Chapter 13

Conclusion

Who wins – consumerism or consumers?

History answers several basic questions about consumerism – for example, why did it get started, and how do different societies vary? It defines other questions that require more personal evaluation. This chapter highlights the major issues.

The development of consumerism represents one of the great changes in the human experience, literally around the world, over the past two or three centuries. The emergence of new types of marketing and advertising is important in itself, as part of modern economic history. But it is the shift in behavior and personal expectations that is really intriguing. Large numbers of people have come to define life somewhat differently, and have fostered new kinds of hopes and frustrations accordingly.

This is a recent development, as big historical shifts go, but already it has a complex history. Far more is involved than the apparent simplicity of shopping and acquiring.

While consumerism shows the power of change – a key focus for historical inquiry – it also shows the importance of historical continuities. Each major society has received and elaborated consumerism a bit differently. Key historical factors involved in this distinctive shaping include prior social structures and their degree of rigidity, and of course gender relationships and assumptions as well. The cultural context is also crucial. Consumerism gains ground more smoothly when the prior culture was heavily secular. But even secular philosophies like Confucianism condition the experience. Government involvement can be critical as well; different political traditions have encouraged different levels of state policy to promote, channel or discourage consumerism. The power of consumerism is obvious. Its appeal has often allowed it to advance despite various political, cultural and social obstacles, but the power does not run roughshod over history, which is why international consumerism is not a uniform product.

History also reminds us of crucial differences in timing. Some societies are “farther along” in consumerism than others, and the differences here may prove durable. The historical record also makes it clear that consumerism never progresses unopposed, and that it may even be slowed or
temporarily reversed. At the outset of the twenty-first century, powerful objections to consumerism persist in many parts of the world, and we may see new cases in which the consumer apparatus is rolled back. We will certainly see vigorous debate over the phenomenon almost everywhere, though the specific forms will vary from one society to the next.

The importance of variations in the receptions of consumer behaviors may seem unexpected, for it is tempting to look at consumerism as a uniform phenomenon, some undifferentiated product of Westernization. But the variations are real, and they continue to shape consumerism's prospects.

History also explains why consumerism exists at all, though the balance among factors must still prompt debate. The apparatus is one element from the first: consumerism exists partly because so many clever people promote it, with increasingly sophisticated techniques, but consumerism also exists because it meets other needs. Its role in responding to blurrings of identity is crucial. Consumerism helps people deal with confusions about social status and with challenges to established patterns because of new foreign influence. Consumerism also, relatedly, allows quiet challenges to hierarchy, in terms of social class, gender, even parental authority. It provides some sense of freedom and individual expression, however superficial the outcome. And, particularly outside the West, it offers a sense of belonging to a larger whole, of gaining access to the up-to-date and modern. It compensates for change, and also provokes further change in the interests of apparent personal fulfillment and new forms of identity. Finally, of course, consumerism takes increasing root with time, unless (rarely) it is successfully rolled back by effective opposition. People come to grow up with consumerism from infancy; they assume its logic and normalcy.

The combination of three components - manipulation, fulfillment of social and personal needs, and habituation - serves as consumerism's incubator and ongoing support. Shopping may offer some intrinsic pleasures, but there are reasons for its growing role in human life.

History does not, of course, tell us exactly what comes next, and important issues surround consumerism's future. Three question marks particularly apply to consumerism's prospects as the twenty-first century moves forward. The first involves the impact of the religious revival affecting many regions of the world, from Islam, to a new movement in China derived in part from Buddhism, to the surge of Protestant fundamentalism in Latin America, to the increased popularity of religious commitments in the United States. Religious fervor can of course coexist with consumerism, but there are inevitable tensions. Will religion provide an alternative to consumer interests, and if so where, and to what extent? To what extent do the fervent religions take hold particularly among people - the urban unemployed, for example - left out of consumerist gains, and to what extent do they inhibit consumer interests?
The second issue involves the new surge of protest against multinational corporations and global trade policies. This protest led during the year 2000 to unexpectedly vigorous demonstrations against international economic agencies such as the World Bank, in cities ranging from Seattle to Geneva. The protest does not focus on consumerism per se, but it does argue that protecting jobs and the environment should take precedence over maximizing consumer gains. It also involves groups that do disavow consumer goals outright, harking back to the alternative spirit of the 1960s. Where will this lead? Is it possible that either local or global protests will displace consumerism?

The third issue, related to both the others, involves the growing economic gap that has opened worldwide between the relatively affluent and the increasingly poor. The gap has widened steadily during the past two decades. It involves certain regions, like much of Africa, in disproportionate poverty, at levels that inhibit consumerism of any sort. It also involves left-out groups even within the United States, that have found their incomes stagnating or falling as income inequality becomes sharper. For the poor, consumerism is not the question; seeking adequate subsistence is. The question haunts a large percentage of people in Africa, South Asia, and elsewhere. It haunts the growing number of children below the poverty line – thirteen million in the year 2000 – in the United States. Where will the growing inequality trend lead? Will it generate new forms of protest, or will it simply continue to create a divide, within societies as well as internationally, between those who can and those who cannot significantly participate in modern history's new toys? There is an additional twist. Many poor regions and poor people now provide low-wage labor to make consumer goods for others. Long hours and unsafe conditions add in as well. This includes sweated peasant workers in China, making Christmas ornaments or fireworks, workers making fashionable sneakers in Vietnam, textile workers in Indonesia or Lesotho. Spreading consumerism, and the quest for low prices and greater profits, in this sense contributes directly to poverty, to the great divide between those involved in the system and those left out.

Again, it is essential to assume debate and constraints when contemplating consumerism’s future prospects. Some issues are new – environmentalism, for example, at its current level of concern – but complexity has long been part of consumerism’s impact.

Still, for all the question marks, it is logical to assume that consumerism will continue to gain ground, as more societies seek to share in the presumed delights. China, for example, clearly seems poised for greater consumerism, and Russian interest is obvious though clouded by uncertain economic prospects. Large middle classes in countries such as India, Mexico, Turkey, and Brazil already define life in part through standard consumer acquisitions. Many other groups and regions seek larger slices of the consumer
pie. Even in the United States, amid some questions about whether unprecedented affluence provides enough purpose in life, consumer interests continue to surge forward. Indeed, economies from the United States to China, and to some degree globally, now depend on steady and advancing consumerism. Small wonder that consumer diligence has come to be virtually an obligation of citizenship, particularly in the United States, essential to keep the wheels of society turning. American leaders, urging a return to normalcy after the terrorist attacks of 2001, made the point clearly: “keep buying and keep flying.”

The steady intensification of consumerism—despite problems and despite real inequalities—leads to three final questions that focus on evaluation of consumerism’s meaning and impact rather than on historical perspective and forecasting alone. First, is consumerism making the world too homogeneous, at undue cost to regional identities and expressions? Second, will the spread of consumerism usher in other historical changes, and of what magnitude? And third, wherever it has hit or will alight, is consumerism a good thing, in terms of human values?

The homogeneity issue goes to the core of a world-historical approach to consumerism, but it is not easy to deal with. The spread of consumerism does involve convergence on shared goals and many shared styles. To take a simple point: people around the world dress more similarly, at the outset of the twenty-first century, than ever before since clothing was invented. T-shirts, blue jeans, neckties are everywhere. Consumerism encourages people to seek minor individual variants in clothing—a distinctive slogan on the T-shirt, for example—but amid great, growing, and often truly international conformity.

Indeed, we have seen that one of the goals of consumerism, particularly outside the West, has been a sense of participation in a larger global community. People even accept products they don’t greatly like, such as McDonald’s fare, in order to gain this sense of belonging, in order to shake off a sense of parochialism and separateness.

Yet homogeneity is far from complete. People continue to differ over consumerism, as a result of the wide disparity in earnings but also because of very different expectations. The rural-urban gap still shows in most societies. Rural people stake more on acquisition of land and family solidarity than their urban cousins do, and work less strenuously to maximize consumer gains. Different societies offer distinctive packages as well. The tensions between consumerism and community traditions in Africa are not felt to the same degree in Japan. Partly this reflects differences in historical timing, but there may be more involved. Japanese consumerism is associated with individualism to a degree, but it has not erased a far greater sense of conformity in Japan than in the West. Europeans spend far more on vacations and vacation time than Americans do, a huge difference in the definitions of appropriate consumerism even within the West. Americans lead the world
in personal credit card debt, reflecting a particular addiction to maximizing consumer opportunities as early as possible (or, according to concerned critics, earlier than is really possible). There is no reason to believe that the rest of the world will follow this American example, for again precise goals continue to vary by group and region. Many Indians embrace aspects of consumerism, but they also combine it with local fashions.

In other words, consumerism does erase some divisions and it does create unprecedentedly wide interest in some common types of items, even single brands such as McDonald's or Mickey Mouse or Pokémon. It does permit people to find known consumer emblems virtually everywhere they travel. It does encourage a sense of global belonging. But it does not erase all differences. Whether the world's peoples are becoming too similar around consumerism, or whether too many differences still hamper mutual understanding remains an important tension. Consumerism has not eliminated the tension.

A second question about consumerism, both past and future, involves range of impact. We have seen that consumerism can affect more than buying habits and personal and family life. Many people believe it has profoundly altered the political process in countries such as the United States, leading to new levels of manipulation in "selling the candidate." But as consumerism deepens, and spreads to still more countries, will there be further effects? One American journalist, Thomas Friedman, in his book The Lexus and the Olive Tree, argues that deeply consumerist societies will not wage war against each other. He contends that when lots of people in a society enjoy the fruits of consumerism, they no longer want to go to war, and so war will decline (except, of course, for aggrieved societies where consumerism has not yet taken hold). He notes the unpopularity of military service in many consumerist societies. This is an ambitious theory, and frankly not enough time has passed to judge whether it is right or wrong. (Consumerist England eagerly went to war against Argentina in the 1980s over the Falkland Islands, but of course it was a minor engagement, and also Argentina was not yet fully consumerist, so maybe the theory didn't apply.) But thinking this way about the potential precedent-shattering effects of global consumerism at least points the way to the possibility of wide impacts on our future. The United States attack on Iraq, in 2003, shows that deeply consumerist societies will still go to war when they can be persuaded they are under threat. But the war (like the Vietnam war before it) was also intriguing in that it did not call for significant consumer sacrifice; taxes were not raised and people were encouraged to keep on spending, as government deficits mounted. Perhaps Friedman should be modified: consumerist societies will prefer wars that do not interfere with consumer life, but other goals may take precedence and drive them to battle despite consumerism. And if this is so, how much has this aspect of history really changed?
More basically still: is consumerism "good?" In one sense the question is unanswerable except in terms of personal values, and people clearly disagree. Consumerism can be appallingly shallow. It opens even thoughtful people to manipulations by salesmen and advertisers. It does relate to a decline of spiritual values and other intangibles. It does generate mindless conformities. It may even make people less aware of their own emotional reactions, as they seek to buy yet another item that will distract them. It certainly can reduce protest, making people reluctant to confront social injustice or deteriorations at work so long as their buying power holds up. It can negatively affect the environment, by encouraging unregulated production and creating wasteful products.

But consumerism can be defended, even without denying some of the criticisms. New goods provide new levels of comfort and diversion, and arguably even beauty, into ordinary life. Few people would willingly go back to pre-consumerist material standards — though this may reflect the extent to which consumerism has blinded them to higher values. It is also true that some commentary on consumerism, still today, reflects elitist disdain for the pleasures of the masses and a related sense that the lower orders should not call attention to themselves. It often assumes that ordinary people don’t know what’s good for them — which is possible but not certain.

It is also vital to recognize how consumerism has often stood for goals and concerns well beyond material acquisition. We have seen that consumerism gives many people a sense of global belonging. It also often stands for freedom and individual choice. This was true in the past and remains true for many today. It often stands as well for an attack on rigid social or gender hierarchy. These strivings through consumerism may be disapproved of, as elite critics have often done when consumer gains challenged hierarchy. Or consumerism may be attacked for serving the goals badly; freedom, for example, may be a goal in consumerism that is thwarted by conformity and commercial manipulation. But a judgment of consumerism must recognize its important service to broader social and personal interests. It is not always as shallow as it seems. Many people express themselves through it, in ways impossible in earlier times.

What of the loss of identity consumerism may involve? Consumerism and Westernization are not the same thing, in that some societies, for example those of Japan or Africa, may increase consumerism without totally surrendering to Western values. Outside the West, consumerism has always involved an attack on regional traditions through attraction to imported goods and tastes. This may not only offend nationalist pride, but also seriously disorient individuals who voluntarily commit to consumer goals. They may end up — as some Africans claim to feel — not knowing who they are.

Even in the West, it is hard to say whether consumerism has made people happier. Measuring happiness historically is terribly hard, perhaps
impossible. Clearly, the advance of consumerism has always involved losses as well as gains, and some of the drawbacks have not been clearly perceived by enthusiasts. One study, issued in 2000, claims that major consumer gains in a society – a real move upward in material standards – initially causes a definitive jump in measurable happiness. But after that and in more established consumer settings, consumerism is irrelevant to claimed satisfaction, and people enmeshed in milder forms of consumerism may be happier than consumerist zealots.

The study of consumerism in world history does not provide a definitive balance sheet on whether the long-term results are favorable or unfavorable. But it does provide perspective, allowing greater understanding of what consumerism involves, and perspective, in turn, offers a greater capacity to choose an appropriate level of involvement, rather than being swept away by the latest enthusiasm.

Understanding where consumerism comes from, what needs and pressures it responds to, does not prove that consumerism is good or bad. But historical understanding does generate some opportunity for considering one’s own take on a truly powerful international force in contemporary life. It also helps to know what some of the criticisms have been, and to be able to compare one set of national patterns against another.

Managing consumerism is a challenge, for it is easy to be managed by it. But consumerism is a human construction, despite all the complex factors behind it. It should serve human ends.