THE HISTORY OF CONSUMPTION

Kasper H. Andersen, Kristoffer Jensen & Mikkel Thelle (red.):
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In their introduction to this volume, the editors write that, ”Danske historikere har ikke beskæftiget sig meget med forbrugets betydning for samfundsudviklingen” (p. 17). That is quite surprising. After all, we are all consumers. The consumption of goods and services has been fundamental in the development of modern Danish society, just as it has been elsewhere. But perhaps herein lies the problem. One of the reasons for this lacuna may thus simply be the unwieldiness of the topic and the enormous difficulty of trying to make sense of consumption and consumer history in a coherent way.[1]

The history of consumption can be studied in a myriad of ways. The field has been fragmented: are we concerned with histories of consumption, or of consumption regimes, consumerism, consumers or consumer society?[2] The history of consumption can provide a lens through which to investigate many other historical problems. It can help to address some fundamental questions about the emergence and evolution of modern capitalism in local, national and global contexts, and also how such developments have been challenged and contested. The consumption – or not – of particular goods has always been intimately associated with the formation of cultural identities, whether individual or social, but equally importantly consumption has also been a matter for regulation and the negotiation of citizenship, and for political struggles over this.[3] In a Swedish context, studies of the history of consumption have shed further light on the history of the welfare state, as a means to secure minimum material standards of living for consumer citizens, but also through education to encourage these consumer citizens to undertake ‘rational consumption’ in the broader interests of state and society.[4]

Peter N. Stearns has defined consumerism as “a society in which many people formulate their goals in life partly through acquiring goods that they do not need for subsistence or for traditional display."[5] Stearns asserts that consumerism is a modern phenomenon that arose – for various complex social and cultural reasons – approximately 300 years ago in western Europe. It spread to the rest of the world through the extension of European influence to other parts of the world and it is thus intimately bound up with the history of European colonialism and more generally with globalization.[6] These processes were never one-sided of course, as new patterns of consumerism and consumption inevitably provoked opposition and resistance.[7] But as Frank Trentmann has commented, consumers are also an "elusive category", one that has been constantly contested and reshaped in relation to other social identities.[8]

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[1] The most important recent contribution to the field is Trentmann: *Empire of Things.* See also Strikwerda: ‘Too Much of a Good Thing?’.

[2] Trentmann: ‘Beyond Consumerism’.

[3] Cohen: *A Consumers’ Republic*.

[4] Aléx: *Den rationella konsumenten*; Aléx: *Konsumera rätt;* see also Husz and Lagerkvist: ’Konsumtions motsägelser’; Husz: *Drömmars värde*.

The volume that is under discussion here is concerned with the history of consumption in modern Denmark in the broadest sense, but it focuses on one aspect of that history in particular, namely urban retailing. As the editors write in their introduction, "byerne [har] spillet en afgørende rolle i forbrugets historie" (p. 12). From the middle ages, cities enjoyed special privileges as spaces of consumption through the regulations on markets and other types of trade. Inevitably, therefore, they were also places were new types of goods could be consumed and displayed, where new fashions and tastes were formed and disseminated. They were also the targets for political protests over consumption, where consumers gathered to protest against high prices, poor quality or the scarcity of essential goods. Changes in retailing and especially the rise of fixed-price, fixed-place trading in the form of the shop were fundamental to the transformation of towns and cities during the early modern and modern periods, with profound implications for urban planning.[9]

Certain types of retailing, notably the large department stores found in larger urban centres, have often been identified as being synonymous with modernity and the modern city, but recent research has largely rejected notions of a nineteenth century 'retail revolution' found in the older literature.[10] Other forms of distribution, such as itinerant peddling, market stalls, second-hand trading, barter and direct exchange also deserve to be studied in historical context alongside modern forms of retailing such as chain stores and supermarkets.[11] Nonetheless, it is also true that the twentieth century has seen major changes in the retailing sector, especially food retailing. Victoria de Grazia has identified the Great

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[5] Stearns: *Consumerism in World History,* p. ix.

[6] Stearns: *Consumerism in World History.*

[7] Hilton: *Prosperity for All.*

[8] Trentmann: 'The Modern Genealogy'.

[9] Stobart and Howard: 'Introduction'; Cohen: 'Is There an Urban History of Consumption?'

[10] See Benson and Ugolini, 'Introduction'; Stobart and Howard, 'Introduction', p. 4.

[11] For examples of historical studies of different forms of trading see Wassholm and Sundelin, 'Småskalig handel', and other articles in the same themed issue of *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland*; Lilja and Jonsson: 'Inadequate supply'.

Depression as a key moment in the transition from what she calls a “bourgeois” mode of consumption and distribution in Europe, where the sector was dominated by small independent retailers who maintained personal relations with their customers, to a “Fordist” mode characterised by mass marketing, chain stores and supermarkets.[12] Crucial to this transition was the import of American practices in retailing and distribution, a transfer that was further stimulated after the Second World War, as the editors to this volume discuss (pp. 17-20). Espen Ekberg has identified three major transformations in the (food) retailing sector after 1945: The rise of the large, self-service store or supermarket; the rise of the chain store, implying integration and standardisation of the supply chain under centralised control; and the rise of consumer affluence.[13] But these transformations were also uneven and they were also often resisted, with different degrees of success.[14]

Not all the chapters in this particular book are strictly within the theme of ‘shop, city, consumer’. Bertel Nygaard’s chapter on publisher Meïr Goldschmidt’s travels in 1840s Paris; Michael F. Wagner’s on the motorcar in leisure activities from the 1920s; and Helle Strandgaard Jensen’s on the interest of Danish and Nordic broadcasters in the US-produced children’s TV series *Sesame Street* are all interesting in their own right, but will not be discussed in more detail here. Instead, I will discuss here those chapters which deal explicitly with questions of retailing and consumption in the urban environment. These span a broad historical period, ranging from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Jon Stobart on the spatial organisation of English shops 1700-1820; Jakob Ørnbjerg on the prominent Svaneapotek in Aalborg founded by pharmacist Friedenreich in 1665); through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Kirsten Rykind-Eriksen on the marketing strategies of two Copenhagen furniture stores; Jens Toftgaard on shop window displays); to the twentieth century (Kirsten Linde on the aesthetic and spatial design of shops in Oslo and Akershus).

Taken as a whole, these essays raise several very interesting themes. The first concerns changing uses of space, both within the shop itself and concerning the placing of retailing sites within the city. While in the early modern period there was often an overlap between domestic and public space, and between spaces of production and consumption (Stobart; Toftgaard), the rise of modern retailing saw a gradual separation in these functions. Linde describes twentieth century shops as “halvoffentlige rum”, where members of the public were allowed access but only during certain hours and in controlled ways. The counter marked a physical boundary between consumer and retailer, undermined by the introduction of self-service where consumers were then allowed or rather encouraged to browse freely among the goods.

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[12] de Grazia: ‘Changing Consumption Regimes’.

[13] Ekberg: ’Confronting three revolutions’.

[14] Scroop: ‘The Anti-Chain Store Movement’.

A particularly interesting aspect of all these chapters is their attention to the role of the senses in consumption and retailing. Different sources are used to explore these questions, ranging from shop inventories (Stobart) to technical plans (Toftgaard) and photographs (Linde). Visual display was of course essential – and its significance is the easiest to trace in historical sources – and all these authors discuss the ways in which goods were laid out and presented to consumers. Toftgaard discusses how technical changes in the design of buildings, windows and glass allowed shops to display their goods even when the shop was closed (see also Rykind-Eriksen). This in turn had profound implications for the city, as brightly lit shop windows transformed the use of urban space especially after dark. Window and interior displays also signalled important messages about the status of the shop and the customers that it aspired to serve (Rykind-Eriksen; Linde), though the window display also introduced the possibility of vicarious consumption, or "window-shopping", for those who could not afford to buy the goods. But at the same time, Toftgaard notes that the increased reliance of visual display, especially when it was behind glass, removed consumers' reliance on their other senses in experiencing and choosing goods. This is highlighted in Ørnbjerg's chapter, which discusses the smells of the often exotic goods available in the apothecary.

All of this goes a long way to fulfilling the book's ambition to investigate 'the production of consumption', namely; "hvordan forbrug skabes eller konfronteres, men også omvendt, hvordan forbrugspraksisser former identitet, byrum og erhvervsliv." (p. 12). As 'brick-and-mortar retailing' becomes increasingly threatened across Europe, challenged by the rise of internet shopping, a historical assessment of these questions seems timely.[15] If there is one aspect I am missing from this discussion, however, it is the politics of these changes.[16] For consumption has been intensely politicised: a target for control and regulation, and often for conflict. As Lizabeth Cohen has shown, from the Great Depression and especially after 1945 consumers were expected to play a central role in American economic success, driving the economy through their spending on "essential" items such as white goods and motor cars.[17] This also applies to Denmark, albeit in the rather different context of the expanding welfare state and with it rising public spending. Moreover, as Frank Trentmann observes, consumption has always been bound up with moral questions.[18] With the rise of "affluent societies" in Western Europe and North America during the post-war era, political struggles over consumption switched from a focus on not having enough to consume, especially of essentials such as food, to questions about over-consumption. But these issues were never straightforward, as the problems of over-consumption (waste, pollution, obesity and related diseases) continued to co-exist with deprivation and inequality, especially in a global context.

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[15] Stobart and Howard: 'Introduction', p. 1.

[16] See also Strickwerde: 'Too much of a good thing?'.

[17] Cohen: *A Consumers' Republic.*

[18] Trentmann: *Empire of Things.*

In a now classic article from 1971, E.P. Thompson argued for a new interpretation of the widespread bread riots in eighteenth-century England. Such protests could not be dismissed merely as the incoherent protests of a mob angered by their empty bellies, argued Thompson; rather they were motivated by a commitment to established "moral economies" that ensured the availability of corn at a fair price through regulation, and were directed against those seen as contravening this moral economy, such as millers and merchants.[19] Following Thompson's lead, historians have paid attention to how consumers have mobilised to protest against high food prices or food shortages in many different historical contexts.[20] Such protests were often gendered, for example mobilising working-class women in their role as the managers of household budgets during the First World War.[21]

The successes of consumer politics have typically been confined to temporary and single-issue campaigns, however, in contrast to the often more stable organisations arising out of conflicts over production. It has been much more difficult to build lasting coalitions of consumers mobilised as consumers.[22] An exception to this might be the success of consumer co-operatives, but even co-operatives have sometimes struggled to maintain a clear identity as consumer organisations, especially during the post-war era of mass affluence.[23] Nonetheless, the history of consumption and consumerism has never been about the one-sided triumph of capitalism and consumer choice.[24] Conflicts over access to the market and the scarcity of goods remain, as do the conflicts over the moral economies of consumption. Campaigns about fair trade, ecology, the welfare of human or animal workers and now increasingly concerns about the over-consumption of goods and scarce natural resources dominate contemporary headlines but also have long and complex histories. This book is a welcome stimulus to further explorations of an important field.

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[19] Thompson: 'The Moral Economy'.

[20] Bentley: 'Reading Food Riots'; Gurney, 'Rejoicing in Potatoes'.

[21] Davis: 'Food Scarcity'; Hunt: 'The Politics of Food'.

[22] Hilton and Daunton: 'Material Politics'; Hilton, *Consumerism*; Maclachlan and Trentmann, 'Civilizing Markets'.

[23] Hilson, Neunsinger and Patmore: *A Global History of Consumer Co-operation.*

[24] Hilton: *Prosperity for All.*

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MARY HILSON
PROFESSOR, PH.D
AARHUS UNIVERSITET
MARY.HILSON@CAS.AU.DK