

# Consumer Culture, History of

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Although the notion of consumer culture did not emerge in Western culture until after World War II, the historical rise of a recognizable set of cultural values and norms associated with consumption certainly goes back to earlier stages of the modern era. Since the 1990s, the historiography of consumption has emphasized that a specific culture of consumption was the driving force in the process of industrialization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It has also been argued that earlier forms of consumer culture can be traced further back to the second half of the sixteenth century or even to the Renaissance.

While the acts of buying and using goods in a meaningful social way have no doubt existed since the beginning of civilization, historians of consumption commonly assume that a proper culture of consumption developed only in modern societies as a long-term and progressive process. Consumer culture represented a crucial cultural feature in the development of the modern Western world. Its historical emergence could also be interpreted as the result of a specific social configuration, in which the relationship between the symbolic world and material resources started to be mediated through the market and to assume a central role in socio-cultural reproduction, in the fulfillment of personal needs and the use of material objects (see Slater 1997, 8). Over the centuries, the main features of this consumer culture have been the growth of a materialistic attitude, a

tendency to develop forms of social competition through goods, and also an increase in the meaningfulness of these goods to express identity and social belonging.

After the seventeenth century in particular, this culture of consumption, based on the processes of social stratification, emerged as an influential force, sustaining the formation of modernity, the development of trade and mercantilism, and the adoption of the monetary economy: in sum, it has accompanied the entire rise of modern capitalism. In the nineteenth century, the spread of consumer culture was a prerequisite for the industrial revolution and, consequently, for the diffusion of the industrial mass production of standardized goods, as well as the transformation of cities and the process of urbanization. It thus became an important symbolic dimension in the emergence of the bourgeois and middle classes. In the twentieth century consumer culture evolved into a crucial facet of society, acquiring a pre-eminent role in the evolution of contemporary global culture. As the historian William Leach (1993) has pointed out with reference to the United States, in the first part of the twentieth century we assisted in a wide social effort to promote an orchestrated and coherent culture of consumption as a system of values, practices, and imageries based on the desire of material objects and the acquisition of goods to fulfill needs and to achieve prosperity and self-realization in society.

## THE BIRTH OF CONSUMER CULTURE: RENAISSANCE, ROYAL COURTS, AND BOURGEOIS CLASSES

While early historical accounts concerning the consumer society simplistically assumed that the importance of consumption had just

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been a consequence of changes in production that occurred with the nineteenth-century industrial revolution, contemporary historiography (e.g., Sassatelli 2007; Trentmann 2012) has pointed out that explicit forms of consumer culture have accompanied the evolution of the modern world, at least since the early modern era. The formation of modern societies was accompanied by the emergence of both new cultural models, through which people interacted with commodities, and new ways of generating collective identities and social distinction thanks to the consumption of goods. The local markets held in European cities in the late Middle Ages were one of the first phenomena in which modern consumption attitudes can be recognized. The French historian Fernand Braudel (1982/1979) located the earliest forms of modern consumer culture within Italian Renaissance cities, and in particular in Lorenzo de' Medici's Florence, where people started to develop materialistic attitudes and to adopt material goods as tools of social competition.

However, it was only in the late seventeenth century that the historiography of consumer culture identified some of the key moments in the evolution of modern consumption habits, by looking at the social changes occurring in England and in other European countries, which were the main players in the nascent international trade with "exotic" colonies. One of the more convincing descriptions of the emergence of consumer culture in the period focuses on the court of Elizabeth I in late sixteenth-century England. The anthropologist Grant McCracken (1988) points out that Elizabeth consolidated power over her kingdom by using the magnificence of courtly ceremony and stimulating social competition between nobles through the material acquisition of luxury goods and fashion. It is in this period that we can recognize a more systematic emergence of what Thorstein Veblen (1899) noted as a

crucial feature of consumer modernity: conspicuous consumption, namely, the strategic use of material goods to achieve or display social status. From the time of Elizabeth I onward, the focus on competition through consumption and the role of consumption in the processes of social differentiation became determinants in consumer culture, initially among the nobles and eventually in wider sectors of society in a trickle-down pattern.

Luxury goods are the point of departure in the German historian and sociologist Werner Sombart's (1967/1913) historical interpretation of the development of consumer culture. According to the reconstruction in his seminal study *Luxury and Capitalism*, luxurious products have played a decisive role in the creation of markets and modern merchant capitalism since the late Middle Ages and, consequently, they have been decisive in the birth of the modern consumer culture. On the one hand, luxurious consumption had been made possible by the transformation of the feudal economy into a capitalist economy, which allowed the accumulation of those resources needed for investments in international trade and in the exploitation of colonies. On the other hand, the trade with colonies was directly stimulated by a new consumer demand for luxury goods such as spices, textiles, perfumes, and precious stones. As early as in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these new material resources circulated through an early capitalistic economy led to a profound rearrangement of the cultural classification of goods and also stimulated the recognition of material objects as a means of self-expression and social distinction.

#### COLONIAL COMMERCE, SOCIAL COMPETITION, AND HEDONISM

The role of luxury and colonial products was not solely a matter of economic value. These

new and rare goods were also important for the cultural changes they gave rise to in consumers' mentality and in their attitudes toward material objects. Historians of consumption have highlighted this aspect by focusing on the role of new colonial goods that arrived for the first time in Europe as early as the fifteenth century, such as sugar, tea, and coffee. Cultural sociologist Chandra Mukerji (1983) argued that, when they were commercialized in Europe, these new colonial goods needed to be completely contextualized by the attribution of a new set of values and ethical projections, depending on local consumers' knowledge and social norms. The diffusion of these commodities forced growing sections of the population to deal with new objects and new meanings of consumption, and introduced the pressure to develop cultural competence in regard to the classification and evaluation of these goods.

A major historical reconstruction of the emergence of consumer culture coincides with the unfolding of a revolution in consumption among the eighteenth-century English middle class. As the historical economist Neil McKendrick (1982) has shown in detail, it is possible to recognize a major revolution of consumption within English society in this period, involving not only primary commodities but also and especially luxury goods, apparel, and furniture. A real difference from previous periods was that this revolution involved the middle class and was characterized by explicit imitative forms of consumption related to forms of class competition and the desire for social mobility. McKendrick exemplifies this change in relation to the commercialization of the Wedgwood potteries, which were a great commercial success with the middle class, thanks to Josiah Wedgwood's marketing strategies and the forms of sponsorship he put in place. These potteries were used officially by British and European royal families,

and for this reason their possession started to be considered a sign of social advancement by the emerging bourgeois class. The consumption of these objects, usually held in the homes of nobles, was explicitly and consciously assumed to be a means of upward social mobility of the growing middle class.

The rise of the relevance of consumer culture in social processes was not only dependent on forms of emulation relating to social aspiration, but it was also related to other cultural developments. In this regard, the historical sociologist Colin Campbell (1987) argued that in nineteenth-century England, a new cultural attitude marked by materialism and hedonism permeated society, opening the way for a different approach to commodities. In Campbell's view, the cultural influences of Romanticism were the basis for the development of a new consideration of commodities, clothes, and other personal belongings, which started to be identified as tools to foster the imagination, desire, and individual fulfillment. Overturning the perspective of Max Weber – according to which the rise of capitalism was linked to an ascetic style shared by the emerging bourgeois classes – Campbell argued that it was rather a focus on desire, material hedonism, and expressiveness through goods to stimulate a new way to consume, and therefore to generate a new demand for goods, that was essential for the development of capitalism. Consumer culture incorporated wider cultural transformations as romantic ideas grew in popularity (thanks especially to the popular success of the literary character of Dorian Gray, created by Oscar Wilde), and consumption legitimated not only hedonism, but also aesthetic enjoyment and the idea that consumption represented a sphere of self-expression and identity formation in the modern experience of society.

The rise of an autonomous and self-aware consumer culture was a long journey during

which major changes relating to the transition from the feudal world to modern societies were accompanied by profound transformations in the cultural values associated with commodities and consumption. With the advancement of modernity, consumption became more and more influential in both stimulating the development of the capitalist system and defining boundaries, distinctions, and homologies between the new social classes of the emerging capitalistic society.

#### CITIES, DEPARTMENT STORES, AND ADVERTISING

If the period from the late Middle Ages to the start of the mid-nineteenth century was a period during which material goods acquired a role in social distinction and self-expression, and which saw the emergence of a materialistic attitude in society, then the era between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries was a time of rapid and intense change. During these few decades, at least three profound transformations in production and everyday life accompanied the rise of consumption: the process of industrialization and the spread of the mass production of goods; urbanization and the new lifestyles emerging within huge modern cities; and, lastly, the evolution of advertising. It was in this period that advertising acquired its modern configuration and laid the foundations for the further symbolic role ads would acquire in modern culture after the world wars.

There is no doubt that, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the rapid shift of population from the countryside to large cities was instrumental in the transformation of the infrastructures, spaces, and culture of consumption. German sociologist George Simmel offers vivid accounts of the changes occurring in urban life in late nineteenth-century Berlin, which was characterized

by a multiplication of aesthetic and sensory stimulation. Dress styles and fashion reflected and encouraged individualism as well as a new sense of affinity between different people, highlighting how consumer culture has been a crucial dimension in the shaping and expression of identity within the changing context of individualized modern societies (Simmel 1904/1895). As for Paris, the social theorist Walter Benjamin (2002/1927–40) offered powerful pictures of the typical Parisian *passages*, road corridors with numerous shops and windows exhibiting luxury goods. These *passages* were described by Benjamin as “landscapes of consumption,” reflecting the significant role of commodities and shopping in Parisian society and heralding the autonomous spectacle of commodities in the culture and social practices of the time.

This age was full of innovations in consumption and marketing, including the introduction of department stores. They were characterized by large, well-kept, enclosed public buildings in which commodities were displayed in a very attractive way. One of the earliest and most famous department stores was the Bon Marché, which opened in Paris in 1852 and was renovated sumptuously at the end of the century with the help of the engineer Gustave Eiffel (Williams 1982). The department stores introduced the idea that consumers were not forced to buy anything and that they were not required even to interact with saleswomen; all this contributed to affirm the idea that goods could constitute an autonomous spectacle, independent from the act of buying, in a similar way to exhibits in museums.

The latter half of the nineteenth century was also, and above all, characterized by the advent of modern advertising, which started to assume the role of the engine of trade in the economy of mass-produced goods, together with the earliest marketing techniques and

strategies. Advertisements had appeared since the seventeenth century, accompanying the publication of newspapers and magazines, but they had remained for a long time informative in tone and factual in content. From the late nineteenth century, ads started to become more and more attractive, adopting metaphors and allusions, and beginning to use the technique of symbolic association that would be recognized by Roland Barthes (1972/1957) in the postwar period as typical of popular modern mythologies. It was, therefore, during this period that advertising stopped just selling products and began to offer lifestyles and dreams, taking on the role of a really powerful player in contemporary cultural flows.

#### FROM THE "CONSUMER SOCIETY" TO THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

The historian of consumption Frank Trentmann (2012) argued that the historiography on consumer culture can be divided into two broad streams. On the one hand are the studies that deal with ancient history, focusing mainly on Europe from the Renaissance to the beginning of the twentieth century. On the other hand are the researchers who place a dominant emphasis on World War II onward, and especially on North America and US society. In effect, there is no doubt that the gravitational center of consumer culture in this latter historical phase shifted from Europe to the United States, where many innovations in consumption have appeared, including shopping malls. But, even more relevant, consumption in itself came to be recognized as one of the main dimensions to measure the growth of individual and social wellness.

The first shopping mall was opened in Minnesota in 1956, paving the way for the creation of larger and larger cathedrals of consumption and of an entire way of life

based on suburbs and the use of private cars. In the postwar decades the centrality of consumption in American cultural life was also reflected in the pop art movement, particularly in the work of Andy Warhol, who transformed objects of everyday consumption and advertising (i.e., a soup can or a soap box) into pieces of art. In the 1950s and 1960s, the consumer society became a common way to account for the fact that desiring, buying, and using commodities was at the core of everyday social experience, predominantly in the United States but also in the rest of the capitalist Western world. Since then, thanks especially to TV broadcasting, consumer culture has started to be more and more inextricably intertwined with the global media industry and the world of entertainment. Television advertising was increasingly important both commercially and for its ability to permeate popular culture and people's imaginations. Since the 1980s companies' logos and brands have acquired a pervasive presence in everyday life, and have attained the status of a sort of global iconic language in the West and in many underdeveloped countries as well.

At the same time, the pervasiveness of consumption generated distinctive critical voices, particularly with reference to the way in which consumer culture was corrupting the supposed traditional values of society. In the United States, public figures such as John K. Galbraith and Vance Packard condemned the culture of consumption as a carrier of excessive individualism and vacuous interpersonal relationships; in Europe, intellectuals such as Theodor Adorno and Marx Horkheimer identified a sort of spiritual impoverishment in consumer society compared to the achievements of European cultural traditions.

Since the 1990s, many of these concerns have become common arguments of political movements that are critical of the processes

of globalization. With a different, but sometimes overlapping, critical perspective on the world of consumption, groups active in the protection of consumer rights have gained visibility, especially after the 1960s. In addition, thanks to their actions in the postwar decades, new regulations defending the rights of consumers were enforced in many Western countries. However, the advancement of ethics and democracy within consumer culture can also be interpreted as the unfolding of the effects produced by a “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005/1999) – that is, the tendency of late twentieth-century capitalism to reinforce itself by incorporating criticisms in order to further expand its power, such as the introduction of ethical principles into business and commerce.

In recent years, several new perspectives and specific concerns have enriched the understanding of the evolution of consumer culture. Among them, it is worth mentioning the role of gender in the construction of consumer culture, particularly in the shaping of the everyday domestic consumer practices. Another crucial topic has been the politicization of consumption, such as in the case of boycott actions, which have been increasingly important in political activism, especially in the form of an anti-capitalistic attitude shared by the anti-globalization movements. Moreover, growing attention has been devoted to the way in which social differences such as class, age, ethnicity, or group membership influence the development of consumer culture, for example the way children’s consumption has become a rising area of commodification. Finally, the evolution of consumer culture today intersects with the internet and digital personal communication. While the ongoing process of the digitalization of consumption has already produced huge effects on markets, practices, and cultures – such as in the exemplary

case of digital music – the mutual shaping of consumer culture and digital media has yet to completely unfold all its potential consequences on culture and society.

SEE ALSO: Advertising; Americanization; Benjamin, Walter; Capitalism; Consumer Culture; Consumer Movements, Contemporary; Consumer Movements, History of; Consumer Society; Department Stores; Fashion; Frankfurt School; Globalization and Consumption; Mass Culture; Mass Media; Shopping Malls

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