

But before picking up the most recent extensions in Chapter 11, Part II will turn to consumerism on a world scale, which began to take shape in the 1850s but under somewhat different circumstances from ongoing developments in the West.

From

Consumerism in  
World History

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## The emergence of consumerism

The discovery of significant consumerism, of the modern sort, in eighteenth-century Western Europe was a major historical find. It has significantly reshaped the way we think about modern social history and about consumerism itself – particularly its causes and initial meanings. This chapter lays out what initial consumerism was, in terms both of apparatus – the new sales techniques, outlets and goods – and in terms of human behavior and perceived needs. The first part, of course, is more measurable than the second.

Historians love to dispute about origins. Because strong traces of consumer interest and behavior go well back in human history, as we have seen, it is not surprising that some components of European consumerism predate the eighteenth century. There was something of a gradual buildup within the larger global context of accelerating international trade and urbanism. And it may be that, ultimately, it will be the later seventeenth rather than the eighteenth century that will hold pride of place for the fuller emergence of consumerism. Whatever the precise boundary line between preparatory steps and flowering, it is clear that a consumer society existed by the mid-eighteenth century in Britain, France, the Low Countries, and parts of Germany and Italy. Some traces also have spilled over into the British colonies in North America, though this will be taken up in a later chapter. Not surprisingly, consumerism first centered in the regions where a commercial economy was most fully developed and where access to global products was expanding most rapidly.

Initial signs of consumerism include the growing market for sugar. Wealthy people in Europe had indulged a taste for sugar since the late Middle Ages. This prompted further development of sugar production in new European colonies, first in the islands of the southern Atlantic, such as the Azores, then in the Americas. This production, in turn, spurred a larger market, making sugar, in the terms of one anthropologist, the world's first mass consumer good. Sugar purchases did not constitute full consumerism, but they did suggest a new taste for indulgence in a food that was by no means necessary. Other kinds of purchases drew attention also. Spending on household furnishings increased for people above the poverty

line, as early as the sixteenth century. Better beds, with cloth rather than straw mattresses, were one item. Decorated cabinets provided work for hosts of nameless craftsmen, even in the countryside.

Tulips were another novelty purchase, reaching many people in the seventeenth century. Initially imported from Asia in the sixteenth century, tulip purchases became a genuine passion by the 1630s, particularly of course in Holland. New varieties were developed – another consumerist symptom – and by the 1640s speculators were trading on future tulip consumption. Paintings of tulips and other flowers were a related consumer item. While the tulip craze hinted at consumerism, it was not widely available to ordinary people; and when the craze passed, it was not immediately followed up by another fad, as would become standard when consumerism was fully installed.

Expansion of colonial trade and profit spurred an escalation of consumer purchases toward the end of the seventeenth century. This was when consuming tea and coffee began to be fashionable. Coffee houses would become a staple public venue in eighteenth-century cities, but the new items were also consumed in the home. This in turn prompted growing interest in fancier serving sets, including coffee- and teapots. For the wealthy, these might be sought in porcelain imported from China – material that in fact began to be called china, in the seventeenth century – but a market developed below this level as well. Imports also played a vital role in clothing. Cotton fabrics from India drew wide attention, because they could be dyed in bright colors and because they were cheap and easily washable. Here too was a field soon exploited by European producers.

### The consumer apparatus

The most easily measured aspect of eighteenth-century consumerism consisted of an explosion of shops and new marketing methods, and the change was dramatic indeed. Older types of exchange, with peddlers and fairs, continued as well, and in some cases expanded in bringing hints of consumer goods to remote areas. But it was the shopkeeper and his methods that anchored the first iteration of a consumer society.

Indeed, what one group of historians has called the consumer revolution was based on the realization by shopkeepers and consumer goods producers that wants and needs were infinitely stretchable, not confined to what was required to live up to conventional standards or to subsist. Imaginative storeowners began to pull out all the stops to lure customers. They set up enticing window displays. They featured bargain items, even selling at a loss to get customers into the store – where they might buy more expensive goods. (This practice of using “loss leaders” obviously continues today.) A comment in 1747 noted; “A custom has prevailed among Grocers to sell Sugars for the Prime Cost, and they are out of Pocket by the Sale;” but

purchases of “other Commodities” for which customers paid “extravagant prices” made up for the loss. Consumer credit was widely extended, again, to help people buy what they did not need. Leading outlets gave gifts to notables, hoping that their example would inspire others to “have to have” the same item.

Relatively humble shopkeepers invented special gimmicks. One such, in England, named Martin von Butchell, a former dentist who sold medicine, highlighted his own eccentricities. He rode a “white pony which he sometimes painted all purple and sometimes with spots,” to advertise himself and through this his wares. A picture from 1747 shows another salesman dressed like a high fashion lady, to draw attention to the gingerbread he was selling.

Use of advertisements proliferated. They filled the weekly newspapers now available in the cities. They contributed to posters and trade cards that were widely distributed. Fashion magazines with drawings first developed in France in the 1670s, but England developed the genre still further. Fashion prints became common by the 1770s. Advertisers began to insert pictures of the latest hats and dresses into pocket books and almanacs, specifically designed for “ordinary young gentlewomen, not the extravagant few.” Fashion dolls, often imported from France, were also used to stimulate taste. Most advertisements, however, consisted of words, not visuals, given the available print technology. Newspapers featured paragraph-length ads, looking like news inserted in news columns. Vivid claims made up for the limitations of the medium. The *London Morning Post*, in 1783, thus described a new bed:

In the celestial bed no feather is employed . . . springy hair mattresses are used . . . in order that I might have for the important purposes, the strongest and most springy hair, I procured at vast expense, the tails of English stallions, which when twisted, baked and then untwisted and properly prepared, is elastic to the highest degree.

But the chief elastic principle of my celestial bed is produced by artificial lodestones. About fifteen hundred pounds' weight of artificial and compound magnets are so disposed and arranged as to be continually pouring forth in an ever-flowing circle inconceivably and irresistibly powerful tides of magnetic effluxion, which is well known to have a very strong affinity with the electric fire . . . fully impregnated moreover, with the balmly vivifying effluvia of restorative balsamic medicines . . . It is impossible, in the nature of things, but that strong, beautiful, brilliant, nay double-distilled children . . . must infallibly be begotten.

Here, obviously, huge claims, backed by invocations of science, suggested the full power of the advertising imagination. In case the message was lost, that the bed would produce higher-quality children, the biblical message

"Be fruitful, multiply and replenish the earth" was imprinted, in "burnished" gold, on the head of the bed.

Advertisers also used testimonials from the rich and famous. A razor-strop manufacturer named Packwood claimed that noblemen wrote to him to praise his product – "that ease, with which my beard was taken away, entirely resulted from the virtue of PACKWOOD's newly-invented Strops." Public opinion was also invoked for this fashionably novel product:

Public opinion on the power of Packwood's superior Razor Strop agree that it is worth its weight in gold, and acknowledge their face to be cleaner in the evening (by the use of the Strop) than it used to be immediately after shaving in the morning.

Packwood also placed his ads in merchant newspapers, destined for traders and ships' officers in the East India area, noting that his items took up little space but, again, "are acknowledged to be worth their weight in gold."

Finally, manufacturers began to combine with shopkeepers to stimulate but also to check on public taste. Josiah Wedgwood, the pottery maker known also for his innovations in the production process, begged his sales force to keep him informed of any new whim. We can "make you new Vases like lightning when you think we may do it with safety," he wrote at one point, asking whether the public was ready for a new "Grecian" style. New designs were tested in selected outlets before being mass-produced, while regular reports also warned that tastes were shifting and that production of some of the older lines should be halted. Wedgwood again: "It is always of the first consequence to us to know what does not, as well as what does sell." Production and sales now consisted of a combination of trying to whip up enthusiasm for a new craze, with studying how tastes were spontaneously shifting. The goal was to be able to change frequently, so that people who had bought one set of plates or vases would have to come back again lest their possessions be out of date.

The apparatus of the consumer revolution involved inventing or embellishing virtually every sales technique that consumerism still employs. The technology was different from that of our own time, quite obviously. Reaching individual homes was more difficult, use of visual imagery more restricted. But the grandiose themes of advertising were already fully established, as were the methods of drawing people into stores, lending money for items not really required, and adjusting production lines to fashion whims.

### What they bought

The goods involved in the first consumer revolution were varied. Most, understandably enough, shaded off from necessity, though there were a few breakthroughs toward really new consumer items.

Clothing headed the list. Early in the eighteenth century tall hats, wigs, and wide skirts became the rage for women. In 1711 the critic Addison wrote ironically of "the ladies" that "the whole sex is now dwarfed and shrunk into a race of beauties that seems quite another species" because of their massive attire. People began to refer to an "epidemical madness" to consume the latest fashions; they talked of "universal" contagions and "infections," referring to the compulsive power of clothing styles. Printed cotton cloth became a key craze. So did new undergarments, including stays and corsets designed to mold the body. Monthly fashion shows in cities such as London and Paris set the tone, but local salesmen could advertise that they had "just returned from Town with the newest Fashions," with equal effect. Provincial newspapers carried regular reports on styles in cities such as London or Paris. One British observer noted that, in one town, "the wives and daughters of the most topping tradesmen vie with each other every Sunday in the elegance of their apparel."

The ripple effect of consumerism drew quick comment, for the styles of the higher classes could easily be imitated in cheaper models designed for wider sale. One sour critic noted:

It is the curse of this nation that the laborer and the mechanic will ape the lord, the different ranks of people are too much confounded: the lower orders press so hard on the heels of the higher, if some remedy is not used the Lord will be in danger of becoming the valet of his Gentleman.

"The different stations of Life so run into and mix with each other, that it is hard to say, where the one ends, and the other begins." Domestic servants were particularly noted for imitating the styles of the ladies they served. "A fondness for Dress may be said to be the folly of the age, and it is to be lamented that it has nearly destroyed those becoming marks whereby the several classes of society were formerly distinguished."

Clothing interests could extend to other items of apparel. A passion for watches spread widely in the eighteenth century, particularly for men. Historians used to note the rapid spread of clocks and watches as a sign that people were becoming increasingly conscious of clock time, and this is to some extent accurate. But many people initially bought watches in order to look up-to-date, to be the first in their group to have one. Only later would they learn actually to tell time and use the item.

Items to beautify the body in other ways won attention. We have already noted the enthusiasm claimed for new shaving devices for men. Perfume sales began to mushroom. People, particularly in the middle and upper classes, began to become more conscious of "bad" smells from the late eighteenth century onward: masking the body was a durably important response, and a goldmine for certain products.

In addition to clothing, household items constituted the second major line of consumerism. Here too, as with Wedgwood's china, new styles and tastes could be endlessly invented. The eighteenth century would see a proliferation of Greek styles, rivaling Gothic motifs, along with genuinely new designs. Wills reveal a steady expansion of furnishings plus brass, pewter, and china items, by the later seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, even in relatively ordinary households. Beds had improved earlier and still commanded attention, but the percentage outlays for bedding actually declined as other objects, headed by tableware, gained greater attention. Glassware, china, knives and forks, tea equipment, and table cloths increasingly became necessities, reflecting serious changes in the rhythms as well as the physical context for family life. In 1711 an English magazine urged all "well-regulated families" to take an hour each morning for breakfast at home, of course with the proper "Tea Equipage."

Quite simply, by the eighteenth century, people were investing more of their incomes into consumer goods. Home furnishing items pioneered by the upper classes, particularly in the cities, progressively fanned out to more urban lower-class homes and to the countryside, throughout the Atlantic world.

And consumerism could extend into other areas. Items explicitly designed for children constituted one new area. Toy manufacturing began, with some of the same market testing as with items for the home. Books explicitly designed for children constituted another new consumer item. Older fairy stories were adapted for a child audience for the first time, and eager entrepreneurs also commissioned new books. Children did not yet constitute a direct consumer market; purchasing was done by parents, mostly middle-class, eager to buy items that would educate and improve their offspring. Promotions for the books set the tone: "A Play-book for children to allure them to read as soon as possible" – "to decoy children into reading."

While a fully consumerist leisure did not yet exist, there were important developments. Circuses were organized for the first time in Europe, starting in France in the late seventeenth century. Attractions were set up to teach children science through exhibits of curiosities, with family tickets advertised. Coffeehouses of course offered not only coffee, but also reading matter for adults – another contact with consumerism. It was also in the late eighteenth century that restaurants began to open (as opposed to inns designed to feed travelers), where people would go to buy meals to please their taste. The idea of fine foods, or what the French (who led in this development) called gastronomy was closely attached to this aspect of consumerism.

By the eighteenth century, in fact, the list of items that people regarded as necessities was beginning to expand, a key facet of consumerist development. During the French Revolution, for example, Parisian workers insisted that they be provided with "goods of prime necessity," by which they meant sugar, soap, candles, and coffee. The list included three things

(candles were the exception) that would have seemed clear luxuries just a century before. (But just before the Revolution, Parisians had been consuming two and a half million pounds of coffee and six and a half million pounds of sugar per year.) And other products were coming close to being necessities. Pipe tobacco was one, a clearly masculine item. Cosmetics, including not only perfume but also rouge, were in wide use, as were decorative buttons and other kinds of cheap jewelry. The French Revolution also generated its own consumer items, in the form of new medals, new clothing fashions, and special hats.

### Consumerist needs

Describing the apparatus and goods of consumerism already raises questions about the functions, the human needs that new levels of consumption were serving. When new products moved from novelty to necessity, when observers talked of people obsessed with fashionable clothing, something more than adroit salesmanship was involved. Acquiring goods was becoming part of individuals' identity, their measurement of what a satisfactory life involved.

Two particular aspects of the consumer revolution drive this point home. The first was theft. The same raging compulsions that drove some people to thirst for the latest style drove others, unable to indulge their needs, to steal. Second-hand trade in dresses, shoes, ribbons, and scarves brought the price down, but this was not necessarily enough. The rate of theft of clothing rose rapidly in the eighteenth century, with men and women both involved. Shops were not the only targets. Penelope Coleman stole a pair of gold earrings, and pair of stays and a calico apron from Sarah Garshier, a young girl inexperienced in adult wiles. Some people, women as well as men, stripped people naked by violence or threat. (Drunks were a common target.) Servants stole clothing from their mistresses and masters, travelers from fellow-lodgers at inns. Friends stole from each other, when they visited at home. The need for stylish or novel items might easily overcome normal restraint. Not surprisingly, people also went deep into debt to cover consumer goods they thought they needed. Thus a new artisan apprentice in London, from a farming family, detailed the shoes, jacket, socks, ruffled shirt, and hat he sported, while going heavily into debt.

On the other side of the law, people began to name consumer items lovingly in their wills, hoping to pass down a cherished piece of furniture or dress as an emblem of affection. Material objects, here, focussed and symbolized emotion. Women, particularly, even from relatively modest households, went into their possessions in great detail when making out wills. They listed clothing, furnishings, tableware, jewelry, clocks, and books. One woman left her "best long scarf" to a cherished friend, again because of the personal meaning the item had. Household items were passed on,

one by one, to members of families. Mirrors, china tea sets, and silver items of various sorts, from candlesticks to shoe buttons, came in for special attention. Here, the role of consumer goods in family life could persist after death, with the goods distributed to individuals who had particularly fancied them as a sign of affection.

New ideas of comfort accompanied other meanings of consumer goods. People began to comment on older homes in terms of how uncomfortable they were. They began to dislike smells that had previously passed without notice, claiming among other things that they kept them awake. A number of new inventions, including the Franklin stove, were designed to reduce smokiness within the home, as part of the new quest for comfort. This new attention to comfort was part of redefining items that had once seemed luxuries into necessities, as with certain types of home furnishings or the availability of tea on a cold day. Clothing was also now rated in terms of comfort. Changes of clothing were now seen as desirable, and good for the health (again, washable cottons were a godsend here). A London doctor related comfort to expanding consumerism directly:

The Wants of the Mind are Infinite, Man naturally Aspires, and as his Mind is elevated, his Senses grow more refined, and more capable of Delight; his Desires are enlarged (*sic*) and his Wants increase with his Wishes, which is for everything that is rare, can gratify his Senses, adorn his Body, and promote the Ease, Pleasure and Pomp of Life.

A growing interest in umbrellas provides a fascinating example of the consumerist standards of comfort, and how new they were. People began to dislike getting wet, something that seemingly had never greatly bothered them before. Apparently borrowed from Chinese example, umbrellas were introduced to Parisian nobility in the seventeenth century, and then began to move down the social scale. In rainy England, umbrellas passed into wide use from the 1770s onward. They were criticized as being foreign and effete: Horace Walpole, an essayist, blasted the French for "walking about the streets in the rain with umbrellas to avoid putting on their hats." But the invasion of umbrellas could not be stopped, and soon began to be associated with Englishness.

Comfort did not always prevail. Most furniture was valued more for gentility than comfort, and chairs, particularly, were stiff and unyielding. Other items were debatable. Some people contended that corsets and stays, for women, improved comfort by artificially supporting the body, but there were critics who contended that fashion forced women to fit into unpleasant contortions. Consumerism could be complex.

Finally, consumerism gains additional meaning through the advent of the idea of boredom, another eighteenth-century innovation. Surely people had been bored before consumerism, but in English, at least, they had no

word to describe their condition. Now they did. In a society increasingly impressed by novelty and acquisition, it became easier to deplore a lack of interest and stimulation – to note, in sum, that one was bored. Novelists began to write frequently of boredom (for which consumerism might be a cure). Here is another indication of the profound changes in human perception that consumerism involved.

## Conclusion

The arrival of consumerism in Western Europe involved truly revolutionary change in the ways goods were sold, in the array of goods available and cherished, and in the goals people defined for their daily lives. This last, of course – the redefinition of needs and aspirations – is the core feature of consumerism, though also the hardest to define. Questions remain. We do not yet know how many people were involved in what levels of consumerism. Some items were still largely reserved for the wealthy. Urbanites clearly had more opportunities than rural people (still the vast majority). Yet consumerism did have more democratic aspects, as witness the spread of household items, the claims of French revolutionaries, the signs of change in the countryside or the prevalence of theft. The problem is knowing how many people really could join the full consumerist parade, or even wanted to.

The depth of commitment of those involved is also hard to fathom. Some people, clearly, and not just the wealthy, took issues of stylishness and comfort very seriously indeed. But others may have dabbled, perhaps particularly in their youth, without committing themselves deeply to a lifetime of keeping up with every new whim. These issues continue to complicate an assessment of consumerism even today, but they are particularly challenging in the initial period. Many people were poor; many were illiterate; many had little contact with trendsetters of any variety. The consumer revolution was very real, but it did not, immediately, establish the range or level of participation that would develop later on.

It is also important to remember objections and countervailing forces. Even as consumerism gained ground in the eighteenth century, other currents pointed in different directions. The Methodist religion spread in Britain and its North American colonies, for example, emphasizing obedience to God and downplaying materialism. More broadly, what some historians have called a "Protestant ethic" spread among various groups, urging hard work but also self-denial and saving, rather than consumption. These movements did not prevent consumerism – some individuals might believe in the Protestant ethic but still demonstrate some of their success through consumerism – but they do suggest complexity. Explicit objections to consumerism also developed. Many critics blasted the frivolity of the lower classes or of women, basically arguing that established hierarchies

should be protected against consumerism. King Frederick the Great of Prussia condemned popular coffee drinking, arguing that beer should be good enough for his subjects; here, simple traditionalism plus a reaction against foreign products motivated concern. We have seen that even comfort drew its opponents, eager to see traditional hardiness enshrined.

By the same token, of course, the chorus of objections to consumerism, while important, also demonstrates both the prevalence and the novelty of the new interests. If consumerism had been a minor eruption, or if it simply expressed a set of natural cravings, it would have passed without notice. People at the time had some sense of change, and today in hindsight we can see even more clearly: a significant reorientation was underway.

The revolution that did occur obviously must be explained. Why did many people generate new and passionate attachments to things? Assessing the causes of the new consumerism is a clear challenge to historical analysis. For without grasping the causes, the whole phenomenon loses meaning. People do not redefine what life is about very frequently; some powerful forces must have been involved.

### Further reading

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