

Transnational consumption and circulations

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ABSTRACT

Many actors contribute to the production and distribution of objects, including industrial actors, merchants, advertisers, and designers, thereby constructing the Europe of goods. Whether they are engaged in (sometimes rebellious) consumer associations or are simple (and sometimes creative and tinkering) users, consumers themselves also helped construct the consumer society. Consumption has been a decisive factor in the construction of European societies since at least the early modern period, and is part of a fabric of relations and circulations that stretches beyond national borders.



Josiah Wedgwood, Anti-slavery Medallion, United Kingdom, 1787. © British Museum. In its ethical facet, responsible consumption found in anti-slavery one of its founding causes. Abolitionists refused to consume products made from slave labor, and diffused their message in the late eighteenth century through manufactured objects, notably Wedgwood porcelain. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Consuming locally is a contemporary watchword. It reflects the extent to which the consumption of certain products coming from afar, and especially abroad, has been part of the European lifestyle for decades and even centuries. This watchword also reflects a culture of responsible consumption, which has also paid no heed to borders.

The transnational space of the consumer society

The number of goods and transactions increased sharply in eighteenth-century Great Britain. A first “consumer society” already emerged through transformations in the methods of production and sale, as well as new practices on the part of consumers (who purchased more on the market, produced less at home, and diversified their purchases). At the same time, in other countries such as France, practices evolved in connection with certain objects such as clothing, as consumption increased, goods circulated between social groups, and buying methods evolved. These transformations in relations toward goods were not entirely new, partially dating back to Renaissance Italy and sixteenth-century China. However, practices relating to fashion, quicker change of goods, the mass of objects involved, and a less moralizing discourse were ruptures that initially occurred in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands during the eighteenth century.

The very early transnational circulations of goods should be emphasized. For example in India, even before the arrival of Europeans in the early sixteenth century (and before textile industrialization in England during the eighteenth century), Indians produced and sold cotton fabric throughout Africa and Asia. Empires also played a central role in the diffusion of new goods, as the number of goods connected to the expansion of European empires exploded between 1492 and 1900. Goods from the Empire filled the shopping baskets and homes of Britons. Sugar, tea from India or China, along with cotton fabric imported from India and produced in England using these imported raw materials were among the goods consumed by a growing part of the population beginning in the eighteenth century.

Books, silk, and chocolate circulated in empires, although a practice sometimes had to be transformed in order to become acceptable. Chocolate, for instance, was initially a consumer good tinged with impurity, because it came from the indigenous peoples of the Americas; the Jesuits who imported it had to prepare chocolate differently, reducing its bitterness in order to make it “consumable.” Tastes and the representations of products changed together, ensuring a continental diffusion for the product in European courts, and soon after among the entire elite. Some goods, however, did not circulate, for instance coffee, which did not take root in Great Britain, or cola, which did not cross the Atlantic.

The twentieth century saw the arrival in the West of “mass consumption.” When precisely did this take place? In the early twentieth century, consumption was already being displayed, notably with the development of advertising on walls and in the press. The wealthiest, who were true consumer pioneers, bought new goods for themselves—for example the first automobiles—while consumers from working-class backgrounds broadened their consumption horizon thanks to specific credit practices. This enabled them to buy wardrobes, for instance. After the Second World War, beginning in the mid-1950s, Western European countries experienced a period of strong growth marked by increased purchasing power for all social categories, along with an increase in products. New goods were diffused in a greater number of households, especially household appliances such as the washing machine, which transformed the lives of housewives, and the television, which changed leisure practices. The development of marketing, large retailers, and the *Salon des arts ménagers* [Household Arts Show] characterized this period, in which new consumption practices were learned. The expression “affluent society” naturally corresponds to a widespread sentiment connected to the appearance of products that were sometimes presented as gadgets, but also includes profound social disparities in access to certain goods, as well as the phenomenon of long waiting lists that could stretch up to multiple years (automobile, telephone, etc.).

The transformations did not only involve Western Europe and the United States during this period: mass consumption was not the prerogative of the West. In connection with the Cold War, some Westerners defended the idea that consumption was linked to the consumer's free choice, and was a foundation of Western democracy, as illustrated by the Kitchen Debate between Nixon and Khrushchev in Moscow in July 1959. This vision was nevertheless contradicted by certain consumption practices in the East.

Contrary to what was believed in the West during the Cold War, people consumed goods and services behind the "Iron Curtain," and they were often the same types of products as in the West, whether it was as part of consumption organized by the regimes (with an intelligentsia that had particular rights and objects), or resulting from different kinds of "tinkering." Goods circulated officially or unofficially between the East and the West. In the East a different culture of consumption was put in place, a culture of scarcity characterized by waiting lines, the stocking of "loss-making" products, the use of demonetized exchange, theft in the workplace, and recourse to corruption.

The European space of consumption, defined according to practices, can include the British Isles, Russia, and Turkey. The personal computer created a shared culture well beyond continental divisions, even though the practices of early communities of computer users were different in the West and the East. In Greece, Poland, and Yugoslavia, users had to make recourse to imported machines, but invented their own languages to make them function.

Finally, tastes and practices travelled in complex movements of hybridization. For instance, Italian-Americans began to consume pasta upon their arrival in the United States, something they had not done in Southern Italy because they were too poor. To the great displeasure of American reformers during the 1930s, they chose to affirm their identity by eating like wealthy people from their native Italy (pasta, meat, olive oil, pizza). When they returned to Italy, they brought their habits with them...and helped shape the so-called traditional food of Italy. Such a process was also present within the European continent, with Spanish and Portuguese immigration in France, or Greek and Yugoslav immigration in Germany.

In this transnational space of circulating goods and people, consumers could also be responsible; they became, in other words, political actors as consumers.

The transnational circulations of the responsible consumer

Consumption could indeed be used as a political language by both governments and citizens. Consumer movements can be divided into two groups: ethical consumption and consumerism. In the first case, consumers insist on their duty as consumers to defend slaves, laborers, children, and other categories. In the second case, consumers express themselves to defend their rights and own interests as consumers. Here we shall take an interest in ethical consumption, which gave rise to transnational circulations.

Ethical consumption is one that insists on the duties of consumers. There are a number of key "moments" for ethical consumption, which contrary to what one may think do not date from recent years. These moments were marked by transnational circulations.

In 1791, a boycott of sugar produced by slaves challenged triangular trade in Great Britain. The boycott was largely organized by women. To promote their movement, they used porcelain merchandise (bracelets, brooches, etc.) produced by Josiah Wedgwood representing a black child (slave). This became the symbol of their activity. These abolitionist circles helped create a culture of consumption by including aspects that went beyond the consumed product itself. For all that, Wedgwood—a symbol of the consumer culture of the eighteenth century—was the manufacturer of large quantities of porcelain objects. We therefore see that there was no opposition between producers and responsible consumers, but a wide spectrum of practices and goods. The

boycott of English products was also one of the tools of Irish protest movements during the last third of the nineteenth century.

In the early twentieth century, certain movements proposed not to boycott products, but to reform consumption methods in order to have “social” or reform action. In France, a Ligue social d’acheteurs [Social Consumers’ League] was created in 1902 based on the model of American consumers’ leagues, which were partially driven by the abolitionist struggle of the preceding generation. This league published pamphlets, postcards, conferences, etc. to explain the duty of consumers (bourgeois by implication) to consume by taking into account the working conditions of the laborers and employees who worked for them. They also invented communication tools, for example “exhibitions of misery” that denounced inexpensive clothing, which for them was necessarily produced by underpaid workers. They took an interest in the workers and employees visible around them: their domestic servants, the seamstresses who made their dresses, employees of department stores, the bakers who made their bread, etc. They were concerned about their working and living conditions, as part of the major reform movement that affected Western countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This example, like others, shows us that consumption can at a particular moment be a political language for both men and women. Here consumption enabled a group of social Catholics to have an impact in the Third Republic. At the same time, comparable leagues were born in Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. In Great Britain, a different movement took hold of consumption, that of free trade. Here once again, consumption served to express ideas about the economy and political organization.

Fair trade, which was built from the 1950s to the 1970s in the Netherlands, Great Britain (around Oxfam), and subsequently in other European countries, partially drew on this legacy from the 1900s. Still, this legacy is most often unconscious, and was renewed through the engagement of young Christian Third-Worldists from the 1950s onward. For that matter, companies played a growing role during this period: Starbucks and Cadbury strengthened the market for fair trade coffee when they decided to modify their procurement. While fair trade can be considered as the latest wave in a long series of efforts to moralize the economy, it is even more global than during the late eighteenth century.

Responsible consumers and their ideas circulate as much as objects do. The other form of consumer movements is consumerism. This dynamic serves to identify, legally recognize, and defend consumer rights. In many respects, consumerism resembled the social movements of the second half of the twentieth century: mass consumer associations enabling greater impact, media denunciations of situations unfavorable to consumers, official recognitions enabling their inclusion in institutions, etc. Based on the American model, the privileged tool for consumerism remains the comparative test. While occasional associations limited to a product or a service emerged starting in the early twentieth century (telephone users in France), the most noteworthy remained general associations, such as the Consumers’ Association (United Kingdom, 1957) or l’Union fédérale des consommateurs [Federal Union of Consumers] (France, 1951). These different national associations came together on the European level in 1962 as part of the European Consumer Organisation, located in Brussels. On the institutional level, numerous countries established policies for defending consumers through administrative entities for combatting counterfeits and conducting health inspections, sometimes going as far as creating ministries. The definition and harmonization of norms for both mass consumer products and more sensitive products (food, toys, medicine) has imposed itself as one of the European Commission’s primary activities, especially since the transition to the Single Market. Yet this defense of consumers was once again not independent of industrial considerations.

Social circulations? The consumer-user

Consumers, whether tinkerers or rebels, built Europe by appropriating and consuming a great number of

technologies, from the sewing machine to the bicycle, the doll to the computer. Some circulations also took place within the national space as social circulations. Objects had a “long life” that continued well beyond the commercial exchange; for instance, they sometimes circulated between social groups through the intermediary of domestic servants or second-hand sales. The consumption of second-hand objects has been present for a long time across all social classes.

For example, in connection with the rise of antique dealers starting in the 1860s, some members of the bourgeoisie wanted to obtain old furniture, thereby inscribing themselves within the long-term. At the same time they began to collect objects, with showcases appearing in apartments during the 1830s for their display.

Working-class circles also frequented second-hand circuits during the nineteenth century and the Belle Époque. They especially purchased from *brocanteurs* [dealers in second-hand goods], who specialized in the resale of merchandise produced in series. In working-class environments, objects were used to the very end, tinkered and transformed. One had to “make use,” in other words to use objects as far as possible. Cloth was constantly mended, shoes were resewn, furniture repaired. Objects almost never died: they were recovered by rag dealers, a profession that slowly disappeared, but still existed in the early twentieth century. They retrieved discarded food and clothing, and lived in slums. As in the early modern period, goods were also forms of indirect saving, which could be placed in a pawnshop, or resold if necessary.

Consumer-users helped redefine objects. For example, the sewing machine could simultaneously be a working tool for women who did sewing at home, a decorative object for certain bourgeois women, or a means of making clothing for family use. Bicycle models were different depending on their users, for beginning with the late nineteenth century, the working-class sought speed, while the middle class and certain categories of users wanted safer and more comfortable bikes. With the development of the car the bicycle slowly became the transportation means of the poor and workers (after 1900 and during the interwar period). It was only starting in the 1970s that the bicycle once again interested the middle and bourgeois classes through new leisure practices, as well as the adoption, especially in the Netherlands, of innovative forms of daily mobilities, which have continued to develop up to the present (return of the bike to cities).

Some users who did not immediately adopt the goods proposed to them appeared as resistant consumers. For instance in Canada or Japan, housewives debated the use of washing machines, notably due to limited electric or water connections. Customs also explain resistance: in Japan, women’s and men’s clothing had to be washed separately, while in Germany, companies had to launch major publicity campaigns during the interwar period to change the habits of housewives, who continued to scrub laundry by hand.

Similarly, we know through the use of consumer goods, particularly the radio and telephone, that the Soviets claimed ownership of goods, even though they did not possess them. While radio was thought of by political authorities during the 1920s as a means for diffusing the regime’s propaganda, amateur radios gained their independence, and people listened to what they wanted to, notably shows from the West. Beginning in the 1960s, the diffusion of transistor radio sets enabled individuals to make personal choices, and to listen to Western stations (Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty), despite jamming and the risk of arrest. In similar fashion, from the 1970s onward, the telephone became a relational tool, even though it was seen by political authorities as a tool simply designed to respond to emergency situations. Even when it was present in collective apartments or telephone booths, users made private use of it, which led to comical scenes that appear in Russian cinema. They did so *de facto*, and not in an effort to resist the regime.

Finally, consumers could distort or subvert certain uses of objects. The vibrator, which was invented during the last third of the nineteenth century to treat what was referred to at the time as feminine hysteria, slowly left hospitals in the early twentieth century by becoming electrified. Its sale was restricted but indeed present during the

interwar period, especially by mail order; under the impetus of certain feminist movements, it became a symbol of women's claim to pleasure during the 1970s. The object became a part of popular culture (television series) in the late 1990s, as its use spread to the mass-market.

Consumer-users were also actors in consumption, in the same manner as responsible consumers. They helped construct a particularly shifting space of consumption consisting of circulations, in both Europe and beyond. Consumer-users were also actors when they limited circulations by their taste or habits; circulations did not exclude barriers, but instead most often made them move.

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