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# *Consumer Society in American History*

A R E A D E R

*Edited with an Introduction  
and Bibliographic Essay by*

**Lawrence B. Glickman**

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## Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History

Lawrence B. Glickman

“The American Dream is a vision of men as consumers, and the American story is the story of an inveterate struggle to embody this dream in the institutions of American life.”

—Horace Kallen, 1936

“The basic myth of our culture is that consumption is the goal of life.”

—Dallas Smythe, 1972

Consumption has long been central to American identity, culture, economic development, and politics. More than one commentator has called consumption the “national pastime” of the United States.<sup>1</sup> But America’s long engagement with consumption has not been unchanging. The term itself has undergone a significant transformation. Once “consumption” was synonymous with wastefulness—a meaning that has not completely disappeared among critics, as several essays in this volume reveal. Over the course of the industrial revolution, however, consumption came to take on the more neutral, or even positive, connotation of productive social activity in a market economy. Even within any given era, “consumerism” has had a plurality of distinct and not always consistent significations: sometimes defined as excessive materialism, sometimes as a political movement of organized consumers.<sup>2</sup> It has been treated as moral danger, popular culture, economic policy, political activity, and as a symbol of modernity itself. The tension among these meanings throughout American history is emblematic of the ambivalence that Americans have felt—and continue to feel—about the part consumption plays in their lives. As James Gilbert has observed, “While American society is the most consumer-oriented in the world (in terms of the sheer number of material objects), it is also a society that quizzes itself endlessly about the effects of materialism, of inauthenticity, of defining oneself in terms of consumer objects.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite transformations in both its significance and its sites of practice (consumption has shifted from the trading post to the internet, from the corner store to the department store, from the farm to the factory), consumption has been central to American national identity from the period of European

exploration to the present. Equally important have been the longstanding, and unresolved, debates about the moral, economic, and political consequences of consumption, and the near constant stream of consumer philosophizing. For every advocate of the idea that simple living is the embodiment of the American spirit, there have been as many proponents of the contention that a deep and abiding materialism is the root of the nation's unique greatness. This is why both epigraphs at the beginning of this introduction are apt: consumption is central to both the material and ideological components of American identity; it is simultaneously a concrete institution and a guiding myth.<sup>4</sup>

A synopsis of consumption in American history suggests the important, if continually changing, place it holds.

- Commercial exchange was central to the earliest colonial encounters between Europeans and native Americans and transformed both cultures in what James Axtell calls "The First Consumer Revolution." Well before the industrial revolution made mass consumption possible, a commercial and nascent global economy placed consumption at the center of the cross-cultural exchange in the "Age of Exploration."
- During the colonial period, as the American population doubled every twenty-five years, the growing "middling classes" in the colonies began to purchase manufactured goods which they proudly displayed in their homes. Growing demand, a result of a marked increase in per capita wealth among colonists, spurred the industrial revolution, first in England and eventually in the United States.
- American religious leaders expressed concern about the potential for commercial avarice in the New World. New England Puritan ministers strove to ensure that merchants charged only "just prices," not market prices, for their ever-expanding array of imported goods. Yet at the same time the language of the market began to creep into religious discourse—a tension that has continued into the twentieth century as churches have aimed for limits on consumption while embracing parishioners as consumers.
- The American Revolution was in part a consumer revolution. The identity of the colonies as a nation, an "imagined community" to borrow Benedict R. O'G Anderson's phrase, grew out of the practices of wearing homespun clothing and boycotting British goods, most notoriously during the Boston Tea Party. The revolutionaries became the first in a long line of Americans to link consumption—or its withdrawal—and politics.
- The market revolution of the early nineteenth century brought mass-produced goods first to the urban, middle-classes and eventually to small-town America. As America shifted economically (in an uneven process) from a rural, subsistence society to an urbanizing, market-based one, the meaning of what constituted "necessities" changed. Rather than consuming only what was needed, Americans began to raise their standards of consumption.
- In the shorter hours movement, begun in antebellum America and intensifying with the eight-hour movement of the 1870s and 1880s, workers de-

manded more leisure. They argued that, to the extent that they produced the nation's goods, they deserved to enjoy their fair share of the fruits of their labor. For most American workers the work week steadily declined: from sixty-four hours in 1850, to sixty by 1890, to fifty-five by 1914, to forty by the 1930s.

- Along with the shorter hours movement, workers' demand for "living wages" (defined as reward for consumption needs rather than simply a productive equivalence) became central to organized labor's "consumerist turn" in the late nineteenth century. Thus the store and the cash register joined the shop floor as a place of labor struggle and activism.
- With the rise of the union label, first popularized in the immediate post-Civil War years, workers and labor reformers developed a model of solidarity based on consumption. The idea that consumption was not merely an individualist activity had already been argued by the American revolutionaries who ascribed social meaning to market activities; but in the late nineteenth century, consumerist solidarity began to take on its characteristically modern form. The twentieth century has seen it become one of America's dominant modes of political activism.
- Following the Revolution, but particularly after the Civil War, minority peoples frequently used boycotts and consumer activism as a political tactic to make claims for justice in the public sphere. Emboldened by a demand for what the historian Robin D. G. Kelley calls "consumer entitlement" through activism, African Americans, for example, boycotted Jim Crow streetcars in southern towns and cities in the 1890s when segregation was applied to the public transportation systems.<sup>5</sup>
- Through criticism by those identifying themselves as "white," of the standard of consumption of others (often in derogatory-gendered or racial language), consumption has also been a tool for injustice and discrimination, a way of marking outsiders. Even as the purchase of goods was being acclaimed as a key to American identity and citizenship, the business practices of "red lining" (keeping stores away from minority neighborhoods) and of making products and services unavailable to blacks served to exclude racial minorities from consumption. A 1906 pamphlet by Samuel Gompers and Herman Gustadt, *Meat vs. Rice: American Manhood against Asiatic Coolieism. Which Shall Survive?* made a consumerist argument for resuming the practice of legally preventing Chinese immigration.
- N. W. Ayer & Son, the first advertising agency, was created in 1877. By the end of the century, advertising had become a big business, a linchpin of the new corporate economy and a crucial purveyor of the American Dream. By 1900, corporations spent \$95 million a year on advertising; by the end of World War I, American advertising had become a half a billion dollar a year industry.<sup>6</sup>
- In the nineteenth century, mail order catalogs led to the creation of what Daniel Boorstin calls "consumption communities," groups of Americans

united by their purchases into the web of consumer culture. This form of purchase, which allowed anyone to buy national brands at standard prices through the anonymity of the postal system, appealed to African Americans and others who often faced maltreatment at the local store. Rural Americans, who lived far from stores able to offer them a big selection, also became enthusiastic catalog shoppers, especially after the late nineteenth-century advent of Rural Free Delivery.

- In the nineteenth century, consumption became what it continues to be today: a central part of American commercial and popular culture. “Cheap amusements”—commercial entertainments such as amusement parks, theaters, and dance halls—transformed the urban landscape, providing the arena for a new heterosocial public life and the abandonment of Victorian culture. Department stores, “palaces of consumption,” created a new consumer landscape for the largely female middle-class shoppers and working-class clerks: John Wanamaker’s, A. T. Stewart’s, R. H. Macy’s, Gimbel’s, Jordon Marsh, and Filene’s included amenities such as restaurants, electric displays, and wide varieties of merchandise. The new disease of “kleptomania” arose during this period as Victorian middle-class women faced the social pressures of the new consumer culture.
- Immigrants and urban newcomers, while continuing to assert their ethnic identity, also assimilated through what Andrew Heinze calls the “bridge” of consumer culture. It enabled the immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (whether Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, Jews in the metropolises of the Northeast, or Central Europeans in Chicago) to Americanize on their own terms, carving out identities as hyphenated Americans neither inhabiting the cultural world of the old country nor leaving behind their culture for an American one.
- Consumption became a gendered phenomenon, particularly in the late nineteenth century. For many families, shopping was a form of women’s work; at the same time, the new commercial world afforded women new opportunities in the worlds of work and leisure.
- Two works of turn-of-the-century fiction politicized the meaning of “consumer society.” Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1887) depicted an American utopia in which widespread consumerism obviated the need for class conflict. Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) popularized the consumer movement and, with its stomach-turning depictions of the meatpacking industry, gave impetus to the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.
- In the most influential critique of the decadent consumer culture of the Gilded Age upper class, Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) brought the phrase “conspicuous consumption” into the national vocabulary.
- At the turn of the twentieth century a new kind of politicized consumption emerged. Known as the “consumer movement,” it was a characteristically Progressive Era form of middle-class political engagement, with a special ap-

peal for women. The founding of the New York Consumers League (1890) and the National Consumers League (1899) were key to the politicization of middle-class consumers. As Kathryn Kish Sklar notes in discussing women’s political activism in the nineteenth century, it has often been the case that “consumer consciousness built political consciousness.” In 1914, at the peak of the Progressive Era, Walter Lippmann wrote, “We hear a great deal about the class-consciousness of labor; my own observation is that, in America, today’s consumer’s consciousness is growing much faster.”<sup>7</sup>

- During the Progressive Era, another facet of modern consumer society emerged: the assembly line. Henry Ford mass-produced the reasonably priced Model T and paid his workers \$5 per day so they could afford his cars and other fruits of mass production. The automobile became, in Daniel Boorstin’s words, “the omnipresent symbol of American consumption communities” and the leading edge of the “Fordist” mass production/mass consumption model that dominated American business practices until the late twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>
- In 1927, the consumer movement, dormant in the immediate postwar years, was revived with the publication of Stuart Chase’s and F. J. Schlink’s *Your Money’s Worth*. It became known as the “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” of the consumer movement, a best seller, and a selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club.
- The 1930s saw the proliferation of a wide range of consumer organizations ranging from the Consumers Union to the League of Women Shoppers (slogan: “Use your buying power for justice”) to consumer cooperatives. In addition to formal organizations, a number of grassroots movements emerged—including the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign of African American city dwellers. During this decade, the politicians and economists came to agree that underconsumption played a significant role in setting off the Great Depression. The New Deal responded with a host of measures aimed at bolstering the purchasing power of ordinary Americans.
- President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1941 State of the Union Address laid out “Four Freedoms,” one of which was “freedom from want.” In the speech, FDR called for “the enjoyment of the fruits of scientific progress in a wider and constantly rising standard of living.”<sup>9</sup>
- The 1950s witnessed a new kind of American affluence dominated by suburbs and automobiles. Shopping malls proliferated from eight in 1945 to 3,840 by 1960. In two articles in the late 1950s, “Rocketing Births: Business Bonanza” and “A New, \$10-Billion Power: The U.S. Teen-Age Consumer,” *Life* magazine argued that the baby boom generation—both infants and teens—was leading America to new levels of consumption, some of it family oriented (diaper services, clothing, food) and much of it individual (automobiles, record purchases, beauty care products).<sup>10</sup>
- In the mid-1950s, a new phase of consumerist protest, starting with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, launched the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Several years later, sit-ins in Greensboro, Nashville, and elsewhere expanded the connection between consumption and civil rights. “Close your charge account with segregation, open up your account with freedom” was one of the slogans of the drive to integrate the lunch counter at Rich’s department store in Atlanta.<sup>11</sup>

- With the 1959 “kitchen debate,” consumption entered foreign policy as Vice President Richard Nixon used the presence of modern appliances in American homes to make the case for the superiority of free market capitalism and Western democracy.
- President John F. Kennedy’s 1962 message to Congress called for a “Consumer’s Bill of Rights” which included the right to safety, the right to be informed, the right to choose, and the right to be heard in governmental decision making.
- David Caplowitz’s *The Poor Pay More* (1963) brought national attention to the high cost of consumption for impoverished Americans.
- Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1964) revived national concern about the environmental consequences of mass consumption.
- In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson created the White House post of Special Assistant for Consumer Affairs and selected longtime consumer activist Esther Peterson to serve in the position.
- Ralph Nader’s *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1965) launched the contemporary consumer movement with his claim that consumers were “manipulated, defrauded, and injured not just by ‘fly-by-night’ hucksters but by blue-chip business firms.” Nader suggested that, “Giving consumers the know-how to help themselves is one of the most creative functions of government.” The next year, Senator Philip Hart’s (D-MI) “Truth in Packaging” bill was passed and signed into law.<sup>12</sup>
- Beginning in the late 1960s, the United Farm Workers brought consumption into the labor struggle once again. Agricultural workers urged middle-class consumers to refrain from purchasing grapes, so long as growers resisted union organizing campaigns and industry conditions remained dangerous.
- Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, apostles of the “simple life” revived this old American ideal even as the counterculture became a source of profits for big business.
- President Jimmy Carter’s 1979 “Crisis of Confidence” speech warned Americans that “too many of us now worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things do not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence and purpose.”<sup>13</sup>
- In the 1980s, critiques of Yuppie consumerism were outweighed by celebrations of American affluence. Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise* (1985) parodied the emptiness—and danger—of American affluence by depicting trips

to the supermarket in competition with an “airborne toxic event” for the attention of the townspeople.

- Even as the 1990s witness new levels of consumer spending, marketing, and advertising, the decade also brings a revival of older notions of consumerism. Scorning companies that produce goods with cheap labor abroad and sweat shop labor at home, many critics have been led to call for a revival of consumer responsibility. Calling for a “Civic Consumers Coalition,” the political theorist Benjamin Barber argues that consumers “can do plenty of things . . . to nurture greater corporate virtue.”<sup>14</sup> Concern about long work hours and declining real wages are also leading Americans to ponder once again the relationship between work and leisure.

### The History of American Consumer History

The preceding capsule summary demonstrates that throughout American history, consumption has been widely practiced and encouraged. Consumerism (the various ideologies and movements built around consumption) has been central to economics and politics—hence the description of the United States as a “consumer society.” Yet what exactly do these phrases mean? Despite the endless labeling of America as being a consumer society—sometimes with praise, other times with blame—until recently there were few serious analyses of the meaning and history of America’s consumer society. Although central to the American experience, consumption has not been central to our frameworks for interpreting that experience.

The result has been a rather stale view of the history of America’s consumer society: it appeared briefly in most textbooks as a phenomenon emerging alongside mass production in the 1920s; it then reappeared in these same texts as a part of the discussion of post-World War II affluence. These mentions in textbooks notwithstanding, few scholars treated the origins and development of a consumer society as a topic worthy of historical inquiry. (The “Classics” section of the “Bibliographic Essay” at the end of this collection lists a number of important works on the subject, many of them best sellers, written in early- and mid-twentieth century America; but rarely were these treatments historical in approach.)

For much of the twentieth century, intellectuals either celebrated or derided America’s consumer society. What they rarely did was to treat it as a serious object of study. There were a few exceptions to this rule, such as David Potter’s *People of Plenty* (1954). Yet even Potter held a curiously static view of consumption. Consumption to Potter was what the frontier was to Frederick Jackson Turner: the defining component of national character.<sup>15</sup> (The difference was that whereas Turner worried about the declining frontier, Potter was made uneasy by the increasing flood of affluence.) In arguing that Americans were fundamentally a people of plenty and that the only variable that changed over