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“The History of Consumer Society” by Frank Ackerman

When did the consumer society begin, and why? Turn the clock back just a few centuries, and our ancestors, of whatever class and nation, displayed neither the attitudes toward consumption nor the behavior described in the previous sections of this book. But did they awaken gradually to the dawn of mass consumption, or were they roused abruptly in a "consumer revolution"?

The questions about the history of consumer society are so broad that it is necessary to begin by delineating what will not be included in the discussion. A basic distinction must be drawn between the existence of occasional luxuries or goods consumed for symbolic purposes on the one hand, and widespread, nonutilitarian consumption as a way of life on the other. Traces of luxury and symbolic consumption can be found throughout history; anthropological and archeological evidence suggests that such consumption is even older, perhaps as old as human material culture itself.¹ In contrast, consumer society - in which ever-growing consumption becomes the principal aspiration, source of identity, and leisure activity for more and more of the population -- is a much newer construct.

Our question is not when consumption beyond subsistence first appeared, but when it took over. This distinction parallels the one made by Karl Polanyi between the quite ancient appearance of markets and the more recent domination of society by the market.² Since the rise of markets and of mass consumption are closely related, Polanyi's conclusion that the dominion of the market was finally established in England in the 1830s is potentially relevant to the history of consumerism.

SURVEYING PERCEPTIONS OF THE PAST

Before the 1970s it was possible to complain that very little had been written about the history of consumption. The gap was filled, first by the massive works of Fernand Braudel and soon after by many others. Braudel described the evolution of material culture throughout Europe from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries, bringing to light an astonishing amount of provocative detail: for example, while religious paintings of the Last Supper can be found throughout European history, the first time that Jesus and his disciples were shown eating with forks rather than their hands was in 1599.³

In an article summarized here, Grant McCracken surveys the literature on the history of consumption, beginning with Braudel and other pioneers of the field. McCracken delineates the multiple contexts within which the history of consumption should be understood, emphasizing

the close connections between culture, social change, and patterns of consumption. While offering a rich theoretical perspective, this multifaceted understanding also presents a practical problem, especially for earlier historical research. We would like to discover the attitudes, beliefs, and motivations of past consumers, and the meaning that consumption had for them. Unfortunately, we are often limited to records of what was consumed and when. In many of the cases discussed below, we will see aspects of the rise of consumer society only darkly through the glass of past purchasing patterns.

The expanse of historical research that is now available makes clear the need for a restricted focus both in time and space. Those who want a more detailed guide to historical studies of consumption will find extensive citations in both McCracken's article (the original, not the summary) and the recent literature review by Paul Glennie.⁴ The work summarized here is largely restricted to the history of consumption in England and America, the countries in which the consumer society began.

It is natural to locate the rise of the modern consumer society in relation to the Industrial Revolution. After all, contemporary mass consumption goods are largely mass-produced commodities that were either unavailable or prohibitively expensive prior to industrialization. As a historian of the period put it, "The Englishman of 1750 was closer in material things to Caesar's legionnaires than to his own great-grandchildren." England was transformed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: Imports of raw cotton for use in the textile industry rose from less than 3 million pounds in 1760 to more than 360 million pounds in the 1830s, while the price of yarn fell to one-twentieth of its earlier level or less.⁵ Nor was the textile industry alone in its expansion, as production of coal, steel, machinery, railroads, and more burst forth. Much the same changes arrived, a few decades later, in the United States and in northern and western Europe.

But to say that the birth of consumer society is linked to the Industrial Revolution does not yet specify which way the causal and temporal sequence runs. Broadly speaking, there are three possible relationships. The spread of modern consumerism could come first, as a foundation on which industrialization could have later been built; or the two could have arisen nearly simultaneously, as part of a single process of rapid change; or the consumer society could have been of a more complex construction, which only became possible well after the consolidation of industrial production. The articles summarized here reflect all three of these views. To some extent they simply disagree with each other, but to a larger extent they emphasize different aspects of the rise of consumer society, for which differing hypotheses may be appropriate.

The contemporary interest in the history of consumption has raised a broader issue concerning the interpretation of industrialization. Accounts of the causes of the Industrial Revolution often mention such factors as capital accumulation, the Protestant ethic and entrepreneurial behavior, patterns of international trade and political institutions, availability of natural resources, and technological innovation. The influence of consumption typically comes far down the list, if it makes it onto the list at all.

But histories of consumer behavior have identified two ways in which consumption could play a leading role in the story of industrialization. First, some historians have revived the formerly

obscure analysis by Werner Sombart, who stressed the economic stimulus created by luxury consumption in the early modern period (the two or three centuries before industrialization). In Sombart's view, a new personal freedom and sensuality on the part of both old and new elites created rising demand for luxuries, and brought into existence thoroughly capitalist enterprises to supply that demand. Building the fountains at Versailles, for example, required a French ironworking industry that could produce a lot of pipes.⁶ Second, Neil McKendrick has argued that the rise of mass consumption based on emulation of the rich created the demand for the products of new industries; the views of McKendrick and some of his critics will be discussed below.

EARLY MODERN CONSUMPTION

Three authors included in this part address, from very different perspectives, the nature of consumption before the Industrial Revolution. Chandra Mukerji, whose work spans a broad range of topics in early modern European consumption, here turns her attention to one of the earliest examples of mass consumption of luxury goods, namely pictorial prints. No one would claim that the market for prints, or even the industry that supplied them, was in itself large enough to be an important part of aggregate supply and demand. But Mukerji traces the ways in which the production and dissemination of prints, made possible by innovations in technology and industrial organization, both reflected and promoted an increasingly modern, secular, cosmopolitan worldview in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. The cultural connection forged among consumers of prints throughout Europe may have laid the groundwork for the national and international markets that became so important in the centuries that followed.

Carole Shammas takes a ruthlessly quantitative look at mass consumption of imported "groceries" in early modern England and its American colonies. Using a plausible standard for when a commodity reaches the level of mass consumption, she finds that tobacco became a mass consumption good in England by the middle of the seventeenth century, sugar products (including rum and molasses) by the end of the century, and tea early in the eighteenth century; the colonies lagged only slightly behind. Unlike pictorial prints, groceries were economically significant in themselves, accounting for one-third of English imports in 1800. Mass consumption of these luxury goods in the early modern period might have stimulated tastes for other luxuries, and could be a harbinger of the broader spread of consumption in the era just ahead.

In one important way, however, the groceries studied by Shammas are not typical of later consumption goods. Tobacco, rum, and tea are all, to varying extents, physically addictive, providing a different mechanism and meaning for their mass consumption. Tobacco, the most addictive, spread the fastest, with potentially serious health effects. The ample quantity of rum consumed in the colonies is at odds with the latter-day American mythology of sober, hard-working Puritan settlements. The difficulty of generalizing from these to other goods is shown even in Shammas' other area of data analysis, concerning consumer durables, where the patterns and conclusions are less clear-cut. However, a valuable insight that emerges from this second area is her suggestion that physical consumption levels per capita grew rapidly while budgets remained fairly stable, since the growth of commerce was steadily lowering prices. The same expenditure yielded more and more goods as time went on, much as happens today, for example,

with personal computers.

A very different side of consumption just before the Industrial Revolution is explored by David Shi, in his analysis of the difficulty that the Quakers of Pennsylvania experienced in maintaining their traditional commitment to simple living. Quakerism began in the turmoil of the English Revolution (1640-1660). Initially it was a politically radical, theologically millenarian, and not particularly pacifist sect. In the much more conservative climate that prevailed after 1660, the Quakers turned abruptly toward pacifism and withdrawal from active politics. Although their radical origins were soon forgotten by Quakers themselves as well as others, Cristopher Hill suggests that it is only in light of this early history that the Quakers' ongoing sense of social separatism and resistance to authority can be understood.⁷ They should, therefore, have been ideally prepared, if anyone was, to resist the temptations of a materialist society that offered ever-greater levels of luxury.

Nonetheless, it was soon evident that, as an old saying puts it, the Quakers came to Pennsylvania to do good and ended up doing well. Even in their own colony, founded on strict religious lines, Shi finds that the shared moral commitment to simple living was eroded by material success and its increasingly extravagant display. Consumption, it seems, had become integral to the life of the community, despite strong religious beliefs to the contrary. By the 1740s, only sixty years after the founding of Pennsylvania and a century after the first appearance of Quakers in England, a revival movement was needed to bring back the traditional Quaker commitment to pious simplicity. This experience has important lessons for contemporary advocates of voluntary simplicity (see Part X); it also emphasizes the extent to which a culture of mass consumption had become an irresistible part of colonial life by the middle of the eighteenth century.

By this time, as England was on the eve of industrialization, the American colonies were on the eve of independence. The prevalence of mass consumption could be seen in the movement for independence, as described by T.H. Breen.⁸ Resistance to Britain was frequently expressed through refusal to buy British goods; mounting social pressure to buy domestic products and use homespun cloth was a key part of the creation of a shared sense of national identity in the decades immediately before independence. A very similar, and perhaps better known, role was played by the *swadeshi* (home industry) movement in the struggle for India's independence in the first half of the twentieth century.

In short, the evidence for the rise of consumer society prior to the Industrial Revolution is impressively diverse. Throughout Europe people were buying goods that helped to create a common aesthetic and culture. In England and America, a mass public had become regular users of tobacco, sugar and rum, tea, and other imported, inessential foodstuffs - items that had formerly been available only to the elite, if at all. Purchases of durable consumer goods were evidently on the rise. In the American colonies, waves of prosperity eroded religious traditions of simple living; consumption of imported manufactures was so prevalent that its refusal could become a potent expression of national identity and unity.

Yet the consumer society as we know it today was far from completely established. In eighteenth-century England, side by side with the emerging signs of modern consumer behavior, precapitalist traditions still shaped the popular understanding of the purchase of grain in the

towns and countryside. The "moral economy of the English crowd", based on the laws and customs of a much earlier era, called for all grain to be sold locally in open markets on specified days at a publicly agreed-upon "just price," with the poor of the village given slightly preferential treatment. In times of shortage, when farmers, merchants, or millers were suspected of withholding grain from local markets for export or speculative sales outside the community, crowds frequently seized grain and enforced the traditional standards of sale.⁹ This militant traditionalism affected the consumption of only one commodity - in fact, the one least likely to be involved in the pursuit of luxury or status. But it suggests the persistence of older perspectives on distributive justice and appropriate patterns of consumption, which had to be eliminated before consumer society could prevail.

EMULATION AND INDUSTRIALIZATION

There is a long road left to travel between village riots to defend medieval notions of a just price for grain, and shopping for bread at a modern supermarket. Moving along that road, we next encounter the second of the three broad hypotheses about the rise of consumer society: some aspects of mass consumption may have arisen at about the same time as industrialization. On some level this must be true; the appearance of mass production must be accompanied by mass consumption. The new goods have to go somewhere, and someone has to learn to buy them. Two of the articles included here bear directly on this question -- and disagree emphatically with each other.

Neil McKendrick's research has played a central role in the evolving history of consumption. As he argues in the article summarized here, a "consumer revolution" in late eighteenth-century England was the demand-side analogue, and essential stimulus, to the Industrial Revolution on the supply side. A century of intellectual debate had overturned traditional moralism and won acceptance of the economic benefits of high and rising consumption, even of luxuries. New fashions in elite consumption spread geographically from London to the provincial gentry, and socially from master to servant to the working classes as a whole; without an expanding desire for novelty in appearance, the new flood of textiles produced by British industry could not have been sold. In this and in other work, McKendrick gives primacy to the historical role of growth in demand, which made it possible to market the growing supply of manufactured goods.

In response, Benjamin Fine and Ellen Leopold contend that it is a mistake to simply give demand, or supply for that matter, a leading role in explaining long-term historical change. While short-run business cycles or events in particular industries may usefully be analyzed in terms of the divergence of supply and demand, a long-run, aggregate analysis must recognize that the same forces tend to cause growth on both sides of the market. Fine and Leopold call for a return to the sweeping scope of the classical economists, who sought to identify the historical causes of growth in both supply and demand. They also offer a detailed response to McKendrick's portrait of emulation in the demand for fashion and clothes. While they do not dispute (or address) the possibility that desire for fashionable attire could spread through emulation, they show that "effective demand" -- desire combined with the money to buy the clothes -- could not have spread in the manner suggested by McKendrick.

As we move through the period of the Industrial Revolution, the modernization of labor, daily life, and consumption have come a long way. By the 1830s the English countryside had

witnessed the last of the enclosures of common lands; the traditional "moral economy" and the notion of a "just price" had vanished from sight. In the same decade, the last of the income subsidies provided under the Poor Laws were eliminated, making urban labor wholly dependent on wages; this was the point at which, in Polanyi's view, the market could finally be said to dominate social and economic life. By that standard, America was not a market-dominated society until the abolition of slavery some thirty years later. For the first time in history, the working population of a society worked entirely for wages, and obtained material necessities and luxuries entirely through purchases in the marketplace. Consumption of purchased goods played a growing part in daily life, expanding as fast as incomes allowed. While this may not have been a sufficient condition for the triumph of modern consumer society, it was undoubtedly a necessary one.

CREATING A LIFESTYLE

The expansion of the American and British economies over the course of the nineteenth century led to further changes that reshaped the consumer experience. Businesses grew in size, sophistication, and market power. This both allowed and depended on the creation of new commercial institutions, new advertising strategies, and finally new ways of life centered on modern consumption. These institutions, strategies, and lifestyles (to use the modern term) constitute three aspects of the transformation in consumption that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, creating a consumer society that looked increasingly like the one we live in today.

Stores had existed for ages, but nothing quite like the modern department store had been seen before the second half of the nineteenth century. The new interest in the history of consumption has given rise to many studies of department stores in the United States, France, and England (see Glennie's literature survey, cited above), including the article by Rudi Laermans summarized here. For Laermans the rise of the department store represents the intersection of several social and economic trends. While earlier stores typically specialized in only a few lines of merchandise, department stores sought to sell almost everything, consciously designing the store environment to promote a pleasant and prolonged shopping experience. The department store created a new public space in which middle-class women felt comfortable; the tension between the liberating aspects and the commercialized nature of the experience is one that recurs in more recent contexts. In an era before the automobile, the department store was both creation and creator of metropolitan life. Only in a large city with trolleys connecting neighborhoods to downtown was the market large enough to support such a store, and the cosmopolitan styles sold in the department store allowed consumers to define themselves amid the anonymity of urban life.

In America, the rise of the department store transformed popular culture in more ways than we usually realize. To a large extent, contemporary Christmas customs were created by late nineteenth century marketing efforts, often by department stores.¹⁰ Christmas gift-giving was virtually unknown in the 1840s, to judge from December newspaper advertising; promotion by Macy's and other department stores after the Civil War made Christmas shopping into the seasonal phenomenon it is today. Saint Nicholas only rarely was described as traveling across the sky in a sleigh before that era, and did not acquire his rotund, cheerful, white-bearded appearance until the 1860s. Christmas tree ornaments were all but unknown before 1880, when

F.W. Woolworth began to promote them; Christmas cards date from about the same period. "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer" was written, much later, by an employee in Montgomery Ward's advertising department.

New approaches to marketing in this period were not confined to department stores. The emergence of large corporations around the turn of the century led to the rise of nationally advertised brand names, as Susan Strasser has documented.¹¹ While commonplace today, the idea of brand names was initially unfamiliar, and advertisers struggled to associate their brands with a reputation for quality; success in this struggle allowed them to charge a substantial premium over the price of generic goods.

The heightened visibility of advertising affected more than the prices of specific brands. As T.J. Jackson Lears explains in the article summarized here, the turn of the century was a time when much of American culture turned from the Protestant ethic of salvation through hard work and self-restraint to a "therapeutic ethos" in which self-realization became the goal. Jackson Lears traces this change to the growing numbers of people who felt themselves to be adrift in a technologically complex urban world; as identity through work became less compelling, the new urban population sought meaning for their lives in other areas such as consumption. Advertisers were quick to realize the potential of the therapeutic ethos and the quest for self-realization, and soon moved away from narrowly informative ads to ones that played on consumers' emotions. Jackson Lears' discussion of emotionally based advertising anticipates some of the themes that are addressed in more detail in Part VII of this volume.

What kind of life was created by these changes in marketing and consumption practices? The final article summarized here, by Gary Cross, follows his work that was summarized in Part II. In the earlier selection Cross considered the reasons why, after about 1920, workers received the benefits of productivity gains almost entirely in the form of pay increases and higher consumption rather than shorter hours. In the current selection, Cross examines and critiques the interpretations of the turn toward consumerism offered by several of the authors represented in this volume, and then presents his view of what consumerism offered to the working-class household of the early twentieth century. Homeownership brought a combination of status-conscious consumption and creation of private space, a refuge from the world of work; the effort of creating the new household life required the role of housewife as full-time homemaker. Vacations to a commercially developed seaside resort likewise offered a refuge in time, a week of escape from the routine of the work year. As in the home, status-conscious consumption of standard, public vacation experiences was combined with the creation of private experiences and memories.

By the time we reach Cross' working-class household, in the 1920s, many essential aspects of the consumer society we know today have been established. After a lengthy interruption for the depression of the 1930s and World War II, the growth and development of consumer society continued into the postwar era of television and suburbanization - as is described further in Part VII.

Notes

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1. See, for example, Colin Renfrew, "Varnu and the emergence of wealth in prehistoric Europe", in Arjun Appadurai, editor, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
 2. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944).
 3. Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life 1400-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 140-141. Other historical evidence presented by Braudel confirms that table utensils first became common at about this time.
 4. Paul Glennie, "Consumption within historical studies", in Daniel Miller, editor, *Acknowledging Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
 5. David Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969), quote from p. 5, cotton statistics from pp. 41-42.
 6. Werner Sombart, *Luxury and Capitalism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967; first published 1913). See the discussion of Sombart in Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value", in Appadurai, editor, *op. cit.*, 36-39.
 7. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), especially chapter 10.
 8. T.H. Breen, "'Baubles of Britain': the American and consumer revolutions of the eighteenth century", *Past and Present* 119 (1988), 73-104.
 9. E.P. Thompson, "The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century", *Past and Present* 50 (1971), 76-136.
 10. See Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 157-164.
 11. Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).