

Encyclopedia of
ACTIVISM *and*
SOCIAL JUSTICE

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A SAGE Reference Publication

 **SAGE Publications**
Thousand Oaks ■ London ■ New Delhi

colonial politics throughout the continent, and by the mid-1960s, most colonies had become independent states with the exception of those governed by recalcitrant white minorities in Rhodesia, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and South Africa. In these countries, African nationalists were forced to conduct revolutions to drive the colonialists out.

—LaRay Denzer

See also Du Bois, W. E. B.; Garvey, Marcus; Nkrumah, Kwame

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ANTI-CONSUMERISM

Historically, consumerism and its antithesis, anti-consumerism, have fallen under a variety of descriptions in different times, regions, and as part of various cultures. Defining anti-consumerism can be a somewhat thorny task because it can be difficult to establish just what consumerism is. In some contexts, consumerism, like that often referred to in the phrase "consumer society," is a pejorative. However, in other contexts, "trickle-down economics" for instance, consumerism is considered a positive and integral part of modern, capitalist economies.

Consumerism generally refers to the creation, purchase, and use of goods and commodities over and above the material needs of those purchasing and utilizing the goods. This phenomenon is certainly not new, and many have argued it is as old as human civilization itself, but it has reached unprecedented levels in recent decades. In addition, consumerism is also

closely associated not only with excess goods but with acquiring new and novel goods, as well as the status associated with such possessions. One result is a plethora of, strictly speaking, unnecessary consumer goods and a seemingly insatiable demand for a continual supply of new and novel products. The role of the commodity and its consumption is thus elevated beyond both its use value and exchange value. This feature, in particular, links modern consumerism closely with what Karl Marx called the fetishism of commodities and what Thorstein Veblen described as conspicuous consumption.

The primary criticisms of consumerism have most often come from three sources: religious groups, secular conservatives, and a somewhat loose collection of social and political activist perspectives that often coalesce around certain issues. Of course, criticisms have originated from other sources as well, but these three seem to capture those that dominate most anti-consumerism discourse. The first two have played important historical roles in the development of consumerism, but it is the last of the three that is most commonly referenced by the term *anti-consumerism* in contemporary discourse. However, it remains useful to look briefly at anti-consumerism based both on religious concerns and on conservative secular values, even if only to demonstrate the penetration of consumerism into various aspects of human social, political, and economic life.

Religious anti-consumerism generally turns on the view that human beings ought to focus their energies on spiritual matters rather than on the acquisition of worldly goods. Those holding this perspective have often argued that the focus on material goods produced by and within consumer culture detracts from the ability of individuals to focus on their spiritual existence. This view is not necessarily limited to any one religion, culture, or region. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, among others, all contain within their belief systems prohibitions against focusing on the corporeal world and the acquisition of material goods.

However, it is worth noting that even in areas where these faiths are dominant, consumerism often has taken root and exercised great influence. In some instances, forms of consumerism have become

absorbed into religious practice itself in the form of elaborate churches, mosques, and temples or in the creation and accumulation of ornate religious artifacts. In a way similar to that of individual consumer goods and purchases, the acquisition of such religious goods or the construction of such structures has often been viewed as a means of establishing status or even proving the favor of deities.

Nonreligious, secular conservative ideologies also have manifested brands of anti-consumerism. Issues of social status have produced anti-consumerism criticisms on a variety of fronts. The oft-heard contemporary critique of consumerism expressed in the colloquialism "keeping up with the Joneses" takes aim at the desire to attain the appearance of a certain level of material wealth. Such criticism generally takes aim at the desire to "keep up." Yet anti-consumerism critiques have also come from quite a different perspective too—that of the proverbial "Joneses" themselves. While some have criticized "keeping up with the Joneses" on the grounds that it encourages people to buy things they don't need, others have criticized it on the grounds that it encourages people to buy things they should simply refrain from desiring and pursuing.

Although it is true that such a critique is sometimes based on religion, it more often emanates from groups defined primarily on secular grounds (such as the aristocracy) and which are concerned with maintaining the perception of privilege in their social position. Such secular movements have argued that consumerism and the status seeking it both expresses and encourages threatens traditionally established social and economic hierarchies. It has been argued that consumerism, by encouraging those of lower social stations to desire and attempt to acquire goods traditionally reserved for the upper classes, threatens established boundaries between classes. For this reason, among others, growing consumerism also received criticism not only from those concerned about increased inequality but also from those advocating certain kinds of inequality viewed as appropriate and natural.

Although religious and secular conservative perspectives have played a role in anti-consumerism, the bulk of contemporary criticism of consumerism derives from individuals and groups concerned with

contemporary social issues and problems they see as inextricably linked to the growth and expansion of consumerism.

Anti-consumerism (and consumerism itself) often focuses largely on the reasons goods are acquired; on why and how certain commodities are bought and consumed by individual members of societies. One of the primary criticisms of consumerism concerns the purchase of consumer goods on the basis of novelty or because of artificially manufactured perceived needs.

The central criticism involved here is that people purchase things they really have no need or even use for simply because they are the latest and most novel products on the market (or latest version of some older product). On such a view, consumerism produces or contributes to several objectionable outcomes including, but not limited to, resource depletion and environmental degradation, the creation of artificial needs, consumer debt, competitive or conspicuous consumption, unequal distribution of wealth, and global poverty.

Rampant consumerism leads to the depletion of resources because the demand for more products, as well as the new and novel, outpaces the ability to produce such goods in a sustainable manner. Increasing demand for a variety of products produced from non-renewable or relatively hard to reproduce resources, such as oil or certain varieties of wood, can and does lead to a depletion of such resources. In addition, procuring or locating many such resources (drilling for oil or harvesting timber) often causes environmental damage. The specifically anti-consumerism feature of this objection is that many of the consumer activities associated with these harms are not strictly necessary but rather meet demands for novelty or status, such as fuel for sport utility vehicles or furniture fashioned of relatively rare and expensive wood.

Another of the charges often leveled against consumerism includes that, through advertising, those attempting to sell consumer goods generate artificial desires or perceived needs for novel but unnecessary products. The idea is that corporations, for example, depend on continually increasing market share, sales, and profits. They do this, in part, by continually creating, marketing, and selling new products. However, this depends on the ability of the companies in

any purchases. The primary point of Buy Nothing Day, activists maintain, is to make consumers aware of the constant and demanding role consumption plays in their lives.

Although Buy Nothing Day may be one of the most recognizable and visible manifestations of it, anti-consumerism also finds expression as part of a variety of other movements, such as *Adbusters* magazine, culture jamming, anti-globalization activities, or smaller, organic movements to reduce consumption through co-ops or the resale and reuse of goods. Neither consumerism nor anti-consumerism appears to be a recent invention, but the exponential growth of consumerism in recent decades has thrown into sharper relief the issues and potential problems surrounding it and, as a result, as consumerism increases and intensifies, anti-consumerism continues to grow along with it.

—Cory Fairley

See also *Adbusters*; Anti-Globalization Movement; Anti-Sweatshop Movement; Buy Nothing Day; Environmental Movement

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ANTI-DEATH PENALTY MOVEMENT

The anti-death penalty movement, also called the abolitionist movement or the new abolitionist movement, seeks to end capital punishment. The movement's

members view capital punishment as a human rights violation, which is frequently associated with other social justice issues, like racism, classism, and inadequate judicial processes. While the anti-death penalty movement itself works toward the abolition of capital punishment, its members approach and argue the issue from a wide variety of viewpoints. Various arguments made against the death penalty include its religious and humanistic immorality, its detrimental effect on victims' family members, its likelihood of executing an innocent person, its arbitrary and often racist or classist application, its ineffectiveness as a deterrent, and its high financial cost. Even though the anti-death penalty movement as a whole aims to abolish the use of the death penalty throughout the world, most of the recent efforts against capital punishment have been "centered on the United States, one of the last democratic countries to still execute its citizens.

The anti-death penalty movement in America has its roots in English opposition to the death penalty, which was documented as early as the 1640s, but the movement has existed on American soil, in one form or another, since the 1700s. Initially, many individuals only opposed capital punishment as a sentence for property crimes like theft, but by the 1780s, abolitionists began to protest the use of the death penalty as a response to any crime, including murder. From this point on, Herbert H. Haines describes organized resistance to the death penalty in America as cyclical, with four significant periods of protest and condemnation: the 1830s and 1840s, the 1890s to the beginning of World War I, the mid-1950s and 1960s, and the late 1970s to the present day. While the early era of the 1830s and 1840s—frequently called the anti-gallows movement—accomplished the goal of having executions take place behind prison walls rather than in town squares or courtyards, the anti-death penalty movements of later eras have worked toward the complete abolition of capital punishment.

In fact, the U.S. Supreme Court's 1972 ruling in *Furman v. Georgia*, which struck down all existing capital statutes in America as violations of the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution, was initially hailed as just such a victory for the anti-death penalty movement, but the Supreme Court's ruling