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“Summary of article by Grant McCracken: The History of Consumption: A Literature Review and Consumer Guide”

Changes in consumption have played an important role in the transformation of Western societies. This paper presents the history of consumption in seven different contexts - cultural, sociological, psychological, political, intellectual, marketing and consumer. The paper offers a brief overview of the history of consumption, issues for future research, and a review and criticism of recent work in the history of consumption.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS: CAVEAT EMPTOR

Four recent studies in the history of consumption have attempted a broad sweep of the subject. Fernand Braudel's Capitalism and Material Life 1400-1800, published in 1973, was the first work to suggest the contribution of consumption behavior to the development of the West, and to establish the history of consumption as a legitimate field of study. In a volume edited by Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, entitled The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England, (1982), McKendrick argues that the consumer revolution was a necessary companion to the industrial revolution in bringing about the great transformation. The other two studies that offer a broad view of the history of consumption are Rosalyn Williams - Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth Century France (1982), and Chandra Mukerji - From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism (1983).

These ground-breaking studies, followed by a number of smaller scale detailed studies, have opened up the research field. Two major challenges face the growing field of the history of consumption. The first is to show how culture and consumption are mutually determining. The second is to acknowledge that consumption is not just a reflection of social change, but is a cause of social change as well.

SALIENT CONTEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF CONSUMPTION

Cultural Context

Culture creates the categories of "person, time, space, activity, and object" and "supplies the distinctions of class, sex, age, occupation into which the social world is organized." (144) It transforms the world into a shared body of distinct impressions.

A study of the history of consumption can help us understand and define different cultures by seeing changes in fashion and style in clothing, pottery, food, architecture, and the like. For example, Western notions of space determined new kinds and amounts of consumption, especially in housing. Innovations in housing helped realize new ideas of privacy. It is possible that notions of privacy were a product of new attitudes about possession which were in turn a product of the consumer revolution.

Another important cultural context in the history of consumption is the emergence of the individual from the family or the clan. The use of consumer goods helped the individual define individuality and provided the necessary meaning and definition for individual expression. Consumption has also played a vital role in the transformation of the individual over time. This is seen in Colin Campbell's thesis of the development of the romantic self which expresses itself through new levels of consumption. Others have seen the consumer revolution as redefining and commodifying the human body.

Finally, culture and consumption are intertwined through goods. The interrelationship between marketing, consumption, and the meaning and symbols attached to goods have profoundly impacted Western culture.

Sociological Context

One of the key issues shaping the sociological context of consumption is the influence of the group (such as family, social class, ethnic group, friendship circle, or occupation) on the individual as a determinant of the level and pattern of consumption. In turn, the aggregate consumption levels of groups are a function of "demographic composition, social location, resource base, status entitlements and ambitions, and concepts of self, society, and world," (148) as well as the influence that groups have on each other.

Historical research on consumption in the sociological context should concentrate on how consumption contributed to and was changed by the transformation of class and family. From the sixteenth to the twentieth century the concept of class was relatively well defined and was an important determinant of consumption patterns. There has been an erosion of the concept of class since the beginning of the twentieth century, and research should concentrate on the declining influence of class and on the increasing role that other reference groups now play in determining consumption. Research should also look into issues surrounding consumption and class mobility, and the relationship between the democratization of consumption and the democratization of society.

Similar to class, the importance of the genealogical family has eroded as a determinant of consumption, and today the individual has emerged as an autonomous consumer. Changes in consumption patterns should be traced from the days when the family was the central social unit through the present. The relationship between family, "the home," and consumption is also a growing area of research. Along with issues surrounding class and family, the sociological context must examine the role of conspicuous and competitive consumption.

Psychological Context

Fundamental psychological changes were needed to bring about the increase in consumption in Western Europe and North America. People's attitudes towards new objects, influences, information sources and behaviors had to be changed. Advertising and film were employed to change and mold the new attitudes. New brands and products introduced new meanings, and new concepts about self. Information processing underwent radical change. Along with issues of information, questions of sexuality and advertising contribute to the psychological context of consumption. All these changes must have resulted in new skills needed to process information.

Political Context

There are a number of issues in the history of consumption that have a political context. First is the historical appearance of participation in mass consumption. Here we must ask when different social groups became consumers, and what choices they faced. The second is the issue of how consumption was used as an instrument of politics. There is a body of literature that argues that fifteenth-century Italian leaders, Elizabeth I in England, and Louis XIV in France used consumption as a political tool. Research should be done to understand how the consumption strategies of ruling courts helped legitimize their claims to power.

Intellectual Context

The intellectual context of consumption looks into how a society comes to terms intellectually with the social and cultural changes that follow changes in consumption behavior. Over time in all societies intellectuals have commented on the effects of changing consumption. In fact the social sciences can be seen as intellectual attempts to come to terms with the social changes brought about by the industrial and consumer revolutions.

Marketing Context

Marketing and the manipulation of the marketplace have played a key role in the development of consumption. Marketing existed as early as the 1500s and took on a modern form by the eighteenth century, as exemplified by the English entrepreneurs Wedgwood and Boulton. In the nineteenth century the department store was a key marketing innovation. With the advent of film, marketing created fantasies to entice consumers. An historical look into marketing and consumption should examine how producers have perceived consumers and the methods they have employed to persuade them. The creation of homo economicus and the shift of exchange activities from social exchange to market exchange is also noteworthy.

Consumer Context

As consumption increased, the nature and opportunities of the consumer changed. Once-a-week market days gave way to being able to shop on any day of the working week. Shopping expanded from the localized, traditional marketplace to venues throughout the city. Laws protecting the consumer against fraud by the producer were enacted and sumptuary laws were removed. Consumption was raised to a new social and cultural activity by the individual.

"[C]hanges in consumption are just as important as changes in production and this transformation represents a consumer revolution as well as an industrial revolution." (159)