RATIONAL CONSUMPTION: A BRIEF HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the changes in perceptions of rational consumption through three historical periods, the early Greek, the period of religious domination and the industrial period. In each period, the changing definition of life's goals and the means to achieve them change resulting in perceptions of rational consumption. In pre-industrial periods, the perception is essentially "less is better." An examination of the changes wrought by industrialization leads to the contemporary vision extolling "more is better." The factors precipitating this radical transformation are briefly examined as well.

Introduction

The most difficult part of the review of rational consumption is, of course, determining what it is. To that end, an extensional bargain is to be achieved with the reader at the outset. Since there can be no historically constant description of rational consumption, it will be defined here so a common interpretation may be used throughout. Note that a common agreement is not necessarily required; only a common interpretation. Rational consumption is defined, for purposes of the present paper, as a level and form of consumption which precipitates progress toward the prevailing conception of life's ends or, at least, does not detract from progress toward those ends, whatever they may be. Within this definition, a historically transient description of rational consumption exists since the conception of life's ends and the extolled modes of achievement change from period to period. Examining rational consumption thus requires a simultaneous examination of the ends against which consumption is judged rational or not.

Greek and Roman Periods

In virtually all historical periods, the relationship of the individual to the level and purpose, or rationality, of consumption has been of interest to someone for some reason. From the ancient Greeks, for example, Pythagoras admonished that "the property of friends is common" and required all his students to place their private possessions...
in a common store to be used by all (Laertius p. 342). His basic belief was that there was a unity of life and the goal of each individual was to live in harmony with that unity. Consumption behavior which detracted from this unity would be considered irrational by Pythagoras. The capacity for property ownership to disrupt social harmony is evident in his belief that attachments to the material world sully the individual by promoting self-interest which would conflict with social harmony (Rudmin 1988).

Both Plato and Aristotle, though for different reasons, followed the Pythagorian view. Plato's view of the fully developed individual lay in political participation, or as citizen. His view of rational consumption then is predicated upon its role in the development of the individual in this capacity. From the perspective of consumption, Plato believed man's economic nature was excessive and pernicious and, left unconstrained, had the capacity to disrupt the social harmony of the polis. To mitigate against this capacity in The Laws, he devised a system of property ownership in which the accumulation of material goods was limited to four times the value of a lot of land. This he felt could help insure that consumption of material goods, i.e., goods of the body, would remain inferior to goods of the soul. For Plato, then, rational consumption is limited consumption stemming from deficiencies in the human capacity for self-control.

Aristotle's primary departure from Plato lay in the belief of the naturalness of ownership and its capacity for engendering moral development. Property was natural, he believed, when acquired through the direct application of human labor and, when acquired, can be shared thus precipitating social harmony. Aristotle evidences two concerns with consumption that can render it irrational and socially disruptive, however. First, when goods become commodities possessing exchange value, their naturalness disappears for "...there is no bound to the riches which spring from this art of wealth-getting (Smith and Ross 1921, 1257b 25)." His second concern lay in the necessity that, while private ownership of goods was the common mode of ownership, common use should be the
appropriate mode of consumption. This he felt was "...in the spirit of the proverb which says 'friends' goods are goods in common (Barker 1952, p. 49)." This is predicated upon his view that the best practicable state is a "...community of equals, aiming at the best life possible (Smith and Ross 1921, 1328b 35)." For Aristotle, the best possible person and the best possible citizen were identical (Diggs 1974) and it is this identity that renders the mode of consumption rational or not. That mode which promotes the best citizen, as for Plato, would be rational. Like Plato, Aristotle felt unconstrained consumption could lead to social, and thereby, individual disharmony.

This idea was to be carried forward to the Stoics of the Roman period, primarily Cicero and Senneca, and beyond. In making the concept of natural law palatable to Rome, Cicero introduced "the law of right reason in agreement with Nature" as a philosophical concept. Through natural law the equality of all men followed as a principle but not a reality. He argued to resolve this conflict that men need not be equal in wealth to be equal in rights and that true equality existed "...in the golden age when men lived by the law of nature (Schlatter 1951, p. 25)." Because men now have a corrupt nature, controls were necessary and ownership fell in the domain of conventional rather than natural law. While the Stoics approved ownership of goods, they expressed disapprobation with certain modes of consumption. They were particularly averse to the expressive function of consumption and held it to be unnatural (Rudmin 1988).

This disapprobation is expressed succinctly by Senneca in the Epistles, "It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more that is poor (Hadas 1961, p. 52)." And again in On Tranquility, he reaffirms the Aristotelian ideal in his statement, "The proper amount of wealth is that which neither descends to poverty nor is far distant from poverty...Let us accustom ourselves to set aside all ostentation, and to estimate the value of things by their uses, not their embellishments (Hadas 1961, p. 68)." Thus the Stoics continued the tradition of moderation in consumption apparently aware of the corrupting capability of consumption.
Period of Religious Dominance

The Stoic tradition of moderation in consumption was adopted and adapted by the early Christian church since, in the early development, it was in accord with the doctrine of poverty. This was consistent with the goal of spiritual transcendence expressed by the Church and because of this view of Life's end, their disdain for material attachment was similar, if not stronger, than that of the Greeks.

One of the primary Stoic ideas retained by the Church was the notion that the justification for ownership was knowledge of use. Augustine states "Therefore, all that which is badly possessed is the property of another, but he possess badly who uses badly (Schlatter 1951, p. 38)." Further, Ambrose argues strongly against attachment to what is owned in the statement, "A possession ought to belong to the possessor, not the possessor to the possession (Avila 1983, p. 67)." These expressions of disapproval regarding the consumption of and relation to material wealth stem directly from the goal of spiritual transcendence and the role that consumption plays in that project. Once again, the requirement for rational consumption as consumption with strict limitations on quality and quantity appears, albeit in a different historical context with a different developmental goal.

While the forces leading to dramatic changes were percolating throughout the Middle Ages, the adept juxtaposition of religious doctrine and Aristotle by Aquinas opened the door to a new definition of the individual (Kilbourne 1988). Of this, Ullmann (1966) states, "In the history of the relations between man and society, the rebirth of the individual as a full homo appears to me one of the major historical achievements of the human mind (p. 127)". The net result of Aquina's achievement was incipient individualism which would later lead to the secularization of the rationality of consumption.

Ultimately the doctrine of material simplicity came into conflict with the reality of the church, and the stage was set for the Reformation. In this historical period is found the first major transformation of the rationality of consumption in more than a thousand years.
of religious hegemony. It was to be developed in the Puritan morality founded predominantly in Calvinism which emigrated to America (Rudmin and Kilbourne 1989).

Of particular interest here is the Quaker form of Protestantism as it reflects a view of consumption that was the harbinger of the contemporary form. Since the Quakers held the same values of duty and thrift as other Puritans, they were economically successful and prospered. In addition, they harbored antinomian sentiments which allowed them to backslide a little on consumption values. So long as the individual controlled wealth and not the reverse, then the enjoyment of the results of success were tolerated so long as they were not excessive. William Penn, for example, lived in non-ostentatious luxury while extolling the virtues of rational, limited consumption. The combination of these factors, material success and tolerance of non-excessive consumption, resulted in an increase in the capacity for and the use of material superfluities (Shi 1985).

**Period of Industrialization**

As their success accelerated so did the capacity for self-indulgence. The need for piety and austerity receded before the growing secularization of consumption. Opulence in consumption grew and by the mid 1700’s wealthy merchants and farmers were chastised on patriotic rather than religious grounds. Samuel Adams, for example, feared the destabilizing effects of wealth accumulating in too few hands. He advocated a system for spreading wealth so that none would be too wealthy or too poor recalling the Stoic tradition. The revolution, for Adams, was to be a return to spiritualism more than a separation from England, but he was to be quite disappointed with the outcome. Instead of the Puritan ideals, the evolution was to a new economic freedom unconstrained by either religious or secular authority (Shi 1985).

The confluence of unconstrained individualism and expanding productive capacity prompted a revitalized Romantic attack on evolving levels and modes of consumption. The critique was to take a different form however. In the past, proscription on consumption
was imposed from above. From the Romantics to the present, the appeal is salutary rather than commanding (Rudmin and Kilbourne 1989).

The Romantic vision of rational consumption is provided by Emerson and Wordsworth respectively in the following passages.

'Tis the day of the chattel,
Web to weave, and corn to grind;
Things are in the saddle'
And ride mankind (Bode 1979, p. 648).

Rapine, avarice, expense
This is idolatry; and this we adore;
Plain living and high thinking are no more (Wayne 1955);

It was the desire of the Romantics to transcend this emerging mode of industrial existence. The effect of material excess was already evident in society and Thoreau, the foremost practitioner of rational consumption reacted to it in vitriolic fashion. His animus for the new found consumption ethic is evident throughout Walden. His views on the effect of consumption on individual development, the professed goal of the Romantics, is especially important for this paper. In addition, his ideas have been carried forward to the present and have been incorporated into the works of contemporary critics of consumption such as Gregg (1936) and Elgin (1981) two of the leading proponents of voluntary simplicity (Rudmin and Kilbourne 1989).

Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million, count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail (Shanley 1973, p. 91).

This expresses Thoreau's vision that plain living and high thinking come from the life unencumbered by material superfluities. It was evident, however, that the lowest common denominator of success was material acquisition even as early as 1845. Cognizant of this development early on, Thoreau admitted that his vision was not for all.

As for the rest of my readers, they will accept such portion as apply to them (Shanley 1973, p. 4).
And he further expresses the Stoic position on the relationship between knowledge of use and accumulation in the passage:

If there are any to whom it is no interruption to acquire these things, and who know how to use them when acquired, I relinquish to them the pursuit (Shenley 1973, p. 70).

As for the relationship between consumption and development in the individual not immune to the "slings and arrows of outrageous consumption" he offers these perspicuous cautions (Shenley 1973).

With consummate skill he has set his trap with a hair spring to catch comfort and independence, and then, as he turned away, got his own leg in it (p. 33).

And the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him (p. 33).

I also have in my mind that seemingly wealthy, but most terribly impoverished class of all, who have accumulated dross, but know not how to use it, or get rid of it, and thus have forged their own golden and silver fetters (p. 16).

...for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone (p. 82).

The similarities between the Romantic and the Stoic visions of rational consumption are evident in these passages. The last is also attributed to Socrates (Laertius 1853). Thoreau's motivation for these statements was the development of individual potential through plain living and high thinking. Aware of the failure of the industrial humanization experiments in Lowell, he explicitly denied the possibility that individual growth, the Romantic ideal, could be achieved within the evolving system of industrialization and mass production. Thoreau's prognosis appears to have been correct and as Shi (1985) comments,

Peace ushered in not a golden era of renewed social restraint and individual morality but a gilded age of entrepreneurial scrambling and political corruption. In the process, the simple life as a societal ethic was pushed even farther from the realm of practice into the realm of memory (p. 153).
Irrationality is probably the fitting description of the mode of consumption accompanying incipient mass production. Consumption was rendered irrational, relative to the historical vision, by the exigencies of mass production requiring the rationalization of production. Mass consumption is the *sine qua non* of this rational form of production. For this new industrial regime to develop and sustain itself, a new social regime was indispensable. Consequently, a new vision of individual development was a concomitant. While the individual had been freed from religious hegemony, the locus of development still lay within the individual through humanistic transcendence and the vision of rational consumption still extolled simplicity as the mode of consumptive behavior.

Simplicity in consumption is, however, incompatible with the industrial mode of existence since every increase in the capacity to produce must be accompanied by an equivalent increase in the willingness to consume. This exigency of mass production precipitated a vulgarization of day to day existence about which Howells (1878) commented, "new wants were invented, prudence and simplicity of life went out of fashion... (quoted in Shi 1985, p. 155)." Further, the changes wrought gravitated to the common man and, as Veblen (1899) observed, pecuniary invidiousness was now characteristic of the lower classes as well as the upper classes. Rational consumption, as envisioned by the Greeks, Christian fathers and Romantics, was changing its character in the new social organization precipitated by advancing industrialization. Where rational had historically been equated with less, the new regime was resulting in a radical transformation of the historical ideal to its antithesis. Harmony and unity were being redefined as conformity to the exigencies of mass production. With the changing definition came a transformation of the mode of existence to one in harmony, not with the needs of the individual, but the needs of the process itself, i.e., the commodified form (Marcuse 1969). Society's vision of itself, its very consciousness, was being transformed.
As capacity to satisfy true needs (in the Romantic sense) was exceeded, needs were redefined elevating the unnecessary to the necessary, effectively turning the individual against himself and consuming his potential rather than developing it (Marcuse 1969). By redirecting the focus of social unrest precipitated by industrialization back on the individual and then proffering consumption as the solution, as suggested by Ewen (1976), industrialists engendered a new vision of consumption, therapeutic consumption. With the introjection of the new consumption rationality, "plain living and high thinking" are, as Wordsworth suggested, no more. Babbit is Everyman and Thoreau's "trap with a hair spring" is set to snare the unsuspecting and suspecting alike.

Overcoming the barriers imposed by the rationalization of production requires elevated purpose, methodical disengagement from the status quo and desublimation of consumption. Plain living does not precipitate high thinking. Rather, high thinking is now requisite for plain living. This effectively renders the commodified form of existence irrational in its extolled rationality. To explain this somewhat anomalous conclusion, we must return to the goals precipitating the judgment of what is rational as suggested at the outset.

The goal proffered in contemporary society differs little from that of the Greeks or Romantics; it is the development of individual potential. The transformation has occurred in the definition of how one proceeds in developing that potential. Therapeutic consumption is now extolled as the rational mode of consumption, i.e., the one through which individual development can be achieved. However, this mode of consumption is endemic to rationalized production and is rendered rational only in its capacity to sustain the prevailing mode of production. But it was engendered to sustain the mass production process, and as suggested by Marcuse (1964), effectively turns individuals against themselves consuming rather than developing potential. Therapeutic consumption is, therefore, rational in that it sustains the capitalist mode of production but irrational because it sustains the commodified form of existence through which the individual cannot develop
potentialities. The prevailing mode of thought within the dominant class is that sustaining the mode of production will automatically result in the development of the individual. This is considered an ersatz development by contemporary critics of consumption practices and is, therefore, irrational.

Summary

Thus we have seen in this brief historical sketch, a radical transformation of the vision of rational consumption. From the early Greeks through the Romantics, simplicity in both quantity and quality of consumption has been extolled as the rational mode, i.e., that which will lead the individual to the appropriate end. While the historical periods examined each have extolled a different end and different paths to that end, the visions of rational consumption have consistently maintained an air of simplicity. Less is better! From the beginnings of industrialization, a radical transformation of this vision has emerged.

As a result of the exigencies of mass production, rational consumption as less receded before the juggernaut of industrial rationalization. While the locus of development remained within the individual, a radical transformation of the means has been engendered within which therapeutic consumption is proffered as the appropriate mode of rational consumption. More is better has become the dominant organizing principle in contemporary industrial society.
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