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Consumption and the World of Goods
Edited by John Brewer and Roy Porter (London:
Routledge, 1993, 564 pages + 64 pages of black and
white plates, \$60).

This large work is the first of three projected volumes to come out of the Center for Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Studies and the Clark Library at UCLA on "Culture and Consumption in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries." (The others are John Brewer and Susan Staves [eds.], *Changing Conceptions of Property in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, and John Brewer and Anne Bermingham [eds.], *Word, Image and Object: Culture and Consumption in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*). As such it represents a formidable attempt to deal with the rise of consumption before the Industrial Revolution—a Consumer Revolution. At the heart of this work is a dispute about what triggered this revolution, with Colin Campbell and his supporters on one side and Neil McKendrick and his supporters on the other.

McKendrick crafted the thesis that a Consumer Revolution was caused by the discovery of fashion in England—in clothes and customers—and the spread of fashion items by a pattern of emulation of their social superiors, by first the middle classes and then the laboring classes (McKendrick 1982). As it appears in the current work, the argument is modified by McKendrick's statement that although the *desire* to emulate is probably a universal human trait, the *ability* to emulate has been restricted for most of human history.

Campbell, on the other hand, has handed down the Scottish verdict of "not proved" on the "emulation of fashion" thesis. He prefers to emphasize the rise of Romanticism and its accompanying hedonistic tendencies as the source of the Consumer Revolution of the eighteenth century (Campbell 1987).

Although Campbell is technically correct in his verdict, historians rarely deal in proof; instead, they deal in plausibilities, probabilities, and preponderances of evidence. And in those terms, one has to give the palm to McKendrick, especially now that he has modified his emulation thesis explicitly to recognize that the ability to emulate lags the desire to do so.

What neither Campbell nor McKendrick—nor, indeed, any of the authors in this work—has found is the key to explain why and how fashion suddenly was triggered in the eighteenth century; how is it that a small group of middle class people in England were able to spark the Consumer Revolution. Several authors in this work go to some pains to sketch the paucity of material possessions for most people in the seventeenth century. This lack of *things* in the house continued in many places far beyond the seventeenth century, of course. Robertson and Robertson (1993) show some of the slow pace of accumulation over several generations in rural Southern New England in the nineteenth century. O'Callaghan (1992) discusses his boyhood in the village of Killavullen, North Cork, Eire, in the 1920s and 1930s in a house "without sanitation"—they used a field or, in winter, the cowshed. Desire to emulate? O'Callaghan certainly knew of a wider life. He went to school and read widely; but otherwise his existence could be that described by Thomas Hardy in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

What of the *ability* to emulate? Somewhere in the middle years of the eighteenth century, the English middle class could afford a bit more; then the laboring classes could afford "the decencies." The English no longer feared starvation (although the Scots—particularly the Highlanders—and the Irish continued to, with good reason); their clothing costs continued to decrease, though it was now subject to the whims of changing fashion. And, suddenly, there was an array of consumer durables and nondurables available that people wanted and could afford to buy.

Was this mass consumption? No; that came later. But there was production and use of large numbers of similar products (Styles 1993). Liquor and wine bottles were made by the thousands by individual artisans blowing them into molds for standardization; every student who has gone through Introductory Economics has been exposed to Adam Smith's description of pin making *circa* 1776. Even before the Industrial Revolution had automated parts of the cloth-making process, home-produced cloth, whether the stereotypical linsey-woolsey of American history or otherwise, was becoming a mark of marginalism—the marginalism of poverty, the marginalism of living on the physical frontiers of society, or both; George Eliot showed what had replaced it in *Silas Marner*, in which cloth was produced by people whose working lives were dedicated to nothing else and who participated in a market economy by producing standard goods. Standardization of this sort did not inhibit the growth of product diversity; on the contrary, it probably facilitated it. In this respect, it differed from twentieth-century standardization, at least as far as mass-produced, mechanical products are concerned (Styles 1993).

Two items remain to be discussed: how pervasive was this new consumption, and how was the new consumption ethic integrated into the philosophies of the people?

The pervasiveness of this new consumption is difficult to gauge (de Vries 1993).

With very few exceptions, every generation of decedents from the mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth century left behind more and better possessions. However, these growing accumulations of possessions did not come to bulk larger in the total value of estates. Indeed, their relative value fell, and, often enough, their absolute value as well.

The "world of goods seems oddly disconnected from the world of wealth" (de Vries 1993). And yet, as historians must consider, is this a plausible event? Today, "most people, after a lifetime of frenetic consumerism and prodigious expenditures, die with personal possessions of inconsequential value, hardly enough to pay for a decent burial." In this respect, the probate inventories [of early modern Europe and the North American colonies] surely do reveal a rosy dawn of modern consumption (de Vries 1993).

What about the new consumption and European philosophy?

Why is consumption uniformly construed negatively even though there is abounding evidence that consuming is pleasurable and popular and brings rare moments of satisfaction? Why, in the floodtide of Enlightenment enthusiasms for freedom—free speech, free inquiry, free labor, free trade, free contract—was free consumption never articulated as a social goal? Or put another way, why has the opportunity to consume been made dependent morally upon the opportunity to produce, but functionally upon the opportunity to purchase... Why is it, to put the question in more total terms, that consumption, which is the linchpin of our modern social system, has never been the linchpin of our theories explaining modernity? (Appleby 1993)

As a moral imperative, then, consumption has never stood a chance. Perhaps to this extent Campbell is right; as Romanticism declines as a driving force, as the world becomes increasingly postmodern, the drive to consume *things* for their hedonistic value will decline.

Who should read this book? I believe there are two groups of readers who should read and would benefit from a close reading of the present book and those due to follow. The first group comprises academics in both general marketing and history. The authors do a forceful job of demolishing many of the myths that have grown up in history as it is taught, particularly in survey and introductory courses in economic history. The second group is consumer-behavior researchers, because the present work continues to push the date of the Consumer Revolution back toward the beginning of the modern era (as historians use that term); this perspec-

tive is important to our understanding of current consumption behavior, because changes in consumption over time are crucial in highlighting current consumption behavior (Robertson and Robertson 1993). However, most practitioners would find much of this work a tough slog—even though some of the material is potentially quite useful—because it is presented in what one of my clients has called “High Academy” language and format.

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