

Gender, Consumption, and Technology in the 1920s

Teaching American History Workshop
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- I. Workshop Objectives: gather content and resources to facilitate teaching U.S. social, cultural, and economic developments of the interwar (1919-1939) with particular attention to the role women played in the growing consumer economy.

The applicable NJ History Standard for this session is 6.1.12.C.8.b: Relate social, cultural, and technological changes in the interwar period to the rise of a consumer economy and the changing role and status of women.

It is difficult to relate all the important changes of the period in one neat package as this standard seeks to do. However, by keeping the consumer economy at the center of the discussion, we can present students with an understandable and very relevant (to contemporary issues and concerns) discussion of the relationship between economy, society, culture, and gender. The underlying premise of this approach is that the consumer economy encouraged a consumer culture (and vice versa) and that this culture influenced the role and status of women (among other things).

- II. Introducing the Topic:

- a. Changes and Important Developments of the Interwar Period:

Social	Cultural	Technological
Immigration restrictions.	Jazz and modernism in the arts	Mass-produced automobile
Population moves westwards and to the cities.	Cultural divide between traditional and modern America	Radio
Great Migration	Prohibition	Airplanes
Rural Depression	New Woman/Flappers	Electric household appliances
Increasing wealth inequality	Isolationism	Talking films
Women's suffrage	Celebration of business	Plastics and chemicals
Birth control/contraception	Celebrity culture	Television (beginnings)
After 1929—the Stock Market Crash and Great Depression—until U.S. entry in WW2 (1941)		
25% unemployment (peak)	Regionalism in the arts	Rural electrification (TVA)
New Deal	New Deal in the arts	
Protests and strikes/unionization	Celebration of "ordinary folk"	

- b. Defining a consumer economy and consumer culture: What makes an economy a “consumer economy” and how does this relate to a “consumer culture” ?
- i. **Solving the production problem—from scarcity to abundance:** historians and economists agree that one of the fundamental economic steps to creating an economy based on consumption is the ability to mass produce consumer items and get these items to market efficiently. This problem was solved by the end of the nineteenth century through mechanization, vertical integration, and a national rail network. [Have students look at the 1890’s Sears catalogs for insight into the merchandising of the era. Visit <http://www.searsarchives.com/index.htm> . Although still not available online, the older catalogs have been reprinted and make an excellent classroom resource.
 - ii. **Disposable income and consumer credit**—in the older producer economy, there was no such thing as consumer credit. You could borrow money to start a business, but borrowing to purchase was considered unsound, even sinful. Disposable income was also in shorter supply as families had less cash to begin with (the money supply problem) and the cash they had went to meeting essential needs or towards savings.
 - iii. **Decline in household production**—as long as people make their own clothes, preserve their own food, slaughter their own livestock, or barter locally with others to perform these and other household tasks, it is hard to establish a true consumer economy. By the end of the nineteenth century, an increasing percentage of Americans were wage earners living in cities or suburbs where keeping chickens and a garden was impractical. So was contacting the local blacksmith to make a set of andirons or the local tailor to make a suit of clothes. These modern consumers had more disposable income and came to rely on manufactured items to fill their needs (and desires).
 - iv. **A change in personal behavior** in which excess consumption (wanting and purchasing items beyond your basic needs) is not viewed as wasteful or sinful. Historians see a shift in the older Protestant-based ethic of thrift and delayed gratification to an attitude where consumption is seen as a legitimate way of fulfilling one’s personal desires and as a positive good. (Remember what President Bush told us to do after the 9/11 attacks?)
 - v. **Women are the primary consumers.** 60% of consumer purchases are made by women. The change from an agricultural, extractive, and heavy industrial producer economy to a consumer economy placed women in a different economic role. How did this affect their overall role and status in society?

c. **Useful primary sources to analyzing the economy of the 1920s:**

- i. *Historical Statistics of the United States, 1789-1945*: Series J 49-96—Value of Output, Finished Products and Construction Materials at Current Prices: 1919-1933, <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/HistoricalStatisticsoftheUnitedStates1789-1945.pdf>. (p. 181 of the original printed report, p. 191 of the .pdf).
- ii. *1930 Statistical Abstract*: Table 805—Summary by 16 General Groups of Industries, [1899-1927], <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/1930-17.pdf>. (p. 795 of the original printed report, p. 4 of the .pdf).
- iii. *2010 Statistical Abstract*: Table 740—Economic Census Summary, 2002-2007, <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2010/tables/10s0740.pdf>.

d. **What makes a “consumer culture”?**

- i. Advertising: from simple product descriptions to persuasive ads focused on the “human interest angle.” Products are advertised as fulfilling a need or enhancing a person’s beauty, social standing, efficiency, etc. This is the hallmark of advertising from the early twentieth-century on.
- ii. Merchandising: from markets and simple stores to the sumptuous displays of the department stores (beginning in the 1880s) in which the display of goods promotes desire on the part of shoppers.
- iii. Government support: providing a stable and adequate monetary supply (1913 Federal Reserve Act), consumer protection (1906 Pure Food and Drug Act), infrastructure development (Good Roads Movement, Rural Electrification, Rural Free Delivery).
- iv. Attitudes and rituals: traditional holidays (Easter, Christmas, July 4th, etc.) turned into festivals of consumption, other holidays created (Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Grandparent’s Day); legitimating of consumption by cultural authorities including clergy, political leaders, educators.

III. Putting it all together: how did the consumer economy impact the status and role of women during the interwar period? The arguments:

- a. Consumerism as liberation: household appliances, automobiles, cosmetics, and other goods freed women from the drudgery of household labor, provided more leisure time, and allowed them to fulfill personal desires in ways previously unimaginable.
- b. Consumerism as reaffirming woman’s domestic role: for all the guff about women being freed from domestic labor, the majority of ads show women pursuing domestic ends.

Consumer culture emphasized home, family, and leisure in domestic settings. Ads showing women in independent productive and creative roles are non-existent. The only exceptions to this rule were ads of flappers and other modern chic women, but they are engaged in leisure activities.

- c. Consumerism as a new system of gender control replacing the older Victorian code of domesticity. While consumer goods offered women choices for self-expression and fulfilling desires, they also established a new set of expectations about personal appearance, home furnishings, leisure activities, etc. Consumer goods became a “code” through which gender roles and social status were established and confirmed. (Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) and his concept of “vicarious consumption” is the first work to explore this theme)
- d. Consumerism involved picking and choosing. Women (and men) made choices about what they purchased and how they put their purchases to use. For instance, in ethnic communities, radios and phonographs were often used to listen to music from the homeland, not to mainstream American products; African Americans living in the North participated in mainstream American consumer culture, but they also established a separate black economy that addressed their community’s needs and desires.

IV. Suggestions for Classroom Exercises:

- a. Analyzing Consumption Patterns—*The Buying Habits of Small-Town Women*. This survey, published in 1926, is an excellent primary source available through the Library of Congress’s American Memory Project, Prosperity and Thrift: The Coolidge Era and the Consumer Economy, 1921-1929 (see on-line resources listing at end of this presentation). Go to <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/amrlg.lg06> and access the facsimile pages.
- b. Analyzing advertisements—*Emergence of Advertising in America* (John W. Hartman Center at Duke University). This website includes an online database of advertisements from the period. Go to <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/eaa/>.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Consumer Society in American History: A Reader. Lawrence B. Glickman, ed. Cornell University Press, 1999. Good introduction to the subject. Some of the articles are heavy going (very scholarly), but others are very informative and useful.

Cross, Gary. *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America*. Columbia University Press, 2000. A readable account of the development of the consumer economy from the beginning of the twentieth century to the end.

Garvey, Ellen Gruber. *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s*. Oxford University Press, 1996. This scholarly study examines the advertisements and editorial copy of the new, illustrated magazines of the late nineteenth century. Garvey argues that through both middle-class women were enticed into a new world of consumption.

Hill, Daniel Delis. *Advertising to the American Woman, 1900-1999*. Ohio State University Press, 2002. 329 pp. This richly illustrated volume documents advertising over a century's span and covers the major areas of discussion in the field including the role of household appliances, personal hygiene products, idealized versus realistic portrayals of women, and the continuing preference of advertisers to show women in home settings rather than at work.

Leach, William. *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*. Vintage Books, 1994. This well-written study argues that beginning in the last decades of the nineteenth century entrepreneurs, government, clergy, advertisers, and others worked together (often unwittingly) to create a consumer culture in which what was formerly seen as sinful (unnecessary consumption) became acceptable and even desired.

Lears, Jackson T. *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*. Basic Books, 1995. A dense, scholarly, but interesting work by the noted Rutgers historian in which he dissects the advertising industry and criticizes its pretensions and methods.

Marchand, Roland. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity*. University of California Press, 1985. This classic study of advertising argued that in the early 1900s advertisers moved from item descriptions to the "human interest angle," promoting desire rather than utilitarian objects. Along the way, women were portrayed as idealized feminine objects rather than real human subjects—a trend that continues to this day.

Scanlon, Jenifer. *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender, and the Promise of Consumer Culture*. Routledge, 1995. An in-depth study of the *Journal* during the crossover decades (1890s to 1920s) in which Scanlon argues that the magazine and the J. Walter Thompson Agency (who produced many of its advertisements) harnessed women's "inarticulate longings" to consumption, thereby weakening the potential for greater social and political activism on the part of middle-class women.

Twitchell, James. *Lead Us Into Temptation*. Columbia University Press, 2000. Twitchell plays devil's advocate to the academic criticism of consumption, arguing that consumption is good, and we enjoy what we do. Consumption has become the new religion.

Resources- Digital and Online:

Library of Congress, American Memory Project—Advertising.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/browse/ListSome.php?category=Advertising>. Contains six collections including a link to the Duke University *Emergence of Advertising* website (see below). Most useful for this topic is *Prosperity and Thrift: The Coolidge Era and the Consumer Economy, 1921-1929* – <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/coolhtml/coolhome.html>.

University of Houston, Digital History Project—*The Jazz Age: The American 1920s*.

<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/subtitles.cfm?titleID=67>. This website provides useful background information on the period.

University of Virginia, Digital Crossroads Project—*The Attic: Advertising in 1920s Women’s Magazines*.

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug00/rekas/attic/main.htm>. A small set of images and some useful essays from advertiser N.W. Ayer.

Duke University Special Collections Library, John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising, and

Marketing History. <http://library.duke.edu/specialcollections/hartman/index.html>. The Hartman

Center includes several very useful online collections including *Emergence of Advertising in America:*

1850-1920— <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/ea/> , and *Ad*Access*—

<http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adaccess/>, a searchable collection of 7,000 newspaper and magazine ads.

Gilder-Lehrman Institute, Modules on American History—1920s.

http://www.gilderlehrman.org/teachers/module.php?module_id=460. This site is designed specifically for teachers and features outlines and primary source materials. The module on consumer culture addresses some of the basic issues—such as “were the 1920s really a decade of prosperity?” – but relies on scholarly perspectives of a generation ago.

U.S. Census. Now available online are the complete historical censuses and statistical abstracts. Go to

http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/past_years.html and

<http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/>.