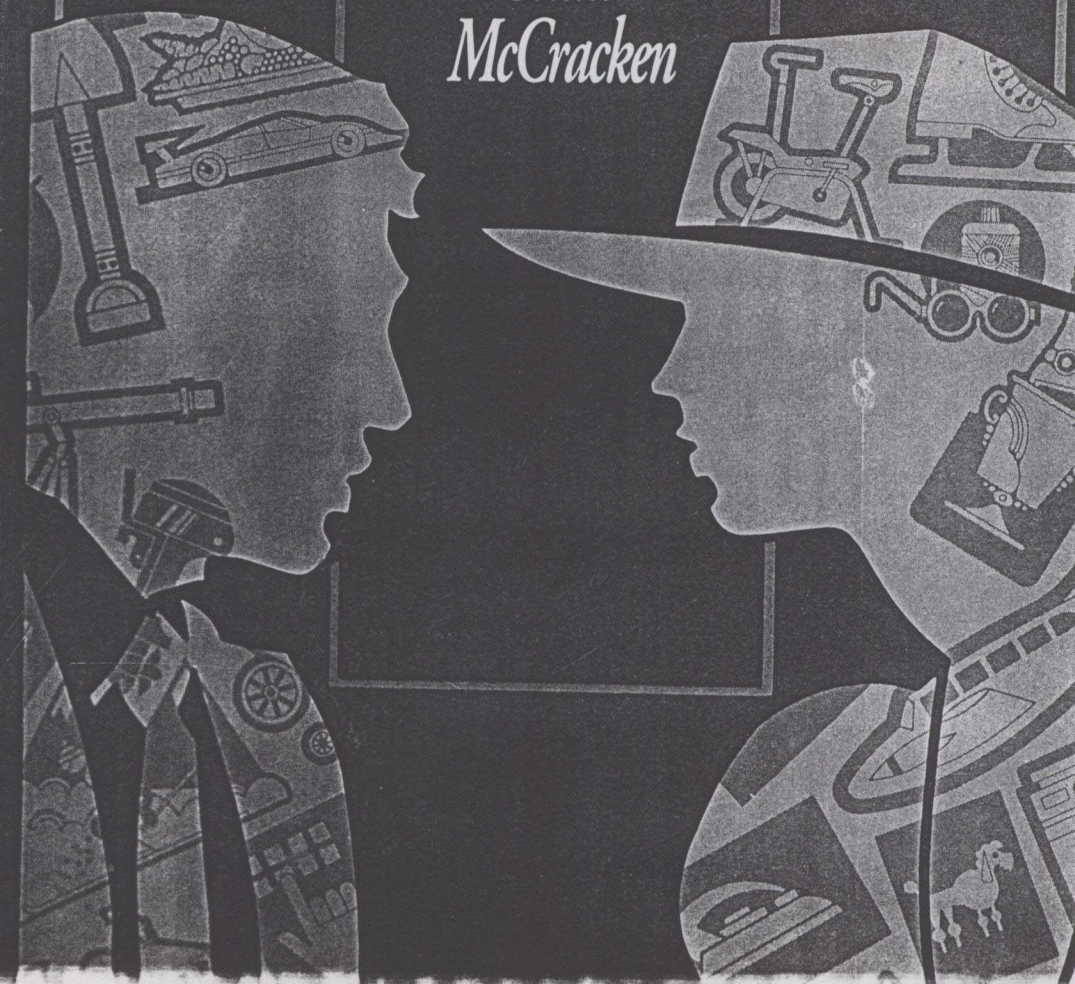
& CULTURE Consumption

Grant McCracken



CULTURE AND CONSUMPTION

New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities

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INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Bloomington and Indianapolis

First Midland Book Edition 1990

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McCracken, Grant David, 1951–
Culture and consumption.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Consumption (Economics)—History. 2. Culture—History. 3. Social values—History. I. Title.
HC79.C6M385 1988 339.4'7 87–45394
ISBN 0-253-31526-3
ISBN 0-253-20628-6 (pbk.)

6 7 8 9 99 98 97 96

To the memory of my grandfathers,
Joseph Allan McQuade (1896–1983)
and Elsworth Smith McCracken
(1889–1973)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the following people for their contributions to this book: M. Vadasz, L. Michaels, A. Knight, V. Ayoub, N. Lesko, M. Sahlins, A. Fienup Riordan, S. McKinnon, J. Curry, M. Verdon, T. and V. Li, K. O. L. Burridge, R. Pollay, M. Sommers, J. Wardlaw, R. Belk, and D. Woolcott. Thanks are also due to the Killam Trust and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial support of research reported here.

INTRODUCTION

This collection of essays has a single theme: the relationship between culture and consumption. By "culture" I mean the ideas and activities with which we construe and construct our world. By "consumption" I broaden the conventional definition to include the processes by which consumer goods and services are created, bought, and used. Culture and consumption have an unprecedented relationship in the modern world. No other time or place has seen these elements enter into a relationship of such intense mutuality. Never has the relationship between them been so deeply complicated.

The social sciences have been slow to see this relationship, and slower still to take stock of its significance. They have generally failed to see that consumption is a thoroughly cultural phenomenon. As the essays in this book seek to demonstrate, consumption is shaped, driven, and constrained at every point by cultural considerations. The system of design and production that creates consumer goods is an entirely cultural enterprise. The consumer goods on which the consumer lavishes time, attention, and income are charged with cultural meaning. Consumers use this meaning to entirely cultural purposes. They use the meaning of consumer goods to express cultural categories and principles, cultivate ideals, create and sustain lifestyles, construct notions of the self, and create (and survive) social change. Consumption is thoroughly cultural in character.

The reciprocal truth is, of course, that in Western developed societies culture is profoundly connected to and dependent on consumption. Without consumer goods, modern, developed societies would lose key instruments for the reproduction, representation, and manipulation of their culture. The worlds of design, product development, advertising, and fashion that create these goods are themselves important authors of our cultural universe. They work constantly to shape, transform, and vivify this universe. Without them the modern world would almost certainly come undone. The meaning of consumer goods and the meaning creation accomplished by consumer processes are important parts of the scaffolding of our present realities. Without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition and collective definition in this culture would be impossible.

The idea that culture and consumption should be so mutually dependent comes as a surprise to us. It is indeed entirely contrary to a familiar truth. We "know" from popular opinion and social scientific study that our materialism is one of the things that is most wrong with our society, and one of the most significant causes of our modern difficulties. This familiar, and entirely wrongheaded, idea has helped keep us from seeing the cultural significance of consumption plainly.

The purpose of these essays is to begin to improve upon this impoverished view. It is to show that the goods that are so often identified as the unhappy, destructive preoccupation of a materialist society are in fact one of the chief instruments of its survival, one of the ways in which its order is created and maintained. Each of these essays was written to stand on its own, but all address the nature of the relationship between culture and consumption. All of them represent the effort of an anthropologist to determine just why we are so preoccupied with consumer goods, and what contribution they make to our novel culture and society.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section is historical and contains three chapters. The first two chapters examine the origins of the consumer society and trace its development from the sixteenth century to the present day. The third chapter treats the

experience of a modern-day consumer whose pattern of consumption has strong pre-modern characteristics. The second section is theoretical in character. It examines the theoretical models available to us in the consideration of the relationship between culture and consumption. The "goods as language" model is rejected in one chapter and a new model that looks at the movement of cultural meaning is constructed in the next. The third section consists in four chapters, each of which examines a different use of consumer goods to accomplish social and cultural work. These chapters examine the use of goods to express new notions of gender, to protect cultural ideals, to maintain product and lifestyle consistencies, and to create and respond to social change.

Before reviewing these chapters in more detail, let me briefly comment on the scholarly foundations of this book. There are two contributing disciplines. One is anthropology, the field in which I was trained. The second is consumer behavior, the field in which I have taught and done research for the past four years. This book represents a kind of rapprochement of these two quite different disciplinary perspectives. A word on the nature of this rapprochement is perhaps in order.

Anthropology and the study of consumer behavior have been reluctant participants in the study of the relationship between culture and consumption. Neither has evidenced, until quite recently, an interest in examining the cultural aspects of consumption or the importance of consumption to culture. Happily, this is beginning to change. Developments within both fields are beginning to make the study of culture and consumption an imaginable, practicable activity.

In the field of consumer behavior, these developments are numerous. First, scholars have begun to broaden the definition of "consumer behavior." This emerging definition takes it beyond "purchase behavior" (i.e., what happens when the consumer reaches to the shelf to choose brand "x" or brand "y") to include all of the interaction between the good and the consumer before the moment of purchase and after it. Second, they have also begun to move beyond their long-standing preoccupation with the "decision-making process" to look at the role of other cognitive processes (especially symbolic ones) and the role of affect. Third, the field has displayed a new willingness to transcend the methodological individualism and microscosmic focus inherited from the field of psychology, and to consider the larger social and cultural systems and contexts of consumption. In a fully Durkheimian shift, the field is developing a macroscopic perspective that takes account of the supra-individual characteristics of consumption. Fourth, more scholars have begun to accept as legitimate topics for research ones that have no immediate relevance for the marketing community, and this marketing community has begun, in turn, to define the nature of its inquiry more broadly. In general terms, in this broadening of the field, consumption is now less often defined as a small slice of the individual's reality and more often approached as a range of diverse, systematic, embracing, and fully cultural phenomena.[1]

Anthropology has also seen a series of developments that has allowed it to take up the study of culture and consumption. First of all, it has begun to renew its interest in material culture, an essential development for the study of consumer goods. Second, it is beginning to shift away from its almost neurotic refusal to contemplate its own culture. Anthropology has traditionally felt an attraction for the alien and the marginal. Anthropologists have passed over opportunities to study their own culture, and especially the "mainstream" aspects of this culture, with mind-numbing regularity. (Interestingly, this has made novelists the most active and successful ethnographers at work in North America today.) Third, anthropology has developed the theories of culture, of meaning, and of symbolism that were needed to understand the cultural and communicative properties of consumer goods and behavior.

Fourth, still more recently anthropologists have begun to develop the theories of process and context that allow them to capture the dynamic character of consumption. Fifth, there is evidence that some members of the field are beginning to transcend the ideological suspicion that any treatment of the cultural properties of consumer goods is tantamount to participation in the free enterprise system. Sixth, some anthropologists are preparing to give up their elitist pretense that any examination of contemporary popular culture must be a form of intellectual slumming. Finally, and perhaps most important, they have begun to move beyond the peculiar notion that consumption can be dismissed as a nasty combination of self-indulgence, greed, vanity, and irrationality that does not need or deserve systematic study.[2]

In its attempt to combine anthropology and consumer behavior, this book should be read much more as a "first go" than the "final word." It is distinctly *not* a judicious survey of the two fields that concludes in magisterial pronouncements and directives. Or, to change the metaphor, this is not a document in the nature of a report from a Royal Commission or a United Nations paper that bids unfamiliar and uneasy parties to the conference table and the contemplation of their mutual interests. More exactly, this is the work of a single, often quite nervous, individual who has spent the last few years smuggling concepts and data back and forth across a well-guarded border, keen to see what one field looks like in the context of the other. This treatment is then partial, experimental, and tentative. It is more a demonstration of possibilities than of certain truths. It means to begin the rapprochement. It does not pretend to accomplish it.

Let us look now at each of the chapters in turn. The first chapter investigates how Western society undertook its reckless new experiment with consumption. "The Making of Modern Consumption" draws on the explosion of scholarly activity that followed the appearance of the work of Braudel in the 1960s. It also draws on the author's own research into Elizabethan England. The chapter considers three episodes in this making of modern consumption. These took place in the sixteenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, and each reveals a new stage and a new set of forces in the creation of our modern consumer society. This study allows us to glimpse the extraordinary process by which we began by stages to recognize and exploit the meaningful, symbolic properties of consumer goods and make these the scaffolding of our implausible social life.

The second chapter, "Ever Dearer in Our Thoughts," narrows our attention from the broad sweep of Western societies to a single cultural institution within them. Here we examine the role of "patina" as a symbolic device. Before the eighteenth century, the rich were especially fond of patina. The fine surface that accumulated on their possessions as a result of oxidization and use was proof of their long-standing claim to high status. It was proof that they were "ancient" nobles, not newly minted ones. In this way, the ruling classes used the patina of goods as a status gatekeeper, a means of distinguishing aristocrats from arrivistes and pretenders. In the eighteenth century, however, the advent of the fashion system helped to eclipse patina, and thereafter this status strategy became the exclusive concern of only a very small and very particular group in society. This chapter is an attempt to tell the story of patina from the sixteenth century through to the modern day. In the process we will have occasion to discuss theories of status and symbolism from Goffman, Veblen, and Pierce.

The third chapter is entitled "Lois Roget: Curatorial Consumer in a Modern World," and it reports the experience of a modern individual whose consumption has several entirely pre-modern characteristics. This treatment of Lois Roget gives us the opportunity to reconstruct in intimate ethnographic detail certain aspects of consumption as a "lived reality" before the eighteenth century. In a sense, this chapter means to do for pre-industrial consumption what Peter Laslett's *The World We Have Lost* (1971) does for pre-industrial family

life. It attempts to suggest some of the connections between culture and consumption before the dawn of modernity.

The fourth chapter, "Clothing as Language," looks at one of the ways we have traditionally come to think about the symbolic properties of our consumer goods. Academic and popular treatments have encouraged us to think of these things as a kind of "language." Certainly this is an improvement over the antique ideas with which we have considered (usually to condemn) consumer goods. But it is nevertheless still unsatisfactory. This chapter examines the attempts to suggest that the consumer good, clothing, is a "language." It argues that clothing is in fact quite unlike language and that indeed it communicates cultural meaning best when it departs from the syntagmatic principle on which language operates.

This fifth chapter, "Meaning Manufacture and Movement in the World of Goods," is written to suggest a different approach to the cultural significance of consumer goods. It draws on the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, consumer behavior, American studies, and material culture to create a theoretical scheme of the cultural meaning that adheres in consumer goods. The scheme is designed to show how this meaning gets into and is got out of the goods. The emphasis here is not on what people "say" with the meaning in goods but what they "do" with it. This chapter attempts to show how we use the meaning in goods to construct concepts of the self and world.

The organizing theme of this chapter is "movement." The meaning of goods is constantly in transit, constantly moving from one location to another in the cultural world. The chapter shows how meaning begins in the culturally constituted world and the process by which it is then "unhooked" by product designers, advertisers, marketers, and journalists and transferred to the consumer good. It then shows how we as consumers fetch this meaning out of the goods for our own purposes in the construction of our own worlds. Four different rituals are considered here, each of them important to the process of getting meaning out of goods. In sum, this chapter looks at how we make consumption a source of cultural meaning and use it in the construction of individual and collective worlds.

The third and final section of the book seeks to look more particularly at some of the cultural objectives of consumption. Chapter 6 looks at how consumer goods and behavior are used to accommodate and create new notions of gender. Chapter 7 looks at their use in the preservation of certain of our ideals. Chapter 8 considers their dual role in the preservation of lifestyles or their reform. Chapter 9 looks at how we use the meaningful properties of consumer goods as an instrument of continuity and change.

Chapter 6, "Consumer Goods, Gender Construction, and a Rehabilitated Trickle-down Theory," applies new theories of symbolism to a very old and venerable diffusion theory. The "trickle-down" theory of diffusion was for a long time the most compelling model for describing how the clothing behavior of one group could influence the clothing behavior of another. In the last twenty years this model has been elbowed aside by brash new models. The purpose of this chapter is to rehabilitate the trickle-down theory by wedding it to new theories of symbolism.

The ethnographic case in point here is the clothing innovations among professional men and women and especially the "dress-for-success" look. Here we see a classic case in which consumer goods are used to create and respond to a fundamental shift in gender definition. What this chapter shows us is how women have used the meaning in certain goods to create new images of themselves.

The seventh chapter, "The Evocative Power of Goods," is designed to show how we use goods to keep alive some of our ideals and hopes. It begins with the suggestion that societies deliberately take their ideals and remove them from harm by "displacing" them to

another time or place. Thus, the mountain village that has experienced a high rate of domestic discord (and might begin to wonder whether its present definitions of "family" and "gender" are misconceived) can protect its present ideal of family life by claiming that it existed with perfect clarity and ease "in the days of our grandfathers." Now the ideal is displaced, "proven" by its "existence" in another cultural space and time. But once something has been displaced, how does one recover it and make it live in the here and now? Consumer goods are one of the answers here. They serve as bridges to displaced meaning without compromising its displaced status. The theory explains why we so often wish for objects beyond our reach and why we suppose that we will obtain with these objects a new happiness. Consumer goods have long promised the realization of personal and collective ideals (only rarely delivering them). Chapter 7 attempts to show how this happens.

Chapter 8, "Diderot Unities and the Diderot Effect," begins with a glimpse of the great French philosophe Denis Diderot in his study mourning the passing of his old dressing gown. It is about the cultural consistencies that draw a collection of consumer goods into a characteristic grouping (e.g., the yuppie's BMW, Burberry, and burgundy) and how these product complements are preserved and sometimes transformed by the Diderot effect. This chapter considers the implications of Diderot unities and the Diderot effect for theories of lifestyle, advertising, and consumer demand.

The object of the final chapter of the book, "Consumption, Change, and Continuity," is to show how consumer goods serve us both as instruments of continuity and as instruments of change. The meaning in consumer goods is one of the ways in which we give our lives a consistency in the face of the overwhelming change to which it is subjected. Goods help in this capacity by creating a largely undetectable record of existing cultural categories and cultural principles. Surrounded by these goods, we are encouraged to imagine that these categories and principles are somehow inherent in the very nature of things. It is partly because sexist distinctions between men and women are invested in the physical objects of our daily existence that new definitions of gender in this society have been so hard to establish. The cultural meaning in goods also helps them to disarm cultural innovations. What Sahlins calls the "object-code" incorporates innovations such as "hippie" aesthetics and principles and make them a harmless part of the mainstream. But goods also have a genuinely innovative capacity, and they are certainly one of the most powerful engines of change in our society. The object-code of goods allows individuals to take existing cultural meanings and draw them into novel configurations. They are a kind of language of invention with which radical groups can think about, refine, and ultimately advertise their ideologies. Goods then are instruments of innovation and conservation and in both capacities they serve us in our modern quest for order in a disorderly world.

Culture and Consumption is a systematic inquiry into the cultural and symbolic properties of consumer goods. The first three chapters show how we came to be a consumer society. The second two chapters suggest how we might think about the cultural properties of consumer goods to best understand their symbolic properties. The final four chapters consider different uses to which we put the meaning of goods. The largest objective of these chapters is to help demonstrate the extraordinary contribution that the meaning in consumer processes makes to the structure and process of contemporary society.

Contents

Part I

HISTORY

An understanding of the modern relationship between culture and consumption demands an appreciation of the historical context in which this relationship was fashioned. The purpose of these opening chapters of the book is to offer three very different treatments of this context. In chapter 1, I attempt to integrate the large number of scholarly books and articles into a single overview of the history of consumption. I have added to this overview my own understanding of the changes in consumption that took place in Elizabethan England. In the second chapter, we narrow our attention to one particular moment in the history of consumption, the transformation of the "patina" system of consumption. In the third chapter, we descend still more steeply to the particulars of an individual life and the ethnographic treatment of the "curatorial" system of consumption. Together, these three chapters provide a historical foundation for the chapters on modern culture and consumption that make up the remainder of the book.

ONE

The Making of Modern Consumption

The historical community, following the lead of Braudel and the example of McKendrick, has recognized that the "great transformation" of the West included not just an "industrial revolution" but also a "consumer revolution." This community now argues that this consumer revolution represents not just a change in tastes, preferences, and buying habits, but a fundamental shift in the culture of the early modern and modern world. The consumer revolution is now seen to have changed Western concepts of time, space, society, the individual, the family, and the state. This first chapter seeks to establish a single overview of the available literature in order to consider how Western culture became increasingly dependent on and integrated with the new consumer goods and practices that appeared from the sixteenth century onwards. It seeks to show the historical circumstances in which culture and consumption began to fashion their present relationship of deeply complicated mutuality.

Modern consumption is, after all, a historical artifact.[1] Its present-day characteristics are the result of several centuries of profound social, economic, and cultural change in the West. Just what these changes are and precisely how they gave rise to the consumption of the present day are matters of some dispute. What cannot be doubted is that an inquiry into the origins and development of modern consumption is now well under way, and that this task now occupies a growing segment of the historical and social scientific community.

The first appearance of consumption in its modern form was dramatic. Elizabethans said they thought they detected something that "did smell of beyond the seas." Somewhat later observers referred to it as an "epidemic" or an "act of madness." Modern observers have used equally dramatic language. They have referred to it as an "orgy of spending" (McKendrick et al. 1982:10) and the creation of "dream world" (Williams 1982:66). Modern consumption was the cause and consequence of so many social changes that its emergence marked nothing less than the transformation of the Western world. As one historian has suggested, the appearance of the "consumer revolution" is rivaled only by the Neolithic revolution for the thoroughness with which it changed society (McKendrick et al. 1982:9).

The consumer revolution is a piece of a larger social transformation to which a large amount of social scientific and historical inquiry has been devoted. Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Simmel, Sombart, and Tonnies all addressed themselves to what Polanyi (1957) has called "the great transformation." Indeed it does not

exaggerate to say that the study of this transformation is responsible in some part for the foundation and development of the social sciences. What is striking about this vein of scholarship, however, is that it has devoted very little of its attention to the development of consumption. As McKendrick notes, it is the study of the legal, economic, industrial, and other revolutions that has preoccupied the students of the great transformation. Only recently have scholars, with McKendrick as perhaps the most conspicuous and remarkable party, begun to look at the role of changes of consumption in the transformation of the West.

The work of this new group of scholars is diverse. There is no consensus on even the most fundamental terms of the consumer revolution. For instance, McKendrick (1982) claims to have discovered the birth of consumer revolution in eighteenth-century England, Williams (1982) has discovered it in nineteenth-century France, and Mukerji (1983) has discovered it in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England. This diversity of outlook and approach is useful. It allows us to see the disparate aspects of the consumer revolution from several points of view. It is the purpose of this chapter to review these points of view and to show how they can be organized and interrelated in the creation of a general perspective on the origins and development of modern consumption.

The first part of the chapter will review the chief contributors to the study of the origins and development of modern consumption. The second part will examine three moments in the history of consumption, drawing together a diverse range of historical materials to create three "snapshots" of the Western world as it moved from the sixteenth century to the present day. This will include diverse topics, including new categories of goods; new times, places and patterns of purchase; new marketing techniques; new ideas about possessions and materialism; changed reference groups, lifestyles, class mobility, diffusion patterns, product symbolism, and patterns of decision making. Our concern throughout will be the transformation of culture that took place in the consumer revolution.

It must be emphasized that the chapter does not pretend to assemble these disparate aspects of the consumer revolution in any comprehensive way. Still less does it claim to provide a historical treatment that would satisfy the high standards of evidence and argument established by historians. If this chapter engages in speculation from which most historians fastidiously abstain, it does so because even speculation is preferable to the confusion that now surrounds this vital academic question.

THE STATE OF A NASCENT ART: THREE PIONEERS

The Birth of A Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England is the most thorough, well-grounded and impressive of the works from which this essay draws.[2] Its most striking characteristic, perhaps, is its tone. There is nothing guarded or tentative about this piece of history. While some historians write to a Lilliputian scale and rarely stray beyond, say, the wills and probates of

a single village in the third decade of the fifteenth century, McKendrick and his colleagues set out to take on a "big question" and present their arguments without faint-hearted qualification or reticence. This book also has a slightly "whiggish" quality insofar as it construes the past as a prelude to the present.[3] This is as much "history for the sake of the present" as it is "history for the sake of the past." Third, this book has the great advantage of being written in the effortless prose for which historians are deservedly famed. Its exposition of the complexities of the eighteenth century is elegantly clear. These three qualities, forthrightness, relevance, and clarity, make *The Birth of a Consumer Society* an unusually valuable and pertinent piece of historiography. It is easily the strongest contribution to the present field.

The larger terms of McKendrick's project are simple. He seeks to supply a neglected aspect of the social transformation that took place in eighteenth-century England. He insists that the traditional approach to this transformation gives us only half the picture. He argues that we have emphasized the industrial revolution to the exclusion of other, equally important developments. What has gone ignored is the "consumer revolution" that was the necessary companion of the industrial revolution. A change in productive means and ends, he says, cannot have occurred without a commensurate change in consumers' tastes and preferences. Nevertheless, historical scholarship has emphasized the "supply" side of the transformation and ignored the "demand" side. The purpose of *The Birth of A Consumer Society*, then, is to document the development of the demand side of the industrial revolution and illuminate how this transformation of tastes and preferences contributed to the great transformation.

One of the opening events of this revolution was the wild enthusiasm with which the English consumer greeted the cheap calico and muslins imported from India in the 1690s. The sudden demand for this fashion was an early indication of the new consumer tastes which would act as an engine driving domestic production and foreign importations to a new scale of activity. McKendrick, taking this as his cue, examines the "commercialization of fashion" as one of the chief areas in which consumer demand changed and was changed by eighteenth-century innovations. These innovations include a new, intensified tyranny of fashion, a more rapid obsolescence of style, the speedier diffusion of fashion knowledge, the appearance of marketing techniques such as the fashion doll and the fashion plate, the new and more active participation of previously excluded social groups, and finally, new ideas about consumption and its contribution to the public good. He turns, then, to the study of the commercialization of pottery and the entrepreneurial genius of Josiah Wedgwood, who both followed and led the consumer boom of the period. Especially interesting here is the account of the ease and skill with which Wedgwood manipulated the tastes of the "opinion leaders" of this period, the aristocracy. Finally, McKendrick examines the story of the commercialization of eighteenth-century fashion and the contribution of George Packwood, who did so much to develop newspaper advertising in the period.

McKendrick's contribution to this question is so important and remarkable that

criticism has a churlish quality. We owe him a debt of gratitude, not carping disagreement. Still it must be observed that McKendrick's work is seriously flawed on two counts. First, on a point of historical fact, it appears that McKendrick has misread the empirical record. He claims that fashion did not govern the clothing of Elizabethan England with the rapidity it was to assume in the eighteenth century. There is, he says, no evidence of annual fashion in this half of the sixteenth century (1982:40). This is mistaken. Both primary and secondary sources make it clear that annual fashion was very much alive in Elizabethan England (cf. Fairholt 1885; Linthicom 1936; Norris 1938).[4]

This seems a small error, but it is in fact a major one. For McKendrick's study depends on two assumptions: that the consumer revolution was a sudden break, a genuine revolution, and, second, that this revolution took place in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, his evidence, as he willingly concedes (1982:12), comes chiefly from one product category, clothing. To advance his case he must successfully argue, then, that clothing became the sudden captive of a highly innovative fashion and that it did so in the eighteenth century. It appears that both of these contentions are not only groundless but a surprising departure from the well-established facts of the matter.

The second ground for complaint has to do with McKendrick's analytic approach. In order to investigate the "consumer boom" of the eighteenth century, he adopts two ideas from the social sciences: the notion of conspicuous consumption developed by Veblen (1912) and the "trickle-down" notion refined by Simmel (1904). Examined in the light of these ideas the consumer boom of the eighteenth century becomes a war of status competition in which goods serve chiefly in status-marking and status-claiming capacities. Certainly this is a fair characterization of one of the ways goods were used in the period and why they proved so popular. It is highly doubtful, however, whether this sociological explanation is an exhaustive account. But this is precisely what McKendrick attempts to make of these ideas. He entertains no additional or competing explanations. He subjects these concepts to no careful scrutiny. Simmel and Veblen are made to pull this argument through the unfamiliar soil of the eighteenth century unaided by the assistance of the author or fellow social scientists.

McKendrick's uncritical attachment to the ideas of Simmel and Veblen prevent him from taking up some of the questions his research raises. For instance, if a new fondness for novelty was at the base of the acceptance of fashion, whence did this fondness come? As McKendrick (following Braudel 1973) notes, fashion change is by no means universal (1982:36). When McKendrick's study of the new intensity of this fashion in the eighteenth century tells us that novelty had become an "irresistible drug" (1982:10), he leaves us to wonder just how this fundamental change in "mentalitie" had taken place. Similarly, when he tells us that much of the new spending was competitive and emulative (1982:11), he leaves it to the reader to work out whether consumers were slavishly imitating their betters or challenging them, and whether they were competing with their peers in a status war or merely putting social distance between themselves and their own imitative lessers.[5] These