Politics and Culture in eighteenth-century Britain

Lecture 7: Luxury and the Creation of Desire

Key themes of the historiography of consumption
- Fashion
- Consumerism
- Luxury
- ‘Capitalism’

Origins and contributory factors:
- Whig emphasis on commerce
- Empire
- ‘Urban renaissance’
- Developing communications and industrialisation
- Enlightenment

Fashion and social pretensions

Be not amaz’d dear Mother – it is indeed your daughter Anne

Consumerism – promoted by the development of advertising
e.g. front page of *Morning Chronicle*, 2 March 1801

Consumerism and the market:
Queen’s Ware by Wedgwood, 1760s

http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectId=51352

Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771)

• ‘The tide of luxury has swept all the inhabitants from the open country – The poorest ‘squire, as well as the richest peer, must have his house in town, and make a figure with an extraordinary number of domestics. The plough-boys, cow-herds, and lower hinds, are debauched and seduced by the appearance and discourse of those coxcombs in livery…"
Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771)

- There are many causes that contribute to the daily increase of this enormous mass; but they may be all resolved into the grand source of luxury and corruption…
- In short, there is no distinction or subordination left – the different departments of life are jumbled together…'

Bernard de Mandeville, *Fable of the Bees* (1714)

Luxury
Employed a million of the poor,…Thus vice nursed ingenuity,
Which joined with time and industry
Had carried life’s conveniences,
Its real pleasures, comforts, ease,
To such a height, the very poor
Lived better than the rich before;
And nothing could be added more…

Adam Smith (1723-90): ideas and influence

- *The Wealth of Nations* (1776)
- free trade
- self-interest and individual liberty
- rising real wages
- division of labour
- ‘invisible hand’