
UNIT 25 CONSUMERISM

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25.1 INTRODUCTION

In modern times, the term “consumerism” has been associated with a preoccupation with the acquisition of goods and commodities. Traditionally, it has been used with negative connotations – as a “problem” that indicates a lack of discretion among “buyers” and “consumers” regarding what goods to buy and why to buy them in an increasingly commercialized environment. Among Marxist thinkers especially, what happened has been linked to exploitation under industrial capitalism.

“Consumerism” has been associated with the growth of industrial capitalism in Europe from the 18th century and its global spread thereafter – a development that was accompanied by economies of scale and increases in production and productivity. Improvements in technology and extensive use of the division of labour enabled manufacturers to produce on a large scale for “wants”, “needs” and “fashions”. Commercialization of leisure and the penetration by innovative manufacturers, of religious practices, public health, and education reinforced the habits of acquisition and increasing “consumption”. In European society, in these circumstances, availability of goods ceased to be a substantial problem. Rather, more important were means to ensure that they were in demand and “consumed”. If this was not achieved, “gluts” and economic depressions would take place, affecting employer and employee alike.

On the other hand, the regular use of commercial methods to make goods desirable, some argued, encouraged an obsession with purchase and consumption – often distorting habits of discretion and a sense of proportion. The consequence would be “consumerism” (i.e. defined as the near-compulsive concern with consumption) – which might be economically profitable, but would lead to distorted social perspectives. The manufacturer’s concern with mass consumption, it was argued, led to a decline in interest in quality, ensuring that “consumerism” bred so-called “mass culture” (i.e. culture that catered to the lowest common denominator in society) as a common social reference point. “Consumerism” as defined above could also lead to poor management of household budgets and impoverishment.

Such a perspective encouraged a critical approach on the character of consumption under industrial capitalism – and the attempt to avoid indiscriminate consumption under

socialist industrialization. The critical vision stirred a concern with the rights of the consumer. And this in turn made questions of consumption a matter for politics – as it was anyway at another level, given that in societies where needs and wants were continuously the object of discussion and representation, public figures were concerned about the symbolism that advertisers and manufacturers toyed with and what goods they projected. Consumption came, consequently, to be associated with citizenship, since it was connected with social status and politics.

Duly, the critique of consumerism has been met with perspectives that sharply differ with it – perspectives that argue the benefits of variety in the market for the consumer and the necessity of regular consumption for economic and social stability. The popularity of the critique has consequently varied considerably.

Most recently, writing on consumption, “material culture” (the attitude of consumers, producers and society in general to the world of manufactured “things”) and “material politics” has firmly established that whatever the value of the critical appraisal of consumerism, manufacturers’ practice and consumer experience cannot be easily straitjacketed. This is all the more true in regions of the world where consumer societies of a sort have existed in the past (India, China, Africa) and which came to industrial capitalism late and in unusual circumstances.

25.2 THE CHARACTER OF COMMERCIALIZATION AND “CONSUMPTION” UNDER INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM

This Unit deals with two major aspects of the problems presented by consumption and the various definitions of “consumerism” in modern Europe. Firstly, what were the major features of the context in which these problems came to be posed? Secondly, how have these problems been treated at different times?

25.2.1 Early Days

Production and consumption of a variety of goods of everyday use was well established in Europe and other consumer societies in Asia and Africa by the mid 18th century. In addition, in Europe, a variety of exotic goods – often brought from China (mainly porcelain) and India (spices, and cotton goods) — were luxury products in high demand among the aristocracy.

Various historians have indicated that during the 18th and 19th centuries, manufacturers, endowed with sophisticated industrial technology, used the great renown of luxury goods among classes outside the aristocracy, and rushed to meet local demand with large scale production of goods on the foreign pattern that were produced locally. Such devices, together with close attention to machine production of basic metal goods (buttons, cutlery etc.) appealed to middle classes and stimulated their inclination to buy.

Industrial Capitalism brought significant changes in consumption for the “revolution” in economic life in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries but economic changes varied substantially from country to country. If “home demand” was important in the way textiles, and iron and steel played the role of “leading sectors” in the Industrial Revolution in Britain, low levels of income and social differences made “demand” less important as a motor of change in France, Germany and Russia. Here, concentrations of capital

(in investment banks) and the initiatives of the state played a major role in what transpired, with the state often acting as the prime consumer (as in the case of Tsarist and Soviet Russia). However, once initial changes had occurred in the character of the regional economy, exploitation of “demand” and “consumption” in everyday life became essential to the further development of European societies.

The process came slowly, and in fits and starts. In Britain, from the mid 18th century, as indicated by the instances of Manchester textile manufacturers, in the enterprises of Matthew Boulton (associated with metal goods) and Josiah Wedgwood (associated with the pottery manufacture) sustained and careful surveys of markets were normal and production for them by small manufactories working on strict principles of the division of labour, was the rule. Hence, one description of the Boulton business would stress regular travel by its owners to establish the contours of the market. And it would also stress various initiatives taken to establish the reputation of the firm’s products:

Scarcely a day passed but Boulton received letters of introduction of merchants and gentlemen from every quarter and as their house was only emerging from obscurity, Boulton was desirous of promoting its reputation with all in his power and therefore paid a particular attention to all their customers both foreign or domestick and to all their connections whatsoever in so much that his house at Soho for many years seemed like an inn for the entertainment of strangers.

The description would present further details of how Boulton invited powerful members of the European courts to his manufactory (the Duke and Duchess of Villaformosa, Count Orlov, Catherine the Great’s favourite, Prince Poniatowski of Poland etc.). Well aware that such notables would be emulated by the gentry and middle classes of their societies, the Boultons attempted to present their goods to various markets through this route to establish a taste for such products.

Elsewhere in Britain, in order to extend the range of such products, crafts were fitted into a putting out system that gave the trader or merchant preference – allowing them to understand patterns of demand and taking initiatives to use prevailing patterns of consumption to greatest effect.

Meanwhile, in almost all major states of modern Europe, the period upto 1870s was dominated by small-scale producers who gradually moved away from a position as craftsmen dealing in quality goods. In France and Germany, following the economic expansion of the 1850s and 1860s, craftsmen targeted a large market. As Shulamit Volkov has pointed out, carpenters restricted their range of products, in order to produce more that had a regular demand. The same came to be true of shoemakers. Technology was applied to achieve economies of scale. Only in food processing was this transformation not to be noticed until the 1890s – when refrigeration gradually came to permit the same in this quarter.

The increased output (often according to a set pattern) was presented to the buyer through a range of routes. In Britain, potential consumers were targeted by manufacturers, but they were normally approached by the itinerant trader, who provided the less well endowed buyer with credit (payment was made on an “instalment plan”). These drapers worked together in societies and associations in order to protect their interests against defaulters: the Highland Society of London (formed 1778), and English Guardian societies such as the London Society of Guardians for the Protection of trade against Swindlers and Sharpers (formed in 1776).

Among labouring classes, minimum levels of consumption were ensured by associative action among certain trades to ensure that sickness and unemployment could be tided over. This was especially so among various unions and societies — the Boilermakers, the Amalgamated Engineers and the London Compositors for instance. Among these and others, Friendly Collecting Societies existed, as did Industrial Assurance Companies. All of them were protected by law and took subscriptions to provide assistance to their members in times of distress. The big unions (e.g. Amalgamated Engineers) provided pensions to members by the beginning of the 20th century. Such institutions and initiatives clearly improved the spending capacity of the working class, while, elsewhere at this level, the usual run of Christmas Clubs, Goose Clubs etc. encouraged saving for the great extravagance on a special occasion. Building Societies and Freehold Societies enabled the household with the small income to plan the purchase of land or a home.

The mid 19th century in France and Germany also witnessed the “democratization” of demand on the British pattern. This followed from the high agricultural prices of the time and the overall increase in employment. In Germany, the trend persisted well after 1871, sponsored by the high levels of public and municipal activity paid for by French reparations after the war of 1870. Craft enterprises became focused and streamlined to take advantage of this phenomenon.

The change in employment and settlement patterns already indicated in the Units on demographic trends and industrial capitalism made the distribution of consumer goods easier. The concentration of populations in cities and small towns (in the Midlands and North of England, the Paris Basin in France, and the Rhine country in Germany) provided more ready and regular demand for manufactured goods than dispersed communities of the countryside.

25.2.2 The Late 19th Century and After

The late nineteenth century saw the persistence of many of these institutions and habits. In Britain, for instance, itinerant traders continued to be of importance well into the 20th century. Known numbers increased from 9459 in 1831 to 69,347 in 1911. From the 1850s, however, three major changes are noticeable in this pattern. Firstly, consumption was not strictly the preserve of firms and individuals. Local government and the state also became regular consumers. This developed an old habit – purchase for the administrative and military establishment. Municipal construction and the development of amenities (gas distribution, parks and gardens, bridges, institutions to provide medical treatment and education) became significantly marked.

Equally, though, capacities for individual consumption received a boost. Initiatives were taken to provide opportunities to subjects/citizens for savings, and important variations were noticeable in trading practice to tempt the consumer with small income. In Britain, savings schemes included the Post Office Trustee Savings Banks, with their “Home Safes”, and a range of other Savings Banks. By the time of the inter-war period, mortgage banks (such as the Abbey Road) had also made their mark.

At another level, the urban environment became the target of a new system of trading and distribution – through the “department store”. The best example of this was Fortnum and Mason’s of London and the Bon Marche in Paris. These department stores, in some cases, began to form branches in various towns, and “chains” of stores emerged in the commercial network. The shops run by Jesse Boot that dealt in pharmaceutical products were an example in Britain. This “chain” began in the pre-1914 period and persists to the present day. Woolworth is another such chain which exists in the US

and Britain. In post-1945 France, the Monoprix and Uniprix chains are the equivalent. The significance of these shops was that they displayed a large range of goods (while the standard store specialized in two or three major types of goods) – encouraging a general redefinition of needs and wants among those who passed through them. The store also paid attention to attractive presentation. This had already been achieved through advertisement and discussions in newspapers and through the small billboard. But the large space given over to specific ranges of products in department stores increased the impact of the profile. Association of quality with the name of the store also drew in customers who were also otherwise bewildered by the variety of the market and the problem of shoddy produce.

The desire of the state to take advantage of the interest in consumer products for its own purposes also led to investments in specific goods in France under the Third Republic and Germany under National Socialism. From the 1920s, the radio and, from the 1950s, the television both added a new dimension to such activities and to the advertising of products.

25.3 REPRESENTATIONS OF “CONSUMPTION”

The availability of a vast number of goods and commodities in the market place was often celebrated. Manufacturers not only pointed to the merits of their products, but also to the remarkable system of production that went into those products – a system of production that not only made them fashionable but miracles of modern science. Boultons and Wedgewoods consistently laboured this aspect of their output.

Other views of consumption developed from perspectives associated with the idea – widespread among intellectuals at this time – that industrial capitalism broke down “communities”, and created individuals who faced the world alone, or as members of “society”. In such “society”, individuals were more open to the suggestions of the market than was the case when they were members of “communities” where they followed “traditions” and “rituals”, and where individuals were less self-conscious. Large or medium-sized towns saw the breakdown of communities and the creation of a world of individuals whom the market manipulated to think of needs and wants that they had hitherto never conceived. Advertisement by producers and traders were designed to tempt individuals into a preoccupation with buying and consumption.

Some of this may have been admitted by many who approved of the changes of the time, but they did not see it with foreboding or worry. In the early days of industrial capitalism, optimistic as ever, Adam Smith argued:

“Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to only so far as may be necessary for that of the consumer”.

He also noted, though, as David Miller has pointed out, that ‘the human propensity to consume was the consequence of a fascination for “baubles and trinkets”, a passion for accumulating objects of “frivolous utility” and “a vehicle for deception with false promises that wealth will bring happiness”. Smith called for caution and discretion:

“Money will at best “keep off the summer shower”, “but not the winter storm”, leaving humans more exposed than before to anxiety, fear and sorrow, disease, danger and death”.

The new atmosphere of acquisition and consumption attracted disapproval and warnings elsewhere. In the 18th century itself, condemnation of exotic luxury items was often evident. Adam Anderson, in his *Historical and Chronological Deduction of the Origin of Commerce*, in the 1760s, decried goods that were not clearly “useful and excellent for the Ease, Conveniency or Elegance of Life”. Luxury, consumption and acquisitiveness were condemned by Wesleyans, Quakers and other Non-Conformist Protestants in England, who considered such behaviour sinful. Critics associated with the Romantic Movement – including major figures such as William Ruskin – argued that the obsession with the market worked against what was “natural”. The German poet Schiller expressed similar sentiments when he called for the recognition by man of what was ideal in him rather than be diverted by the superficial demands and standards of society. Early socialists of the 19th century expressed similar sentiments: in France (Prudhon and Fourier) and in Britain figures such as William Morris, who stressed the virtues of individual creativity and expression, and made craft industry a fashion, repudiated the virtues of machine-made goods.

More fundamentally, Karl Marx, making the distinction between “use value” and “market value”, argued that consumption merely refined the process of exploitation through which manufacturers extracted surplus from the working class. Looking closely at the world of acquisition and consumption in Europe and the United States, Thorstein Veblen, the American essayist, spoke of the appearance of a wealthy leisured class that indulged in conspicuous consumption, and also of an acquisitive society where consumption was not moulded by requirements but by somewhat witless emulation and imitation. Veblen disapprovingly argued that consumption was the product of the wish to impress and to improve social status.

Many came to argue at the end of the twentieth century that rampant consumption motivated by such inclinations rather than discretion, bred a respect for goods and occupations that smacked of a lack of serious thought and refinement. This was the hallmark of what was called “mass culture”, which was considered (by figures as different in their opinions as Adorno, one of the principal philosophers of Frankfurt School and F.R. Leavis an important English literary critic) to have had a disastrous impact on society.

On the other hand, following Smith’s more optimistic assessments of consumption and its character in the 19th century, followers of the “marginal utility” school of economic thought were worried that people would not consume enough to ensure economic and social stability. This was a notion that was echoed in the work of J.M. Keynes in the period between 1918 and 1939. Commentators such as Simmel argued that fashion was not, contrary to Veblen, merely the consequence of the desire to establish status as much as a means of establishing one’s own identity in a world in which individuals did not wish to wholly set themselves apart from others. In his somewhat difficult language, he would term it as a phenomenon that:

“represents nothing more than one of the many forms of life by the aid of which we seek to combine in uniform spheres of activity the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change”.

Most recently, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has taken issue with the perspectives of Marxists and others who have stressed the distinctions between “use value” and the value created by the market – stating that “use” is seldom free of a market culture of sorts. They also have pointed to how consumers often deal independently and as groups with the products that are recommended to them – transforming them, and

finding a value for them that is wholly outside the value that advertisement suggests. Baudrillard still warns though, of problems, given the way commerce has come to surround the consumer through media blitz and social manipulation. As David Miller has pointed out, he is better known today:

‘for his argument that the massive spread of consumer goods as acts of symbolism has reached such a level that where goods once stood for persons and relationships, they now come to replace them. Such is the power of commerce to produce social maps based on distinctions between goods that actual consumers are now relegated to the role of merely fitting themselves into such maps by buying the appropriate signs of their ’lifestyles’.

25.4 MATERIAL CULTURE

Whatever the merits of these points of view, in recent comment and research, a number of writers concerned with “material culture”, “material politics” and “consumption” have pointed out that the experience of consumer society in modern times has been varied and cannot easily be straitjacketed into the framework of the opinions covered by these debates. The approach of producers and buyers to manufactured items took on different shapes over time.

True, the subjection of crafts to the putting out system placed the focus of the production system squarely on the trader who had an interest in the product primarily from the point of view of saleability. Hence what was considered exotic or unusual (as in the case of Chinese/Indian imports) decisively influenced patterns of production. Meanwhile, inventive producers – St. Gobain the glass makers, Boultons, the metal workers, and Wedgewoods of the ceramics’ industry – followed the market also, but they also tried to create a demand for specific products that they understood they could make.

The critics of the consumption that was bred under the circumstances point out that buyers were influenced by the utility of goods, but also by the status they conferred. In the 20th century, advertisement made the associations of a product still more important than before. And what transpired became a problem of some size and scale. Consumers came to be faced with a bewildering choice of goods not only when it came to everyday needs and requirements but also when they dealt with occasions such as birth, marriage and death (christening robes, bridal wear, coffins) and the way they took their leisure (sportsgear, theatre equipment etc.)

But the authority of the manufacturer/trader should not be overstressed. As the strength of itinerant trades in Britain and France indicate, persuasion that took into account personal taste still continued to be very important. Studies of 18th century France at the time of the Ancien Regime and the Revolution also indicate the impediments consumers encountered, as politics often sought to direct and regulate the presence of manufactured items.

25.5 THE RISE OF THE CONSUMER MOVEMENT AND MATERIAL POLITICS

In fact, those who were worried about the way manufacturers and the market could draw the consumer into a net that ensnared him in different ways – both making him buy goods he did not really “want” and also providing him with shoddy goods – quickly

sought to set up bodies that would prevent this. In the 19th century itself, in France, shoddy goods led to recourse to law, and also to judgments that were hostile to manufacturers. In Britain, the period from the mid-19th century witnessed a rash of legislation to prevent deception of the buyer: the Sale of Food and Drugs Act (1875), the Sale of Goods Act (1893), a series of Weights and Measures Acts (1878-1936), and, dealing with purchase on the basis of part payment, the Hire and Purchase Act (1938).

Movements at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries to protect consumers have been identified with various personalities: Percy Redfern and Beatrice Webb in Britain, Charles Gide and Jean Prudhommeaux in France, Louis de Brouchere in Belgium. And Percy Redfern’s sense of things is common to most of these activists in one way or another:

“We the mass of common men and women in all countries also compose the world’s market. To sell to us is the ultimate aim of the world’s business. Hence, it is ourselves as consumers who stand in central relation to all the economics of the world, like a king in his kingdom. As producers, we go each unto a particular factory, farm or mine, but as consumers we are set by nature then to give leadership, aim and purpose to the whole economic world. That we are not kings but serfs in the mass is due to our failure to think and act together as consumers and realize our true position and power.”

The work of these activists and their latter-day followers, coping with the aid of TV, has led to a fresh wave of consumer-protection legislation in Britain. This followed the formation of the Molony Committee on Consumer Protection in 1962, which led in 1963 to the formation of the Consumer Council. The legislation that followed intensified consumer protection in the market place: the Trades Description Act (1968), the Fair Trading Act (1973), the Restrictive Trades Practices Act (1977) and the Consumer Safety Act (1978). Similar activities and legislation has figured in France and Germany around groups that came together around the Council of Consumer Groups (Germany) and the National Consumption Institute (France).

25.6 SUMMARY

As Elizabeth Cohen has pointed out, the moves to strengthen the consumer’s status, however far it has developed, still remains, though, a matter of shopping and controls on it in Modern Europe and the United States. The grand vision that inspired Redfern – that the consumer should be given a dignity in social awareness is in all likelihood still an ideal that few are concerned with. Given the differing approaches to consumption over time, and changes in the way the production system operates, it is probably also uncertain that anything can be done for the consumer on these lines. Contributing to this is the lack of self-awareness among consumers as consumers primarily.

As the spread of industrial capitalism in the world indicates, moreover, patterns of consumption vary widely from society to society. Before the onset of industrial capitalism, consumption in India and China, for instance, had followed specific patterns associated with gift and exchange unlike the patterns followed in Europe. Even if modern times create a uniform pattern of consumption at certain level the world over, the specific pattern is often moulded by the existing paths that have been followed. Habits of emulation and imitation also vary.

In the circumstances, the fears that were often expressed of the consequences of consumerism may be valid at some levels, but they are far from applicable as a rule.

Not only in Modern Europe, but also in the Modern World, the story of consumption has been too different to justify a single perspective.

25.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the meaning of consumerism.
- 2) How did industrial capitalism lead to the coming of modernization of 'Consumerism'?
- 3) Critiques of consumerism have also led to consumer rights movement. What are its different aspects?



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