

Things Are in the Saddle

Samuel Strauss

Introduction

Mass production of consumer goods increased dramatically from the 1890s through the 1920s. Mail order catalogues like Sears and Roebuck, mass media like the radio and popular music, and especially the advent of the automobile redefined American homes and families. Mass production requires mass consumption. By the 1920s, consumption defined the growing middle class. The definition of middle class (then and now) centered on purchasing power, access to credit, and visual cues that you were of the “respectable class.”

Business and political leaders argued that consumption was the essence of American freedom in the Modern era. For example, the modern housewife had the freedom to choose whether to buy Ivory soap or Palmolive soap for her family. The most important thing was that she bought some kind of manufactured soap, a requirement for middle class homes. Critics of mass consumption argued that a society based on material wealth was doomed to fall into corruption and immorality.

Journalist Samuel Strauss was one such critic. From 1917 to 1925, Strauss published a weekly periodical called [The Villager](#) out of his apartment in the West Village of New York City (on the Lower East Side). The magazine relentlessly criticized business, lending institutions, and the federal government for promoting “consumptionism” no matter the cost. In 1923, Strauss wrote, “No, business does not care a straw for its individual initiative any more than for its individual freedom. The only freedom it worries over is the freedom which is threatened by Government interference, and this freedom is the freedom to make and keep profits, nothing more.”

Strauss published his best-known article, *Things are in the Saddle*, in the November, 1924 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, where he later work as an editor and essayist¹.

Primary Source

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

¹ Samuel Strauss, “[Things are in the Saddle](#),” originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1924. This work is believed to be in the public domain as of January 1, 2020. Until then this work is reprinted here under the provisions found in 17 U.S.C. § 108 (H).

to get in the way of the Republic—political corruption, extreme wealth, foreign domination, faction, class rule; what history did not advise them of, their truly extraordinary understanding of human nature and of political science supplied. 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 discovered². And surely nothing approaching what has taken recognizable shape in the twentieth century ever entered the mind of any philosopher of the eighteenth century, or any economist or any forward-looking salesman. 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.

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 magazine³ of things, is regarded as the successful development of the Fathers’ work⁴, 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 appeared 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.

² Interesting point. Strauss argues that the “Founders” had no precedent or context to understand mass production and consumption and how it would corrupt democracy. This argument only stands if you completely ignore the Atlantic Slave Trade, the domestic slave trade, an agricultural economy rooted in mass production of cash crops only possible from slave labor. The majority of the “Founders” were slaveowners and the Constitution protected slaveholders and their property rights. All you have to do is read the Debates from the Constitutional Convention to know the Founders were total aware of the threat of amoral capitalism on a nation. Nevertheless, Strauss’ point is well-taken.

³ “Magazine” originally referred to a unit of storage (originally from the ancient French verb “to store”), later used in the title of books providing information useful to a particular group of people, which then became the word for a periodical (until recently, magazine referred to a print periodical, it now refers to any publication of regularity, in print or otherwise) that appeals to a particular group of people. Strauss refers to the term’s original meaning: a unit of storage.

⁴ The “Founding Fathers.”

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. There are a thousand programmes cooking throughout the country, there are a thousand isms and causes and parties, each with its own notion of what must be done for the national good and the human good. Some of them are at war with each other, but at one point they are allies; some of them are worlds apart, speaking languages strange to each other – yet one word they have in common. The minister in the pulpit cries out upon materialism, commercialization, science, politics, rum, divorce, the young folks. He offers this or that or the other as the cure. But no minister in any pulpit offers any cure which requires that what is called the nation's "standard of living" sag⁵ back.

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 enthusiast⁶, 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 nettle⁷ 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.

⁵ Move backwards, roll back.

⁶ The League of Nations was formed following World War I (1918) with the hope of solving international conflict through diplomatic solutions rather than war. President Harry Truman included the League as part of his plan for the post-WWI world, called the Fourteen Points. Every nation invited to join the League did so, except the United States. The Republican Congress argued that joining the League would leave the country vulnerable to attack and encourage immigrants to side with their home countries against the United States. Despite the fact that the US President organized the League of Nations, and later won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts, Congress voted against the US joining the League.

⁷ Briars and weeds.

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.

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