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H-France Review Vol. 23 (May 2023), No. 87

Michael Kwass, *The Consumer Revolution, 1650-1800*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. xi + 261 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$79.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780521198707; \$25.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780521139595; \$25.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781009234399.

Review by Pierre Gervais, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle.

Michael Kwass's ambitious overview presents itself as an attempt at updating Brewer, McKendrick, and Plumb's famous collection of essays, *Birth of a Consumer Society*, coincidentally or not on its fortieth anniversary.<sup>[1]</sup> Much has changed since then. The study of the consumer revolution has been internationalized, first in Europe and the Americas, then in South and East Asia. It has expanded back in time towards the Renaissance, spawned the associated idea of an "industrious revolution" in the productive sphere, and, for some historians, been downgraded to an evolutionary "culture of consumption." In addition, Kwass mentions a whole range of more recent thematic developments to be dealt with. These include the extent of the interaction between social stratification and the structure of consumption, the study of the processes through which goods were brought to consumers, the influence of fashion on these processes, the gendered nature of consumption, the issues of imperialism and globalization, the backward links from consumption to production, and the revolutionary or at least protest-oriented potentialities of consumer behaviors. Thereupon, after some grand claims for consumption history as a source of empowerment against both twenty-first-century consumer capitalism and the dangers of climate change, the introduction ends rather abruptly, with a very short programmatic paragraph promising "a transimperial synthesis of the consumer revolution, reviewing recent debates, assessing the latest research, drawing fresh conclusions, and, where possible, advancing new hypotheses" (p. 15).

This sentence misrepresents the book, and even does it a serious disservice. *The Consumer Revolution* is definitely worth reading, but not as a theoretical discussion of the consumer revolution or as an overview of the phenomenon in economic terms. It is, first and foremost, a work of cultural history. The book could probably have been entitled *The Cultural Consumer Revolution* with no great loss to either author or reader. The economic dimension mostly remains a backdrop against which various issues are discussed. Keeping the term "revolution" is passingly justified in the introduction by the "transformative nature" of the growth of consumption (p. 8), but what was transformed, and above all, why, is unclear. One has to wait for chapter two to discover Kwass's answer, which is limited to rounding up the usual suspects: urban growth; specialization, whether local, regional, or international; the mass consumption of exotic goods (cotton textile, tea, and sugar are singled out), produced with the help of the slave-based horrors

of the plantation economy; and, very briefly, import substitution. No clear periodization is offered, and regional variations and their causes are barely explored. To his credit, Kwass acknowledges that this narrative of economic growth, proposed mostly by economists, can hardly by itself account for the rise in consumption given falling wages and persistent poverty. Hence the reliance on Jan De Vries's "industrious revolution" as a *deus ex machina*, with consumerist men, women, and children turning to wage labor in order to buy the goods they coveted.[2] One can sense a certain skepticism on the part of the author, who nonetheless concludes on the basis of the behavior of one Lancashire family, who took up spinning for the extra income (pp. 49-50, quoting John Styles), that "Such consumption-driven proto-industry seems to have been happening on a broad scale in rural areas of western Europe where the textile industry was developing" (p. 50).[3]

This breathtaking jump from the most locally individualized to the most continentally generalized is a good illustration of the second shortcoming of *The Consumer Revolution* as a work covering an economic phenomenon, besides its reluctance to discuss it theoretically: it offers very little in the way of quantified evidence, and barely discusses it at all when it does. In the sentence quoted above, we don't know who exactly worked more, where, or by how much, nor if there were regional differences. Even the wording is hardly conclusive ("seems to..."), and the statement is partly contradicted in the very next page, with Kwass correctly pointing out, but again as a figure-free, qualitative assertion, that the "industrious revolution" merely allowed poor Europeans to make ends meet, at best. There is only one table in the whole book, providing an Ngram, Google-based estimate of the quantitative use of luxury-related words in four European languages in the eighteenth century, and no more than around two dozen instances of isolated percentages scattered throughout the 250-odd pages, not all of them consumption-related anyway. Even when figures are quoted, they often seem inadequate to the conclusion derived from them. Thus, Kwass asserts that "the laboring classes" in general had more clothes and accessories at the end of the eighteenth century than at the beginning, on the basis of two sets of Parisian inventories studied by Roche and Fairchilds.[4] And when the key question of poverty, and the extent to which it shut out of the consumer revolution a significant and possibly increasing percentage of the population, is raised in chapter two, no figures are given, even though some would certainly be available.[5]

The truth of the matter is that Kwass is not that interested in the consumer revolution per se, or in the economic debates swirling around it, the topics of the first two chapters. Chapter one describes mostly qualitatively the growth of consumption, listing the main items which were consumed (clothing and accessories, household furniture, and food- and drink-related goods), with a focus on the novelties of the eighteenth century and their diffusion in France, England, and the Americas, and in circles beyond the gentry which had first started to use them in previous periods. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the link between social stratification and consumption, but, in the absence of hard data, the poor are quickly dispatched, the "middling sort" is ignored in spite of its centrality in the literature,[6] and Kwass focuses on the very rich: the courts made fashion important by turning it into a political prop, stimulated luxury production, and energized urban consumption among the bourgeoisie and even lower classes, although he is careful not to ascribe too much power to this emulation process. Chapter two, as we have seen, is a cursory presentation of the components of growth. However, it closes with a fascinating discussion of "modern materiality" (pp. 71-73), which for Kwass is the product of a deep cultural shift from durable goods, transmitted from generation to generation, to more ephemeral ones, giving rise to continuous replacement and thus to consumerism. Here, the tone

of the book changes significantly. The author is clearly much more at ease with this kind of topic, and the reader will find in the following chapters a wealth of interesting developments, insightful commentaries, and indeed new hypotheses, backed by well-chosen primary sources, and footnotes often qualifying as small bibliographical essays.

Thus, chapter three gives a detailed account of the rise of the retail shop, contextualizing it with respect to older forms of retail (peddlers especially), and stressing its increased openness, even to the poor and to slaves, its development of a whole new world of advertisement and fashion journals and of new sales techniques. Kwass argues convincingly and forcefully that early modern economic growth benefitted from the constant dialogue between consumers and producers generated by the “feedback loop” (p. 95) through which retailers recorded the tastes of the former and communicated them to the latter. Chapter four similarly takes a strong stand against a simple model of emulation of the elites on the part of the lower classes as an adequate description of the motives behind the increased consumption by the latter. Other parameters such as an urban setting or a professional link to the commercial world, could trump wealth and status as indicators of a higher level of consumption. Kwass argues that the increased availability of both luxury objects and imitations of them after 1600 weakened the direct link between objects and status, which became increasingly mediated through consumer taste. Fashion, in a way, was an answer to the inability of the sumptuary laws to maintain a legible social order. It was also inherently revolutionary, or at least part of the Enlightenment, because of its stress on the new, on the individuation of the self (rather than individualism: fashion was still a collective project, that in turn legitimized sentiment, personal comfort, natural, hygienic simplicity, and (less convincingly) exoticism. Kwass argues that eighteenth-century consumer modernity is really our consumer modernity, an early form of Bourdieu’s distinction, certainly not egalitarian, but breaking with past aristocratic values, a claim that may be disputed but deserves debate.

Chapter five delves more deeply into this connection between the consumer culture stressing the new, the present, and the fashionable, and the way the Enlightenment unfolded in Paris and to a lesser extent London (the rest of Europe appears only fleetingly). A sequel to the preceding chapter, it explores the print culture—with, interestingly enough, more quantitative data in two pages than there is in the entire first chapter—and argues that broad-gauged, “extensive” reading, combined with a new form of “intensive” reading, again centered on personal feelings, furthered the revolutionary thrust of consumer culture and helped create a politically aware public sphere, in which every social group, monarchs included, would eventually participate. New spaces of sociability arose as a result. Kwass highlights the elite ones—the salons, the cafés, and the promenades—arguing that salons were visible manifestations of a “tense fusion” (or attempted fusion, rather) of traditional, highly hierarchized courtly culture and Enlightenment openness (p. 148). Cafés, on the other hand, were more clearly linked to the newly created public sphere and at the source of what came to be called “public opinion,” but they were also gender-exclusive, compared to the women-dominated salon scene. Lastly, public gardens and promenades pioneered social diversity, although Kwass is critical of the idea that a true egalitarian, commodified counterculture had already appeared in the eighteenth century. For him, the elite “omnivore” cultural consumer did develop an interest in popular culture, but elite culture, conversely, remained closed to the lower orders (pp. 155-156).

The two last chapters tackle the political dimension of the consumer revolution, starting with the “luxury debate” in chapter six. Made up of a series of lecture notes on every author from Fénelon and Mandeville down to Tobias Smollett, Diderot, the physiocrats, and Adam Smith,

the chapter reads like a stand-alone, separate general course in intellectual history. Kwass argues that “luxury” was really a proxy for “increased consumption,” an equation which allows him again to focus on elite consumption exclusively and should be more problematized. In spite of the opening assertion of a pan-European debate, the texts are strictly English and French, and incidentally, the author seems to reproduce the classic misreading of Rousseau as extolling the state of nature over organized society.<sup>[7]</sup> These debates, however, seem strangely disconnected from the world of consumption the preceding chapters have described, and Kwass merely sees them as promoting the marketing of more “natural” products, a very small effect for very big ideas.

Chapter seven pursues this exploration of politics, connecting consumer culture and the Revolutionary spirit, and argues that “consumer activists politicized consumer goods” (p. 182). Kwass still loses the plot at times, focusing first for instance on the popular attempt to control the price of bread in France and the price caps enacted by the so-called “General Maximum” law under the French Revolution, even though bread was hardly a symbol of the consumer revolution, and the identification of hunger riots with consumer activism is a questionable proposition. But he argues convincingly that the new products of the consumer revolution (tea, sugar, coffee) came to be included in an expanded popular view of what was “necessary” and consequently became politically charged issues because of mercantilist and fiscalist policies pushing their prices up beyond the means of their average consumer. Thus, protests against excise (consumption) taxes in Latin America, Revolutionary France, and most obviously, North America with the American Revolution, should be placed alongside smuggling as manifestations of the same tug-of-war around consumption. In the bargain, the new durable items which had met with so much success in the eighteenth century were remade as explicitly revolutionary objects as well, with political slogans and markers appearing on everything from teapots to dresses (the cockade), although the novelty here is less obvious, since for centuries the Catholic Church had used everyday items to promote its own message. The chapter concludes with anti-slavery boycotts, a significantly different form of politicization that may have deserved more than the four pages of text Kwass devotes to it. As for the conclusion, it combines an eight-page summary of the previous chapters with a six-page discussion of the climate crisis, which, Kwass argues, is due to the consumerism developed in the eighteenth century, a logical jump at best.

Overall, yes, *The Consumer Revolution* overpromises both in its title and its introduction. It delivers a partial introductory tour of the topic instead of a synthesis and stresses the cultural and the political at the expense of economic processes and social analysis. Yet, it is still well worth the read. On his narrower topic, the cultural dimension of the consumer revolution, Kwass does indeed deliver a number of fresh insights and hypotheses, and the book benefits also from his clear and witty expository style, his ability to synthesize multiple directions of research into a coherent narrative, the numerous and well-chosen illustrations and their perceptive commentaries, and the use of an impressive array of secondary sources in English, French, and Spanish. There are misses. In addition to the studies of social stratification mentioned above, one could also think of the rich recent literature on merchant practice, which is ignored, or of the narrow focus on France and England, which crushingly dominates the narrative, with little space left for the rest of the world, colonies included, or of the equally exclusive focus on elite activities and lack of discussion of popular culture. But as an introduction to the many cultural issues raised by the changes in goods consumed between 1650 and 1800 in a few lucky areas in Western Europe, it does the job both clearly and pleasantly. Not all such introductory overviews can claim as much.

## NOTES

[1] Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa Publications, 1982).

[2] Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[3] John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 229-245.

[4] Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the 18th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 163; Cissie Fairchilds, "The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods in Eighteenth-Century Paris," in John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993), p. 230.

[5] Overview in Branko Milanovic, Peter H. Lindert, and Jeffrey G. Williamson, "Pre-Industrial Inequality," *The Economic Journal* 121 (2011): 255-272. See Table 1, p. 261.

[6] E.g. Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks, eds., *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994).

[7] Tanguy L'Aminot, "Nature, Culture, and the Social Contract: Emile's point of view," in Anne Deneys-Tunney and Yves-Charles Zarka, eds., *Rousseau Between Nature and Culture: Philosophy, Literature, and Politics* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), pp. 179-196.

Pierre Gervais  
Université Sorbonne Nouvelle  
[pierre.gervais@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr](mailto:pierre.gervais@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr)

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ISSN 1553-9172