

5HUM0291 Lecture 6: Luxury and the creation of desire

Key themes:

- Fashion.....
- Consumerism.....
- Luxury.....
- 'Capitalism'.....

Origins and contributory factors:

- Whig emphasis on commerce.....
- Empire.....
- 'Urban renaissance'.....
- Developing communications and industrialisation
- Enlightenment.....

Why have historians been interested in consumerism?

Shift from economic history to social history.....
Changes in the 1980s and 90s.....
Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (1982).

Effects of the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century:

Debates on luxury:

Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771, Everyman edition 1993), pp. 90-1:

'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...

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...'

Critiques of luxury:

1. Country patriotism
2. Spectator:
3. South Sea Bubble of 1720:
4. Religious objections:
5. Problems of maintaining order: gin and gambling: Henry Fielding, *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers* (1749-53); Murder Act 1752

6. luxury of the poor not the rich

17thC conceptions of the 'labour theory of value' and 'mercantilism'

Moves away from older conceptions of the economy:

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

Luxury
Employed a million of the poor,
And odious pride a million more,
Envy it self and vanity,
Were ministers of industry;
Their daring folly, fickleness
In diet, furniture and dress,
That strange ridiculous vice, was made,
The very wheel, that turned the trade.
Their laws and clothes were equally
Objects of mutability.
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, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776):

- free trade.....
- self-interest and individual liberty
- rising real wages
- division of labour
- 'invisible hand'

book 1, chapter i:

The greatest improvement in the productive powers of labour, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which it is anywhere directed, or applied, seem to have been the effects of the division of labour....

...To take an example, therefore, from a very trifling manufacture; but one in which the division of labour has been very often taken notice of, the trade of the pin-maker; a workman not educated to this business (which the division of labour has rendered a distinct trade), nor acquainted with the use of the machinery employed in it (to the invention of which the same division of labour has probably given occasion), could scarce, perhaps, with his utmost industry, make one pin in a day, and certainly could not make twenty. But in the way in which this business is now carried on, not only the whole work is a peculiar trade, but it is divided into a number of branches, of which the greater part are

likewise peculiar trades. One man draws out the wire, another straightens it, a third cuts it, a fourth points it, a fifth grinds it at the top for receiving, the head; to make the head requires two or three distinct operations... Those ten persons, therefore, could make among them upwards of forty-eight thousand pins in a day. Each person, therefore, making a tenth part of forty-eight thousand pins, might be considered as making four thousand eight hundred pins in a day....

Further reading:

Berg, Maxine, and Eger, Elizabeth, eds., Luxury in the eighteenth-century: debates, desires and delectable goods (Basingstoke, 2003)

Bermingham, Ann and Brewer, John, eds, The Consumption of Culture, 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text (London, 1997).

Brewer, John, The Pleasures of the Imagination (London, 1997).

Primary sources – [on ECCO via Voyager, or google.co.uk/books]

Bernard de Mandeville, Fable of the Bees (1714)

Henry Fielding, An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers (1749-53)

Adam Smith, The Wealth of Nations (1776)

see the collections of the British Museum:

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database.aspx

and the Victoria and Albert Museum:

http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/periods_styles/18thcentury/index.html