

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CONSUMER SOCIETIES

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Contents

1. The Historical Problematization of the Consumer Society
 2. Definitions and Chronologies
 3. Practices and Discourse
 4. Modelling the Consumer Revolution
 - 4.1. Consumerist Explanations
 - 4.2. Modernist Explanations
 - 4.3. Exchangist Explanations
 5. Multifarious Trajectories for Modern Consumption
- Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

The term ‘consumer society’, contrived after the Second World War, indicates that consumption had become a central mode of existence in Western societies. However, historians have shown that as early as the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, both in everyday practices and in public discourse, consumption had become central. Already, people appear to have had many more manufactured, commercially distributed things, e.g. paintings, ceramics, umbrellas, gloves, etc. In the late seventeenth century the consumption of new groceries—tobacco and sugar in particular—seems to have played a powerful role together with the diffusion of textiles. In the eighteenth century, furniture and other goods were needed to develop functional specialization of rooms, a process continuing in the nineteenth century, together with better heating and lighting. These trends are not signs of mass production. Yet, they operated on a national and international level, fostered by international commerce and the diffusion of produce from the colonies. This discontinuity in material culture was coupled with the development of discourses specific on and for consumption. Besides producing new evidence on the development of the modern Western market economy, historians have stressed the shortcomings of production-led explanations which rely on industrialization. Three different explanation of the so called "consumer revolution" have been offered: consumerist (N. McKendrick), modernist (C. Campbell) and exchangist (J. De Vries). However, recent historiography is abandoning the attempt to offer overall explanations for the birth of the consumer society. The focus is rather on the different timing and spacing of a number of phenomena—from international commerce, to the importance of colonies, to new communication technologies, to ethics, and so on—which started to come together around the eighteenth century, and which, in

different ways in different countries, have given way to modern ways of consuming and of thinking about consumption.

1. The Historical Problematization of the Consumer Society

As is well known, the ‘term consumer society’ was contrived after the Second World War to grasp the fact that consumption had become a central mode of modern life in Western societies. This notion is based on the assumption that the movement towards mass consumption in the inter-war period was accompanied by a general reorganization of everyday experience. However, historians and historically informed studies have shown that already in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, both in everyday routine and in public discourse, consumer practices had become central. "Consumption" had gained prominence in public discourse from the turn of seventeenth century in Britain, as modern consumption patterns combining the multiplication and diversification of goods and the predominance of market exchange circuits underwent difficult legitimation processes.

Such prominence has been characterized by a deep attitudinal ambivalence towards it. In eighteenth century Britain, for example, the medical rhetoric preoccupied with individual well-being rather than with that of the "nation", like Mandeville and Scottish Enlightenment, was deeply critical of new consumption practices. As underlined by Roy Porter, the term "consumption" remained strictly associated with physical consumption, and with the much-feared illnesses such as tuberculosis. More broadly, instead of reassuring people that their consuming passions paved the right road to health, doctors judged new consumption patterns a health threat. Nevertheless, "consumption" was not only characterized as a negative and passive act, stigmatized by the assonance with such concepts as "erosion", "destruction" and "exploitation", but started to gain some positive connotation as it appeared to be linked to market-laden collective (i.e. national) benefits.

Recent historiography has helped smooth this normative ambivalence which still characterizes much of the discussion around "consumer society" in the social sciences at large. In particular some remarkable works in social, cultural and economic history, which have appeared since the late 1970s, have been fundamental to the development of a new social scientific body of knowledge about consumption patterns and modernity. Britain, USA and to a lesser extent France, Germany and Italy have been the main focus of the new wave of historical analysis on consumer culture and practices. This new body of research has documented the differences in consumer and market relations through time, space, culture and market-sector—recent works dealing with eighteenth century England; seventeenth century Holland; renaissance "commercial revolution" and the Italian city states; nineteenth century France. With respect to market-sector, there are works on clothing, leisure, and food consumption, and finally, regarding the development of the different elements of the market, the focus is on advertising in USA and the UK and on shopping and the retailing industry. These studies have helped in clarifying how consumption has become what it is in contemporary Western societies. All in all, historical perspectives have figured as a main means of going around the dilemmas of the so-called "consumer society". Firstly, they have produced new evidence on the development—timing, location, scope and dynamics—of the modern Western market economy so that it is now possible to maintain that the "consumer society" is not a sudden occurrence of the

second half of the twentieth century. Secondly, they have contributed to the awareness that production-led explanations—in their reduction of consumer practices to epiphenomena of industrialization stages—are insufficient to account for what appears to be a rather more complex intertwining of social relations. Thirdly, they have helped to set the direction for a more articulate understanding of consumption practices, one that is not confined to those actions and variables which are typically associated with the demand side of mainstream economic theory.

2. Definitions and Chronologies

When speaking of consumer society, lay people generally indicate a number of phenomena which may be shifting, but which are broadly connected with the development of modern Western society. Despite differences in emphasis and chronology, most historians agree on certain attributes such as growing per capita consumption of commodities, increasing production and improving distribution, increasing mobility and social division of labour on the one hand and, on the other, stress key transformation periods, using metaphors of transition and revolution, opposing consumer society to pre-modern consumption, in which people were users of things, engaged in a natural activity oriented to use values, rather than consumers of commodities. Yet, for historians questions of chronology are crucial and, with chronology, the very definition of what characterizes consumer society varies.

More precisely, discussions within historiography have dealt with the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century. Traditionally, historians have considered either the wave of consumerism which coincides with the development of the arcade and the department store in late nineteenth century or the diffusion of durables in the post WW2 era as the origin of consumer society. The majority of the works focusing on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, take into account the huge development of urban commercial spaces and of the mass press, analysing metropolis such as Paris and Berlin, the birth of the department store and the diffusion of modern retailing and advertising. In particular, the institutionalization of advertising and marketing techniques has accompanied the progressive consolidation of a culture of consumption in the USA and Europe at least from the late nineteenth century. Commercial advertising came to fill the gap between production and consumption which was becoming characteristic of developed economies, dressing the ever-growing flow of new commodities with meanings. If the first commercials appeared already in the seventeenth century, accompanying the diffusion of news papers and periodicals, they were typically very factual in tone and presentation. From the late nineteenth century ads have started to become more and more evocative, exploiting metaphors, mythologies and symbolic associations to construct complex contexts and scenarios which not only suggest simple modalities of use, but also articulate a variety of lifestyles as ways of being and living.

Rather than focusing on structural changes in the media of consumption, the works dealing with the post WW2 era tend concentrate on the structural changes brought about in everyday life by the innovations introduced in the technological basis and diffused by mass production. They try to document the effects of mass production in USA, the diffusion of electrical equipment in private homes, the Americanization of European consumption patterns, and even the emergence of consumer movements which tried to transform the category of the consumer into a political weapon against industrial concentration and mass

production. Other works document the diffusion of new patterns of diet and family expenditure, especially in southern Europe where the post WW2 era has been characterized by wide changes in the economic and cultural structure. In general, while the diet has become richer, the proportion of the household income spent on food has decreased dramatically leaving more room for leisure expenditure. Meanwhile, as the twentieth century proceeded, the erosion of culinary traditions and family meals as well as the diffusion of fast-food spread new food-related problems, such as obesity.

Recently, several studies have preferred to refer back to the seventeenth and eighteenth century. They seem to share a common attempt to supplement or revise the historical wisdom which links economic modernity to the industrial revolution. European diets, for example, start to change markedly from the diffusion of colonial foodstuffs and drinks from the late seventeenth century: sugar, coffee and tea quickly became commodities available to larger and larger section of the population, changing both popular food habits and popular perceptions of health and pleasure. For its theoretical relevance, the debate about the emergence of modern consumer society in the seventeenth and eighteenth century has gained a marked prominence both within contemporary historiography and in the social sciences at large. Previous historical evidence led us to think of the genesis of consumer society as if it were part of a well-ordered, dialectical process. First, in the seventeenth century, we could see the development of an industrial revolution, and then industrial society followed—or rather degenerated—in the late nineteenth century, resulting, in the interwar period, in the "consumer society". Recent works on eighteenth century England and France as well as on seventeenth century Holland are related to the possibility of gaining a more articulate picture of the historical process that has brought economic modernity. This is the result of a double focus. On the one hand, there are works which have focused on the documentation of the diffusion of modern consumption patterns; on the other, there has been a growing interest in the study of the development of the notion of the consumer in expert discourse related to the developing nation State and its wealth.

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Biographical Sketch

Roberta Sassatelli teaches sociology, cultural sociology and consumer studies at the University of East Anglia (Norwich, UK) and the University of Bologna (Italy). Her research focuses on the historical development of consumer societies and the theory of consumer action, with a particular interest in the contested development of the notion of the consumer as against notions such as citizen or person. She has done research on the commercialization of sport and in particular on the way the fitness movement has been variously appropriated as a leisure pursuit. She is currently the Italian Scientist in Charge of an EU project on trust in food and she continues her work on how European consumers are responding to the food crisis and articulating notions of typicality and quality. In addition to her two monograph “Anatomy of the Gym”, il Mulino, 2000 and “Consumption, Culture and Society”, il Mulino 2004), she is the author of numerous articles in books and international journals such as *Acta Sociologica*, *Body and Society*, *Journal of Material Culture*, *European Societies*, etc.