Consumer Society – RIP. A Comment[1]

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Andreas Wirsching has written an ambitious paper about the rise of the 'consumer society' in the twentieth century and its implications for historical research.[2] I should say at the outset that I am sympathetic to his warnings against a Whig history. The career of the 'consumer society' needs to be historicised. My main problem is that 'the consumer society' is used in multiple, slippery ways in this article which moves back and forth between treating it as an ideological construct, an analytical concept and as a material reality of how people live their lives. It sometimes appears as 'paradigm', yet at other times it is the real thing, 'a burgeoning consumer society'.

Let us start with the concept. 'The consumer society' was a term born in the cold war. It emerged in a stream of writings by (mainly American) public intellectuals which then enjoyed transatlantic diffusion; Riesman, Galbraith and Katona were the most widely read. Wirsching confirms the strength of the moral reaction in West Germany both amongst conservative and Marxist intellectuals in the 1950s–60s. He rightly stresses fears about Americanisation at the time, and that both conservative and Marxist critiques were losing ground after the sixties. This is not, however, quite the same as saying that former opposition has given way to an open embrace of the American model. There continues to be a steady stream of writings by intellectuals and commentators that warn against the tyranny of choice, environmental disasters, the spread of unhappiness and depression, social disorders, child labour and exploitation, and many other evils associated with consumer lifestyle. What has changed since the 1960s is, rather, that consumerism has been uncoupled from 'the

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[1] For references and further discussion, see my recent articles: Frank Trentmann, 'Crossing Divides: Consumption and Globalization in History', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 9, 2 (2009), 187–220; Frank Trentmann, 'The Long History of Contemporary Consumer Society: Chronologies, Practices, and Politics in Modern Europe', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 49 (2009), 107–28; Frank Trentmann, 'Materiality in the Future of History: Things, Practices, and Politics', *Journal of British Studies*, 48, 2 (2009), 283–307.

[2] Andreas Wirsching, 'From Work to Consumption. Transatlantic Visions of Individuality in Modern Mass Society', *Contemporary European History*, 20, 1 (2011), 1–26.

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American way of life'. By the 1970s, French, British and German politicians and social movements recognised that they were creating their own hybrid consumer societies, which combined purchasing power and global goods with national traditions, values and institutions. I am not sure that Americans have been (or are) more optimistic about consumption. It would be an interesting exercise how to measure such a mood. Arguably, just looking at books and media coverage, the society with the most intense consumer habit has also been the one which has vented the greatest anxieties about the perils of consumption. Practices and anxieties of affluence have marched hand in hand.

One problem, I might even say frustration, with the article is its singular and static use of 'the consumer society' as an actual system. We are never told precisely its make-up, though we can infer that for the author it refers to a society marked by the wide availability of mass-produced articles made possible by Fordism, and with consumption a principal source of identity. Since the article culminates in a plea for a critical narrative, I find it curious that the basic chronology of the subject is left so vague. The main reason, I suspect, is that the discussion tries to combine under the same umbrella 'consumer society' the history of the concept (1950s–60s) and the history of actual consumption, that is what people acquired, used, desired, and how these goods and services shaped their lives.

There are three main problems here. The first is how well the American picture of 'the consumer society' or 'the affluent society' of the 1950s described realities. The short answer is: problematic. These were not innocent tracts and scholarly diagnoses but texts with a political message. For example, Galbraith painted a terrifying scenario of consumer debt and collapsing public services, while in reality these were golden years of saving in the United States (10 per cent in 1958) and rising government spending.

The second is to what degree this diagnosis continues to be fit for purpose for societies in the 1980s or 2010. Wirsching clearly thinks so: West Germany and other Western societies have all become a consumer society. But is, for example, the contemporary emphasis on individualised lifestyle the same as that of a 1950s American suburb with fairly well-defined class, gender and racial milieus? Moreover, how do we know that we are dealing with the same type of consumer society? Are people in Beijing, Paris, Boston and Berlin leading (or converging towards) the same consumption lifestyles? It is intriguing that a historical critique of consumer society is so confident about what the phenomenon is that it does not feel it necessary to consider the possibility of diversity and change. To give this aspect the full treatment it deserves would require a book of its own, but there are plenty of indications that cultures of consumption continue to diverge. For example, in the United States, the supposedly typical consumer society, fast food and snacking has expanded by leaps and bounds; from the 1970s to the 1990s the time spent by Americans eating at home declined from one hour to 40 minutes a day. Go to France and you see a radically different picture: here people spend 96 minutes eating at home every day, just as they did thirty years earlier. Note the immense concentration of retail in the United Kingdom compared with the strength of small shops and kiosks in Greece

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and Finland. Germans and the Japanese consume a lot but they also continue to save a lot (unlike Americans since the 1980s). We could multiply examples but it should be clear that people in these affluent societies are not identical consumers. In other words, 'consumer society' might not be a single story advancing to a shared telos.

There is an additional problem that concerns the United States. While Wirsching rightly emphasises that not everyone is an active participant in consumer culture, he nonetheless presumes that that consumer culture has a homogeneous quality. But this is open to debate. Arguably, the United States is marked by a high degree of specialisation – some individuals spend all their time at the gym, others only watch baseball, yet others spend hours reading but doing little else. The high degree in specialisation contrasts with continental European countries where most people share in a more even distribution of leisure activities.

The third problem is about the beginning of the story. Where exactly does 'consumer society' start and come from? In Wirsching's treatment it repeatedly appears next to early twentieth-century 'mass culture' or 'mass society', which, again, features as a chameleon sometimes appearing as idea, sometimes as fact. When German historians discovered consumption they did so with their eyes fixed on the story of West Germany after 1945, and preoccupied with the American–German axis. All this makes sense if we want to understand how this particular society shifted from totalitarianism to a social market democracy. But it is a less helpful analytical frame for viewing consumer society more generally. The story is not a simple stand-off between dynamic and optimistic Americans and sceptical Europeans; the German reaction is sometimes conflated with that of Europeans more generally, which ignores the lively and more sympathetic attitudes to goods and consumption in north-western Europe since the seventeenth century. Britain, Holland, France, and Germany too, had internal dynamics that boosted consumption before Ford, the Marshall Plan and Galbraith appeared on the scene. The prehistory matters, as do regional and transnational exchanges that are not centred on the United States.

Why should it matter? It matters because using the concept of consumer society and 'mass society' as a hermeneutic device delivers an in-built ready-made narrative which offers a cause and effect that runs from mass production and Fordism to affluence and ends with consumption as a new source of identity. The question to be asked is where does this leave societies before 1900? Wirsching sidesteps this dilemma by telling us that before the triumph of mid-twentieth-century consumer society, we are in an historical era where work is all that matters. Work defined people's identity, not consumption. I find this troubling. Behind it lurks the assumption that people were stuck in a world of basic needs without stuff or desires – only societies after 1945 had discretionary spending, choice and opportunities for self-fashioning. In fact, the rising volume and social diffusion of consumer goods and fashions is well documented. In the late seventeenth century, millions of brightly coloured, fashionable chintz cottons reached Holland and England from the East Indies. Mass consumption preceded mass production; cottons were woven and dyed by Indian artisans. Tea, coffee and the accessories to go with these made it into the homes of labourers and paupers in the eighteenth century. In the United States, slaves were

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buying mirrors and combs at the time of the revolution – presumably, they did not derive their identity from work. People in Zanzibar had their own vocabulary for goods and riches. Recent work on eighteenth-century Britain has shown the considerable diffusion of fashionable cottons, teapots and interior furnishings amongst plebeian consumers. People cared a lot about their possessions and appearance. Chroniclers in late Ming China (sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries) were bemoaning how villagers and youths were copying the dress of courts and city elites to be in the style 'of the moment'. Wirsching cites Georg Simmel as evidence how metropoles around 1900 were encouraging a new culture of self-fashioning to communicate their personality. European and American commentators from Daniel Defoe to John Rae said much the same in earlier centuries. Wirsching cites Veblen to argue that, other than household objects, women only gained opportunities to consume with mass society. But what if Veblen were wrong? In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries women were active consumers – indeed enlightenment thinkers such as Millar believed that their role at the centre of refined consumption and sociability was one of the great civilising achievements of the age.

We are still some way from seeing the longer history of consumption in all its contours. Part of the problem, and one borne out by this article, is that twentieth-century European historians are preoccupied with the Americanisation thesis and look forward in time to our own consumer culture, with little interest in earlier periods or other parts of the world. The automatic association of consumer culture with industrialised Western societies in this article is typical, as it leaves out a large chunk of the world where people consumed as well. Meanwhile early modern historians have reconstructed earlier global exchanges but been fixated on claiming the 'birth' of consumer society for their own particular country and period, which has left little interest in charting how we got from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. What is clear, however, is that the story presented here as a paradigm shift from a work society to a consumer society sometime in the middle of the twentieth century is too simple.

In his conclusion Wirsching offers a plea for a more critical history of consumption. I do not know of many triumphant accounts. Most studies have, in fact, been critical or morally charged – 'consumerism' comes with a bad aftertaste. That consumption undermines community and citizenship is a trope shared on both sides of the Atlantic. Most recent scholarly writing has focused on the negative effects, especially on happiness. The literature is so overwhelmingly bleak or cynical that we are in danger of missing why people consume in the first place. If there is a problem, it is too much morality, not too little. Wirsching rightly urges us not to forget about work when writing about consumption; after the focus on shopping in the 1980s, the literature in geography and anthropology has been reconnecting production with consumption. I am less persuaded by the precise role he claims for work in terms of purchasing power and identity. Labour, he writes, has 'ceased to serve as a basis for the construction of selfhood' (p. 22). That is a grand statement. Surely, this differs across classes, generations, gender and regions. In the United States, managers and top professionals now work longer hours than they did a few decades ago (unlike

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blue-collar workers), in part because they derive status and distinction from busyness. Wirsching, too, suggests that only gainful employment provides a ticket to participate in consumer society and 'so affirm themselves as individuals' (p. 25). I am not sure where this leaves children and teenagers, but above all the elderly, who have emerged as active consumers in their own right, a dramatic social revolution in the last few decades. Research on taste and leisure practices in the United Kingdom today suggests that it is education, not work or wages, which is decisive for the degree and form of participation in consumer culture, followed by gender and ethnicity.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about 'consumer society' is not whether it is right or wrong but how historians (and many social scientists too) continue to labour under its shadow. It is easily picked up as a bundle of ideas to pronounce on the state of the world but rarely put to the test of evidence. The gulf between grand theories and moral positions on the one hand and empirical studies on the other remains vast, and probably larger than in any other subject (work, education, family, health, etc). We do indeed want new narratives of consumption but to get there we first need to free ourselves from the schematic straightjacket that came with the original 'consumer society' model.

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