
This book deals with two controversial trends in today’s American consumption behaviour. On the one hand, Harvard economist Juliet B. Schor describes the continuous upscaling of consumption in America and attributes this spending behaviour mainly to competitive motives. On the other hand, Schor analyses the lifestyle of a group of people who, in contrast to the majority of Americans, cannot or do not want to participate in this “new consumerism.” She calls them “downshifters,” because they work less, earn less, spend less, and try to find a better balanced life by focussing on quality of life rather than on success and status in society.

At the beginning of the book, Schor presents the well-known fact that consumption is a competitive process and spending an act of social comparison (p. 3). She presents Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class, which identifies conspicuous consumption by the rich and describes how spending becomes a means by which the upper class demonstrates its social position in an affluent society. The lower classes see this and tries to emulate this stance. In this way, consumption turns into a so-called trickle-down process, an expression coined by Simmel (1905). Due to increases in productivity, growing outputs, and declining prices during the 1920s, far more people were considered to be middle class than in the previous decades. As a consequence, the rise of a certain mass prosperity led to an emulative process known as “keeping up with the Joneses,” by which members of the middle-class tried to imitate their neighbours’ consumption patterns (p. 8). Later in the century the reference shifted. No longer did neighbours set the standard for spending, but co-workers on a higher salary or “television friends” and celebrities whose lifestyles were unattainable for the average person. Later, with a greater need for individuality, the reference group changed once more. Rather than referring to classes or income groups, consumer patterns began to be based on
the values and lifestyles of smaller chosen groups, so-called lifestyle clusters, e.g., the Yuppies.

While during the 1970s researchers began to proclaim the declining importance of status symbols in our post-industrial society, the intensification of competitive consumption during the 80s showed that the contrary was true. According to Schor, particularly the upper middle-class was characterized by an extremely ostentatious display of wealth (p. 11). As a reflection of this development, Schor points to the fact that surveys, interviews, and focus groups all indicated a constant expansion of desire and expectations. She identifies “a proliferation of new products, e.g., computers, cell phones, faxes, a continual upgrading of old ones (autos and appliances), and a shift to more expensive versions” (p. 6). People have always strived for more, but what is new at the end of the twentieth century is the pervasiveness and the universality of material desires. Compared to twenty years ago, far more people focused on material goods and luxuries when asked about what constitutes “the good life.”

One effect of escalating lifestyles and ever more competitive consumption is the rise of consumer or household debts, along with record levels of borrowing and augmentation of credit card usage. For many individuals the promises of a consumer culture are hard to resist. Thus, the need to keep up has led to mass “overspending,” i.e., people spend more than they want to, more than they realize, and more than they can afford (p. 20). About 30% of the population admit to be in heavy or moderate debt, another 30% express having slight debts, whereas only 30% report no indebtedness at all (p. 72). This tendency is also reflected by the fact that the US savings rate of 3.5% of the disposable household income is the lowest in the world. Europeans save at least two or three times as much of their income. Most strikingly, the ratcheting up of standards has furthered positional consumption and undermined savings among the college-educated better-off urban or suburban households (p. 77). One third of this group did not save at all, because they were unwilling to lower their living standard. Later in the book, the correlation between debt and excessive TV watching is shown, proving the important role of television in consumer upscaling. Therefore, it is not surprising that consumers tend to base their expectations on their wealthy, upper-middle-class role models from TV series (p. 80).

In the second chapter, after writing about the particulars of the pioneering book “Distinction” by the French sociologist Bourdieu