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Colonialism and consumption: material identities in global perspective

Consumer society, consumerism, overconsumption. Even in the midst of climate crisis, why is consumption so hard to leave behind?

This piece argues that consumption is a key aspect of human life and as such, contemporary consumption dynamics affect global power relations that particularly touch colonial and post-colonial spaces. By using consumption as a window, I aim to examine past and contemporary colonialism and colonial relationships in a wide perspective.

The things that make us: consumption and identity

Having, gifting and using things, in the most general sense, is a key aspect of social life. At the most basic level, we are what we choose to have, use, eat or pass on. This is not an individual endeavour: these material choices are socially constructed, through exchange and daily renegotiation with others.

Material distinctions help us become part of a group, and the society where we live largely defines what "things" to have, eat or gift. Therefore, this relationship between consuming and identity works in two directions: to belong to a group, and to determine those that do not belong.

A classic example lies in the beginnings of European colonial expansion in the Americas during the 16th century: the indigenous people encountered by those early colonizers were immediately characterized as "savage". In this shock, the locals' food choices were the main "proof" of their monstrosity. Not only did the natives eat bugs, roots and other unknown beasts, but early colonizers started "seeing" one-eyed, blood-thirsty natives easily recognizable by their alleged cannibalism. The construction of difference between colonizers and locals started by their consumption habits, and then was consolidated through myths.



Source: "Brazilian cannibals". In De Bry, Theodore, *Americae tertia pars*, *Grandes voyages: India occidentalis*, 1st edn, 13 vols (J. Wechel et S. Feierabend, 1592), III <<https://bodmerlab.unige.ch>>

While nowadays it is less socially acceptable to judge people based on their likings or consumption choices, the identity implications of consumption remain. Why is it that "culture shock" is particularly noticeable with food? Why do we consider specific clothing items as "necessities"? How do you know when it is appropriate to wear a tie, and when it could be "too much"? Consumption is deeply embedded in our everyday life, from choosing your daily outfit to your lunch.

Consumption and colonialism: global beginnings

When thinking about consumption, most people imagine shopping malls, huge Amazon orders and Shein clothes filling landfills in Chile. They are not wrong. However, consumption is not a 20th, or even 19th-century phenomenon.

If, as outlined above, consumption is deeply linked to identity and human societies, it is a phenomenon as old as humanity itself. What humans decide to grow, gather, gift and keep has taken different shapes throughout history, but at its core it serves the same social purpose.

The need for "things" has shaped our contemporary world at every level. For instance, in the 16th century European colonial expansion was largely led by the quest for food. The "discovery" of the American continent was partly driven by the need of growing European monarchies to find fertile land to feed their people (and their soldiers).

The colonization of the Americas, Africa and Asia, and the immense exploitation this brought, was spurred by demands for food, exotic goods and manpower. At its most basic level, consumption was one of the drivers of imperialism and slavery. This consolidated specific power dynamics that often placed Europe and the United States at the pinnacle of a narrow view of "development" and "progress".

These dynamics did not stop after the independence of colonized territories in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The unprecedented flows of people, things and knowledge spurred by colonialism cemented the inequalities of global capitalism as we know it today.

Material consequences of colonialism: consumption in colonial & post-colonial spaces

The unequal power dynamics caused by colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Americas did not only shape global capitalism and transnational economies. Colonialism also instituted new ways of consumption in colonial territories. People living in these spaces not only produced goods demanded in Europe and the United States, but also engaged in new consumption patterns themselves. The material needs of colonial societies around the globe sometimes replicated imperial tastes, but not always. In many instances, the logics behind colonial consumption were locally constructed.

In colonial societies of the past, as is still the case now, using specific things showcased one's social standing. So, for instance, in colonial Spanish America, certain clothing items were only reserved for white people. This was the case of "mantillas", a type of head covering reserved for high end white women.

The links between dress, race and socioeconomic power in colonial Latin America are also evident in casta paintings. Typical of 17th- and 18th-century Spanish colonies, these painting series depicted the result of racial mixings. While the goal was to showcase the racial variability of the region, artists often added further elements that characterized every "mixture". As such, the individuals shown were dressed in the socially appropriate clothes for their standing, and sometimes even included foods that represented their place in society.

The material needs of colonial societies and the significance of items was specific to their own cultural context. As such, items considered "luxuries" in Europe were in some cases worn by people of all social standings in other parts of the world. In this sense, 18th and 19th-century travellers marvelled -sometimes in horror- at south American black women wearing pearl bracelets, delicate dresses and satin stockings even when they belonged to the lower social groups.



Source: Detail of groups 5, 6, and 7, Casta Painting, 18th century (Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Mexico)

However, consumption in the colonies was not always done on European terms. [Recent research](#) has shown that instead of simply desiring European goods or imitating the tastes of the Global North, people living in colonial spaces demanded goods for their own reasons. For example, 19th century Senegal was a relatively large importer of Indian cotton, instead of the more readily available British cotton. In contrast to neighbouring African regions, West Africans preferred Indian cotton and actively engaged in south-south trade, effectively bypassing British taste.

Nationhood & consumption in post-colonial contexts

Consumption choices have also served to unify national communities. In this sense, 19th-century nation-building often linked citizenship to consuming specific goods, particularly in post-colonial contexts outside of Europe and the US.

In many nations, consumption of industrial goods has been actively promoted by political elites to create a “modern nation”, often taking countries in the global north as examples of modernity. In [19th-century Mexico](#), machine-rolled cigarettes, department stores and billboards served as a way to create a feeling of national belonging: the “new Mexican citizen” would try these new technologies and bask in the prowess of local and foreign industries.

The use of consumption to consolidate a specific national ideology was not exclusive to the 19th-century. Countries around the world have used food in the last few decades to promote the nation at an international level, purposefully creating an image of the “local cuisine” that is then taught to citizens in a stark top-bottom motion. In successful cases, like Peru, the middle and lower socioeconomic groups eventually reproduce these consumption patterns, with internal variations.

Consumption demands in post-colonial spaces have also sparked controversy. In the 1980s and 1990s, many scholars aligned with post- and de-colonial movements heavily criticized the consumption of goods from the US and Europe. Sometimes called “coca-colonization”,

scholars worried that foreign goods were replacing local ones, eventually erasing cultural differences and deeply changing indigenous communities. However, [recent research](#) has shown otherwise.

While some consumption of foreign goods aims to imitate foreign taste, this is not always the case. Neither colonial nor modern consumers blindly follow imported tastes. Instead, locals outside of Europe and the US have used goods (local and foreign) to claim identity on their own terms, forge new political views and grapple with new ideas about nation, citizenship and belonging.

American goods made in China? Overconsumption, mass production & post-colonial spaces

While people all around the world have always engaged in consumption of material things, contemporary consumption demands spurs specific inequalities and exploitative dynamics. Oftentimes, the places that were ravaged by colonialism in the past engage nowadays in mass production of goods to feed the global demands of industrial capitalism.

Since the 1970s, western companies have outsourced the production of many products, notably clothes, to countries in the global south (Africa, Asia and Latin America). Within global capitalism, post-colonial spaces are considered sources of cheap labour, with [more than 75 million factory workers](#). Unfortunately, these workers are subject to dangerous labour conditions, exploitation and modern slavery.

Modern-day overconsumption is only possible due to underpaid and overworked labourers that make as little as 2 USD a day, sometimes even less. In a similar fashion to what happened with the exploitation of colonized lands, modern-day consumerism places regions and people outside the global north in a disadvantaged position. In this sense, global consumption demands perpetuate the exploitation of post-colonial spaces, feeding a toxic cycle with dangerous consequences for workers and the environment.

Room for growth? Out of the consumption cycle

Understanding the deeper logics of why we consume might make us more aware of the possible pitfalls when trying to lower our consumption. Stopping the shopping cycle is hard, among other things, because it helps us recreate our self-identity.

However, this does not mean all is lost. As more people strive to reach a more balanced relationship with material things, we might look at what people in the global south are doing. While oppression and harsh inequalities still plague post-colonial spaces, there are also pockets of resistance, innovation and change. From upcycling to reusing "discarded" materials, improving the lifecycle of consumables and trying to stick to local supply chains, communities around the globe are trying to deal with overconsumption in different ways.

For those of us living in Europe and the US, we hold weight as consumers. Re-thinking the global supply chain, trying to improve local workers' working conditions and holding companies accountable for their production practices are all within our sphere of influence and might help rebalance the inequalities present in modern-day consumption practices.