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Consumerism and Consumption

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A national consumer culture first emerged in the United States late in the nineteenth century. But the origins of a consumer society stretch back for at least a century before that. In the 1780s Thomas Jefferson had dreamed of a virtuous republic composed of self-sufficient yeoman farmers, untainted by the squalor associated with manufacturing. Consumption, in Jefferson's utopia, would revolve around the basic requirements of subsistence, all of which could be found in the land's bounty. His was a powerful vision, and its ideological influence was long-lasting. But it was not an accurate description of how most people lived in the new United States. Jefferson himself was one of the nation's most conspicuous consumers, going deep into debt to fill his home, Monticello, with expensive goods from around the world.

On small farms in Massachusetts, in elegant Philadelphia row houses, and on sprawling Virginia plantations, Americans at the end of the eighteenth century bought, bartered, and used a range of goods that they did not or could not produce themselves, including tea, china tableware, spices, calico, satins, clocks, Dutch ovens, and sugar. Even on the edges of the Appalachian frontier, peddlers and general storekeepers kept households supplied with whiskey, needles, hoes, and a myriad of other items.

Many of these goods came from or through Great Britain. All told, Britain's exports to North America and the West Indies expanded by more than 2,300 percent over the course of the eighteenth century. By the early 1800s North America and the West Indies bought more than half of Britain's exports, the overwhelming majority of which were manufactures, especially textiles and metalwares.

Antebellum Consumption

In the first decades of the nineteenth century most commercial connections within the United States were local. New England peddlers, for example, hawked Bibles, almanacs, and hymnals to individual farmhouses in rural Vermont as well as to regional merchants. Plantation owners in eastern Georgia travelled to Savannah to buy buckwheat, crackers, lard, and tea, using credit on their future cotton sales.

During a nine-month period at the beginning of the nineteenth century sixty-six different customers were noted in the ledger of one general store in Louisville, Kentucky. Most patrons were white men, but several women and African American slaves shopped there as well. In almost twelve hundred transactions, an average of about eighteen per customer or two visits each a month, these people bought thread, shoes, hats, chamber pots, spectacles, and other goods and paid for their purchases with cash, store credit, skins, and wood.

The inhabitants of early-nineteenth-century cities had more choice in goods and outlets than those who lived in rural areas. Hundreds of stores filled urban streets, offering an assortment of groceries, dry goods, glassware, medicines, and even paint. Buoyed by rapid population growth and increased commerce, specialty shops also appeared in U.S. cities beginning in the 1820s. These outlets initially focused on broad categories of merchandise, such as groceries and hardware, but by 1850 urban consumers could find

stores dedicated to narrow lines of goods, such as books, carpeting, tea and coffee, china, cutlery, and hats.

Nearly all stores were small, measuring a few hundred square feet in size. Many were operated informally from the owners' homes without elaborate displays or extensive advertising. Space was frequently in short supply during the first half of the nineteenth century, and like their counterparts in the country large numbers of city dwellers paid for their purchases with other goods or on credit.

This localized consumer economy did not necessarily translate into widespread material affluence or comfort. In the 1830s, for example, most farm families lived in three- or four-room houses without basements or flooring, save for the bare earth. On average these households probably spent less than 200 dollars (about 3,100 dollars in late-twentieth century dollars) a year for all expenses except housing. Rural families in the 1830s spent about 40 percent of their nonhousing budgets on food. More than half of this went for cereals, flour, and cured meat and fish. Most of the remainder was spent on salt, spices, sugars, and beverages. In the city as well as in the country most Americans had bland and monotonous diets. Root vegetables (especially potatoes), meat, bread, and dried pulses (beans, peas, and lentils) made up the bulk of calories consumed. Men ate about fifteen pounds of food a week, and women ate about twelve or thirteen pounds. They washed it down not with water, which was often unsafe, but with large quantities of tea, coffee, hot chocolate, beer, wine, and spirits.

Before 1850 the majority of Americans could count the number of durable manufactured items they owned on the fingers of two hands. Some of these items, such as a Wedgwood vase, a grandfather clock, or silver spoons, occupied a special place in household inventories, prized symbols of gentility or, for those on the frontier, of people and places once close by and now distant. Recounting her family's move to Lowell, Massachusetts, in the antebellum period, one middle-class woman remembered

> familiar articles [that] journeyed with us: the brass- headed shovel and tongs, that it had been my especial task to keep bright ... the two china mugs, with their eighteenth-century lady and gentleman figures, curiosities brought from over the sea. ... Inanimate objects do gather into themselves something of the character of those who live among them, through association ... They are family treasures, because they are part of the family life, full of memories and inspirations

Larcom, *A New England Girlhood*, pp. 149-150

The Emergence of a Consumer Society

During the middle and late nineteenth century the United States gradually developed a national market. Borne along by the dramatic expansion of the telegraph and railroad after the Civil War, people, livestock, and goods crisscrossed the continent faster, cheaper, and more reliably than had been possible previously. In 1830 it took three weeks to move calico or imported earthenware from New York to Chicago. In 1860 it took only three days, and by 1880 people and goods could make the journey in less than twenty-four hours.

This "transportation revolution," as historians have called it, knit together an economy of unprecedented scale. Previously scattered and localized transactions

gave way to frequent commercial connections that spanned regions, industries, and the nation. By the 1880s even settlers in the remote Dakota Territory no longer produced most of their major food crops. Instead growing numbers of farmers concentrated on wheat or cattle for sale to eastern markets. For the rest of their foodstuffs, such as flour, bottled pickles, salt, spices, fruit, and some vegetables, these men and women increasingly relied on distant canners and other manufacturers.

The development of an integrated national market helped fuel mass production. In 1869 more than half of the goods produced in the United States were agricultural and about a third were manufactures. Thirty years later the ratio had flip-flopped: 33 percent of all commodities produced were agricultural and 53 percent were manufactures. The remaining 14 percent came from mining and construction.

To find work in these growing sectors, people poured into cities, where they adopted new patterns of consumption. Most fresh vegetables came from a street cart or a grocery shop rather than the family plot. New shoes, which rural households often purchased only when a peddler with appropriate sizes appeared, were available to urban families in an assortment of sizes and styles all year round.

Industrialization brought economic growth and rising incomes. From 1869 through 1900 real per capita income rose by 2.1 percent a year. Although the late nineteenth century was punctuated by several significant depressions beginning in 1873, 1884, and 1893, the long-term trend was strongly upward. This was the most significant and sustained expansion that the U.S. economy had thus far experienced, and its effects stretched far. One of the most visible results of the new prosperity was the mass production of countless new consumer goods, including canned soups, ready-made shirts, packaged meat, soft drinks, and watches. Some of the same improvements that created new things helped make established products, such as revolvers, clocks, corsets, gloves, and locks, better, cheaper, and more easily obtainable.

Late-nineteenth-century households encountered many of these goods in new forms and outlets. For most of the century, rural and urban customers purchased staples such as vinegar, soap, and soda crackers from local stores, where clerks poured, weighed, and scooped these bulk items into desired quantities, often advising customers on quality. After about 1880, however, fast-growing companies such as Heinz, Procter and Gamble, and the National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) began to brand and package a wide range of products for national distribution. Along with the American Tobacco Company, Singer Sewing Machine Company, Kellogg's, Eastman Kodak, and Pillsbury, these manufacturers used their brands and the marketing initiatives that supported them to build direct relationships with end users and create large markets for their offerings.

As the scale and scope of national distribution expanded, households relied less on the local retailer's assessment of a particular product. Instead consumers came to know and trust goods by the way new brands

were advertised. Heinz's baked beans were "pure food for the table," and Coca-Cola, invented in 1886, was promoted as a "Delightful, Palatable, Healthful Beverage." Ads claimed that Singer sewing machines had helped bring the "women of the world into one universal kinship and sisterhood." Many of these branded products were sold through established distribution channels, such as urban specialty shops, country merchants, and "drummers," or traveling salesmen.

By the end of the century several important new outlets had emerged, including chain stores, department stores, and mail-order houses. A. Montgomery Ward published his first mail-order catalog in 1872. His venture was a huge success, and by the 1890s his catalog totaled more than one thousand pages, had a circulation of 730,000, and elicited an average of two and a half orders per catalog. The arrival of the Montgomery Ward catalog, one customer remembered, "was like having Christmas come three or four times a year." Spurred on by Ward's accomplishment and the advent of rural free delivery in 1896, other retailers such as Sears, Roebuck also began offering goods by mail. By the end of the century almost twelve hundred mail-order concerns were competing for more than 6 million customers. For households, especially those in remote locations, mail-order catalogs were a vital link to an expanding world of goods.

One of the first and most important chain stores was the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A&P), which began in 1859 as a small store selling hides and feathers in New York City. Within a few years the founder, George Francis Gilman, decided to specialize in tea. He and his partner, George Huntington Hartford, opened new stores and gradually broadened their lines to include groceries. By the end of the century the chain had nearly two hundred stores in twenty-eight states. Others quickly followed in A&P's wake. The Jones Brothers Tea Company, which later became Grand Union, began operations in 1872; F. W. Woolworth opened his first "five and ten cent store" in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1879; and in 1882 the Great Western Tea Company of Cincinnati (later the Kroger Company) opened its doors. These chains gradually homogenized the U.S. grocery market, exposing millions of Americans to a growing and roughly similar array of goods.

Mail-order houses and chain stores relied on centralized buying and management, high inventory turnover, and modern accounting systems. These practices made possible lower unit costs than those faced by most local merchants. Chain stores passed on some savings to customers by offering national brands and private label goods at fixed prices below those of independent retailers.

The mid-century emergence of department stores also shaped urban consumers' wants and needs. By the end of the century most major cities and many smaller ones boasted at least one of these "palaces of desire." New York had A. T. Stewart's, R. H. Macy, and Lord & Taylor; Philadelphia had John Wanamaker; Boston was home to Jordan Marsh and Filene's; and Chicago was home to Marshall Field, the Fair, and Carson-Pirie. Department stores were very busy places that were far grander in

scale than urban specialty shops or rural general stores. At the end of the century Marshall Field employed more than seven thousand people to staff its State Street store in Chicago, which included more than half a million square feet of selling space on twelve stories, each opening onto a great atrium with an enormous skylight. A vast assortment of merchandise, from women's furs to children's tricycles to South African diamonds, was displayed. As many as fifty thousand people a day crowded into Field's great store. By 1900 daily transactions numbered in the tens of thousands, and annual sales topped 17 million dollars. With their dazzling window displays, elaborate lighting, and numerous rooms filled with goods, Marshall Field and other emporiums were magnets for residents and tourists alike. Most of the merchandising and advertising was aimed at women, who made up the majority of customers. Shoppers at department stores found themselves in a "fairyland," noted one contemporary observer, a scene of "splendor and of beauty."

In department stores, specialty shops, and open- air markets, urban women bought the food, clothing, and furnishings that were no longer produced at home. Consumption had become a vital component of the work of the household, and women assumed major responsibility for it, crafting new and significant public roles for themselves. This social shift happened more slowly in remote areas, where men continued to make up the majority of customers at general stores well into the twentieth century. By 1920 retailers, advertising executives, sociologists, and family members accepted women's position as households' chief purchasers of consumer goods.

As the twentieth century began most Americans had access to a substantially higher standard of living than that of their ancestors in 1800. Families still spent the bulk of their incomes, an average of about 70 percent, on food, shelter, and clothing, but they had more and often better choices in these expenditures than earlier generations had enjoyed. In 1890, for example, each urban American ate an average of a pound of fresh beef a week and drank more than a quart of milk.

The things that most Americans once considered luxuries, such as a bed frame and springs or a clock, had become indispensable to all but the very poor. Pianos and mirrors, scarcely dreamed of on the early-nineteenth-century frontier, found their way into the parlors of urban and rural middle-class homes. Working-class families in 1900, those with annual incomes below 600 dollars, often had carpets and curtains. Although vacations remained the province of wealthy households, working- and middle-class families spent small sums on an occasional trip to an amusement park or five-cent movie theater.

The consumer society ushered in during the late nineteenth century was a far cry from that of the late-twentieth-century United States. In 1900 only one in four families had running water, less than one in five had an icebox, and only one in six had a flush toilet. No televisions, day care centers, health clubs, birth control pills, video stores, or fast food outlets were available. The majority of households did not rely heavily on installment credit to fund their purchases. Despite these differences, U.S. consumerism at the end of the nineteenth century looked forward rather than

backward. The industrialization, urbanization, economic growth, mass production, and distribution that accelerated after 1870 greatly expanded Americans' sense of material possibility. These forces created consumers operating in a mass market, where once only customers interacted in local economies through personal connections. As a modern consumer society took firm hold at the beginning of the twentieth century, the values o an older, preindustrial culture that emphasized spiritual as well as material improvement began to weaken. In their stead arose a culture organized around the production and acquisition of goods and services, focused on self- fulfillment through economic prosperity.

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