

Capitalism with a Capital "I"

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Writer's Note

What do I truly need? I was never asked that question as a kid. I grew up in a wealthy town called Winnetka and often found myself playing with new toys, looking at new cars, trying on new clothes and watching new TVs. I never thought about the large amount of consumption my family did because I never thought about how we were able to shop like that. I did recognize I was from a privileged town; however, I did not understand or know about the large economic inequality that was in a city about ten minutes away from my house. My parents hid that life from me so that I was able to live a happy and pampered life.

I began to recognize that when people bought new stuff, they would often become happy. I grew up seeing my mom smile when she got a new ring and my dad laugh when my new pet dog would lick his face. Growing up, all the happiness I saw in my family was from some type of purchased object. I grew up confused and disappointed about that.

When I was diagnosed with depression, my parents' immediate response was to buy my therapists, regular hospital visits and medicine. At that point in my life, I felt hopeless and saw very little happiness in day-to-day things. Therefore, I began to do what I saw others doing when I was younger. I began to shop for happiness, beauty, acceptance, and confidence. This lifestyle worked. My friends started to hang out with me more and I felt pretty with the extreme amounts of inappropriate clothes and make-up I was wearing. I started to associate happiness with money and things. It took me a few years to realize that happiness is found from within and not from stuff. However, there are a few things that can medically increase the happiness in a person's brain that need to be bought. Nevertheless, those are exceptions.

After my first job, I began to realize the amount of power money has. Furthermore, I began to realize the amount of power a lack of money has. Ever since I earned my own money, I have fewer chores around the house and a more relaxed curfew. Since I pay for my own gas, I am able to go anywhere I want (as long as I tell my mother) during almost any time. Additionally, after paying for my own clothes, my parents have very little say in the things I wear or what make-up I use. I have gotten more respect from my peers, teachers, and parents because of the fact that I work. I was so unaware of the lack of power I had when I did not work. I had to live under all of my parent's rules and nothing could be discussed or debated. Because of this, I have begun to realize that true importance money has on everyday life.

My dad is an investment banker; so, money was never short. He taught me how to spend little money on a lot of stuff, but would always have an extra \$100 in his pocket. I honestly believe this is where my excessive spending started. I grew up thinking that spending was just an everyday thing that people did when they needed something to smile about. I did not understand the economy; therefore, I did not understand the effects it had on everyday life. Because of this, I was not aware of what my spending fully meant. The economy is still mysterious to me, regardless of everything I have been through. That is why I want to learn more about it.

~Hannah Lumberg

Consumerism in America is all but unknown to many; however, it is what makes the world turn. By understanding what consumerism truly is, the individual is able to understand the country of America a little better. Although consumerism in America has a long history, one must fully explore its history to get a better understanding of what consumerism is. Whether that exploration is about the founding fathers of American consumerism or old advertising methods. Furthermore, by understanding the history of consumerism in America, the individual is able to understand how consumerism is affecting the daily life of the individual. Consumerism has found its way into most people's lives. Because of this, Americans are considering material possessions to be a part of the "self." This introduces the question of: How does the individual identify the "self" through material possessions? American society is deeply rooted in consumerism; however, to many Americans, consumerism is all but unknown. By understanding consumerism and where it comes from, the individual is learning more about his or herself.

So what is "consumerism"? Consumerism can mean many different things. The definition of consumerism all depends on the type of "field." In economics, consumerism is the rules and policies that are placed on consumption. However, the word consumerism has recently been used to describe high levels of consumption and collection of material possessions. Historically, people believed the notion that the higher the level of consumption of goods the higher success and freedom a person had. The history of consumerism is long and complicated. Because of this, many individuals do not fully understand what consumerism is. Therefore, one must understand the history of consumerism in America to fully understand what consumerism is.

The journey of American consumerism started with a man from Austria named Sigmund Freud. Born in the Austrian Empire in 1856, Sigmund Freud began his journey as the founding father of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud was an influential physiologist, doctor, psychologist and thinker in the early 20th century. Freud believed that all people possess uncontrollable forces like: love, hate, guilt and fear. Freud also thought all of these forces were interconnected, causing them to establish and maintain erotic and mental attachments. Through psychoanalysis and analyzing dreams, Freud found that all people still possess dangerous and instinctual sexual and aggressive drives. Ultimately, Freud discovered how fragile and uncontrollable humans are. Although Freud was not American or an economist, his ideas inspired many individuals. One of these individuals was his nephew, Edward Bernays, who used Freud's ideas to sculpt American consumerism.

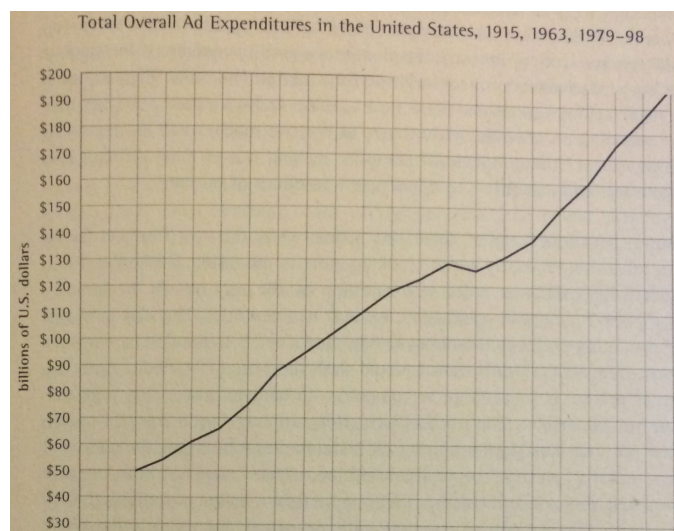
Freud's ideology forever changed American consumerism through the works of his nephew, Edward Bernays. In 1917, Edward Bernays, a young American, was employed by President Wilson to broadcast the President's reasoning and goals of entering World War I. After numerous successful propaganda campaigns, Bernays was then invited to accompany President Wilson to the Paris Peace Conference. Due to Bernays' campaigns, the admiration of Woodrow Wilson sky-rocketed. While being interviewed for the British TV series, *Century of the Self*, Bernays states: "When I came back to the United States, I decided that if [one] could use propaganda in a time of war, [one] could certainly use it in time of peace... Propaganda had a bad name, so I tried to find a different name and I got 'public relations'" (*Century of the Self*). Bernays was one of the very first individuals to think of the idea of public relations (*Century of the Self*). Furthermore, he soon became famous for his techniques of persuasion often found in

public relations and advertising. One of these techniques was using the idea of manipulating people's irrational emotions to make money. This idea was based off Freud's theory.

Bernays soon began to experiment with advertising and public relations. One of his most successful experiments was convincing women to smoke in public. The American Tobacco Company asked Bernays to fight through the stigma men had created that convinced society that it is not acceptable for a women to smoke in public. Bernays worked with Abraham Brill, a leading American psychoanalayst, to understand the reasoning behind this claim. They soon concluded that the cigarette became a symbol of manhood (Century of the Self). With this in mind, Bernays paid young and glamorous women to dramatically link arms and smoke in the New York Easter Day Parade, knowing there would be publicity. Bernays called the cigarettes "torches of freedom" (Century of the Self). Therefore, by connecting a material object with the idea of liberty and freedom, the human subconscious began to associate smoking in public with an act of justice. Moreover, anyone who disagreed with this act would be against equality and liberty.

Through his successful experiment with the American Tobacco Company, Bernays proved that it is possible to sell products if they are linked to the buyer's emotions and feelings. This introduced the idea of buying happiness and contentment through an emotional connection with products. Because of this, Bernays began to use numerous psychological ideas as key components to advertising. Previously, advertisements were meant to appeal to a person's practicality; however, Bernays began to advertise to a person's uncontrollable "wants" (Century of the Self).

Much like in Bernays' time, propaganda, public relations and advertising are still major components in American consumerism. Along with advertising, brand names, logos and corporations play a large role in consumerism. *No Logo* by Naomi Klein is a book about how American consumerism, brand names, and advertising all mix to create a powerful force. In fact, American consumerism is not about the product but the name. As stated by Klein: "Successful corporations must primarily produce brands, as opposed to products" (Klein 3). Consumerism is not about the product anymore but the name on that product. Instead, companies have begun create a "picture" of their product and sells the idea of that "picture." Klein states: "A new kind of corporation began to rival the traditional all-American manufacturers for market share; these were the Nikes and Microsofts, and later, the Tommy Hilfigers and Intels. These pioneers made the bold claim that producing goods was only an incidental part of their operations" (Klein 4). Therefore, there is no longer a need to produce a broad range of products. Instead, simplicity is key. This is because the label becomes the product, not the object itself. Individuals have begun and are continuing to become attached to the "face" on the box and not the "message." This is why, according to Klein, advertisement and branding budgets have increased dramatically (see Figure 1).



Not only are people becoming attached to brands, but they are beginning to self-identify through these companies and their products.

Because of advertising and branding methods in our market today, the everyday individual often include things in his or her reflection of “self.” In *Possessions and the Extended Self* by Russell W. Belk, the idea of self-identification through objects is addressed. Belk states that:

A key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as part of ourselves. Our fragile sense of self needs support and this we get by having and possessing things because, to a large degree, we are what we have and possess. (139)

Self-identification is almost unavoidable. Therefore, by acknowledging this fact, the individual is able to understand a key component in unraveling why humans self-identify through objects. Humans impose their identity on objects and vice versa (Belk 141). Therefore, the difference between “me” and “mine” is beginning to fade. This is because, Belk states: “Possessions are regarded not only as a part of self, but also as instrumental to the development of self” (141). Humans are bringing objects into their sense of “extended self” because we are learning from a young age that that is acceptable (Belk).

American consumerism is a complicated mass that is continuing to grow in both power and frequency. Therefore, its presence in everyday life will only grow. Through the ideas of Freud and actions of Bernays, America as become a capitalist country. Although many people do not acknowledge or think about consumerism on a day-to-day basis, it is beginning to consume the individual and the individual identity. This is done primarily through brand names and advertisements. I personally have experience with this topic and, although I did not fully understand consumerism at the time, I am now aware of how consumerism has affected my relationships and myself.

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