From the Selected Works of Jon Foster

Spring May 7, 2012

THE EFFECTS OF MASS CONSUMPTION ON AMERICAN SOCIETY

Jon Foster, Cornell University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jon_foster/4/
For a generation that doesn’t relate to the ‘eighties’, fondly remembers the
‘nineties’, and came of age in the two thousands, we often think of the sixties with a bit
of nostalgia; reminiscing about Woodstock, and hippies, the nuclear family or maybe the
Beatles. Unfortunately, much of this understanding is isolated within a bubble; wherein
the sincere socioeconomic issues of the time, often become detached from their idealistic
counterpart. To clarify, the causal relations that gave rise to what my generation
remembers and typifies as the ‘sixties’, becomes distorted within the context of the
rapidly changing times.

More to the point, the rebellious atmosphere that many social activists attributed
to greater collective civil action of a political nature, was in reality of an economic nature
altogether, and dealt specifically with the causal reactions of the American consumer in
the postwar economy. Specifically, the individual social classes that mass consumption
served to marginalize and isolate within the burgeoning consumer economy. For these
people consumption was a laborious and disingenuous task, which acted more to restrict
access to the market, then to increase it. As a result, this decade is emblematic of
divergent consumer groups, and the battle between economics and geo-social politics. To
that extent, this paper will seek to expound on the political, social, and economic effects
that mass consumption had on American social classes.
Nevertheless, in order to explain the causal relation that existed between the predominant consumer class, and the minority one, we begin our analysis with the geographic discrepancies that existed between the suburbs and the city. Accordingly, when discussing the rampant growth and consumption experienced in the decades following World War II, many things come to mind: the rise of bargain stores, a massive expansion of credit, and especially extensive suburban development. However, for many people, specifically those within the inner cities, this reality simply didn’t exist. Lines of credit for home mortgages, kitchen appliances, and similar durable goods were simply not available to those outside of the reach of the suburban markets. This geographic divergence was similarly advanced through racial politics, and reinforced through economics.

In essence, governmental policies enacted in the postwar era served to rapidly accelerate suburban growth, while also increasing the availability of financing, and access to residential capital. As noted,

“The suburban growth that resulted from these policies was neither universal nor inevitable…In the United States, the FHA and VA mortgage polices, the highway system, the financing of sewers, the support for suburban developments such as Levittown, and the placing of public housing in the center of urban ghettos, facilitated the dispersal of the white middle class in the suburbs and contributed to the decay of the inner cities.
Furthermore, blacks were excluded from the suburbs by *de facto* segregation and the FHA’s redlining policies, more then by poverty.”¹

As indicated, the governmental policies enacted in the postwar boom, were predominately aimed at benefiting the white suburban class. As a result, African-American populations within the cities grew drastically during this time. For example, 

“[i]n 1940, approximately 2,495,000 African-Americans resided in northeast and north-central urban areas. By 1960, this figure had grown to 6,193,000. Moreover, the number of African-Americans living in southern cities also increased significantly.”²

Furthermore, the dramatic nature of this demographic change, in both scale and pace, had a pronounced effect on both economic markets: wherein overnight, the consumer markets became extensively more homogeneous.

The rapidity of this shift quickly altered the buying power of both demographic populations; and as a result, retailers quickly shifted their storefronts to serve the needs of the burgeoning, affluent, middle-class suburbs. In addition to cheaper land and a wealthier target market, suburban stores benefited from the stability of a captive market, with relatively constant demand. Conversely, urban markets deteriorated and the inner cities soon became economic ghettos: creating a “two-tier system” that drastically limited any access to credit, or financing, and generally exploited the African-American consumer base.³

² Glickman, CSAH, 317.
³ Louis Hyman, Professor at Cornell University. Notes from Class Lecture April 10th
Moreover, as a result of their marginalization and effective denial from consumer markets, African-Americans responded with massive riots during the mid-sixties. In all, there were 329 riots in 257 cities, starting in 1964 and lasting for over four years.\textsuperscript{4} In the end, the effect of such persistent rioting only served to increase the rate at which retailers fled the city, and worsened the socioeconomic status of the urban markets even further. Generally speaking, these retailers never returned and many urban areas have yet to address the consumer deserts that exist within their inner cities.

Alternatively, the urgency of these riots forced corporations to acknowledge the African-American consumer market as an economic force. In essence, as urban consumption and wealth steadily became concentrated within million dollar markets, urban consumers could also express their outrage through boycotts; more effectively damaging major retailers by the sheer increase in consumption power. Furthermore, in places where racial segregation existed, African-Americans used boycotts and sit-ins to advance racial equality, as well as consumer equality through the use of economic self-restraint in their buying patterns. “Yet, the African-American experience during this period included more than boycotts, “sit-ins,” “Freedom rides,” and massive protest marches… As African-Americans streamed into American cities…U.S. businesses sought to influence the consumption patterns of these increasingly important black consumers.”\textsuperscript{5}

Nevertheless, as African-Americans exercised their political rights through the act of non-consumption, and urban retailers soon began to feel the economic burden, it created a political push by business to legislatively promote racial equality. Heavily

\textsuperscript{4} Notes from Class Lecture April 10th
\textsuperscript{5} Glickman, CSAH, 316.
influencing the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, a major step forward for racial equality in this country. Additionally, a year later, congress would authorize the Voting Rights Act in effort to protect and ensure the franchise for African-American voters; many of which had previously been disenfranchised. What is interesting about these political advances is that they stem from the consolidation and solidification of the African-American consumer market, and serve to demonstrate the true force an economic and politically active consumer group.

Relating this back to the topic, it is important to highlight that, “[c]onsumerism in the postwar years went far beyond the mere purchases of goods and services. It included important cultural values, demonstrated success and social mobility, and defined lifestyles. It also provided the most vivid symbol of the American way of life: the affluent suburban home.”6 When seen in this light it becomes more understandable as to how such divergent geopolitical cultures evolved: one urban, the other suburban. How the individual consumed effectively distinguished their class, affluence, or even political views. In essence, consumption had evolved to a far more integrated process, emerging as an effective form of social representation.

However, it was not only African-Americans who found themselves marginalized by business, but middle class women as well. As a result of social norms, women during the sixties were generally not much if any economic independence with the consent of her husband. Although married women may have found it easy to purchase goods on credit under their husbands’ name, as a de facto policy there generally not offered any access to the retail credit markets. As would be expected, women generally found this

---

6 Glickman, CSAH, 313.
lack of economic freedom to be repressive and austere, and quickly mobilized consumer rights campaigns in support of their economic independence.

Although it could be argued that the comparison between women and African-Americans is not an accurate one, when you address the effective lack of credit to a women in the suburbs it serves as a similar economic crutch. That is to say, for many women who didn’t work during this time their only income would have likely been through their husbands, and consequently if a woman desired to leave her husband, the economic feasibility of such a notion was relatively slim. In effect, women often felt trapped and isolated in their middle class suburbs, unable to exercise much control over their personal independence.

“Along with the ideology of sexual containment, postwar domestic consumerism requires conformity to strict gender assumption that were fraught with potential tensions and frustrations. Suburban homes filled with material possessions could not always compensate for the dissatisfactions inherent in the domestic arrangements consumerism was intended to enhance and reinforce. In fact, those very domestic arrangements, although idealized and coveted at the time, were the source of countless miseries. As one looks though the ‘window of vulnerability’ in the cold war era, one sees families inside their suburban homes struggling to achieve the postwar dream of abundance and security.”

7 313
Arguably, this quote offers great insight to the effects that mass consumption was having on American society. Interestingly, as white suburbanites settled into the politically designed model of the postwar era, they soon came to realize that they were no more trapped within a socioeconomic system than the urban populace was. Whereas urban minorities struggled to gain access to basic individual and consumer rights, those in the suburbs found they were effectively stuck in a monotonous, constricting environment.

For white suburbanites, the idealistic dream of the suburban environment quickly became quite pedestrian. “For them, suburban life was not a life of fun and leisure but of exhausting work and isolation… And although parents frequently mentioned the benefits of togetherness and the ability to spend more time with their families, the time consuming commute for the men, and for the 25 percent of suburban women who were employed, actually reduced the amount of time available for families to share.”

What is interesting about this observation is the extent to which mass consumption influenced society as a whole, wherein initially it appears as though the urban population is most sincerely marginalized, in reality the effects of consumption work both ways. While politics and culture had shaped the demographics of American populace, consumption had altered how they lived their lives: economizing the human life, and commodifying human time.

Whereas businesses either ignored or exploited urban minorities, they similarly restricted suburban and single women. Additionally, consumer economics pushed the male patriarch to work longer harder hours at potentially dead-end jobs. With

---

8 Glickman, CSAH, 307.
consumption as a relative status symbol, both urban and suburban populations struggled to obtain the social ideals of a modern society. African-Americans fought for their civil and constitutional rights, while women campaigned for economic and cultural liberties. However, even for the suburban male who benefited most from mass consumption, was not necessarily happy either.

“The potential tragedy in this situation was that in spite of widespread prosperity, the provider role was a heavy burden, and not all men could be successful at it. Nor was the status of family breadwinner always adequate compensation for an otherwise monotonous or dissatisfying jobs. Just as material goods could contribute to marital harmony or even compensate for unhappiness to some extent, the failure to achieve or appreciate the fruits of prosperity could cause tensions.”

In essence, it appears as though the forces of consumption ensnared all parts of society to some extent. Ironically, the same wealth with which suburban males tried so hard to obtain and readily deny from both women and minorities, came to imprison them socially as well. By restricting the access to economic wealth for those marginalized by mass consumption, urban males effectively placed the entire economic burden on themselves, and soon began to buckle under the external and internal pressures.

In point, mass consumption had a profound effect on the society of the sixties. Demographically it shifted African-American populations towards the cities, and white Americans towards the suburbs. Consequently, consumer markets distinguished by race,

---

9 Glickman, CSAH, 309.
and social politics were rapidly concentrated and targeted by business. Moreover, the solidification of such retail bases gave the consumer a feeling of collective consciousness, which they could exercise through their personal consumption habits.

Lastly, this economic consciousness was transformed through political and social mobilization of the African-American and women’s consumer classes. As consumption affected society, so did society begin to effect consumption, altering regulations and policies to expand the consumer market and truly make mass consumption incorporative of the entire society. Nevertheless, as consumption became imbedded in the American psyche, the process of regulating oneself through their consumption became seen as a way of empowering ourselves socially and utilizing the power of economic persuasion to achieve some good on a political, cultural or civil level. Ostensibly, this perhaps the most profound effect mass consumption has had on the totality of society.