



“Summary of article by Gary Cross: The Consumer’s Comfort and Dream” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 144-147

Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being

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Early in the twentieth century, "the democratization of time and money" -- that is, widespread preference and demands for increasing leisure rather than increasing income -- seemed like a real possibility. Yet in the end mass consumption won out, not only because it "delivers the goods" but also because it satisfies people's expanding longings. The previous chapter of this book [summarized in chapter 2 of this volume] examined the economic pressures of the 1920s and 1930s that reinforced consumerism. This chapter reviews other theories of consumerism, and argues that "working people actively participated in the formation of the consumer society even as they were being manipulated by it." (155)

THEORIES OF MASS CONSUMERISM

Three widely discussed theories offer overlapping and generally negative explanations of the rise of the consumer society. The first links mass consumption to the cultural degradation of industrial work. The deskilling of labor, in settings such as the assembly line, is said to have produced workers who were unable to resist the allure of new consumer goods. The need for fantasy, ostentation, luxury, and distraction, as expressed by workers who are detached from traditional ways of life and excluded from new forms of cultural enrichment, leads to conformist patterns of consumption. The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs was an early exponent of this theory, while authors such as Pierre Bourdieu present more contemporary variations on the same theme.

A second theory, rooted especially in the American context, identifies two simultaneous trends as the source of consumer society: an emerging mass-production economy produced a need for mass markets, while the erosion of the ascetic Victorian personality created a consumer psychology susceptible to advertising appeals. Early social theorists like Robert Lynd believed that consumers were essentially passive objects that were molded by advertisers. Recently, a more subtle variant of this view has stressed the decline of the Protestant ethic in the twentieth century and its replacement with an ethic of adjustment, self-fulfillment -- and consumption after working hours. The contradictory longings of the new personality gave meanings to goods, and created scope for advertising.

A third approach stresses the social psychology of spending, as seen in the work of Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel. Veblen's analysis of emulation and conspicuous consumption is well known; Simmel came to similar conclusions from an analysis of money, the marketplace, and fashion. For Simmel, fashion reflected humanity's universally imitative character, accentuated

by social inequality and mobility: those who were insecure imitated the fashion of those who were more secure; as a result, the fashion leaders were obliged to create fresh innovations to distance themselves from the crowd. Fred Hirsch presents a modern version of this view and its gloomy implications in his analysis of positional goods.

The third theory is more successful than the first two, recognizing the internal dynamics of consumption and avoiding the assumption of omnipotent manipulation by advertisers. But all three views assume the passivity of consumers and the inferiority of social life constructed around goods. A corrective is provided by a fourth interpretation of mass consumption, recognizing the centrality of goods as positive vehicles of social expression, as seen in the recent work of cultural anthropologists such as Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood. Likewise, Daniel Miller emphasizes that working people engage in "self-production" when consuming, giving meaning to goods and their uses. However, this anthropological view, like the three earlier perspectives, remains incomplete.

The key to a better understanding of consumption may be found in the linkages between labor productivity, leisure, and consumer needs. In the 1920s, "the productivity of Fordism shifted the motivation to work from fear of impoverishment to the allure of goods ... The meaning of inequality was radically changed in the transition from subsistence to Fordism because the locus of dependency shifted from the workplace to free time. To be sure, the 'golden chain' of instalment buying had replaced the stick of hunger; in exchange for those goods that equalised and privatised, families sold their future time." (162-63) Free time represented "the realisations of the consumer's comfort and dream: domestic time provided continuity and memory through accumulated goods while holiday time suspended temporal routines and was expressed in the magic of uninhibited spending." (164)

SHAPING CONSUMERISM: NATIONALITY, CLASS, AND GENDER

The modern Anglo-American consumer's household was a middle-class creation with its origins in the Victorian home. Domestic goods presented a "silent socialization" about the meaning of culture, property, gender, and authority. Working-class culture rigidly defined the rules of domestic consumption, reflecting its aspirations to middle-class respectability. The gender-based division of labor helped to reconcile leisure and spending; few married women worked outside the home in Britain or America in the interwar years.

Because domestic consumption often involved labor rather than leisure for women, the idea of consumption as self-production can be best applied to female homemakers. Time and goods at home hardly had the same association with leisure for many women as they did for working men. In fact, the norm of the eight-hour workday for male workers depended on the existence of women homemakers; without the gender-based division of labor, a more radical transformation of the division of labor and time would have been necessary.

HOME, DISPLAY, PRIVACY AND TEMPORALITY

Homeownership and suburbanization spread rapidly in interwar Britain and America. Status was conveyed not only by location, but also by the choice and arrangement of household objects,

particularly in formal front parlors. The move from old urban neighborhoods to new suburbs created anonymity and a concern for appearance, but also allowed privacy and retreat. Homeowners wanted space for private family life and longings, with "friendliness but not friends" in the neighborhood.

For working-class families, purchased furnishings were often modest at first, as the cost of the home itself was a financial strain. However, homes provided space for artifacts and souvenirs, ritual objects from the family's past and objects of current personal significance. The radio, the most important new consumer good of the interwar years, brought a new dimension to family entertainment. Although leisure time activities blossomed, it was "real" time at work that gave meaning to domestic time, especially for male breadwinners. For the female homemaker, of course, this dichotomy did not exist; instead, her hours of housework justified her access to her husband's money and her enjoyment of the private time that she created.

HOLIDAY'S DREAM OF SPENDING AND FREEDOM

Time and money were also reconciled in the rituals of the holiday, which came to England earlier than to the U.S. or France. The English seaside vacation was a perfect metaphor of the consumer moment, a transcendent experience for modern industrial people. Blackpool, the archetypal holiday mecca, received 7 million visitors in 1937.

The summer holiday took over the role once played by religious or seasonal rituals, and the trip to the sea acquired new rituals of its own. People on holidays sought freedom from ordinary, regulated, mechanical time; the resorts were organized to provide novelty, frivolity, and opportunities for spontaneous choices of diversions. Binge-like spending unrestrained by ordinary budget limits was part of the experience, even for many who could ill afford it. Year-round saving and austerity to prepare for the holiday were welcomed by many; the ordinariness of everyday life was relieved in the annual week of luxury.

In holiday spending, domestic life, and elsewhere, consumption fulfilled the combined needs for privacy and sociability, allowing autonomy and group membership at the same time. "Goods prevailed because they reconciled time and money. ... Goods and 'sacred' time become fused in the cyclic rites and museums of domesticity and in the vacation time of the consuming crowd."
(183)