books & ideas

A Compendium on Consumption

About: Jean-Claude Daumas, *La révolution matérielle. Une histoire de la consommation. France, XIXe-XXIe siècles*, Flammarion

Hubert Bonin

Mingling all kinds of historical approaches—economic, social, entrepreneurial and societal mentality—J.-C. Daumas dedicates a fresco to the immaterial perception of consumer goods.

Changes in modes of consumption are a privileged prism to study the profound transformations of a society over time. The relevance of this subject is self-evident at a time when we are questioning the sustainability of the way we consume, and consumer associations enjoy considerable political and media influence, capable of shaping company regulations and their strategies. Jean-Claude Daumas is a specialist of company history. His substantial but well-structured work on the consumer revolution largely adopts an economic history perspective, but is nonetheless located at the crossroads of several fields of study (the history of society, societal mentalities, lifestyles), which constitutes its richness, confirmed by the size of the bibliography. His extensive research into hundreds of old publications, written by a range of specialists from historians to sociologists (p. 558-561)—updated by texts from the 1990s-2000s and works dedicated to the history of a specific product (washing machines, cheese, etc.) or distribution networks, exhumes an impressive number of references.

This editorial adventure allows the author, whose research was supported by the Institut universitaire de France, to offer us a true compendium! It follows a chronological order covering half a dozen successive periods, but far from being limited to an analytical narrative, the journey is suspended from time to time to develop problematizing mini-summaries that lead us reflect

upon various themes (the "American Dream", the match between demand and industrial growth, etc.).

Multiple Histories

For each period, the book intertwines economic history (consumption, living standards), social history (sociology, inequalities), company history (distribution companies, consumer goods production companies), the history of collective mentalities and cognitive distortions with regard to the immaterial perception of consumer objects. It is a "total" history that follows the rhythm of the cycles of the rise of consumerism and the growing production and distribution of commodities and services used by households.

The issues of consumer society inspire a captivatingly subtle reflection, as communities and social classes, from the countryside to cities, are minutely examined. Every territory is affected by this aspiration for "better living standards", to be achieved by conquering the difficulties of daily life (food, clothing, hygiene and health, etc.). J.-C. Daumas gauges the progress of food consumption according to social position and industrial progress; he evaluates the density and spread of the consumption of goods (clothing, from castoffs to garment manufacturing for the populace, etc.); he measures the progress of household equipment and the size and layout of housing, from dirt floors for some villagers to the "luxury" apartments of the 1960s-1980s.

From the Object to its Representation

The history of this "material" revolution focuses inevitably on household equipment. George Perec's *Things* (1965) is mentioned as a model of the shift that made "the object" and the "world of things" central to modern life. The number of objects, their role and their attractiveness are key issues, representing the dynamism of the demand and the way living standards evolved. The need to possess them first arose with poor homes acquiring the minimum equipment to allow them to move out of misery, particularly in terms of bedding or personal hygiene. But the way objects were "represented" (for example in the case of furniture or interior decoration, with the development of scales of comfort) also underpins a history of the 'immaterial" aspects of the object. This history encourages reflections on the sociology of consumption and the construction of the identity of social groups seeking to differentiate themselves or copy others. Over the course of the author's analyses, we thus discover a number of fashion magazines, department store or mail order catalogues, advertisements, and manuals on the norms of good taste that all contributed to this development, while the first Salon des arts ménagers (Household Arts show) in 1923, was of great symbolic importance.

The shortage of space in a work that is already substantial doubtless explains that the history of people's relationship to fashion is not mentioned, although this theme has become a vast field of study for historians. Luxury and the means that served to spread a "desire" for fashion, through advertising messages and elitist (*Vogue*) or popular (*Elle*, *Marie-Claire*) magazines, as well as fashion practices like dressmaking at home, hence the role of patterns provided by magazines like *Modes et travaux* or *L'Écho de la mode,* would have had a relevant place in the book. The construction of a personal and social identity was a powerful lever to drive consumption, and the author could also have drawn from a number of novels (or even photo comics like *Nous-Deux*) to illustrate this point, which is certainly not limited to fashion.

From Survival to Well-Being

To an extent, J.-C. Daumas ignores the aspirations of men and women to what we could call 'life and survival", to focus mainly on the material pleasures of consumption. The infantile mortality rate (high until the 1890s), unequal life expectancy or access to health care, and insalubrity in the immediate surroundings, are so many signs of lower access to "progress" and "under-consumption" in the areas of hygiene and health. Thus the material revolution that affected individuals at the physical level was a key issue: we need only think of the "hygienist" trend at the turn of the 20th century. Home economics courses played a role in housekeeping for women (who worked or not) and domestic staff: the book provides several analyses of this gendered education, enriched by several small manuals on running a home.

The harsh conditions for "survival" and the difficulty in accessing "normal" consumption levels appear several times in the book. But, for example, the history of the three periods of rationing during the war and under the Occupation (partial or total), are not mentioned. A reprint could dedicate a short summary to this subject. At a deeper level, the role of informal distribution circuits seems to lack detail: the "grey" markets, maintained over the centuries by travelling salesmen (studied by Laurence Fontaine: *Le marché, Histoire et usages d'une conquête sociale*, Paris, Gallimard, "NRF Essais", 2014) and all the markets and fairs, would have been worth developing. "Cheap goods" were accessible, and there was even a sub-economy based on the recuperation of objects by the 19th century groups of "rag and bone men" and by religious or philanthropic networks, a practice that has regained its relevance over the last few decades.

Collective consumption is included in the book, in the form of water and waste treatment equipment, and mainly the design of urban buildings or farms, with progress and the spread of service networks and (good) hygiene habits. The work only touches upon the determining aspect of the real estate revolution. The replacement of insalubrious housing with new and "modern" buildings was a constant philanthropic or civic objective (HBM (working

class housing), HLM (rent controlled housing), working class towns, in the context of employers' paternalism or not), along with health issues, such as the battle against tuberculosis.

Using transatlantic comparisons, J.-C. Daumas carefully reconstructs the spread of mass consumption patterns throughout the 20th century. He includes the industrial history of consumer goods and household equipment—although, despite a few fleeting evocations, he neglects the history of consumer credit and housing loans.

The Consumption of Time

The relationship to time, a very "immaterial" field, could have been studied more deeply. For a very long time, the "rank and file" worker had little rest and leisure time, and all the political debates around the appropriate length of a workday symbolise the acuity of the issue (eight hour day; weekly rest, 40, 39, then 35 hour week). Before "healthy" mass recreational activities emerged (music and cinema, sport, or even culture), employers and moralists went as far as wondering what an employee would do with this free time, beyond indulging in alcoholism.

The middle classes (often) associate culture, sport and shared leisure activities with free time. The upper classes, even more so than managers, who are absorbed by their responsibilities, have to determine how to manage even more free time, as they are released from a number of tasks by the presence of domestic staff. At a completely different level, this relationship to time also affects life itself: consumers have an extremely short life expectancy, of about half a century (infantile death, death during childbirth, epidemics, "consumption" of viruses, work accidents and work related diseases, etc.).

There is a recurring analysis of leisure activities, but the question of the rhythm of life—a fashionable theme once the concept of "alienation" took shape—and the intensity of the lifespan (work time, weekly rest, etc.) is not discussed. The effects of the rail and automobile revolutions are viewed in a classic manner: the bourgeoisie initiated a revolution with their seaside leisure activities before the masses finally had the opportunity to enjoy their "paid holidays".

From Modes of Consumption to Consumption Models

Everyone knows how modes of consumption circulated between sites of production or lifestyles. At the turn of the 19th century, potatoes, chocolate, tea and coffee were the symbols of these circuits before North American and Italian pizza that arrived simultaneously, along

with a certain Moroccan drug… Regional products became accessible for national consumption then regained their specificities in the name of local produce, designations of origin or short consumption circuits. Hence J.-C. Daumas could not have omitted a reminder of the crystallisation of the "American model' in the 1900s-1920s (automobiles, cinema), and mainly after the Second World War. But his book lacks matter (again, a shortage of space) with regard to the "transnationalisation" of consumption patterns.

Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel has become the French specialist of these processes of transoceanic imitation, which developed over the centuries thanks to the creation of a transnational "affluent society". One of its high points was household equipment, with the revolution of the refrigerator followed by the washing machine, which President Georges Pompidou described during a press conference as one of the signs of progress central to family life. These attributes of progress successively permeated Eastern Europe as it emerged from under-consumption and the collective tools of Communist consumption, then China that practiced a Communist form of mass well being without freedom

J.-C. Daumas's book is hence a sort of fascinating serial. The recurring intrusions of consumption "patterns" follow on from each other, with shifts in herd behaviour and aspirations for better living standards, often accompanied by the rise in female employment—although the author pays little attention to the effects of this phenomenon. He also describes the effects of marketing campaigns and advertising, two "immaterial" tools of the 'Material revolution".

A History of Frustration

Throughout the book we discover the history of under-consumption, the frustration of the popular classes or the residents of certain rural or suburban areas, and certain generational strata. The rhythm at which consumption revolutions spread is extremely unequal—and the history of social ("Bread!", in 1936) or societal movements confirms this view. By destructuring the production system established by the second industrial revolution, and by promoting flexible working practices, the third industrial revolution has, in fact, provoked a vast shift towards precariousness.

We can hence view J.-C. Daumas' approach to the "march of progress" over the centuries as overly "positivist". The work would benefit from a chapter on the huge gap between the race to consume in emerging countries (including Central and Eastern Europe) and the breakdown of the "model" amongst North American 'rednecks' and Europeans in situations of precariousness, including the French. The axiom "Consuming in order to belong to society"

(analysed by Jeanne Lazarus[1]) can, at times, be painful. After all, the Restos du cœur,[2] short consumption circuits and structures to recycle worn out objects, are the expression of the interruption of "progress" in a number of social strata and spaces. The invention of the concept of "lower middle classes" (at a time when the term "petite bourgeoisie" became politically incorrect) and the debates on the "middle classes" or the "uberisation" of work, can only raise questions about a new "social fracture" represented by access to modes of consumption that consecrate the attributes of a social position, which is at least stable, if not comfortable.

J.-C. Daumas has written a brilliant summary of the highest quality that has put him on par with his British colleague Frank Trentmann. It confirms his membership of the school of contemporary history of consumption that has prospered over the last fifteen years—even if historians (C. Bonneuil *et alii*) have, of course, questioned the uniqueness and legitimacy of the model of the Thirty Glorious Years, and sociologists have recently undermined the myth of the aspiration to possess an automobile.

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[1] "Consommer pour faire partie de la société", *Projet*, 2018, 6/367, pp. 33-40.
[2] Translator's note. A French charity launched by the actor Coluche in 1985 that distributes food packages and hot meals to the needy.

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