

The Progressive Era in the United States: A Shift Towards Consumerism

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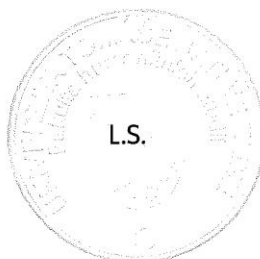
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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce zkoumá vývoj konzumní společnosti ve Spojených státech během období Progresivní éry a zároveň popisuje předcházející okolnosti, které umožnili tomuto vývoji vzniknout. Dále tato práce dává vyniknout kontrastu tradičního venkovského životního stylu devatenáctého století a městského života z počátku dvacátého století. Zabývá se nadměrnou spotřebou a hodnotí její dopady. Cílem této bakalářské práce je odhalit vývoj konzumního trendu, který se postupně stal jedním z hlavních rysů současné Americké společnosti.

Klíčová slova: Progresivní éra, progresivismus, urbanizace, imigrace, industrializace, komercializace, masová výroba, velké podniky, Thorstein Veblen, 'okázalá spotřeba', konzumní společnost.

ABSTRACT

This bachelor's thesis examines the development of consumer society in the United States during the Progressive Era and describes the preceding circumstances, which gave rise to this development. Further, this thesis contrasts traditional rural life of the nineteenth century with the urbanity of the early twentieth century. The thesis analyzes excessive consumption and assesses its effects. The objective of this thesis is to unveil the development of consumerism, which gradually became one of the dominant features of American society.

Keywords: Progressive Era, progressivism, urbanization, immigration, industrialization, commercialization, mass production, big business, Thorstein Veblen, 'conspicuous consumption', consumerism, consumer culture.

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INTRODUCTION

The Progressive era marked a considerable turning point in the history of the United States. Between 1890 and 1920, following the industrialization and great continental expansion of the nineteenth century, America entered its modern age.¹ Historians are treating the epoch from different perspectives and often do not agree on its nature.² This thesis will predominantly examine social and economic aspects that contributed to the rise of consumerism in America. It will outline the main features at the turn of the twentieth century and document the shift from traditional farm life. It will describe the rise of big business, and the transformation of commerce from local markets to a mass production economy. It will then explain the social effects of these changes and their influence on modern America.

¹ John Whiteclay Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), vii.

² *Ibid.*, ix.

1 GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

The turn of the twentieth century in America was a time of modernization. The frontier was conquered, and the population was becoming increasingly urban. Small independent entrepreneurs were increasingly being driven out of business by large corporations. Such dramatic changes provoked large-scale reforms. It was also during this era that the United States became a real world power.³ Its prosperous industrial economy focused on profit maximization and international markets. Increasing capital, immigrants, and infrastructure allowed for increased profits, further padding corporation coffers.⁴

In the late-nineteenth century, a powerful United States emerged. Publicists were relishing the “nation” and the fulfillment of manifest destiny. Growth, development and enterprise became interrelated concepts, as did nationalization, industrialization, mechanization, and urbanization. To most Americans, though these characteristics prompted disruption and confusion.⁵ Tension developed between progress and tradition, and between unfettered economic success and the enlightenment values of life, liberty, and property. The conflict between science and religion further complicated matters.⁶ The society was without a core, and a sense of uprootedness prevailed. National authorities that might oversee such rapid changes and mitigate the resulting tensions were notably absent. Traditional institutions such as the church, family and community could not meet the challenge of maintaining order.⁷

1.1 Urbanization and Rise of the City

At the end of the Reconstruction era, American civilization was still primarily rural. Historian Arthur Schlesinger stated that “of the fifty million people counted in the census of 1880, three fourths, or nearly forty million, lived on the open land or in villages of less than four thousand inhabitants.”⁸ In the next twenty years, the public interest turned from

³ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), vii.

⁴ Eric H. Monkkonen, *America Becomes Urban: The Development of U.S. Cities & Towns, 1780-1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 82.

⁵ Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, vii.

⁶ Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, vii-viii.

⁷ Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 11-12.

⁸ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 1.

country to the city. Historian Richard Hofstadter noted that “the United States was born in the country and has moved to the city.”⁹

The urbanization of the U.S. population was arguably the most significant historic development of the era between the Civil War and World War I. A vast demographic shift was generated by massive immigration, rural populations migrating to the city as a result of increased agricultural efficiency, and emerging industrial opportunities. The result of the process of movement from rural areas to more densely populated environments was the growth of cities. For instance, in 1870 Detroit was a city of about 80,000; by 1920 it was home to nearly a million. Chicago within the same time frame multiplied from 300,000 to 2.7 million, and New York eclipsed 5.6 million people.¹⁰ On the other hand, rural agricultural areas were growing or declining depending on size, productivity, and infrastructure.¹¹

Several reasons contributed to the great expansion of American cities at the turn of the twentieth century. Railway transportation was one of the factors shaping urbanization. However, rail transit did not affect so much the established urban world as it accelerated the building of new cities. Nevertheless, railroads, and later hard surface roads, dominated the urban settlement and promised future urban economic expansion. Opportunity for entrepreneurship was another significant aspect of development. Also location made a great difference. Western mining created centers with population size that would not have been achieved by agriculture or manufacturing. The population of Denver, for example, tripled from 35,000 in 1880 to over 106,000 by 1890.¹²

Residence is a main factor of one’s relationship to a place. Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the dominant vision of housing was altered by the social and economic changes. Historian Eric Monkkonen described the image as “an owner occupied, single family home inhabited by the same family for decades, though not for a whole lifetime.” But this picture did not always reflect reality.¹³ Urban living conditions in late nineteenth

⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 23.

¹⁰ James Carroll, “Urbanization During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era: An Overview,” in AP U.S. History, New York, http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/US_History_Urbanization_SF.pdf (accessed March 25, 2014).

¹¹ Monkkonen, *America Becomes Urban*, 82.

¹² *Ibid.*, 78-84.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 182.

century varied depending on income. For affluent temporary dwellers, there were hotels constantly increasing in number, size and sumptuousness. Schlesinger noted “such hotels, gorgeously decorated and furnished, with a steadily diminishing emphasis on the ‘steamboat style,’ made a special appeal with their private baths, electric elevators, electric-call service and other up-to-the-minute conveniences.” Large cities also offered hotels of second and third class or of no class at all. Boarding houses offered another possibility for lodging.¹⁴ The automobile became a symbol of the late nineteenth-century American city. From the 1890s until World War I, the automobile was considered an expensive toy for the elite, but Henry Ford’s mass production of cheap and reliable cars led to millions being purchased.¹⁵ Swifter means of transport enabled people to move into suburban districts, which gave rise to satellite colonies. On the other hand, less prosperous classes and particularly immigrants lived in slums. Schlesinger described these congested barracks as “foul and grimy, infested with vermin and lacking privacy and proper sanitary conveniences.” As one state tenement-house commission pointed to the shocking conditions dominating the slums, in New York real housing reform was secured by legislation, inspiring other municipalities to take action.¹⁶

1.2 Immigration

Mass immigration led to an enormous population boom. In the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, fifteen million people arrived in the United States, which was the same sum that entered in the previous forty years. Immigration was responsible for almost one-third of the nation’s population growth.¹⁷ Expansion of American industry and few restrictions lured a constant stream of immigrants, which peaked in 1907 when 1,285,000 foreign-born persons were registered by American authorities. By 1910, 13,345,000 immigrants were residing in the United States which was nearly one seventh of the total population. In the nineteenth century came the English, Irish, Scandinavians, and Germans, while after 1900 most immigrants were from southern and eastern Europe, as well as Russia.¹⁸ Usually, young men from a village headed off to the States to find work in a mill,

¹⁴ Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City*, 106-111.

¹⁵ Monkkonen, *America Becomes Urban*, 166.

¹⁶ Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City*, 106-111.

¹⁷ Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, 81-82.

¹⁸ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 177.

factory, or mine to earn some money. Many of them planned to return home and buy land, but many stayed in the United States.¹⁹

Native Yankee-protestant Americans developed hostility against immigrants. They were shocked by the circumstances under which the immigrants lived. Their slums, crowding, unhygienic conditions, their strange languages and religions all created fear. In addition, in many big cities, immigrants often had numerical superiority over the native inhabitants. In eastern and midwestern cities such as Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, Philadelphia, or Pittsburgh, the native-born were by far exceeded by the foreign ones. Yankees often felt trapped in their own communities.²⁰

1.3 Progressivism

Resulting from economic and social changes, a dynamic general reform effort called progressivism originated. What historian John W. Chambers summarized as “a mixture of pragmatic, piecemeal reform and an idealistic, quasi-religious vision of efficient democracy” stirred millions of middle-class Americans to some social action.²¹ Historian Richard Wiebe noted that “men from all walks of life, already shaken by an incomprehensible world, responded to any new upheaval as an immediate threat.”²²

The nationwide movement began to influence events starting from the 1890s and was vanishing after the outset of World War I, though it proved most dominant for a decade between 1906 and 1916. The depression of the 1890s unsettled society enough so that reformers could form remnants of discontent into a nationwide movement. Previously split among regional, ethnic, or class ranks, many disappointed groups for some time pulled together with local reformers.²³ Progressive leaders were comprised mainly of urban and small-town middle and upper classes, especially well educated and well-off white Anglo-Saxon Protestant or German Jewish citizens of various professions such as lawyers, journalists, educators, scientists, physicians, social workers and in the beginning also of independent small and medium-sized businessmen.²⁴ These reformers emphasized the common position of “exploited” consumers who were robbed by self-centered business and

¹⁹ Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, 81-82.

²⁰ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 177.

²¹ Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, ix.

²² Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 76.

²³ Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, ix.

political interests. Due to the depression, people were made aware of their role as consumers, which helped reformers target the often dishonest practices of corporations. Gas and electric businesses and streetcar companies maintained or increased rates during the depression without service improvements. It was also shown that as local governments increased taxes due to higher costs resulting from massive unemployment, the wealthy citizens and corporations often avoided taxes through the bribing of governmental officials. Progressives exposed many such exploitations, which led many consumers to support provisions such as progressive taxation, the recall of public officials, and public ownership of utilities and streetcar lines. In more than 100 cities, reformers and infuriated customers adapted public services and found a form of municipal socialism.²⁵ There were also important nonprogressive communities that sometimes supported particular progressive reform and sometimes were in opposition. These included big business, labor unions, urban immigrant groups, agrarian interests and occasionally rural fundamentalists.²⁶

²⁴ Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, 138.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

2 THE CHANGING FACE OF AGRICULTURE

A fundamental contribution to the changing nature of American life at the turn of the twentieth century was made by a great transformation in agriculture. Throughout the nineteenth century, the face of American agriculture was modified as competition between independent yeoman farming and commercial agriculture led to the supremacy of the latter and to the rise of industrialized cities. To fully comprehend the shift, this chapter describes early farming and its transformation.

2.1 Early Agriculture

Probably the most dominant feature of American life before the nineteenth century was pastoral life. Farming played an important role in the country's development.²⁷ Agriculture was not merely an occupation but rather a rural social creed that gave rise to a predominantly agricultural society. Since the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, agricultural interests began competing with industrialism. When the first political parties formed, the Federalists led by Alexander Hamilton promoted fiscal planning and the power of the central government. Agricultural interests on the other hand were represented by the anti-federalists, led by Thomas Jefferson, who were concerned that a powerful national administration would prove detrimental to the states.²⁸ According to historian Paul Johnstone, Jefferson's agrarian creed was comprised of three fundamental notions. Firstly, the farmer was an independent economic unit. Secondly, all other business activities were based on farming. And finally, rural life was regarded as natural and therefore good.²⁹

With regard to the agrarian tradition, a connection of farm living with sentimental notions about country life became well established within American culture. Historian Richard Hofstadter called this tendency the "agrarian myth." He further noted that

Its hero was the yeoman farmer, its central conception was the notion that he is the ideal man and the ideal citizen. ... The yeoman, who owned a small farm and worked it with the aid of his family, was the incarnation of the simple, honest, independent, healthy, happy human being. ... His well-being was not merely physical, it was moral;

²⁷ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 23.

²⁸ John H. Aldrich, and Ruth W. Grant. "The Antifederalists, the First Congress and the First Parties." *Journal of Politics* 55, no. 2 (May 1993): 295.

²⁹ Paul H. Johnstone, "Old Ideals Versus New Ideas in Farm Life," in *Farmers in a Changing World*, (Washington: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1940), <http://naldc.nal.usda.gov/download/IND43893710/PDF> (accessed January 25, 2014).

it was not merely personal, it was the central source of civic virtue; it was not merely secular but religious, for God had made the land and called man to cultivate it.³⁰

As a result, the farmer was considered the ideal citizen for both his virtues and the merits of his work. He was praised for his honest, self-sufficient, non-commercialism by prominent citizens such as preachers, philosophers, writers, and statesmen. Alexander Hamilton, even though not among the great supporters of agriculture, stated that “the cultivation of the earth, as the primary and most certain source of national supply,... has intrinsically a strong claim to pre-eminence over every other kind of industry.”³¹

However, as Hofstadter has noted, non-profit-seeking family farming was often the result of unfavorable circumstances. Often, commercial farming was not possible due to a lack of markets and infrastructure. The farmer’s motivation might very well have been to earn money, but there were few opportunities to do so.³²

2.2 Commercialization

Historians argue about the genuineness of the agrarian myth. From its early development throughout the eighteenth century, the vision of the idyllic farm life in truth matched reality. At the beginning of the nineteenth century when America was still mostly forests, there were numerous self-sufficient farmers who labored in the fields to earn bread and butter.³³ In the colonial period, certain commercial aspects of agriculture existed, but these were generally not feasible due to a lack of infrastructure and markets. In the nineteenth century, the situation changed.³⁴

According to Hofstadter, “the character of American agriculture was transformed” between 1815 and 1860.³⁵ Profit was becoming a frequent feature of the family farm. As everything needed was produced on the farm and almost nothing was bought, the farmer’s

³⁰ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 24-25.

According to Hofstadter, the word myth does not mean here an idea that is simply false but more likely one that effectively represents men’s values that it significantly influences their perception of reality and thus their behavior.

³¹ Alexander Hamilton, *The Works of Alexander Hamilton – Manufactures* (Federal Edition), vol. 4 (1790),

http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1381&chapter=64338&layout=html (accessed 27 February 2014).

³² Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 36.

³³ Ibid., 36.

³⁴ Ibid., 36-38.

³⁵ Ibid., 38.

savings were increasing. “My farm gave me and my family a good living on the produce of it; and left me, one year with another, one hundred and fifty silver dollars, for I have never spent more than ten dollars a year, which was for salt, nails, and the like. ...With this savings, I put money to interest, bought cattle, fatted and sold them, and made a great profit,” said a farmer of the Jeffersonian era.³⁶ With money enough, many improvements on farms were made. Due to mechanization, a farmer’s spare time was devoted to other types of work. As a result, many farmers learned some kind of trade, and agriculture was performed to a lesser extent. But with growing populations, markets and demand, farmers were urged to produce more. As a result, farmers were not growing everything that they needed anymore; agriculture became specialized. Each farm aimed to cultivate what was best for its conditions and all the other necessities were purchased.³⁷

The establishment of commercial agriculture revealed another ideal, competing with the agrarian myth – “the notion of opportunity, the career, of the self-made man.”³⁸ While initially the yeoman farmer was satisfied with his simple life, the modern farmer was inspired to surpass the traditional goal of self-sufficiency and strive for economic success. As a result, traditional agriculture began to vanish, replaced by personal dynamism.³⁹

Strangely enough, the agrarian myth was gaining popularity while its authenticity was passing. Characteristics of independent yeoman were attributed to agriculture the more it was becoming commercial and the cultivation of the soil was praised long after it had lost popularity. As Bernard Baruch, a metropolitan financier stated in 1921: “Agriculture is the greatest and fundamentally the most important of our American industries.”⁴⁰

³⁶ A. Whitney Griswold, *Farming and Democracy*. (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 136.

³⁷ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 37-39.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁰ Joseph S. Davis. “Agricultural Fundamentalism,” in *On Agricultural Policy*, (Stanford: Food Research Institute, 1939), 25.

3 THE AGE OF PROSPERITY

3.1 Economic Growth and the Rise of Big Business

The genesis of big business presented a radical change in technology and business organization. Railroads and telegraphs were the first large businesses to emerge in the 1850s and 1860s. Since these industries required complex systems of networks distributed over great distances, its owners employed professional managers who controlled the operations and maintenance. To manage this involved innovations of the managerial hierarchy. The determination and delegation of responsibilities and the creation of information flows were of special importance. The establishment of such networks necessitated large capital investments. Due to the extent of finance and intricacy of operations, labor was divided between them. The roles of ownership and control were separated, and the capital market developed to raise needed funds through the sale of bonds and equities. By 1870, big business in United States took shape in form of these service industries.⁴¹

With the development of the transcontinental railroad and communication networks, the costs related to transportation lowered substantially, which led to the creation of a national market and the birth of mass production.⁴² American manufacturing changed over the next several decades. Countless new firms were established and their size was increasing.⁴³ Products that were earlier subject to small craft manufacturing became subject to large scale production in manufacturing plants. In examining the origins of big businesses, many social scientists share the assumption that mass production is organized efficiently. Based on this understanding economist Martin Stack stated that “if the market senses that goods can be made more efficiently in mass rather than craft production, then the economy will naturally evolve in this manner.”⁴⁴

Manufacturing businesses increasingly exploited technical innovations. A new source of power arose when George Westinghouse introduced a long-distance system of transmitting alternating electrical current. With its efficiency and convenience it replaced

⁴¹ Jack High. “Economic Theory and the Rise of Big Business in America, 1870-1910.” *Business History Review* 85, no.1 (Spring 2011): 86-87.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴³ Martin Stack, “The Rise of Big Business in Turn-of-the-Century America: A Taxonomy of Interpretations.” *Journal Of Economic Issues* 36, no. 2 (June 2002): 469-476.

steam power. In the early years of the twentieth century, one-third of manufacturing businesses implemented electrical power into their plants. Electricity also powered the first mass-marketed products such as washing machines or vacuum cleaners.

A high increase in productivity was accomplished due to the expansion of machinery, including the use of an assembly line. When Henry Ford used this process to make automobiles, “America became the master of mass production and mass consumption, and Ford emerged as the presiding genius of the new flow technology which Europeans labeled Fordism,” noted Chambers. He also stated, “slicing assembly time from 12, 5 to 1, 5 hours, the Ford Motor Company cranked out 500,000 Model Ts a year and eventually chopped the base price from \$950 to \$290.”⁴⁵

The American economy was thriving thanks to the mass production of industrial goods and the increasing production of consumer goods. Between 1897 and 1914, real gross national product increased 6 percent annually, and cost of living grew 39 percent during the same time. Journalist Paul Lewis cited Simon N. Patten’s assertion that the United States was moving from “a pain or deficit economy” to a “pleasure of surplus economy.”⁴⁶ The era was therefore regarded as a time of great economic progress in productivity and standard of living.⁴⁷

3.2 The Pursuit of Efficiency

With the rise of big businesses, great concern for efficiency and methods for its measurement and application spread widely among the society. Efficiency in industry, in government as well as in public life and personal affairs became means of reform. Economist Jennifer Alexander noted that “efficiency helped to create a stable and reliable platform from which to conduct an enterprise or a life.”⁴⁸

Efficiency and scientific management were widely spread, especially after 1910 when the public was made aware of railroad operations’ rates and waste and after the outbreak of the First World War. In the railroads case the business was accused of trying to raise rates. Railroad efficiency consultant Harrington Emerson played an essential role when he

⁴⁴ Ibid., 469-476.

⁴⁵ Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, 62.

⁴⁶ Paul Lewis, “In Buying We Trust,” *New York Times*, May 30, 1998., B7.

⁴⁷ Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, 61.

discovered that “through its inefficiency the railroads wasted \$300 million per year.” At a hearing, Luis Brandeis, representing the railroads, stated that railroads could save one million dollars a day and therefore did not need to increase its prices. The railroad case became a triggering event for the nationwide enthusiasm for efficiency.

Progress also produced negatives. Keeness for efficiency contributed to make labor more impersonal by measuring personal efficiency. As Alexander notes, “it was also measured, and packaged in quizzes and tables that proposed standards for how even the most intimate behaviors should be performed.”⁴⁹

3.3 Concentration of Wealth

Before the onset of great corporations, the wealth of the country was distributed relatively evenly. As Hofstadter documented, “up to about 1870 the United States was a nation with a rather broad diffusion of wealth, status and power, in which the man of moderate means, especially in the many small communities, could command much deference and exert much influence.”⁵⁰ But later as big businesses earned great fortunes for their owners, wealth started to be accumulated by a small group of people.

The period after the Civil War was characterized by plutocracy, which stemmed from rapid industrial development. Among the dominating industrial sectors were coal, steel, railroads and oil. These industries produced great wealth, which increased in the 1880s when industrial organizations formed trusts and cartels. The men managing them and profiting from its wealth were called “captains of industry or robber barons.”⁵¹ Journalist Sam Pizzigati noted that even in 1998, adjusting for inflation, some of these robber barrons remained among the richest Americans of all time.⁵² The first on the list, John D. Rockefeller, ran an oil industry business which “began as a single refinery and grew with the country's nascent oil industry.” At its peak, three-quarters of the national oil industry

⁴⁸ Jennifer Alexander, “Efficiencies of Balance: Technical Efficiency, Popular Efficiency, and Arbitrary Standards in the Late Progressive Era USA,” *Social Studies of Science* 38, no. 3 (June 2008): 325.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 337.

⁵⁰ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 35.

⁵¹ James Kurth, “The Foreign Policy of Plutocracies,” *American Interest* 7, no. 2 (November 2011): 5-17.

⁵² Sam Pizzigati, “Must Wealth Always Concentrate? Just taxing high incomes hasn’t brought us lasting equality. We may have to cap them.” *Good Society Journal* 14, no.3 (December 2005): 63-67.

was dominated by Rockefeller's Standard Oil. Such robber barons "laid the foundations of the world's biggest economy," but often at the expense of others.⁵³

The political system at the turn of the century was democratic in arrangement but plutocratic in its essence, as almost all of the Republican Party and a good deal of the Democratic Party were controlled by the industrial sectors. The minority Populist Party along with populist elements within the Democratic Party led by William Jennings Bryan aimed to establish a truly democratic structure. However, plutocratic forces had at their disposal not only the wealth which enabled them to buy politicians and policy but also their collective force, which posed a great advantage. Accordingly, the democrats were repeatedly defeated by the power of plutocrats.⁵⁴

The growing concentration of wealth was concerning the progressive reformers. Disparities in wealth threatened the economy and also posed political problems. As economist Wilford I. King suggested "whoever controls the property of a nation becomes thereby the virtual ruler thereof."⁵⁵ As a result of these concerns many policy makers supported the concept of the progressive taxation to redistribute the wealth by the state.⁵⁶

3.4 Entrepreneurs' Motives

The late-nineteenth century made difference in relation between wealth, power and ideas. Anthropologist John Hamer described the trend as "a new national world view that replaced the regionalism and community centeredness of the Republic and linked for the first time political, moral, and economic authority."⁵⁷ Entrepreneurs were certainly influenced by ideologies that dominated their period. They were driven by strengthening materializing and self-enhancing tendency of the society. Hamer explained that "in the United States there was increasing pressure on entrepreneurs from a mid-nineteenth century entrepreneurial culture to aspire to and conform to the dictates of competitiveness and material self-enhancement."⁵⁸ Some of them might have regarded acquisitiveness as a part

⁵³ Gideon Lichfield, "Robber Baron." *New Republic* 229, no. 20 (November 17, 2003): 13-16.

⁵⁴ Kurth, "The Foreign Policy of Plutocracies." 5-17.

⁵⁵ Wilford Isbell King, *The Wealth and Income of the People of the United States* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1969), 53.

⁵⁶ Carole Shammass, "A new look at long-term trends in wealth inequality in the United States." *American Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (April 1993): 412-431.

⁵⁷ John H. Hamer, "Money and the moral order in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American capitalism." *Anthropological Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (July 1998): 138-149.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 138-49.

of nature as it was interpreted. Hamer further noted that “the evolutionary theory of Darwin was reinterpreted as "Social Darwinism" in the market place, in the sense that competition was a part of nature, therefore the struggle to acquire money could no longer be considered immoral.”⁵⁹ On the other hand according to Hamer, “by the 1890s the concept of the ‘Christian doctrine of stewardship’ assigned the wealthy the role of responsibility for the poor.”⁶⁰ He also noted that “the stewardship concept forced Rockefeller to accept distribution as well as accumulation of wealth.” Partly from this belief many then entrepreneurs spent a great deal of their fortunes in some philanthropic activities.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid., 138-49.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 138-49.

⁶¹ John H. Hamer, “English and American giving: Past and Future Imaginings.” *History & Anthropology* 18, no. 4 (December 2007): 443-457.

4 THE CONSUMPTION CULTURE

An important phenomenon that emerged with rapid economic growth and introduction of mass production was the culture of consumption. According to Chambers it is “a set of ideas and values that emphasized the importance of the ongoing acquisition of goods and services that was promoted as offering both a new frontier of economic expansion and a new mechanism for individual happiness and fulfillment.”⁶²

Managers of big companies realized that to make full use of the greatly increased production, the demand must be enhanced correspondingly. Considering this fact, businesses were encouraging demand by means of advertising.⁶³ Since publishers as well were affected by the technological progress, between 1890 and 1920, mass media and advertising experienced huge development. With high-speed rotary machines public press companies became national institutions connecting rural town areas with big centers. Mass circulation dailies no longer provided only information but also entertainment and advertising. Historian Matthew Hall noted:

When residents of Weldon, North Carolina, opened their January 7, 1897 edition of the Roanoke News, they encountered news, stories, and advertisements influenced by, of from, centers of economic power beyond their agrarian region, demonstrating Weldon’s connections to the nation and its increasing consumer-driven economy... On the front page, an ad for a Baltimore company’s “ideal laxative” promised to relieve a surprisingly wide range of symptoms, while inside, pictures of pigs, horses, factories, fences, fruit, and satisfied customers offered visual spectacles for other businesses and products... The simple process of reading the newspaper connected Weldon residents with economic and cultural trends well beyond their small southern town.⁶⁴

Some of papers such as New York Times were considered as reliable sources of information but others were labeled as “yellow journalism” for its extreme sensationalism. Press also played an important role in forming opinion on public affairs for which was both hailed and condemned.⁶⁵

For the media beside main source of income, advertising became a major tool in influencing the consumer culture. Using psychological appeal agencies moved from providing sober information to creating associations of happiness, attractiveness and status

⁶² Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, 9.

⁶³ Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, 63.

⁶⁴ Matthew R. Hall, “The Reliable Grocer”: Consumerism in a New South Town, 1875-1900.” *North Carolina Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (July 2013): 259.

⁶⁵ Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, 114.

with products ranging from soap to automobiles. The consumption therefore became sign of power and status in the society. Economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen introduced the term “conspicuous consumption” into the language. He noted: “the basis on which good repute in any highly organized industrial community ultimately rests is pecuniary strength; and the means of showing pecuniary strength, and so of gaining or retaining a good name, are leisure and a conspicuous consumption of goods.”⁶⁶ Historians Catherine Canavan and Pamela Walker Laird noted “Increasingly, people came to judge themselves and others according to their abilities to consume, rather to produce. As early as 1900, advertisements for manufactured goods had come to set many standards for what people should buy, contributing to what we now call a “consumer culture.”⁶⁷ Thanks to that, starting from mid-nineteenth century, obesity was highly tolerated, even popular. Sociologist Michael Carolan stated: “Fat bodies meant fat bank accounts, while thinness was associated with hardship and illness (particularly tuberculosis). The (male) elite at this time were depicted with large midribs and full faces.” But this has changed with the flow of immigration in late nineteenth and early twentieth century when fatness began to be connected with foreignness and poverty.⁶⁸

Plutocracy played an important role in the pursuit of status and power as the ordinary people were striving to become equal with their wealthy contemporaries. Hofstadter noted: “so far as a great part of the dissenting public was concerned, the central grievance against the American plutocracy was not that it despoiled them economically but that it overshadowed them, that in the still competitive arena of prestige derived from conspicuous consumption and the style of life, the new plutocracy had set standards of such extravagance and such notoriety that everyone else felt humbled by comparison.” He further noted that “by setting the pace for a frantic competitive consumption, our infinite gradations in wealth (with which gradations the plutocracy is inevitably associated) increase the general social friction and produce an acute social irritation... We are

⁶⁶ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, (Project Gutenberg, 2013), chapter 4, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/833/833-h/833-h.htm> (accessed April 3, 2014).

⁶⁷ Catherine Canavan, and Pamela Walker Laird, “Advertising and the Rise of Big Business.” *OAH Magazine of History* 24, no. 1 (January 2010): 41-45.

⁶⁸ Michael S. Carolan, “The Conspicuous Body: Capitalism, Consumerism, Class and Consumption.” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture & Ecology* 9, no. 1 (March 2005): 87-88.

developing new types of destitute – the automobileless, the yachtless, the Newport-cottageless.”⁶⁹

Historian Wiebe ascribed social problems to the trend of greatness that was starting to dominate the American culture. He noted:

What they saw about them were more tracks and more factories and more people, bigger farms and bigger corporations and bigger buildings; and in a time of confusion they responded with a quantitative ethic that became the hallmark of their crisis in values. It seemed that the age could only be comprehended in bulk. Men defined issues by how much, how many, how far. Greatness was determined by amounts, with statistics invariably the triumphant proof that the United States stood first among nations... Increasingly people were judged in the public arena by dollars raw not refined. A man rose or fell in common parlance according to the slide of his bank balance, and the cult of the millionaires arrived, focusing rapt attention upon how many there were and how much money each had.⁷⁰

Successful businessmen were running their enterprises in pursuit of bigness, which American nation has learned as well. Nonetheless, not only did businessmen use quantitative ethics for decisions to expand and consolidate, but often it dominated their personal life as well. “In the midst of depression, rival branches of the Vanderbilt family matched taste in the construction of summer homes, the one a \$5 million palace of seventy rooms, thirty-three house servants, and thirteen grooms, the other a \$2 million villa compensated with furnishings worth \$9 million.”⁷¹

4.1 New Patterns of Behavior

New American culture presented enormous possibilities for the future that were able to change some old patterns of behavior. The consumption culture, regardless of its superficial and manipulative nature, entailed a new freedom from self-denial and from repression. Although it failed to accomplish the expectations the consumer capitalism attracted many people, especially women, who embodied the main targets of consumer advertising.⁷²

In 1870s, luxurious department stores with consumer goods were beginning to come into view. With their size up to a block long and several stories high and dazzling showcases, they left behind the former dry goods houses. ‘Show window’ developed into

⁶⁹ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 147.

⁷⁰ Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 40-41.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

most important part of the department store. Glass was used extensively in displays by “curved or straight glass door and shelves, counters, containers, and showcases” as well as artificial lighting and color harmonization of equipment in order to attract customers. Applying all of this helped to establish the glory of emporia such as the Bloomingdale’s and R.H. Macy’s department stores in New York, John Wanamaker’s in Philadelphia, Marshall Field’s in Chicago or Gimbel Brothers in Milwaukee. These consumerists heaven appeared to offer beside goods also excitements and delight. Historian Chambers quoted the entry from diary from 1879 of Sophie C. Hall, the wife of an Episcopalian minister in New York, he stated: “I saw so many beautiful things that we found it a trying matter to get out.” Department stores were decorated in exotic settings and fantasy world. Everything was devised in order to arouse the possibility of personal transformation by consumers. The encouragement for shopping was further intensified by 1902 when new liberal credit policies of charge accounts invited consumers to impulse buying.⁷³

The life of middle and upper-income women was notably affected by the introduction of department stores. For many of them, shopping turned into a regular ritual. In 1915, women performed 80 percent of consumer purchasing in the United States. William Leach, who compared diaries of urban women in the 1840s with those of the early twentieth century, observed that the lives of many women became more secular and public with the very help of the culture and institutions of consumption. They also helped with drawing women into individualism and equality with men.⁷⁴

An increase in leisure time activities also contributed to the development of the mass consumer culture. It was a result of the reduction of the workweek, a loosening of the work ethic in response to feelings of “overpressure”, and growing popularity of what the philosopher William James called the “gospel of recreation.” Before the industrialization, people enjoyed their leisure in form of religious holidays and festivals. In a maturing industrial society, the average workweek in industry experienced decline. In 1850 it was 66 hours, but in 1900 it was 56 and in 1920 it was even 41 hours. With an increasing amount

⁷² Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, 115.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

of leisure time, new types of organized entertainment were developed for the urban masses.⁷⁵

4.2 The Development of Southern Consumer Culture

The development of consumer culture at Southern region was different from that of the industrial North. It was mainly because the postbellum South was isolated from national trends in political, economic, and social development. For decades after the turn of the twentieth century, its agricultural economy remained depressed and dependent on northern capital. South also lacked great consumer centers like Chicago or New York, the purchasing power of local people was limited by per capita income and eventually, it was a rural region. Hall noted: “poor tenant farmers, black and white, lived in dilapidated shacks, lacked currency, and typically purchased staples and goods only with the approval of merchants or landowners who controlled their credit.” Their consumer wishes were often not fulfilled. Newly introduced world of consumerism was limited by the reality of rural life in the southern area.⁷⁶

The development of mass consumer culture and economy in the New South was not studied by many historians. Historian Ayers stated that “Southerners eagerly purchased new products, luxuries, and conveniences” though “they did not and could not, given the region’s economy, consume as many luxuries, name-brand goods and fashionable products as northerners.”⁷⁷ Historian Jackson Lears argued that “at a time when Americans longed for physical and mental renewal, even poverty failed to stop consumerism.” Although few comprehensive studies of consumerism at postbellum South are provided, scholars of the South and of consumerism agree that national consumption patterns were entering the region.⁷⁸

The town of Weldon, New Carolina, transformed itself from a plantation into a transportation and industrial centre. Owing to its favorable location, Weldon linked commercial interests, and with its abundance of water power attracted entrepreneurs. From the beginning of its existence, the town depended upon its commercial traffic on the Roanoke River by which local agricultural staples were distributed to Norfolk, Virginia.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 115.

⁷⁶ Hall, “The Reliable Grocer”: Consumerism in a New South Town, 1875-1900.” 259-62.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 260.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 260.

Following Weldon's agricultural success in Norfolk, Petersburg merchants linked Weldon to Petersburg and Wilmington, North Carolina. By 1850, Weldon was connected to many North Carolina markets. In 1895, it was announced that a twelve-thousand-spindle cotton mill would be built in Weldon. In 1898, another mill was added following an opera house, bank and charter school. By 1900, the community was provided with electricity from waterpower and Standard Oil established a storage tank. As a result, Weldon enjoyed great world's interest, and its residents were just as attracted by the national and world's news and culture.⁷⁹

Local merchants played a key role in the emerging economic order in late-nineteenth-century southern consumerism. Edwin Clark, son of a farm laborer, was one of them. After he moved to Weldon in 1880s, he set up a local grocery. Unlike most of the other merchants, Clark managed to adapt to the evolving economy and shifted himself from grocer to retail merchant. As a grocer, his trade included a large variety of consumables and a range of nonperishable goods like seeds, tobacco, jars, nails, rope, clothing, soap etc. To contain the developing consumer economy, Clark broadened his stockpile by mass-produced, standardized products and name-brand goods, sold all over the country and was observing foreign market trends. His customers purchased bicycles from H. A. Lozier & Company and goods like Eagle Milk, Lilly Family Flour, Eagle Mills Corn Meal, Lion Baking Powder, Octagon Soap, Duke's Cigarettes, and White brand sewing machines or Anheuser-Busch beer, which was the most popular name-brand. Increasingly, the name-brand products were getting importance in the rural consumer setting. As historian Hall noted "Clark, a grocer in Weldon, North Carolina, was the local representative of a truly worldwide business. Provocative advertisements, mass-produced goods, national and international companies, and agency contracts increasingly integrated his grocery into the emerging mass consumer economy." Thanks to Clark's business and national advertising on the pages of newspapers, Weldon's residents were allowed to buy the same products as residents of New York or Milwaukee and recognize themselves as a part of the nation's commercial and material culture.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Ibid. 262-66.

4.3 The Controversy of Consumerism

The materialism engendered by the mass consumption economy turned to be very controversial. Like the great corporations, of consumerism was spoken highly and it was criticized as well. Some critics argued that excessive building of giant emporia may cause lack of arable land as a frontier of economic growth. Others regarded the economic growth as a symbol not only of an improved well-being but also enhanced morality. A Massachusetts bishop in 1901 claimed that “material prosperity is helping to make the national character sweeter, more joyous, more unselfish, more Christlike.”⁸¹ On the other hand, spirituality experienced serious decay as many upper and middle-class northern Protestants were seeking “real” firsthand experience. Psychic and psychological health therefore, turned from a morality that stressed salvation towards a hedonistic ethic which favored immediate gratification. The values of permanent work, compulsive saving, and self-denial were considered more suitable for the production-oriented community of small businessmen and the new consumption-oriented society was controlled by bureaucratic corporations.⁸²

This is closely connected with the tension of dual imperatives of consumer capitalism. Carolan noted that “On the one hand, we are told to consume, consume, and, when we are done, consume some more. In short, we are expected, and even encouraged, to release control; to give in to the commodified world around us and indulge in the pleasures of the sign.” And referring to Weber, he stated “...we are also conditioned to an ethic of hard-work, taught the imperatives of saving, and are habituated to self-discipline so we will then have enough money to purchase these products and goods that we continuously see flashed before our eyes.”

The control of desire is a constant issue of consumer capitalism. While consumers are continually under fire of tempting advertisements, they also realize that certain forms of overindulgence are socially condemned. Nevertheless, Carolan also noted that “the satisfaction (and indeed the overindulgence) of certain desires and temptations is encouraged and required for our current socio-political system to exist.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Ibid. 261-74.

⁸¹ Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, 63.

⁸² Ibid., 113.

⁸³ Carolan, “The Conspicuous Body: Capitalism, Consumerism, Class and Consumption.” 92-93.

Critics regarded much of the gospel of mass production and consumption terrifying. A leading journalist and political commentator, Walter Lippmann, pointed out how powerful was advertising when stimulating the demand and how helpless the public: “the eastern sky ablaze with chewing gum, the northern with toothbrushes and underwear, the western with whiskey, and the southern with petticoats, the whole heavens brilliant with monstrously flirtatious women.” More vigorous opponents such as the economist Thorstein Veblen concerned about the potential diversion of industrial workers from attacking the economic system. For the emphasis on consumption of material good would lead them to accept the wage system and seek satisfaction in immediate symbols of status and achievement.⁸⁴

The national thrift campaign turned to be very controversial too, as government’s interests were in dispute with that of business. “With the American entry into World War I, the Federal Government threw its weight behind a national thrift campaign to pay for the conflict, selling \$17 billion Word of Liberty Bonds and collecting \$1 billion in War Savings.” After the War, treasury secretary Andrew Mellon wanted to continue it but he faced opposition from business, which objective was people to spend. Only after the war, the golden age of mass consumption began. In 1991, Martha L. Olney wrote in “Buy Now, Pay Later” that in 1920s, consumer taste of Americans not only increased but also switched from buying china, furniture and books to include also recently mass-produced cars, radios and household appliances. “The average American household spent \$79 a year between 1889 and 1908 on consumer durables; that rose to \$267 a year from 1919 to 1928, helped by the invention of consumer credit and an explosion of advertising spending that was deductible from the excess-profits tax imposed on business in 1917.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change*, 63.

⁸⁵ Paul Lewis, “In buying we trust.” *New York Times*, May 30, 1998, B7.

5 CONSUMERISM

The word ‘consumerism’ denotes several meanings, which have been subjects to differing opinions and periodic reinterpretations. One of the meanings is, according to the Oxford English dictionary, “advocacy of the rights and interests of consumers.”⁸⁶ Consumerism of that kind has spread considerably as a result of affairs from the turn of the twentieth century when the light was shed on the American meat industry.

Before then, food was generated in mass-producing factories, people were purchasing at local markets from sellers who were at the same time the producers of the food. But with the mass production, the distance between the birth of the product and the store shelf extended further. Consumers then saw only well-packaged food, and the deceptions of businesses such as elimination of quality control, cutting of wages or ignorance of worker safety were left behind the curtain. Benjamin Sachs from University of Virginia School of Law suggested: “...the mass production economy precipitated a wave of reforms in consumer protection...”⁸⁷ When Upton Sinclair in “The Jungle” described the conditions ruling inside the Chicago’s slaughterhouses, he intended to highlight the plight of slaughterhouse worker, but the plight of the meat turned out to be of a bigger interest of Americans. “Sinclair described in detail the stacks of meat left to rot in open rooms where rats, alive and dead, found their way into just about everything, and subsequently the just-about-everything found its way into the can and onto the store shelf.” After that, the Federal Meat Inspection Act of 1906 was issued, and following meat, other sorts of industries were regulated as well. “Seemingly by accident, Sinclair had triggered the birth of consumer protection, an extensive body of law and policy that would shape the nation’s industrial growth.”⁸⁸

More than to deal with consumerism with reference to protecting the consumer’s interests this paper aims to follow up the other meanings of the term. The second meaning of the word according to the Oxford English dictionary is “a doctrine advocating a continual increase in the consumption of goods as a basis for a sound economy.”⁸⁹ With

⁸⁶ "consumerism, n.". OED Online. March 2014. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39979?redirectedFrom=consumerism> (accessed March 28, 2014).

⁸⁷ Benjamin R. Sachs, “Consumerism and Information Privacy: How Upton Sinclair can again save us from ourselves.” *Virginia Law Review* 95, no. 1 (March 2009): 205-206.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

⁸⁹ "consumerism, n.". OED Online. March 2014. Oxford University Press.

reference to that, economist Swagler noted that “in his 1960 best seller, *The Waste Makers*, Vance Packard wrote about excited businesspersons who had “caught a glimpse of the potentialities inherent in endlessly expanding the wants of people under consumerism...”⁹⁰

The third and probably the most widespread interpretation of the term ‘consumerism’ is an “(excessive) emphasis on or preoccupation with the acquisition of consumer goods.”⁹¹ Prominent psychologist Erich Fromm expressed in one of his works his indignation and disappointment about a modern man, who is preoccupied with what he possess and less he longs for an actual being. Fromm is criticizing the mentality of consumerism, by which people assess themselves first of all on the basis of what consumer goods they are able to gather. The growing consumerism of many affluent Americans at the turn-of-the-twentieth century resembles to what Fromm criticized a few decades later.

With respect to Fromm, sociologist Jan Keller noted that consumption in industrial societies is probably the most important form of possession. Its mentality forces people to consume more and more, because what was once consumed is ceasing to satisfy them. An ephemeral enjoyment of consuming goods and quick exchange of them for new goods creates hopeless cycle of consumption shopping.⁹²

5.1 Consumerism as a Religion

Anthropologist Peter Stromberg compared the phenomenon of consumerism to a religion. He argued that consumerism is in fact more than a popular ideology since by some definitions of religion, it is accurate to term it like that. One of the definitions says that “it is the process of placing one’s experience in a larger framework, a framework that imparts to that experience some sort of meaning.” In other words, religion is whatever gives meaning to person’s everyday existence. For example, Mr. Blue may consider himself a Methodist and regularly attend church, but if his day-to-day life is arranged by businessmen’s objectives and concerns, his real religion is the ideology of business capitalism.⁹³

⁹⁰ Roger Swagler, “Evolution and Applications of the Term Consumerism: Theme and Variations.” *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 28, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 354-55.

⁹¹ "consumerism, n." OED Online. March 2014. Oxford University Press.

⁹² Jan Keller, *Až na dno blahobytu*. 3. Ed. (Praha: Earth Save, 2005), 38.

⁹³ Peter Stromberg, “Elvis Alive?: The ideology of American Consumerism.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 24, no. 3 (Winter 1990): 12.

The fundamental belief of consumerism, according to Stromberg, is that the day-to-day existence of believer is not final, but there is another world after this one, a perfect world, where every desire is fulfilled. The believer is eventually focused on that world, since the possibility of entering the world from this one is certain. Every day, there are many opportunities to encounter an evidence of the second world: in advertisements, in movies, in television programs and in magazines. The second world is similar to this one, yet happier, more comprehensible, and more exciting.⁹⁴

One attempts to enter the second world through consumption. Eventually, the message constantly being driven into the consciousness is hardly possible to avoid. The message promising that by consuming certain product one will be happy and beautiful like those people portrayed in the advertisement. The person in the advertisement represents the customer, as he could be. It was observed, that modern advertising is based on principle which originated in the period around 1920, when a new kind of ad copy was appearing, its purpose was to sell the product by its ability of changing consumer's life rather than on the basis of product's qualities. Therefore, the new advertising proposed that the customer has the opportunity or need to be changed. The message must be endlessly repeated because it is of course not true. However, the faith in the promise is strong, partly due to the repeated assurance, partly from the ardent wish to be true and partly also because of the evidence of actual people, who have, without a doubt, entered the second world.⁹⁵

Such consumerism owes much to the existence of celebrities who act as intermediaries. Stromberg illustrated that on the example of Elvis Presley who had lots of committed fans who "worshipped" him. Each passing year after his death seems to deny that he actually died. From the beginning it was t-shirt proclaiming "Elvis lives in my heart" or "Elvis lives," few years later testimonies of sightings, visions and phone conversations recorded from beyond the grave claimed Elvis' resurrection. Magazines preached his continuing legacy and interviews with devoted fans were full of assertion about his perfection and metaphors that Elvis is "the king." And naturally, remains of the king have an unspeakable value. Unsurprisingly, exhibits of the relics are displayed in places like shopping centers. Elvis was thus after his death assigned with many characteristics of Jesus Christ. This phenomenon was explained by instance of what is true

⁹⁴ Ibid., 11.

to some extent to any celebrity that “celebrities are deities because they are the most significant mediators in American consumerism.” They are both human and God like Christian God Jesus Christ, since they participate in both worlds. And by the existence of celebrities living in the world of fabulous beauty, wealth and fame, it is more convincing that the heaven is real and reachable. That is why people are so interested in personal details about celebrities. These details show that celebrities participate in both worlds: the miserable one and the perfect one. By failures they prove they are like ordinary people and at the same time they inhabit the happy, beautiful and satisfied world depicted in advertisements towards which the mortals head.⁹⁶

According to Stromberg, the need to transform one’s life by changing oneself was for some vaguely for some fervently built in Americans’ mind. The change can be accomplished through consumption, and those who have already underwent it, give solace and hope for all who believe.⁹⁷

5.2 Shopping Problems of Nowadays

However, consumerism can grow to such extent that it can get out of control. Nowadays, many people struggle with various problem trends related to shopping. One of them is “compulsive buying” which was first described in the early twentieth century. Professor of psychiatry Lejoyeux and psychologist Weinstein stated that up to 5% of adult Americans appear to be afflicted with compulsive buying, from which large majority of compulsive buyers are women.⁹⁸

Extreme couponing is another, more recent shopping trend that apparently supports consumerism. After the collapse of financial markets in 2008, Americans became very interested in coupons and in 2009 they saved \$3.5 billion using 3.3 million coupons. In order to save money, many American housewives spend hours by planning their shopping trips and no less by completing them. Shannon Shaffer, for example, has thanks to couponing accomplished to reduce her family weekly shopping expenses from \$250 to \$50.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 11-13.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 16-17.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁹⁸ Michel Lejoyeux and Aviv Weinstein, “Compulsive Buying.” *American Journal of Drug & Alcohol Abuse* 36, no. 5 (August 2010): 248.

Shafer who established a couponing site called 'For the Mommas' says that any family can save 25% to 50% on coupons.⁹⁹

But what initially originated in money saving became a craze. Partly thanks to TLC's television show *Extreme Couponing*, everyday hunt for a good deal is making homemakers steal newspapers or dive into dumpsters for discarded coupons. By applying coupon-shopping, filling up several carts of groceries of hundreds of dollars' items costs the couponers just a few dollars.¹⁰⁰ Many people thus started purchasing outrageous quantities of consumer goods only because it is money saving and filled their houses with things they cannot consume or use. Such as the woman who has ceiling-high piles of diapers-for babies despite she does not have any and is not pregnant, or the man with a barrel full of deodorant sticks in his basement. Sheila Dougherty noted that "extreme couponers proudly show off their "stockpiles" – meticulously organized shelves full of packaged food, drinks, laundry detergent and paper goods, all scooped up for pennies on the dollar, or nothing at all."¹⁰¹

It is incredible how behavior motivated by thriftiness becomes its opposite. Certainly, appetite comes with eating. Dougherty deduced that "with extreme couponers, the root more often than not appears to be bald greed or a desire to get one over on The Man."¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Kayla Webley, "Extreme Couponing. (Cover story)." *Time* 178, no. 14 (October 10, 2011): 36-37.

¹⁰⁰ Jervis Rick, and TODAY USA. "Extreme couponing' craze, cable show tied to newspaper thefts." *USA Today*, n.d.

The term 'couponer' stands for a person engaged in acquisition and using of coupons.

¹⁰¹ Sheila Dougherty, "Flat-out greed outweighs savvy frugality in TLC's 'Extreme Couponing'." *Advertising Age* 82, no. 27 (July 11, 2011): 13.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 13.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, consumerism as a concept of excessive consumption is a common feature of most developed societies. It is referenced with a decline of morality and more often to a non-economical wastage of resources, threatening future generations.

The dawning of the contemporary consumerist lifestyle can be observed in the changing face of American culture, resulting from the large and rapid progress at the turn of the twentieth century. The consumption power of Americans grew with the increasing wealth of the nation. Apart from the economic depression of the 1890s, the national economy at the turn of the twentieth century was expanding. Giant corporations generated great profits and made their owners millionaires. International markets and advertising connected distant parts of the country with manufacturing centers and created mass demand. For people of that age, excessive consumption was an expression of social status and power. The affluent started competing among each other in purchasing expensive goods and the less moneyed were attempting to keep up with them. With the development of large department stores, the purchasing habits of the population changed. Shopping was no longer a necessity for households but started to be considered an entertainment and free time activity, especially for women, who became the major purchasers. With growing emphasis on material values, spirituality declined as well.

The present day, however, has to face to an increasing number of negative effects of consumerism. For many people, shopping developed into an obsession and consuming became a kind of religion. Thorstein Veblen, the father of the term 'conspicuous consumption', thus labeled the trend, which became one of the legacies of the Progressive Era.

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