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How Consumerism Consumed America

The men and women who sailed across the Atlantic to colonize what would become America couldn’t have fathomed how their morals and past experiences would propagate through generations and affect the way that Americans choose to live now in 2017. As America was founded and as it grew to become the country it is now, the way consumerism has taken over American thought and processes can be in part explained by the ideas colonists and their close descendants chose to impart on their fellow countrymen. It is this effect that provided the scaffolding upon which the good and the bad that we see in America today was built. By delving into the commonalities and differences between the first Americans and finding evidence of distinct vectors of thought continued through our country’s history, we might be able to extrapolate further into the future. Of course this is no easy task considering how different we consider ourselves to be in comparison to our founders in regards to concepts like racism, superiority, and religion.

Even before America’s genesis there was opposing thought with respect to how life should be in this new land. The Massachusetts Bay colony was founded by Puritans seeking to practice Catholicism in a way they thought was more pure than the teachings they were receiving in England. The Jamestown colony, on the other hand, took the route arguably more recognizable today as the roots of America. It was structured as a business and its goal was solely that of profit. One shared belief between these two colonies was an idea that the unexplored wilderness around them, and the people in that wilderness, were savage. This idea was strengthened by works like *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, which detailed the capture of a colonial woman held captive by Native Americans for eleven weeks and five days. Throughout the narrative Rowlandson repeatedly quotes from the Bible. When she is feeling hopeless about the condition of her children, she writes “I repaired under these thoughts to my Bible (my great comfort in that time) and that Scripture came to my hand, ‘Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee’” (Rowlandson 9th Remove). This text and others like it allow us to see how early colonists perceived themselves in this new land in relation to the native peoples already populating it. Many times throughout the story Rowlandson is directly faced with some physical obstacle, one which local Native Americans dealt with routinely. She writes, “… the water was up to the knees, and the stream very swift, and so cold that I thought it would have cut me in sunder” (Rowlandson 16th Remove). This type of physical obstacle was a common fear of early colonists, as there was no safe way to cross them. It was a common nuisance to experienced natives, but a raging current could take an unskilled colonist with ease. Rowlandson’s introspection provides the reader with the usual “savage” and “barbarous” tropes regarding Native Americans, but makes clear how frightening everything was back then. She had little knowledge of where she was and what would happen to her. This must have been a common, albeit more intense, version of what all colonists felt around this time.

The wilderness presented colonists with a sense of fear, contrasted with a sense of great possibility. It was a great metaphor for early America since the prospect of becoming wealthy came at the price of willingness to take chances. Especially in Jamestown, if you had initiative combined with some luck you could make yourself a very wealthy man. This concept is still alive and well with us today, but now it has a name. The “American Dream” is a commonly talked about phenomenon which claims that almost anything is possible in our country with enough work, or risk. Everyone wants in on the wealth America seems to generate out of thin air, and they’re willing to do some deplorable acts to get there. These deplorable acts in tandem with Americans’ day-to-day needs and interests work to make what we today call “American consumerism”. This American consumerism has been with us since before the birth of our country, and shows no sign of slowing its growth.

Benjamin Franklin is a defining character in America’s narrative. His autobiography details how the son of a lowly soap maker built his way up to become wealthy, meanwhile taking on the role of America’s first internationally recognizable celebrity. His story is the ultimate testament to the existence of the American dream, and uncountable others have followed in his footsteps with great success. Franklin rarely took no for an answer, so when he knew something was seemingly impossible he would find a way around it. When he was too young to garner respect from his brother, the owner of an early Boston newspaper, he planned a way of getting his writing printed anyway, writing “I contrived to disguise my hand, and, writing an anonymous paper, I put it in at night under the door of the printing-house” (Franklin Part I). It is devious tactics like this that made Benjamin Franklin who he was, and it was America’s acceptance of that type of behavior that in turn made him and people like him flourish.

The conniver, the person trying to make it in America, and the enabler, America itself, work conjointly to produce spectacles such as Benjamin Franklin while recursively making that type of life and achievement more appealing to the masses. In the second part of his autobiography Franklin lists off some virtues which he perceives as important, and these virtues might explain what he thought was required back then to make it in America. One of these virtues was “INDUSTRY. Lose no time; be always employ'd in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions” (Franklin Part II). This value put into industry is one that will come up again and again through America’s history. Instead of value being place in the beauty already surrounding us such as nature or human experience, it is placed in a purely human construct. Value is placed in that which puts itself before all else.

One output American industry tends to focus on is what Americans need to continue living comfortably in their lives. It does so while also convincing us that we need more or better things than what we had before. To be able to pay for these things we have to work more, and the cycle continues. This brings us to another virtue Franklin cited, “FRUGALITY. Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing” (Franklin Part II). Maybe Benjamin Franklin’s success can be tied to the way that he lived both within the expected norm of working in industry, while making concerted efforts to not consume that industry more than required. The American dream cannot be achieved by squandering the little wealth you have on the way to success. The American dream only exists due to the masses of Americans *not* pursuing it. If everyone made concerted efforts to achieve the absolute best they could, how would anybody profit off of those who are frugal? Herein lies the unspoken flaw of the American dream, that it relies on the manipulation and clutching of the lower classes and the assumption that those lower classes will do little about it. This manipulation is the promotion of consumerism as the norm of American society. Consumerism has preoccupied American thought and life since its wide early acceptance during the industrial revolution. Certain Americans have aided in the acceleration of the unstoppable train of consumerism by learning how to stoke it more efficiently. One of these leaders was Henry Ford.

Henry Ford thought differently. Specifically he thought that some common business practices in his time were anti-industry. In talking about the practice of charging a business for upfront capital, he wrote that “Money is not worth a particular amount. As money it is not worth anything, for it will do nothing of itself” (Ford ch 2). When it came to employee efficiency, nobody else had thought about how if you “Save ten steps a day for each of twelve thousand employees and you will have saved fifty miles of wasted motion and misspent energy.” (Ford ch 5). This kind of thinking was revolutionary in his time, and would lead to the creation of cost-saving measures like the assembly line.

This structure of business and utilization of the most efficient tools and processes available would soon become the norm for American businesses. Suddenly if you were a business not utilizing your employees to their best ability in every facet, you were costing yourself money. Money which could have been re-invested back into the business to make it more efficient at producing its output. Again this cycle of consumerism becomes involved in the actions of businesses, as there would be no reason to produce more if the consumers were not demanding more. Ford, in writing about capitalists who trade in money rather than production, stated that “If their money goes to complicating distribution—to raising barriers between the producer and the consumer—then they are evil capitalists and they will pass away when money is better adjusted to work” (Ford “Introduction”). He speaks as if the economy is alive and able to make the decision of killing off non-productive members of it. This can be an easy mistake to make as consumerism’s many cycles and growth can be mistaken as a growing, breathing animal. It can seem like an evil that has followed us along the way to becoming perhaps the most powerful country in the world. It has been with us since the Virginia Company of London established Jamestown, and it has been passed down through the generations of colonists into the people living here today.

Rather than looking at consumerism as some kind of monster we should look at it simply as what it is, a cyclical process which carries countries in and out of power and influence. It promotes poor working conditions while promoting human development. It makes people become greedy and evil while making others inspired and prosperous. It is not innately evil or good, just as a hammer is not innately evil or good. It is simply a tool with which Americans have built their country from the ground up. It was influenced by the very creators of our country, those people brave enough to sail across an ocean with uncertainty as to what lay on the other side. It was bread through those colonists who recognized that success comes with risk. It was passed on through these people and their children. People like Benjamin Franklin grew up in a semi-consumerist era and learned how to thrive in it. Later, great magnates of industry developed in our country. Henry Ford and his assembly line is key example, but there were innumerable people in America’s history that contributed to the exponential growth of consumerism.

Consumerism is something that is here to stay, and instead of shooing it away as a pest we should embrace it for what it is and use it to further develop humanity. Sooner or later this planet will no longer accept the way we’ve been treating it, and it will become an enemy to consumerism. The final battle and proving ground of consumerism will be whether or not we can make profit off of sustainable products and energy sources. If not we are looking ahead into a bleak and alarming future. If consumerism succeeds in doing this we will see society evolve on a grander scale than ever before, one which we won’t feel guilty leaving to the generations to follow. It’s too early to place bets yet, but looking at how consumerism has developed since the days of slavery and child-labor, the latter doesn’t seem too out of reach.

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