

Introduction

“They kept shopping.” So observed a dazed Kimberly Cribbs after a tragic incident at the Green Acres Mall Wal-Mart in Valley Stream, New York, the morning of “Black Friday,” November 28, 2008. In the predawn darkness of the first day of the Christmas shopping season, customers gathered outside the entrance to the big-box chain store, eager to snatch up holiday bargains. At 4:55 a.m., five minutes before the store was set to open, an impatient crowd of 2,000 customers crashed through the sliding-glass doors and, rushing into the store toward discounted merchandise, stampeded over several employees who had been trying to hold back the throng. One of those employees was thirty-four-year-old Jdimytai Damour, a temporary worker from Queens, who was knocked onto the linoleum floor and killed as customers surged past him. Upon learning that an employee was fatally injured, managers attempted to close the store, but customers “kept shopping,” determined to get what they came for.¹

We live in an age of consumption. In high-income countries of the Global North and, increasingly, middle- and low-income countries of the Global South, the acquisition, circulation, and use of nonstaple consumer goods define much of daily life. Children grow up staring at advertisements on screens large and small. Adults go into debt to obtain cars, household appliances, and electronics. Internet users click on products selected for them by complex algorithms, leaving behind “taste fingerprints” to be processed for laser-targeted advertising. Small wonder that even wealthy Americans say that they cannot afford to buy everything that they “need,” despite living in houses of unprecedented size crammed with stuff. According to M. J. Rosenthal, member of the

¹ After the tragedy, the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration fined Wal-Mart \$7,000 for violations of employee safety rules. The corporate giant battled the ruling for years but ultimately gave up and paid the fine. “Wal-Mart Employee Trampled to Death,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2008.

2 Introduction

National Association of Professional Organizers, the average American home holds 300,000 items, from televisions to toothpicks.²

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the sheer force of consumption in contemporary society. Government restrictions and fear of infection sent consumer spending plunging in 2020, producing severe contractions in economies across the planet. As neighborhood restaurants closed and retailers shut their stores, many nations experienced declines in GDP not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s. At the same time, however, the pandemic showed how eager people were to continue purchasing goods and services, even if it put their own and others' lives at risk. Months into the pandemic, consumers dismissed warnings from public health officials and blithely shopped and dined out, even as the retail and service workers who attended to them fell ill. Restaurants, bars, nightclubs, cafés, casinos, gyms, and big-box stores filled up once more in a stirring of expenditure lauded by business leaders around the world. To bet against the US consumer "is a loser's game," said Paul Schatz, president of Heritage Capital, who predicted America's "spending spirit" would power the economy forward once the crisis passed.³ Meanwhile, corporations concerned about the optics of crassly promoting products in the midst of a public health crisis nimbly reframed consumption as an act of public service or familial duty. One commercial depicted a drone-equipped grandfather airlifting a box of Dunkin' donuts to his safely distant grandson, implicitly promising that the sweet pastry would keep families together during the pandemic.

If the force of consumption in the modern world is undeniable, so is our profound unease with that reality. In the twentieth century, intellectuals on both the left and right raised doubts about the moral implications of spending so much time and money on the acquisition of material objects. As consumption reached unprecedented heights in the postwar Global North, critics warned that an obsession with commercial products dulled moral sensibilities and eroded our humanity. "The people recognize themselves in their commodities," lamented Herbert Marcuse, one of the last century's fiercest critics of consumer capitalism, "they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen

² Robert Frank, *Luxury Fever: Money and Happiness in an Era of Excess* (New York, 1999); Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (New York, 1998); www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2017/05/18/why-hard-stop-buying-more-stuff/TikBKa6hUCSN2UkKoSBSeL/story.html, accessed June 29, 2021.

³ Callum Keown, "Betting against the U.S. Economy and Consumer Is a Loser's Game – Why One Strategist Sees Dow 40,000 on the Horizon," www.marketwatch.com/story/betting-against-the-us-economy-and-consumer-is-a-losers-game-why-one-strategist-sees-dow-40000-on-the-horizon-2020-05-18, accessed June 29, 2021.

equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced.”⁴ The materialism of modern consumer society, Marcuse asserted, impeded independent critical thinking and prevented human beings from reaching their full social and political potential.

Today, a surfeit of books, magazines, and blogs offer advice to anxious consumers on “decluttering” their homes, “simplifying” their lifestyles, and “downshifting” their expenditure, even as the very same texts advertise the latest fashions. *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, the best-seller by Japanese writer Marie Kondo,⁵ has created a worldwide sensation. Kondo encourages her millions of readers to purge from their homes all material possessions that do not spark “joy.” The ultimate goal is the creation of a clutter-free household in which every possession brings happiness. While such movements have failed to slow the furious growth of consumption, they suggest that many of the world’s most privileged citizens are exploring ways (however superficially) to recast their relationship to commercial life.

And then – alarmingly – there is the climate crisis. The greatest threat facing humanity today, climate change is a direct result of the ceaseless consumption of fossil fuels, which provide the energy for consumers to live comfortably by heating and cooling buildings and powering cars and trucks. Environmental activists argue that we cannot solve the problem of climate change with technological advances alone. We will have to reduce consumption significantly by changing our everyday habits, habits centuries in the making but which now seem perfectly natural. For some, the dramatic fall in consumption following the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that it is possible, if the collective will is there, to escape the grip of modern consumer capitalism, mitigate its disastrous effects on the environment, and build a sustainable green economy. But the failure on the part of the consuming public to sustain lockdowns during the pandemic suggests how difficult this will be.

Meanwhile, concerns about the environment and other pressing issues have given rise to a variety of movements that social scientists call “political” or “ethical consumerism.” Many consumers have come to believe that their daily purchases have significant implications for a whole host of major public issues: human and animal rights, corporate governance, fair trade, labor policy, industrial agriculture, and climate change. Accordingly, they refrain from buying certain goods (boycott) and

⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London, 2002), 11.

⁵ Marie Kondo, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (London, 2014).

4 Introduction

choose to buy others (boycott) under the assumption that their collective decisions will make a genuine difference in the world at large. Proponents of ethical consumerism believe that a new awareness of the global connections between production and consumption – a better understanding of where consumer goods come from and how their production affects communities near and far – will generate new patterns of demand, which will in turn discourage corporations and states from pursuing harmful labor, environmental, and political policies. We see this playing out in any number of ways, from the spread of vegetarianism and veganism (which are more sustainable than meat-eating) to boycotting fast-fashion (disposable garments made by child laborers and others working under terrible conditions in the Global South) to dropping subscriptions to Facebook (which amplifies hate speech on its platform). Indeed, the contemporary marketplace has become an ethical minefield for countless socially conscious consumers.

Histories of Consumption

How did we get here? It will be difficult to make enduring changes in consumption at either the personal or collective level without a better understanding of how humans developed a hunger for high levels of consumption in the first place. Delving into the history of consumption can help us comprehend contemporary predicaments and perhaps find ways to resolve them. The first step is to acknowledge that consumption has a history. The obsession with shopping is nothing new. Nor is the seemingly endless pursuit of novelty and fashion; the process of globalization with its attendant inequalities and international division of labor; or the attempt to build a better world through consumer activism. Historians are currently unearthing consumption's deep past, and it turns out to be a rich, complicated, and controversial story.

When did large numbers of people begin to expand their consumption beyond mere subsistence? Historians propose different chronologies. Some adopt a short-term perspective, spotlighting the development of post-World War II American and European consumer culture. In the 1950s and 1960s, the growth of suburbia and youth culture drove consumption to new levels as the West moved beyond the lean years of the Great Depression and the war. Even the dramatic social protest movements of the 1960s, as subversive as they were, were integral to a larger process of the commodification of youth culture. Looking deeper into the past, others trace the origins of modern consumer society to the nineteenth century, when the gains of the Industrial Revolution translated into remarkable profits for the bourgeoisie and (eventually) rising wages

for the working classes. This was the age of factories, railroads, and steamships; of grandiose department stores and amply decorated bourgeois apartments; of cheap newspapers and popular entertainments for the working classes – an age that experienced “an immense accumulation of commodities,” as Karl Marx famously wrote in the opening line of *Capital*.⁶ Surely, these scholars conclude, the first age of mass production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gave rise to the first age of mass consumption.

Until fairly recently, most historians assumed that changes in consumption followed from changes in production. Production was the causal agent that mattered, setting the conditions for various patterns of consumption. Thus, the idea that the development of modern forms of consumption was only possible after the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century was virtually axiomatic.

In 1982, however, Neil McKendrick took a radically different approach. In a seminal work written with historians John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, he claimed that there was a “consumer boom” of “revolutionary proportions” as far back as the eighteenth century. This “consumer revolution was the necessary analogue to the industrial revolution, the necessary convulsion on the demand side of the equation to match the convulsion on the supply side.”⁷ According to this hypothesis, the middling women and men of late eighteenth-century England bought an unprecedented quantity of goods, ushering in the first modern consumer society. For McKendrick, the “birth” of this consumer society, which was coterminous with the advent of industrial factories, constituted the first “stage” of a longer process that would ultimately lead to mass consumption in the twentieth century. Scholars had missed this first consumer revolution, he explained, because they so long focused on the history of production, particularly on the causes and consequences of the Industrial Revolution. McKendrick insisted that the Industrial Revolution had a semiautonomous demand-side counterpart, the consumer revolution, that was not merely a consequence of industrialization. The consumer revolution had a history all its own that paralleled that of industrialization.⁸

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London, 1981), 25.

⁷ Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, IN, 1982), 9.

⁸ McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society*. Joan Thirsk’s *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1978) first articulated many of the themes discussed in *The Birth of a Consumer Society*.

6 Introduction

For McKendrick, the consumer revolution could only have begun in England, where commercial society was developing more rapidly than in the rest of Europe and the structure of society was less rigidly hierarchical. He argued that the precocious existence in England of a prosperous middling class engendered a system of social emulation that encouraged the diffusion of fashionable goods. The wealthy aristocracy set standards of consumption, the robust middling ranks aped them, and the rest of society imitated the middling classes. First appearing in eighteenth-century England, he claimed, this sociocultural dynamic activated a robust new system of consumption. “Spurred on by social emulation and class competition, men and women surrendered eagerly to the pursuit of novelty, the hypnotic effects of fashion, and the enticements of persuasive commercial propaganda.” As social inferiors emulated their social superiors, “many objects, once the prized possession of the rich, reached further and further down the social scale.”⁹ Consumer society was born.

The publication of *The Birth of a Consumer Society* triggered a veritable explosion of literature on consumption. Historians of England and British America dug into late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century probate inventories (lists of household goods drawn at the time of death) to add detail to the preliminary sketches of McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb. After-death inventories showed that men and women dramatically expanded their wardrobes; splurged on a variety of personal accessories; adorned their homes with new types of furniture, tableware, and decorative objects; and ingested new psychoactive colonial products like tea, coffee, tobacco, and sugar – all well *before* the Industrial Revolution.¹⁰ If McKendrick rendered the consumer revolution equal and opposite to the Industrial Revolution, the body of work his book spawned moved the growth of consumption even further back in time to predate industrialization.

Meanwhile, as the picture of British consumption became clearer, the geographic scale of the study of consumption broadened considerably. Casting the exceptionalism of the British case into doubt, historians of continental Europe discovered similar phenomena there. The pioneering work of Daniel Roche revealed that France, too, experienced

⁹ McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, 11.

¹⁰ Studies that have effectively used probate inventories include Mark Overton et al., *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600–1750* (New York, 2004); Carole Shammas, *The Pre-industrial Consumer in England and America* (LA, 1990); Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660–1760* (London, 1988).

“a revolution in consumption” involving many of the same sorts of goods.¹¹ Others demonstrated that the Netherlands and parts of the German Lands enjoyed surges in consumption as well.¹² By the turn of the twenty-first century, something of a consensus had emerged that patterns of consumption changed dramatically in western and central Europe and in colonial America between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Jan de Vries called this historiographical turn “the revolt of the early modernists,” because it was a rebellion against an older historiographic tradition that had assumed that the economy of the early modern period (1500–1800) was stagnant and that any meaningful social change could have only occurred after the Industrial Revolution.¹³ By contrast, the new interpretation of consumption was based on a more dynamic image of early modern society, a society shaped by vigorous migration, expanding commerce, robust urbanization, accelerating social mobility, vibrant print culture, and complex labor markets.¹⁴ For Roche, the birth of consumption was essential to a vast cultural transformation whereby the traditional values of a stationary economy gave way to the egalitarianism and individualism of contemporary commodity culture. Challenging the twentieth-century critiques of Marcuse and others, Roche contended that the expansion of consumption was not completely negative, for it had liberating effects on society and culture. As early modern historians reevaluated the period on which they worked, moreover, historians of later eras began to emphasize the gradual rather than revolutionary pace of nineteenth-century industrialization, calling the very term “Industrial Revolution” into question. As a result, the once great chronological divide of industrialization no longer seemed quite so imposing. The consumer revolution thesis narrowed the gap between the preindustrial

¹¹ Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Regime*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge, 1996); Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600–1800*, trans. Brian Pearce (Cambridge, 2000). See also, Annik Pardhailé-Galabrun, *The Birth of Intimacy: Privacy and Domestic Life in Early Modern Paris*, trans. Jocelyn Phelps (Philadelphia, 1991). To encourage further reading, the notes that follow give priority to English translations of foreign-language texts whenever possible.

¹² Notably, Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York, 1987).

¹³ Jan de Vries, “The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution,” *Journal of Economic History* (JEH) 54 (1994), 253.

¹⁴ The early modern world beyond Europe, particularly East, South, and Southeast Asia, is now cast in more dynamic terms as well, though debate still rages over the question of the later divergence between the developed and developing worlds. See Victor Lieberman, *Beyond Binary Histories: Re-imagining Eurasia to c. 1830* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1999).

8 Introduction

past, once seen as fundamentally alien – a world we have lost – and contemporary industrial and post-industrial society.

To say that some sort of consensus has been reached is not, however, to suggest that the consumer revolution thesis has gone unchallenged. Some historians are not comfortable using the term “revolution” to describe a transformation that was decades in the making and may not have significantly altered the lives of ordinary people.¹⁵ They prefer the term “consumer evolution” since it evokes a gradual rate of change. Others, however, argue that while the growth of consumption may have been incremental, its cultural effects were indeed revolutionary.¹⁶ They contend that the hothouse environment of rising consumption engendered new social and cultural practices, new forms of sociability and publicity, new kinds of political debate and contestation, and new ways of thinking about society and social progress. This book retains the expression consumer revolution because it conveys the transformative nature of consumption in the eighteenth century. However, it does so with some important caveats that acknowledge that the transformation unfolded over the course of a century or more; that it was not, in many respects, unique to Europe; and that large sections of the European population did not experience a dramatic increase in consumption even if elites, the middling classes, and, strikingly, some in the laboring classes undoubtedly did. Readers can judge for themselves whether the changes the book examines were truly revolutionary or merely evolutionary in scale.

¹⁵ Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain*, rejected words like “consumer society” and “consumerism.” Shamma, *The Pre-industrial Consumer in England and America*, avoided the expression “consumer revolution.” T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (Oxford, 2004), 81, suggests that “revolution” overstates the pace of change. More recently, contributors to “Les révolutions à l’épreuve du marché,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* (AHRF) 370 (2012), 165–190, shied away from the term “consumer revolution.”

¹⁶ Daniel Roche consistently speaks of a “revolution of consumption.” James Riley, “A Widening Market in Consumer Goods,” in Euan Cameron, ed., *Early Modern Europe: An Oxford History* (Oxford, 1999), 257, suggests that “the process of growth in consumption was evolutionary, but its effect was revolutionary.” Natacha Coquery, *Tenir boutique à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2011), 24, denies the existence of a consumer revolution or society but acknowledges a “rise of a culture of consumption.” Regina Grafe, *Distant Tyranny: Markets, Power, and Backwardness in Spain, 1650–1800* (Princeton, NJ, 2012), 208–209, distinguishes between the consumer revolution in northwestern Europe and a consumer evolution in Spain. Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2005), 5, speaks of a “product revolution.” John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT, 2007), 1–5, parses the debate between optimists and pessimists.

Indeed, although the book employs the term consumer revolution, it openly addresses questions about that revolution's speed, global reach, and social limits, inviting further debate. In terms of chronology, McKendrick portrayed the revolution as a strictly late eighteenth-century phenomenon, but many scholars claim that it began, in the Netherlands and England at least, in the middle of the seventeenth century, and perhaps even earlier. Some would claim the origins go as far back as the Italian Renaissance. When the growth of consumption really began remains an open question.

Geography is also at issue. If transformations in consumption took place most conspicuously in northwestern Europe, what of the rest of the continent? Did consumption accelerate in areas beyond the northwestern European core as well? And what of rural Europe? Did provincial nobles, farmers, and peasants partake of novel forms of consumption or was this primarily an urban phenomenon? Further, in the multipolar early modern world, regions beyond Europe were hardly static. Although Fernand Braudel once claimed that fashion first emerged as a dynamic force in the West, the modernity of which he contrasted with a purportedly fixed non-Western world, it is now clear that Europe was not the only part of the globe where fashion took hold and consumption was growing.¹⁷ Elites in China during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), for example, eagerly filled their homes with an abundance of new furnishings and other fashionable goods.¹⁸ Kenneth Pomeranz suggests that before the middle of the eighteenth century, consumption in the bustling Yangzi delta was roughly on par with that of northwestern Europe.¹⁹ Hence, this book, while it concentrates on Europe, does not make claims about the uniqueness of the European case. Instead, it places European consumption in a global perspective, underscoring connections between Europe

¹⁷ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York, 1982–1984).

¹⁸ Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge, 1991); and “Things in Between: Splendour and Excess in Ming China,” in Frank Trentmann, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (Oxford, 2012), 47–63.

¹⁹ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000). Alternatively, Carlo Marco Belfanti, “Was Fashion a European Invention?” *Journal of Global History* 3 (2008), 443, argues that, in Europe, consumption underwent a particularly deep transformation as fashion moved well beyond the orbit of royal courts, was treated extensively in the periodical press, and shaped the material lives of the middling and, to some degree, laboring classes. “Fashion was not a European invention, but it first fully developed as a social institution in Europe, while in India, China, and Japan it only evolved partially in pre-modern times, without being able to obtain full social recognition.” See also the conclusion in Maxine Berg, Felicia Gottmann, Hanna Hodacs, and Chris Nierstrasz, eds., *Goods from the East, 1600–1800: Trading Eurasia* (New York, 2015).

10 Introduction

and the wider world that dramatically shaped European consumption and altered, to a greater or lesser degree, the many regions with which Europe interacted.

Finally, and perhaps most problematically, there is the social question. It is difficult to determine how far down the social hierarchy new consumer practices spread. Did the laboring classes enjoy rising levels of consumption or was this an exclusively elite or perhaps middling affair? This is a crucially important question because depictions of the rise of consumption that do not carefully define its social limits risk giving a falsely sanguine impression of the eighteenth century. Rosy portrayals of consumption must be weighed against evidence of severe material constraints, persistent underemployment, and downward social mobility. After all, as we know well today, it is possible for downward and upward social mobility to occur simultaneously, allowing consumption to expand among elites while stagnating among the laboring classes. It is time to provide a more nuanced assessment of these changes and to explain the uneven rise of consumption.

Going beyond questions of chronology, geography, and social structure, this book will also consider a number of themes that, though addressed in the early literature, have since received much closer attention. Take shopping, for example. The early literature on the consumer revolution claimed that well before the advent of the great department stores of the nineteenth century, retailers pioneered new modes of marketing in an effort to heighten the desire for goods. But it did not explore in detail how merchants, shopkeepers, and peddlers sought to stoke consumer desire. How did they market their goods, and how did consumers respond to their appeals to create feedback loops between producers and consumers? Long before corporate focus groups and data collection, consumers and retailers exchanged information about taste and desire. Print advertising was an important part of this exchange, but so was the shop itself, which became a site of display and sociability. What did eighteenth-century shops look like, and when did shopping become a leisure activity for city-dwellers and tourists? Further, how did the concept of fashion enter into the picture? It is clear that fashion cycles accelerated over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as men and women sought to stay “à la mode,” but we are only beginning to understand the mechanisms behind the spread of fashion and fashion’s impact on capitalism.

Fashion raises difficult questions about what goods meant to those who acquired them. Originally, McKendrick and others who subscribed to the emulation thesis suggested the main function of nonsubsistence goods was to signal social status. Consumers displayed luxurious or