



Consumerism and its History

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Defining Consumerism

There are three main dictionary definitions (see Dictionary.Com):

- 1. The movement that began in the 19th century to protect consumers 'against useless, inferior or dangerous goods, misleading advertising, unfair pricing,' etc. - AS ACCESS**
- 2. The economic doctrine that 'an ever-expanding consumption of goods is advantageous to the economy' – AS GROWTH**
- 3. The practice and experience of a society based on the above – AS EXCESS**

To this I would add a fourth, which is the sociologists' understanding of consumerism which derives from the third: 'a state of mind and way of life centred on the purchase and use of goods and services'. – AS DELUSION



Consumerism is an ideological term: it aims to protect and encourage us to believe in a 'growth economy', and at the same time condemn us for being duped by it.

From the above definitions it is clear that

- A. Consumerism is linked to the productive capacities of industrial capitalism and a requirement to continuously produce 'new' and attractive goods (WASTE)**

Consumerism must use up resources ever-more rapidly and make waste as it does (creative destruction?)

- B. Consumerism is also closely linked to the expansion of mass-media, which aims to encourage us to consume more than perhaps we need (DECEPTION)**

Consumerism is the belief that consumption is the key to 'the good life' or a better one (tail wags dog)

1. Early History

War in Middle East in the Late Middle Ages leads to disruption in luxury trade routes from Asia to Europe (silks, spices, jewels, etc.)

Leads to search for safer journeys, and discovery of Americas and gradual increase of trade

Second great influence is the Renaissance, and 'restoration' of 'golden age' of Greece and Rome

This required the courtly exercise of taste, to display one's character, manners and learning.

Creates demand for luxury goods, a 'remaking' of self, possessions, homes, etc. to show off 'nobility', culture, learning.



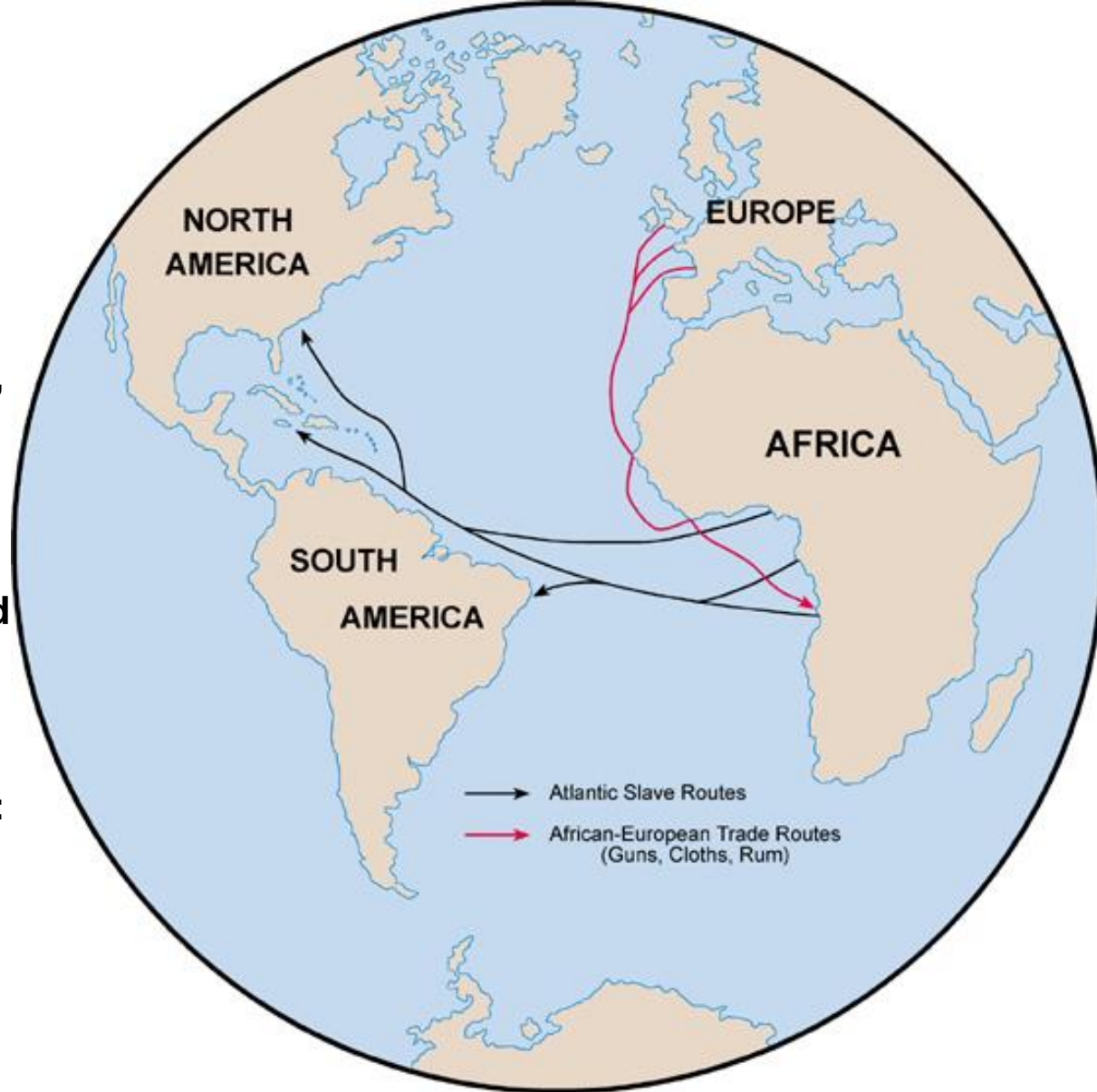
Ludovico Gonzaga of Mantua and his family (c.1470)

Increasing global trade led to 'democratization' of courtly luxury to city-based traders and professionals

Cotton, silk, sugar, tobacco, tea, coffee, chocolate- these create new desires and habits, new markets, retail, and professions

Luxury living requires credit and money and leads to expanding search for 'latest and best'

Britain first in this development: primogeniture and tendency to give land to men who lost in trade ventures leads to creation of plantation economy in USA, and also expansion of Slave Trade



The Slave Trade - 'plantations' growing coffee, sugar, spices, cotton, mahogany - then imported to Europe and processed



- By 18th century debates over luxury (traditionally seen as destructive of virtue), and a new fascination with the paradox that '*private vice = public virtue*'
- This starts a common distinction between refined, restrained 'Good luxury' and restrained 'decency' and 'bad luxury' of excess (as in Hogarth's *Rake's Progress*).
- This self-restraint associated with new view of self as 'mobile', a project under development, whose life a journey towards self-realisation, expression (Romanticism).
- Cities of Europe and America remade to cater for m-class consumers, in a period termed the 'consumer revolution' –expansion in demand drove an expansion in supply



2. Expansion of Middle Class Consumption

- Expansion of retail based on imitative desire of consumers. Josiah Wedgwood a pioneer –uniformity, quantity and quality of goods - via showrooms, catalogues
- Created sets of goods in fashionable neo-classical style to imitate that which was most valued at the time (Greek and Roman antiques); his 'Queenware' starts craze.
- Design becomes critical intermediary, influencing desires, tastes, interests, a vital component of industrialisation, with the engineer emerging as great innovator
- Adoption of machines, especially in textiles, to create quantities and varieties of goods more quickly for sale, with money saved reducing price - expands market further

Cities transformed - transformation of technologies of provision, including transportation, lighting heating, cooking, sanitations

- **‘Torrent of technological change’ from 1860s –decreases costs, creates new products and services: e.g. bicycles, chemical dyes, trains, sewage, water, gas, later electricity.**
- **Raises living standards of majority, but also raises their expectations. Consumerism as shopping still predominantly a middle class thing**
- **New department stores and arcades ‘dream palaces’ designed to seduce, to overwhelm and entice shoppers to see themselves as others might, to generate new needs**

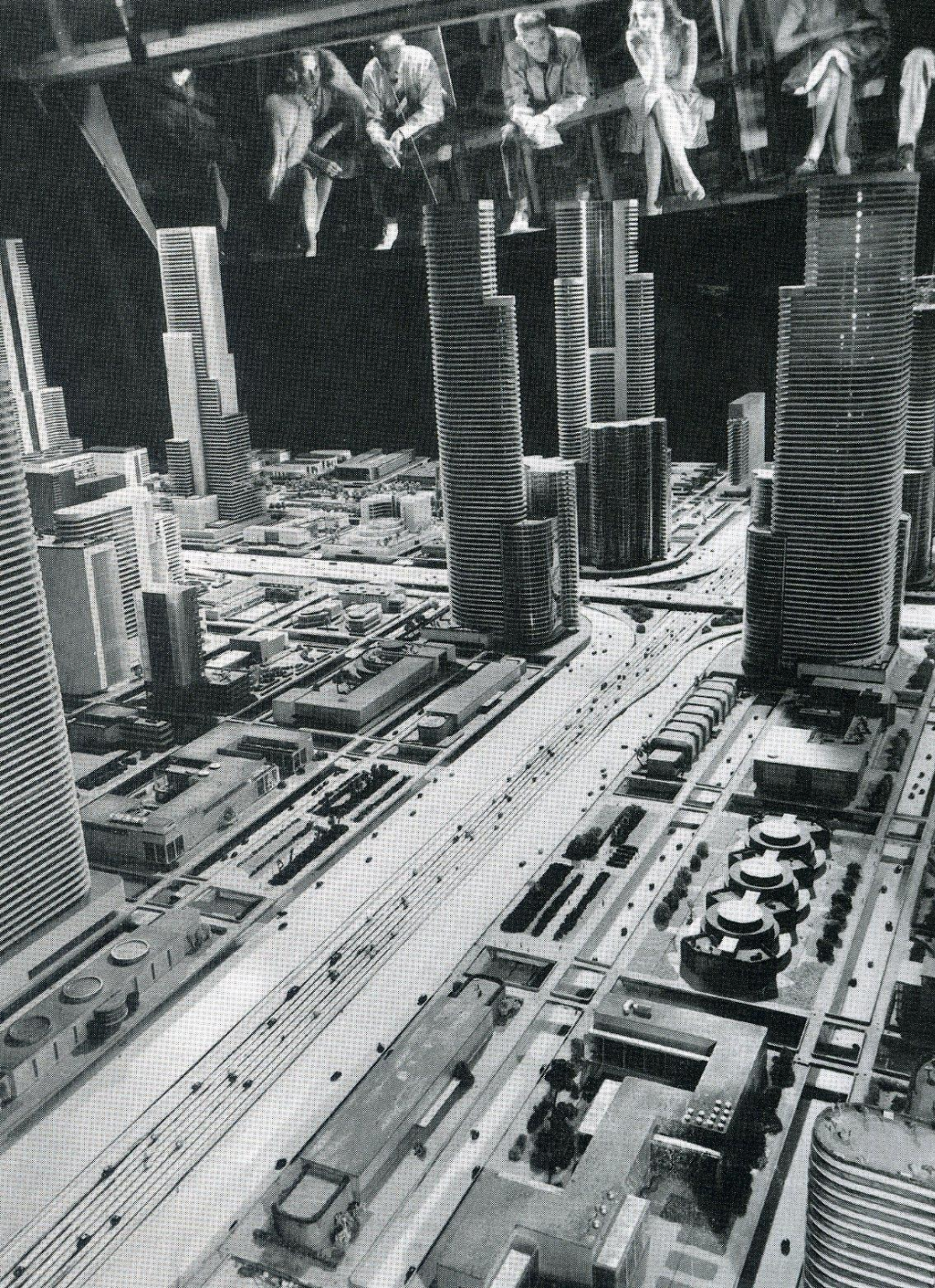




New Mass Retail

The formula used in department stores echoed in magazines, posters and papers, a complete promotional system, using senses to seduce, change behaviour, via

- 1. abundance of goods**
- 2. Big variety and choice**
- 3. Fixed, accessible, prices for all**
- 4. Democratized luxury ('popoluxe')**



3. Postwar Mass-Consumption

Until 1920s in the USA retail class based, with big stores targeting Middle Class, and 'cheap' targeting workers

Until then cars luxury toys for rich; but discovery of 'economic consumerism' changes this – idea that supply of more and better consumer goods 'for all' would create work, prosperity, and raise living standards

Promise of an open society of consumers presented as democratic, American, sponsored by corporations

(Norman Bel Geddes' design for GM's 'Futurama', 1939 New York World Fair)

Devastation of World War 2 – task of rebuilding, and constructing new alliances versus Communist East (USSR, China);

‘Marshall Plan’ - US funding to rebuild Western Europe, part of Cold War strategy to resist Communism, to be based upon constructing a global democratic consumer society, along American lines.

Education, health, housing, industry, transport, all subsidized – for ‘everyman’. Industrial recovery – post-war industries of electronics, plastics, chemicals, cars.

‘1950s Syndrome’ : lower oil prices, rising production of goods, cars, appliances, results in rising emissions – ‘the Great Acceleration’.

This the start of the ‘growth economy’





"Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction and our ego satisfaction in consumption. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever-increasing rate" (Victor Lebow, 1955)



4. Consumerism as a way of life (after 1975)

- Colonization of everyday life by *commercialization*, ads, 24/7;
- Increase in *choice* – number and range of goods, services;
- Increase in *environments* devoted to retail, commerce, leisure;
- Increase in *packaging and promotion* of goods and services;
- Increasing emphasis on *style, design, fashion and branding*;
- Expansion and legitimization of *consumer debt* and its risks;
- Increasing emphasis on *novelty technology* in media.



Typical motives for Consumption (often linked together):

- 1. To *know* or *experience* more (- experiential)**
- 2. To extend our *control* over something (- functional)**
- 3. To enjoy *what others have* (- positional, competitive)**
- 4. To have the *beautiful*, for self or for others (aesthetic)**



- Continuous growth leads to more and more frequent upgrading (e.g. in 2010 release of Apple iPhone – 1.5 million sold on first day, 77% to owners of existing iPhones) – upgrading to keep up, alibi often to gain ‘better access’, and also probably FoMO – ‘fear of missing out’



- **The present system is unsustainable: for example, 288 mt plastics manufactured in 2012; only 15 mt traded for recycling, but 8 mt ‘escaped’ into oceans (we think)**
- **This ‘linear economy’ is understood in figures, but these can only capture quantities and not ecological relationships or social impacts**