Justifying Your Shopping Addiction: How Consumerism Paves Way for Political Action and Social Progress

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Stanford University: PWR 1SN: The Rhetoric of Containment

11 June 2018

Author’s Biography and Abstract

Amanda Wang is a freshman at Stanford University studying economics and history. She graduated as valedictorian and student body president from University High School in Tucson, Arizona. In her time at University High, she helped direct and contributed her own writing for the publication of *Since You Asked: Arizona Veterans Share their Memories*, which is held in the Library of Congress.She is currently a research assistant at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research under Dr. Marcela Alsan, as well as a Director for BASES (the Business Association of Stanford Entrepreneurial Students).

This paper begins by establishing a relationship between consumption and politics; one that ties them to one another in a way that cannot be broken. One’s actions as a consumer cannot be evaluated separately from his/her actions as a politically-active citizen. It then analyzes two independent entities: the economic boom that followed the ending of World War II and the feminist and welfare movements that also directly followed and saw great change for these groups, who voiced took advantage of the times and pushed for the things that America always enshrines: equal representation and democracy. After using these movements of feminism and welfare as case-studies, the paper concludes with the idea that there is a positive correlation between economic prosperity and social change; that any growth in the economy leads to unique opportunities for political change and therefore, social progress.

**Section 1: Introduction**

“When I shop, the world gets better, and the world is better, but then it's not, and I need to do it again,” Rebecca Bloomwood passionately declares in *Confessions of a Shopaholic.* This zany, comedic 2009 film focuses in on a New York City shopaholic who quickly finds herself faced with an insurmountable amount of debt. Despite finding a stable job and fulfillment in activities besides shopping for the first time, her desire to excessively spend never truly diminishes. However exaggerated this movie may seem, it does shed light on an essential facet of everyday life in America: the tendency to spend frivolously and impulsively, which is why roughly 38.1% of all American households find themselves carrying some sort of credit card debt (ValuePenguin). However foreign this lifestyle may seem to those outside of the United States, those bred from within cannot imagine a life void of fast food chains on every corner nor the annual Black Friday binge-shopping craze. Often, criticism regarding the United States’ material drive comes with an assumption that the United States has always been this way. Yet, this extreme consumer culture has only existed for roughly 70 years. So, the question quickly becomes: how exactly did America so rapidly evolve into the consumer-driven society that it is today?

Among historians, there exists little contention about the catalyst that led to the rise of modern American consumer culture: World War II came to an end, and so, too, did the rationing and restriction that had itself consumed the American people on the home front. The relationship between this consumer culture that exploded in the United States following the end of World War II is often explored by historians through a lens of democracy and political activism. Yet, out of this discussion can emerge a deeper synthesis. Historians are quick to separate political activism and consumerism from one another, often stating that one is more prosperous without the other, and that the two are incompatible because they are so distinctly different. As stated by Michael Schudson, “all of us…are and necessarily must be consumers as well as citizens,” so attempting to separate the two and argue that one is better off without the other is a claim that many adopt without proper evaluation (Schudson 238). By looking at the movements of welfare and feminism that took place in the decade following World War II, a fundamental relationship between politics and consumerism can emerge; one that argues that the two cannot be separated from one another. Furthermore, it will be argued that not only does there exist a relationship between consumerism and politics, but the relationship is one such that a rise in economic wealth within a society provides opportunity for greater social progress and democracy that would not otherwise exist. This is seen throughout history, as oppressed groups repeatedly use the newfound economic prosperity of their state as a primarytool for enacting social change and progress. In order to illuminate and generalize these principles, this essay will evaluate the post-World War II economic boom and its relation to the social progress made within two movements of the time: women’s rights and welfare.

**Section 2: Defining the Relationship Between Consumption and Politics**

Scholarship often fails to reflect on a relationship between consumption and politics. Rather, historians jump into specific arguments without explicitly stating a relationship between economic prosperity and politics, despite the fact that all ensuing arguments fundamentally depend on this relationship. One such example is Lizabeth Cohen, who, in “A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America” argues that consumer culture did nothing but further “exacerbate divisions between social groups” and recklessly damage American democratic ideals (Cohen 238). However, her discussion – which begins by arguing for an expanding middle class and ends with the notion that despite this growth, class and racial divisions only widened – never clearly defines to her audience how the post-war economic prosperity directly relates to the described decrease in American democratic ideals. Without such a base understanding of how the two are related – or if they are even related at all – it is difficult to completely understand and evaluate her arguments. In order to be as explicit as possible, this section will be devoted to clearly defining a stance on the relationship between consumerism and political change: that they are intricately related and therefore, inseparable. This inherent relationship is described to lay the foundation for a later argument: that this relationship is positively correlated, i.e. an increase in economic and social wealth leads to an increase in political activism and social progress.

One argument in favor of the inevitable interconnection between consumer behavior and political action is given by Dr. Michael Schudson. He writes, in his “Citizens, Consumer, and the Good Society,” that a fundamental misjudgment is often made by historians: one that “measur[es] the virtue of ‘the citizen’ against the virtue of ‘the consumer’” (Schudson 238). This separation leads many to believe that individual consumer behavior, such as “buying in the marketplace” is an “inferior form of human activity compared to voting…or otherwise exercising citizenship” (Schudson 237). By separating the politically active, democratic citizen and seemingly selfish consumer, one simultaneously separates the motives behind each of the actions, which Schudson argues is a “ridiculous exercise” that leads to a “misleading view of consumer behavior as well as an absurdly romanticized view of civic behavior” (Schudson 238). The idea, then, that consumerism is entirely “self-interested,” while political action is both selfless and “public-spirited” is altogether incorrect (Schudson 236). In fact, both marketplace and political participation are equally selfish and selfless, as identified on a case-by-case basis, and therefore, cannot be generalized. In the same way that purchasing a Tesla for oneself may be seen as selfish, so too is politics when looking from an angle of many self-centered actions taken to maximize a certain individual or group over others (via race, class, etc.). Looking at it from the opposite side, in the same way that voting for a group cause rather than an individual is an objectively selfless behavior, so too is choosing not to purchase a certain good that may benefit you as an individual, but that you know may damage more people in society. Overall, Schudson’s argument illuminates an important pillar of the interconnectedness between consumer choice and political action: that because the two actually require all Americans to make identically virtuous decisions, based on homogeneous expectations and values that can either enhance or endanger democracy, they cannot be separated from one another.

Another core argument is one that points to consumerism as direct encouragement and motivation for political action and social progress. One widely-held counter argument regarding the relationship between politics and consumerism is that consumerism simply distracts from political issues, and that being a more involved consumer necessarily makes one less politically involved. British scholar Philip Elliot reflects on this perceived “shift away from involving people in society as political citizens of nation states toward involving them as consumption units in a corporate world” extremely negatively (Elliot 244). However, he fails to recognize a number of things. For one, it is a widely held belief that political involvement is often more boring and mundane than marketplace participation. As stated by Schudson, in the same way that “citizens of eighteenth-century Boston…didn’t read Montesquieu but did drink tea, matters close to home…bring people into the political arena” which would not be the case if the economy wasn’t directly related to politics (Schudson 243).

With this in mind, the consumer market is actually an effective tool and outlet for both creating awareness of political issues, and sometimes even taking stances. Both producers and consumers have been found to capitalize on consumer culture as a way to simultaneously contribute to the economy and political atmosphere. Primarily through advertising and press, producers are able to announce their own stances on political issues completely unrelated to their respective businesses. An example is Chick-fil-A, one of the largest growing fast food chains in the United States (ABC News). As well-known as the chain’s famous waffle fries is the company’s stance on gay marriage, one of the biggest political debates of the 21st century. Not only is the chain openly Christian and because of that, closed on Sundays, it is also extremely open about the millions of dollars’ worth of funding that it annually provides to conservative, anti-same-sex marriage organizations, such as the “Marriage & Family Foundation” (ABC News). This crossover between a private organization in the consumer market and such a political statement – a grand anti-same-sex marriage sentiment – is not unique to Chick-fil-A, and exemplifies the sort of inevitable crossover that occurs for a great majority of producers in the marketplace. This only goes to show that however separate the consumer market and political arena may seem, the political stances of producers cannot help but influence the way that they act with their private industry, proving an inherent relationship between the two.

Consumer behavior, on the other hand, is theorized by Dr. Boris Holzer in his “Political consumerism between individual choice and collective action: social movements, role mobilization and signaling” to reflect “role mobilization”: the idea that the expression of political views by consumers in the marketplace creates “transmission belts for political objectives” that actually “provide signals to producers” and enact real change (Holzer 2). This leads to an extension of the argument for the inseparability of consumer action and political participation goes beyond the similarities between them. Instead, when looking closely at behavior in the marketplace, the identical nature of the two appears: the idea that more often than not, consumer behavior *is* political action and participation. Although not necessarily falling into the ‘conventional’ definition, the conscious decisions of individuals every day in the marketplace directly reflect and show tangible efforts towards their political goals and motives, whether intentional or not. This idea is furthered in “Concept of Political Consumerism” by Dr. Michele Micheletti and Dr. Dietlind Stolle, who argue that being a conscientious consumer often “brings people to be more politically active,” and that being able to make “every day decisions” in the marketplace that reflect the political actions that they are also advocating for at the polls holds its own “special value” (Micheletti and Stolle 1). This special value is derived from the instant gratification that comes from participating in the marketplace; the feeling that you have made an immediate, tangible impact towards a political goal that is not felt when placing a checkmark on a piece of paper at a polling place twice a year. Looking at a specific demographic of young people, Micheletti and Stolle point to this group’s “usage of the marketplace to challenge how we live, work, and do politics,” because this group “encourage[s] individual consumers to fight” for and against things such as “rights of workers and animals…unbridled free trade…use of pesticides,” etc. (Micheletti and Stolle 1). In a poll in 2002, “51.4% of young Americans between…15-25” said that they had “not bought something because of the conditions under which it was made” (Micheletti and Stolle 2). This boycotting, or buycotting, is an extremely prevalent usage of consumerism as a way to make political claims and express concerns to both big corporations and as a direct consequence of the former, political leaders in government.

The undeniable relationship and clear connection between politics and consumerism is extremely well-founded and actually deemed ‘political consumerism’ by many historians. The understanding of this relationship as legitimate and especially prevalent since the end of World War II will be important in pointing next to the positive correlation that exists between economic growth and social progress in this same time period.

**Section 3: The Positive Correlation Between Economic Prosperity and Social Progress Post-WWII**

Now that the relationship between consumer behavior and political participation has been clearly defined and shown to exist, it is pertinent to evaluate the specific economic and social changes that occurred following the end of World War II. In the decade following the end of the war, the United States re-consolidated its position as the world’s richest country. Real consumption rose by 22% between 1944 and 1947, and spending on durable goods more than doubled (Bohanon). The private economy took over, in large part because factories that had been created to mass produce weapons were transformed to produce household items, such as toasters. This switch from “a wartime economy to peacetime prosperity” was caused by the efficient and quick flow from public to private production (Bohanon). This period is often referred to as the Golden Age of Capitalism, and the period by which consumer culture and mass consumption really evolved into what every American is surrounded with today.

The few decades following the end of World War II are not solely known for the enormous economic expansion, but more so for the great social movements that, too, arose. The economic ‘boom’ following WWII came with simultaneous social changes related to the two issues of feminism and welfare. By looking specifically at the timing and motivation behind these two movements, this section aims to prove a positive correlation between economic prosperity and political action. It is no simple coincidence that these social movements occurred at the same time as such a grand economic resurgence in the United States. This discussion will also draw upon a third variable – the concept of ‘social progress’ – and argue that it, too, correlates positively with an improvement in economic improvement i.e. what can also be dubbed increased social wealth.

Beginning first with the feminist movement, Dietlind Stolle states, in “The Gender Gap Reversed: Political Consumerism as a Women-Friendly Form of Civic and Political Engagement,” that “we have every reason to believe that women’s participation has risen since World War II, despite the overall limited time budget” available to working women (Stolle 2). Much of this participation was motivated by the economic boom because it caused so many other positive and prosperous changes that externally affected women: an emergent middle class, increased standards of living and job opportunity for the men surrounding, etc. More than that, even, is that this great industrialization and boost in efficiency made possible by this Golden Age of Capitalism made it so that women’s traditional roles as mothers and housewives were quickly replaced – by new innovations, technology, etc. – meaning these previous roles were called into question. In deciding that they wanted, and more-so, *needed* to gain new rights due to the economic progress, and branch out of the household, so too came the realization that “conventional political venues did not welcome their participation” (Micheletti 251). They then “look[ed] elsewhere to influence politics,” and quickly realized that the quickest way to do so was by involving themselves in market-based political activity (Micheletti 251). The ability to participate in the marketplace became the clear choice because women have traditionally been deemed the “family shoppers,” meaning they are much more inclined to be political consumers over men (Micheletti 255). This use of consumerism as a political tool is attributed to women, who first used it in a variety of “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaigns to manipulate the market as a way to further their political agenda: suffrage (Micheletti 249).

The economic progress and prosperity immediately following World War II went beyond women simply working with other women to break themselves into lives of more political equality and status; it also motivated previously unrelated groups to reach out and speed up their road to equality. One example can be seen with various unions. Union involvement with consumer issues “opened up a public space in labor activities for women because it was important that they, as homemakers, wives, and mothers, understood the cause and applied it in their everyday shopping activities” (Micheletti 249). The economic boom is what caused unions to become much more active and demanding for more rights that would allow them to benefit from the prosperous economy; because of this, they began, for the first time, to include women and collaborate in a way that had not before been seen in history. This completely “erased the clear boundary between the public sphere of work and politics and the private sphere of family and household economics” (Micheletti 249). Overall, the work of women with one another and other, external groups who had previously excluded them was extremely motivated by the economic growth of the time. This motivation was so great that women achieved milestones of equality and independence; the beginning of a movement that is still continuing today. Some of these accomplishments, that can be at large attributed to the economic boom, are: a 5.1% increase in the percentage of women of working age in the labor force, equal pay for women teachers and a variety of civil servants, and 29% of all women workers were unionized (Gender Press).

The second movement that will be evaluated is that of welfare. Dr. Felicia Kornbluh, in “Consumerism and the National Welfare Rights Movement,” argues that the economic growth and unprecedented boom pushed minority groups to fight for their own rights stronger than they had before. Through the lens of welfare, she points directly to how the movement “between 1966 and 1973…extended the promise of great society” by uniquely empowering minority groups (Kornbluh 79). Kornbluh evaluates the circumstances that surrounded the American economy and society as consumer culture exploded; it became such the norm that “survival in America” was equated with living at a “high material level,” one that was much higher than previously seen, which can once again, be attributed to the great economic progress that was made following the war (Kornbluh 82). The lower classes – often synonymous with communities of color and low socioeconomic status – were being left behind, while the previously wealthy just seemed to become wealthier and more indulgent (Kornbluh 83). Her focus zooms in on women of color in these poorer communities, which further connects to the feminist movement. These lower classes felt that the separation had become so drastic that they had no choice but to stand up and push for equality in a way that “might otherwise have been inaccessible” given worse economic conditions (Kornbluh 86).

This increasing, more urgent and prominent feeling of being left behind in large part came about also because of the economic prowess of the day. As the government increased spending with things such as the GI Bill – that provided returning veterans with money for college, businesses, mortgage – previous blue-collar workers were able to enter the middle class and start voicing their own needs in the market of mass appeal by producers (TIME). The women of color who led the welfare movement argued that where “welfare gives…enough for food and rent and second-hand clothes,” these items are “not all of life,” especially in the post-war consumer society; if they were to truly feel equal and taken care of, then they deserved to be compensated at the same pace with which the affluence of everyday American life seemed to be exploding (Kornbluh 85). These new needs and demands from the lower classes would not have come into fruition, nor been nearly as well acknowledged had the economic boom not drastically changed the quality of life for the middle class. This welfare movement eventually pushed the U.S. to further evolve into the great model welfare state that it is today. Only a couple of decades after the end of the war did President Lyndon B. Johnson initiate his “War on Poverty,” a direct sub-section of his Great Society plan, focused on social-welfare legislation such as federal support for education, expansion of Social Security, and “elimination of the barriers to the right to vote” (Britannica).

**Section 4: Conclusion**

The telling of social progress movements such as feminism and welfare are likely never to explicitly nor primarily involve their relation to economic growth and prosperity. This relationship, while interesting and related, cannot compare to a comprehensive history of suppression. From the ending of World War II, as the U.S. began to indulge more than ever before, and the U.S. economy expanded more widely than ever before, so too came the rise of social movements that are argued to have helped usher in the progressive society that exists today. And through the deeper historical analysis advocated and represented in this essay, scholars can look more closely and holistically at the relationship that exists between economic prosperity, political action, and social progress.

The first lesson to be learned is that there exists an undeniable relationship between politics and consumerism. This relationship became truly established and has continued to dominate every member of society in the United States since the end of World War II. Each person is both a consumer and political participant, and often, these two ideals find themselves intertwined and stem from the same moral decisions. Not only can consumerism act as encouragement towards political action and change, but it itself can be the tool used to spark a change. While it is important to first understand the individual economic boom, and social movements that followed World War II, a deeper understanding of their interconnection – in what is presently deemed ‘political consumerism’ – is necessary to call into question what the relationship is between economic growth and social progress. Therefore, the second lesson to extract from such a historical analysis of the post-World War II economy and the ensuing social movements is exactly that called into question above: that a growth in economic wealth and prosperity has the capacity to uniquely offer pockets of opportunity for political change that pushes the United States into a direction of social progress and improvement.

All in all, the evaluation of two specific and significant movements – women’s rights and welfare – are meant to illuminate a more general point: that economic growth and prosperity in the economic arena of the United States open up unique opportunities for social progress and change that would not otherwise be attainable nor successful. This positive change comes about in a process that goes something like this: economic progress leads to a political call to action that only pushes for the reinforcement of American ideals such as equality and democracy. In evaluating the way that social progress comes about, it is vital that a historian, in some capacity, point to this relationship.

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