

A Critical Review of Steven Watts' *The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century*

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In *The People's Tycoon*, Steven Watts addresses many aspects of Henry Ford's life, portraying him as a consumer, producer, celebrity, legend, moralist and bigot. He argues that Ford played a key role in shaping the twentieth century through his approach to consumption, mass culture and populism. Though all of these issues are worthy of detailed consideration, this review will focus on Ford's contribution to changing views of consumption habits during the early 1900s. It will explore the shift from Victorian values of self-control, gentility and Protestant morality, to the new commercialism that emphasized pleasure and self-fulfillment. By comparing Watts' portrayal of Henry Ford to the extensive historiography of consumer culture in the twentieth century, this review will analyze the strengths and weaknesses of Watts' arguments. Although Watts' portrayal of American consumption is consistent with other historical sources, his weaknesses include an exaggerated portrayal of Ford's influence, the failure to put forth a more global presentation of consumption during the twentieth century, an inadequate depiction of the extent of Ford's anti-Semitism, and a poor use of sources.

Watts argues that Henry Ford came to prominence while America was experiencing a period of cultural change, and claims that, with the decline of Victorian principles such as self-discipline and thrift, Henry Ford "popularized a new creed of consumer self-fulfillment."¹ Watts notes that, although Ford had little intention of abandoning Victorian morals, his consumption ethic promoted a revolution in consumer consciousness.² During the nineteenth century,

¹ Steven Watts, *The People's Tycoon* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), xii.

² *Ibid.*, 122.

American consumption practices were centered on Protestant morality, emotional self-restraint, and gentility. Goods were purchased based on necessity.³ According to Watts, Ford's vision of consumer prosperity, embodied in the Model T, facilitated the transformation of American attitudes towards material goods. Ford's "gospel of spending" maintained that regular indulgence, as opposed to frugality, encouraged "social harmony" and "personal fulfillment" for the consumer.⁴

Watts maintains that Ford used the Sociological Department to encourage new spending habits among workers. Along with preaching the importance of sobriety and sanitation, investigators for the Sociological Department were expected to implant values of "responsible consumption" in their workforce.⁵ Watts notes that the Sociological Department encouraged immigrant workers to adopt American values towards material comfort, and continues on to argue that the new consumer culture was increasingly seen as "the essence of Americanism."⁶ Watts contends that Ford played a crucial role in transforming American values along with their lifestyles, stating: "Ford's articulation of the consumer ethic helped recast popular ideas about 'the pursuit of happiness' in a new mold for the modern era."⁷ According to Watts, American spending habits assumed a new course away from Victorian morality, replacing self-control with self-indulgence, largely because of Henry Ford's innovative approach to consumption.⁸

Many scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to consumption patterns in the early twentieth century and have explored Ford's contribution to the evolution of consumer culture. In the article "Fordism," David Harvey recognizes that Ford differed from many of his contemporaries because he understood that "mass consumption meant mass production" and had a vision of "a new system of the reproduction of labour power, a new politics of labour control and management, a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist

³ Watts, *The People's Tycoon*, 8-9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 112, 207.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 534.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 318-319.

democratic society.”⁹ In *Today and Tomorrow*, Ford explained his belief in purchasing power, arguing that prosperity depended on high wages and low prices, which served to both create and supply consumers.¹⁰ This approach encouraged a shift in consumer attitudes from frugal-minded consumption to spending that emphasized self-fulfillment.

Lizabeth Cohen contends that, in the 1920s, a new system of installment sales arose out of the belief in an American consumer revolution that emphasized luxury goods, chain stores and national brands.¹¹ These new spending habits were perceived as a unifying movement that would eradicate old social divisions, thus creating a classless American society. However, she notes that mass consumption may have encouraged further separation between the working and upper classes rather than unifying them because workers molded mass culture, including shopping, movies and radio, to suit their needs and tastes.¹² Although workers in Chicago during the early 1900s were influenced by advertising and other marketing techniques, they actively chose which aspects of consumer culture to adopt.

In her discussion of early twentieth-century refrigerator designs, Shelley Nickles describes the manufacturers’ notion of the average consumer as a thrifty, efficient housewife who valued convenience.¹³ Although this depiction is inconsistent with the ‘new consumer values’ of indulgence and self-fulfillment, Nickles argues that the refrigerator became a “compelling and contentious symbol of a modern American standard of living,” demonstrating the fact that consumption became linked to comfort and wellbeing.¹⁴ As the century progressed and the number of potential consumers increased, Frigidaire made revisions to its perception of American consumers, recognizing that there was an increasing demand for refrigerators among middle- and lower-class households.¹⁵

⁹ David Harvey, “Fordism,” *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), 125-126.

¹⁰ Henry Ford, *Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1926), 152.

¹¹ Lizabeth Cohen, “Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots,” *American Quarterly* 41 (1989), 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³ Shelley Nickles, “‘Preserving Women’: Refrigerator Design as Social Process in the 1930s,” *Technology and Culture* 43 (2002): 694.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 699.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 701-702.

With the evolution of consumption practices, manufacturers created new targets, therefore shaping who would consume their product.

According to Roland Marchand, advertising in the 1920s “cast off its sober, utilitarian outlook in favor of a new, pleasure-minded, consumption ethic.”¹⁶ He also notes that manufacturers felt the need to reeducate the public, elucidating consumption as a pleasurable pursuit rather than spending based on necessity.¹⁷ Material goods became increasingly design oriented, paving the way for stylistic obsolescence. He argues that Ford, who rejected the need for extravagance and promoted living within one’s income, was forced to give in to style-conscious consumers and did so with the introduction of his Model-A car.¹⁸ As consumers adopted the spending ethic of self-indulgence, their demands were increasingly shaped by style. Marchand maintains that by portraying functional objects as obsolete, producers molded American perceptions of living standards; eventually consumers were expected to purchase a second model in order to maintain an adequate standard of living.¹⁹

While America was experiencing its revolution in consumer culture, similar changes were taking place elsewhere, including Canada, Iran and Italy. America was seen as the dominant global promoter of mass consumption, influencing and setting standards of consumption ethic across the world. According to Adam Arvidsson, advertising and mass consumption were increasingly associated with the ‘American’ identity.²⁰ He argues that the American sentiment associated with spending practices was perceived to expose all nations to the “civilizing impact of American consumer culture ... [in order] to transform the inhabitants of backward societies into modern, rational consumers who behave, think, and desire the same things as Americans.”²¹ He maintains that Italy, along with other European countries, was exposed to and adopted many aspects of American advertising culture, affecting Italian

¹⁶ Roland Marchand, “The Consumption Ethic: Strategies of Art and Style,” *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 118.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 156-157.

¹⁹ Marchand, “The Consumption Ethic,” 161.

²⁰ Adam Arvidsson, “Between Fascism and the American Dream,” *Social Science History* 25 (2001): 151.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

commercialism in the early twentieth century.²² American culture strongly influenced European economics and consumption ethic. Mary Nolan contends that German housewives were expected to be efficient like their American counterparts; they were not, however, granted the same consumption practices. She argues that “the flamboyant consumerism of the American woman had been safely domesticated to the harsh, material circumstances of post-World War I Germany.”²³ Although Europeans were exposed to many aspects of American consumerism, they attempted to filter out its less agreeable features, choosing which qualities to adopt. In “Importing ‘Beauty Culture’ into Iran,” Camron Michael Amin discusses the influence of American consumerism on Iranian culture, and notes that the notion of ‘beauty culture’ emerged contemporaneously in both America and Iran.²⁴ He argues that the new consumer values in America and Iran were part of a growing global commercial culture, affecting many areas of Europe as well.²⁵

The Sociological Department played a key role in spreading Ford’s ideas of proper consumption. Management was no longer exclusive to the factory; it extended into the home with the goal of molding workers’ values.²⁶ According to Harvey, this control included the intent to instill “‘rational’ consumption to live up to corporate needs and expectations.”²⁷ Meyer argues that, like Ford, many in the upper echelons of society felt workers needed to be taught a new culture based on values that supported their industrial lifestyle.²⁸ By creating a Savings and Loan Association alongside the Sociological Department, Ford further increased his power over working-class consumption. Meyer maintains that the Savings and Loan was established to promote “the saving habit among

²² Arvidsson, “Between Fascism and the American Dream,” 155.

²³ Mary Nolan, “‘Housework Made Easy’: The Taylorized Housewife in Weimar Germany’s Rationalized Economy,” *Feminist Studies* 16 (1990): 552.

²⁴ Camron Michael Amin, “Importing ‘Beauty Culture’ into Iran in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24 (2004): 80.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁶ Martha May, “The Historical Problem of the Family Wage: Americanization in the Ford Motor Company and the Five Dollar Day,” *Feminist Studies* 8 (1982): 275.

²⁷ Harvey, “Fordism,” 126.

²⁸ Stephen Meyer, “Adapting the Immigrant to the Line: Americanization in the Ford Factory, 1908-1921,” *Journal of Social History* 14 (1980): 68.

workers.”²⁹ Workers were expected to contribute money from each paycheck, enabling the Sociological Department to have direct control over their ability to consume. Immigrants were the primary targets of Ford’s Sociological Department, which attempted to inculcate proper ‘American’ values and, thus, standards of living.³⁰ Along with language lessons, the Americanization effort put forth by the Sociological Department taught foreign workers proper consumption practices, including instructions on “Buying and Using Stamps,” “Pay Day,” and “Going to the Bank.”³¹ Consumption was increasingly considered part of the American identity, and immigrant workers were expected to become new American consumers.

Watts’ portrayal of consumption practices in America during the early twentieth century is consistent with the historiography on the topic. Spending habits underwent a shift from being conservative and necessity-based to being based on self-fulfillment. As Marchand’s study indicates, consumption evolved from utilitarian to design oriented, and became increasingly a symbol of one’s standard of living.³² New purchasing practices, such as installment payments, arose out of this consumer revolution, emphasizing mass consumption.³³ As both Watts and Nickels maintain, consumption was increasingly associated with living standards. This change is particularly evident in the Ford Sociological Department’s regulations. Like Watts, Meyer recognizes that the Sociological Department was dedicated to implanting values of consumption into the minds of workers, particularly immigrants because large-scale consumption was seen increasingly as an American quality.

Ford played a critical role in developing American spending practices. However, Watts gives Ford more credit than he perhaps deserves. Although Watts recognizes that Ford was not the only influence on consumption ethic, he fails to dedicate discussion to other pressures. Upon examining the historiography, it is clear that American consumer culture during the early 1900s

²⁹ Stephen Meyer, “Toward Modern Labor Management: The Lee Reforms and the Five Dollar Day,” in *The Five Dollar Day: Labor Management and Social Control in the Ford Motor Company, 1908-1921* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 107.

³⁰ Meyer, “Adapting,” 70.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

³² Marchand, “The Consumption Ethic,” 120.

³³ Cohen, “Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots,” 9.

was influenced by a multitude of forces, not least of all Ford. As Cohen contends, members of the working class and immigrants shaped mass culture and therefore consumption practices to meet their liking. For example, instead of shopping at large chain stores with national brands, many chose local grocers who did not require cash-and-carry payments.³⁴ Nickles maintains that manufacturers, particularly Frigidaire, influenced consumption practices because they were determined to target specific consumers. By expanding their line to include basic and luxury models, Frigidaire opened its market, creating more consumers.³⁵ Advertising also played a critical role in shaping consumer attitudes. Marchand argues that “advertisers ... often wished to lift a mundane product out of the familiar, to reshape perceptions of it, to ‘put some soul into the commodity.’”³⁶ Obviously Watts’ intention was to portray Ford’s contribution to consumer culture in America. However, further discussion of how workers actively shaped their consumption practices, how other manufacturers contributed to the movement, and how advertising was critical in developing consumer attitudes would have added more depth and accuracy to his argument.

Although Watts discusses the role of the Sociological Department in instilling ‘American’ saving and spending habits to Ford’s immigrant workers, he fails to acknowledge that similar changes in consumption were taking place across the globe, in countries such as Italy, Germany and Iran, during the same period. As Amin notes, the shift to spending as a form of pleasure and self-fulfillment took place on a global scale.³⁷ Despite Watts intent to depict Ford’s contribution to American consumer culture, he could have presented a more well-rounded argument had he noted the role American consumer culture played in creating an international consumption ethic, and how other nations were undergoing comparable transformations in the early twentieth century.

Ford’s attitude towards consumption was ironic in many ways. While facilitating a consumer revolution through his Model T and Five Dollar Day, Ford looked to Protestant morals of self-restraint and gentility, associating the

³⁴ Cohen, “Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots,” 10.

³⁵ Nickles, “‘Preserving Women.’” 719-720.

³⁶ Marchand, “The Consumption Ethic,” 145.

³⁷ Amin, “Importing ‘Beauty Culture’ into Iran in the 1920s and 1930s,” 80.

newer principles of indulgence with Jews.³⁸ In *The Peoples' Tycoon*, Watts downplays Ford's attitude towards Jews. Although Watts dedicates a chapter to the discussion of anti-Semitism, throughout the book he argues that Ford is suspicious of intellectualism, Hollywood and Wall Street bankers, but hesitates to indicate that these groups were largely comprised of Jews.³⁹ According to John Dos Passos, Ford believed that Jews were behind all things he thought to be evil, including Bolshevism, international banking, movies and bootlegging.⁴⁰ Unlike Watts' portrayal of Henry Ford, other observers dedicate more discussion to Ford's racial views. Some even go so far as to label him a fascist. For example, David Rovic sings, "Henry Ford was a fascist / and a cunning liar, too / A brownshirt with a swastika / draped in red, white and blue."⁴¹ Watts failure to present how Ford's anti-Semitic position affected daily aspects of his life makes it seem excusable. By dedicating one section of his book to anti-Semitism instead of incorporating the issue throughout the book, Watts separates this significant part of Ford's outlook from the rest of his life.

In order to gain a broader perspective of Ford's contribution to consumer culture in America during the early twentieth century, Watts should have examined a wider variety of sources. He depends primarily on newspapers, magazines, political speeches, as well as Ford's own writings (which were often ghostwritten) and discussions. Despite being helpful sources, none of them provide a great deal of insight to the workers' side. Most of Watts' research is based on middle- to upper- class depictions of Ford, and there is no doubt that Watts would have portrayed Ford differently had he consulted more proletariat sources.

Clearly, Watts' intention is to portray Ford in a favourable light and as one of America's most influential businessmen of the twentieth century. In many ways, Watts' discussion of Ford is accurate; he played a large role in facilitating new values of consumption, although unintentionally at times, and managed workers' spending habits through his sociological department. However, Watts neglects to discuss the role of other forces, including working-

³⁸ Watts, *The Peoples' Tycoon*, 535.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁴⁰ John Dos Passos, "Tin Lizzie" in *The Big Money*, (New York: Signet, 1969), 74.

⁴¹ David Rovic, "Henry Ford Was A Fascist,"

<<http://members.aol.com/drovics/fordl.htm>>, December 2006.

class agency, in shaping American consumer consciousness. He also fails to address the global qualities of consumption in the early twentieth century. Along with limiting his sources, Watts minimizes Ford's anti-Semitic character. His portrayal of Ford, as well as his consumption practices, would have been much more accurate had he incorporated more of these issues into his argument.