

Although Britain is commonly referred to as a consumer society, many historians do not agree on the accuracy of this epithet, or on the nature of the consumer revolution, if indeed one occurred. Here John Benson discusses the character and timing of changes in consumption. He concludes that changing patterns of consumer expenditure evolved gradually over the hundred years since 1880, but questions whether these changes are sufficient to warrant Britain usefully being described as a consumer society.

Consumption and the Consumer Revolution

Economists and early modern historians have long stressed the importance of studying consumption, but it is only during the past decade or so that historians of modern Britain have begun to switch their attention from investigating the ways in which goods and services were produced to focus on the ways in which they were consumed. Indeed, they have turned with considerable enthusiasm to the study of consumption and the consumer revolution in seeking to describe and explain the history of the last two hundred years, with many coming to the view that Britain has undergone a consumer revolution and become a consumer society. [6, 8] Yet, although modern Britain is now commonly described as a consumer society, historians do not always agree about what consumption was, how it changed, why consumers consumed, when the consumer revolution occurred, and even whether today Britain really should be described as a consumer society.

Accordingly, this article has five broad aims: to review the different terms that are used when discussing consumption; to identify the major changes that took place in consumption during the hundred years after 1880' to present the various theories that have been advanced to explain why consumers consumed; to examine the existence and timing of the consumer revolution, and propose that it was a long, drawn-out affair; and finally, to suggest that it is neither accurate nor helpful to describe modern Britain as a consumer society.

What is consumption?

It is not at all easy to define what is meant by consumption. Although it is generally agreed that consumption can be defined as 'the process in which goods and services are bought and used to satisfy people's needs' [6], this definition is still ambiguous: for example, should buying a house or placing a bet best be understood as a form of consumption, as a form of saving, or as a form of investment? If consumption is defined as expenditure on goods and services which satisfy people's needs, we must also be able to define clearly what is meant by needs. We might think initially that food, housing, and clothing can be defined as 'necessities', while travel, consumer durables and entertainment are clearly 'luxuries', but when we look at specific goods and

services, the problems with these categories become apparent. On what criteria should we base our classification? For example, should a bar of chocolate, a pint of beer, or a new dress - all items of food or clothing - really be classified as necessities? At what point would these goods cease to be necessities and start to become luxuries? Similarly, under what conditions should a second-hand car be regarded as a necessity rather than a luxury?

The most helpful way to make the distinction is by using the economic concept of income elasticity of demand: this defines a necessity as a good or service for which demand is insensitive to changes in consumer income (ie. A change in income causes a less than proportionate change in the quantity consumed); and a luxury as a good or service which is sensitive to changes in consumer income (ie. A change in income generates a more than proportionate change in the quantity consumed).

Changes in consumption

Despite these definitional problems, it is possible to comment with some confidence on the major changes which have occurred in consumer spending during the century since 1880. There were changes both in the amount of money which was spent, and in the types of goods and services which were purchased. Table I shows that as consumer income increased, so, to a lesser extent, did consumer spending. Between 1880 and 1980 real consumer income per capita increased five-and-a-half times, while real consumer spending per capita quadrupled: the latter grew by over 50 per cent between 1880 and 1900, by almost 25 per cent between the two world wars, and by just over 40 per cent between 1960 and 1980. The significant growth in consumer spending revealed here constitutes a key feature of modern British economic, social (and political) history.

Table 2 indicates that as consumer income and consumer

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Table 1: Consumer Income and Consumer Spending per Person, 1880-1980

	Income		Spending	
	At current prices (£)	In real terms (1880=100)	At current prices (£)	In real terms (1880=100)
1880/1	33	100	32	100
1900/1	44	173	39	158
1911/15	65	227	53	187
1939/40	140	316	100	231
1960/1	428	363	322	279
1980/1	3,523	557	2,455	396

N.B. Figures before 1939/40 include Southern Ireland.

Sources: P. Deane & W. A. Cole, British Economic Growth, 1688-1959 (1969), pp.8, 116, 266; A. H. Halsey, British Social Trends since 1900 (1988), pp.104, 145, 182.

spending increased, the types of goods and services purchased also changed: there was a decline in the proportion of spending allocated to 'necessities' such as food and clothing, and an increase in the proportion spent on 'luxuries' such as consumer durables, travel and entertainment. There were modest changes in the

distribution of spending between the two world wars: the relative significance of expenditure on food declined slightly, while the proportion of consumer spending allocated to clothing and consumer durables (such as motor vehicles and electrical goods) increased significantly, although the latter was from a very low base. There were more substantial changes in the years which followed the second world war: food and clothing continued to decline in importance for consumers, while the proportion spent on housing increased, consumer durables declined and recovered, and the proportion spent on running a car more than doubled.

The changing nature of British consumption during this period supports Engel's observation, in

the economic law which bears his name, that as income rises, the proportion spent in necessities declines. Further support for Engel's law comes if we look in more detail at the changes within, as well as between, expenditure on 'necessities' and 'luxuries'. Table 3 demonstrates that the decline in the proportion of consumer spending devoted to food was accompanied by significant changes in the types of food which were consumed. As income and expenditure

increased, consumers tended to reduce their consumption of staple foods like bread and potatoes, and increase consumption of more expensive items such as meat, fruit and vegetables. This reflects the economic definition of necessities and luxuries given earlier, suggesting that bread and potatoes were income insensitive necessities, while fruit and vegetables were income sensitive luxury foods. Thus the decline in expenditure on staple foods within a budget in which food assumed a lower priority as income rose, provides additional support for Engel's Law.

Why did consumers consume?

It is especially difficult to explain why consumers chose to use the increasing incomes which they had at their disposal for consumption rather than for saving or investment. Some historians suggest that consumption increased because consumers shared an almost instinctive desire to enjoy a higher standard of living and improve their material and psychological well-being. [1] Others believe that consumers consumed in order to

emulate those around them; as Perkin suggests, 'If consumer demand... was the key to the Industrial Revolution, social emulation was the key to consumer

Table 2: Consumer Spending on 'Necessities' and 'Luxuries' as a Percentage of all Consumer Spending, 1900-1980

	'Necessities'			'Luxuries'		
	Food	Housing	Clothing	Consumer Durables	Travel & Communications	Running a car
1900	28	10	9	4	4	1
1915	30	10	8	4	4	1
1940	27	12	11	12	4	2
1960	25	10	10	8	4	3
1980	17	14	7	10	5	7

Sources: A. H. Halsey, British Social Trends since 1900 (1988), p.150.

demand. By the eighteenth century nearly everyone in England and the Scottish Lowlands received a money income, and nearly everyone was prepared to spend a large part of it in 'keeping up with the Joneses.' [7] Other historians maintain that consumers were manipulated by the machinations of advertisers and other commercial interests. According to Royle, 'The lubricant to make the consumer society of the late twentieth century function smoothly was advertising, which was made all the easier with the advent of

television.' [8]

In fact, it is probably a mistake to look for any single explanation for something as complicated as the desire to consume. It is almost certainly better to use the three explanations summarised above as hypotheses to be tested rather than as conclusions to be accepted.

Those who believe that the consumer revolution did not occur until after the second world war can draw attention to the 40 per cent increase in individual consumer spending that took place between 1960 and 1980, further shifts in the balance of spending between necessities and luxuries, and the emergence of a distinctive, consumption-oriented youth culture.

'The 1950s were the starting point', claims Obelkevich. 'They saw the early stages of a long consumer boom that brought the biggest improvement in the material standard of living in Britain since the Middle Ages. What previously had been luxuries for the rich - cars, refrigerators, televisions, overseas holidays - now were enjoyed by the majority of the population. In the long haul from poverty to affluence, this was the great leap forward.' [6]

It is easy enough then to point to changes in consumer spending, the establishment and growth of new consumer industries, and the increasing importance of 'new consumers' such as women, teenagers and those of the working class who were in regular, well-paid work. It is a great deal more difficult to decide whether such developments amounted to a consumer revolution, and, if so, when such a revolution occurred.

Nevertheless, it can surely be agreed that over the past century the British people's experience of consumption has been transformed almost beyond recognition; and it can be suggested with some confidence that it is best to think of this transformation less as a once-and-for-all revolution than as a long, drawn-out evolution with significant shifts occurring towards the end of the nineteenth century, between the two world wars, and then again between the 1960s and the 1980s.

Table 3: Annual Food Consumption per person, 1890-1983 (lbs)

	Bread flour & wheat	Potatoes	Other vegetables	Meat	Fruit
1890	28	10	9	4	4
1909-13	30	10	8	4	4
1924-28	27	12	11	12	4
1934	25	10	10	8	4
1950	17	14	7	10	5
1983	100	130	143	124	93

Source: J. Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880-1980* (1994), p.63.

When was the consumer revolution?

The fact that the consumption increased does not mean, of course, that Britain underwent a consumer revolution, and, even if it did, it certainly does not tell us when such a revolution occurred. Indeed, the term consumer revolution is used so imprecisely that it has been claimed that the consumer revolution occurred on at least five different occasions in four different centuries: in the seventeenth century, in the eighteenth century, towards the end of the nineteenth century, between the two world wars, and in the years following the second world war.[1]

Those who believe that the consumer revolution occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century can stress the 50 per cent increase in average per capita spending which took place between 1880 and 1900, the establishment of new leisure industries, and the emergence for the first time of large-scale demand from the working class for better food, more fashionable clothes, new forms of entertainment and a growing range of consumer goods such as the piano. 'By the 1900s', claims Charles More, 'the economic system, whatever its drawbacks, provided this modest prosperity for a large proportion of the population.' [5]

Those who argue that the consumer revolution occurred between the two world wars can point to the 25 per cent increase in average per capita spending which took place between 1911/15 and 1939/40, the foundation of new consumer goods industries producing electrical goods and motor vehicles, shifts in the allocation of spending between necessities and luxuries, growing consumption by the middle class and those of the working class who were in work, and the fact that, according to some commentators, this 'was probably the first time that a substantial number of teenage wage-earners in Britain found themselves with a significant amount of money to spend on leisure.' [3, but see also 9.]

Is Britain a consumer society?

Even if Britain did undergo a consumer revolution, this does not mean that it became a consumer society. The argument is complicated by the fact that those studying the history of consumption appear to be using two quite different definitions of what constitutes a consumer society.

Economists and economic historians tend to define such a society as one whose economy is directed by the purchasing decisions of millions upon millions of individual consumers, and/or one in which a certain proportion of GNP (gross national product - the value of all the goods or services produced in the economy) is devoted to individual consumption. The problem is that this proportion tends not to be specified, and, furthermore, with the growth of central and local government spending on health, education and social security, the percentage of GNP devoted to consumer spending declined by almost twenty per cent between 1900 and 1980 (see Table 4). The use of the economic definition suggests therefore that Britain has become less, rather than more, of a consumer society over the past hundred years. This is a suggestion which simply cannot be sustained.

On the other hand, most social historians seem to believe that a consumer society is one in which there is a desire for

Table 4: Consumer Spending, and Local Government Spending as a Percentage of Gross National Product, 1900-1980

	Consumer Spending	Central & Local Government Spending
1900	85	10
1920	86	8
1935	90	11
1960	75	18
1980	69	25

Source: A.H. Halsey, *British Social Trends Since 1900* (1988), p.147.

products which are new, exciting and fashionable, one in which choice and credit are readily available, and social value is assessed in terms of purchasing power and material possessions. The difficulty with this definition is that it does not make clear how widely or how deeply such characteristics need to be embedded for them to produce a consumer society.

Given such striking differences of approach, it is scarcely surprising that there is little agreement as to whether or not Britain has become a consumer society. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere [11, it is doubtful whether it will ever be possible to encapsulate the complexities and contradictions of any society in a single epithet, however telling or memorable - and, of course, modern Britain has also been described as an affluent society, a corporate society, a leisure society, a professional society and a classless society. It is possible therefore that the term consumer society will simply become a new cliché, so that just as the gentry were always declining, and the middle class was always rising, so the consumer society was always emerging. Given the inherent difficulties of using epithets, and given too the current state of our knowledge about consumption, the term consumer society is probably best avoided altogether.

There can be no doubt about the importance of consumption, the adoption of new patterns of spending, and the emergence of important new groups of consumers. However, there must still remain considerable doubt as to the value of adopting the concept of a consumer society when attempting to describe - let alone explain - the history of twentieth-century Britain. What is needed now is an attempt to move beyond a concentration either on production or on consumption, for neither can be considered properly in isolation from the other: both must find a place in the serious study of modern British economic and social history.

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