



“Summary of article by A. Fuat Firat: Gender and Consumption: Transcending the Feminine?” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 95-97

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This paper analyzes the relationship between consumption and gender within the western capitalist system from historical and contemporary perspectives. The author argues that in the early periods of industrialization when production and consumption were separated and linked to the public and private spheres, respectively, the consumer role was simultaneously minimized and associated with feminine characteristics. More recently, consumption has supplanted production as the primary source of self-definition for both men and women, eliminating the historical feminization of consumption.

HISTORY OF CONSUMPTION AND GENDER

Unlike pre-industrial cultures in which work and leisure were merged, the industrial revolution separated the two domains and linked the home life with leisure, recreation and consumption, activities requiring little expertise or important knowledge. Work in the male-dominated factory was prized much more highly than women's work or consumption in the home and was viewed as the primary source of value, creativity and personal identity. Capitalism bestowed upon productive activity in the public domain an importance that did not exist in activities pursued in the privacy of home.

As women came to be associated with an increasingly trivialized private domain tied to consumption and men were associated more with the exalted public domain of production, feminine and masculine characteristics were linked to the separate spheres of consumption and production, respectively. Attaching discrepant values to public and private domains established a social order based on a normative picture of the modern family. These values perpetuated the myth that the domestic sphere was private even as domestic relations were determined increasingly from outside the family, by the politics and culture of the public domain as well as by the marketplace.

Market growth influenced the nature of consumption in the home, and the position of women in the production process, and created paradoxical situations for women. Prior to mass production, household consumption was creative, transforming most market goods into final goods. With the arrival of mass production, household consumption has become less creative, directed toward finished goods that come with instructions and standards for their appropriate use.

As a number of researchers have suggested, mass production in western industrialized countries forced women out of the public labor force (e.g, in the decades following World War II) and into the private home to consume the fruits of an expanding market. Once in the home, women faced paradox and tensions. Women's expertise in consumer activities was trivialized and ridiculed, while excessive frugality was condemned since low consumption could hurt the economy. With more time- and labor-saving devices women's household labor was expected to be more productive; however more of these products were consumed with the end result that little if any time was actually saved.

CONSUMPTION AND GENDER IN POSTMODERNITY

Recently the producer role has lost its privileged status as the primary source of meaning; increasingly both men and women tend to represent themselves through consumption, rather than define themselves through their occupation. Consumption is no longer exclusively feminine or a passive activity.

It is not yet possible, however, to state that gender categories are lost, or that significations of feminine and masculine are completely changed. Modern significations of gender categories are still very strong. It is just that males and females are encountering a culture that is much more tolerant of both sexes participating in roles and meanings attached to both gender categories. That is, increasingly, we find both males and females representing the feminine and the masculine during different moments in their lives (males participating in housework, taking on more nurturing roles with children, and increasingly consuming fashion products, cosmetics, and so on, while women are becoming part of the workforce, managers, politicians, and representing masculine qualities in their participation in production in the public domain) ... (217)

Increasing tolerance for gay and lesbian lifestyles is suggestive that traditional gender categories of male and female may eventually become obsolete.

As the public and private domains are increasingly fragmented into separate spheres (e.g., home life, work life, shopping life, neighborhood life, recreational life), successful participation in each requires a distinct persona that can be constructed through consumption. The need to cultivate various images increases dependence on the marketplace, but also allows a measure of control over the means of self-production for both men and women. Consumption becomes an active process of self-construction rather than a passive process of need satisfaction.