



“Summary of article by Rudi Laermans: Learning to Consume: Early Department Stores and the Shaping of the Modern Consumer Culture (1800-1914)” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 138-141

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## **“Summary of article by Rudi Laermans: Learning to Consume: Early Department Stores and the Shaping of the Modern Consumer Culture (1800-1914)”**

The work of sociologists and historians in recent years has aided the understanding of the role of social and commercial institutions in the development of a culture of mass consumption. As this article explains, early department stores in European and American cities were leading proponents of the modern consumer culture through commercial innovation and the creation of public spheres for middle-class women. Active buying was transformed into passive shopping by the department store.

### **SHAPERS OF MODERN CONSUMER CULTURE**

Sociological interest in consumption has focused on everyday practices where individual creativity, social resistance and collective pleasures are expressed. Sociologists have identified within homogenous mass culture a heterogeneous mass of creative symbolic practices fueled by individual imagination and grounded in everyday social relations. Both recent historians and writers of the late 1800s have recognized the leading role that early department stores played in the development of a mass consumption culture in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in New York, Chicago and Paris. (In England and Germany department stores were introduced later, around the turn of the century.)

### **DEPARTMENT STORES AS COMMERCIAL INNOVATORS**

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century local markets and neighborhood stores supplied the daily needs of people, while luxury goods could be found in specialized shops in large cities. In such specialty shops, products were neither advertised nor displayed; prices were not fixed, but were established by bargaining between customers and merchants. Entering a shop was often taken as an implicit agreement to buy something, at a price to be set by bargaining. Exceptions to this mode of commerce were the Quaker merchants (who posted fixed prices as early as the 1600s) and London shopkeepers who displayed merchandise, offered exchanges to dissatisfied customers and publicized their businesses with cards. These exceptions paved the way for the sense of freedom and choice experienced in department stores, where impersonality made it possible to enter and exit the store without a comment. This, in turn, allowed comparison shopping.

### **FEMALE PUBLIC SPACES AND LEISURE**

Department store managers stimulated the transformation of their stores into distinctly female oriented public spaces. Department store shopping became a leisure activity, a way of pleasantly passing the time. It also became increasingly time-consuming, as the possibility of collecting a great deal of information about commodities and about bargains created an expectation that this was a major part of the role of the good housewife. Contemporary commentators had both positive and negative reactions to these changes. Newspapers in the 1880s expressed concerns about the new shopping mania among well-to-do women. The transformation of buying into shopping, and the subsequent "leisurization" of shopping, offered middle-class women new opportunities within the public sphere, legitimizing their escape from the home. The stores stressed comfort and convenience, and provided free services such as refreshment and reading rooms. However, the commercial provision of women with a public place of their own came with its own social costs. Traditional sex stereotypes were reproduced: "Keen, cold-blooded males encouraged women to be what they were supposed to be, that is, 'irrational', 'childlike' and 'thoughtless' human beings." (96)

As competition grew between growing numbers of stores, credit facilities were introduced to attract buyers. The continual growth in credit services helped to reinforce the ambiance of leisure.

## **ADVERTISING INNOVATIONS AND THE DISPLAY OF COMMODITIES**

In the absence of the sales talk that had traditionally accompanied the act of buying and selling, commodities had to sell themselves. Print advertising was reformed by innovations such as enlarged size, catchwords, slogans, and even new printing techniques. Early department stores were among the first to use photogravure and chromolithography. Images transformed commodities into desirable items. "The external rhetoric of advertising had to be continued inside the store through an appealing and eye-catching 'commodity rhetoric.'" (90)

Many display strategies of the early department stores have by now become generally accepted. However, at the time, the stores seemed to be "object theaters" in which commodities were staged, thereby transforming merchandise into a permanent spectacle.

The advertisements and displays of early department stores pioneered the 'technocracy of the senses' – an artificially produced fascination of the consumer. The practical value of an item counted for less than its appearance in the sights of gazing shoppers. The luxurious, comfortable and fashionable way of life was on display for all. The real success of early department stores was partly due to low prices; goods were not handmade but mass-produced. The aura of luxury in which the goods were presented compensated for their actual cheapness.

## **CONCLUSION**

Modern capitalism created its own culture in the sociological and anthropological sense. It transformed mass-produced products into symbolic goods that convey specific meanings. In this context, the rapid take off of the new kind of store can be traced to three causes: 1) Early department stores offered middle-class women an opportunity to escape the dullness of domestic life. 2) The stores appealed to the appetite for status symbols of the rapidly growing urban

middle class whose members wanted to distinguish themselves from the lower social strata. The early department stores fulfilled this need – their merchandise was relatively cheap but possessed imaginary associations with luxury and comfort. 3) The social conditions of life in large cities required the invention of new forms of social interaction among individuals who were mostly strangers to each other. By selling the goods needed for respectable appearance in an anonymous urban setting, the department stores helped to create what has become known to us as modern culture.