

FAMILY, GENDER, AND SOCIALIZATION ISSUES IN CONSUMPTION

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Summary

In contemporary society consumption activity is one of the most meaningful experiences of the social life of individuals. This culture is linked to the world of goods and objects, where the act of consumption seems to be dissociated from the material quality of goods and their value of use. The origin of this new attitude towards consumption is marked between the fifteenth and sixteenth century by the passage from a pre-industrial economy to an industrial and capitalistic economy, characterized by mass production of goods introduced on the market with the only aim being to sell them and make money. The division between the production sphere and the household sphere, which emerged with the outset of the industrialization process, contributed to the establishment of the relationship of women to consumption towards the end of the eighteenth century. This approach was particularly relevant to the female model widespread at that time, that is a woman performing family tasks, with few interests outside her family and spending money to buy new products. The advent of mass distribution, first, and the loss of the central social role of production, later, inevitably marked the decline of the relation between women and consumption. Concerning the different consumer behaviors in the family sphere, between 1982 and 1984 Pahl conducted an empirical study on the control and division of money among British households, showing that women devote their earnings to family needs, while men keep a part of their salary for their personal needs.

Consumption behavior has significantly changed in the last thirty years. The first changes were produced after the Second World War, when the production or labor

spheres start to lose their central role to leave space for a variety of social spheres. The distinctive trait of contemporary consumers is the unwillingness to be typecast and the acceptance of lifestyles that, by definition, are more dynamic and spread to large sections of the population.

1. Introduction

Consumption behaviors, as acts related to the exchange of goods, are present in almost all human cultures and in almost all human civilizations. Nowadays consumption is an element defining the Western world culture. This culture is more and more material and linked to the world of goods and objects, where the act of consumption seems to be dissociated from the material quality of goods and their value of use, to become a “symbolic act”, that is an act through which individuals use the system of objects as carrier of culturally given meanings to communicate their position within a social world and to assert their identity.

The decline of the feudal society, the establishment of industrial production and then mass production and distribution are the fundamental steps that led to the emergence of the new meaning of consumption. In contemporary society consumption activity is one of the most meaningful experiences of individuals' social life. For instance most activities made during leisure-time involve consumer practices. On this subject, George Ritzer said that while production dominated the previous periods, nowadays this supremacy is held by consumer goods and therefore shopping malls have replaced factories as the typical structure of this era.

To understand the development of consumption practices it is necessary to go over the various steps of the industrial revolution which started in England in the eighteenth century and in little more than two centuries imposed the materialistic consumption patterns still existing today. Therefore in the following pages we try, first of all, to focus on the origin of the consumer society through a theoretical picture developed by some social historians. Second, we consider gender differences in consumption behavior. The division between the production sphere and the household sphere—that can be translated into a separation between the public and private spheres—which emerged with the outset of the industrialization process and the final decline of the household as a production unit, contributed to the establishment of the relationship of women to consumption. This approach was particularly relevant to the female model widespread in pre-industrial times, that is a woman performing family tasks, with few interests outside her family and spending little money on new products.

The advent of mass distribution, first, and later the loss of the central social role of production, inevitably marked the decline of the relation between women and consumption. To this must be added the transformations in the representations of masculinity and femininity. Their traits became less distinctive and more similar, to the extent that it was difficult to base gender differentiations on consumption. In short, if it is difficult to think of exclusively male or female modes of consumption; it is also impossible not to consider that there are specific differentiation codes according to which objects are devoted to male or female consumption. Pat Kirkahm pointed out that gender differentiation in objects is centred on the object's color and shape. Several

conventions linked to gender have been recently applied. For instance, the binary opposition implicit in pink for a little girl and blue for a boy was only established in the 1930s; babies and parents managed perfectly well without such color coding before then.

When talking about consumption and gender differences one cannot avoid considering different consumer behaviors in the family sphere. Unlike what stressed the opposition between women and consumption, research by Pahl in Britain in the eighties of the last century, showed that women devote their earnings to family needs. Conversely men keep a part of their salary for their personal needs and sometimes, if women do not have a source of personal income, this choice can create difficulties for the family budget. Even more recent data show that women have different pattern of consumption and, above all, different priorities when compared with men: they demonstrate greater concern for family welfare, for children needs, and they spend for themselves only when the needs of the other family members are satisfied. Men seem to have more individualistic attitudes toward consumption.

Finally, we want to face the transformations of the socialization process related to consumption. The loss of importance of the production sphere, both at social and personal level, and the establishment of several areas of self-actualization, and the increase in the number of lifestyles put at stake the model that considered consumption as an instrument of social status achievement. Nowadays consumption practices hide more complex decision-making patterns which involve self-actualization reasons, the establishment of one's own identity up to the solution of the anxieties which characterize post-modern man.

2. Theories on the origins of consumption

Historians coined the term “commercial revolution” for that period of transformation in commerce, between the fifteenth and sixteenth century, which became essential for the establishment of a consumption culture similar to the present one. This period was characterized by a series of new and previously unknown products introduced to the European markets due to the progress made in transportation and the development of trade with other continents. According to Chandra Mukerji, the commercial expansion at international level was responsible for the new material goods culture in Western Europe that still conditions our consumption behavior. The origin of this new attitude towards consumption is marked by the passage from a pre-industrial economy oriented at self consumption by manufacturers, to an industrial and capitalistic economy, characterized by mass production of goods introduced on the market with the only aim being to sell them.

Fernand Braudel places the establishment of a consumption culture—the leading element of the tremendous economic development that European countries experienced in the last few centuries—around the Renaissance. Indeed, changes produced in the field of consumption since the Renaissance, apart from developing commerce and production, fostered the emergence of a social culture promoting economic growth by means of personal mobility and attitude to change. To this end, one must not disregard the role played by fashion which pushed people to constantly innovate their clothing,

food, furnishing and other goods bought for the home. As we will see in the following paragraphs, women were particularly involved in the consumer acts produced by these innovations.

Braudel and Mukerji also pointed out the importance of the consumption of luxury goods by rich men in Italy in the fourteenth century. The predilection for such goods was functional, to reflect their rank and power. At the social level, the importance of this consumption mode lies in its subsequent diffusion among other strata of population. Unlike these two authors, Grant McCracken attributes the outset of the new material goods culture in England to the court of Queen Elizabeth I, that is in the second half of the 16th century. The order to leave their homes and move to the Court, given by the Queen to the aristocrats, triggered competitive consumer behavior. So as not to go unnoticed in front of the Queen, these aristocrats were forced to flourish more and more luxurious clothes and jewels. The most important point of McCracken's analysis is that he pointed out how the consumption of luxury goods by aristocrats turned from a practice aimed at assessing individual prestige and reputation of the family to an activity of buying goods for themselves in order to claim their personality in the society. Consumption became a behavior no longer aimed at acquiring goods to keep and to hand down to the next generation to stress the family honor, but at possessing new fashionable products.

As a matter of fact, the material goods culture, on which the consumer world is based, developed in the seventeenth century with the first industrial revolution. According to McKendrick, Bruner and Plumb in “The Birth of a Consumer Society”, the birth of this type of culture has to be traced back to solely economic reasons. In fact, according to these authors, the consumer society developed in particular in eighteenth century England with the acceleration of the industrialization process. As a consequence, consumption acts were extended to large masses of people that for the first time had to choose autonomously products to buy, disregarding constraints imposed by the tradition. According to these authors, the thesis of the birth of a new consumer culture would be supported by the emergence of a new social subject—the company—which, by means of new marketing tools and advertising, significantly contributed to the establishment of large-scale consumption patterns, no longer confined to a local area.

A further element witnessing the emergence of a consumeristic culture is the extension of consumption activity to women. As a matter of fact in this historical period women start to work and to have an autonomous disposable income which allows them to buy industrially those goods that previously they made at home (e.g. clothes, garments, curtains).

The establishment of a consumer culture was aided by the growth and spread of values favorable to consumption within the society; for instance the idea developed from the 1870s that the desire for luxury and material goods contributed to common well-being. In the early eighteenth century merchantilistic thinkers contributed to feed the propensity to consume luxury goods. They stressed that the luxury trades were an impetus to the accumulation of national wealth. This stance marked the final decline of a medieval view of consumption—a means by which the monarch and rich aristocrats defined their power and their status. With the shift to *laissez-faire* ideology,

consumption stood at the heart of modern market society being the sole end and purpose of all production. Adam Smith in “The Wealth of Nations” writes that consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production and that consumption should never take care of the manufacturer's interest unless this is necessary to promote the consumer's interest. A few years later, in “On the Principles of Political Economy, and Taxation” David Ricardo expressed a similar concept: no one produces unless he wants to consume or to sell and no one sells if he intends to buy some other goods that are immediately useful or can contribute to future production.

In his “Luxury and capitalism” Werner Sombart based his analysis on the birth of consumer culture on the importance of the use of luxury goods by aristocrats. In the first stage of capitalism, that he defined as “early capitalism” (between 1200 and 1700), the consumption of luxury goods was an important expedient for the development of capitalism because it guaranteed prosperity to companies specialized in the production of such goods. At this stage consumption was an exclusive prerogative of aristocrats, although it soon became a model to be followed by the ascending bourgeoisie.

In the second stage of capitalism development, the “mature capitalism”, which prevailed from the nineteenth century, taste and refinement, which had characterized consumption in the aristocratic society, were sacrificed to the quantity of goods on the market. Consumption becomes mass consumption, with a lower aesthetic quality, aimed at meeting the consumer needs of the bourgeoisie, which had definitely established itself.

In tracing back the steps of the origin and development of structural and cultural aspects of the industrial society, Colin Campbell recognizes the existence of a logic within consumption which differs from the production logic. The consumer society, born in eighteenth-century England, is characterized by the prevailing desire to consume, which leads people to conspicuous consumption of goods. By investigating the historical genesis of the desire for goods, Campbell speaks of a true “ethic of consumption”. The never-ending desire to consume is the result of the establishment of a romantic idea of consumption aimed at personal reward and oriented at the search for pleasure. According to Campbell, Romanticism would have fostered the outset of modern consumerism and in the two following centuries would have given new impulse to consumption dynamics.

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Biographical Sketches

Luisa Leonini is professor of sociology at Milan State University, Italy. She is chair of the M A in Communication and Society at the Faculty of Political Science. Professor Leonini's research and teaching interests are focused in a number of areas. One is consumption with particular interest in gender and sub-cultural differences in patterns of consumption and life styles. A second area of interest is the globalization of markets and the consequences on individuals everyday life in contemporary multiethnic

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