

# THE TWENTIES IN CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY



Leonard Dove, *The New Yorker*, October 26, 1929

## — CONSUMERISM —

Mass-produced consumer goods like automobiles and ready-to-wear clothes were not new to the 1920s, nor were advertising or mail-order catalogues. But *something* was new about Americans' relationship with manufactured products, and it was accelerating faster than it could be defined. Not only did the latest goods become necessities, *consumption* itself became a necessity, it seemed to observers. Was that good for America? Yes, said some—people can live in unprecedented comfort and material security. *Not so fast*, said others—can we predict where consumerism is taking us before we're inextricably *there*?

Something new has come to confront American democracy. The Fathers of the Nation did not foresee it. History had opened to their foresight most of the obstacles which might be expected to get in the way of the Republic—political corruption, extreme wealth, foreign domination, faction, class rule; . . . That which has stolen across the path of American democracy and is already altering Americanism was not in their calculations. History gave them no hint of it. What is happening today is without precedent, at least so far as historical research has discovered. . . . No reformer, no utopian, no physiocrat, no poet, no writer of fantastic romances saw in his dreams the particular development which is with us here and now.

Samuel Strauss  
 "Things Are in the Saddle"  
*The Atlantic Monthly*  
 November 1924

This is our proudest boast: "The American citizen has more comforts and conveniences than kings had two hundred years ago." It is a fact, and this fact is the outward evidence of the new force which has crossed the path of American democracy. This increasing stream of automobiles and radios, buildings and bathrooms, furs and furniture, [ocean] liners, hotels, bridges, vacuum cleaners, cameras, bus lines, electric toasters, moving pictures, railway cars, package foods, telephones, pianos, novels, comic supplements—these are the signs. And it is just these which we accept naturally. We think of them as particularly American, as the logical growth from that particular beginnings which was ours; these we think of as America's second chapter. The first chapter was concerned with the Fathers and their struggle, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution. The second chapter is the present—the chapter in which we use the opportunity secured for us, the chapter in which every American comes into his own, the chapter in which every American lives better than once a king lived. This America today, this vast magazine of things, is regarded as the successful development of the Fathers' work, the natural fruit of that democratic seed which they planted in the fertile American soil.

But although to us this development may seem natural, be sure it would not have seemed natural to the Fathers; be sure it would have seemed abnormal to them. Is this to say that the Founders of the Republic never looked forward to the time when every citizen would have his own conveyance, his

own house, with abundant furniture, when every wife and daughter would have silk garments and a piano to play upon like a princess? No. It might be said that this was precisely that to which they did look forward; this was an essential part of their expectation. . . . But they could not foresee what has happened. They could not foresee at what a rate the machine would multiply things; they could not foresee how the prosperity—indeed, the very existence—of the nation would come to depend upon people being forced to use what the machine pours out.

What is the first condition of our civilization? In the final reason, is it not concerned with the production of *things*? It is not that we must turn out large quantities of things; it is that we must turn out ever larger quantities of things, more this year than last year, more next year than this; the flow from mill and mine must steadily increase. . . . The Capitalist and the Socialist are at each other's throats, but the issue between them is, Which can ensure the distribution of the most goods to the people? No statesman, no pacifist, no League-of-Nations enthusiast, would entertain his pet scheme for a moment longer if he believed it would mean that ten years later people would buy half of what they buy today. For the standard of living to sag back, for the people to buy half of what they used to buy—everybody knows that that means ruin, and not the ruin of business alone. The national prosperity gone, the national safety is in danger. This is not a fear; it is a fact. If anything were to happen to industry, there would be first confusion and then decline in all our institutions; our great system of free education for the nation would wither, our organized charities would dry up, the thorn and the nettle [weed] would spring up in our parks, our slums would become fever spots, our roads would fall into decay. More than all, our ideals of political authority would be a heap of jackstraws; we should hold the kind of government the Fathers gave us to be a broken reed.

Production has played many parts in history; it has taken various forms. The form which it takes in this, the Machine Age, is strange and new. Consumptionism is a new necessity. Consumptionism is a new science. Through the centuries, the problem has been how to produce enough of the things men wanted; the problem now is how to make men want and use more than enough things—the “science of plenty,” it has been called. Formerly the task was to supply the things men wanted; the new necessity is to make men want the things which machinery must turn out if this civilization is not to perish. Today we dare not wait until men in their own good time get around to wanting the things; do we permit this, the machine flies to pieces. . . . The problem before us today is not how to produce the goods, but how to produce the customers. Consumptionism is the science of compelling men to use more and more things. Consumptionism is bringing it about that the American citizen's first importance to his country is no longer that of citizen but that of consumer.

**radio luxury.....**  
**for a luxury hungry world**

**MATCHLESS TEMPLETONE . . .**  
superb duplication of sound  
just as the recording artists  
commit it to the microphone . . . is  
the exclusive gift of Temple to a  
world that is healthily hungry for  
radio luxury.

The new Temple is so great an  
achievement in aerological engi-  
neering it needs no superlatives to  
bolster its appeal.

The intricate devices by which this  
true miracle has been wrought  
need not be described here. The  
world doesn't ask for blue-prints.  
It takes results to its heart.

Any Temple dealer will proudly  
demonstrate to you that Temple  
gives a true, sweet, full-proportioned  
echo of the program it receives.

Life, November 1, 1929

LEAVE IT TO THE YOUNGER CROWD TO KNOW THE BEST!

**I** IT is characteristic of this younger set to settle the cigarette question exactly as they settle their hard-fought games — on the sporting principle of "may the best win!"

**FATIMA**

A few cents more — for the best that money can buy!

Life, November 24, 1927

Stuart Chase  
*Prosperity: Fact or Myth?*  
1929

Economist and consumer activist Stuart Chase published several bestselling works on consumer culture and the social effects of technological innovation, all based on extensive research into the realities of modern American life. [See also p. 6.]

## \_\_\_THE NEW STANDARD OF LIVING\_\_\_

[I]t will be well . . . to enumerate again the specific goods, services and qualities which comprise the new American standard of living. Remember that it is not a list which all possess but only a list to which all aspire . . . Or almost all.

### SHELTER

More apartment living<sup>2</sup>  
More attractive villas  
for the business class  
Furnaces and oil heaters  
Plumbing and bathtubs

Electric lights  
Electric appliances,  
such as washing machines  
Refrigeration  
Sleeping porches  
Overstuffed furniture

Radios  
Phonographs  
Telephones  
Five-foot shelves  
Glittering cocktail services

*And smaller space.*

### CLOTHING

More variety  
More style  
More silk  
Rayon

More accent on underwear  
More commercial laundry,  
pressing, and cleaning work  
More cosmetics

More fat reducers  
Permanent waves  
More colorful vestments for men

*And poorer quality.*

### FOOD

More variety with fewer calories  
More fresh vegetables  
More fresh fruit  
More tin cans  
More quick lunches

More attractive service  
More milk products  
More packaged foods  
More delicatessen shops

More restaurant eating  
More tea houses  
More drugstore bars<sup>3</sup>  
More candy and sugar  
More chewing gum

*And less home cooking.*

### SUNDRY [Misc.]

Motor cars  
Moving and talking pictures  
More elaborate children's toys

More athletic shows  
More clubs, including night clubs  
More high school and college  
education

More golf  
More traveling—particularly  
to Florida and California

More books  
More cigarettes  
More comic strips

More correspondence courses  
More magazines and tabloids  
More parks and playgrounds

More bridge  
More jazz

*And more noise and speed.*



Mass consumption has also dealt a body blow at the time-honored doctrine of thrift. We are urged on the highest authority to spend rather than to save. Only by spending can we make the wheels of industry turn. We are urged deliberately to waste material. Throw away your razor blades, abandon your motor car, and purchase new. This strange doctrine would have horrified our grandfathers—and alas, has an excellent chance of horrifying our grandchildren. It operates to engulf irreplaceable natural resources at a staggering rate.

<sup>2</sup> By "more," Chase notes, is meant "relative to population. These items are increasing faster than the number of people in the country."

<sup>3</sup> Soda fountains.



foods and the attitude of foreign housewives toward new ideas in England, France, Belgium, Holland, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland. I was a speaker at the International Home Economics Congress at Rome in 1927 and presided over the Home Exposition (“Salon du Foyer”) at Paris in October 1927. I have no hesitation in saying that American housewives in the mass are fully twenty times more responsive to new ways, new foods, new devices than are foreign housewives. . . .

Twenty times as responsive to new offerings, inventions and improvements by industry! That is a mighty makeweight in the balance of progress in America, both for individual health and happiness and for business. The American woman’s relation to American manufacturing is positively startling to foreign eyes—but a commonplace here. She writes letters to Home Service heads employed by the manufacturer, and secures a woman-to-woman reply. She attends household lectures and secures free education. She is supplied with general household information, recipes and housekeeping aid that is only indirectly connected up with the manufacturer’s product. Abroad this would frankly be regarded as philanthropic folly. She is asked for her opinion both before a new product is put out, and afterward; she is offered prizes and rewards for participating in the improvement of the product and the widening of its scope of usefulness. She is given information in the newest developments, told promptly of new inventions, and is offered through reduced prices made possible by mass production, a dividend share in the patronage she supplies.

**Mrs. Consumer Fully Approves Advertising.**—*All this is an advertising technique.* The printed page acts as the constant inter-communicating telephone or radio between manufacturer and Mrs. Consumer. They were strangers before this was the fact, but are in effect now co-partners in advancing American standards of living. It is even not unusual for a parlor game to consist of a test of remembrance of advertising slogans, or for society costume balls to be sprinkled with characters representing advertising trademarks.

Little wonder then that we do not resent the very considerable amount of advertising in the women’s magazines. I believe I speak accurately for my sister American housewives when I say that we would certainly be distressed and discommoded if the magazines were to drop their advertising. . . . Advertising is a live part of our trade and technical information on women’s special fields—food, furnishings, children, equipment. I have often noted that the carping critics of advertising are *not* housewives, and do not possess, as we do, the manifold remembrances of the benefits and new ideas we derive from advertising.

But always this attitude of ours toward advertising is *unconscious*. We inhale advertising as we breathe in air—and *exhale* unconsciously that part of it which is without interest, without merit, or without sincerity and sense. We live in a vast whirligig of advertising, to be sure, and shop-windows, signs, displays are all about us. To be conscious of it would invite irritation or surfeit. We women simply adapt ourselves to an advertising age as men adapt themselves to a machine age because it is an important element of modern life, and far more vital to it than casual criticism makes out. In fact, there is much absolute nonsense talked in the name of criticism of advertising, and none, when she thinks, knows it better than Mrs. Consumer. Her superbly practical mind quite readily grasps the basic economics involved not theoretically but in daily practice. . . .

As a consumer I always think of advertising as a tremendous moving-picture device to keep ever and constantly changing before us, in film after film, reel after reel, all the good things that manufacturers make everywhere, set in a dramatic scenario which compels attention through the touch of advertising genius. Not only has it by force of example made a bath in a porcelain tub and a brushing of our teeth national daily rites, but it is performing the task that the churches have long given up—it is strengthening our characters. I am really serious. Advertising is truly forcing us to develop strength of will to resist its alluring temptations to buy articles which we do not need.



New York Public Library

1921

# Are We Debauched by Salesmanship?

THE FORUM ■ JANUARY 1928 ■ EXCERPTS

The *Forum*, a magazine of social and political commentary, regularly invited point-counterpoint essays on contemporary issues. For this inquiry the *Forum* invited essays from economist and consumer activist Stuart Chase and advertising executive Roy Durstine.

## Yes: “Six-Cylinder Ethics”

STUART CHASE

In the last generation, the technical arts have built an industrial plant capable of producing goods a great deal faster than purchasing power has been released to absorb them. As an inevitable result, the world of business has shifted its accent from producing to selling. The great and pressing problem has been how to dispose of the volume of articles which mass production has made possible. Hence the higher salesmanship, advertising, sales quotas, the shattering of sales resistance, go-getters, the discovery of Jesus of Nazareth as the first advertising man, courses on the development of personality, pie charts, maps with red, orange and violet pins, closing men, contact men, sucker lists, full line forcing, direct mail appeals, trade association drives, Paint Up Week, the conversion of real estate men into realtors, the conversion of undertakers into morticians. (One awaits expectantly the inauguration of a Get Buried Oftener Week.)

High speed selling has been so essential (with no fundamental change in the money and credit structure) and so universal, that it has profoundly affected both related and distant fields. Thus the clergy have taken over the technique in great numbers, and urge us to church with posters, sky signs, dodgers, and even veiled hints of sermons garnished with sex appeal. . . . No politician worthy of the name is to be found without his publicity agent, endlessly busy on the job of selling the statesman to his customers. No respectable captain of industry fails to retain a counsel [advisor] on public relations to sell his personality, his shiny new dimes, his marvelous whiskers, his throbbing brain, his great open heart, to the free citizens of the greatest republic ever heard of. . . .

For better or for worse, we have entered the Age of the Salesman. The final objective of the salesman is to put it across, to get away with it, to secure the order. The signature on the dotted line becomes the Supreme Good. It follows that any methods involved in this consummation [completion], are, *ipso facto* [thereby], good methods. The new ethics is thus built on the ability to get away with it, by whatever means.

## No: “Twelve-Cylinder Critics”

ROY S. DURSTINE

It’s all right for every man to have his own viewpoint, but the danger lies in adopting a viewpoint the way a house adopts paint—by having someone lay it on. It’s the fashion now to be captious [find fault] about American business—especially about American businessmen. There seems to be a paying market for satire on this subject. . . .

[Mr. Chase] is being influenced, consciously or not, by the badly informed and smug people who pick up some catch phrases and put them into newspaper paragraphs or plays or funny papers to lambast business. . . . For example, Mr. Chase has a great many things to say about advertising agencies. Most of them are no more typical of the good agencies of the country than machine guns are typical of home life in Chicago. He is describing the appointment of an agency to market a manufacturer’s product.

“Short of opium,” says Mr. Chase, “and the more deadly varieties of arsenic, the agency accepts the mandate with enthusiasm.”

First error. Any self-respecting agency looks at a prospective client’s product with caution. A product of merit is the only one worth advertising. The fact that here and there an unworthy product has made a success through advertising does not disprove the rule that the outstanding and permanent successes of advertising have been made for products of genuine merit. . . .

. . . No one believes that American business is even remotely perfect. But is it any worse for [biographer] Ivy Lee to give the world a perhaps too favorable portrait of John D. Rockefeller than for Mr. Chase to give the world a too unfavorable picture of the American businessman? . . .

Finally, it may be well to observe a twelve-cylinder critic out of the library. A certain man of Mr. Chase’s school of fault-finding, another twelve-cylinder critic . . . recently was invited to work out some of his ideas under practical conditions. He obtained a job under the watchful eye of another economist and was told to go ahead and economize. They have him all the rope he wanted and it took him exactly three weeks to get so hopelessly snarled that it took several plain, hard-working businessmen a long time to untangle the knots. [P.S. He lost the job.]

# Should We Stop Installment Buying?

THE FORUM ■ MAY 1927 ■ EXCERPTS

The *Forum*, a magazine of social and political commentary, invited point-counterpoint essays on contemporary issues. For this inquiry the *Forum* invited essays from a past vice president of Ford Motor Co. and an automotive industrialist originally with Studebaker.

## Yes: “Installment Buying and Its Costs”

JAMES COUZENS

Former VP, Ford Motor Co.; U.S. Senator from Michigan

All statistics aside, installment buying is a rapidly growing evil. It is inflation of the worst kind. Installment buyers pledge their earnings for years in advance; and then when hard times come—as they inevitably will—this large debtor class finds itself forced to pay in deflated, higher-value dollars, what they had contracted for when dollars were cheap. . . .

Installment buying is an attempt to keep up with the Joneses, to satisfy every passing want; and it is creating a condition that is certainly unsound and, in many cases, results in weakening of character and neglect of the more substantial things of life. I can say from my personal knowledge that the education of children, their physical well-being generally, even the care of their teeth, are being neglected to enable families to purchase on installments many luxuries and things they could very well do without. If this is sound, then let the orgy proceed. . . .

Advocates of installment buying say that they make possible mass production and lower costs. The motor-car industry admits that seventy to eighty percent of its cars are sold on an installment basis, thus making for mass production and lower prices. But if the volume of installment sales in industry at large is as infinitesimal as economists say, it can hardly have such a stimulating effect upon production as they claim. . . .

A friend of mine recently purchased a sewing machine of well known make on installments, at a total cost of one hundred dollars. If he had paid cash, he would have received a discount of fifteen percent. The very great increase in cost to the installment buyer, of which this is a striking example, seems to be ignored in public discussions. . . .

They say that installment buying is here to stay. Of course, it has always been and always will be with us. That is not the point of discussion. The point is whether or not it is being properly or improperly used.

## No: “The Case for Installment Buying”

CHARLES CONNARD HANCH

Former VP, Natl. Automobile Chamber of Commerce

My childhood was spent among the hardships of pioneer life on a midwest wilderness farm. My mother made the family’s clothing by hand with needle and thread, while my father cultivated his crops among the stumps of the clearing. Five times during my early life I came in contact with the installment plan: first, when my mother bought her sewing machine; second, when my father bought his first reaper; third, when the family purchased a piano; fourth, when I bought my first good suit so that I could hold down a city job; and fifth, when I purchased my Encyclopedia Britannica in place of the college education that was beyond my reach. I look back upon these five events as memorable occasions in my life. When I recall the relief brought by the sewing machine and the pleasure brought by the piano into my mother’s life, I bless the man who first conceived the idea of consumer credit. . . . I mention these things because they are typical. Thousands of other people have had similar experiences. . . .

There are, in fact, three very important benefits of installment selling. It enables a new article to come into general use more rapidly than would otherwise be possible. It greatly increases production. And from these facts it follows that installment buying reduces costs of production, at the same time making possible an improvement in quality. . . .

Critics of the installment plan assert that the installment purchaser gets into the habit of pledging all his available income for months in advance, leaving no margin for the inevitable emergencies which are bound to arise. Here, in fact, is the essence of all the hue and cry against the installment plan. Everybody seems ready to admit that installment buying is comparatively harmless where the buyer is careful not to overobligate himself, and most of the protest is based upon the assertion that buyers are reckless. . . .

This is a serious accusation, and the most interesting thing about it is that nobody has ever tried to prove it.