The Making of CONSUMER CULTURE in Modern Britain

ALARMING SACRIFICE.

Peter Gurney

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations vii
List of Abbreviations viii

1 Historicizing Consumer Culture 1

PART ONE A New World of Goods: 1800–1870

Preface 19

2 Producing Consumers: Consumption Practices 21

3 Alternative Paths: The Politics of Consumption 41

PART TWO Making a Mass Market: 1870–1920

Preface 63

4 Image Worlds: The Rise of Modern Advertising 65

5 Shopping as Pleasure: Department Stores 87

6 Co-op Commonwealth: Consumer Organizing 109

PART THREE A Consumers' Democracy: 1920–2000

Preface 133

7 Ideal Home: The Growth of the New Consumerism 135

8 Mass Consumerism: From Austerity to Affluence 157

9 Consumer Culture: The Hegemony of Choice 179

Epilogue: Satisfaction Guaranteed? 201

Notes 211
Select Bibliography 263
Index 269

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1 George Cruikshank, 'The Dispersion of the Works of All Nations from the Great Exhibition of 1851', in Henry Mayhew, *1851: Or, the Adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys and Family* (1851). 29

Figure 2 George Cruikshank, 'Alarming Sacrifice', *Comic Almanack* (1851). 38

Figure 3 Anti-Corn Law League membership card, 1839. 44

Figure 4 C. J. Grant, 'The Modern Nero', *Penny Satirist*, 30 October 1841. 54

Figure 5 'The Age of Advertising', *Fun*, 21 January 1885. 77

Figure 6 'The Greedy Soap Trust', *Daily Mirror*, 22 October 1906. 79

Figure 7 'Selling off Winter Stock', *Snap-Shots: Humorous Pictures and Amusing Reading*, 19 January 1895. 95

Figure 8 Fred Pegram, 'The Dedication of a Great House', 1909. 105

Figure 9 Liberal postcard, 1905. 126

Figure 10 Conservative Party leaflet, 1910. 128

Figure 11 Advertisement for opening of Marks & Spencer store, November 1936. 139

Figure 12 Fred Hayward, *The Co-operative Boycott and Its Political Implications* (1930). 151

Figure 13 George Chrystal, *News of the World*, 27 May 1962. 171

Figure 14 David Low, *Guardian*, 10 June 1960. 176

Figure 15 Charles Griffin, *Daily Mirror*, 12 May 1988. 186

Figure 16 Martin Rowson, *Guardian*, 28 September 1998. 199

ABBREVIATIONS

BMA	British Medical Association
BMP	Boase, Massimi, Pollitt
CPS	Centre for Policy Studies
CA	Consumers' Association
CAI	Council for Art and Industry
CIC	Co-operative Independent Commission
CWS	Co-operative Wholesale Society
EMB	Empire Marketing Board
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IEA	Institute of Economic Affairs
JWT	J. Walter Thompson
NCC	National Consumer Council
NFTL	National Fair Trade League
NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
RPM	Resale Price Mechanism
SCA	Shadow Communications Agency
SCAPA	Society for Checking the Abuses of Public Advertising
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
WCG	Women's Co-operative Guild
WSOC	Wider Share Ownership Council
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union

1

Historicizing Consumer Culture

In early August 2011, serious riots broke out on the streets of London. Triggered by the shooting of an alleged criminal by the Metropolitan Police, they soon spread to other cities across England. Five people died in the disturbances and about 2,500 shops were looted in total, rioters helping themselves to designer clothing, flat screen televisions and other expensive consumer durables. Police reported that nearly 3,300 offences were committed in London, more than a third of which involved looting. The cost of damage to property was estimated at upwards of £200 million; a Miss Selfridge store was set alight in the centre of Manchester causing £500,000 worth of damage alone. For Prime Minister David Cameron the riots were evidence of a more general moral malaise – a sign of a 'broken Britain' – while the head of research for a leading City broker blamed the unrest on the 'consumerist ethos, in which a materialist vision is both peddled and, for the vast majority, simultaneously ruled out by exclusion', with damaging social and economic consequences.[1] In a similar vein, the Marxist sociologist Zygmunt Bauman contended that these riots were the actions of 'defective and disqualified consumers'. The problem of absolute scarcity may have been solved, Bauman observed – rioters were not stealing bread after all – but those who were denied the good things in life felt isolated and, as 'defective consumers', they were frequently shut out from shops and shopping, which had acquired a 'truly eschatological dimension' in modern society, lending meaning to people's lives.[2] Criminologists later supported this interpretation, coining the memorable phrase 'aggravated shopping' to describe the looting that had occurred. Denied a formal political voice or institutional power, the mainly young men and women who took part in the unrest had 'nowhere to take their anger and resentment but the shops'.[3] There were other motives behind the riots besides thwarted consumerism, as more recent academic studies have shown.[4] Nevertheless, these motives were certainly important and it is also significant that this aspect was what attracted most attention at the time, across the ideological spectrum. The riots of 2011 undoubtedly exposed deep-rooted anxieties about modern

consumer culture, anxieties that had been pushed conveniently to one side during the good times but which had gradually come more to the fore since the financial crisis began in 2008.

No one could deny that the language of consumption is now ubiquitous. Our 'consumer choice' rather than our productive activity is widely regarded as *the* source of self-definition and identity: 'I shop therefore I am', as the American artist Barbara Kruger wryly observed. We are constantly addressed as consumers and the virtues of consumption are regularly proclaimed, not only by advertisers and entrepreneurs but also by politicians and commentators of all kinds. No mainstream political party would dare tell 'citizen-consumers' that they ought to significantly lower their material expectations, except to meet the exigencies of a short-term emergency. Admittedly, discordant notes are sounded quite frequently nowadays, by religious leaders concerned about rampant materialism or by environmentalists understandably worried about the effects of our seemingly insatiable appetite for things on the natural world. The onset of the 'credit crisis' prompted the Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, to link these anxieties on BBC Radio 4 in 2009. 'We call ourselves "consumers" and fail to see the irony. To consume is to devour and to destroy', Jones noted, and he continued, 'I imagine that historians of the twenty-second century might look back with incredulity that we could have called ourselves so comfortably "the consumer society", plundering and consuming the earth as if it were some limitless larder. If you couple our cavalier attitude to consumption to the reality of the debt we are now in both nationally and, for many of us, personally, you begin to realise just how much more serious the situation really is.'[5] This powerful argument for personal and social reflection on the meaning of consumption gained a hearing for a short while, when it seemed as if our economic system was on the brink of collapse. But such voices were soon drowned out amid the general chorus of approval, as commercial and political elites looked eagerly for signs of rising 'consumer confidence' that would portend a return of plenty.[6]

When did consumerism assume this central position in British life? Recalling their own experiences, some scholars have suggested that an important turning point occurred towards the end of the twentieth century. The literary critic Rachel Bowlby, for example, has observed that until the 1960s and 1970s the phrase 'consumer society' carried largely pejorative connotations, referring to a deluded, usually female population – easy prey for manipulative advertisers. By the turn of the century, however, 'a remarkable rhetorical turnabout' had taken place, whereby 'the consumer has been elevated to a status of exemplary good sense in areas extending far beyond shopping itself'.[7] Similarly, Avner Offer, retired Chichele Professor of Economic History at the University of Oxford, pinpoints the late Thatcher years as a key moment of change, remembering that 'no longer did notices and loudspeakers speak to travellers as "passengers", or to sick people as "patients". They were now addressed as "customers".' Musing on the

significance of this linguistic shift, Offer suggests that 'it appears almost as the ideological mirror image of the use of the term "comrade" in the Soviet Union. Customers were supposed to be "empowered" by "choice".'[8] The view that profound change occurred in the late twentieth century has a lot to recommend it, though the roots go back a very long way indeed. Consequently, this book explores how our consumption habits have changed over the past two hundred years, particularly our consumption of consumer goods. Some major omissions have had to be made, primarily for reasons of space. Little is said in the pages that follow about housing, for instance – the cost of which represented a large percentage of private expenditure, particularly for working-class consumers throughout the nineteenth century and well beyond – or leisure, sport and tourism, areas of social life which also came to be thoroughly commercialized during the period covered by this book.[9] The focus here is mainly on the sphere of retailing and the practice of shopping for everyday goods, the most immediate and quotidian signs of modern consumer culture.

The generally positive contemporary dominance of 'consumer' and 'consumption' as descriptive nouns for the use of all kinds of goods and services tells us a great deal about the kind of society we now live in. 'Consume' dates back to the fourteenth century and was originally almost always used in a negative sense, meaning to use up or waste, as the Bishop of Liverpool reminded listeners. This negative sense can still be found in 'consumed by fire' and consumption as a popular description of tuberculosis that caused people to literally waste away. Similarly, 'consumer' was negatively freighted when it entered the language in the sixteenth century. From the mid-eighteenth century, however, this word began to be used in a more neutral sense within the emergent discipline of political economy and, as the capitalist market extended its reach, spheres of human activity began to be conceived more abstractly in terms of production and consumption, with corresponding identities defined increasingly as producer and consumer. Negative connotations of consumer were remarkably persistent though, continuing until the late nineteenth century at least.[10] 'Consumerism' was used during the interwar period in America but only appeared in Britain after the Second World War. It carried two distinct meanings, referring to movements of organized consumers that had developed to protect consumer interests between the wars, but also conveying a more general sense of a growing propensity to consume. Some tried to give the term a positive spin early on. In 1955 the *Daily Express* quoted the vice president of Ford who proposed that '"consumerism" be substituted for "capitalism"' owing to the fact that the 'consumer is the real boss and beneficiary' of the economic system.[11] But opprobrium stubbornly clung to the term, which only increased following the publication in the late 1950s of books by American intellectuals such as J. K. Galbraith and Vance Packard that were critical of the 'affluent society' (another neologism) and its methods.[12] Both 'consumer society' and 'consumer culture' also tended to be used pejoratively from about

this time, usually to condemn the supposed shallowness and moral vacuity of a commercialized 'mass culture'.[13] Talking about George Lichtenstein's graphic art in 1964, for example, a correspondent writing in *The Times* spoke about how it captured 'the utter banality of mass consumer culture'.[14] Clearly, then, these concepts are highly complex and come loaded with a great deal of historical baggage.[15]

This complexity has led some historians to deny the usefulness of terms such as 'consumerism', 'consumer society' and 'consumer culture' altogether.[16] We need to be wary of over-generalized, imprecise concepts, certainly, and we ought to be careful of moralistic attacks on people's consumer practices in the past. Middle-class intellectuals have often been too quick to denounce the materialistic 'consumerism' of the 'masses', easy to do when one has enough of the good things in life oneself.[17] Nevertheless, there is no need surely to reject these terms out of hand so long as we are aware of their problematic and changing meanings – after all, we need concepts to think with and help make sense of the past and present. The concept of a 'consumer culture', for instance, helps us to grasp the fact that a whole way of life has been constructed around the consumer and to realize how consumption now figures as a motivating centre around which other aspects of social life revolve. This is not to suggest that every aspect of our lives have been commoditized or that consumption is now the only source of identity; work remains an important source of meaning for many people and some simple pleasures are still free, but the reach of consumer culture seems clear enough. Its eventual hegemony depended on the agency of numerous manufacturers, retailers, advertisers, newspaper proprietors, publishers and politicians as well as countless numbers of men, women and children whose day-to-day purchasing decisions made modern consumer culture possible. When and why did people want more goods and how did they acquire them? What did commentators say about the transformations that this widening market entailed and how did they evaluate these changes?

The answer to why people desired more things has often been regarded by historians as self-evident, particularly as far as working-class consumers are concerned; they wanted more 'comforts' in order to 'ameliorate' lives that were frequently impoverished by material scarcity.[18] Of course, there is some truth in this argument but it is seriously flawed. It underestimates the way different groups in society had competing visions of consumption and sought to organize consumers to make those visions real. It ignores the way consumer culture was shaped by government policy, sometimes restrained or channelled in certain ways, at other times encouraged and celebrated. In short, instinctivist explanations for the emergence and generalization of consumer culture ignore questions of power – how the making of consumer culture was necessarily a political process that involved the triumph of particular historical alternatives and the suppression of others. This study of the making of consumer culture in Britain over the past two centuries explores such issues, presenting an overview of and a route through a

vibrant field of inquiry. It argues that the consumer culture which emerged during this period was shaped as much by political relationships as it was by economic and social factors.

Some theoretical perspectives

Historical understanding of this subject has perhaps been hindered as much as helped by the work of earlier social theorists who tended to share the generally negative stance towards consumption traditionally adopted by many intellectuals. It is not the intention here to discuss theoretical perspectives in detail, though a brief consideration might be useful. Karl Marx may have accompanied his wife, Jenny, on shopping trips and been obsessed with the burgeoning world of goods on the streets of mid-Victorian London, but his analysis of capitalism focused squarely on production and he had remarkably little to say about consumption. Classes, for Marx, were formed by virtue of their relationship to the means of production and the majority, the working class, who had nothing to sell but their labour power, were alienated both from the products of their labour, which were taken from them by the owners of capital, and from the wider society, over which they had little or no control. He prophesied that finding their exploitation increasingly unbearable, organized producers would eventually rise up to overthrow the dominant economic system and replace it with socialism.

Although Marx tended to ignore the specificities of Victorian consumerism – including the opportunities it afforded for organized consumer action – a relatively minor aspect of his analysis of the commodity form in the first volume of *Capital* (1867) has subsequently been highly suggestive: the idea of 'commodity fetishism'. Marx argued that as commodities were torn from the social and historical relationships that had brought them into existence, they took on the properties of a religious fetish. As totemic objects of worship, commodities appeared to have fallen from the skies and presented themselves not as products of labour but as endowed with lives of their own, seemingly able to bring themselves to market. The exchange of the products of labour in the capitalist market created ideological mystification, turning everything on its head and making the social world appear topsy-turvy. Relations between people thus took on the quality of relations between things or were reified, while things were typically personified, taking on characters of their own. Marx wrote:

> The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from

> and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social … It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.[19]

Although somewhat tangential to Marx's theoretical project and highly speculative, many literary and cultural critics have found the notion of 'commodity fetishism' very useful, helping them to better understand the transformation of the role of advertising, for instance, as advertisers, it is thought, implicitly grasped the mystical or 'phantasmagorical' nature of the commodity and used it to their advantage.

More influential, as far as historians of consumption are concerned, have been the ideas of the late nineteenth century American sociologist, Thorstein Veblen. The son of Norwegian immigrants, Veblen's Lutheran religious background no doubt shaped his views, as did his fraught relationship with the academy and his outsider persona. In his caustic analysis of the plutocracy, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Veblen argued that consumer goods did not merely fulfil material needs but were complex, highly symbolic phenomena. In an increasingly urbanized, anonymous modern society, Veblen believed, people used dress and other commodities to say things about themselves, particularly their status. The rich displayed their wealth and asserted their power by means of wasteful 'conspicuous consumption', often showing off their possessions in a highly ritualistic, even theatrical manner. However, it was not just the idle rich who acted in this way; all groups were affected, including the middle classes with more disposable income and also artisans and workers. Moreover, Veblen emphasized that consumption practices were frequently gendered and that men and women had access to different kinds of goods. This had been the case in pre-capitalist, 'traditional' societies, but differences persisted in the modern world; women were generally prohibited from consuming narcotics such as tobacco and spirits, for example. Finally, and most importantly, Veblen suggested that peoples' consumption habits could best be explained in terms of 'social emulation'; whenever possible, individuals copied the consumption practices of their superiors, were forever craning their necks and looking upwards, taking their consumption cues from those above them in the social and economic hierarchy.[20] Veblen expressed these ideas with venomous wit, deflating the pretentions of the super-rich of his time such

as the Vanderbilts, and attacking their wasteful expenditure as immoral. His emphasis on the symbolic meanings of goods and the gendered nature of consumption was valuable but other aspects of his work have attracted much criticism, especially the notion of social emulation as an explanation for why people want goods. As many scholars have pointed out, most consumers are not forever looking upwards and desiring goods always out of reach. Instead, they seek to consume goods that enable them to better fit in and identify with the socio-economic group to which they belong, rather than that to which they aspire. Thus, consumption practices are more often about maintaining one's position in the race rather than winning, looking sideways rather than above.[21]

Whereas Marx's sense of the 'fetishism' of commodities was influenced by the shopping streets of Victorian London, and Veblen's views on 'conspicuous consumption' were shaped by the showy excesses of American plutocrats during the fin de siècle, the critique of consumer society produced by the French intellectual Jean Baudrillard was grounded in the post–Second World War shopping mall. In *La Société de Consummation* (1970), Baudrillard brought the developing study of semiotics to the analysis of consumer culture. In this work, Baudrillard rejected Marx's overriding emphasis on production, arguing that modern capitalism was best understood from the perspective of consumption. He contested the idea that people were simply duped into wanting more things by canny advertisers who created 'false' needs, as liberal thinkers like the American economist J. K. Galbraith had maintained. Baudrillard questioned the instinctivist basis of this argument, suggesting that the definition of needs was far more complex than moralistic critics of modern consumerism allowed; the boundary between wasteful 'luxury' and basic 'necessity', for instance, was historically contingent and therefore constantly changing. Like Marx and Veblen, Baudrillard stressed that commodities were complex things, which carried symbolic meanings and functioned as signifiers. Understood as a totality, consumer goods constituted a kind of language through which buyers articulated both their real and imagined desires. Linked together in the mail-order catalogue or in displays behind plate-glass windows in department stores, the desire for particular commodities was part of what he called a 'general hysteria', which Baudrillard likened to the pathology of this mental illness – the desire for particular goods was analogous to the way in which various symptoms paraded themselves in patients suffering from hysteria. The quintessential space where this disease of modern capitalism could be found was the shopping mall. The implications were grim. For Baudrillard, Western consumers strolling through these climate-controlled utopias were unwitting inhabitants of a new kind of prison, akin to Max Weber's bureaucratic iron cage but constructed instead from their own insatiable desires. Feeding off 'general hysteria', contemporary consumer society according to Baudrillard was nothing other than a form

of 'social control', and he argued that 'the current training in systematic, organized consumption is the equivalent and extension, in the twentieth century, of the great nineteenth-century-long process of the training of rural populations for industrial work'. Attempts by consumers to reform this system were destined to fail because they lacked agency and were necessarily divided rather than united by their practices and identities as consumers.[22]

The eighteenth-century context

These key thinkers analysed consumption as either 'fetishism', 'emulation' or 'hysteria'. They not only shared a highly negative outlook, their theories also lacked historical specificity and failed to explain precisely when and how modern consumerism had emerged or how it had contributed to the enormous changes that had taken place since industrialization.[23] With these questions in mind, a number of historians have traced the roots of consumer society in Britain back to the seventeenth century and earlier.[24] The most ambitious (or foolhardy) have sought to construct an even wider frame, narrating the ineluctable global march of the 'empire of things' across more than half a millennia.[25] Many historians, however, look for origins in the eighteenth century. The enormously rich historical work in this field that has appeared over the last three decades or so employed some of the theoretical insights that have been briefly discussed. Neil McKendrick's path-breaking work leans heavily on Veblen's notion of social emulation, for example. According to McKendrick, the eighteenth century witnessed nothing less than a 'consumer revolution' – a transformation as profound as the revolution in production – as growing numbers of consumers eagerly bought the latest china, furniture and furnishings, clothing, and imported slave-produced foodstuffs such as sugar, tea, and coffee. Evidence of this new material culture was obvious to foreign observers, who drew contrasts with the relative lack of consumer goods elsewhere in Europe. A combination of factors accounted for this British peculiarity: the growth and increasing prosperity of the 'middling ranks' of society; the size and importance of London as a commercial centre; the overturning of the economic doctrine of mercantilism, which aimed at achieving a balanced rather than an expanding economy and which denigrated imported foreign 'luxuries' as morally dubious and enervating; and the spread of fashion consciousness among all levels of society, including among the large class of domestic servants that provided a vital link in the chain of consumption, as even the lower orders had an eye for the latest bonnet, taking their cues from their social superiors. The notion that an increasing propensity to consume was the motor of economic advance slowly spread before 1776 when Adam Smith could state in the *Wealth of Nations* that 'consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be

attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. The maxim is … perfectly self-evident.'[26]

In McKendrick's account, fashion was no longer regarded as a trivial phenomenon, best left to amateur (and frequently female) historians, but featured instead as a motor of economic change. Its influence was spread by the production of cheap fashion dolls and numerous periodicals such as the *Lady's Magazine*, which published the first colour fashion print in 1771. The industrial revolution depended on the sale of humble products like beer, buckles and buttons, knives and forks, cups and saucers and cheap cottons, and contemporary commentators often remarked how all ranks participated in the new consumerism; the *London Magazine* in 1772 complaining that 'the lower orders of the people (if there are any, for distinctions are now confounded) are equally emerged in their fashionable vices'. Although London set the pace, 'Scotch drapers' and other itinerant traders brought goods within reach of provincial consumers and shops such as Browns of Chester also catered for the expanding wants of genteel consumers far from the metropolis.[27] Entrepreneurs like Josiah Wedgwood played a vanguard role in stimulating consumer desire. The Staffordshire potter was a major promoter of the 'china mania' that gripped Europe's rich during the last third of the eighteenth century. His astonishing success was due not to pricing (his goods were actually more expensive than most of his rivals'), nor to draconian methods of labour control, though these were employed at his factory at Etruria, but owed more to Wedgwood's astute marketing strategy: 'One of the most brilliant and sustained campaigns in the history of consumer exploitation'. Wedgwood went to great lengths to ensure that his goods were judged fashionable, securing the patronage of royalty, nobility and gentry, and he made extensive use of warehouses and showrooms not only in London but also in Bath, Liverpool, Dublin and elsewhere, as well as pushing his products nationwide through exhibitions, trademarks, press advertisements and travelling salesmen. When he died a very wealthy man in 1795, people no longer spoke of 'common pewter' but of 'common Wedgwood'.[28]

A generation of scholars have fleshed out these insights. The sociologist Colin Campbell, for example, argued that romanticism provided the ideological underpinnings of modern consumerism in the eighteenth century, encouraging greater reflection on the self and a quest for hedonistic pleasure, which, like romantic love, could never be fully satisfied. As such, it complemented the discipline of the Protestant work ethic that Max Weber famously suggested had made possible the rise of capitalism during the preceding century.[29] Unsurprisingly, historians tended to take a less speculative approach to the subject. One of the most useful studies to appear was Lorna Weatherill's monograph based on a national sample of about 3,000 probate inventories that listed household goods of deceased persons from the middle ranks between 1675 and 1725. From this kind of evidence, one is able to gain a less impressionistic picture of the spread of

material possessions, the kinds of goods people purchased and the kinds of people who bought them. Weatherill concluded that those engaged in trade, commerce, and professional occupations were more likely to own fashionable domestic goods than those engaged in agricultural occupations, underlining the importance of urban consumption, as did research by other scholars.[30] She found that despite their higher social standing, the lesser gentry were less likely to own most kinds of goods than commercial and professional people and contested earlier explanations that relied on Veblen and the idea of social emulation to explain consumer practice. Importantly, Weatherill also stressed that 'we should be very cautious about accepting that the market extended as far down the social hierarchy' as McKendrick had maintained, as the middle ranks – between the upper gentry and labourers – constituted the most important consumer markets. Although admitting the relationship between status and ownership of goods, she helpfully observed that 'the theory of emulation, while applicable in some cases, can easily be overstated with little regard for the practical and social situations of people's lives or the exact nature of the social hierarchy'.[31]

Other historians have used qualitative sources to explore the social life of goods more deeply. Using letters and diaries of provincial women in Georgian Lancashire, Amanda Vickery has researched genteel consumption in meticulous detail, allowing greater understanding of how goods were appropriated by their owners and the meanings that were assigned to them. She shows how genteel women used material culture to construct their social identities and assert their status: 'Mahogany, silver, porcelain and silk all announced the wealth and taste of the privileged. A shared material culture united polite families.' Metropolitan gentlefolk may have regarded themselves as cutting edge with their Chippendale furniture but North-West elites were not in their shadow, actively preferring the productions of Gillows of Lancaster as less showy, better lasting. The world of goods was gendered of course; a gentlewomen and housekeeper like Elizabeth Shackleton was the main household consumer but husband John bought big ticket items like their mahogany dining table. Consumption was not only about keeping up appearances either, as women invariably expressed their personalities by means of their possessions, especially dress. Again, evidence suggests that although they were often very fashion conscious, they did not simply follow the dictates of high fashion or mimic the styles of their economic and social superiors.[32] Early taste professionals advised them on the right things to buy in order to appear respectable rather than flashy.[33] Elizabeth Shackleton used goods to help maintain barriers between social groups but she also frequently endowed her things with emotional meaning and freighted them with family memories. Gift giving played an important role here. Shackleton sometimes gave cast-offs and small trinkets to her servants, hoping to strengthen bonds of obligation and deference thereby. However, she made servants in her employ no allowance for 'luxuries' such as tea, coffee and sugar, and keenly asserted her property rights when insubordinate servants

helped themselves. In the late 1770s, Shackleton recorded in her diary that she was 'much vexed' when she discovered that her cook was drinking full-cream milk, and fiercely contested the expropriation of what seemed to her to be illegitimate perquisites, indignantly complaining about how 'servants come to a high hand indeed'.[34]

We now know a great deal about many aspects of eighteenth-century consumerism. Detailed studies of colonial goods such as sugar, coffee and tea that were being transformed into everyday luxuries craved by both rich and poor – much to Shackleton's dismay – have deepened our understanding of both the local and global impact of commodity flows. Tea and coffee drinking became important rituals requiring a panoply of material accoutrements, which helped to cement gendered spheres of private and public life, frequently bridging both.[35] Clothing and footwear have also attracted historians, who have sometimes lent support – often on the basis of rather flimsy evidence – to the argument for an extension of demand down the social scale to plebeian consumers.[36] Unsurprisingly, the place where people purchased goods has also attracted attention and the subject of shops and shopping has been thoroughly re-evaluated.[37] Numbers of fixed shops increased across the century, though fairs, markets and hawkers continued to be important, especially for poorer consumers. Those towards the bottom of the social hierarchy no doubt benefited from the growth in fashion consciousness, which meant goods were passed down the chain more quickly to be resold by second-hand dealers, whose numbers grew in London and elsewhere.[38] For those who could afford it, shopping became a leisure pursuit in itself, approved practice bound up with the etiquette of politeness.[39] A contemporary source from 1764 was typically condemnatory, interpreting it as a symptom of lassitude and referring to the way in which 'Ladies are said to go a *Shopping*, when, in the Forenoon, *sick of themselves*, they order the Coach, and driving from Shop to Shop, without the slightest Intention of purchasing any thing, they *pester* the Tradesman, by requiring him to show them his Goods, at a great Expence of Time and Trouble.'[40]

A generally optimistic picture emerges from this literature of a dynamic commercial society, gradually improving the lives of the majority of the population.[41] The influential work of the economic historian Jan de Vries, who has described how an 'industrious revolution' took off in Britain during this period based on a relatively high wage economy compared to its European counterparts, lends support to this roseate view. According to de Vries, women and children as well as men were sucked into wage labour and they worked hard to better themselves and buy more goods – it was their 'industriousness' that depended intimately on new consumer desires which drove modern capitalism forward.[42] Despite the undoubted strengths of such arguments they are partial, as they tend to marginalize the existence of widespread scarcity and the prevalence of social and economic protest that regularly punctuated the polite veneer of Georgian society. As we have seen, evidence from probate inventories opens a window onto the

consuming habits of the middle ranks but they tell us nothing about the relationship between the labouring poor and the world of goods. This is not to say that the latter did not benefit sometimes from the greater amount and diversity of things in circulation – the odd second-hand coat or dress, a cotton frock, more sugar, tea, coffee and tobacco – but they remained poor relatively speaking, often went hungry, and resorted to direct action to vent their feelings. The historiographical trend has been to ignore the people whose lives were consumed by the growth of a consumer society, among historians of eighteenth century consumerism at least, or else to assure us on the basis of inconclusive evidence that they must have been benefiting from material advance.

The insights of E. P. Thompson still have much to offer here. In a famous article, Thompson reconstructed the workings of what he called the 'moral economy' that, he maintained, was eroded over the course of the eighteenth century. Labouring families were dependent on bread above all else, spending over half of their weekly income on it when prices were high. What Thompson termed the 'bread-nexus' was therefore intensely political, analogous to the 'cash nexus' of the nineteenth century, and generating a 'highly-sensitive consumer-consciousness'. Buyers and sellers met together in real markets – not the abstraction imagined by Adam Smith – and the bargains they struck were saturated with values and not determined by economic rationality alone. A paternalist model existing in eroded statute law, common law and custom condemned 'immoral' market practices such as forestalling, engrossing and regrating, which were used by avaricious millers and dealers to magnify their profits. This 'moral economy' commanded a good deal of assent across social groups and when that model was tested in times of dearth, plebeian consumers sprang to its defence. In bad years, when harvests failed or supplies were interrupted by war, the threat of starvation was very real indeed and well-disciplined crowds often forcibly seized corn and other goods, 'set the price' and distributed it to those in need in a ritualized, disciplined manner, action that frequently provoked sympathy from members of local elites who had not yet fully internalized the 'truths' of political economy like the 'law' of supply and demand. Increasingly, the model drifted away from reality as political economy grew stronger towards the end of the century and the spheres of morality and economics became more completely disaggregated in both theory and practice.[43]

Modern scholarship is divided on the usefulness of the idea of 'moral economy'. Some deny that it ever existed, pointing out that all economic systems are shot through with morality and that capitalism therefore cannot be accused of 'demoralizing' the economic sphere. At the moment this side seems to have the advantage.[44] It might be worth pausing, however, to consider what may be lost if the concept is thrown overboard too readily. Critics like Thompson are seeking to understand how the transition to industrial capitalism happened, and the idea that economics became 'disinfested of intrusive moral imperatives' is one way of grasping that transition.[45]

Interestingly, one well-known contemporary observer provides support for this approach, albeit rather tangentially. The doggerel poem and extended polemical commentary, *The Fable of the Bees*, which began life in 1714, has often been referred to by historians of eighteenth-century consumerism, for its author Bernard Mandeville emphasized the progressive stimulus of fashion that he believed affected all consumers, the poor emulating the rich whenever they could. For Mandeville, fashion and emulation were not trivial and suspect but were instead the mainsprings of economic growth. He wrote: 'To this Emulation and continual striving to outdo one another, it is owing, that after so many Shiftings and Changing of Modes, in trumping up new ones and renewing of old ones, there is still a *plus ultra* left for the Ingenious; it is this, or at least the consequence of it, that sets the Poor to Work, adds Spurs to Industry, and encourages the skilful Artificer to search after Improvements.'[46] But there was more to Mandeville than this. The book provoked a scandal when an enlarged edition was published in 1723 that lasted, remarkably, for the rest of the century; the Dutch-born London physician who pared the flesh of the body politic was called a 'MAN-DEVIL' and his book presented as a public nuisance by the grand jury of Middlesex. Mandeville's error was to tear back the polite skin of Georgian society to reveal the vices that propelled it forward. The bees in the allegorical poem that prefaced the work cleaned up their flourishing hive, denounced the sins of avarice, prodigality, pride, vanity and luxury that created insatiable wants, and drove these vices out. The hive soon collapsed, falling prey to rival hives that had no such scruples. Mandeville was suggesting that, to be successful, capitalist modernity had necessarily to be, if not immoral, then certainly amoral, hence the work's subtitle – *Private Vices, Publick Benefits*. Morality and commercial progress were incompatible, he thought – the notion of a moral capitalism simply absurd – and that was why his book was attacked so vehemently.[47] Adam Smith was still troubled by it in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and it was not until the 1930s that John Maynard Keynes sought to resuscitate Mandeville as an early exponent of under consumptionist theory.[48]

Structure and argument

Focusing mostly on retailing and shopping, in this book I tell the story of how forms and relations of consumption have changed over the past two centuries in Britain. Although many vital developments certainly took place in the eighteenth century and continuities were therefore important, the market for consumer goods did not expand to encompass the majority fully until the nineteenth century. Employed in ever-expanding numbers in workshops, factories and mines – as well as in the home – working people were increasingly dependent on the market for their everyday needs, while those further up the ladder enjoyed greater choice than ever before. The

growth of the 'mass market' was made possible by a combination of structural factors. The population of Britain expanded from nearly 11 million in 1801, to about 21 million in 1851, rising to over 37 million by 1901. People migrated to towns and cities looking for work and new urban centres like Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales sprang up almost overnight, sucking workers in from rural districts, while London continued to mushroom. Incomes also increased, for the middle but also for the working class, meaning that there was more money to spend in the shops and markets that boomed in tandem with the expansion of production. Technological and social change made it possible to produce more goods than ever before and more were consumed. The exact timing of the rise in real wages enjoyed by working people has been the subject of intense debate among historians for generations, 'pessimists' maintaining that the standard of living for the majority did not improve significantly until after mid-century, 'optimists' arguing for improvement decades earlier. This is a vast subject which is not only beyond the scope of the present book, it is also somewhat irrelevant to it.[49] One or two comments are necessary, however, especially as the 'dark satanic mills' view of the industrial revolution has been recently criticized as both misleading and outdated in a work that alternatively stresses the increased scope for individual advancement made possible by the new economy.[50] One might point to the expanding retailing sector and the burgeoning world of goods to buttress this argument, though it is a simplistic view which ignores the fact that a great many people protested against industrial capitalism in its early stages and sought to reform or replace it with more humane, democratic ways of consuming as well as producing goods. Many workers no doubt had a bit more cash in their pockets, even before mid-century, and they often spent it on 'luxuries' like tea and sugar as we shall see. But this did not mean that they were content with their lot or with their society, especially when those better off – who generally ignored their protests – enjoyed plenty as never before, while in bad years they still suffered from want of the necessities of life.

A major argument running through this book is that it is impossible to understand the making of consumer culture in modern Britain without placing power at the heart of things.[51] Like production, consumption is an intensely political sphere: the distribution, exchange and circulation of the products of social labour necessarily raise questions of power. Anthropologist Mary Douglas has put the point well. Goods, she observes, are arranged in 'vistas and hierarchies' that are neither fixed nor randomly arranged but under gird structures, 'anchored to human social purposes … [which] may well deserve all the criticism and moralizing that is generally given simply to the consumer's choice of goods', and she goes on to insist that there is 'no serious consumption theory possible that avoids some responsibility for social criticism. Ultimately, consumption is about power'.[52] Although historians of modern Britain were relatively slow to appreciate fully the importance of the politics of consumption, historians of the United States

were rather less tardy, publishing studies which explored key phases from the American Revolution to post–Second World War.[53] This may perhaps have something to do with the fact that intellectuals in the United States have often been less coy to admit the interpenetration of commercial and political domains than they have traditionally been in Britain. The influential American conservative historian Daniel Boorstin, for example, argued for an intimate connection between mass consumption and democracy; indeed he once defined the latter as no more than 'a set of institutions which aim to make everything available to everybody'.[54] Richard Cobden, leader of the Anti-Corn Law League that mobilized middle-class consumers behind the cause of free trade in Britain in the 1840s, would have heartily agreed with this crudely instrumentalist view.[55] However, citizenship and consumption have not usually been conflated so absolutely on this side of the Atlantic, where greater diffusion of goods has caused deep anxiety, for various reasons, across different social groups, as we shall see in the chapters that follow.

Although the present book focuses on Britain, this is not to deny the fact that consumerism was a global phenomenon. As has already been noted, some of the earliest commodities that fuelled growing and more widely diffused consumption were colonial goods – sugar, coffee and tea especially. From the outset, empire was inextricably bound up with the making of consumer culture in modern Britain and its continuing influence is easily demonstrated. A national focus remains useful, however, as consumer culture not only emerged at a very early stage in Britain, it also had different characteristics to those observable in other countries. A number of studies have appeared in recent years that have considerably deepened our understanding of these different paths of development as far as the consumer is concerned, including studies of the United States, France and East and West Germany,[56] and also Asia and Africa.[57] The notion that countries outside northern Europe and the United States were stagnant for consumers clearly no longer holds water. Moreover, desiring consumers have been found in various times as well as places, including Renaissance Italy, late Ming China and the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century. Just as one can find examples of capitalist social and economic relations before the industrial revolution took off in eighteenth-century Britain, then, so too can one discern acquisitive consumers in very different contexts. One must be careful, however, not to draw simplistic conclusions from this and flatten out historical change to argue that things have ever been thus.[58] What made Britain distinctive from the late eighteenth century onwards was that the capitalist market widened inexorably and that governments as well as entrepreneurs endeavoured to create conditions that encouraged its continued expansion in the belief that the spread of material 'comforts' among consumers was a necessary sign of economic progress and national greatness.

Adopting a chronological framework, this book considers how a consumer culture was constructed in Britain from the beginning of the

nineteenth century until the end of the twentieth. We can usefully divide these two centuries into three major phases and isolate three alternative 'consumption regimes' which existed and overlapped within these phases.[59] In the first phase, discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 and covering the period from the beginning of the nineteenth century until around 1870, industrial advances facilitated the mass production of more and cheaper goods. New ways of selling and marketing these goods stimulated consumption among all classes. Branding started to spread, the number and size of shops increased and advertising was better organized. Changes in representation also occurred, including a more positive identity for the consumer and a more elaborated language of goods. Alternative politics of consumption vied with one another. Chartists contended for a democratic consumerism that emphasized control and regulation of the emergent capitalist market to protect poor consumers and spread the benefits of industrialization more evenly. Conversely, middle-class radicals trumpeted a distinctive liberal consumerism, which emphasized the progressive effects of free markets and free trade that, it was thought, would maximize material improvement, which would eventually trickle down to the majority. Although anxieties continued to be generated by consumption, this latter creed enabled the middle classes to 'make peace with indulgence'.[60]

During the second phase discussed in Chapters 4–6, stretching from the onset of what historians used to call the 'Great Depression' in the late nineteenth century until just after the First World War, important quantitative but also qualitative changes occurred as the 'mass market' was enlarged and reimagined, notwithstanding the persistence of poverty revealed by social investigators. Major shifts took place during this phase as a number of factors came together to create a visibly different kind of economy and society. Advertising became increasingly sophisticated and extended its reach across both society and polity in conditions of growing industrial concentration and monopoly power; huge department stores emerged as temples to modern consumerism that spun fantasies or 'dream worlds' for large numbers of female but also male shoppers. Liberal consumerism and the hegemony of free trade came under pressure from other groups that purported to speak for the consumer during the fin de siècle, including 'fair traders' and socialists. A specifically imperial consumerism, backed by sections of the Conservative Party, gained a great deal of popular support from the turn of the century, as did a reinvigorated democratic consumerism articulated by the co-operative movement, the leaders of which believed that it was possible for working people to build a radical alternative to capitalism by means of the collective organization of their consumption practices.

The final phase discussed in Chapters 7–9 – the short twentieth century – witnessed the consolidation and full extension of the 'mass market' for consumer goods, increasingly produced by large multinational firms and sold by multiple shops and department stores, in the context of mass democratization. The spread of cheap luxuries was aided by new

developments in leisure and entertainment, most especially the cinema but also the mass press. Free trade was abandoned finally and imperial consumerism came more to the fore between the wars, though democratic consumerism continued to grow stronger. The policy of 'fair shares for all' pursued during the Second World War gave the latter a major fillip, though it soon faced pressure from a more confident capitalist consumerism, reinvigorated by a strident ideology of 'consumer sovereignty'. The ability of social democracy to effect thorough economic and social transformation was seriously undermined by its failure to treat the consumer seriously; historically, both Liberals and Conservatives had more time for consumer interests than Labour, and the latter squandered the opportunities afforded by the co-operative movement, which went into inexorable decline after it lost 'the battle of the consumer' during the 1950s. Liberal consumerism was reconfigured by neo-liberalism, which championed the consumer when the golden age of capitalism eventually ended in the early 1970s. Trading on the language of 'choice' and placing the individual consumer at the heart of culture as well as economic and political life, the neo-liberal model became hegemonic during the last two decades of the twentieth century, gaining continuing momentum thereafter and leading to the seemingly inexorable erosion of social provision. The epilogue says something about how these changes have played out in more recent years, emphasizing the way in which a consumer culture that prioritizes 'freedom of choice' continues to generate not only satisfaction but also deep anxiety.

PART ONE

A New World of Goods: 1800–1870

Preface

During the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, Britain became not only the 'workshop of the world' but also the world's leading shopping nation. No longer was the consumption of a proliferating range of goods confined to the elite and the 'middling orders', as it largely had been in the eighteenth century. Now both an expanding middle class and working class bought and enjoyed goods more than they ever did before. Colonial expansion and involvement in the slave trade facilitated flows of goods such as coffee, tea and sugar back to the metropole, where they were transformed from luxuries into necessities consumed by all social groups. People used goods to meet their daily needs and to fashion individual and collective identities. Indeed, classes were defined to a major extent by what people consumed and where they purchased their food, clothes, furniture and other belongings. Countless retailing outlets sprang up in urban centres to meet growing demand. Old forms were developed and new ones appeared: arcades and bazaars heightened the pleasures of just looking; drapers' shops mushroomed into emporia and early department stores; street-sellers and shops of all kinds swelled in number and urban markets were redeveloped; while 'Scotch drapers' and packmen hawked goods throughout the country. Concrete transformations like these were accompanied by changes in representation and language. A new discourse was elaborated by the