

## Book Review

# The Rise of Consumer Capitalism in America, 1880–1930

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Cesare Silla, *The Rise of Consumer Capitalism in America, 1880–1930*, Abington and New York: Routledge, 2018, viii + 254 pages.

Over thirty years ago, Colin Campbell (1987) published his provocative book *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* – a landmark text in the emerging sociological study of consumption. In an imaginative rejoinder to Max Weber’s thesis on the religious origins of capitalist accumulation, Campbell argued that the development of romanticism as a cultural and artistic movement, preoccupied by the cultivation of imaginative pleasure in a disenchanted world, gave rise to the unceasing quest for novelty which would later underpin the peculiar dynamism of modern consumption. In this smart and ambitious new volume, Cesare Silla also takes Max Weber as inspiration, but draws a rather different line of enquiry in his analysis of consumption. The starting point is his reading that Weber had already identified a new kind of subject taking shape within the milieu of the modern city – the subject as ‘personality’ – preoccupied with self-feeling, aesthetic pleasures and hedonistic pursuits. However, Weber also serves as the methodological inspiration for Silla. The author lays claim to his study of consumption as a Weberian genealogy, a historical sociology of how capitalist processes and productive innovation became interwoven with the emergence of new ideas of personhood rooted in continuous, self-defining consumption. To these ends, Silla sees the global consumer societies of the present as originating in the economic, social and cultural flux of a United States that underwent rapid modernization in the fifty years between 1880 and 1930. For the author, this historically-specific flux – captured in the concept of ‘liminality’ – was radically disorientating and served to unmoor people from an established order of community, work and religion that had provided meaning and purpose for generations. In its place, the fresh-faced acolytes of capitalist industry sought to inscribe a new order based on a more restless, more personal quest for meaning cultivated by the branding, advertising and marketing of mass-produced consumer commodities. Within this, a whole new connection was forged between intimate selves and capitalist accumulation.

In explaining how this occurred, the book is divided into four broad analytical themes: the economic and cultural context of a modernizing United States, the city and the experience of modernity, the production and elicitation of consumer subjects, and the emergence of consumer marketing as a broad, capitalist endeavour.

Chapters 1 and 2 examine innovations in capitalist production and organization underwriting enhanced possibilities for mass consumption and how these were coupled with new idealizations of personhood that tilted away from the older stoicism of ‘character’ to the anxious vivacity of ‘personality’. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 assess the changing structure and meaning of the American city, tracking the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 as a bold, imaginative experiment in urban design and a model for the reinvention of city life. No longer a realm of labour or manufacturing, the city became an arena of spectacle and a crucible for a new kind of restless, self-fashioning consumer performance. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 address the broader ‘invention’ of the consumer whom capitalist

industry and retailing sought to cultivate, cajole and seduce. The emerging professional cadres of consumer capitalism accomplished this through breathing both reassurance and aspiration into brands, staking out sophisticated new modalities and aesthetics in advertising, and terraforming new retail environments that captivated consumers' imaginations as much as it captured their pocket books. Chapters 9, 10 and 11 take a more focussed look at marketing as the central strategy of the new consumer-oriented capitalism taking shape. Within the competitive world of business, it was no longer enough to know how to make goods efficiently – these businesses had to know how to sell them and it was marketing know-how and innovation which would determine competitive advantage. At its root, marketing required the ongoing accumulation of knowledge – extensively and intensively – of one's actual and potential customers which could, in turn, be used to attract and sustain their loyalty and commitment. Within this context, the very object of consumption was transformed. At one level, brands transcended the materiality of the goods they represented – the consumer industries were now entering into the business of selling status, joy and reassurance as much as they were Cadillacs, Camels and Coca-Cola. At the same time, the increasing segmentation and aestheticization of product lines and the deliberate engineering of planned obsolescence made goods vectors, rather than objects, of desire.

Silla's volume is engaging and well-written, combining primary archival research with a sure-footed engagement with the extensive secondary literature in the cultural history of consumption. It provides the reader with an excellent overview of how the world of goods characterizing consumer capitalism emerged as it did in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The insights it offers are perhaps not revolutionary to our understanding of consumption, nevertheless, the breadth of scholarship casts important new light on the technical and organizational processes and innovations that made a new kind of consumer culture possible. In so doing, the book rightly skewers the pretensions of the postmodernists whose dearth of historical scholarship blinded them to the nascence of postmodern experience within modernity itself.

On a more critical note, however, there is a lack of theoretical and conceptual nuance in some of the treatment of the subject here. The proliferation of consumption, and the desire of consumers to find meaning in goods, are seen to hinge on processes of emulation and identity building. However, such seemingly important concepts are not discussed in any depth and the work of respective critics such as Colin Campbell (1995) or Alan Warde (1994) who have interrogated them (and found them wanting) is not engaged with. This book, in a sense, swerves more to the cultural history of consumption than it does its sociological theorization.

A further issue in that we hear very little from consumers themselves; to borrow EP Thompson's phrase, there is not much by way of 'history from below' here. The consumers who were being brought into being remain firmly off-stage, their parts spoken by exponents of the new retailing, advertising and marketing arts, or social scientists in thrall to new world of consumption, all of whom claimed to know what consumers wanted. A reading of literature, say, *The Great Gatsby* of 1925 would suggest a pronounced disquiet at the direction the new American Century was taking. Where is the story from below, antagonistic or otherwise? How did consumers actually think about the goods they were now desiring, buying, cherishing and throwing away? How did individuals feel about the new world that was taking shape around them?

Finally, perhaps a rather obtuse question, but one that bears asking: Do we actually live in 'consumer societies' as Silla so firmly believes (judging by his concluding remarks) and which he so assiduously excavates here? Sociologists love epochal, adjective shifts. If we do not live in consumer societies, then it is risk societies, or neoliberal societies, or societies governed through crime, or where systems now colonize lifeworlds, or where contemporary cultures come into being critically defined in some way by control, therapy or fear. The list is practically endless. We might accept that consumption is of supreme economic importance yet we should question Silla's assumption that individuals are primarily consumers, their social identities inextricably bound to the practice of consumption. Work, labour, and the business of production still seem pivotal in how most people express identity and relate to the social world around them, even if class has lost its salience. Certainly the contemporary politicization of gender and race, not to mention the rise of political populism, suggest a pronounced concern for identity and meaning beyond what the market can provide.

Nevertheless, despite these qualms, I would certainly recommend this book to any reader interested in how the conjoined twins of consumer capitalism and capitalist consumption came into being, and the role that a new vanguard of proselytizers, advertisers and marketers played in this process. Lively, informative and clearly argued, but with a historian's attention to the telling detail, it is a worthy addition to the literature in this area.

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