore, it is misleading to assume that modern consumption equals mass consumption. Consumption in modern societies may well be consumption "for the masses," something that could not occur until modern techniques made large-scale production possible; but what really distinguishes it is its dynamic character. The very high levels of

consumption typical of modern societies do not stem primarily from the fact that large numbers of people consume; rather, they stem from the very high levels of individual consumption, which in turn stem from the apparent insatiability of consumers and the fact that their wants appear never to be exhausted. While technological innovation and planned obsolescence both have a part to play in keeping consumption levels high, the greatest contribution is consumers' almost magical ability to produce new wants immediately after old ones are satisfied. No sooner is one want satisfied than another appears, and subsequently another, in an apparently endless series. No modern consumer, no matter how privileged or wealthy, can honestly say that there is nothing that he or she wants. It is this capacity to continuously "discover" new wants that requires explaining.

What makes consumerism even more puzzling is that we typically discover that we desire novel products, ones with which we are unfamiliar. We cannot possibly know what "satisfaction" (if any) such products might yield when we desire them. Indeed, it would seem that it is principally this preference for novel goods and services that lies behind the apparent inexhaustibility of wants itself, as manifest, for example, in the central modern phenomenon of fashion.

These, then, are the features that distinguish the modern from the traditional consumer. The latter generally tends to have fixed needs rather than endless wants, and hence consumes the same products repeatedly, as and when these needs arise. This pattern of consumption does not, as economists often seem to imply, simply result from the lack of resources to consume more. Rather, the pattern represents all the consumption that the "needs" dictated by traditional ways of life require.⁷ The problem to be addressed when attempting to account for modern consumption, therefore, is how it is possible for inexhaustible wants—often wants for novel products and services—to appear with such regularity.

A Hedonistic Approach

It is possible to provide at least a partial solution to this problem by regarding modern consumption activity as the consequence of a form of hedonism. In saying this, it is important to recognize that what is meant by hedonism or pleasure-seeking has nothing in common with that theory of satisfaction-seeking, deriving from utilitarianism, which traditionally underlies most economic theories of consumption.

The latter model is built around the idea that human behavior is concerned with the elimination of deprivation or need. Consequently, it assumes that individuals interact with objects so as to make use of their "utility" to "satisfy" these "needs." Such conduct may bring pleasure to the individual, but not only is this not guaranteed, it is not the reason the object was desired. Thus, eco-

nomic theory is not centrally concerned with pleasure-seeking behavior. The principal reason for this is that whilst utility is a real property of objects, pleasure is a judgment that individuals make about stimuli they experience. As such, pleasure is not necessarily connected with extracting utility from objects. Trying to satisfy needs usually requires engaging with real objects in order to discover the degree and kind of their utility in meeting pre-existing desires. Searching for pleasure means exposing oneself to certain stimuli in the hope that they will trigger an enjoyable response. Hence, whilst one typically needs to make use of objects in order to discover their potential for need satisfaction, one need only employ one's senses to experience pleasure. What is more, whereas an object's utility is dependent upon what it is, an object's pleasurable significance is a function of what it can be taken to be. Only reality can provide satisfaction, but both illusions and delusions can supply pleasure.

However, since the elimination of basic human needs is generally experienced as pleasurable (as in the experience of eating when one is attempting to eliminate the deprivation caused by hunger), pleasure-seeking has traditionally been perceived as bound up with efforts to meet needs. This perception becomes less valid as the advance of civilization causes fewer people to experience the frequent deprivation of their basic needs, so that the pleasure associated with need-fulfilment tends to become more and more elusive.⁸ the traditional hedonist's response is to try to recreate the gratificatory cycle of need-satisfaction as often as possible.

Traditional hedonism hence involves a concern with "pleasures" rather than with "pleasure," there being a world of difference between valuing an experience because (among other things) it yields pleasure, and valuing the pleasure an experience can bring—that is, focusing upon a distinct aspect or quality of the experience. The former is the ancient pattern. Human beings in all cultures seem to agree on a basic list of activities that are "pleasures" in this sense, such as eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, socializing, singing, dancing, and playing games. But since pleasure is a quality of experience, it can, at least in principle, be judged to be present in all sensations. Hence the pursuit of pleasure in the abstract is potentially an ever-present possibility, provided that the individual's attention is directed to the skillful manipulation of sensation rather than to the conventionally identified sources of enjoyment.⁹

Modern Hedonism

All too often, then, it has been assumed that hedonistic theories of human conduct emphasize sensory pleasures. This, however, is not necessarily the case, for although all pleasure-seeking can be said to have a sensory base, there is no reason that hedonism should concentrate exclusively, or even primarily, on the "basal" appetites. Indeed, while an emphasis on the sensory may have characterized traditional hedonism, it is not characteristic of its

contemporary counterpart; modern hedonism focuses less on sensations than on emotions.

Emotions have the potential to serve as immensely powerful sources of pleasure, since they constitute states of high arousal. Any emotion—even the so-called negative ones, such as fear, anger, grief, and jealousy—can provide pleasurable stimulation. However, for the stimulation associated with such emotions to be experienced as pleasant, the extent of the arousal must be adjustable: it must be possible for the individual to “control” the emotion. An ability to self-regulate emotion is much more than a mere capacity to suppress (though this is its starting point), but extends to the “creation” of a given emotion at will.

Such emotional cultivation is achieved largely through the manipulation of what an individual believes to be the nature of his or her condition or environment, particularly through adjustments in the degree to which certain things are held to be the case. For example, to the extent that people can convince themselves that they have been harshly treated by life and don’t deserve their bad luck, they will be able to enjoy the “pleasure” of self-pity. To a large extent, however, the deliberate cultivation of an emotion for the pleasure derived from experiencing it does not center around efforts to reconstruct what is believed about the real environment in this way. Rather, it tends to focus on the somewhat easier task of conjuring up imaginary environments that are sufficiently realistic to prompt an associated emotion. This modern, autonomous, self-illusory hedonism is called, in everyday language, daydreaming.

Daydreaming

Daydreaming is an integral part of the psychic lives of modern men and women, yet there is a tendency either to ignore its presence and/or to deny its importance. Nearly everyone in modern society both daydreams and fantasizes; this is a regular, daily activity for both sexes and all ages.¹⁰

Yet there has been little recognition of the importance of this phenomenon or of the fact that it is characteristically a modern practice, largely dependent on the development of individualism, literacy (that is to say, silent reading), and the novel. There is little doubt that the impulse lying behind daydreaming is a hedonistic one, as individuals turn away from what they perceive as an unstimulating real world in order to dwell on the greater pleasures imaginative scenarios can offer. In this context, the individual can be seen as an artist of the imagination, someone who takes images from memory or the immediate environment and rearranges or otherwise improves them so as to render them more pleasing. Such daydreams are experienced as convincing; that is to say, individuals react subjectively to them as if they were real (thereby gaining an emotional response), even while realizing that they are not. This is the distinctly modern faculty the ability to create an illusion that is known to be false but felt to be true.

Generally speaking, the way reality is typically adjusted by the daydreamer

so as to give pleasure is by simply omitting life’s little inconveniences, as well as by adding what, in reality, would be happy (if not extraordinarily unlikely) coincidences. In this way, imagined experience characteristically comes to represent a perfected vision of life, and from what are often quite small beginnings, individuals may develop daydreams that become “alternative worlds”—that is, elaborate works of art—deviating more and more from what might reasonably be expected of reality.

Although daydreaming is commonly dismissed as an inconsequential phenomenon, there are grounds for believing that it has significant effects. For example, although daydreaming is typically prompted by boredom, the pleasures it supplies mean that daydreamers are likely to experience “real life” as more boring than they did before, increasing the probability that further daydreaming will occur. Thus, like all forms of pleasure, day-dreaming can easily become addictive and result in a certain tendency to withdraw from ordinary life.

However, daydreaming differs from straightforward fantasizing in that it concerns events and scenarios that might actually occur at some point in the future. Indeed, daydreams often begin with simple, anticipatory imaginings surrounding real, upcoming events, such as holidays. This makes it more or less inevitable that actuality is going to be compared—in terms of pleasure gained—against the standard set by the anticipatory daydream, and hence generally experienced as (quite literally) disillusioning. For no matter how pleasant the real-life experience turns out to be, it is impossible for it to resemble the perfection attained in imagination. Consequently, disillusionment is very likely to prompt still more daydreaming, and thus, inevitably, further disillusionment. This suggests that daydreaming creates certain permanent dispositions: a sense of dissatisfaction with real life and a generalized longing for “something better.”

The Spirit of Modern Consumerism

Such an understanding of the dynamics of how dreams and experiences of real life interact may make it possible to explain those mysterious features of modern consumerism identified above. These include not simply the question of where wants come from (and indeed go to), but also how it is that consumers have an inexhaustible supply of them, and why it is that they have such a strong preference for novel, as opposed to familiar, goods. We can now suggest that modern consumers will desire a novel rather than a familiar product, largely because they believe its acquisition and use can supply them with pleasurable experiences that they have not so far encountered in reality. One may project onto the novel product some of the idealized pleasure that has already been experienced in daydreams, but that cannot be associated with products currently being consumed (as the limits to the pleasure they provide are already familiar). For new wants to be created, all that is required is the presence

in the consumer's environment of products that are perceived to be new.¹¹ Hence, we can say that the basic motivation underlying consumerism is the desire to experience in reality that pleasurable experience the consumer has already enjoyed imaginatively.

Only new products are seen as offering any possibility of realizing this ambition. But since reality can never provide the perfected pleasures encountered in daydreams (or, if at all, only very occasionally and in part), each purchase naturally leads to disillusionment; this helps explain how wanting is extinguished so quickly, and why people disacquire goods almost as rapidly as they acquire them. What is not extinguished, however, is the fundamental longing that daydreaming itself generates. For the practice of daydreaming continues (and indeed may be strengthened), and hence there is as much determination as ever to find new products to serve as replacement objects of desire.

This dynamic interplay between illusion and reality is the key to an understanding of modern consumerism (and modern hedonism generally), for the tension between the two creates longing as a permanent mode, with the concomitant sense of dissatisfaction with what is and the yearning for something better. Daydreaming turns the future into a perfectly illusioned present. Hence, individuals do not so much repeat cycles of sensory pleasure-seeking (as in traditional hedonism) so much as they continually strive to close the gap between imagined and experienced pleasures. Yet this gap can never be closed, for whatever one experiences in reality can be adjusted in imagination so as to be even more pleasurable. Thus the illusion is always better than the reality, the promise more interesting than actuality.¹²

This theory of consumerism is inner-directed. It does not presume that consumption behavior is either guided by, or oriented to, the actions of others. In that sense, it breaks with the long-standing sociological tradition that presents consumption as an essentially social practice.¹³ On the other hand, this theory does not present consumption as driven by material considerations. The idea that contemporary consumers have a magpie-like desire to acquire as many material objects as possible (the acquisitive society thesis) represents a serious misunderstanding of the basic motivational structure that leads consumers to want goods. The acquisitive society thesis is particularly at odds with the facts, for modern consumer society is characterized as much by the extent to which individuals dispose of goods as the extent to which they acquire them. Consumerism involves a high *turnover* of goods, not merely a high level of their acquisition. This fact is consistent with the claim that the true focus of desire is less the object itself than the experience the consumer anticipates possessing it will bring.

Consumerism and the Counterculture

By extricating modern consumption from its presumed connection with other-directed status striving and envy on the one side, and crude materialism

and acquisitiveness on the other, an understanding of this sphere of activity may be reached that does not automatically carry with it overtones of moral disapproval or condemnation. Unfortunately, this aim does not appear to have been achieved, since, by closely associating consumption with hedonism, it seems inevitable that consumerism will remain an object of moral disapproval. Indeed, one could claim that the present theory only makes matters worse, as, in some quarters at least, pleasure-seeking is even more objectionable than the consumption of "luxury" goods. Certainly we can say that, on the whole, pleasure has been the one constant target of moralists over many generations, largely because of the hostile attitude originally taken by the early Christian fathers and typically still held in our own day by fundamentalists and other representatives of the religious right.¹⁴

There is, however, an alternative moral tradition that not only defends the pursuit of pleasure, but associates it directly with the highest moral and spiritual ideals. This tradition of thought was represented historically by Antinomianism and then, in more recent times, by Romanticism. It is still very much alive, with its last significant efflorescence occurring in the 1960s in the form of the movement we know as the "counterculture."¹⁵

Central to the Romantic creed is the belief that the true and the good are both subsumed under the beautiful, and consequently that they, too, are to be discerned by means of the imagination. It also follows that these ideals, like beauty itself, can be recognized by their capacity to give pleasure, with the natural consequence that the path to virtue and enlightenment is identical with the pursuit of pleasure. This is recognizable as the faith that inspired many of the young counterculturalists of the 1960s; yet it is only fair to observe that they were hardly renowned for their defense of the consumer society. On the contrary, they launched the very critique of commercial and material values that has, to a large extent, laid the basis for much of our current unease about the state of modern life. While the counterculturalists defended pleasure-seeking, they also attacked what they saw as the evil of consumerism. How is this paradox to be explained?

To some extent it can be accounted for by the fact that the counterculturalists, like the spokespersons for the conventional morality they claimed to reject, held to that erroneous view of the nature of consumption mentioned above. Hence, they accepted the assumption that consumerism involved status envy, acquisitiveness, and materialism, whilst being perhaps understandably reluctant to recognize that their own high valuation of pleasure might be connected in some way with their experience as the first generation to be reared in a climate of widespread affluence.

In contrast to this explanation of the paradox, what one might call the "official" explanation is that the Romantic identification of pleasure with the ideal realm of virtue and beauty means that there is an understandable hostility to any trivialization or "prostitution" of this central dimension of human experience—hostility, in other words, to any tendency to treat the pursuit of pleasure

as a simple end in itself, a mere "recreation" in which push-pin could be regarded as on a par with poetry. Thus, the Romantics' principal objection to consumption (it is said) was not that it was prompted by a search for pleasure (even less that it gave pleasure), but that pleasure seeking was not being taken seriously enough. In other words, Romanticism gives the highest possible legitimation to the pursuit of pleasure, especially the pursuit of imaginatively mediated pleasure, whilst condemning not merely simpleminded and crass pleasures, but hedonism itself, when it is not associated with a high moral purpose.

The Goods of Consumerism

However, to suggest that one can approve of pleasure-seeking when it is part and parcel of the pursuit of high ideals, yet disapprove of it when, separated from such ideals, it is engaged in simply for personal gratification, presumes that it is possible to tell which is which. Unfortunately, this is not so easy. For example, the practice of taking drugs, especially LSD, was defended by many in the 1960s on the grounds that it was an important means of attaining enhanced self-awareness and spiritual enlightenment. But for many hippies and quasishippies, drugs were probably used with no such end in view, but simply because of the "high" they yielded. It is difficult to distinguish between these two positions because, in practice, they often merge into one another; or perhaps, more accurately, the one can easily become the other over time. Individuals may set out to take drugs merely to gain a high, only to find that their awareness is transformed; or, alternatively, those who take drugs because they hope to attain enlightenment might, on the contrary, merely develop an addiction to a particular form of intense physical stimulation.

It might be objected that this is to make heavy weather of what is really a fairly simple matter, since as far as most consumption activity is concerned, purely selfish, or at least self-interested, motives are obviously at work. Unfortunately for this argument, the presence of selfish interests is not incompatible with more high-minded concerns. Whilst some consumption is merely a matter of mundane provisioning, much of it is of considerably less prosaic interest to those involved. Obviously, buying a house, a car, a boat, or a set of furniture is, for most people, an act of some moment, linked to what might be considered their "life projects." Understandably, then, major purchases of this kind often figure prominently in people's thoughts, where they play a crucial role as both incentives and rewards. In other words, such acts of consumption are critically interwoven into the motivational structures of individuals, providing the energy they need to carry through difficult tasks as well as the gratification necessary if they are to believe subsequently that their efforts were worthwhile. In this direct and obvious sense, not merely actual consuming, but also imaginary, "anticipatory consuming" can indeed be said to be good for us, since without it, we might lack good reasons for doing anything at all.

It does not necessarily follow, however, that because purchasing goods plays such an important part in the reward system of individuals, there is no idealistic or ethical dimension present in those projects around which individuals organize their lives. After all, although people's daydreams differ, a common factor, apart from the quality of pleasure, is the representation of the dreamer in an idealized manner. Thus, the pleasure people derive from daydreaming is not separate from their moral life; it is intimately associated with it: doing good—or more accurately, perhaps, imagining oneself doing good and being good—often constitute an important part of the pleasures of daydreaming.

In this respect, the pleasures associated with imagining perfect scenarios relate directly to imagining oneself as a perfect person, one who exemplifies certain ideals. This point can be illustrated by considering two important aspects of modern consumption: fashion and tourism.

The theory outlined above helps explain why modern consumers should be so eager to "follow fashion," without, however, having to resort either to the implausible suggestion that they are forced to do so, or that they are merely striving to "keep up with the Joneses." Since fashion is an institution that guarantees the controlled introduction of a degree of novelty into goods with high aesthetic significance, the taste for novelty generated by the widespread practice of self-illusory hedonism helps explain the importance and persistence of this institution.

Unfortunately, there has been a consistent tendency for intellectuals to decry fashion, to treat it as a trivial, insignificant, even worthless phenomenon. Yet if we use the term properly, to refer to a consistent process of changes in style (rather than simply a synonym for custom or practice), opprobrium is entirely inappropriate. For fashion necessarily involves an aesthetic ideal, and those who dedicate themselves to keeping up with fashion—or even more interestingly, perhaps, to "taking the lead in fashion"—can be said, quite justifiably, to be striving to bring their lives into line with the ideal of beauty. That there may be an element of narcissism involved, or that the conduct in question may be strengthened by the presence of such motives as pride or vanity, does nothing to negate the ideal dimension of such behavior, since all forms of moral conduct probably require the helping hand of self-interest. "Following fashion" may indeed, in some instances, be little more than a mindless and morally worthless endeavor, but it can also be the high-minded pursuit of a serious ideal.

Much the same can be said of tourism which is increasingly becoming a central component, not merely of modern consumerism, but of modern life. Tourism does not involve the purchase of products, but of experiences; yet, as with fashion, novelty is the most critical quality in defining the parameters of desire. Here, too, there has been a tendency in some circles to caricature and despise the "tourist" whilst celebrating, by contrast, the genuine "traveller." But this bias is hard to justify, since the acquisition of valued experiences is crucial to the goals that find favor in modern society (and especially, perhaps,

in the contemporary United States). The human potential and encounter-group movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as their successors, the quasireligious and psychotherapeutic movements of the 1990s, stressed the importance of critical "experiences" in helping individuals to discover their "true selves" and hence maximize their potential. Such phrases are also often to be found in statements defining the goals of education, therapy, and art. If the acquisition of "experiences," especially those of a highly novel kind, is accorded such critical importance in contexts such as these, how is it that it should be denied this status when occurring under the heading of "tourism"?

Is Consumption Good for Us?

I do not know. Such a question suggests both that we can agree on what constitutes the good life and that we know exactly what effects our current consuming practices are having on ourselves and our society. In addition, it is difficult to speak of "consumption" as if it were a single, undifferentiated activity. However, as I have tried to show, there is something distinctive about modern consumption. By elucidating this I have endeavored to shed some light on whether the motives and goals embedded in such activity can be considered good. Obviously there is no simple answer, for consumerism is a complex phenomenon.

However, it is clear that both self-interested and idealistic concerns are involved in consumerism. Indeed, consumerism is prompted by concerns and guided by values that underpin many other modern institutions, yet which, in those other contexts, are usually regarded favorably. It is not as if the theory I have outlined applies only to consumption. It applies with equal force to all forms of behavior in which imaginative pleasure-seeking or desire plays a significant role. Romantic love is one such phenomenon, so one could ask, with equal justification, whether love is good for us.¹⁶

Hence, it is delusory to imagine that one can cordon off consumption from the larger moral and idealistic framework of our lives and dub it "bad" without, in the process, significantly affecting the total moral landscape of our world. Consumerism probably reflects the moral nature of contemporary human existence as much as any other widespread modern practice; significant change here would therefore require no minor adjustment to our way of life, but the transformation of our civilization.

Notes

1. Another moral dimension to this discussion is associated with gender. Much consumption activity (especially shopping) has long been seen as primarily "women's work," whilst production has been judged "men's work." This can also be seen as a major influence on the ethical judgments passed on consumption.

2. It has often been suggested that a new "ethic" has arisen that serves to legitimate consumerism: see William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Doubleday-Anchor Books, 1957); David Reisman et al., *The Lonely Crowd: A Study in the Changing American Character* (New York: Doubleday-Anchor, 1966); and Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (London: Heineman, 1976). Tellingly, such claims are made by writers who do not themselves endorse the new ethic, but, on the contrary, seek to condemn it, often from a perspective of apparent support for the old ascetic Protestant values. Consequently an attitude of suspicion, if not hostility, toward consumerism still typifies academic and intellectual discussions in this field.

3. This view sometimes places the blame on individuals for engaging in such practices, while at other times it exonerates them by arguing that consumers are typically coerced or manipulated into this form of behavior by others (usually manufacturers or advertisers). In either case, however, consumerism itself is judged to be bad, whether the source of the evil lies in individuals or in the organization of the society.

4. This extremely negative view of modern consumption is not typically shared by consumers themselves; indeed, one suspects that it is not actually shared by academics and intellectuals, either, when actually acting as consumers. In fact, there has recently been a movement among intellectuals and some academics to view consumerism as far more significant; see Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 1991); and Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991). Here, there is a tendency to regard consumption as the central focus of the efforts of individuals to create and maintain their personal identity. However, despite this development, there is little evidence of any change in moral tone. For such conduct is still likely to be despised, if not actually condemned.

5. In the first place, the picture of a single leisured elite whom all other classes seek to emulate (either directly or indirectly) inaccurately portrays the complex stratification system of modern societies. Second, what determines the consumption habits of this elite remains a mystery, as they have no one to emulate. Third, new fashions in the consumption of goods do not always or even commonly originate with a social elite and then "trickle down" the status ladder as a result of imitation and emulation by those in inferior positions. In fact, fashions "trickle up" or even "across" just as often as they trickle down (see Paul Blumberg, "The Decline and Fall of the Status Symbol: Some Thoughts on Status in a Post-Industrial Society," *Social Problems* 21 [1974]: 480-98). Fourth, social standing is not determined simply by wealth (let alone only by conspicuously displayed wealth); other qualities, most obviously birth, can still be important. Finally, treating wealth and leisure as equivalents, both signifying "waste," is seriously misleading given the important Protestant tendency to applaud the first whilst deploring the second, as well as the Bohemian inversion of this view. For a full account of the emulation model of consumption see Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1925); for a critique, see Colin Campbell, "The Desire for the New: Its Nature and Social Location as Presented in Theories of Fashion and Modern Consumerism," in *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, ed. Roger Silverman and Eric Hirsch (London: Routledge, 1992), and idem, "Conspicuous Confusion? A Critique of Veblen's Theory of Conspicuous Consumption," *Sociological Theory* 12, no. 2 (1994).

6. See, for example, Melville J. Herskovits, *Economic Anthropology: A Study in Comparative Economics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960).

7. See Elizabeth E. Hoyt, "The Impact of a Money Economy upon Consumption Patterns," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* no. 305 (1956): 12-22; and Kusum Nair, *Blossoms in the Dust: The Human Factor in Indian Development* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962).