“Buy, American”

Moralist Attitudes toward a Consumer Society in America, 1875-1929

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“For there is no such thing as economic growth which is not, at the same time, growth or change of a culture; and the growth of social consciousness, like the growth of a poet’s mind, can never, in the last analysis, be planned.”

E.P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism”, in: Past and Present 38 (1967) 97.

Content

Introduction

In 1854, Henry David Thoreau wrote the seminal work *Walden*, urging his contemporaries to pursue non-materialistic means and seek a life of fulfillment and independence in a more natural environment. Thoreau was one of the many nineteenth century observers raising criticism on the ever increasing consumer economy that seemed to expand over the American continent. "I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools… Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolfe… Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are… hindrances to the elevation of mankind", Thoreau concluded.[1]

Like many before and after him, Thoreau raised moral questions about what impact the growing acquisition of commodities had on the character of Americans. As the social fabric of the nation changed under the modernizing forces of immigration, urbanization and industrialization, the spread and impact of an consumer economy worried many. Ranging from civic groups, household budget experts, writers and novelists, scholars, religious spokespersons, medical experts and intellectuals, late-nineteenth century and early twentieth-century moralists held critical opinions about the corrosive influence of a new culture of consumption.

Additionally, as traditional bonds of community and kinship, religious ties and work ethics altered, Americans seemed to become, and increasingly regarded themselves, as a nation bound together by consumption. As scholars like Meg Jacobs and Charles McGovern argue, the link between nationalism and consumption was strengthened in many ways at the end of the nineteenth century. Jacobs coins the term "economic citizenship" to illustrate how an increasing number of Americans became participants in the mass consumer economy: economic citizenship meant "full membership in the American polity".[2] Charles McGovern convincingly argues that a notion of "material nationalism" characterized the nation at the turn of the century, since "consuming symbolized the

[1] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, Or, Life in the Woods* (1854, reprint: New York: Dover Publications, 1995) 3-4. Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America. A Social History of American Culture and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) 60

[2] Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 1-2

uniqueness of the United States as a nation and a civilization; getting and spending affirmed one's Americanness".[3]

Whether on male and female members of the working-class, remote agrarian communities or respectable middle-class ladies, consumption held the power to have transformative effects. With new public venues acceptable for women, mass communication systems like radio and magazines, financial possibilities to buy with credit, a large market of popular culture and mass-produced goods available for lower prices, the daily lives of people changed radically as the nation turned into a consumer society. Moreover, by associating the national identity and political order with the power of consumption, corporate elites and the advertising industry equated formerly political ideologies of individuality and freedom to choose with consumerism, creating a distinctive national ideology based on American abundance for all. At the same time, as Charles McGovern argues, consumption symbolized belonging to the nation even as it divides those within the nation, as not all social groups had equal access to the culture of consumption.[4]

But while consumption made up the fabric of American life and became a defining aspect of modernity, the emergence of a consumer economy led to critical voices and new anxieties. As American economy and society changed dramatically in many ways, these alterations were reflected in the critical remarks by Victorian moralists. Often, by failing to distinguish between the commodity and the character of its consumer, conservatives perceived audiences as ignorant and un-informed. Conceiving the mass-purchased goods and popular entertainment as representations of costumers, this process of symbolization characterized moralist's writings as America developed a mass consumer economy. Consumerism, apart from being a symbol of modernity, economic polity and arena of political struggle, was very much received as a moral danger. These tensions among the various meanings of the emerging consumer economy led to ambiguous responses.

On what grounds, then, did American moralists issue their critique on the emerging consumer economy that surrounded them? This intellectual history searches for an understanding of how American intellectuals, from 1875 until 1929, have understood, talked about, and practiced consumption. Struggling to make sense of their surroundings, the cultural texts that moralists created show that the dangers of declining religious piety,

[3] Charles F. McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 119.
[4] McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945*, 374..

diminishing social hierarchies, altering gender roles and striving for emulation and never-ending accumulation of goods were perceived as very real and corrosive forces. As "the rise of a consumer culture provided compelling new texts for society to behold and read", this research focuses on these new cultural texts that were created in the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century.[5] What were the reactions and consequences of the cultural processes affecting American society, such as "the shift from production to consumption, from an emphasis on the touch and feel of things to the look and style of commodities, and from a small-town ethos to the rising cosmopolitan ideal"?[6] Victorian moralists linked work and progress, as they perceived the ethos of workmanship and production as the main sources of personal fulfillment and distinction. But around 1900, one now worked in order to satisfy the want for consumer goods, critics feared, not because one had to survive or commit to the Victorian notion of character. The therapeutic ideals of personality, intensified by the advertising industry, turned consumption into a secular and self-referential project, far removed from larger ethical or religious frameworks of meaning.[7]

Economist Thorstein Veblen warned in 1899 for a decline in the spirit of "workmanship", the ability to produce rather than consume. Likewise, the authors of household budget studies, initiated by the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor in 1875, kept a critical eye on the expenditures of the working-classes they investigated. The dangers of profligacy and intemperance lured working-class Americans and ethnic immigrants from their occupations and family responsibilities. New means of transportation and public venues eroded the Victorian cult of domesticity, as women joined their male counterparts with shopping in department stores, or, some decades later, profane the Sabbath's rest and their morality by joining a man in his automobile ride.

As the examples above indicate, the critiques on aspects of a mass consumer economy are extensive and diverse, and differed over time. Therefore, this work is by no means a complete overview of responses that were ushered as the nation changed around the turn of the century. Moreover, as Daniel Horowitz notes, "the definition of

[5] Simon J. Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture", in: Simon J. Bronner ed., *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America 1880-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989) 14-15.
[6] Simon J. Bronner, "Introduction", in: Simon J. Bronner ed., *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America 1880-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989) 6-7.
[7] T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930" in: Richard Wrightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (eds.), *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1983) 4, 32.

consumption as a social problem is an old story and not exclusively an American one".[8] Although European scholarship is included, this research is confined to American moralists – a term that covers a wide range of public figures and intellectuals, both male and female. That is not to say that transatlantic crossings did not occur, or that reciprocal models of influence and reception are ignored. Nor does it imply that similar moralist concerns were not articulated in Europe, especially influenced by Marxist economic critique. Rather, by focusing on the specific history of America's consumer society and its critics, this research aims to discover how American moralists regarded the vastly changing world around them at the end of the nineteenth century. The feelings uneasy or comfort – depending on the viewpoint towards accumulation – that accompanied an expanding array of services and goods and greater affluence for many, illustrated how nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American intellectuals came to terms with a defining aspect of their nation.

This research expands the fairly recent discussion of "material nationalism" by incorporating the visions of moralists and conservatives in order to achieve a more complete overview of the alleged democratizing forces of consumption in the one hand, and the distinct social hierarchies and power relations a consumer economy reinforced on the other.[9] By incorporating the institutional framework of consumption and the notion of material nationalism, this research aims to link the emerging culture of consumption with the critique that arose on the ethics and morality of consuming. A profound tension existed between the nation's older pre-industrial society and the modernizing institutions and social structure that accompanied the development of industrial capitalism from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, leading contemporaries to voice their concern about the influence of a consumer economy on the nation and its inhabitants. As a result, while the definition of consumption as a moral danger has a much longer history, conservative moralism emerged in a specific cultural and historical setting as consumption achieved a significant role in American lives.[10]

The first chapter focuses on the emergence of an American consumer society and the culture of consumption that it produced. In consumer history, some elements are measurable, such as the increase of wealth per capita, the expanding array of mass-produced goods, or the number of department stores in the United States. Other factors that

[8] Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1985) xvii.
[9] Charles F. McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2006)
[10] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xi.

contributed to the coming of age of America's consumer society are more ideological, as the guiding myth of consumption spread across the continent, turning more and more Americans into consumers. By being compelled to a sense of time-thrift, workers gradually shifted from a producer-oriented ethic to a consumer ethic. In a world where the Victorian notions of character and respectability were gradually replaced by ideas of self-realization and personality, consumption became a means to achieve happiness through the pleasures that consumer culture offered. Moreover, the spread of goods helped to establish middle-class consumption, as more citizens participated in getting and spending. As William Leach argues, "the culture of consumption was an urban and secular one of color and spectacle, of sensuous pleasure and dreams" that subverted older mentalities of repression, practical utilitarianism, scarcity and self-denial.[11]

The second chapter deals with the attitudes towards affluence, and combines the earlier described culture of consumption with the judgments about consumerism. While Americans embraced the new culture of abundance and mass consumption, they worried about it as well. As will be argued in the second chapter, different strains of thought can be discerned from the writings of conservatives and critics. Religious spokespersons feared for a decline in religious faith, as the delicate balance between effort and enjoyment was easily disturbed. Second, many moralists feared that the social relations were eroded by the striving for emulation that a culture based on commodities initiated. Whether received as a negative attribute, in the case of Thorstein Veblen, or as positive effect of newfound levels of comfort, like Simon Patten argued, intellectuals and experts had their say about what consumption did to the American people. Lastly, by looking at the changes in gender roles, the appearance of women in public places and their newfound freedom resulted in critical remarks and writings, as some feared that "the awful prevalence of the vice of shopping among women" should be considered "every bit as bad as male drinking or smoking".[12]

A Short History of Consumer History

It is only since the late 1970s and 1980s that consumption became regarded as important part of "the fabric of American life", as one scholar put it in 1999.[13] While consumption has been seen as side-effect of larger social or economic developments, the subject has

[11] William R. Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925", in: *The Journal of American History* 71 (1984) 320.
[12] Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925", 333.
[13] Lawrence B. Glickman, "Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History", in Lawrence B. Glickman (ed.), *Consumer Society in American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) vii, 9.

taken the center stage in since the 1980s. Intertwined with the major themes of national identity and American history, U.S. consumer history has taken a central position in historical research. As it includes many perspectives and voices, consumerism as a topic moved from the trivial position at the margins of historical research to a central theme of American history. The rapidly expanding and evolving field, by using an interdisciplinary approach, combines various research methods and interpretations. Since the 1980s, research has shown that the history of consumption ties in with American history more generally, as it is intertwined with gender, labor, environmental, ethnic, religious, political and intellectual history. Scholars uncovered the roots of current consumer practices in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, not by invoking mythic ideas about American abundance, as Lawrence Glickman points out, but by studying social and cultural history.[14]

Thus, as a result of the cultural turn within the academy, the field of consumer history has been validated as credible academic subject since the 1980s. Culture came to be seen as decisive realm, the place were power was manifested, exercised, and challenged. However, before the notion of consumerism, with its economic and social values and its influence on the daily life of millions, became considered a legitimate topic of scholarly attention, many sociologists and historians tried do discern the American character in relationship with abundance and wealth. Authors as David M. Potter, T.J. Jackson Lears, David Riesman and Christopher Lasch tried to understand the 1950s through the 1980s by looking at the consumerist aspects of American society in historical perspective: their best-selling books proved that the American public was interested in the nation's history as a consumer society as well.[15] Therefore, the sociological studies carried out by these scholars preceded the cultural turn and its new academic fields of research, such as consumerism. Although as a group they may have not been conscious of their roots in the mass culture debate, their research has been important for the framework of later consumer historians.

One important strain in the academic discussion of consumer history centers on the periodization of a new consumer culture and the consumer revolution. Since the American market became saturated with both European and domestic products during the colonial era, European and American scholars like Neil McKendrick, Colin Campbell and Timothy

[14] Lawrence B. Glickman, "Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History", 9-10.
[15] David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (1954, reprint: Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1987), T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950)

Breen have argued how the turning point for modern consumerism lays in eighteenth century.[16] In *The Marketplace of Revolution*, historian T.H. Breen claims that it was precisely the colonist's shared experience as consumers that provided them with the "cultural resources needed to develop a bold new form of political protest", eventually resulting in the American Revolution.[17] According to Breen, goods became the foundation of trust in a time when the New World became separated from the Old World. The American Revolution of 1776 was therefore, in part, a consumer revolution. Although the issue of periodization continues to spark academic discussion, many scholars agree that consumption, whether in the colonial era, Victorian period, or in the "consumers' republic" of the 1930s, might be considered as "defining thread of American life".[18]

The second broad strain of thought within the field of consumer history is concerned with ideological and political structures and the issue of power relations. Whether from an economic Marxist point of view or derived from political sciences, American scholars began to search for the meanings of consumption and the importance it held for people in various respects. It can be argued that the scholarship on consumer history is broadly divided between two opposing understandings of the nature of consumption. The first emphasizes the emancipatory potential of consumption: the possibility to cultivate or empower subjects by improving "individual existence and challenging the status quo". The second understanding of consumption has a more negative connotation as it emphasizes consumption as a "process of manipulation buried within the larger system of social relations".[19] David Steigerwald distinguishes a culture-pessimistic view versus an empowerment view of the process and power of consumption. The former, influenced by mass culture-critics, underscores that the system of unparalleled abundance may restrict civic life and sustain race, class and gender divisions. The liberatory or empowering understanding emphasizes the possibility to cultivate or empower subjects through consumption, exemplified by T.H. Breen's work. Through the act of buying and spending, people have found an outlet to defend their racial, sexual, or national identity, in active engagement with a modern consumer apparatus. As a result, American conceptions of "freedom, democracy and equality" became closely intertwined with a process of mass

[16] Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic And The Spirit Of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb (eds.), *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982)
[17] T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution. How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) xiv-xv.
[18] David Steigerwald, "All Hail the Republic of Choice: Consumer History as Contemporary Thought", in: *The Journal of American History* 93 (2006) 385.
[19] Steigerwald, "All Hail the Republic of Choice", 385.

consumption.[20] Consumption contained political meaning: "the American conception of, and struggle for, freedom accordingly inheres in the market transaction of buying things".[21]

Over the last two decades, different academic disciplines as anthropology and cultural studies have influenced the premises that accompany consumer histories. As Steigerwald notes, these premises hold that the act of consumption is an ambiguous one that individuals can invest with meaning of their own, that group solidarity can be expressed through consumption as people draw their taste and values from subgroups, and that self-liberation and collective solidarity make it possible to view consumerism as a medium for political subversion of, or even opposition to, the social order.[22]

Consumption is more that the acquisition of commodities: it can be regarded as a culture in itself. It is not primarily the satisfaction of needs, but the rituals and practices following from consumer goods: "the dreaming, shopping, buying, personalizing, and disposing of commodities" is included as well.[23] As Daniel Horowitz marks out in the first pages of *The Morality of Spending*, people attribute meaning to their lives in complex ways, "bringing to their consumption of commercial goods and experiences the expectations and values that stem at least as much from their own lives and backgrounds as from what elites tell them to feel and do". As consumers, ordinary Americans did not merely bow to the will of corporate elites or simply accepted what the economy had to offer them. Rather, they continued to maintain traditional bonds and alliances in a rapidly changing world, since, as Horowitz reminds us, "consumer society did not obliterate an older America based on friends, workplace, family, religion, ethnicity, region, and social class".[24] Nonetheless, much of the traditional pillars of identity underwent profound changes as immigration, urbanization and industrialization marked both cityscape and rural America.

Following Horowitz's outline, this research agrees that a culture of consumption was not imposed by external forces, nor made up of personal aspirations or consumer expressions only. Rather, as consumer culture is a complicated phenomenon, this research is based on a reciprocal model that covers both the powerful institutions and people that have tried to impose their visions on society, as well as American consumers who

[20] Steigerwald, "All Hail the Republic of Choice", 386-387.
[21] Steigerwald, "All Hail the Republic of Choice", 386-387. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003)
[22] Steigerwald, "All Hail the Republic of Choice", 388.
[23] Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream. A Cultural History of Consumer Credit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 7.
[24] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xii.

responded by purchasing goods and experiences, relying on their own personal, ethnic or cultural histories.[25] By looking at the institutions of consumption or the economic and social structures on one hand, and the culture of consumption as ideology on the other, this work aims to incorporate both the corporate structures and people that made up America's emerging consumer economy to describe the historical background in which moralists moved.

This history of various attitudes towards consumerism is not stuck between "the stark alternatives of celebration and revulsion" of mass culture, but rather an intellectual inquiry in the reasons why contemporaries celebrated or shied away from mass consumer culture.[26] As Jean-Christophe Agnew asserts in 1993:

> "The last decade of research has boldly challenged and immeasurably enriched our picture of consumer culture, but the very richness of that work – the thickness of its description and the details of its maps – has at times submerged important questions of periodization, of power, and, if you will, of principles – questions that historians can ill afford to ignore".[27]

Following Agnew's remarks, this research paper strives to incorporate these concerns in one intellectual history. The periodization will start in 1875, as the first large household budget study is carried out by the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, revealing as much about workers expenditures as it did about how observers thought working classes should spend their money.[28] By 1929, as the Great Depression took a hold of America and the rest of the world, wealth and consumption acquired new meanings. As scholars as Lizabeth Cohen and Meg Jacobs have pointed out, consumerism became not only an individual expression but also a political perspective.

By the 1930s, Americans knew they lived in a consumer society. The culture of consumption had been established in the previous decades, and although the Depression would destabilize that culture, Americans from now on considered themselves as citizens, workers, and consumers.[29] Agnew's questions of power are addressed as well, by reflecting on the broad range of corporations, advertisers, moralists and consumers that inhabited the nation's consumer economy. Lastly, the clash of traditional principles with

[25] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xi-xii.
[26] Jean-Christophe Agnew, "Consumer culture in historical perspective", in: John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993) 29.
[27] Agnew, "Consumer culture in historical perspective", 34.
[28] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xxix.
[29] McGovern, *Sold American*, 131.

modernizing forces and the struggle that the notion of material nationalism invoked for women, working-class and ethnic Americans, will be addressed as well.

1. Living in a Culture of Consumption: Transformations in American Society

For late nineteenth century Americans, "consumerism could be ambivalently identified as a symbol of modernity, an economic polity, a popular cultural phenomenon, or rather as a moral danger, based on their preoccupations.[1] While the academic discussion about what defines consumerism and when the modern version of a consumer society came into existence lingers on, some agreements have been made about the characteristic elements of a world made up of and oriented towards consumer goods. The concrete institution of a consumer economy depended on numerous factors. Some elements are measurable, such as the increase of wealth per capita, gross domestic product and increase of the national market, or the number of department stores in the United States. Other factors that contributed to the coming of age of America's consumer society are more ideological, as the guiding myth of consumption spread across the continent, turning more and more Americans into consumers.

This chapter will look at the changes in production and work ethics that prevailed as an economic order of industrial capitalism was established. It was not only the production side of economy that changed profoundly. Innovations in communication and transportation, combined with new methods of selling and shopping implied that growing demand was catered as well. As a result of large-scale social processes such as urbanization and immigration, new groups of customers found their way to commodities advertised as "national", while rural consumption was stimulated by in the introduction of mail-order catalogs. How these economic, technological and social changes became reflected in an emerging culture of consumption will be a central theme in this chapter.

Time is Money

The industrial revolution moved America in the economic vanguard as the century proceeded: in 1894, the U.S. manufactured product nearly equaled in value that of Great-

[1] Lawrence B. Glickman, "Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History", 1.

Britain, France, and Germany together.[2] With an increasingly bureaucratized industrial society, catering to an expanding domestic and international market, the United States took the lead. The transformation from an agrarian industry to an industrial capitalistic order was accompanied by changing work habits and ethics. Historian Jan de Vries has formulated how an "industrious revolution", in which households simultaneously increased the amount of market-oriented labor and the percentage of household consumption purchased from others, preceded the industrial revolution in north-western Europe and north America between 1650 and 1800. According the economic historian, "an industrious revolution, with important demand-side features", began in advance of the British industrial revolution, "which was basically a supply-side phenomenon".[3] The significant contributions from women and children and an increase in working hours for men were motivated by a desire to "consume new types of goods or old goods in new quantities", such as cottons, linens, sugar, tea and alcohol. Although De Vries demonstrates that the industrious revolution preceded the industrial revolution, after 1850 the industrious household, with its multiple income streams from a variety of family members, was replaced by the "breadwinner-homemaker" household as the married man provided the family income.[4]

English labor historian E.P. Thompson argues how the concept of "time" influenced work-discipline and ethics in industrial Britain. His findings can be applied to industrial America as well, as the nation shifted from what Thompson calls "task-oriented" to "timed" labor. The industrial revolution marked a "severe restructuring of working habits – new disciplines, new incentives, and a new human nature".[5] Thompson notes how workers shifted from task-orientated labor to a notion of timed labor. A task-oriented work ethic showed, according to Thompson, least demarcation between "work" and "life", as there is no great sense of conflict between labor and the "passing the time of day". That changed gradually when time became more important and work ethics altered accordingly: "those who are employed experience a distinction between their employer's time and their

[2] Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919", in: *The American Historical Review* 78 (1973) 555.
[3] Jan de Vries, "Purchasing power and the world of goods: understanding the household economy in early modern Europe", in: John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993) 107.
[4] Jan de Vries, "The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution", in: *The Journal of Economic History* 54 (1994) 258; Jane Whittle, Review: Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), in: *European History Quarterly* 40 (2010) 723.
[5] E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism", in: *Past and Present* 38 (1967) 59.

own time". The "irregular and undisciplined work patterns" frustrated cost-conscious manufacturers.[6] In other words, time became currency, as is it was not passed but spent. The adage "time is money" became a reality.

Industrial capitalism changed the nature of work in America profoundly. Abandoning pre-industrial wasteful, immoral and disorderly habits, reformers and industrialists tried to impose industrial discipline and a modern work ethic that was based on sobriety, thrift, and time-consciousness.[7] In addition, the nation changed as a result of the agricultural revolution in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. As farmers gradually abandoned producing their own food, clothing, and tools and instead turned to supplying urban markets, the formerly agrarian nation transformed. Robert A. Gross stresses that this revolution on the countryside was necessary for the creation of an urban-industrial society, as this new world combined modern science with agricultural capitalism.[8]

In the eighteenth century, as a result of limited markets and constraints on production, surpluses were small, and farmers depended on exchange and barter. As Gross notes, "most famers lacked the incentive or capacity to participate extensively in trade. Indeed, most farmers even lacked the ability to be fully self-sufficient".[9] Interestingly, the romantic image of self-sufficient yeomen farmers seems to be less representative than many historians understood. Even in the writings of Thoreau, who longed for a return to self-sufficient simple living as exemplified by the publication of *Walden* in 1854, seemed to choose to forget how interdependence was "the inescapable fact of life".[10] A certain idealization of the preindustrial order was, as will be shown in the second chapter, a habit of some conservatives as they contemplated on contemporary times.

As Gross reminds us, the term "revolution" may distract from the "slow and uneven process", at times characterized by setbacks, that the development of agricultural transformation and industrialization in reality was. However, to participants in the process, this transition must have been a "deeply unsettling experience" as it challenged old habits and practices.[11]

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[6]Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America", 544.
[7] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xxii.
[8] Robert A. Gross, "Culture and Cultivation: Agriculture and Society in Thoreau's Concord", in: *The Journal of American History* 69 (1982) 42-43.
[9]Robert A. Gross, "Culture and Cultivation: Agriculture and Society in Thoreau's Concord", in: *The Journal of American History* 69 (1982) 45.
[10] Gross, "Culture and Cultivation: Agriculture and Society in Thoreau's Concord", 46.
[11] Gross, "Culture and Cultivation: Agriculture and Society in Thoreau's Concord", 43.

The coming of large-scale machine-powered industry led to further standardization and industrialization on the continent, while a greater sense of time-thrift developed among capitalist employers. Changes in manufacturing techniques demanded greater synchronization of labor and time-routines. Shifting away from task-oriented labor, mature industrial societies were marked by a sense of time-thrift and by a clear demarcation between work and life.[12]

Between 1850 and 1900, the American population tripled. The industrial labor force grew from 2,75 million to over 8 million between 1880 and 1910, while the number of cities with populations over 100,000 grew from nine to fifty.[13] Industrialization, immigration and urbanization changed the nation's urban and rural area's profoundly. Although the largest number of Americans still resided in rural areas, dwellers were drawn to urban life-styles. By supposing a vast difference between life in the city and on the countryside, many moralist wondered "whether the agrarian ideals of family, home, and God could be preserved in the wake of rapid change."[14]

From a pre-modern society based on production, gift exchange and barter, America turned to a commodity exchange market by 1900. Moreover, through innovations in production and transportation, goods that were formerly made at home and in private, such as food, clothing, and soap, were now available for who could afford to buy them.[15] As more Americans relied on wages rather than producing or growing products, they increasingly relied on ready-made goods. The changing ways of American life, Simon Bronner notes, were increasingly built upon the accumulation and display of goods. As the distance between producer and consumer grew, "new worlds of assorted choices filled the gaps".[16]

The late nineteenth century witnessed an ideological change in defining the fruits of labor. A producer ethos that prevailed for centuries became gradually replaced by a consumer ethos, in which "Americans shifted from judging one another by how they earned money (a "producer ethic") to judging one another by how they spent their money (a "consumer ethic")".[17] With disciplining of the work force and the advent of mass consumption, work could become a commodity in itself, "something measured in hours

[12] Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism", 78, 80, 93.
[13] Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture", 38.
[14] Idem., 38.
[15] Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption", 326-327.
[16] Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture", 30, 42.
[17] Fischer, *Made in America*, 273.

and dollars, thereby losing its justification as craft, creativity, religious exercise, or expression of familial and communal relations".[18]

With the erosion of the connection between production and personhood – the definition of oneself in relation to performed labor – the new economic order that emerged in the nineteenth century relocated value to and in the marketplace. As a result, a much greater range and number of people were able to participate in the nation's expanding economy, while the new order still discriminated against marginalized groups as women, the poor, and people of color.[19]

Companies and producers incorporated the ideology of consuming workers as well. Among the pioneers was Henry Ford, who, by introducing the assembly line, revolutionized the production of cars. Moreover, by paying his workers five dollars a day, Ford made the mass-produced Model T available for personnel, so that they could afford the fruits of mass production.[20] Resulting in a mass production and mass consumption model, Ford's techniques would dominate American business practices until the late twentieth century, creating "the cornerstone of the leisure society: the affordable automobile".[21]

Even though Ford revolutionized the automobile industry and the role of his employees in it, earlier examples existed of conflating the ideals of worker and consumer within an enterprise. A department store owner in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, invited his workers to spend their days off ("dollar days", as he called them) "leisurely shopping for their labor's rewards". Earnings defined as a reward of consumption rather than a productive equivalent, and the later demand for "living wages", epitomized the nation's transformation from a producer-oriented to a consumer ethic. As employers began to grasp the importance of consumption, their willingness to spend their "dollar days" proves how both consumers and producers alike were caught up in this new ethic.

For American workers, the work week declined steadily: from sixty-four hours in 1850, to sixty by 1890, fifty-five by 1912, and forty hours in the 1930s.[22] The demand for "living wages" – earnings defined as a reward of consumption rather that a productive equivalent – became a central theme for workers, leading to what one historian calls the

[18] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xxii.
[19] McGovern, *Sold American*, 79.
[20] Glickman, "Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History", 5.
[21] Richard Wrightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, "Introduction", in: Richard Wrightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (eds.), *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1983) ix; Daniel Boorstin, quoted in: Lawrence B. Glickman, "Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History", 5.
[22] Glickman, "Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History", 3.

organized labor's "consumerist turn" in the late nineteenth century.[23] And while the work week declined, average Americans' incomes rose. In 1850, around half a million men held white-collar jobs; by 1900, nearly four million men did. Historian Charles Fischer notes how "the middle class consolidated its position; it was not yet a majority, but a still-growing center".[24]

Changes in production methods made it possible for many more Americans to purchase mass-produced goods. However, it was an urban culture of consumption, as many citizens, "particularly those in the poor urban districts and on the frontier, still did without", as Claude Fischer notices. Still, new forms of marketing reached rural customers as well. Improved and expanded railway connections and the institution of Rural Free Delivery in 1898– resulting in purchases delivered at home instead of the nearest post office – and the parcel post service of 1913 connected the nation even further.[25] With the expansion of train lines, it was the "locomotive whose piercing whistle as it swept into town announced the triumph of a new order of things".[26] And with the changes in the postal system, mail-order catalogues turned a series of local markets into a nationwide, integrated market.

Despite urbanization, most Americans lived in rural areas by the end of the nineteenth century. Still, urban consumption was modernized as well with the advent of country stores, county fairs, and the mail order catalogue, as "manifestations and motivations of countryside consumership".[27] To rural costumers, the country store and county fair were traditional cultural institutions; the mail-order catalogue was a newcomer. Often called "Farmer's Bible", the mail-order catalogues issued by Chicago merchant houses Montgomery Ward and Sears were first published in 1872. As "a department store in a book" and "the nation's largest supply house", the mail-order catalogues doubled as "a reader, a textbook, and an encyclopedia in many rural schoolhouses", Schlereth notes.[28] Like their counterparts in urban commercial centers, "country people increasingly purchased more of the goods and services that they had once either produced for themselves or simply had done without". Offering ready-made clothing, a wide selection of

[23] Glickman, "Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History", 3.
[24] Fischer, *Made in America*, 48.
[25] Fischer, *Made in America*, 64-65.
[26] Gross, "Culture and Cultivation: Agriculture and Society in Thoreau's Concord", 54.
[27] Thomas J. Schlereth, "Country Stores, County Fairs, and Mail-Order Catalogues: Consumption in Rural America", in: Simon J. Bronner (ed.), *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America 1880-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989) 339-341.
[28] Thomas J. Schlereth, "Country Stores, County Fairs, and Mail-Order Catalogues: Consumption in Rural America", 364-365.

children's toys and games, furniture, jewelry, bags, watches, rifles, tires, farm equipment, and even tombstones, the catalogues introduced rural consumers to an unprecedented world of goods. In a 1970s reprint of the Sears 1927 Fall and Winter Catalogue, the editor notes how America's habits were changing, and Sear's catalogue reflected the change. "While turn-of-the-century Sears, Roebuck catalogs relegated ready-to-wear clothing to a modest number of pages at the rear of the book", as less time was being devoted to home dressmaking, "the 1927 Catalogue featured more than 45- pages of these items, most shown right at the front". Moreover, by implementing modern selling techniques and display cases, as well as use of national-brand advertising and extended credit possibilities, country-store buying and selling transformed. In effect, the country-store, county fair and mail-order catalogue "nurtured urbanity among rurality".[29]

Material Nationalism

As the U.S. entered the imperial arena after the Spanish-American War of 1898, the nation's changing interior and foreign territories became both a source of inspiration and contributed to the development of a national culture. Amy Kaplan demonstrates how foreign images were used to shape America's domestic culture and narrow nationalist understanding of itself.[30] As Rob Kroes and Robert Rydell convincingly argue in their *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*, mass popular entertainment was used to Americanize citizens, often through exclusion of others. Mass culture industries offered increasingly standardized entertainment forms that were "hardly value-free or neutral", as they often expressed and conveyed "ideologies of race, gender, empire, and consumption", as the authors point out. [31]

But not only imperialism formed a source of inspiration for corporate elites, policy makers and other influential Americans. As recent historical scholarship has demonstrated, American citizens have defined their place in life according to and through standards of consumption as well. In his book *Sold American*, Charles F. McGovern further elaborates on the influence of consumption on the creation of a national identity. During the late nineteenth century and the Depression, the U.S. economy came to depend decisively on

[29] Alan Mirken, "Introduction", in: Alan Mirken (ed.), *1927 Edition of the Sears, Roebuck Catalogue* (1927: reprint: Crown Publishers, New York, 1970) 1-2.Thomas J. Schlereth, "Country Stores, County Fairs, and Mail-Order Catalogues: Consumption in Rural America", 341, 349-356, 372.
[30] Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) 212.
[31] Rob Kroes and Robert W. Rydell, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: the Americanization of the World 1869 – 1922* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005) 4

consumption. McGovern argues that in those years, Americans came to understand spending as a form of citizenship, "an important ritual of national identity in daily life". Equating voting with buying, both in entertainment and public discourse Americans saw their shared common heritage defined by politics and history as well as by goods and leisure.[32] The powerful advertising industry, running full throttle around the 1920s, constructed the understanding of spending as a form of citizenship. Equating buying with public and political power, Madison Avenue professionals connected sales messages with "some of the most important and cherished ideals in American life".[33]

In his book *American Crucible*, Gary Gerstle argues that America in the twentieth century was characterized by both a civic nationalism, depending on a shared American Creed and a fundamental belief in political equality and economic opportunity, and a racial nationalism, a darker component that conceived the nation in ethnoracial terms and institutionalized racism and discrimination.[34] In line with Gerstle's argument, McGovern discerns a third strand of nationalism, a commercial variant that was advocated by advertisers and merchants. A "material nationalism" took hold of the country in the late nineteenth-century, as "the true mark of an American for advertisers remained full participation in the consumer economy".[35] Material nationalism combined the affiliating spirit of civic nationalism, while at the same time upholding the essentialism of racial nationalism. The "consistent erasure of minorities and people of color" in the representations of advertisers echoed a racial nationalism, a national heritage that was hard to shed off.[36]

Material nationalism promised that commodities embodied "ideal and intangible qualities" that made them truly "American". Proctor and Gamble advertised their Ivory Soap as "American Soap", as Ivory embodied "the American spirit of cleanliness, efficiency and economy".[37] Advertisers invented a discourse of powerful national symbols, recognized by millions. However, these national symbols and metaphors downplayed "consumption's connection to a market system that served corporate interest and instead highlighted consumption as furthering ideals of patriotism".[38] By replacing political authority and choice with consumers demand and eroding distinctions between spending

[32] McGovern, *Sold American*, 3.
[33] McGovern, *Sold American*, 95.
[34] Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation In the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 3-6.
[35] McGovern, *Sold American*, 104.
[36] Idem., 104.
[37] Idem., 120.
[38] Idem., 105.

and politics, this political discourse of consumption implied that consumption was a more effective means of securing citizens will and common good that politics . By upholding the electoral metaphor of "consumers as citizens", and a nation of sovereign people where the "consumer is king", advertisers served corporate interest while using a political discourse.[39]

As McGovern illustrates, the influential notion of American exceptionalism was used by promoting a nationalist ethos of consumption among American consumers. The equation of nationalism and consumption was in fact not distinctively American but occurred throughout Western-Europe as well, as particular cultural habits, political systems and local interests shaped consumer economies in England, France, the Netherlands, and Germany as well.[40] And even though national borders and economies became less rigid with the transnational flow of capital, people and commodities, particular nationalist beliefs and values of consumption continued to influence American advertisers and their public.

In the eyes of advertisers and copywriters, some of whom were women, consumption became a distinctive American devotion to pursuing individual liberty. Portraying spending as the means to secure personal autonomy, the purchasing of goods became "an alienable American right and blessing provided by the mass market". By transforming the meaning of choosing (already selected) brands and goods into an almost sacred American devotion to liberty and autonomy, the discourse of consumption as independent and electoral metaphor drew in fact on a narrow definition of liberty and self-transformation.[41] The equation of consumer and political power was a flawed comparison: power remained hidden in corporate enterprises, and there was "no visible official, no single individual, responsible for the public service and leadership corporations were supposed to render".[42]

Advertisers' political language endured because of its ability "to make sense of, justify, even naturalize material conditions and the relationship of everyday life" for America's costumers. In this way, abstract concepts such as "liberty" and "freedom" gained immediate and powerful meanings in the arena of goods and leisure, linking a political-economic system with the nation's material abundance.[43] By using nationalism

[39] McGovern, *Sold American*, 67-75.
[40] Idem. 103-104.
[41] Idem. 77.
[42] Idem. 94.
[43] Idem., 19-20.

and nationality to legitimate consumption, advertisers domesticated consumption by linking individual daily life with history and the nation. Welch's Grape Juice appropriated the slogan "the National Drink" to appear to the nationwide community of users. Campbell's Soup drew extensively on national imagery and language: their wares "belong to America like the Washington Monument belongs – or the White House or the Lincoln Highway", as an advertisement in Cosmopolitan in 1918 read (fig. 1). The American Telephone and Telegraph Company emphasized the telephone's role in bringing together "all kinds of people", creating "A United Nation".[44] Using images of Uncle Sam and the Statue of Liberty, advertisements used national imagery to create a vision of consent and belonging based on consumer practices, upholding the ideal of "the consumer".

Although McGovern is critical of the political discourse on consumerism and its pervasiveness, he emphasizes that material abundance itself does not erode civic bonds or threaten freedom. However, as scholars as Kroes and Kaplan have demonstrated, a national popular culture was founded on "an unequal and discriminatory social and economic system".[45] Around the turn of the century, a nationalist rhetoric influenced many cultural sources, varying from popular entertainment, food, and music to commodities. The modern nation built on the commitment to a unique history and character that was deliberately reinforced through cultural practices. World's fairs attracted millions of people to Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis and San Francisco. One year after the Centennial Exhibition of Philadelphia, John Wanamaker opened what he called a "New Kind of Store" on March 12, 1877. Drawing heavily on the mass spectacle of the exhibition, Wanamaker's business was influenced by the grand exhibits of the fair.[46] Mass culture and mass consumerism evolved together. Articulated by anthropologist Benedict Anderson as "imagined community", Americans increasingly gained a "nationwide awareness in their daily lives", made possible by innovations in mass communication networks and transportation.[47]

[44] McGovern, *Sold American*, 107-111.
[45] McGovern, *Sold American*, 19-20.
[46] Simon J. Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture", 26.
[47] McGovern, *Sold American*, 105-106.

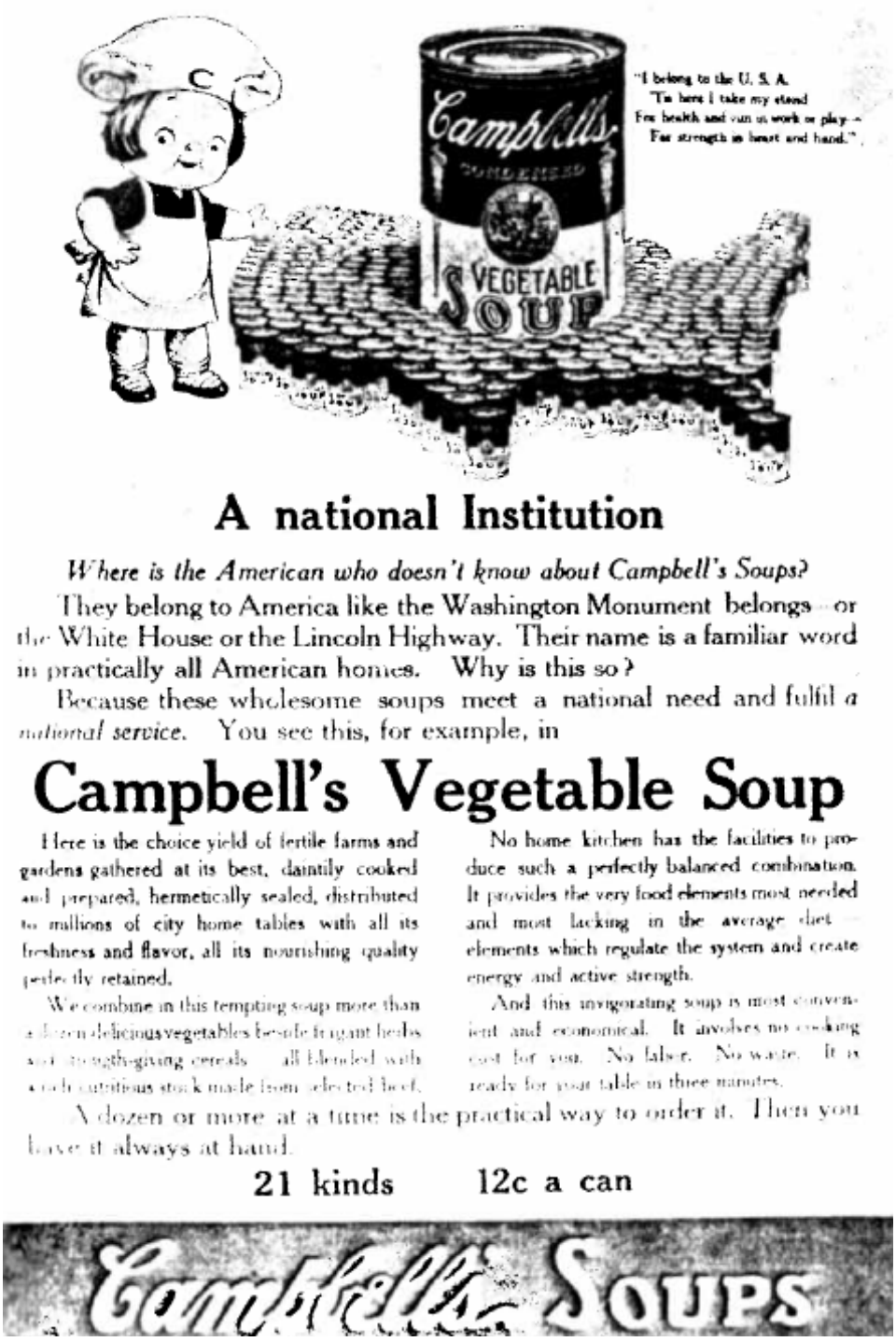

FIGURE 1: "A National Institution". Campbell's Vegetable Soup became equated with typical American symbols like the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Highway. *Cosmopolitan* 65, no.2 (July 1918) 101 (Source: McGovern, *Sold American*, 111)

Although its nature would suggest a truly democratic experience, the culture of consumption was, from the very start, realized in an unequal and discriminatory social and economic system. McGovern marks how "abundance for many has been built on its denial for many others; whether in federal policies, local laws and customs, or the actual experience of goods, Americans learned to consume in a social system that discriminated on the basis of gender and race, class and age".[48] And as Kroes has emphasized, the "shining message of American modernity" has always been accompanied by "the darker side of patterns of racial, gender and class inequality, translated into repertoires of stereotypical representation permeating American popular culture."[49]

"Cathedrals of Consumption"

By the 1890s, consumer venues as restaurants, hotels, department stores, theaters and dry goods houses made up the scenery of cities from New York and Philadelphia to San Francisco and Chicago. Perhaps no other palace of consumption better exemplified the possibilities of mass concentrations of capital and people, the growing national market and expanding transportation system better than the department store.[50] Department stores were among the first urban places to use new technologies of light, glass, and color. By institutionalizing preexisting patterns of commercial behavior and simultaneously revolutionizing them, the new stores marked a break from earlier wholesale businesses. Marshall Field in Chicago, Roland Macy and Isaac Gimbel in New York, John Wanamaker in Philadelphia, I. Magnin in San Francisco: these "merchant princes", many sons of immigrants, consolidated the specialized functions of various shops under one roof, and used the advantages in purchasing power and marketing to popularize their stores.[51]

To create images and commercial dreams that lent a new meaning to Thomas Jefferson's concept of the "pursuit of happiness", new strategies of exhibition and display were crucial aspects of creating a consumer culture.[52] Accessible to many urban dwellers, regardless of their social position or purchasing power, shops and department stores created an American "land of desire" where customers were transformed into consumers. As William Leach describes, consumption became equated with a means to reach

[48] McGovern, *Sold American*, 20.
[49] Rob Kroes and Jean Kempf, "Editors' Introduction", in: *European journal of American studies*: *Wars and New Beginnings in American History* (2012) 6.
[50] Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption", 321-322.
[51] Kroes and Rydell, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*, 43.
[52] Kroes and Rydell, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*, 44.

happiness, offering "everyone access to an unlimited supply of goods (…) that promised a lifetime of security, well-being and happiness".[53]

Signaling a radical break with traditional business practices, the new stores provided more than specialized goods on demand. Up to late into the nineteenth century, customers asked for merchandise they often had not seen beforehand, and goods were brought and handled by store managers. Moreover, few item were displayed, as costumers had to ask for a specific product, often having the possibility to bargain over the price. With the advent of department stores, the high-volume, fixed-price sale of a wide variety of goods, and free entrance without the obligatory purchase proved a revolution in consumer culture.[54]

Dubbed "cathedrals of consumption" by two European scholars, these remarkably secular public institutions transformed the experience of consumption in a fundamental way.[55] By creating new worlds of fantasy and promising personal transformation, shopping became a way of expressing oneself and defining personality. Service was another remarkable feature of department stores, as the practice of giving free gifts, checking services and offering ladies' parlors and lunch counters became commonplace around the 1890s.[56] The interior and exterior architecture, using electric light and color in display, astounded passerby's and visitors of this hallmark of urban consumption. Technological innovation introduced escalators and elevators. New kinds of advertising such as electrical signs, poster art, and illuminated and painted billboards transformed the cityscape – even so profoundly that Vanessa Schwartz's book *Spectacular Realities* characterizes fin-de-siècle Paris, center of a French bourgeoning leisure industry, as a "spectacular realist narrative", a "sensationalized version of contemporary life". Through boulevard culture, the mass press, panoramas, and film, a new urban crowd became a "society of spectators".[57]

In Victorian America, consumption was a gendered phenomenon. Whereas men generally occupied more managerial positions and middle class vacancies in ever expanding bureaucratic and corporate structures, shopping was perceived as a women's job: an

[53] William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 3-12.
[54] Simon J. Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture", 25-26.
[55] Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, *Cathedrals of Consumption: the European Department Store, 1850-1939* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999)
[56] Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption", 329.
[57] Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 1-2.

estimated 80 to 85 percent of the consumer purchasing in 1915 was done by American women.[58] One the one hand, consumer businesses such as department stores reinforced gender distinctions. As Leach notes, department stores became distinct gender spaces, by institutionalizing images and stereotypes: "over time men had separate street and elevator entrances and separate departments, or "stores", dressed in dark and "rugged" colors".[59] Additionally, the advertising industry drew on female imagery and clientele to associate the practice of consuming and a wide range of commodities with femininity.

On the other hand, consumer life also challenged sexual and social differences. Department stores exemplified the new opportunities for both middle-class clientele and working-class clerks, both for leisure and employment. The Victorian notion of the "cult of domesticity", that separated a women's private sphere from her male counterparts public sphere, changed as the commercialized world of consumption expanded and brought new accessible sites of consumption such as amusement parks, department stores and movie theatres. Nineteenth century middle class Americans viewed women as "dependent, emotional, deeply religious, and sexually pure beings" who were supposed to cultivate the domestic arena.[60] That older paradigm changed with the transformation of work, as more women were employed as editors, copywriters, designers or illustrators in new consumer, service-oriented industries. Causing social anxieties and initiating critical response, women gradually entered the public sphere, a domain formerly dominated by men.

The democratizing forces of a consumer economy touched upon the lives of members of the lower strata of society as well. Meg Jacobs recounts the popularity of Filene's Bargain Basements, a Boston-based shop initiated by Edward Filene and his sons 1909. Centering on the notion of "economic citizenship", Jacobs uses the example of Filene's to argue that lower prices and higher wages grew more important around the turn of the century. Economic citizenship, based on participation in the mass consumer society, explained the enormous success of the Bargain Basement. Filene's counted seventy-six thousand shoppers on a busy Saturday, exemplifying how more social groups were able to participate in an emerging consumer culture:

> "Immigrant Jewish, Irish, and Italian women lined up around the block to buy a knockoff dress for seventy-five cents or a stylish hat for fifty cents. (…) Rather to

[58] Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption", 333.
[59] Idem., 331.
[60] Idem., 319.

> cater to upper-class Boston matrons, Filene's was the first store to sell machine-made dresses at prices that middle- and working-class women could afford."[61]

Even women from working-class communities included shopping as part of their daily domestic routine and responsibility as head of the household. As the work of Jacobs and Leach indicates, these new commercial sites had transformative effects on both middle-class women as consumer, and lower-class women as participants and employees holding power within consumer institutions. In this new world, women acquired "a public role as shoppers", which eroded the traditional Victorian distinction between public and private spheres and women's role in them.[62]

Advertising and the Cult of Personality

Where America at the beginning of the nineteenth century was characterized by an agrarian production-centered mentality, prizing thrift and moral character, "postbellum Americans increasingly valued consumer spending and personality (outward appearance) as signs of inner grace and worldly success".[63] What Christopher Lasch famously called "the culture of narcissism" in his culture-pessimist work of 1978, reflected the "pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self" as it became a defining element of American society.[64]

As Daniel Horowitz notes, the turn of the century witnessed a shift from self-control to self-realization, as the world of the producer was taken over by the world of the consumer, relying on personal satisfaction and "the fulfillment of the self through gratification and indulgence".[65] The traditional moral and religious kinds of self-control became gradually replaced by attempts to achieve happiness through the (false) pleasures of consumer culture. In his early study of advertising, Jackson Lears discerns a shift from "salvation to self-realization" that lies at the basis of what he calls the "therapeutic roots of consumer culture". Like McGovern writing more than two decades later, Lears explores the role of national advertising in the complex cultural transformations that took place at the turn of the century. Lears argues that the crucial moral change was the shift from a

[61] Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 1-2, 15.
[62] Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 21.
[63] Kroes and Rydell, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*, 45-46.
[64] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American life In an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978) xv.
[65] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xxvii.

Protestant ethic of salvation through self-denial toward a "therapeutic ethos stressing self-realization in this world – an ethos characterized by an almost obsessive concern with psychic and physical health in sweeping terms". What marked the new age of abundance was a quest for health that was becoming "an entirely secular and self-referential project, rooted in particularly modern emotional needs". [66]

In a culture of self-realization, the creation of "personality" was done by accumulation and display. Jean-Christophe and Karen Halttunen describe how an early twentieth-century domestic culture made the living room "a place to express personality".[67] Within Victorian domestic interiors, the power of purchase grew more important than personal craft. The word "character" had given way to the word "personality" as late Victorian parlors came to represent "a display in which the personal properties of the self mingled with the stage properties of its immediate surroundings". The 1927 Sear's collection of "High Grade Silver Plated Tableware", carefully selected on "Distinction and Beauty", promised shoppers: "You will be proud to have our Silverware grace your table". The idea that one's immediate surroundings reflected one's personality can be regarded as one of the driving forces behind the twentieth century culture of consumption.[68]

If the extending division of labor in society and the monotonous factory work indeed made people "tools of their tools", than an alternative for making life meaningful had to be found. In *Walden*, Thoreau warned that most men, "even in this comparatively free country (…) are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that it finer fruits cannot be plucked by them". The modern man "has no time", according to the novelist, "to be any thing but a machine".[69] If Thoreau was right that manual skills and handicrafts seized to be important as signifiers of social status, Americans turned to other means of satisfying their daily lives. The spread of corporate influence in daily life was intertwined with the advent of advertising and the spread of mass-market magazines. Spreading a "rhetoric of consumption", magazines such as *McClure's*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the *Ladies Home Journal* formed a crucible of

[66] T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930", 3-4.
[67] Karen Haltunnen, "From Parlor to Living Room: Domestic Space, Interior Decoration, and the Culture of Personality", in: Simon J. Bronner (ed.), *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America 1880-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989) 141-158.
[68] Alan Mirken, "Introduction", 762-763; Jean-Christophe Agnew, "A House of Fiction: Domestic Interiors and the Commodity Aesthetic", in: Simon J. Bronner (ed.), *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America 1880-1920* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989) 141-158.
[69] Thoreau, *Walden*, 5.

the modern consumer culture. Rising to cultural prominence after 1885, these magazines were "the original home of large-scale national advertising and market research".[70]

The increase of leisure tied in with the rising of an advertising industry. The agency of N.W. Ayer & Son, created in 1877, marked the beginning of the age of advertising in America. Although the advertising industry arguably began to run full throttle after the turn of the century, the foundations of the "linchpin of the new corporate economy" and the "crucial purveyor of the American Dream" were laid in the late nineteenth century.[71] Advertising became a unique and influential profession that helped to define both American identity and the "self".

Whereas some scholars, for instance David Potter in his *People of Plenty*, argue that the increasing abundance has shaped the American character, others find that the infrastructural framework of a mass consumer society defined people's wants and needs. William Leach, with his bestseller *Land of Desire*, takes the latter route, arguing that American were enticed by merchants, power and a new national culture of advertising. Focusing on the people behind the advertising agencies in a world growing more diffuse with goods and brands, Leach argues that these merchants lured Americans into pleasure and indulgence.[72]

With the advent of more commodities and a larger national market, producers and advertisers invented brand-names to distinguish their products and establish a personalized relationship with the nationwide costumer groups. Given the defamiliarizing impact of market exchange on individuals, Jean-Christophe Agnew argues, the advertising industry worked to "refamiliarize or recontextualize these goods" in a commodity environment.[73] Products as Uneeda Biscuits, Quaker oats, and Campbell's soup were mass-produced and sold under trademarked and copyrighted names. By fostering a demand for brand-name commodities, the balance of power tipped away from merchants and wholesalers who had previously controlled the supply of store shelves and influenced consumer demand. Moreover, by depicting brand names as superior quality, women were encouraged to

[70] Christopher P. Wilson, "The Rhetoric of Consumption: Mass-Market Magazines and the Demise of the Gentle Reader, 1880-1920" in: Richard Wrightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (eds.), *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1983) 41-42.
[71] Glickman, "Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History", 3.
[72] William Leach, *Land of Desire*, vii.
[73] Jean-Christophe Agnew, "The Consuming Vision of Henry James" in: Richard Wrightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (eds.), *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1983) 72.

choose the national brands from large corporations as example of their superior taste and judgment.[74]

The rise of corporations and trusts indicated how economic institutions grew more distant from the mid-nineteenth century localized economies. Protest against the concentration of capital and economic power characterized the mass movement of Progressivism. As small-town, secluded communities or rural areas were opened up by innovations in communication and transportation, and as the power of local shopkeepers or rural peddlers was affected by the nationwide availability of mass-produced goods, advertising played an important role in humanizing and popularizing American corporations. Brand-names created a personalized, intimate relationship with consumers, while advertisers asserted that "consumers "elected" not only particular goods but also those corporations that made them: consumers democratically and voluntarily empowered these institutions", Madison Avenue argued.[75]

As Charles McGovern demonstrates, many advertising agencies saw themselves as civilizers, contributing to the nation's progress. The J. Walter Thompson agency proclaimed in 1909: "Advertising is revolutionary. Its tendency is to overturn the preconceived notions, to set new ideas spinning through the readers brain (…) It's a form of progress, and interests only progressive people". Eagerly interpreting their pervasiveness as power, advertisers saw themselves as educators, studying consumers and their preferences. [76]

From a "reason-why" style of advertising, characterized by simple argumentation and less adornments, the style of addressing consumers changed to sentimental or pictorial advertising, based more on suggestion. Turning the advertisements away from the product and toward its alleged effects, the "therapeutic promise of a richer, fuller life" affirmed that the product would contribute to the buyer's "physical, psychic, or social well-being".[77] With a selection of faux fur coats, the 1927 Sears Fall and Winter Catalogue promised to bring the "New York Styles for Misses" to rural consumers as well (fig.2). Regarded as the fashion center of the 1920s, New York styling was stressed by the editors of the Sears catalogue. Additionally, the appealing captions promised buyers a variety of personal satisfactions and benefits, for instance appearing "Exceedingly Smart" in a $25 dollar

[74] McGovern, *Sold American*, 26, 80.
[75] Idem., 88-89.
[76] Idem., 31-32.
[77] T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930", 18-19; McGovern, *Sold American*, 38-39.

"Coat of Youthful Appeal".[78] Promising "intangible benefits – matrimonial bliss, youth, social acceptance – that they could not actually deliver", advertisements shifted from a utilitarian focus to emphasizing style, fashion, status and availability, thereby transforming the very nature of appealing to costumers.[79] Through careful, or at times blatant, advertisements, these advertising professionals offered solutions to personal difficulties, social anxieties and fears, regarding consumption as a way of improving the quality of life and individual happiness. The inegilatarian conditions of American life were covered up by the advertising industry's claims of consumer democracy and the electoral metaphor of consumer choice. Supposedly, democracy was characterized and sustained by consumption and goods, possessing the power of social equality.[80] There was however a grimmer side of consumption, one that inspired reformers, moralists and intellectuals to voice their critiques on the class character, the dependence on discipline and exploitation, the transforming gender boundaries and the changing social fabric they partly attributed to America's consumer society. The exploitation of labor forces and especially women in consumer industries, material indulgence, the domination of men in managerial and bureaucratic hierarchies, the objectification of women in advertising: all these aspects were part of an inclusive modern consumer society as well.[81]

As the next chapter will demonstrate, the moralist attitudes towards a consumer society varied from time to place. Still, some continuity can be discerned in the cultural texts that will be analyzed, ranging from novels to economic works, reform group visions to conservative reactions to mass entertainment. A profound tension existed between the older American pre-industrial society and the modernizing institutions and social structure that accompanied the development of industrial capitalism from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, leading contemporaries to voice their concern about the influence of a consumer economy on the nation and its inhabitants.

[78] Alan Mirken (ed.), *1927 Edition of the Sears, Roebuck Catalogue*, 32-33.
[79] Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 31-32.
[80] McGovern, *Sold American*, 96-97.
[81] Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption", 320.

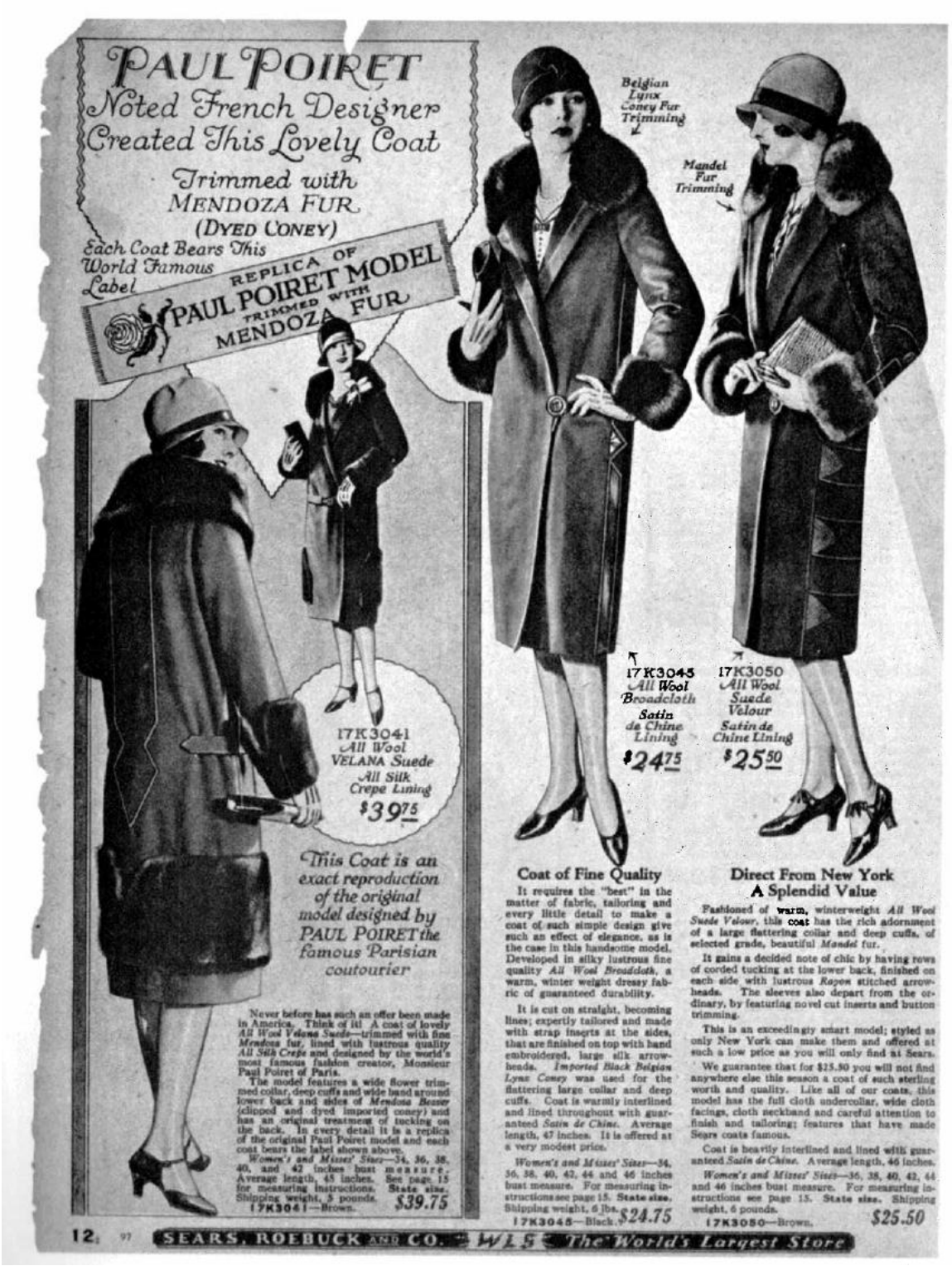

FIGURE 2: "New York Styles for Misses". By referring to "Noted French Designer" Paul Poiret and styles "Direct From New York", the adorned pages of the 1927 Sears Fall and Winter Catalogue emphasized the fashion capitals of style, New York and Paris. (Source: Mirken, *1927 Edition of the Sears, Roebuck Catalogue*, 12)

2. Attitudes towards Affluence: Critical Responses to the Culture of Consumption

For American citizens at the end of the century, whether living in the crammed urban quarters of Chicago or New York, or the wide open prairies of Nebraska, the fabric of daily live changed. An urban culture of consumption influenced rural economies as well, exemplified by the pervasiveness of the "Farmers' Bible" of Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck. Cityscapes changed, using electrical signs and large-scale advertisements, as public places and popular mass entertainment venues fortified a culture of consumption. According to Bronner, the preoccupation of the age was with wealth: "new wealth, consuming wealth, widespread wealth".[1] As materialism came to be seen as "the root of the nation's unique greatness", Americans embraced the age of wealth, but worried about it as well.[2]

Moral critique on consumption, as part of larger movements to legislate morality and alter habits and behavior , has lasted long in America. For centuries, Americans have simultaneously welcomed and questioned the value of new consumer goods and services.[3] As Horowitz argues, generations of social thinkers used the language of "corruption, hard work, profligacy, and self-restraint" when they expressed their worries about the role of consumption in America.[4]

From new means of transportation to more lights and display in city landscapes, from the availability of mass-produced goods offered at low prices, to the flux of immigrants and rapid urbanization: many changes in daily life led people to wonder about the future of America. These deeply unsettling experiences are reflected in the writings of moralist – intellectuals, religious spokesmen, civic groups, experts and many others occupying the public sphere – that appear in various contexts and disguises at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. More exactly, the "anxieties of affluence", as Daniel Horowitz tellingly named the follow-up of his earlier work *The*

[1] Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture", 50.
[2] Glickman, "Born to Shop?", 2.
[3] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xviii.
[4] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, 6.

Morality of Spending, will be a central connecting theme that can be discerned in the various cultural texts that are analyzed.[5]

As will be made clear, reigning anxieties around affluence focused on different forms of consumption and various consumers. As the work of Leach and Cohen demonstrates, consumption was from very early on a gendered phenomenon. That is to say, even though men did partake in the emerging public arena with its new consumer venues, the possibilities consumption offered made women enter the public sphere in an unprecedented way. As a result, some writers have emphasized the dangers that this new American culture of consumption posed for women. It comes as no surprise that with the enlargement of women's spheres, the public discussion about their proper place in society and traditional roles grew louder.

Another important strain of critique focused on the relationship between Americanization, pluralism and consumerism. As will become clear from analyzing experts and their opinions on the morality of spending, many attributed idleness and wastefulness to groups perceived as "un-American".[6] At the same time, historians have demonstrated how ethnic groups, for instance immigrants, have used this specific institution of consumption to partake in the process of becoming American. If being a consumer means being American, what does the expanding market and growing consuming groups tell us about the nation's changing fabric from 1875 onwards?

With the advent of material nationalism, initiated by the advertising industry and employed, albeit in personalized ways, by consumers, the way Americans defined themselves changed. Exemplifying the pervasiveness of a new consumer culture based on spectacle and show, "the images that filled magazines and newspapers, roadsides and streetscapes, store windows and even scrapbooks equated goods and spending with becoming and being American".[7] The profound social and cultural changes at the end of the century and the extension of economic citizenship to a larger part of society, aroused anxieties among the nation's elite. If material nationalism was becoming a permanent and distinct feature of American society, how did citizens turned into consumers and what did contemporaries had to say about these developments?

Economist Thorstein Veblen warned that a "pecuniary culture" and the practice of "conspicuous consumption" had a crippling effect on his fellow citizens. Others feared that

[5] Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004)
[6] Kroes and Rydell, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*, 79.
[7] McGovern, *Sold American*, 62.

a culture of consumption discredited traditional female norms and behavior. Moreover, intellectual cultivation and religious piety were threatened to be replaced by a cult of personality and a striving for self-fulfillment. Opponents were anxious that American values were under threat, while others saw the changes that increased abundance and commodities brought as opportunities to shape and democratize society. Interestingly, as will be argued in this chapter, moralists were mostly "well-to-do-folk" who distanced themselves critically from the excess and abundance of material modernity that they witnessed in lower classes.[8]

E.P. Thompson has noted that the transition to modern industrial societies was no simple technologically-determined process. Rather, "the stress of the transition falls upon the whole culture: resistance to change and assent to change arise from the whole culture. And this culture includes the system of power, property-relations, religious institutions, etc.".[9] Thompson's statement emphasizes the cultural and societal changes brought along by the industrial revolution. Following his remarks, this chapter explores the resistance to, as well as the compliance with, the changes from the nation's transformation to a modern consumer society. Ranging from religious spokesmen, intellectuals, powerful elitists and other cultural actors responding to their changing environments, it becomes clear that the stress of transition indeed falls upon the whole culture.

Conservative Moralism

With his 1985 publication *The Morality of Spending*, Daniel Horowitz was one of the first scholars to dive into attitudes toward the consumer society in America, covering the period from 1875 to 1940. Tracing the parallels between household budget studies, advice literature and sermons, Horowitz uncovers "the persistence of a moral vision that emphasized the dangers of decadence, the loss of self-control, and the desirability of non-materialistic pursuits".[10] *The Morality of Spending* is an intellectual history, in which Horowitz discerns a conservative moralistic vision that reigned during the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth, followed by a modern moralist vision that emerged around 1945. Both strains of moralism broadly shared the concern that a rising standard of living endangered the health of the American nation. And both traditional and modern moralism were anti-commercial, calling for aspiring higher goals rather than the

[8] McGovern, *Sold American*, 104.
[9] Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism", 80.
[10] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xi

pursuit of mundane and false pleasures. By advocating "a combination of hard work, self-control, social concern, pursuit of Culture, and genuine forms of recreation", different versions of moralism influenced "the stance that many Americans have taken toward an improved standard of living", Horowitz notes.[11]

The conservative or traditional moralist position, characterizing the nineteenth and early twentieth century, remained fearful of the profligacy of workers and immigrants. Condemning the ethic traditions, folkways, and frequent use of abusive substances, moralists like budget experts, reformers and social scientists reflected the superiority of their own bourgeois life and Victorian ideals. As Horowitz argues, social critics regarded a higher standard of living as problematic, corrupting, and enervating.[12]

Although the censorious attitude toward workers and immigrants persisted, "modern or twentieth-century moralists drew up a new agenda that was both similar to and different from the older response". Around 1945, moralists turned to a rejection of mass culture, arguing that an expansive capitalist system threatened to "transform American into a nation of conforming, indulgent, and passive people", effecting especially the middle class. In effect, the danger of conformity took the place of profligacy.[13]

The notion of the corroding influence of mass consumption as a conforming and homogenizing force only began to run full throttle after World War II, as the nation's war economy boosted the domestic production to new levels of abundance. This chapter will center around what Horowitz calls conservative moralism, as it introduces the writers, editors, budget experts, religious spokespersons, suffragists and many more who took a critical stand towards the changing culture of consumption that surrounded them.

Scholars like Lizabeth Cohen, Meg Jacobs and Charles McGovern have in various ways argued that the New Deal Era marked a new period of wealth and consumer possibilities. In *A Consumers' Republic*, Cohen puts the rise of mass consumption at the center of her analysis of American society, as she distinguishes different phases in the nation's consuming history, resulting in different citizen-consumer ideal types. Cohen argues how citizen and consumer formed one identity from the 1930s onwards: the "citizen consumer", characterized by putting his or her market power to work in the New Deal

[11] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xviii.
[12] Idem., xvii-xix.
[13] Idem., xvii-xix, xxxi.

political arena, thereby safeguarding the rights of individual consumers and preventing rapid inflation or overpricing. [14]

As the government took up a new role during the New Deal era, the concepts of consumer and citizen thus grew closer as the Great Depression forced almost all Americans to respond to economic questions. As the national economy was at a state of crisis, wealth and consumption acquired new meanings. Consumerism became not only an individual expression but also a political perspective. "New Deal remedies tacked from state economic centralization to buttress profits, to fiscal policies to shore up the buying power of the citizen-voter, the consumer."[15] By 1930, Americans knew they lived in a consumer society. The culture of consumption had been established in the previous decades, and although the Depression would destabilize that culture, Americans from now on considered themselves as citizens, workers, and consumers.[16]

Much earlier though, as a producer ethic was gradually replaced by a consumer ethic, did American workers began to regard and express their political authority in relationship with buying. As a result of the "consumerist turn", Glickmann notes, the "store and the cash register joined the shop floor as a place of labor struggle and activism".[17] However, the increase of the state's role in protecting and defining consumer's needs and desires during the New Deal era marked a break with the late nineteenth-century and the protective atmosphere of the Progressive Era. As result of the severe economic depression, far removed from the economic downfalls of 1873 and 1893, democracy increasingly became defined in material terms.

Poverty and Intemperance

As the population increased, the middle class expanded and economic opportunity offered millions of immigrants a future, class and ethnic fears and biases continued to influence elite views of the changing American society. Even though the Civil War had ended slavery, "it did not abolish these distorted perceptions and fears of new American workers".[18] Resulting from their fears and anxieties, moralists often condemned the

[14] Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003)
[15] McGovern, *Sold American*, 4.
[16] Idem., 131.
[17] Glickman, "Born to Shop?", 2.
[18] Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919", 584.

behavior and especially consuming activities of working classes, ethnic groups, as well as working and middle class women.

Abundance, as David Potter has argued, made liberty and equality – and democracy, resulting from these ideals – possible for the masses. As Potter argues in *People of Plenty* in 1954, "in other societies, liberty – the principle that allows the individual to be different from others – might seem inconsistent with equality – the principle that requires the individual to be similar to others". In the U.S. however, Potter continued, "liberty", meaning "freedom to grasp opportunity", and "equality", also meaning "freedom to grasp opportunity", seemed to become synonymous.[19] Industrialization and economic growth weakened the hold that political and cultural elites had, as the "abundance of foods, goods, and services endowed more individuals with more freedom and confidence to plan their own futures, to demand autonomy, and to expand equality".[20] As a result, many moralists issued their concerns specifically for lower class Americans, as they expanded their freedom to climb the social ladder, and ethnic groups, as they threatened to overturn or damage what contemporaries saw as distinct American work ethics and culture.

In 1875, Carroll Davidson Wright published the first significant study of working-class household expenditures. As head of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor (MBSL), founded in 1869, Wright was determined to maintain an objective, scientific outlook while monitoring labor conditions. The household budget studies that were carried out during the late nineteenth century proved a systematic collection of working class spending habits. Additionally, they can be read as cultural texts, revealing the attitudes of writers to the dilemmas and opportunities that the transformation of America into a consumer culture raised.[21] The household budget studies that the MBSL initiated were carried out during the larger national reform era of Progressivism, and as such largely based on the notion that conditions, rather than the Victorian ideal of character, proved to be decisive in explaining working class lifestyle.[22] Rather than condemning the lower strata of society for their own misgivings, Progressives tried to reshape working

[19] David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (1954, reprint: Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973) 92.
[20] McGovern, *Sold American*, 243.
[21] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xx.
[22] Idem., 50.

conditions, housing, education and society's wealth in the understanding that poverty undermined the general welfare of the nation.

The work of Carroll Wright and other budget experts, as Horowitz argues, indicates the importance that budget investigators attached to notions of character and morality. Therefore, budget studies as historical sources and cultural texts reveal as much about workers expenditures as they did about how observers thought working classes should spend their money.[23] In 1875, a Boston working-class family would spend the majority of its income on food, clothing, and shelter. The MBSL report of that year concluded that "expenses on account of bad habits, or its twin evil of extravagance were kept at a very modest and creditable minimum". But even though the report remarked that the consumption of liquor was low, "the investigators were unable to hide their censoriousness", remaining skeptical about the connection between poverty and intemperance.[24] As many contemporaries feared, the use of alcohol was central in immigrant and working-class life. As an "integral part of the social life, work culture, and health care", working-class males were suspected of spending a significant part of their household budgets on liquor expenses.[25]

Horowitz marks a shift in budget studies carried out during the Progressive period. By moving away from the profligacy of lower-class expenditures, authors of budget reports tended to accept new levels of comfort. As a result, Progressive reports generally demonstrated "a greater sense of the texture of working-class and immigrant life". They continued yet modified the judgmental tradition by shifting from character to conditions "as the explanation of the plight of the poor". [26] Still, bourgeois virtues of respectability, hard work and restraint were highly praised.

Influenced by the consumer behavior of the growing middle class and the economic pressures of inflation, the conservative moralist tradition weakened after the turn of the century as new levels of comfort became accepted. In *Pocketbook Politics,* Meg Jacobs argues that the notion of economic citizenship grew more important in twentieth-century America. The ideology of economic citizenship became relevant for many Americans as participants in the mass consumer economy. According to Jacobs, "the means to consume

[23] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xxix.
[24] Idem., 14, 17-18.
[25] Idem., 17.
[26] Idem., xxx, 50.

became important not only to secure three square meals a day but more broadly as a marker of economic citizenship and a full membership in the American polity".[27]

As a result, the budget studies carried out after 1875 indicated how gradually more Americans could afford to become self-indulgent consumers. "Rising prices raised the question of whether middle class observers could continue to castigate working-class families for pleasures they themselves struggled hard to attain". As "yesterday's luxuries" turned into "today's necessities", reports on working-class expenditures indicated that the lower strata of American society raised their standard of living as well.[28]

Providing accessible and affordable leisure activities for almost all segments of society, new public venues became moralist's sites of concern as well. Saloons, beer-gardens, concert or music halls, vaudeville and later movie theaters successfully built on and competed with popular street culture. The persistence of vernacular popular culture even led department stores, as conglomerates of consumption, to initiate street fairs and carnivals, parades and vernacular celebrations of national holidays.[29]

Additionally, sharp critique was uttered upon the popular customs, ethnic traditions and holidays that many native and new American maintained.[30] Festivals, church holidays and long weekends suffused with heavy drinking posed a problem to experts. Herbert Gutman states how Slavic and Italian immigrants, whose work habits that were alien to the modern factory, brought subcultures with them that stood out from native working habits.[31] For a manual laborer, Saturday "meant going out, strolling around the town, meeting friends, usually at a favorite saloon" (…) The good time continued over into Sunday, so that on the following day he usually was not in the best condition to settle down to the regular day's work".[32] This behavior, equating leisure with the consumption of alcohol, worried sabbatarians and temperance reformers alike. As Gutman demonstrates, these conflicts over life- and work-styles, altered by the coming of age of modern industrial capitalism, "occurred frequently and often involved control over the work process and over time".[33]

As Charles McGovern has argued, material nationalism built on "the concrete reality of everyday goods, as advertisers argued that consumption would forge a united

[27] Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 1-2. Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, 85-86.
[28] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, 85-86.
[29] Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption", 322.
[30] Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism", 84.
[31] Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919", 547.
[32] Idem., 559.
[33] Idem., 555.

nation and a national culture.[34] However, as many historical narratives indicate, independent consumption patterns maintained, as people attributed their own meaning to commodities in different milieus and communities. "There was no single model for the consumer; despite authorities' attempts to contest or shape popular consumption", McGovern argues, "American workers pursued their own distinct agendas and made their own versions of consumer culture".[35]

Ironically, while contemporaries looked condescendingly on immigrant work ethics and decorum, consumption was used by immigrants as well to become part of the American mainstream while maintaining their ethnic identities. Battling with civic, cultural and religious authorities, working-class citizens struggled to define and control their own leisure and entertainment choices outside work. Inevitably, these struggles depended on an institutionalized commodity system and leisure practices and rituals rooted in a culture of consumption.

The personal writings of Mary Antin, a Jewish immigrant living in Boston who came to the United States in 1898, illustrated how participating in consumer life "transformed" her immigrant identity. Erasing the miseries and inequalities that had burdened her immigrant life, Antin regarded her coming to America as "the first great transformation". Her metamorphosis was completed as she and her girlfriends would "march up Broadway, and [take] possession of all we saw (…) and desired", regarding the future as one of "shining" possibility. Part of this transformation was taking place in a "dazzlingly beautiful place called a department store", where Mary Antin and her sisters "exchanged our hateful homemade European costumes (…) for real American machine-made garments, and issued forth glorified in each other's eyes".[36] Opposing homemade, weary European clothes as symbol of her former immigrant identity with the ability to try on and purchase real American ready-made clothing, Antin's dairy illustrates the possibility consumerism offered to partake in a national culture. The notion of material nationalism promised that by purchasing goods that expressed American values and ideals, consumers could assert their own American nationality, buying their way to their

[34] McGovern, *Sold American*, 104-105.
[35] Moreover, assimilated commodities originally from non-American background turned into typical American products in the hands of advertisers. As a result, Anger Spaghetti promised "American-Made Foods for American Homes", demonstrating how a typical Italian dish turned into a worthy symbol of American civilization. McGovern, *Sold American*, 12-13, 121.
[36] Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption", 335.

Americanness.[37] As illustrated by the case of Antin, both advertisers and immigrants shared the view that consuming was an essential part of participating in American life.

Additionally, Lizabeth Cohen has argued that from the 1920s onward, Chicago workers used material resources from a new consumer economy, combined with their local and ethnic traditions and backgrounds, to create "a distinct workers' consciousness that underpinned their emerging union and political activism".[38] Working-class Chicagoans – "male and female, black and white, a large portion immigrants from eastern and southern Europe or their children" – struggling to become effective as national political participants, made choices in how they lived, worked, spent leisure time, and identified themselves socially. As a result, "in contrast to what advertising executives had expected, Chicago's ethnic workers were not transformed into more Americanized, middle-class people by the objects they consumed". Rather, by making their own choices and appropriating commodities for their own reasons, Chicago workers participated in America's consumer culture while holding on to their traditional communal bonds. Cohen's research demonstrates that while "so much else changed in the industrializing decades, tenacious traditions flourished among immigrants in ethnic subcultures that varied greatly among particular groups and according to the size, age, and location of different cities and industries". Additionally, industrialization did not led to a mere social breakdown, as "family, class, and ethnic ties did not resolve easily".[39]

Worldly Goods: the Religious Debate

The definition of consumption as a social problem is an old story, ranging from New England Puritans in the seventeenth century to Progressive moralists at the end of the nineteenth century. What many conservatives had in common was a belief in the guiding religious principles that America was built upon, and the perception that these principles were threatened by modernizing forces. Worrying about the self-indulgence of consumers and the consequences of affluence, comfort, and luxury, religious authorities were eager to express their concerns over what they perceived as the corrosive commercial influences.[40]

For over centuries, prevailing notions of Puritanism became linked with modesty and thrift. At the same time, the nation's Puritan heritage influenced the way Americans

[37] McGovern, *Sold American*, 120.
[38] Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 2-9, 119; McGovern, *Sold American*, 12.
[39] Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919", 561.
[40] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xvii.

thought about work ethics and discipline for many decades. The Puritan discipline, also known as "the protestant work ethic" as coined by sociologist Max Weber in 1904, emphasized a commitment to frugality and hard work as a component of a person's calling. As a result, "worldly" success could be considered as symbol of personal salvation.

As E.P. Thompson notes, the British Puritan ethic was based on "the preaching of industry" and "the moral critique of idleness". It was this "interior moral time-piece" which led the Puritans to a live of hard work and thrift. The moralists who accepted this discipline for themselves attempted to impose it upon the working class: it was Puritanism, "in its marriage of convenience with industrial capitalism", that converted industrial workers to new valuations of time.[41]

However, as Herbert G. Gutnam argues, the "quite diverse Americans" made it clear in both their thought and behavior that the Protestant work ethic "was not deeply engrained in the nation's social fabric". The absence of these virtues within the laboring classes led to "recurrent tensions over work habits that shaped the national experience".[42] The Puritan work ethic as a paradigm inspired some Victorian conservatives to deliberate on the status of work in the United States. Francis Wayland, a prominent moral philosopher and educator, foresaw how affluence would threaten the social order and argued that a delicate balance between effort and enjoyment should be the goal of every hardworking American. Things "of which the only result is, the gratification of physical appetite", such as the use of liquor or visiting saloons or shows, posed a danger to Protestant virtues, Wayland summoned.[43]

With the development of a consumer economy, religious authorities saw temptation lurking, threatening to distract Americans from their higher goals. At the heart of the Puritan critique lied "a utilitarian valuation of goods", Michael Schudson argues. The utilitarian vision dictated that goods served practical human needs, and should therefore be valued for their capacity to fulfill these needs. Commodities should not be ends of desire themselves, however.[44] The abandoning of the purely practical side of commodities led to a wide range of religious critique. Although nineteenth century religious spokespersons differed from the original Puritans, who found offensive dancing, music, theater, nonproductive sexuality, and other material and bodily pleasures, they did emphasize non-

[41] Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism", 87, 95.
[42] Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919", 532, 535.
[43] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, 1-4.
[44] Michael Schudson, "Delectable Materialism: Second Thoughts on Consumer Culture", in: Lawrence B. Glickman (ed.), *Consumer Society in American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 346.

materialistic goals and called for ennobling and rewarding pleasures. Only benevolence and the pursuit of higher cultural ground would contribute both to the individual and society, it was argued.[45]

Apart from a Puritan ethic, Schudson discerns a Quaker sentiment that is concerned with the wastefulness of commodities and the vanity of goods before God. The Quaker sentiment was "less concerned with how people feel about goods than with objectionable features of the products themselves, usually their wastefulness or extravagance". Consumption that is more practical, less wasteful and less ostentatious is better, according to the Quaker sentiment.[46]

It is remarkable, then, that the discourse of commercialism did seep into religious practice and language. Illustrating the ambiguity that authorities felt toward the subject, the ethics of commercialism entered the discourse of its opponents in various ways:

> "American religious leaders expressed concern about the potential for commercial avarice in the New World. New England Puritan ministers strove to ensure that merchants charged only "just prices", not market prices, for their ever expanding array of imported goods. Yet at the same time the language of the market began to creep into religious discourse – a tension that has continued into the twentieth century as churches have aimed for limits on consumption while embracing parishioners as consumers."[47]

"Conspicuous Consumption": the Intellectual Debate

Anxieties about affluence were not limited to religious spokespersons. Many intellectuals and scholars wondered about the effects of a changing economy upon the morale of citizens. If Americans expressed their citizenship increasingly through the democratic process of consuming, what did their participation in a national consumer culture mean for the social order and traditional hierarchies? As will be argued, many intellectuals were disturbed by the striving for emulation, a distinct feature of consumption, that could imply that social differences would erode. Paradoxically, although America was said to be a classless society, the critical attitudes from elite towards the expanding consumer economy indicated that a social hierarchy in fact did exist.[48] "Consumption made the United States a

[45] Michael Schudson, "Delectable Materialism: Second Thoughts on Consumer Culture",346; Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, 1-3.
[46] Schudson, "Delectable Materialism", 347-348.
[47] Glickman, "Born to Shop?", 2.
[48] One of the seminal works on democracy in America and the non-existence of a classless society is Louis Hartz' 1954 *The Liberal Tradition in America*, in which the author, contributing to the notion of American exceptionalism, argues that the New World, lacking a feudal tradition like Europe, was home to "the agrarian

democratic society of equals, marked by consumer goods as symbol and the source of that equality". However, that promise of equality "was undercut by the fiercely guarded privileges and exclusions in American society".[49]

With a shorter work week and less working hours a day, the demarcation between leisure and work became more visible in the modern industrial era than it had been in centuries before. As Americans ceased to be producers, relying on their own household production or crafts, and turned into consumers, conservatives worried about the corrosive influence on character, as the leisurely, personal and social relations previously found in the workplace became fulfilled by commercial means. A society of consumers, with the "freedom of movement and the promise ease", replaced the older power of self-reliance, or so many thought. From a reliance on hard work and craftsmanship, people could now create status differences not through their character, but through the accumulation of luxuries and strategies of display.[50]

It can be argued that scholarship on consumer history can be traced back to 1899, the year that Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* was published. Veblen, son of Norwegian immigrants, began his teaching career at the newly-founded University of Chicago in 1892. Being an economist, Veblen's work is remarkable for the topics he studied, as the workings of the leisure class belonged to "matters too vulgar or too trivial for notice" for many of his colleagues.[51] As his work became more renowned after his death, the concepts Veblen coined found resonance within various academic disciplines. Moreover, as he focused on the leisure class, Veblen differed from his contemporaries by scrutinizing elites and well-to-do-folk rather than immigrants and workers, becoming renowned for his "brilliant reinvention of irony as a mode of approach to theoretical questions".[52]

Veblen argued that the changing consumer society undermined the "instinct of workmanship". With the paradigm shift from a producer ethos to the modern spirit of

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and proletarian strands of the American democratic personality, which in some sense typif[ies] the whole of American uniqueness". In a nation where everyone is "born equal", America becomes a "peculiar land of freedom, equality, and opportunity". Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955) 17, 291-292.

[49] And although advertisements were spreading a democratic message that all consumers could buy their products, modern advertising and marketing used differentiated markets and the philosophy that goods symbolized social distinction. Advertising professionals in public would claim that America was a classless society, while "privately they endlessly studied and remained invested in the class divisions that consumption supposedly would dissolve". McGovern, *Sold American*, 97-98.

[50] Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture", 51.

[51] David Riesman, *Thorstein Veblen: A Critical Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) 3, 110.

[52] Riesman, *Thorstein Veblen: A Critical Interpretation*, 44

consumerism, the economist was aware of the social changes he witnessed and aimed to explain the practice of "conspicuous consumption" and the decline of workmanship. The changes in occupational discipline led from a culture of workmanship to a culture of wastemanship, where consumption goods were no longer designed for productive use only, but the "elements of waste" tended to "dominate in articles of consumption", Veblen argued.[53]

Being surrounded by a "pecuniary culture" around the turn of the century, a corrupting and hedonistic system, Veblen warned for the "contamination of the common man". In a large, modern society where people did not know each other intimately, "appreciation for the actual work a man had done" gave way for a more external evaluation: "the goods which money will buy". As a result, as man's prestige no longer lay "in his specialized capacity as a worker", but merely in the accumulation of wealth and the prestige of leisure, as a symbol of wealth."[54]

According to the Chicago economist, the need to clarify uncertain social status drove Americans to the accumulation of material things, a phenomenon he called "conspicuous consumption". [55] Moreover, the upsurge in consumption created a model of fashion for others to follow. The hierarchy of conspicuous consumption created a continued striving for emulation from the leisure class downward, with lower classes striving for the position and display of wealth as demonstrated by the leisure class. As a result of their vested interests, the leisure class would profit further from the consumption created in the process of emulation.[56] In *Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen discerned a "leisure class" compromising financiers, bankers, merchants, and manufacturers, using consumption "to herald a newly attained status by displaying their excesses and by demonstrating the ease, idleness, and self-gratification with which wealth and success were enjoyed". Whereas "idleness" and "profligacy" were frequently heard in the debate on worker's expenditures, Veblen was one of the first to turn his critical eye on the leisure class instead. For the gentleman of leisure, conspicuous consumption of goods was a means of reputability, Veblen argued, ranging from the giving of valuable presents to "expensive feasts and entertainment".[57] The leisure class itself Veblen considered as "a laggard class, enabled by its wealth to remain in the backwash of economic development,

[53] Thorstein B. Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899, reprint: Fairfield: Augustus M. Kelley, 1991) 100.
[54] Riesman, *Thorstein Veblen: A Critical Interpretation*, 61.
[55] Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture", 14-15; Riesman, *Thorstein Veblen: A Critical Interpretation*, 153.
[56] Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture", 15-16.
[57] Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 75

hence a break upon the wheels of progress". By creating surpluses, modern industrial capitalism permitted new, self-regarding motives to become important. As a result, men and women "found their pleasure in invidious distinctions at the expense of others". In America, consumption lured all classes into a "meaningless chase of superfluities for emulative display".[58]

Although Veblen focused on the emerging leisure class, his contemporaries saw emulative display and conspicuous consumption all around them. In Willa Cather's novel *My Ántonia*, situated on the Nebraska prairie around 1918, the protagonist Ántonia "copied Mrs. Gardener's new party dress and Mrs. Smith's street costume so ingeniously in cheap materials that those ladies were greatly annoyed, and Mrs. Cutter, who was jealous of them, was secretly pleased".[59] The pecuniary culture that Veblen warned about spread from the mercantile centers to the rural areas as well. As a reportage of Willa Cather in *The Nation* indicates, the culture of consumption effected even Nebraska prairie life. In Nebraska, "even as late as 1885 the central part of the State, and everything westward, was, in the main, raw prairie", and the early population, consisting of Scandinavian, Bohemian and Russian immigrants, "largely transatlantic". But rapid industrial development and a time of prosperity entered the Nebraska prairie, home of Cather, as well: "It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that every farmer owns an automobile. (…)The great grain fields are plowed by tractors", and many houses were lighted by electricity and had a telephone. "On Saturday night the main street is a long black line of parked motor cars; the farmers have brought their families to town to see the moving-picture show", Cather wrote in 1924.[60]

With the advent of electrical equipment and technical innovations in farming tools, Cather noticed a shift in the mentality that had long reigned in the immigrant families. "Of course", she wrote, "there is the other side of the medal, stamped with the ugly crest of materialism":

> "Too much prosperity, too many moving-picture shows, too much gaudy fiction have colored the taste and manners of so many of these Nebraskans of the future. There, as elsewhere, one finds the frenzy to be showy; farmer boys who wish to be spenders before they are earners, girls who try to look like the heroines of the cinema screen; a coming generation which tries to cheat its aesthetic sense by

[58] Riesman, *Thorstein Veblen: A Critical Interpretation*, 57-58.
[59] Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918, reprint: New York, Dover Publications, 1994) 104.
[60] Willa Sibert Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle", *The Nation* 117 (1923) 238.

> buying things instead of making anything. There is even danger that that fine institution. the University of Nebraska, may become a gigantic trade school".[61]

The decline of workmanship and a producer outlook, the diminishing role of higher learning and cultivation, a fading of tastes and style by mass consumption, emulating cultures of show and spectacle: for 49-year-old Cather, the "splendid story of the pioneers" was finished as new times and a new generation had arrived. If the hard-working, sober immigrant families from the raw Nebraskan prairies changed into materialistic consumers, what did the future hold for those who could no longer say "we made this, with our backs and hands"?[62] Even though Cather wrote twenty-five years after the publication of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, she shared with Veblen the concerns for a decline in workmanship and increase of emulation and spectacle.

Although Veblen's critique appeared harsh, others saw in the changing economic order possibilities for more benevolent prosperity and egalitarianism. One of these visionaries was Simon N. Patten, an economist and firm believer of the civilizing power of wealth. Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, Patten attempted to reshape conservative moralism, concerned with the profligacy and idleness of workers and immigrants, to fit new economic circumstances.[63] As Horowitz argues, Patten differed from Thoreau's romantic vision of a simple life, instead offering a solution to the problems of the poor. Moreover, Patten understood that work was no longer satisfactory, and that working-class Americans, with many ethnicities, turned to other activities instead, such as communal celebrations. "By opposing possessions but not passions, Patten could stand against materialism without continuing to emphasize self-control", questioning whether censoriousness could and should be used to discipline working-class desires.[64]

Likewise, economist George Gunton argued that America's nation of workers, many of them immigrants, could be educated by the uplifting democratic experience through the cultural education of consumption. Like some of his Madison Avenue colleagues, Gunton envisioned an evolutionary model where the "system of consumption would bring increased comfort, leisure, and refinement to working Americans".[65] Believing in an American standard of taste and cultivation, the economist chided away from critics of popular culture and mass entertainment. Similar to Philadelphia's merchant

[61] Cather, "Nebraska", 238.
[62] Idem., 238.
[63] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xxix.
[64] Idem., 36-37.
[65] Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture", 23-24.

John Wanamaker, he assumed that commerce was "the great civilizer".[66] In the eyes of these men, progress was defined materially, marked by an abundance of goods and an ease of life.

In the decades following Veblen coinage of the term "leisure class" in 1899, the advertising industry was quick to refute the economist's argument. A 1910 King Gilette editorial, which appeared in the popular *Saturday Evening Post*, boldly stated: "There are no idle rich in this country today – no leisure class. (…) The Gilette Safety Razor is a symbol of the age – it is the most democratic thing in the world". The ad continued: "The rich man is not shaved in bed by his valet as he was a generation age. He uses a Gilette and he shaves himself – in three minutes". Drawing on imagery of self-sufficiency, efficiency and egalitarianism, Gillette's "inexpensive abundance" equalized all social strata. However, by reducing class status to mere possessions, advertisements like Gillette's recasted social inequality as marketplace diversity, as McGovern notes: "Such symbolism contained the outlines of a new nationalist culture where consumption was the foundation of citizenship, the individual's membership in a vast American society through ownership".[67]

"The Vice of Shopping": the Gender Debate

Apart from economic concerns, or celebrations, of the age of consumerism and its possibilities, a large share of moralist attitudes centered on the role of women within America's consumer society. As the first chapter indicated, consumption was a thoroughly gendered phenomenon, making commercial sites a respectable place for both working and middle-class women, fostering the ideal of "a new public woman".[68]

The thrilling visual impulses from huge colored glass windows, electrical lightning, the possibility to feel the luxurious fabrics of ready-made-clothing, and the atmosphere of abundance and novelty may have led some women to become light-headed upon entering department stores. It might even release deeply unsettling impulses, leading some women to shoplifting. Many Victorian Americans believed women responded principally to emotional, irrational appeals. As a result, they were more susceptible to the enticing culture of commerce that surrounded them.

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[66] Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture", 29.
[67] McGovern, *Sold American*, 98-99.
[68] Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics* , 20.

In line with the increasing medicalization of society in the nineteenth century, deviant consumer impulses became characterized as diseased compulsion. The newcomer "kleptomania" was invented to name and treat the development of shop-lifting ladies who could in fact have paid for the goods they stole. Coined as a mental disorder for mainly middle-class women, not applicable to lower class women or ordinary thieves, American legal and medical authorities identified the same kind of diseased reactions. As Peter N. Stearns notes, "the cases were atypical, prompted by mental illness of some sort, but the deviance did suggest how far consumerism could reach into personal life".[69] Caught between their own weakened sexuality and a moral and legal order dominated by men, bourgeois women suffering from uncontrollable impulses became labeled as kleptomaniacs from 1870s onward.

Likewise, the "sentiment of acquisitiveness", a favorite them of late-Victorian novels, echoes through in Theodore Dreisser's *Sister Carrie*. The "lure of the material" weighed heavy on the protagonist, young Carrie, as she wanders around a Chicago department store. "Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion; they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves. When she came within earshot of their pleading, desire in her bent a willing ear. The voice of the so-called inanimate!". Her women's heart warm with desire for "every individual bit of finery", Carrie is depicted as a light-headed, susceptible women when she entered the commercial domain.[70] Dreisser's wife was horrified by the novel about "a freewheeling, un-connected American girl", and obstructed the publication of *Sister Carrie*.[71] Concerned with the "blinding impact of the modern city upon the human personality", *Sister Carrie* described a women's preoccupation with accumulation and display in early twentieth century America and the dangers the sentiment of acquisitiveness posed to a young lady.

As shopping became a leisure activity, enjoyed not only by the higher echelons of society, some worried that the acts of self-indulgence, the wandering around in lavishly decorated stores and enjoying avenue culture threatened to subvert women's tasks and daily chores. By the turn of the century, as shopping developed into an "almost full-time

[69] Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History. The Global Transformation of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 59. Elaine S. Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving Middle-class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 23.
[70] Theodore Dreisser, *Sister Carrie* (1900, reprint: New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1957) 64, 94.
[71] Kenneth S. Lynn, "Introduction", in: Theodore Dreisser, *Sister Carrie* (1900, reprint: New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1957) v, xi.

secular and public business", fears were raised that public activities such as churchgoing, reform work or charity might fade to the background.[72]

The rapid increase of women's participation in consumer culture, and their new role as consumers, challenged traditional ideas about proper female conduct. As shopping developed into an a time-consuming public business, by the 1880s, the *New York Times* warned that "the awful prevalence of the vice of shopping among women" should be considered "every bit as bad as male drinking or smoking".[73]

William Leach's study of dairies of metropolitan upper-middle class women shows that many women "were not so much disoriented by consumer life as fascinated with it and with the new opportunities for escape and pleasure" it offered. As Leach argues, the secularization of thought and behavior can be discerned from autobiographical writings and dairies describing the daily lives of women. Their writings illustrate how middle-class women comfortable moved within the public domain.[74] As a result of their participation in the consumer experience, a set of characteristic traditionally known as feminine , such as religious piety, domestic care, sexual purity, dependence and passivity, were challenged and subverted by the new definitions of gender that mass consumer culture presented.[75]And while a clear gap existed between middle-class or upper-class women and their female counterparts from lower-class or ethnic backgrounds, the impact and scale of the nation's consumer apparatus touched upon the lives of a great variety of women.

As hallmark of urban consumption, department stores that sprang up all over the country became the focal point of conservative critique. Department stores, with their attractive glass windows, use of mannequins and regular fashion shows, posed a danger to respectable women, according to purity and reform groups. As the stores did little to prevent or control the "loosening of sensual boundaries", their artificial environments conjured up a "potentially uncontrollable circumstance of longing and desire". Indeed, the editors of the *Dry Goods Economists*, the main trade journal for stores, declared that "certain organizations of women are claiming [that] the stores (…) are ruining the youth of the land by the display of corsets and garments".[76] The scandalous wax figures, revealing women's lingerie and garments in a bedroom set window, affirmed the danger of loosened sexual boundaries for men and women alike, according to critics.

[72] Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption", 333.
[73] Ibidem.
[74] Idem., 334, 336.
[75] Idem., 342.
[76] Idem., 328.

The emergence of mass consumption and public forms of entertainment led to a profound disturbance of traditional gender roles. Not only department stores contested the Victorian dichotomy of public and private spheres: widespread popular culture venues as dance halls and movie theaters became places where the boundaries of acceptable sexual behavior could be tested and redrawn. Indeed, the Victorian ideal of the cult of domesticity began to erode as public entertainment venues like vaudeville houses, motion picture theaters and dance halls attracted not only men, but also large numbers of women and children. As a result, civic and women's groups demanded that city governments addressed the public's exposure to "potentially ruinous subject matter".[77]

In the early twentieth century, suffragists and social reformers struggled with the social and moral implications of the culture of consumption. By uprooting women from their traditional familial settings, making them vulnerable to arguably male exploitation, creating false images of desirability and femininity in the media, the consumer industry posed a danger for many women. At the same time, these social reformers could hardly escape the impact of this new culture, as "American feminists relied on an aesthetic politics of mass spectacle that imitated the practices forged by the urban merchant class". While trying to take a critical stand on changing society and the influences of consumer culture, by inviting departments stores to advertise in their publications, using advertising space in streetcars, and organizing great parades and pageants, the discourse of consumption was used while social reformers agitated against the social and moral changes brought by this new culture.[78] Likewise, by linking consumer choice to political sovereignty, many advertisements reinforced what McGovern calls "the electoral metaphor". By linking consumption with social activism, for instance in a 1914 ad named "Votes for Women" depicting a parade of little girls carrying boxes of Kellogg's Corn Flakes aloft as pickets, commercial culture played on the suffrage movement as well by noting that the "the women of this country have always voted "Aye" for the breakfast cereal" (fig.3).[79] By suggesting that women already had the vote when it came to brand-name cereals, a connection between the suffragist cause and corporate interest was established.

[77] Mary P. Erickson, "'In the Interest of the Moral Life of Our City': The Beginning of Motion Picture Censorship in Portland, Oregon", in: *Film History* 22 (2010) 150
[78] Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption", 336-339.
[79] McGovern, *Sold American*, 70.

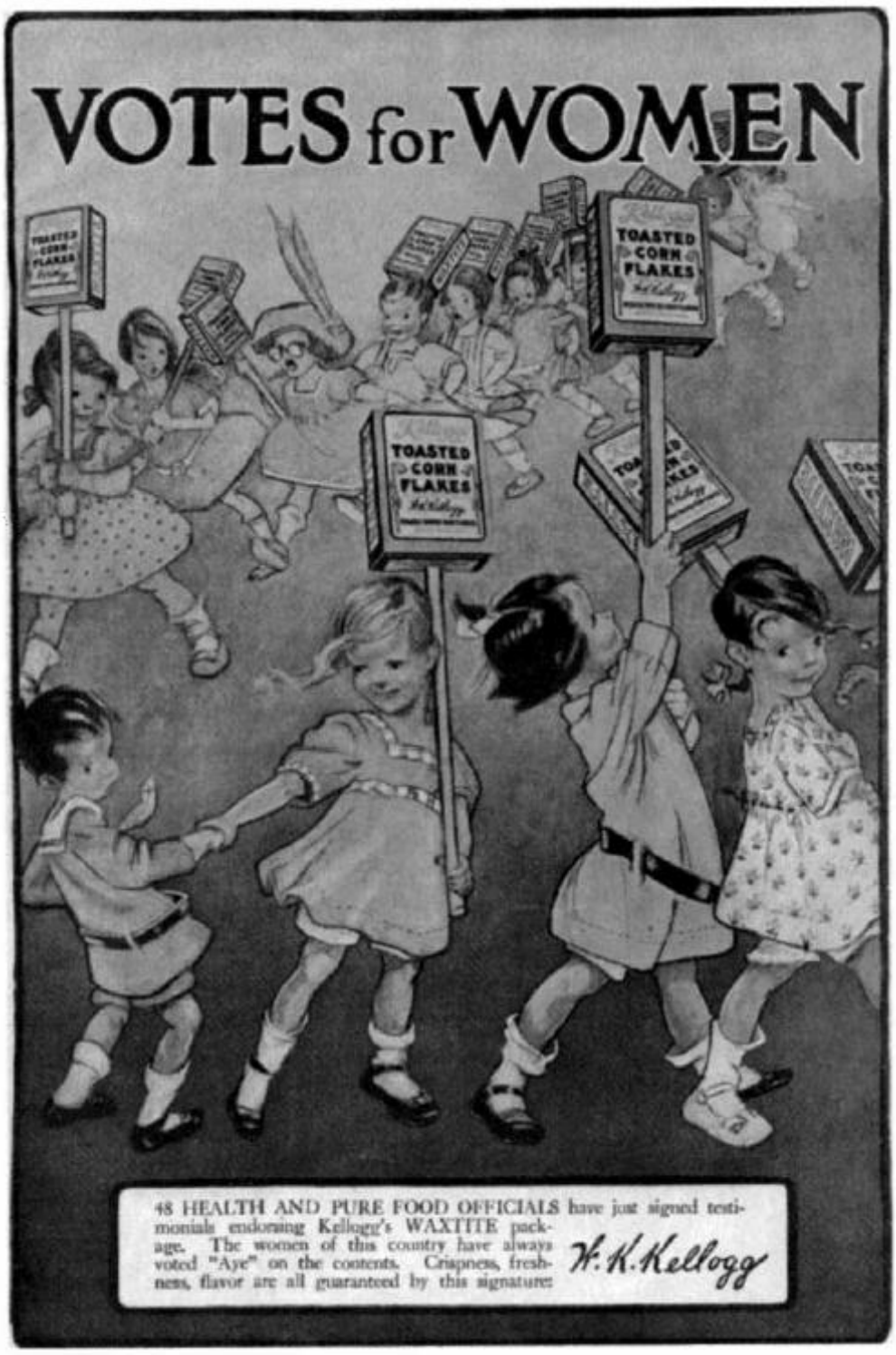

FIGURE 3: "Votes for Women". The caption under the picketing children reads: "Health and food officials have just signed testimonials endorsing Kellogg's WAXTITE package. The women of this country have always voted "Aye" on the contents. Crispness, freshness, flavor are all guaranteed by this signature: W.K. Kellogg. *Women's Home Companion*, November 1914. (Source: McGovern, *Sold American*, 72)

"A House of Prostitution on Wheels"

As the notion of economic citizenship grew more important, raising prices made middle-class Americans accepting a more comfortable way of living as they rejected self-denial and simplicity. As Jacobs argues, the high cost of living was not just "a problem of the urban poor, the unemployed, or the tenement dwellers; it affected everyone, especially the new white-collar middle classes living on fixed salaries".[80] Contemporaries noticed the influence of economic citizenship or consumers' consciousness. "We hear a great deal about the class-consciousness of labor", wrote Walter Lippmann in 1914. He continued: "My own observation is that in America today consumers' consciousness is growing very much faster". Although the notion may sounded vague, consumer consciousness became significant as it was, in the words of historian Richard Hofstadter, the "lowest common political denominator among classes of people who had little else to unite them on concrete issues". [81] During the early decades of the nineteenth century, consumption spread further, leading moralist and critics to shift their concerns from profligacy of workers, women, and ethnic groups, to the corrosive effects that mass consumption had on society. A new standard of living as well as the impact of inflation helped to undermine "the dominant nineteenth-century outlook and foster the emergence of an ethic of comfort and refinement". Still, changed economic conditions weakened, "but never destroyed the moral vision used to judge the way people spent their money" , as will be made clear in the discussion around moving pictures and the automobile.[82]

The popularity of motion pictures, "the super nova in the expanding galaxy of American mass entertainments", spread rapidly by the start of the First World War.[83] Motion picture attendance around the country hit high numbers: in 1909, over 20.000 people attended movies in New York every day, while the weekly seating capacity of Boston's theater was over 400.000.[84] Moving pictures developed from its origins in nickelodeons to a major competitive film industry after the turn of the century. As a result of the growing popularity, political liberals and moral conservatives tried to establish a response to the

[80] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*,) 85.
[81] Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage, 1955), quoted in: Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003) 414.
[82] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xvii, 85.
[83] Kroes and Rydell, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*, 79.
[84] Erickson, "In the Interest of the Moral Life of Our City", 148.

movie industry that "satisfied the goals of uplifting the civilization without hampering its progress".[85]

After 1907, the popularity of movies spread beyond the working class neighborhoods and ethnic urban centers of American cities. As moving pictures became a public form of entertainment, they became a point of controversy. The control of movie content and the subsequent censorship of motion pictures, carried out by the Board of Censors of Motion Pictures Shows (which became later known as the National Board of Review) that was founded in New York in 1909, indicated the growing anxiety that both liberal and conservative politicians, moralists and intellectuals held against this new form of mass entertainment.[86]

Motion picture censorship offered a way for governments to control the deleterious effects this new form of public entertainment supposedly had on society. Yet, as there were "no established guidelines or definitions of what constituted objectionable or immoral content, trial-by-error approaches shaped the bulk of motion picture censorship".[87] The approval of the National Board of Review, which was made up of both reformers and film manufacturers, was promoted as a way to popularize acceptable films and, hopefully, gradually uplift public tastes and the films that satisfied the public. Most problematic were the obscenities and crime-for-crime's sake appearances in movie pictures.[88] Not only was the content of the films morally questionable: censors and conservative moralists remarked that the physical environment of movie theaters also posed a serious problem. Besides the risk of fire, poorly lit rooms and lack of ventilation, "concerns arose over the personal safety of young women as they sat in partial darkness with members of the opposite sex".[89]

A case study of the introduction of motion picture censorship in Portland, Oregon, indicates how different players, such as civic and women's groups, influenced the censorship question. Portland developed its own motion picture Censor Board. The struggle of local theater managers and the council indicated, according to Mary Erickson, how a city undergoing major changes in population, economic and social composition, as Portland shifted from a frontier setting to an urban commercial center, "struggled to define its moral underpinnings".[90]

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[85] Nancy J. Rosenbloom, "Between Reform and Regulation: The Struggle over Film Censorship in Progressive America, 1909-1922", in: *Film History* 1 (1987) 307.
[86] Rosenbloom, "Between Reform and Regulation", 307-309.
[87] Erickson, "In the Interest of the Moral Life of Our City", 148.
[88] Rosenbloom, "Between Reform and Regulation", 311.
[89] Erickson, "In the Interest of the Moral Life of Our City", 150.
[90] Idem., 149.

As a result of the low prices and easy accessibility, motion pictures became a form of entertainment that seemed, in the eyes of middle-class Victorian audiences, "positively un-American because of its popularity with immigrants and the urban working classes".[91] Furthermore, foreign productions shown in U.S. theaters were sometimes far removed from the Victorian ethics of thrift, hard work, and morality: the Board of Censorship saw itself as safeguarding American viewers from certain vulgar scenes that were popular in foreign films.[92] As Kroes and Rydell point out, the content of early films, with their appeal to lower classes, seemed to thwart Victorian norms about proper decorum.[93] Nickelodeons, open to all populations, were categorized as "borderline vice", catering to the lower urban masses. But as more reputable theaters – often called "palaces" – opened their doors in the 1910s and 1920s, motion pictures became incorporated in the leisure activities of middle classes.[94] One of the main concerns of Portland's residents was indeed how movie theaters began to "invade the better class residence portions" of cities around the country. Moreover, only when motion picture attendance began to increase among the middle and upper classes did movie censorship become an issue for Portland's city government: it was precisely these segments of society that were most vocal about the morality of motion pictures.[95]

Another newcomer that sparked a fierce public discussion throughout the country was the automobile. Ford's 1908 Model T, available on a large scale and for an attractive price due to innovations in production, became the first affordable automobile for middle-class America. Ford's ten millionth Model T rolled of the assembly line in 1924, illustrating the success of mass production techniques and the large consumer appeal.[96] By 1920, the automobile had become "one of the most pervasive features of modern life". As the automobile became a symbol of modernity in both urban and later rural areas, its high visibility made it an object of great discussion and popular awareness. As a result, its cultural impact during the 1920s was profound. [97]

The introduction of the car led to ambiguous responses. On the one hand, scholars have been impressed with the ready acceptance of the automobile. On the other hand, there

[91] Kroes and Rydell, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna* , 79.
[92] Rosenbloom, "Between Reform and Regulation", 310.
[93] Kroes and Rydell, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna* , 79-80.
[94] Erickson, "In the Interest of the Moral Life of Our City", 149.
[95] Idem., 150, 155.
[96] Kroes and Rydell, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna* , 8.
[97] Blaine A. Brownell, "A Symbol of Modernity: Attitudes Toward the Automobile in Southern Cities in the 1920s", in: *American Quarterly* 24 (1972) 20.

was a widespread recognition that the introduction of the automobile presaged great social and economic changes for American society.[98] Although motor vehicle registrations soared – from nine million in 1920 to more than twenty-three million in 1929 – the rising automobile sales did not reflect a complete and unquestionable acceptance of this new form of transport. As Blaine Brownell argues, most responses to this significant technological innovation were "highly ambiguous", as "the vehicle that promised to infinitely expand the radius of individual mobility also seemed to threaten the tightly knit family unit and prevailing moral standards".[99]

The way for marketing the automobile had been paved by the introduction of the bicycle during the 1880s. Around 1884, the "safety bicycle", with two wheels of equal size, had been introduced. The demand for it, especially among the younger members of the middle class, spread rapidly. "It offered mobility, the thrill of self-propelled speed, the chance to experience fashionable strenuosity in the street and countryside, and, for many courting couples a chance for an extended excursion away from the watchful eyes of chaperons."[100]

In critique that was similar to condemning automobiles in later decades, cycling could arguably increase immoral behavior or sexual promiscuity. Older courtship patterns, which frequently involved chaperonage, changed with the possibility for a man and a woman to seclude themselves by riding their bicycles. Remarkably, the concerns that the bicycle initiated shared similarities with critique on the introduction of the automobile. Both means of transportation led to secluded, individual leisure activities, initiating a great deal of public debate in the 1920s. Along with concerns about traffic congestion in American urban areas, the rising number of deaths and casualties attributable to motor vehicles and the changing landscape, a large part of concerns focused on the vehicle's threat to community standards of decency and morality – to such an extent that Brownell regards these attitudes as "virtually a separate genre of commentary related to the automobile":

> "Motor vehicles were accused of aiding and abetting criminal activity, fundamentally altering sexual mores and thus contributing to the degeneration of the youth, shattering the bonds of the traditional family unit, desecrating the Sabbath and reinforcing tendencies toward secularism and materialism."[101]

[98] Brownell, "A Symbol of Modernity", 26-27.
[99] Idem., 23.
[100] Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture", 32-33.
[101] Brownell, "A Symbol of Modernity", 28-36.

The auto was drawn into the discussion of "allegedly increasing sexual promiscuity". Older courtship patterns, which frequently involved chaperonage, were more difficult to maintain in the age of modernity, with "the predatory drivers of automobiles" luring "girls of tender ages".[102] In *Middletown*, the Lynds' study of Muncie, Indiana dating from 1929, the book's section on marriage contains a reference to Middletown's red-light district, "catering exclusively to the working class" according to the authors. But, as the judge from the town's juvenile court pointed out, with the increase of motor vehicles in Middletown, "the automobile has become a house of prostitution on wheels."[103] In a typical Middle-American town, sexual mores were profoundly altered by automobiles.

According to religious spokesmen, the automobile endangered traditional gender patterns, the Victorian patriarchal family unit and, through its individualist and secluded character, reinforced secularism and materialism. Many religious leaders feared that the preservation of the holy Sabbath was endangered by the mobility and independence of automobile owners and their changing leisure patterns. Indeed, Brownell notes, the "Sunday drive had apparently become a habit of most motorists".[104] Both the public discussion about the morality of movie theaters and motor vehicles indicates how new consumer environments allegedly had an unfavorable impact on traditional moral standards. These new sites of consumption offered individuals almost unlimited and unregulated encounters with other men and women.

Questioning Modernity

Some moralists located alternatives for a consumer society in pre-industrial times, longing for organic and natural environments that predated industrialization. Thoreau, as one of the earliest prophets of consumer critique, longed for a life of self-sustainment in the woods. However, Thoreau's idealization of preindustrial order was, as Robert Gross argues, far removed from the real world of eighteenth century farming, demanding interdependence and mutual cooperation among farmers. In *Walden*, Thoreau persuaded his contemporaries to "cultivate their higher selves in the very process of getting a living". "By paring back their material needs, providing as much – one might say, as little – as possible for

[102] Brownell, "A Symbol of Modernity", 38-39.
[103] Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1929) 113-114. Muncie became an object of by sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd, who used the slightly disguised name "Middletown" for their studies in Muncie, which was considered a typical Middle-American community.
[104] Brownell, "A Symbol of Modernity", 40.

themselves, and keeping their purchases to a minimum, people would be liberated from the grip of economic necessity and into the lives of true leisure".[105] In the woods of Concord, Massachusetts, the writer aimed for a higher standard of living; "by turning away from comforts and commercial relations, he put toil into a small corner of his world, so that he could sample less materialistic pleasures".[106] Thoreau's critique however did not provide his readers with a powerful alternative. Even though his work is crucial for the transcendentalist-inspired movements and proponents of simple living, his romantic utopia of Concord, Massachusetts proved no substitute for the advent of agrarian capitalism. Although his opposition to the accumulation of possessions, the drudgery of labor, and the crippling force of emulation inspired readers in the decades that followed, few Americans acted on the advice that Thoreau offered.[107]

From the late nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century, moralist attitudes failed to provide a successful alternative way of living. Many of the cultural texts analyzed here criticized their surroundings, proposing instead various solutions ranging from combinations of "genuine work, self-control, democracy, public welfare, high culture, meaningful recreation, and authentic selfhood" to counter the idleness, profligacy, or conspicuous consumption of the age.[108] Moreover, moralists used symbolization of commodities to voice their critique on changing society. Brownell notes how the attitudes towards the popularity of the automobile were ambiguous and uncertain as "the intellectual and psychological responses to the automobile mirrored larger cultural uncertainty (…) about the meaning of modernity."[109] Equating the automobile with the power of modernity, religious spokesmen, city councils and media saw in this new means of transportation a great danger to the moral character of citizens as it entered their communities. As with earlier critiques in the nineteenth century, the public discussion about the merits and disadvantages of the automobile stood symbol for larger changes in society that were not directly traceable to this new means of transportation. It is doubtful if the introduction of the automobile across the continent led to a soaring of unexpected teenage pregnancies, but the virulent public discussion indicated that many feared a decline of traditional norms and values. These critical observers exemplify how technology became a significant factor in shaping America's future, and most of their observations

[105] Gross, "Culture and Cultivation: Agriculture and Society in Thoreau's Concord", 55.
[106] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, 3-4.
[107] Idem., 3,5.
[108] Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004) 2.
[109] Brownell, "A Symbol of Modernity", 44.

were jeremiads against undesirable secular forces that threatened to undermine older values, rather than critiquing a new mode of transportation.

Likewise, by failing to distinguish the commodity from the character of the consumer, advertisers found mass audiences unsophisticated and ignorant. Movies, tabloids, Model T's, and even radio became convenient symbols of ad men's "vague and condescending notions of the mass audience".[110] Conceiving the goods and entertainment as representations of costumers, this process of symbolization took place as America developed a mass consumer economy. As McGovern demonstrates, many advertisers saw their own intellectual, sophisticated lifestyles as far removed from "the masses". By surveying popular tastes and observing consumer behavior, advertisers used a sociology that stressed their own distinct superiority compared to consumer's low taste and limited intelligence. "However sophisticated their understanding of income", argues McGovern, "advertisers conceived of most consumers, from factory worker to office worker, cleaning women to clubwomen, as belonging to an amorphous aggregate in need of uplift and incorrigibly beneath the standards of sophistication they held out for themselves".[111]

In line with many moralists from different backgrounds, advertisers shared the disdain and judgmental opinion about society's lower classes. "Although many powerful and successful executives came from village, rural, or petty bourgeois backgrounds, advertisers could not imagine a society where marketplace values did not rule. Just as they did not acknowledge immigrants, the poor, and people of color as consumers, advertisers imagined a nation bound only by spending and things."[112]

Apart from failing to provide Americans with a long-lasting alternative to life meaningful lives in an era of consumption, most conservatives were far removed from the hardship and struggle that characterized may daily lives of working-class citizens. For many nineteenth-century consumers, importance lay in what they could buy and for what price, not what their market transactions meant, as "most American lived, however ambivalent, firmly within consumer society".[113]While more people became consumers, conservatives saw traditional social hierarchies impaired by the democratizing power that consumption allegedly held. Even though many groups were left out America's exclusionary economic practices, advertising professionals and a culture of consumption created the illusion that each and every one could buy its way to become (more) American.

[110] McGovern, *Sold American*, 58-59.
[111] Idem., 31-34.
[112] Idem., 130.
[113] Glickman, "Born to Shop?", 9.

Interestingly, although the intellectuals, scholars, reformists, novelists and religious leaders came from different but mostly well-to-do bourgeois backgrounds, their concerns are frequently characterized by an elitist standpoint. Having time and leisure to express their concerns about the changing society they inhabited, much of the moralist attitudes expressed anxieties about America's transgression to a multi-ethnic, corporate, modern industrial order.

As supporters of Progressive reform, some moralists tried to influence or improve the lives of workers, immigrants and the lower social classes. Most relatively affluent conservatives however continued to utter critique upon the supposed profligacy and self-indulgence of the lower classes. Many early conservative moralists like Francis Wayland, as they witnessed the middle-class participation in the expanding consumer economy around them, did not censure the middle class. Rather, it were the "saloons, street life, and communal celebrations [that] presented a foreign and dangerous way of life that they hoped to replace with the "refined" middle-class culture of museums, books, and churches".[114]

As for the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, who started to carry out investigations of working conditions and expenditures from 1975 under the lead of Carroll Wright, the MSBL reports reflected the views of the social scientists as much as it told contemporaries about the conditions of the working-class. With their investigation, questionnaires and reports, the authors often unconsciously demonstrated their class and ethnic bias. As Horowitz states: "In 1875, for a worker's family to have a representative of the state, of a different social and ethnic background, ask about personal details must have elicited an immensely complicated series of interchanges, especially from poverty-stricken immigrant families".[115]

Questioning modernity itself in the cultural texts that appeared between 1875 and 1929, conservatives often failed to provide a suitable alternative for the rapidly changing world based on commodities that surrounded them. These men and women were sometimes equally far removed from the daily experiences of lower-class urban and rural dwellers. Stimulated by the consumer economy, America's middle-class expanded and changed social hierarchies. Reflecting the rise of the "leisure class", Veblen argued that the need to clarify uncertain social status drove Americans to the accumulation of material

[114] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, 11.
[115] Idem., 24.

things, a phenomenon he called "conspicuous consumption".[116] And it was precisely the need to define social distinction through consumption that worried conservatives, as they feared a break with Puritan work ethics and religious dedication.

[116] Bronner, "Reading Consumer Culture", 153.

Conclusion

If consumption was to become a hallmark of American society, this research has investigated how a nation struggled to come to terms with modernity. With the advent of mass communication systems, rapid transportation across the continent, the influx of thousands of immigrants to the port cities and the mainland, and the changing social position of women in society among many social, economic and political developments, American conservatives raised their voice to examine the changing world around them. And as consumption touched upon the lives of almost all Americans, whether in a deserted prairie town through the Sears, Roebuck catalogue, or in San Francisco's dazzling downtown shopping district, the conservative moralists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century worried about the influence of a consumer economy on the nation's moral character. Starting with the budget study investigation of working-class expenditures, carried out by the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor in 1875, to the vehement public discussion in the 1920s about automobiles and moving pictures as beacons of modernity, over decades American moralists – writers, civic groups, household budget experts, scholars, religious spokespersons, medical experts and intellectuals – have issued their concerns about the impact of the nation's consumer society on its inhabitants. By contemplating over the loss of old times and the uncertainty of the future, their writings indicated that times were in fact changing at the turn of the century. This research focuses on the critical opinions about the corrosive influence of a new culture of consumption, issued during an important era of nation building. Charles McGovern coins the term "material nationalism" to characterize the nation at the turn of the century, as consuming symbolized the uniqueness of the United States as a nation and a civilization. Increasingly, getting and spending affirmed one's Americanness.[1] McGovern has demonstrated how the advertising industry created links for consumers with history, heritage, folkways and customs that were threatened to be erased in modern life. As a result, advertisers, native and immigrant Americans, and to a certain extent moralists themselves, viewed consumption as essential in participating in American life.

While Americans embraced the new culture of abundance and mass consumption, they worried about it at the same time. As this research argues, different strains of thought

[1] McGovern, *Sold American*, 119.

can be discerned from the writings of conservatives and critics from the late nineteenth-century to the first decades of the twentieth century. In an ongoing religious debate, clerical spokespersons feared for a decline in religious faith, as the delicate balance between effort and enjoyment was easily disturbed. Religious critics worried about the self-indulgence through accumulation and other corrosive commercial influences as the Puritan ethics the nation was built upon eroded. As commercial culture expanded at rapid pace, religious authorities saw temptation lurking, threatening to distract Americans from their higher goals and ambitions.

In what is coined here as the intellectual debate, economists and social scientists argued about the effect of a consumer economy upon the American people. Many moralists feared that social hierarchies and power relations were eroded by the striving for emulation in a culture based on commodities exchange. Whether received as a negative attribute, in the case of Thorstein Veblen, or as positive effect of newfound levels of comfort, like Simon Patten and George Gunton argued, intellectuals and experts had their say about what consumption did to the American people. While a consumer-ethic prevailed over a producer-ethic as the economy changed, Veblen contemplated upon the changes he saw in his surroundings. But even though "consumption made the United States a democratic society of equals, marked by consumer goods as symbol and the source of that equality", that promise of equality "was undercut by the fiercely guarded privileges and exclusions in American society".[2] As the source of equality in this process of symbolization, commodities came to represent their consumers.

Emulation was but one of the destructive elements in what Veblen coined a "pecuniary culture", as lower classes strived for the position and display of wealth as demonstrated by the leisure class. Moreover, as the work of Jackson Lears, Bronner, and McGovern illustrates, people began to use consumption for social distinction and the creation of personality. These therapeutic ideals of popularity and personality, competing with the older Victorian notion of character, were assimilated to corporate needs, for instance in advice literature in magazine's or advertisings.

Lastly, by looking at the gender debate that took place from 1875 up to 1929, the appearance of women in public places and their newfound freedom resulted in critical remarks and writings, as some feared that "the awful prevalence of the vice of shopping among women" should be considered "every bit as bad as male drinking or smoking".[3] The

[2] McGovern, *Sold American*, 97-98.
[3] Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption", 333.

public discussion about the morality of movie theaters and motor vehicles indicated how new consumer environments allegedly had an unfavorable impact on traditional moral standards. The moral questions raised by religious and civic spokesmen and women about the automobile and innovations in mass culture, especially new public venues such as movie theaters and dance halls, were mostly concerned with the related issues of changing gender boundaries and sexual mores, the degeneration of American youth, and the secularization and materialization that supposedly led to the decline of the tight and traditional family unit.

Moralists concerns about affluence is an old story, and not exclusively American, as many industrializing nations redefined the relationship that people held towards commodities. Rather, as a battle between "new wants and old restraints", this research gives insight into moralist attitudes that were expressed at a critical time in America's history.[4] With the influx of immigrants, the expansion of middle classes, and the decline of workmanship and producer ethics, American citizens had to find new ways to express their identities. Consumption offered a means to realize that aim, as the emerging consumer culture held a promise for all Americans. Being a consumer became a shared experience, a way of becoming American, and a way to participate in American society. However, some social groups had difficulty enjoying the benefits of commercialism. Citizens from lower-class backgrounds, immigrants struggling to find financial means, and other marginalized or oppressed groups did not have equal access to the abundance and life of ease that the new consumer culture offered.

The inegilatarian conditions of American life were covered up by the advertising industry's claims of consumer democracy and the electoral metaphor of consumer choice. Supposedly, democracy was characterized and sustained by consumption and goods, possessing the power of social equality.[5] There was, however, a grimmer side of consumption, one that inspired reformers, moralists and intellectuals to voice their critiques on the class character, the dependence on discipline and exploitation, the transforming gender boundaries, and the changing social fabric they partly attributed to America's consumer society. As the notion of economic citizenship grew more important and citizens expressed their civic identity through consumption was well, the nature of moralist critique changed as new economic conditions weakened, but never destroyed, "the

[4] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, 37.
[5] McGovern, *Sold American*, 96-97.

moral vision used to judge the way people spent their money".[6] During the early decades of the twentieth century, mass consumption spread further, leading moralist and critics to shift their concerns from profligacy of workers, women, and ethnic groups, to the corrosive effects that mass consumption had on society. "The materialism and showy extravagance of this hour", as Willa Cather expressed her concerns in 1924, indicated that new times indeed has arrived.[7]

The synthesis of research on attitudes toward the consumer society in America, with the more recent historical studies of economic citizenship and material nationalism can provide new insights into the dichotomy between critics' bourgeois attitudes and lower class consumers' experiences. Since the religious spokesmen, civic leaders, public intellectuals and scholars who voiced their concerns and anxieties about affluence were mostly coming from a well-to-do background, this research indicates that a discrepancy existed between the opinions of conservatives on the morality of spending and the experiences of lower class consumers. Since American citizens increasingly came to define themselves in economic terms, the question "How much does it cost?" turned more important for the nation's shoppers, while conservatives questioned if commodities in itself were desired or necessary by asking "What does it mean to consume?". Moreover, this research indicates that many moralist texts were characterized by a process of symbolization by conceiving the popularity of commodities and new forms of entertainment as representations of consumers. Critical responses to department store services, increased automobile mobility or the intimate environment of movie theatres mirrored larger cultural uncertainty about the meaning of modernity itself. While corporate elites and the advertising industry held a distinct view of America as a nation bound by consuming, the emergence of a consumer society did not capture citizens completely in a capitalist structure. Rather, by a reciprocal process, consumers followed their own preferences based on older ties of ethnicity, friendship, occupation, or community. Or, as Horowitz emphasizes, "consumer society did not obliterate an older America based on friends, workplace, family, religion, ethnicity, region, and social class".[8] While both the elite and the lower classes increasingly perceived consumption as an essential part of participating in American life, the political power of purchasing drew heavily on consumer's own choices as they appropriated commodities for their own reasons.

[6] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xvii.
[7] Cather, "Nebraska", 238.
[8] Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xii.

With the advent of "modern moralism" after the First World War, the dangers of mass consumption and conformity replaced older anxieties about wastefulness, profligacy, and lower-class spending. In the twentieth century, most conservatives expressed their concerns about the advent of a mass consumer economy and the middle class conformity resulting from it. While the Wall Street Crash of 1929 symbolized the economic downfall and recession the nation would witness in the years that followed, the 1920s and 1930s are considered as critical decades in the consolidation of a mass consumer society in America. But rather than focusing solely on the modern moralist debate, we can learn a great deal by studying critical responses that accompanied the emerging consumer economy at the turn of the century. While the foreign and domestic borders of the American empire expanded, the nation's consumer economy and its cultural frontiers increased likewise. These social changes inspired nineteenth-century observers to voice their concerns, condemning immigrant and working class consumption through a discourse of decadence, profligacy, self-control, and higher aspirations. The disdain that middle-class Victorian observers held for "un-American" forms of leisure and entertainment resulted in a "censorious attitude to the habits of workers and immigrants and a righteous belief in the superiority of the bourgeois way of life" that characterized the writings of traditional moralists.[9] At the same time, by equating consumption with naturalization, the advertising industry viewed consuming as "benign and efficient Americanization", transforming "any immigrant or worker, no matter how benighted, into a modern, assimilated, and unthreatening American".[10] Whether perceived as a negative or positive national characteristic, contemporaries recognized the power that consumption held. Reflecting their own ethnic and class perspectives, infused with Victorian notions about respectability and character, conservatives used the morality of spending to utter their concerns about the future of America.

"The Plastic Cage of Consumerism"

In his discussion of consumerism at the turn of the century, Daniel Horowitz states that the moralist critique of profligacy and self-indulgence is a view of consumption that the author holds to a certain extent as well. Alternative and more positive views on consumption, focusing on the reciprocal models of consuming and the process of attributing personal

[9] Kroes and Rydell, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*, 79; Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending*, xviii.
[10] Charles F. McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 123-124.

meanings to consumer goods, did exist, but in 1983, "no one has yet pulled these scattered pieces of evidence and different modes of interpretation into a coherent counterargument", according to the author.[11] Horowitz's statement remains true in 1999 as well, as Michael Schudson argues. We remain stuck with our ambivalence with goods. While more international markets are opened and middle classes in Africa and Asia emerge, the need becomes apparent to "scrutinize the criticisms of consumer culture that have flourished among relatively affluent intellectuals in Western societies".[12] Similar to conservative moralists around the turn of the century, mostly the relatively affluent Western intellectuals have the leisure and power to vocalize their concerns.

The danger of the uniformity of mass consumption has been regarded in different perspectives, whether from a cultural studies, Marxist, or political angle. In their seminal work *The Culture of Consumption* of 1983, editors Richard W. Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears assume that consumption, by becoming a cultural ideal, turned into a hegemonic "way of seeing" in the twentieth century. That makes it necessary to study the "powerful individuals and institutions who conceived, formulated, and preached that ideal or way of seeing", Fox and Lears argue in the introduction of their collection of critical essays.[13] The study of dominant elites – "white, male, educated, affluent" – is critically important. As the essays in *The Culture of Consumption* center on the urban elites, corporate bureaucracies, and new stratum of managers and professionals, the authors argue that the consumer culture is not only a value system "that underlies a society saturated by mass-produced and mass-marketed goods", but also a new set of rules "for the elite to control that society".[14]

The framework of hegemonic power relations that is apparent in the 1980s scholarship, exemplified by the contributions of Lears and Fox, gradually made place for a cultural perspective, influenced by anthropology and sociology. Rather than seeing consumption as an ideology or power structure, more recent historical research links the process of individual choices and autonomy to a culture of consumption. By stressing the subjective aspects of consumer experiences, or the meaning that individuals bring to market exchanges, scholars have tried to understand the historical consequences of consumption for the United States.[15]

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[11] Horowitz,
[12] Schudson, "Delectable Materialism", 353.
[13] Fox and Lears, "Introduction", ix.
[14] Idem., ix-xii.
[15] Lizabeth Cohen, "Escaping Steigerwald's "Plastic Cages": Consumers as Subjects and Objects in Modern Capitalism", in: *The Journal of American History* 93 (2006) 409.

While this research investigates the attitudes towards immigrants, women and working-class citizens, more can and should be known about the meaning consumption and spending held for these groups. The responses of these social, ethnic, and economic communities, and their involvement in an expanding consumer economy, might help us understand the moral and political value of consumption by focusing on the lives of ordinary people. Consumer subcultures, or different social groups defined by class, age, gender, race, and ethnicity, in fact mattered within the world corporate capitalism had created. How social groups asserted themselves politically forms the linchpin of Lizabeth Cohen's work, as she follows a dialectic approach that reveals that the "dynamic interaction between structure and culture, objective and subjective, persists, even if capitalists often have more power and resources than consumers".[16]

In line with Charles McGovern's work *Sold American*, the area of consumption and citizenship marks a new route within the broad field of consumer history. Early historical studies carried out by European and American scholars have shed light on the socio-cultural, economic and political context of emerging consumer societies. The future might lay in the area of critical research on the exclusionary and inclusionary practices of America's consumer economy. In a review of T.H. Breen's and Lizabeth Cohen's work, combined with a historiographical account, David Steigerwald concludes with a rather grim picture of the future of consumer society. Derived from Max Weber's "iron cage of rationality", Steigerwald discerns "the plastic cage of consumerism" that we are now constrained to live in, as he perceives the widely accepted premises of the critical consumer and consumer liberation discredited as convincing historical claims. Consumer capitalism has won out, Steigerwald argues; "where culture is mass produced and consumed, it too suffers from the inflation effect and no longer "effectively speaks to power" ".[17]

In a reaction on Steigerwald's review, Lizabeth Cohen critiques the assumed "plastic cage of consumerism" and the nature of American consumerist society it reveals. In *A Consumers' Republic* and *Making A New Deal*, Cohen argues that "the structures of capitalism, on the one hand, and more indigenous forms of cultural expression and meaning, on the other, exist in dialectic relationship". Even though consumers have often lost out "to those who seek to manage their consumption for economic or political ends",

[16] Cohen, "Escaping Steigerwald's "Plastic Cages", 412.
[17] David Steigerwald, "All Hail the Republic of Choice: Consumer History as Contemporary Thought", in: *The Journal of American History* 93 (2006) 403.

Cohen notes that it remains important to focus on consumer responses, private and communal meaning, and even political defiance that challenges the corporate order from below.[18] Following this perspective of the liberatory capacity of consumption, further research could expand our understanding of how social groups have used consumerism for political agendas. Group solidarity can be expressed through consumption as people draw their taste and values from subgroups, and self-liberation and collective solidarity make it possible to view consumerism as a medium for political subversion of, or even opposition to, the social order.[19] During the 1960s, for instance, the Montgomery bus boycotts or the lunch counter sit-ins motivated protesters to see their exclusion from the right to consume "as a daily denial of what being an American had come to mean". In *A Consumers' Republic,* Cohen stressed the ways African-Americans turned the notion of equality of consumers in a free market into a political argument for racial justice.[20]

Ethnicity can create business opportunities as well. While previously restricted to crowded urban districts, "Chinatowns" reflected the distinct culinary taste and exotic communities of Chinese and Asian immigrants, turning it into an Orientalist space to lure more tourists.[21] Focusing on the San Francisco's Chinese New Year festivals, Chiou-Ling Yeh analyzes how Chinese-American leaders used this cultural production to negotiate difficult political, economic, and social conditions in mainstream society. From a private celebration, the Chinese New Year was transformed into a commercialized and community-wide public event from 1953, as Chinese-American leaders staged these ethnic celebration as a way to fight Cold War politics and rhetoric, Yeh claims. Her work argues how large-scale leisure activities such as the traditional New Year festival helped "reshape the material, social, cultural, and racial space of the United States".[22]

Whether it follows ethnic celebrations and individual choices, or is instead a corporate instrument serving a hegemonic function within advanced, industrialized societies, consumption has long been central to American identity, culture, economic development, and politics.[23] This research shows that consumption has been treated as political activity, popular culture, a symbol of modernity itself, and above all, a moral danger in the eyes of conservatives. Perceived as cornucopia of economic possibilities and

[18] Cohen, "Escaping Steigerwald's "Plastic Cages", 409-410.
[19] Steigerwald, "All Hail the Republic of Choice: Consumer History as Contemporary Thought", 388
[20] Cohen, "Escaping Steigerwald's "Plastic Cages", 411; Steigerwald, "All Hail the Republic of Choice: Consumer History as Contemporary Thought", 403.
[21] Chiou-Ling Yeh, ""In the Traditions of China and in the Freedom of America": The Making of San Francisco's Chinese New Year Festivals", in: *American Quarterly* 56 (2004) 396.
[22] Yeh, "In the Traditions of China and in the Freedom of America", 395-396.
[23] Glickman, "Born to Shop?", 1.

consumer pleasures, the United States remained a republic of virtue and Puritan ethics as well. This duality became more pressing as prosperity increased and the foundations of a consumer economy were laid, leading nineteenth-century intellectuals, moral reformers and conservatives to express their concerns about the ambiguous national character. Celebrants of consumer culture were countered by its opponents, which still holds true for contemporary America. And as long as a mass consumer economy exists, the debate about what consumption means for Americans and their country will continue to linger on.

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