

1 The Implications of the Consumer Revolution

The Advent of Mass Consumption—In the 1860s, twenty-year-old Denise Baudu and her two younger brothers, recent orphans, emigrated from a provincial French village to Paris, to live with their uncle. Arriving at daybreak after a sleepless night on the hard benches of a third-class railway car, they set out in search of their uncle's fabric store. The unfamiliar streets opened onto a tumultuous square where they halted abruptly, awestruck by the sight of a building more impressive than any they had ever seen: a department store. "Look," Denise murmured to her brothers. "Now *there* is a store!" This monument was immeasurably grander than her village's quiet variety shop, in which she had worked. She felt her heart rise within her and forgot her fatigue, her fright, everything except this vision. Directly in front of her, over the central doorway, two allegorical figures of laughing women flaunted a sign proclaiming the store's name, "Au Bonheur des Dames" ("To the Happiness of the Ladies"). Through the door could be seen a landslide of gloves, scarves, and hats tumbling from racks and counters, while in the distance display windows unrolled along the street.

Entranced, the three youngsters walked slowly along, gazing at the displays. In one window an intricate ar-

2 *Implications of the Consumer Revolution*

rangement of umbrellas formed the roof of a rustic cabin, while in another a dazzling rainbow of silks, satins, and velvets arched high above them. At the last display of ready-to-wear clothing, a snowfall of expensive laces cascaded in the background, and before them pirouetted three elegant mannequins, one draped in a velvet coat trimmed with silver fox, another in a white cashmere opera cloak, the third in an overcoat edged with feathers. The heads of the mannequins had been removed and been replaced by large price tags. On either side of the display, mirrors endlessly multiplied the images of these strange and seductive creatures, half-human and half-merchandise, until they seemed to people the street.

Denise awoke from her reverie. She and her brothers still had to locate their uncle. Asking directions, they discovered they were on the very block where he kept his shop. It was housed in a moldering building on the opposite side of the street, where its three dark, empty windows grimly confronted the brilliant displays of *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Inside Denise glimpsed a dim showroom with a low ceiling, greenish woodwork, and tables cluttered with dusty bolts of cloth. She felt as if she were staring into the dank shadows of a primeval cave.

Denise is the heroine of Émile Zola's novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1884), which opens with this account of her arrival in Paris. Her initial encounter with a department store dramatizes the way nineteenth-century society as a whole suddenly found itself confronting a style of consumption radically different from any previously known. The quantity of consumer goods available to most people had been drastically limited: a few kitchen utensils used to prepare a sparse and monotonous diet, several well-worn pieces of furniture (bed, chest, table, perhaps a stool or bench), bedding, shoes or clogs, a shirt and trousers or a dress (and sometimes one outfit for special occasions), some essential tools. That was all. Moreover, these goods were obtained mainly through barter and self-production, so that the activity of consumption was closely linked with

that of production. Money was rarely used by the average person and credit was haphazard and scarce. Only the better-off spent much time in stores; for most, the activity of shopping was restricted to occasional fairs.

In the past century these ancient and universal patterns have been shattered by the advent of mass consumption. Its characteristics are a radical division between the activities of production and of consumption, the prevalence of standardized merchandise sold in large volume, the ceaseless introduction of new products, widespread reliance on money and credit, and ubiquitous publicity. This fabulous prospect of a vast and permanent fair, which transfixed Denise, has since charmed millions of others as it has reached out from the largest cities to ever smaller ones, and from the richest countries to poorer ones. The merchandise itself is by no means available to all, but the *vision* of a seemingly unlimited profusion of commodities is available, is, indeed, nearly unavoidable. In the wealthier societies the manifestations of mass consumption—department stores, discount houses, supermarkets, chain stores, mail-order houses, and perpetual advertising in newspapers and magazines and on television, radio, and billboards—are so pervasive that we hardly realize how recently and how thoroughly both private and collective life have been transformed into a medium where people habitually interact with merchandise.

The advent of mass consumption represents a pivotal historical moment. Once people enjoy discretionary income and choice of products, once they glimpse the vision of commodities in profusion, they do not easily return to traditional modes of consumption. Having gazed upon the delights of a department store, Denise would never again be satisfied with the plain, unadorned virtues of Uncle Baudu's shop. The hackneyed plot of the young innocent in the big city receives a specifically modern twist, for now the seduction is commercial. We who have tasted the fruits of the consumer revolution have lost our innocence.

4 *Implications of the Consumer Revolution*

The Moral Implications of Mass Consumption—Although such moralistic language is not usually applied to consumer affairs, it is appropriate. The implications of the consumer revolution extend far beyond economic statistics and technological innovations to intensely felt, deeply troubling conflicts in personal and social values. Before the nineteenth century, when only a tiny fraction of the population had any choice in this realm, consumption was dictated for most by natural scarcity and unquestioned social tradition. Where there is no freedom, there is no moral dilemma. But now, for the first time in history, many people have considerable choice in what to consume, how, and how much, and in addition have the leisure, education, and health to ponder these questions. The consumer revolution brought both the opportunity and the need to reassess values, but this reassessment has been incomplete and only partly conscious. While the unprecedented expansion of goods and time has obvious blessings, it has also brought a weight of remorse and guilt, craving and envy, anxiety and, above all, uneasy conscience, as we sense that we have too much, yet keep wanting more. We resent our own tendency to judge ourselves and others according to trivial differences in consumption habits.

If mass consumption has altered the patterns of personal and social consciousness, these new attitudes have in turn had profound material effects. The population explosion, the hunger crisis, the energy shortage, the environmental crisis, chronic inflation—all these central concerns of the present originate in our values and habits as consumers. The great hope of the nineteenth century was that production could be expanded indefinitely to meet rising consumption everywhere. We are now coming to terms with the fallacies of that expectation, by recognizing material limits as a permanent condition of human life. While the expansion of production can be regarded primarily as a technical problem, the acceptance of limits on consumption involves not so much technological know-

how as political imagination, personal will, and social morality, with an intellectual understanding of all of these. Such an understanding is now lacking. Decisions are made in response to concrete problems which, pressing as they may be, will only keep accumulating unless our consumer values are clarified.

Such clarification has to begin with a fuller appreciation of just what we mean by *consumption*. The word is often defined in a vague (and pejorative) sense as "using up something in order to maintain life." Another common view is that consumption is the opposite of production. Hannah Arendt has remarked that these two definitions are contradictory, since consumption cannot be the converse of production when the two together form a reciprocal and interdependent cycle necessary to sustain life. She further suggests that impermanent "consumer goods," having as their purpose the maintenance of life, should be distinguished from "use objects," intended to create a world of durable things serving as a familiar home for man in the midst of non-human nature. According to Arendt, the activities and objects we lump together as involving consumption really include two distinct groups, one related to life sustenance, the other to giving meaning to life.¹

Something like this distinction may be found by comparing the two Latin expressions that serve as sources for the single word *consumption* in modern Romance languages. The English word comes from the Latin root *consumere*—a conjunction of *cum* and *sumere*, the latter meaning "to take," so that the expression as a whole signifies "to take away with" or "to use up entirely." With this derivation, it is logical for the English term *consumption* to refer not only to the use of commodities but also to the wasting away of the body (specifically, in tuberculosis), for in both cases the process involves the destruction of matter. That destruction may be active and rapid, as in the case of consumer goods like food or fuel, or gradual and passive, as in the case of use objects like chairs or

6 Implications of the Consumer Revolution

works of art, which are repaired in an attempt to resist the process of deterioration. But in either case consumption is considered equivalent to destruction, waste, decay—in short, to a death-directed process. The unfavorable connotation of the term lingered when, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, it became increasingly used as a specialized term in political economy, a linguistic evolution that accompanied the evolution of an organized capitalist market system.²

The second Latin root suggests a much more positive appreciation of the human relation to material things. This is *consummare*, from *cum summa*, “to make the sum” or “to sum up,” as in arithmetic—to carry to completion, to terminate in perfection. The Latin translation of Jesus’ last words on the cross is “*Consummatum est.*” The usual English translation of his cry (“It is finished”) implies only termination and fails to convey the meaning of a life summed up and perfected in the moment of death. A more adequate and more typical English translation of *consummare* is “to consummate,” which does suggest an understanding of death, and therefore of life, as achievement despite and, indeed, through the inevitable destruction of animate and inanimate matter.

This second Latin root is the source of the French terms—the verb *consommer* and its related noun *la consommation*—which are translated into English as “to consume” and “consumption.” The difference in linguistic origins means that the French expressions have implications not conveyed by the English equivalent. For example, the rich broth the French call a *consommé* is not so named because it is used up as a food but because it represents the distilled essence of bouillon. The French also have a word *consumer*, from the first Latin root, *consumere*, which is properly reserved for specific actions of destruction such as those of fire, corrosion, or wasting disease. In popular usage, however, the two French words *consommer* and *consumer* have long been confused—an instructive confusion, contravening as it does national pride in lin-

guistic precision. It suggests the ambiguity of consumption itself, its mingled nature as achievement and destruction, as submission to entropy and triumph over it. A part of us craves the rewards of "using up" the good things of life, while another part is aware of moving ever closer to the point of death, which will "sum up" our lives in a way that has nothing to do with transient pleasures. The fundamental ambivalence in values lies not in the words but in ourselves.

The Relevance of French History—In attempting to understand the implications of mass consumption, Americans today habitually turn to social scientists such as the sociologist Vance Packard or the economist J. K. Galbraith, who are among the best-known writers on the subject.³ The current prestige of the social sciences is such that this response is a natural, almost an automatic, reflex, but such responses are not always entirely beneficial ones. At the least there is ample room for a variety of approaches to understanding a subject of such import. This book seeks that understanding in the past.

Consumer society is the product of a long historical evolution, at once material and mental. Its material evolution deserves far more study than it has yet received from economic and social historians. In this book, however, the mental evolution is the primary concern. As much as do our economic and political institutions, our attitudes have a history, and examination of their origins may be equally helpful in assessing contemporary life. To explore the emergence of the consumer mentality requires the techniques of cultural and intellectual history, techniques which are humanistic without being unscientific. They include an alertness to figurative language, to allusions and overtones, to how people express themselves as well as what they express, in order to discern patterns of response that have a collective validity. Such techniques are sometimes frowned upon in the social sciences today, especially in those branches which seek quantifiable evi-

8 Implications of the Consumer Revolution

dence. However, as we shall see, one value of the historical approach is that it uncovers alternative modes of social science, advanced at the time the profession was taking shape, which could be more helpful in understanding modern consumption than many of the prevailing modes.

Another reflex impels most Americans to assume that if history can indeed be a powerful aid in understanding the present, our own national history must be the most helpful of all. Again this is a natural response, not only because of national pride, but even more because the United States has become a paradigm of modern consumer society. The idea of studying a paradigmatic national model is basically commendable. It provides a focus for an inquiry which, if viewed on an international scale, would be hopelessly unwieldy, and it still leaves room to suggest how the general phenomenon transcends national boundaries.

In fact, however, the history of France, even more than that of the United States, most illuminates the nature and dilemmas of modern consumption. This is because, in the first place, the French have long prided themselves on furnishing a universally valid model of enlightened consumption. By the eighteenth century the way of life enjoyed by the French aristocracy and wealthy bourgeoisie had established itself as a prototype admired and imitated by upper classes throughout Europe. Princes and kings constructed miniature versions of Versailles; their courtiers admired paintings by Watteau and danced the gavotte to the music of Rameau; and rich bourgeois hired French tutors for their children, instructed their chefs to prepare dishes à la française, and bought chairs designed in the style of Louis XV. This prototype was also adopted by the upper classes in the American colonies, who imported from Europe their manners, card games, liquors, fashions in clothing, and furniture.

These consumer habits, together with less tangible patterns of taste and manners, of reason and feeling, comprised *civilisation*, understood by the French as an

absolute standard worthy of emulation by all other peoples. The concept of *civilisation* provided an authoritative guide for the consumer—in an age when only a small fraction of the population were consumers in the sense of enjoying discretionary spending—by positing a humanistic ideal capable of giving consumption a meaning and purpose. In the nineteenth century, however, the humanistic ideal of *civilisation* tended to evaporate, leaving behind a residue of material possessions which by themselves claimed prestige for their owners. By the end of that century the model of consumption that had originated in prerevolutionary court life had become degraded to the level of the heavy velour curtains, crystal chandeliers, ornate mirrors, and imitation Louis XV divans in the cramped salons of aspiring tradesmen. They can be seen in living rooms even today; such is the tenacity of the forms of courtly life and, in a far more elusive way, of the ideal of *civilisation* they were intended to embody.

The development of this ideal and these forms in France is the subject of the next chapter. Chapter III will examine the consequences of the consumer revolution, which opened up the pleasures of discretionary consumption to the masses and challenged the authority of the courtly model of consumption. Although the concept of a consumer revolution is far less familiar than that of the industrial revolution, they are really two facets of a single upheaval that decisively altered the material basis of human life. Mass consumption inevitably accompanied mass production. A transformation of such magnitude cannot be dated precisely, but the tempo of change was at its swiftest in the nineteenth century. In France, the critical period runs from about 1850 to the outbreak of World War I. Between those dates there was for the first time a steady (if not unbroken) increase in purchasing power—the basic economic fact upon which all the rest depended. A Parisian worker who had 100 francs to spend in 1850 had the equivalent of 165 francs by the early years of the twentieth century. This increase in discretionary income meant that he was able to

10 *Implications of the Consumer Revolution*

buy more staples like fuel, fabrics, and, above all, food. Even more significantly, Frenchmen could purchase more nonessentials. For example, they continued to eat about the same amount of potatoes and bread from 1850 to 1914 but consumed far more wine, meat, sugar, coffee, and cheese. Furthermore, the percentage of income spent on all foods kept falling, from an average of nearly 80 percent for a working-class family in 1850 to about 60 percent by 1905. As disposable income rose, banking systems were overhauled to facilitate payment greatly, especially by the introduction of the ordinary bank check. The increasing availability of credit was particularly significant in France, where before 1860 credit and deposit banking for individuals and small businesses was almost nonexistent.⁴

These economic transformations are one mainspring of the consumer revolution. The second (and the two are wholly interdependent) consists of a torrent of technological changes that simultaneously lowered the cost of existing consumer goods and provided entirely new ones. The enormous gains in productivity made available both more goods and more money with which to buy them. Steam, the productive force in the early days of industrialization, was supplanted by the internal combustion engine and by electricity, forms of power that could be transported more easily and could be reduced in scale for use by individual consumers. The distinctive inventions of early industrialization were machines of production, especially for the production of textiles, which consequently led the way in the revolution of mass-marketed, cheaper goods. After 1850 many notable inventions were consumer products themselves—the bicycle, the automobile, chemical dyes, the telephone, electric lighting, photography, the phonograph. Never before or since has there been such a concentration of technological change affecting the ordinary consumer. What he ate, what he ate with, where he lived, what he wore, how he moved around—all these daily activities and more were being altered simultaneously.

The advent of the consumer revolution in the French

provinces was more gradual than in the cities but was still decisive. In the 1860s there were still large regional differences in provincial consumer habits: in Provence a peasant ate wheat bread; in the north he ate potatoes and rye bread; and in the center of the country, he ate chestnuts and potatoes. By 1900, they all ate wheat bread. In the 1860s the dress of peasant and also of working-class women was noticeably darker and cruder than the complicated trains, trailing skirts, laces, and ribbons of wealthier women. By the 1890s everyone wore shorter, simpler, more colorful clothes. Mass consumption means that similar merchandise reaches to all regions and all classes, and by the turn of the century this uniform market was expanding in France.⁵

The consumer revolution introduced a style of consumption unlike the model that had originated in the courts and had gradually spread among the wealthy bourgeoisie. The upper classes had assumed that the kind of luxuries they preferred would permeate the lower levels of society in time. The future was expected to bring, in the popular phrase, "the democratization of luxury." The future held a rude surprise. The luxury that was democratized was quite different in character from the upper-class paradigm. And in creating this new style of mass consumption the French were nearly as preeminent in the nineteenth century as they had been in developing the courtly model in earlier times. France pioneered in retailing and advertising, the twin pillars of modern consumer life. Its capital city became a sort of pilot plant of mass consumption. The period of its most rapid change was just beginning when Denise Baudu is supposed to have disembarked there. By the time she reached middle age, a quarter of a century later, she would have seen the transmutation of Paris from the cramped city of Victor Hugo to a modern capital of consumption, a city of boulevards, cafés, electric lights, apartments, advertising posters, the Métro, cinemas, restaurants, and parks, with production largely exiled to an outer belt while the heart of the city

12 *Implications of the Consumer Revolution*

was devoted to commerce. If the North of England is the landscape that symbolizes the industrial revolution, the Île de France can well claim to serve as the emblem of the consumer revolution.

French initiative in creating the new style of mass consumption was crowned by the Paris expositions of 1889 and 1900. There was revealed for the first time a planned environment of mass consumption; there thoughtful observers realized, in a confused and uneasy way, that they were immersed in a strange new world of consumer behavior. They saw crowds milling around displays of luxurious automobiles and around glass cages displaying couturier-clothed mannequins; taking imaginary voyages via cinematic techniques to the floor of the sea or the craters of the moon; and, at night, staring at displays of lighted fountains or at voluptuous belly dancers wriggling in a reproduction of a Cairo nightspot. The expositions and similar environments (such as department stores and automobile trade shows) displayed a novel and crucial juxtaposition of imagination and merchandise, of dreams and commerce, of collective consciousness and economic fact. In mass consumption the needs of the imagination play as large a role as those of the body. Both are exploited by commerce, which appeals to consumers by inviting them into a fantasy world of pleasure, comfort, and amusement.

The Relevance of French Thought—Now it is possible to understand why French thinkers around the turn of the century were peculiarly sensitive to the impact of the consumer revolution—and this is the final reason why the French experience is uniquely illuminating. They were witnessing an historical collision as longstanding cultural traditions of enlightened consumption slammed into material and social changes that directly challenged those traditions. They sensed that they lived in an age of transition from which there could be no return to the former state of things—a situation that aroused both great hopes

and great apprehensions. New combinations of thought and feeling were ventured and new values enunciated, since inherited ones were for the most part inadequate to deal with changing social reality. The generations of the 1880s and, especially, of the 1890s were richly inventive in what we would now call consumer lifestyles. In those decades emerged at least two major modes of consumption that provided alternatives to the courtly and mass models already described. The first alternative, elitist in spirit and derived from the dandy tradition, attempted to transcend the supposed vulgarity of ordinary consumption through a uniquely individual arrangement of commodities serving lofty spiritual and aesthetic ideals (Chapter IV). The second lifestyle, inspired by democratic principles, embodied the ideal of social reform by reforming the design of everyday consumer items (Chapter V).

Both the elitist and the democratic modes of consumption have proved durable. Their contemporary equivalents are all around us, and, together with upper-class and mass consumption, they make up an interdependent system of lifestyles that still endures. But in France some of the innovators who helped define these styles of consumption became acutely aware of the frustrations that result from placing such emphasis on merchandise as a means of personal and social self-definition, no matter how idealistic the motives for this emphasis may be. The accumulating sense that the consumer revolution had caused a moral crisis which could not be resolved by multiplying lifestyles led to a reconsideration of the moral implications of modern consumption.

French thinkers were particularly well prepared to undertake this reconsideration because they had behind them the intellectual tradition of the *moraliste*—an untranslatable term suggesting a thinker with a broadly philosophical and historical outlook and a bent toward cultural criticism and social commentary. The closest exemplars in the English-speaking world are the great Victorian social prophets like Thomas Carlyle or John Ruskin. In France

14 *Implications of the Consumer Revolution*

the tradition is especially old and well-established (Michel de Montaigne, who wrote in the sixteenth century, is a famous early example), and it still retains considerable respectability (Albert Camus is a twentieth-century example). Most of the *moralistes* to be discussed here are less famous than these but were no less molded by an outlook that encourages them to consider social and economic changes with an awareness of their ethical implications. They are well-educated, well-informed, intelligent commentators, not necessarily the central geniuses of their day but hardly representative of mass opinion. In many cases they occupy a strategic middle ground between the world of ideas and that of ongoing political, social, and artistic activities.

In trying to assess the implications of the consumer revolution, some of these thinkers revived the venerable concept of luxury and tried to update traditional arguments about its morality to apply to the new "democratized" luxury. Their debate revealed a profound division between desire to consume and guilt about that desire, and this ambivalence formed a serious fault line in bourgeois culture. The desire was justified by the scientific authority of evolutionary theory, which equated moral and material progress; the guilt derived from religious and philosophical teachings of great antiquity, which upheld the virtues of austerity. Although modern science and traditional ethics were both respected authorities, in regard to consumption they offered conflicting and ultimately irreconcilable advice (Chapter VI).

The late nineteenth-century debate about luxury never got beyond this deadlock. Only when the moral problems of modern consumption were posed in different terms was real progress made in solving them. The concept of solidarity above all others suggested the kinds of values most appropriate to post-consumer revolution society. Charles Gide applied the concept of solidarity to economics, calling for consumers to unite and cast off their subservience to producers. More than this, Gide put his ideas

into practice by helping found some of the first important consumer organizations, which eventually joined forces with consumer cooperatives begun by socialists (Chapter VII). Émile Durkheim and Gabriel Tarde applied solidarity to social thought and suggested ways in which mass consumption might give rise to new systems of social values (Chapter VIII). All these thinkers of the 1890s and early 1900s advocated means for consumption to serve social values rather than imposing its own material values upon society.

World War I cut short this era of intellectual experimentation. Not only did its destruction of productive capacity sharply reduce opportunities to consume but its slaughter made the subject of consumer ethics seem frivolous. Intellectuals who had been concerned with the social effects of technological change instead became preoccupied with the implications of mechanized warfare. Now that production has more than recovered from the effects of two world wars, we have come to realize that, along with our military technologies, our technologies of consumption may pose a threat to world peace and even to human survival.

In coming to terms with that realization, we may be helped by reexamining ideas raised in France during the consumer revolution. French intellectuals of that time were prophetically aware that consumption would have to be restricted at some point, that the endless multiplication of merchandise Denise saw in the department-store window was only a mirage. While no one can solve our dilemmas for us, these social critics raised issues we now confront; they defined problems, pointed out dead ends, and provided a starting point for further inquiry. By examining their contributions, we may arrive at a fuller appreciation of what was unquestionably one of the great creative periods in French culture. Even more importantly, this act of historical recovery may increase our understanding of the social ethics of consumption and enable us to create a viable moral code of our own.