

Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe 1650-1850

Review Number:

162

Publish date:

Monday, 1 January, 2001

Author:

Maxine Berg

Helen Clifford

Date of Publication:

1999

Pages:

272pp.

Publisher:

Manchester University Press

Place of Publication:

Manchester

Reviewer:

Matthew Hilton

The Economists are peculiar people. They all recognise the importance of consumption, but most seem loath to discuss the details. Occasional general observations might be made, such as those contained in the theories of marginal utility or the elasticity of demand, but specific goods are only mentioned in a number of asides which seem to reflect more the tastes and prejudices of the economist than some objective criterion of worth or value. In fact, economists could be quite fussy shoppers: John Stuart Mill did not like pineapples or champagne, though he was quite keen on work coats; Alfred Marshall preferred cabbage to green peas in the month of March; and William Thompson desired more hearty bread instead of 'prancing horses and gay clothing'. No wonder current introductory textbooks prefer the homogenous 'utils' to this riot of idiosyncrasy. Instead, cultural critics – and British ones especially – are given the task of telling consumers what to buy. John Ruskin and William Morris drew up lengthy shopping lists of virtuous taste for the working classes, J. B. Priestley explained exactly where to buy the best tobacco, and George Orwell even informed his unfortunate readers on how to make a decent cup of tea.

Delving into this detail is what Berg and Clifford's edited collection is all about. In the eleven chapters an analysis can be found of coffee and sugar, tulips and colours, jewellery and silver plate, food and clothing, paintings and travel guides, and a whole host of fashionable items commercially produced for the first time in the eighteenth century. Together, the contributions seek to extend the work on the concept of luxury and examine how it was applied to discussions of the middling orders from the late seventeenth to the early-nineteenth centuries. *Consumers and Luxury* sees the concept of luxury not as a problem in political thought or as a literary issue, but as a very real and practical contemporary discussion about the meaning of goods and their social function for those who were neither elites nor plebeians. In their introduction, Berg and Clifford consider such an approach as part of a new interdisciplinary project which owes much to the influential edited collections of John Brewer and his various collaborators. Here, in a conspicuous case of academic fratricide, they deliberately fail to mention the bouncing, spending, emulating, baby of Neil McKendrick's prolonged metaphor in his contributions to *The Birth of Consumer Society*. Instead, in a rich

discussion of Adam Smith, Daniel Defoe and Malachy Postlethwayt, they argue that ‘alongside a contemporary debate on luxury, social and economic writers of the period were investigating the class structures, psychological assumptions and aesthetic values which underlay a widely observed expansion of consumer expenditure’ (10). The means to understand consumer society in the eighteenth century, therefore, is not to ascribe some monocausal explanation to economic change, but to examine the complex variety of associations attached to goods and their users at a time when the numbers of both consumers and commodities expanded enormously.

The three best essays in the collection are grouped together in an opening section on ‘luxury and necessity’. Neil De Marchi attempts to resolve the apparent contradiction in Adam Smith’s recognition of the importance of consumption ‘as the sole end and purpose of all production’ and his personal high-handed dismissal of the ‘trinkets’ and ‘baubles’ of commerce (he was even ready to burn his pants on a point of principle). Speculatively, yet persuasively, we are told that Smith was in fact able to maintain a coherent attitude to consumption: fashionable goods he may have found ‘frivolous and useless’ but largely harmless; savings and expensive possessions were useful since they could be exchanged for living labour at some future date; and, according to what De Marchi calls the principle of ‘fitness’, Smith could appreciate the virtues of skill and ingenuity in goods and the application of mental invention to produce useful objects. In what is, whatever the title may suggest, largely an anglocentric volume, Rebecca Spang and Colin Jones extend the field of inquiry to France. Combining both an intelligent analysis of the archival detail and a masterly grasp of the scholarly debates, they demonstrate the fluctuating boundary between necessity and luxury throughout the eighteenth century, so that even the most heroic revolutionaries and renouncers of luxury were possessors of many goods and were acutely fashion conscious. It was the middling rank of goods that had become important: riots were not about the price of bread but over sugar and coffee; Robespierre always needed his hair powder; and the sans-culottes could not imagine life *sans tabac*.

The most comprehensive overview of new goods and their middling consumers is offered in Berg’s individual chapter on what she identifies as semi-luxuries. These were not simply the psychoactive substances of Goodman, Lovejoy and Sherrat’s *Drugs in History*, the exotic produce of James Walvin’s *Fruits of Empire*, or the *genusmittel* of Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s *Tastes of Paradise*. They were printed calicoes, light furnishings, ceramics and glass, clocks and watches and countless decorative objects – goods which had appeared formerly as luxuries but had been ‘imitated’ by British manufacturers for a wider market. ‘Imitation’ in production was not done simply to encourage emulation, since it also involved the adaptation of ancient or exotic principals and designs, stimulating novelty and invention. Berg thus introduces a potentially important concept, but it requires much further elaboration to be entirely convincing, though we can usefully add it to the other studies which have demonstrated the range of reasons accounting for middle-class taste in the eighteenth century.

At this point in the book, the subjects for analysis begin to shoot off in all directions, though a few remain committed to the editors’ aim of exploring luxury and the middling orders. Emma Spary provides a fascinating examination of the debates over food in post-revolutionary France, at a time of the rise of the bourgeois consumer. Bringing together the history of science, culture and politics, she is able to make convincing claims such as the following: the language of food ‘had a genuine political message: hunger created an honesty which prevailed over the contrived excesses of Republican heroes, ancient or modern; food unravelled the tightly controlled self-representations of Sparta and exposed them as absurd.’ Helen Clifford, in a meticulously researched contribution on precious metalwork in early modern England, argues that there was an important shift in attitudes from valuing silver for its intrinsic quantitative worth to one where craftsmanship and decoration could be appreciated on the less-expensive silver plated decorations of the fashionable urban tea-table. Stena Nenadic, following Colin Campbell’s *Romantic Ethic*, takes the debates into the nineteenth century. She neatly sets out the range of books, pianos, tourist routes, art manuals and nationalist ideas through which the middle classes could consume a Biedermeier version of

domesticated Romanticism in which the fashionable literary concerns with loss (of love, of life, of riches, of causes) could be resolved through material possessions rather than religious belief. Charlotte Klonk brings the volume to a close with an examination of London's National Gallery. In such nineteenth-century institutions, art no longer served the rather aristocratic function of improving sensory and social refinement. Instead, it was said to improve morally its middle-class observers, both through raising consciousness to a higher purpose in life abstracted from daily reality and by creating an awareness of the nation's artistic achievements.

Many of the other essays, however, do not seem to tie in so closely with the editor's concerns and could well have been published in any number of the collections that have appeared on the eighteenth century in recent years. Indeed, the articles by Marcia Pointon (on jewellery) and Fiona Ffoulkes (on fashion and luxury clothing) return to the social elites as the focus of their studies. Pointon principally considers mourning rings, night earrings and buckles for stays and, although she repeats the consumer culturalists' mantra that there is more to commodity-use than the conspicuous displays of Veblen and Bourdieu's analyses, the frequency of diamonds and gold in her objects suggests a limited social diffusion which is, in any case, not discussed. At times, the fashion historian Ffoulkes' article descends into a list of the nobles, queens and empresses of Europe catered for by the exceptionally elite Parisien *marchand des modes*, Louis Hippolyte LeRoy. Two further articles by Bianchi (on tulips) and Lowengard (on colour) hardly offer profound insights into consumption. Bianchi tells us that novelty is a crucial stimulant to consumption and Lowengard proves that the past was not in black and white since colour was important in the eighteenth century too. No doubt the latter's ongoing research will produce a useful and welcome contribution to the growing history of the senses, but the former's lack of research suggests that her contribution was essentially a means to voice a criticism of economists than to offer a historical essay. Her point is that economists have failed to take account of novelty since they dismiss it as irrational – that may be so, but does she really expect them to incorporate such a concept into their models?

Consumers and Luxury is the result of the first workshop (in 1996) organised by the Warwick Eighteenth Century Research Centre. As such, we can expect more publications on their 'luxury project' which are committed to the editors' agenda of making the middling orders the principal focus of intellectual and literary history, but also of cultural and economic history. However, the project is by no means as distinctive as is made out in the introduction. Since that workshop was held, several important contributions have emerged which offer similar analyses, most significantly Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough's *The Sex of Things*. Berg and Clifford's collection is thus unlikely to achieve the same status as Brewer and Porter's *Consumption and the World of Goods*. Other universities have also created their own interdisciplinary eighteenth-century studies departments and the publication of a source book – E. Mackie, *The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from 'The Tatler' and 'The Spectator'* - suggests that the interest in the middling orders is by no means confined to Warwick. But in the core of essays based around the editors' main concerns, *Consumers and Luxury* offers some high quality research and a number of ideas (principally: De Marchi on Smith and 'fitness'; Spang and Jones' stress on the fluctuating boundary between necessity and luxury; and Berg's emphasis on 'imitation') that deserve to be read and tested by further research in future years. Berg and Clifford are to be praised for making more 'real' the rather too abstract categories of eighteenth-century political and economic thought.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/162#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/809>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>