

BUYING HAPPINESS
The Emergence of Consumer
Consciousness in English Canada

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments / ix

Introduction / 3

- 1 The Meaning Is in the Spending / 14
- 2 The Promise of a More Abundant Life / 44
- 3 Culturing Canadian Patriotism / 62
- 4 Moralizing the Economy / 89
- 5 Charting the Contours of Modern Society / 110
- 6 Regulating the Consumer / 131
- 7 Buying Happiness / 157
- 8 Academic Encounters / 184

Conclusion / 211

Notes / 215

Index / 280

INTRODUCTION

When people think about consumer society, they usually think about buying things or throwing them away. I believe that living in a consumer society involves a particular way of thinking about ourselves, our relationships with others, and our relationships with things. This book is about the history of Canadian consumer society as an idea. When did we begin thinking about ourselves in this way? How did the idea spread? Why does it matter?

The idea of Canada as a consumer society was largely absent before 1890 when changes in spending and a rising surplus of goods began to put the “consumer” on the public agenda. By the early 1960s, the idea that Canada was becoming a “consumer society” had gained widespread acceptance.¹ *Buying Happiness* examines the emergence and development of consumer society as a way of thinking about Canadian society during this period, utilizing a series of case studies. Each chapter examines how different influential Canadians engaged with the pressing social questions of their day in ways that brought consumer society into focus and into being. The emphasis is on concepts and categories rather than on the buying and selling of goods – an approach that is still relatively unusual in histories of consumption. As this book shows, the rise of consumer society was not simply the result of economic changes in productivity and affluence; it involved and required changes in the way people think.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, social commentators became concerned about the dissolution of social bonds. Society was changing

and fragmenting: traditional moral standards of hard work, self-reliance, and deference were being challenged or abandoned as young people moved from the country to the city, as immigrants speaking new languages arrived with new values and religions, as industrialization increased and urban slums appeared. Overall standards of living were rising, new patterns of success were developing, and older social hierarchies were losing their force. For the next seven decades, social critics, statisticians, politicians, policy-makers, academics, writers, and artists responded to the dramatic changes under way in Canadian society by doing what intellectuals do: they moralized, analyzed, told stories, made public policies, and theorized about changing patterns of consumption. As they thought about and developed new ways of representing Canadians during a time when more of everyday life was being reorganized around commercially sold, mass-distributed goods, they generated new concepts that in turn helped to shape social life. Changes within religious, cultural, civic, governmental, economic, and academic thought and practice reinforced each other. New understandings of Canadian society emerged. The cumulative result of these and other factors was that Canadian society came to be described as a “consumer society.”

The public thinkers whose writings are at the core of this study are historically situated amid different social, political, and economic conditions that present different challenges and possibilities.² The sequence of chapters moves forward in time, sometimes more slowly, sometimes more rapidly, drawing on different sources because different kinds of intellectual work matter more at different times. As society changes so too do the roles and occupations filled by intellectuals and their social and cultural influence. For example, religious authorities became less important while government policy-makers became more so; the authority of sociologists as scholar-experts rose as the discipline developed into a science within Canada’s expanding university system; and the influence of the mass media grew progressively stronger.

Consumption was variously a topic for consideration and opinion making by social commentators, a frame of reference for government policies, a fact to be studied by social scientists, and a virtue to be attached to “universal” ideals such as citizenship. Governmental and academic inquiries reinforced new ways of understanding society and legitimized changes in behaviour that traditionalists considered controversial. Episodes of crisis provided occasions to extend the reach of the state. New knowledge and understandings were produced, including by governments generating cost

of living indexes and sociologists examining the role of consumer goods in suburban life. Persuading Canadians of the benefits of change, experts in modern living prescribed appropriate ways to participate in consumer culture, teaching families how to balance debt loads and desires through carefully planned spending. By the 1960s, mass media, academics, cultural elites, and policymakers commonly addressed Canadians as consumers. Consumer society had emerged as an accepted frame of reference. What had once been described as novel came to be seen as normative and then as ordinary and pervasive. Regardless of whether the intention was to restrict, redirect, or encourage changes in spending, intellectual practices put the consumer on the public agenda. Seeing Canadians as consumers was – and is – an evolving process.

There was no pattern of coercion, but over time people were increasingly encouraged to think of themselves as consumers making choices within the framework of a consumption-oriented society. The understanding of what was good for society, what was good for individuals and their moral development, and what was good for the economy became aligned with the increased consumption of goods and services. For most people, the vision of the good life came to involve the acquisition of a continuing stream of goods and services. Certainly there was ongoing debate, including outright dissent, about what the right kind of consumption should be; nonetheless, the terms of reference became those of consumer society.

Collectively, the chapters of this book suggest the possibility of an “intellectual gaze.” Intellectuals, as they look at society, are not simply observing but are also imposing order on new phenomena, converting data into knowledge and organizing concepts in ways that encourage certain ways of being and impede the path to alternatives. Intellectual practice, *Buying Happiness* contends, must be understood as an active as well as a contemplative exercise. By engaging with society – that is, by describing and debating, by measuring and categorizing, and by making new social models and new public policies – the intellectual and cultural communities came to represent Canadians as consumers and gave specific form to Canadian consumer society.

This study builds on other consumer histories as well as recent studies in cultural theory.³ Although consumer history is a relatively new field, decades of scholarship, initially in pursuit of the “birth” of consumer society, have addressed more time periods, more national stories, and more and different consumers.⁴ Much has been discovered about *who* consumed

*what, when, and where.*⁵ However, the figure of the consumer as an active historical agent was slower to appear. In the 1960s and 1970s, theorists of modern society associated advances in consumption with industrial progress, in some cases painting an optimistic vision of the future with rising standards of living and increasing freedom, in others associating changes in consumption with the rise of mass society, political apathy, and psychological manipulation. Historians similarly tended to regard consumers as the largely passive creations of corporate capitalism, necessary to ensure the profitability of mass production, and most often portrayed them as the victims, rather than the agents, of change.⁶ In the 1980s and 1990s, a new generation of scholars more comfortable with mass culture challenged this emphasis on the oppressive nature of capitalism, acknowledging that consumption and abundant goods were at least potentially liberating. They wrote new histories showing that consumers did not simply internalize the values promulgated by advertising but used goods in creative ways, only some of which were intended and anticipated by producers. Celebrating acts of creativity and resistance in everyday life, some scholars shifted scale, exploring more intimate settings and smaller communities. A decade later, other scholars began to connect private consumption more directly with civil society, politics, and the economy.⁷ New scholarship raised new questions. British historian John Brewer raised one that intrigued me: How do we get from acts of consumption to consumer society?⁸ In the context of Canadian consumer history, this question became specific: How is it that the concept of “consumer” and the idea that Canada is a “consumer society” – notions that were barely visible on the margins of public discussion prior to the 1890s – came to be widely recognized as accurate representations of modern Canada by the early 1960s? I hoped that an answer (or at least insight) could be found by studying the making of these new understandings rather than the mechanisms of advertising and retail exchange.⁹

Approaches from other fields pointed the way: concepts such as *mentalité*, *habitus* (developed by Pierre Bourdieu), *governmentality* (Michel Foucault), and *social imaginary* (Charles Taylor) provided different but compatible approaches to exploring frameworks of social meaning. Although they focused on mechanisms of social cohesion and social stability, these theorists offered practical methodologies that could be used to investigate “consumer society” as a conceptual framework that developed over time.¹⁰

New representations of modern Canada emerged and were entrenched with new ways of thinking about society and new public policies. The

choices available to people change – due in part to real material changes (for example, changes in technology) and in part to changes in their sense of themselves and in what philosophers call “a vision of the good life.” Material changes and new ideas are mutually influential: changes in the material world initiate new patterns of thought, and new ways of thinking influence behaviour. In Canada, as this period progressed, the new vision of the good life came to involve the ability to buy things. By the mid-1960s, such consumerism became taken for granted. This study looks at some of the processes through which it was built up and diffused.

There was no single factor or turning point in the emergence of consumer society as a dominant category of social analysis. Observing the development and diffusion of consumer society as a set of values and understandings, we can observe gradual changes in people’s awareness of themselves and others as consumers. Rather than having a single moment of birth, consumer society emerges as a dynamic category that is not “once and for all,” but cumulative and shifting. Theorists of intellectual history discuss the role of intellectuals as agents of change, often distinguishing between conservative intellectuals serving the interests of the established order and radical intellectuals promoting the transformation of society.¹¹ Canada’s intellectual community, at least during the period of this study, is less easily categorized. In many different roles, with varied vocations and responsibilities, intellectuals helped shape consumer society. Even those thinkers who fundamentally and loudly opposed mass consumerism played a part in making the consumer a common point of reference.

Studying a topic framed as the development of consumer consciousness implies the existence of a prior pre-consumer world. However, as many historians have observed, images of rural self-sufficiency with consumption dependent on the production of one’s own family were always more myth than reality.¹² Douglas McCalla debunks accounts of Canadian settlers living Robinson Crusoe-like lives of self-sufficiency at near subsistence levels.¹³ His study of the account books of general stores located in Upper Canada during the period of colonial settlement shows that settlers shopped, that goods had set prices, that cash was involved in store transactions, and that women were visible in the account books. Luxury goods did not abound, but there were small luxuries, such as ribbons and trim, as well as room for the exercise of preference and choice among multiple flavours of tea, sizes and colours of buttons, and the like. Over the course of his study, from 1808 to 1861, he documents a gradual evolution and expansion in the

number and sorts of goods settlers bought but sees no dramatic revolution. When department stores arrived in the 1890s, he suggests, there was a gain in scale, but the combination of homemade and store-bought goods began well before and lasted long after this arrival. Upper Canada may have been on the edge of an expanding world economy, but its inhabitants were still a part of it. Colonial Canada should not be regarded as a “before” to a modern later. Canadians – regardless of whether they dwelt in rural, village, or urban settings – had long been participants in extended marketplaces linked to regional and global economies.

There was no consumer revolution, but, in the years close to turn of the century, increases in the availability of consumer goods and visible changes in purchasing practices did begin to come to the attention of essayists and moralists. Canada’s conservative intellectuals, progressive religious leaders, and economic theorists are usually studied separately as having unique responses to the challenges of modernity. Chapter 1 pursues a more complex vision, showing how each group engaged with the implications of new spending practices: Who was doing the buying, where did they shop, what did they buy? How much was enough? How much was too much? In a world where more goods were being produced, what (or who) determined who got what? While social conservatives regarded rising affluence and the easy availability of goods as a social problem, leaders in the social gospel movement called on Canadians to seize opportunities created by increasing productivity to build the Kingdom of God on Earth, insisting that adequate consumption was the foundation of a full spiritual life. The small community of political economists acknowledged the power of changing consumption patterns but did not believe that increases in domestic consumption could act as a significant vehicle for economic growth in Canada. Yet, in their writings, the consumer is slowly coming into focus, both as individuals and in aggregate. While the notion of consumer society had not yet been formulated, the practices of consumers were moving from the margins to the centre of concerns about modernity.

In the decade after the turn of the century, the economy boomed and rising prices became a subject of controversy in Canada and, indeed, throughout much of the industrialized world. Rising prices exacerbated wage disputes and intensified the tension between traditional producer values of hard work, self-restraint, and thrift and the acceptance of new comforts and patterns of purchasing. Although not all Canadians agreed

on the definition of basic necessities, cost of living concerns put household provisioning, rather than luxury consumption, at the centre of national discussion. The federal government responded to social unrest with two inquiries into the cost of living, the first in 1909–10 and a second in 1913–14. These studies are the subject of the second chapter. Establishing a Canadian standard of living that was independent of the purchasing decisions of any one family built awareness of a common consumer interest. Presenting the purchase of domestic goods as normal, ordinary, and widely shared undercut reactionary interpretations of consumption as the product of self-indulgent or irrational behaviour. By measuring and categorizing the changing purchasing practices of Canadians, the state expanded its mandate and helped to shape the way Canadians came to see themselves as consumers.

During the interwar period, producers of high culture saw their work as nation-making and disparaged popular commercially driven, mass-reproduced culture as standardized, feminized, and Americanized. Chapter 3 proposes that elite culture was also commoditized at this time, produced, marketed, and sold by a new generation of cultural entrepreneurs to select audiences. The aesthetics of authenticity, purity, and wilderness gained meaning and value in distinction to the mass produced and the commercially sold.

In the late 1920s, economic expansion came to an abrupt halt. The depression that followed was widely perceived as a crisis not of scarcity but of surplus. Production seemingly had begun, at least in the short term, to outstrip consumption. What was not clear was why. Had production accelerated beyond the world's capacity to absorb goods and services, or were gluts due to temporary imbalances in supply and demand that would, over time, correct themselves? Were the causes largely monetary – involving problems of money supply, credit, and foreign exchange – rather than fundamental limits in demand? There was ample discussion but no consensus. However, as politicians, economists, and self-proclaimed experts turned their attention to the consumption problems of ordinary Canadians, it was evident that poverty was no longer associated with the scarcity of goods but rather with the scarcity of sufficient means to buy goods.

Canadians were still struggling to escape the grip of the Depression in 1934, when the federal minister of trade and commerce launched an aggressive and widely publicized attack on big business, charging that the struggles of ordinary hard-working Canadians were the result of unfair

business practices. As public interest swelled, the government quickly established a commission of inquiry, which subsequently became the Royal Commission on Price Spreads and Mass Buying. This drawn-out period of investigation, which included the initial inquiry, the subsequent Royal Commission, the commission's official report in April 1935, and the responses that followed publication, is the subject of Chapter 4.

For over a year, Canadians were scandalized and captivated by revelations of corporate practices that kept profits high and wages low. The public ritual of calling the economically powerful to account was an important factor in the 1935 federal election campaign. Traditionally, historians have associated the expansion of consumerism with times of prosperity and the period of the Great Depression with the expansion of government. However, it was the crisis of the Depression that forged a connection between consumers and politicians, accelerating the incorporation of mass consumption into the mainstream of political and economic policy.¹⁴ The right to a minimum standard of living was central to the rhetoric of the election campaign, with all parties pledging action on behalf of the Canadian consumer.

For the intellectual community, the late 1930s was a time of introspection and reappraisal. Although the worst of the Depression had passed, the spectre of war was rising. Chapter 5 examines the work of social scientists and literary writers who surveyed Canadian society and documented a new social structure oriented towards consumption, with anxious families and budgets stretched between limited resources and increasing choices. They located themselves within this framework, discussing the pressures to commodify intellectual work and their own struggles to resist the allures of the marketplace. Was commitment to high ideals compatible with commerce? Was the disinterested pursuit of knowledge only an artefact of an earlier time? These doubts particularly troubled the nation's economists. The severity of the Depression had called the value of economics as a discipline into question. In the post-Depression period, economists struggled to define their professional worth: were they social scientists focused on the pursuit of truth or experts available for hire, equally able, as one put it, to support "the Stalin model," "the Hitler model," "the Mussolini model," or "the Aberhart model?"¹⁵ There was a common thread in these narratives: regardless of whether the concern was the family budget or government spending, there were too many wants and not enough dollars.

The Great Depression had forged a connection between politicians and consumers as voters; however, it was only during the Second World War that the Canadian state fully acknowledged the economic power of consumers. Chapter 6 examines how the state reached out to Canadians as citizen-consumers during the war and immediate postwar period, seeking in some cases to restrict and in other cases to mobilize their purchasing power. Canada's universal price freeze, implemented in August 1941, was the most severe program to be implemented by any of the allied nations during the war. The system was simultaneously technocratic and participatory. Experts regarded a universal freeze as simple, fair, speedy, and administratively effective; however, they also understood that extensive controls would require a huge bureaucracy and dictatorial tactics unless significant efforts were made to moderate demand and encourage voluntary compliance. The state used tools of market research, including surveys and polling, to gauge public support. A steady stream of propaganda promoted restraint and appealed for compliance on the home front. Hailing housewives as the nation's "House Soldiers," government advertisements, signs, and pamphlets encouraged shoppers to track spending, eliminate impulse buying, monitor prices, and report infractions. Canadian families, particularly Canadian housewives, were enlisted as active partners by the government, called on to exercise their power as consumers to help win the war.

After six years of conflict, the tension between the ideal citizen-consumer, whose constrained patterns of consumption reflected the obligations of patriotic duty, and the private consumer, with pent-up demands and desires cultivated by business, was considerable. Shortages of goods, dating back well before the Depression, had created a backlog in consumer demand. Meanwhile, gains in incomes and the nation's impressive commitment to war savings had built up a significant reservoir of purchasing power. In 1945, the consequences for the postwar period were unknown: Would deferred spending provide a positive stimulus to the economy, creating a temporary boom to be followed by economic collapse, or spur dangerous levels of inflation? Determined to avoid economic stagnation and convinced that sustainable economic growth depended primarily on capital investment and exports, postwar planners recommended policies that would continue to constrain consumers and limit demands for wage increases. Rejecting an expansive, American-style vision of a consumer-oriented society as unsuited to the Canadian economy, the federal government adopted

moderate goals, promising adequate access to basic goods with living standards supported by secure jobs and modest social welfare programs. Going forward, growth would depend on the return of international trade.

By the late 1940s, fears of a postwar recession had begun to dissipate. Domestic spending was increasing amid uneven but rising affluence. Chapter 7 explores changing representations of Canadian families in the period following the war, focusing on the new norms of responsible spending promulgated by daily papers and mass-market magazines. The transition from a regime of austerity to cautious consumerism is encapsulated in a series of articles that appeared in the women's magazine *Chatelaine*, each of which focused on the spending practices of a family identified as typically Canadian, beginning with the Menzies in 1949 (self-reliant, self-disciplined, thrifty, and creative), continuing to the Woodses in 1954 (bewildered consumers, in debt and in need of advice, eventually empowered by the professional expertise provided by the magazine), and concluding with the Roses in 1962 (subjects of "101 Ways to Save Money and Look Better, Dress Better, Eat Better and Live Better"). Canadians did not stop valuing hard work, thrift, and self-discipline, but they did begin to place new importance on personal comfort and convenience. In the mass media, experts gave Canadians permission to spend responsibly, within the limits of the family budget, after carefully researching their choices.

Even though family-centred consumer spending began to be met with cautious approval, increases in spending on movies, mass magazines, comic books, pulp novels, and professional sports continued to trouble the nation's intellectual and cultural elites. In 1949, the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences was empowered to investigate Canadian cultural affairs and institutions of education. The commission acknowledged that the economics of mass production operated to the disadvantage of higher forms of culture: the standards that gave high culture its social significance inherently limited its appeal. Because the commissioners believed that consumption choices were shaped as much by the supply of goods as by demand, they called on the state to intervene in cultural production and distribution, supporting the production of Canadian high culture primarily through investments in the non-profit sector and at the same time imposing a variety of restrictions on commercial mass culture, particularly on American imports.

The final chapter of *Buying Happiness* picks up a different stream of postwar thought, examining the ways in which a rising generation of

academics helped to construct and popularize the image of Canada as an affluent consumer society. While hardly supportive of mass consumption, social scientists claimed a role in helping Canadians negotiate the pressures and tensions of mass commercial society. The emphasis was often on the way Canadians made choices – and therefore on questions of education and taste – rather than on questions of access. Consumer behaviour and consumer society became a legitimate topic of academic study. Narratives in the mass media and in academic studies represented the Canadian household as an economic unit dedicated to increasing consumption. The division of labour into gender-specific roles, with a specialized wage-earner and a specialized wage-spender, was understood as fundamentally supportive of increased productivity and increased expertise in spending.

The coming into being of consumer society required more than simply creating impulses to buy; it also involved Canadians' new ways of thinking about themselves and their social relationships. Concepts of identity, citizenship, class, gender, sociability, aesthetics, well-being, and morality were reworked within a changing and expanding economy. New frameworks of understanding were developed and shared. Certain experiences were encouraged or discouraged and given institutional support or marginalized. Through discussion, measurement, policymaking, storytelling, and academic study, consumer identities became central to social life, and consumer values were woven deeply into the Canadian social imagination.

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