

A brief history of frugality discourses in the United States

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Public discourses advocating frugal consumption have had a long history in the United States. This study provides a brief account of six different periods of such anti-consumerist thought and rhetoric: colonial, antebellum, Gilded Age, early twentieth century, World War II, and late twentieth century. The final section uses history to better understand the religious, political, and societal tensions that have characterized American frugality discourses.

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In the Fall of 2002, a small group of concerned Christians calling itself “The Evangelical Environmental Network” launched a media campaign built around the headline “What Would Jesus Drive?” An advertisement published on their website and in *Christianity Today* juxtaposed an image of Jesus at prayer with a photo of freeway congestion (Figure 1). The copy attacked car pollution for the illness and death it causes – the elderly, poor, sick, and young being the most afflicted – and for its contribution to global warming. The appeal concluded as follows:

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Transportation is now a moral choice and an issue for Christian reflection. It’s about more than engineering – it’s about ethics. About obedience. About loving our neighbor. So what *would* Jesus drive? We call upon America’s automobile industry to manufacture more fuel-efficient vehicles. And we call upon Christians to drive them. Because it’s about more than vehicles – it’s about values. (WWJD 2009)

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This rhetoric did not explicitly accuse owners of gas-guzzlers of immorality, for not loving their neighbors as themselves; but the implication was not far below the surface.

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Secular versions of this critique were also circulated (Armstrong and Welch 2003; Beam 2002; Huffington 2002). Trucks received the most opprobrium. The “Detroit Project” ran television ads that linked driving a sport utility vehicle with supporting terrorism (Detroit Project 2003) and the Sierra Club (2009) sponsored a website, *hammerdinger.com*, that parodied GM’s Hummer vehicles with corny humor such as “Enjoy technology that takes a step backwards!” and “Boy Scout buys hummer; earns Environmental Destruction badge.” Even the long-running cartoon strip, *Doonesbury*, added its opinion (see Figure 2). These campaigns received reasonably extensive news coverage, which soon generated heated reaction from SUV owners and conservative pundits (Kennedy 2003; McNamara 2003). A few years later, environmental activists scolded consumers for buying bottled water, and prompted initiatives in San Francisco

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What Would Jesus Drive?



To some, the question might seem amusing.

But we take it seriously. As our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ teaches us, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Mk 12:30-31)

Of all the choices we make as consumers, the cars we drive have the single biggest impact on all of God's creation.

Car pollution causes illness and death, and most afflicts the elderly, poor, sick and young. It also contributes to global warming, putting millions at risk from drought, flood, hunger and homelessness.

Transportation is now a moral choice and an issue for Christian reflection. It's about more than engineering—it's about ethics. About obedience. About loving our neighbor.

So what *would* Jesus drive?

We call upon America's automobile industry to manufacture more fuel-efficient vehicles. And we call upon Christians to drive them.

Because it's about more than vehicles—it's about values.

Rev. Clive Calver, Ph.D.
President, World Relief

Rev. Richard Cizik
Vice President for Governmental Affairs, National Association of Evangelicals

Loren Cunningham
Founder, Youth with a Mission
President, University of the Nations

Rev. David H. Englehard, Ph.D.
General Secretary, Christian Reformed Church in North America

Millard Fuller
Founder & President, Habitat for Humanity International

Rev. Vernon Grounds, Ph.D.
Chancellor, Denver Seminary

Rev. Steve Hayner, Ph.D.
Past President, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship

Rev. Roberta Hestenes, Ph.D.
International Minister, World Vision

Rev. Richard Mouw, Ph.D.
President, Fuller Theological Seminary

Rev. Ron Sider, Ph.D.
President, Evangelicals for Social Action

Sponsored By **THE EVANGELICAL ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK**

10 East Lancaster Ave., Wynnewood, PA 19096 www.WhatWouldJesusDrive.org

Partial list of signatories. Affiliations listed for identification only.

Figure 1. Print ad from "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign. Source: WWJD 2009.

and other cities banning the use of tax dollars to buy bottled water sold in plastic containers. The manufacture, distribution, and disposal of these very popular and conveniently packaged products was said to have serious environmental consequences compared with perfectly acceptable municipal water. Needless to say, the industry disputed these allegations (McGinn 2007).

These are just a few of many such episodes, stretching across three centuries of US history, where critics have preached the need for more frugal consumption. This tradition is here termed a *frugality discourse*. Although their details vary, frugality discourses generally have advocated that consumers show more discipline and resourcefulness in their product and service acquisition, use, and reuse (Lastovicka et al. 1999). This rhetoric has called on Americans not to reject their material culture to the extent of self-inflicted deprivation, but to consume more carefully, thoughtfully, and with greater restraint. Clergy have delivered many frugality sermons using theological arguments, but they have been joined by a long list of secular philosophers, writers, politicians, and even some commercial advertisers. All have chastised the wisdom and morality of excessive spending and consuming. Frugality discourses have been thus a regular counter-current against the rising tides level of American consumerism. How the most consumer-oriented society in the world (Schor 2004) has long maintained an opposing intellectual tradition to its dominant consumerist mentality merits scrutiny.

Frugality is part of a constellation of terms (e.g. boycotting, brand avoidance, consumer resistance, voluntary simplification) referring to anti-, reformist, or alternative consumption patterns. Frugality thought has concentrated on different issues in different time periods. Concepts important in the early twenty-first century, such as minimizing carbon footprints and counting food miles, were unknown to previous generations. Finishing all the food on one's plate may have been virtuous at one time, but seemed besides the point when obesity reached epidemic proportions in the United States. To complicate matters further, the often elitist rhetoric of some frugality discourses may not correspond to the meanings ordinary consumers assign to their purchasing behavior. In his ethnographic research in north London, Miller (1998) discovered that although shopping expeditions might begin with expenditure in mind, they often transform into efforts to save money, where traditional notions of restraint and sobriety are seen as more respectable than immediate gratification. And thrifty shopping itself may have hedonic value in the realization of consumer fantasies and the pursuit of the unexpected (Bardhi and Arnould 2005).



Figure 2. Gary Trudeau's "Doonesbury," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 January 2004.

Frugality discourses embody a set of attitudes toward and ways of thinking about consumerism. Like other anti-consumption critiques, they show both continuity and change over time (Dröge et al. 1993; Schudson 1991). As a phenomenon, frugality discourses offer an important perspective on the development and character of anti-consumption thought and action within consumer cultures. Yet, surprisingly, with few exceptions (e.g. Lastovicka et al. 1999), “the consumer behavior literature is virtually silent on thrift and frugality” (Arnould 2003, 321). This paper explores frugality discourses through intellectual history, the study of the evolution of ideas within their larger societal contexts (Fullerton and Punj 2004). The primary aim is to organize what is known about frugality discourses into an informative, accessible chronological order useful as reference for anti-consumption researchers. A secondary goal is to use history to better understand the contested nature of frugality discourses.

To achieve the first objective, American history is divided into six eras: colonial, antebellum, Gilded Age, early twentieth century, World War II, and late twentieth century. This periodization scheme was devised primarily for narrative convenience, like dividing a story into chapters, but also for historical reasons. For example, World War II is shorter in years than the other eras discussed, but is treated separately because it embodied an *important event* (WWII), a *major theme* (the consumer home-front), and *significant turning points* (1941 and 1945). All of these are accepted criteria for periodization (Hollander et al. 2005). To attain the second objective, religious, political, and social tensions in American frugality thought are analyzed from an historical perspective. Given the two objectives, the research and writing have been based largely on a review of the secondary literature. However, some primary evidence – sources created during the different eras under consideration (Witkowski and Jones 2006) – has also been consulted. Examples include period books and journals, decorating and homemaking manuals, government posters, magazine advertisements, greeting cards, and oil paintings.

Anti-consumption researchers should be cognizant of when, how often, and in what ways the various issues they study have been expressed over time. Historical precedents, accepted social customs, and well-established norms are all factors that influence both consumerism as well as the myriad forms of anti-consumption behavior it has spawned. Intellectual debates over consumption also have an historical dimension. Widespread skepticism over food security and the consequences of genetic modifications, for example, is part of a long tradition of gloom dating to the dire prognostications Thomas Malthus presented in 1798 in *An Essay on the Principle of Populations* (Belasco 2006). Moreover, ignorance of anti-consumption history risks being more than just a lost analytical opportunity. Historical amnesia may conceivably lead to serious factual errors when, for example, naïve scholars believe their topic to be something new, perhaps an emerging trend or movement, when in reality it is just one further chapter in a long-running story (Wooliscroft 2008).

Frugality discourses in the colonial and early federal eras

For many decades after the first English settlements of the early seventeenth century, frugal consumption was a necessity. Europeans and Africans crossed the Atlantic with few possessions and, in this pre-industrial age, it took them years to accumulate a store of material goods that could be passed on to the next generation. Settlers on the frontier needed to grow most of their own food, make most of their own clothing, and build their own houses and furniture. Tools and other useful objects had to be repaired



and re-used as long as possible. Even the wealthier merchants in the north, and planters in the south, maintained a rather plain style of living well into the 1700s (Witkowski 1989).

Frugality was also a moral virtue, and to some a religious injunction. Between 1732 and 1757, Benjamin Franklin repeatedly published sayings, such as “Be industrious and frugal, and you will be rich” or “Beware of little expenses; a small leak will sink a great ship,” in his financially successful *Poor Richard’s Almanack*. Drawing from a Western Judeo-Christian tradition skeptical of excess in acquisition, Puritans and Quakers favored productive work for the benefit of society and frowned upon consuming more than necessity required (Shi 1985). But whereas the Quaker critique was utilitarian and not an attack on consumption *per se*, Puritans were driven by spiritual principle that the love of consuming was an evil (Dröge et al. 1993; Schudson 1991). Puritan doctrine stressed that:

A man was but the steward of the possessions he accumulated. If he indulged himself in luxurious living, he would have that much less with which to support church and society. If he needlessly consumed his substance, either from carelessness or from sensuality, he failed to honor the God who furnished him with it. (Morgan 1967, 5)

To forestall impious materialism, the Massachusetts and Pennsylvania colonies enacted sumptuary laws in the seventeenth century (Hollander 1984), and New England ministers preached jeremiads against worldliness well into the eighteenth century. The Great Awakening, a widespread religious revival of the 1730s, stressed the virtues of simple living, and a generation later, “Americans of the Revolutionary period in every colony and state paid tribute to the Puritan Ethic and repeated its injunctions” (Morgan 1967, 7).

About 1750, a much different set of consumption values began to emerge. These were the motives of incipient consumerism, where wants continually expand and shopping in stores and buying on credit becomes more common (Slater 1997; Stearns 2001). Surviving material artefacts and written records document this change. Colonists began building larger and more stylish houses, using better-quality eating utensils, improving their manners, and, in general, becoming more refined (Breen 2004; Bushman 1992). Imports of luxury goods from the mother country increased and some colonists began to amass large debts with British middlemen (Henretta 1973). The upper classes were among the first to adopt these newer values and behaviors; but, as documented in surviving probate records (Carr and Walsh 1980), even people of more middling circumstances began to acquire small luxuries such as silver spoons. Breen (2004) contends the desire to obtain imported British goods promoted an “industrious revolution” where entire families labored to obtain additional disposable income, in effect, trading leisure time for material things. Thus, the second half of the eighteenth century marks the birth of true consumerist desire in America.

American consumption became politicized in the decade before the Revolutionary War. Three times in the 1760s and 1770s, colonists organized mass boycotts of British goods in order to force Parliament to rescind objectionable taxes. Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and many other patriots urged their fellows to forego imported “superfluities” and, instead, to be thrifty and to produce their own goods. Such views were aired at town meetings and widely disseminated via letters reprinted in colonial newspapers. This “nonimportation movement” was successful in that the many onerous taxes, such as the Stamp Act and most of the Townshend Duties, were repealed; but it took six years of fighting to finally settle the political dispute with Great Britain. In

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effect, the American Revolution was abetted by a consumer movement stressing frugal consumption and home production (Breen 1988, 2004; Witkowski 1989).

After the Revolution, support for frugality remained a strong force in American culture and politics. John Adams believed that government, in conjunction with the family, schools, community, and religion, could counterbalance excessive materialism, whereas his great colleague, friend, and political rival, Thomas Jefferson, encouraged for others – Jefferson himself loved his luxuries – a modest, agrarian lifestyle (Shi 1985). Both were dismayed by former patriots who discarded “republican simplicity” in favor of renewed acquisitiveness and indebtedness to foreign merchants. Consumerism was wrong when it substituted for productive work and distracted citizens from their civic duties (Dröge et al. 1993; Schudson 1991).

Additional evidence from the period suggests a gendered tension between frugality and consumerism. A letter from 1787, published in a Philadelphia magazine called *American Museum*, described how female influence could override a farmer’s better judgment:

When his second daughter prepared her trousseau, his wife insisted that the girl be furnished with store-bought goods – a calico gown, stoneware tea cups, pewter spoons, and so forth. Although the farmer protested that homespun was good enough, he gave his wife the money. Upon the marriage of the next daughter, his wife again demanded money and this time she bought silk and china. From that point on, no money could be saved because all of the profits went for market luxuries. (cited in Shammas 1982, 248)

Intended as both social and gender criticism, this letter suggests that some women placed a higher priority on household luxuries than did their menfolk, and were earlier adopters of the more prestigious, store-bought items. They were, in other words, developing a propensity to consume characteristic of modern consumerist culture (Slater 1997; Witkowski 1999). Chastising women for frivolous spending continued to be a standard part of the critical repertoire until the late twentieth century (Stearns 2001).

Antebellum frugality discourses

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the US economy had grown considerably larger than in the Revolutionary period and was quite literally gathering steam for even faster growth in the future. Material conditions had improved for many, but far from all, Americans. Great fortunes had been made across the new nation and some centers, above all New York City, became sites for the most fashionable consumption (Milbank 2000; Peck 2000). Middle-class women were becoming increasingly active as their households’ purchasing agents and mavens of domesticity (Witkowski 1999, 2004). Although distribution was spotty and advertising remained primitive, a few bold retailers, like New York’s A.T. Stewart, were experimenting with more opulent and larger-scale merchandising formats that would soon evolve into full-fledged department stores (Benson 1986; Resseguie 1964).

Frugality sermons of the antebellum period took several forms. Those preached in the 1820s and 1830s by the revivalist, Lyman Beecher, advocated a conservative, moralistic “Christian simplicity,” a throwback to the Puritan era. Reverend Beecher worried about materialism undermining the established social order (Shi 1985), whereas other ministers simply repeated the old accusation that “the parade of luxury” undermined the “more durable riches than those this world can offer” (Stearns 2001,

52). Harris (1981) contends that during this mid-century period, criticism of consumerism began shifting from a moralistic disapproval of the upper classes buying luxuries to a concern about working class consumers unable to restrain themselves from purchasing the increasingly alluring array of goods presented in stores.

Different voices stressed a frugal domesticity. In his essays, books, and architecture, Andrew Jackson Downing (1842, 1850) advocated utilitarian cottages and farmhouses for the people and unostentatious, moderate homes for country gentlemen. Magazines, such as *Godey's Lady's Book* (founded in 1837), instructed middle-class women on how to tastefully furnish and manage their houses (Shi 1985). First published in 1828, and with 12 editions by 1833, Lydia Marie Child's popular manual for homemakers, *The American Frugal Housewife*, was "dedicated to those who are not ashamed of economy" (Child 1833). Along with her advice for frugally performing the various domestic arts, Mrs. Child railed against consumerism:

There is one kind of extravagance rapidly increasing in this country, which, in its effects on our purses and our habits, is one of the worst kinds of extravagance; I mean the rage for traveling, and for public amusements. The good old home *habits* of our ancestors are breaking up – it will be well if our virtue and our freedom do not follow them! ... A republic without industry, economy, and integrity, is Samson shorn of his locks. A luxurious and idle *republic!* Look at the phrase! – The words were never made to be married together; every body sees that it would be death to one of them. (Child 1833, 99)

Similar sentiments were echoed in *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841) and *The Domestic Receipt Book* (1846) written by Catharine Beecher, the daughter of Lyman Beecher.

Perhaps the most interesting ideas came from the philosophers, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who endorsed in their lectures and writings a more spontaneous, liberating, and romantic "transcendental simplicity" (Shi 1985). Emerson, who himself lived comfortably and genteelly, saw frugality as a means to a higher end: "Economy is a high, humane office, a sacrament, when its aim is grand; when it is the prudence of simple tastes, when it is practiced for freedom, or love, or devotion" (cited in Shi 1985, 133). Thoreau's sojourn at Walden Pond in 1845–1847 taught him to value self-sufficiency in raising food, making clothes, and building shelter and furniture. High thinking was preferable to high living: "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor" (Thoreau 1971, 14). The audience for this supposedly uplifting philosophy may have been limited. Thoreau was not an especially frequent or popular public lecturer, and it took eight years to sell the 2000 copies of *Walden's* first printing in 1854.

Mid-century genre artists, who depicted the nation's ordinary people and the vicissitudes of their everyday lives, also began commenting on the morality of buying (Witkowski 1996). This theme was explored in several paintings by Francis W. Edmonds (1806–1863), a New York banker by profession, who was also a talented artist influenced by early Dutch genre scenes (Clark 1988). *The New Bonnet* (1858), perhaps his most visually striking work, tells the story of a young woman raptly admiring her just delivered acquisition, while her parents, when presented the bill of sale, give a horrified reaction to their daughter's "extravagance" (Figure 3). The relatively simple dwelling and plain dress of the older couple – not to mention the presence of a forlorn little delivery girl in the doorway – are contrasted with their

daughter's more stylish appearance and buyer's rapture. Here, frugality with things is delicately positioned as a moral opposite to consumerism. Edmond's painting echoed long-standing concerns about unbridled female purchasing, but clearly shows some admiration for the fashionable object in hand. The work does not appear judgmental and seems to ask viewers to draw their own conclusions about consumerism. What Edmond's powerful visual image does accomplish, however, is to place consumerism within the confines of private, bourgeois domesticity (Slater 1997; Witkowski 2004).

Frugality discourses in the Gilded Age

After the Civil War, the nation's predominantly agrarian economy and rural society was transformed greatly through industrialization and urbanization. Living standards improved as incomes grew and the world of goods expanded through product innovation, mass production, and new forms of distribution such as department and chain stores and direct mail (Boorstin 1973; Leach 1984). Advertising of the time embodied a happy optimism and flamboyance (Laird 1998; Lears 1996) and promotional schemes became increasingly aggressive. In the 1870s, chain stores like the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company began giving away premiums such as ceramics,



Figure 3. Antebellum frugality: *The New Bonnet* (1858). Painted by Frances W. Edmonds (1806–1863), oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

glassware, cutlery, and kitchen gadgets (Blaszczak 2000). In the latter part of the nineteenth century, retailers defined shopping as a feminine activity and transformed crockery emporiums, tea stores, and five-and-tens into appropriate public spaces for women and girls. Department stores, in particular, were deliberately feminized for the enjoyment of women shoppers (Benson 1986) and, by the 1890s, relatively few men frequented them. F.W. Woolworth urged its suppliers to create goods with “lady lure” (Blaszczak 2000). Thus, the marketing infrastructure necessary for a modern consumer culture became increasingly manifest.

The 1873 social satire, *The Gilded Age*, written by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, gave this era its lasting soubriquet. Like Shakespeare’s King John, who is advised “To gild refined gold, to paint the lily,/ ... Is wasteful and ridiculous excess,” the extravagance of the very wealthy and powerful was the signal issue (Cashman 1993). Although the buyer behavior of the middle and lower classes came under scrutiny (Horowitz 1985), leading intellectuals, such as William Dean Howells, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, E.L. Godkin, editor of *The Nation*, Charles Eliot Norton, editor of the *North American Review*, and the philosopher William James, voiced much more disgust with the crass materialism of the newly rich (Shi 1985). American plutocracy’s greatest critic, however, was Thorstein Veblen. In his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen (1899) wrote a scholarly, but highly influential, frugality sermon that combined wry social criticism with new insights from economics and cultural anthropology. His theory contended that consumption became grossly conspicuous in order to create invidious distinctions and to mark status. Veblen also explained how women had been transformed historically from domestic laborers to household consumers. Those men who could afford the show paraded their finely attired females in public as gaudy signs of their commercial or professional success. The more visible idleness these wives and daughters enjoyed, the greater their symbolic value. The image of well-dressed women at leisure appeared in a number of works by American painters around the turn of the century. This social pose irritated Veblen, who had a high regard for productive work.

As in the antebellum period, Gilded Age writers published best-selling manuals for achieving a “simplified life.” In *The Decoration of Houses*, Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr. (1897) argued for a simple aesthetic and less cluttered domestic spaces. As her later novels would testify, Wharton (who came from old money) was a keen observer of the social ambitions of parvenus. The English translation (from French) of Charles Wagner’s *The Simple Life* (1904) made the author a celebrity in America. He reprimanded readers for their ostentation, modernity, and abandonment of family tradition. He believed in neither an atavistic renunciation of worldly goods nor in a socialistic redistribution of wealth, but rather that people in all stations needed to make an individual and personal commitment to their authentic and spiritual selves. Wagner’s ideas were popularized by the *Ladies Home Journal* and found a particularly receptive audience among “middle-class urban Americans of liberal evangelical background. Many of these people, who felt morally uncertain or guilty about their increased wealth and comfort, found simple-life philosophy appealing” (Leach 1994, 203). Ironically, Philadelphia’s John Wanamaker, one of America’s richest men and a major financial backer of mainstream, Protestant institutions, became a disciple of Wagner and preached simplicity while at the same time turning luxuries into commodities and necessities for sale in his ornate department stores (Leach 1994; Vanderbilt 1996).

Early twentieth-century frugality discourses

It may not be an exaggeration to say that at least some public discussion of frugality was always taking place in the United States (Dröge et al. 1993; Schudson 1991), but certain events gave moralists new opportunities to express their concerns. World War I appears to have been such a catalyst. In 1916 and 1917, Stuart Chase published articles in *Good Housekeeping* and the *Independent* showing how his personal household budget had been adversely impacted by inflation. When America entered the War in April, 1917, Chase became convinced that reducing luxuries was “not only a personal necessity but a patriotic duty to eliminate waste and extravagance” (cited in Horowitz 1985, 112). Chase went on to write *The Tragedy of Waste* (1925) and, with F. J. Schlink, *Your Money’s Worth* (1927). Chase and Schlink also founded the advocacy group, Consumer’s Research in 1929, which was the precursor organization to Consumer’s Union and its publication, *Consumer’s Report*.

A new National Thrift Movement also emerged and remained active for many years (Blankenhorn 2006). Its leaders wrote popular books and magazine articles, gave talks to civic and youth groups, and formed local Thrift Committees across the country. The movement published *National Thrift News*, sponsored a national thrift week, and organized public service ad campaigns. The American Federation of Labor passed a resolution at its 1919 convention in support of the Thrift Movement (Wolfe 1920). In January, 1920, the entire contents of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* were devoted to “the new American thrift.” In his article, “The Relation of Thrift to Nation Building,” T.N. Carver of Harvard University concluded “Remember that thrift consists in buying, but in buying wisely. Urge every one, if you please, to buy and buy now, but URGE HIM TO BUY THINGS THAT WILL GIVE HIM MORE BUYING POWER NEXT YEAR AND EVERY YEAR” (Carver 1920, 8). Like other American frugality discourses, this one did not reject consumption, but instead instructed on what Blakey (1920) termed the “proper use” of goods.

The Great Depression presented a serious challenge to the consumption patterns and mindset established during the booming economy and exuberant popular culture of the 1920s and previous decades (Ewen 1976; Marchand 1985). With wages down and unemployment rates averaging 17.9% between 1930 and 1940, many people were forced to greatly lower their material expectations and to scrimp wherever they could (Hill, Hirschman, and Bauman 1997). Although the 1930s saw increases in the percentage of US households with inside flush toilets and electric lighting and appliances, many families still lacked a modern consumer infrastructure.

Thirty-three percent of all Americans had no running water in 1940, 67 percent had no central heat, 47 percent had no built-in bathing apparatus in their homes, 48 percent had no interior access to automatic or other washing machines, 48 percent had no refrigerator, and 33 percent cooked with wood or coal. (Green 1992, 7–8)

In 1942, 58% of all US families owned at least one automobile (55% urban vs 69% farm), a percentage about the same as in 1930 (60%) and more than double the 1920 figure (26%) (Lebergott 1993). The 1930s did see continual development of mass audiences for radio, the movies, and professional sports whose stars were lionized by the mass media (Green 1992).

Poor economic conditions engendered a new sentiment that condemned 1920s greed and ostentation, excessive consumer credit, waste in manufacturing, and, for

good measure, alleged immorality in the movies (Cross 2000). Unlike previous discourses on frugality, which tended to be disseminated by elite thinkers, this one had a more populist flavor. The Marx Brothers and Three Stooges, among other comedians, loved to twit the pompous rich in their movies, while Walt Disney's "The Grasshopper and the Ants" cartoon (1934) promoted an ethic of controlled consumption (Lears 1996, 237). A short-lived magazine out of New York, *The Ballyhoo*, skewered advertising and high-pressure salesmanship. In the early 1930s, with a circulation over 1.5 million, it published ad parodies (e.g., "Scramel Cigarettes"), created fake products (e.g., "Lady Pipperel Bedsheet De Luxe"), and encouraged readers to "Become a Toucher Upper!" and go out with paint to mess up outdoor posters (Klein 1999; Rorty 1934). Documentary photographers like Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Margaret Bourke-White created images that contrasted boastful ad slogans ("There's No Way Like the American Way" or "World's Highest Standard of Living") with the surrounding landscape of breadlines and tenements (Klein 1999). Some 1930s advertising began to echo and play upon public concerns about economizing, job security, and day-to-day survival. More and more ads emphasized price and mentioned the competition. Clenched faces and clenched fists, a visual cliché of many advertising tableaux, mirrored consumer anxieties as well as a mythic determination to somehow prevail over adversity (Marchand 1985).

The advertising industry discussed the threat posed by frugality in its trade publications, where writers complained about hoarders, a "buyer's strike," and "consumer constipation." The gloomiest prophets worried about an impending collapse in the consumption ethic:

Columbia professor Walter B. Pitkin warned in 1933 and 1934 of a potential "return to the primitive, a back-to-the-soil type of living" that would disdain progress and "the finer things." "Millions of rising consumers" might well relinquish "what we now consider the American standard of living," he declared. [...] Hart, Schaffner and Marx tried to re-stimulate the buying instincts of men who were becoming accustomed to "skimping" on themselves, and American Telephone and Telegraph worried that people who gave up on their phones during the depression years might lose the "telephone habit." Not only had it become the fashion to be thrifty, complained advertising writer, Roberts Updegraff, but people were beginning to get "vain, virtuous, and vulgar about it in public." Advertising was going to have to work hard to combat this "degenerate type of social prestige," warned Professor Pitkin. (Marchand 1985, 300–1)

And it did. In the 1930s, contests attractive to the wishful thinking of struggling consumers appeared more frequently in magazine advertising than in any other decade between 1900 and 1980 (Pollay 1985). On the burgeoning new medium of radio, inventive product premium schemes were woven into soap opera plots (Lavin 1995). Cross (2000) believes these fears of consumerism's collapse were overblown. Yes, lack of income frustrated many buying plans, but people still clung to their old habits and dreams as long as they could. Movie goers flocked to see the opulent movie musicals of Busby Berkeley and others, and many films of the era seemed fixated on the lifestyles of the very rich.

World War II frugality on the consumer home front

By 1941, better business conditions, helped by increases in military spending, were once again creating a buoyant economy that finally put money in consumers' pockets. The problem was how to spend it. After Pearl Harbor, the war effort necessitated a

redirection of raw materials and production, which quickly led to shortages of a number of consumer goods (appliances, automobiles and tires, gasoline, some foods) and services (housing, medical). In order to mobilize the home front, the US government launched publicity campaigns that advocated being thrifty with goods and services, conserving gasoline and tires, recycling scrap metals and other materials, growing and storing food at home, obeying price and ration controls, and buying war bonds (see Figure 4). The Office of War Information coordinated the efforts of several federal agencies and conveyed these messages through the press, posters, radio, and motion pictures. Schools, libraries, companies, and volunteer groups helped this effort by disseminating posters and other messages (Witkowski 2003). Thus, frugality received official sanction during World War II.

Commercial advertising also contained frugality appeals. Both Texaco and the American Gas Association encouraged energy-saving behaviors, while the Bell Telephone System urged its customers: "Please do not make Long Distance telephone calls to war-busy centers unless it is really necessary" (*Life* 1943a). Yet, some ads were more self-serving – Lane, a maker of cedar chests, declared: "SAVE woollens in a Lane" (*Life* 1943b) – and many admen were none too keen on helping the Roosevelt Administration (Fox 1984). However, threats from Congress to ban advertising for the duration frightened the industry into forming a War Advertising Council in 1942 – composed of representatives from ad agencies, the media, and business – to coordinate public service campaigns for the War effort and improve public relations with the home front (Fox 1975).

Newspapers and magazines published numerous articles on frugal consumption, and private companies printed booklets on home canning and better meal planning (Ward 1994, 184–5). Scriptwriters included conservation and other war themes in popular radio comedies such as *Fibber McGee and Molly* (Nelson 1991). In conjunction with the waste fats salvage campaign, Walt Disney made his third wartime film, "Out of the Frying Pan into the Firing Line," for the Conservation Division of the War Production Board (Ward 1994, 174). In the 1943 RKO movie *Tender Comrade*, star Ginger Rogers lambasted a woman who bragged about her hoarding skills and joined other women in denouncing a black market butcher in their neighborhood (Fyne 1994). A World War II-era birthday card owned by the author refers to food rationing and shortages. Above a cartoon drawing of a white-haired man seated at a table set with just a few items of food on his plate, the copy reads: "HAPPY BIRTHDAY We may be eatin' less these days..." This good-natured acceptance of small deprivations is consistent with the upbeat tone of most other wartime frugality campaigns (Witkowski 2003) and with consumer recollections of the period (Witkowski and Hogan 1999). Perhaps never before, and certainly never since, were frugality appeals disseminated so widely in American society by so many and with such visual imagination and intensity. Consumer response was impressive: Americans recycled 538 million pounds of waste fats, 23 million tons of paper, and 800 million pounds of tin, while planting 50 million victory gardens (Fox 1975, 54).

Late twentieth-century frugality discourses

A deep reservoir of demand burst open after the war and – encouraged by generous credit terms and an added promotional boost from the new medium of television – firmly established once and for all a great American propensity for buying and

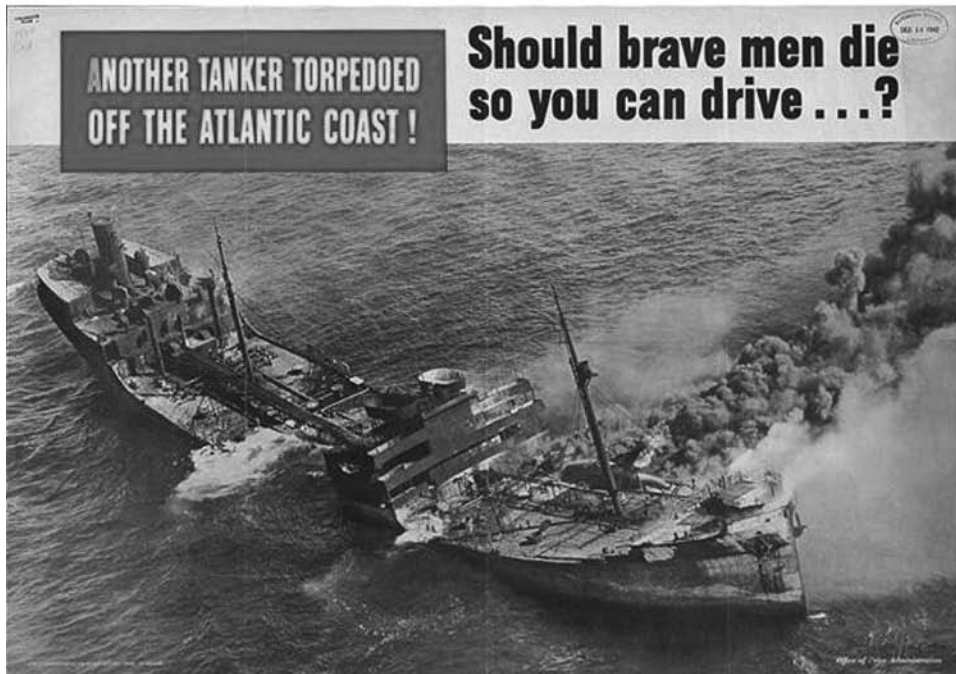


Figure 4. World War II frugality posters, 1943 (top) and 1942 (bottom); US Office of Price Administration.

5 having things. Business, labor, and government agreed that future prosperity depended upon unrelenting mass consumption. In effect, purchasing was transformed into a civic responsibility: good consumers became good citizens (Cohen 2003). Large numbers of Americans dropped the ethos of frugality and re-embraced what Cross (2000), Ewen (1976), Twitchell (1999), and many other observers have contended is the deepest and most durable ideology of twentieth-century America: consumerism.

10 The material well-being of American consumers was not something to be taken lightly, as post-war politicians have generally recognized. During the Vietnam War, the public was not asked to sacrifice financially because President Johnson believed the nation could simultaneously afford to fight communism in Southeast Asia and build a “Great Society” at home. At the beginning of the War on Terrorism in the Fall of 2001, the Bush administration actually asked people to continue spending as usual in order to help revive a sluggish economy. President Carter’s earnest, cardigan-clad appeals for plain living, energy conservation, and lowered expectations did not help him much at the ballot box in 1980. Voters had had enough with oil shortages and stagflation and, instead, opted for Ronald Reagan’s politics of early-morning optimism. In the 1980s, and again after 2001, economic growth would be fueled by lower taxes, private spending, and record federal budget deficits.

20 Frugal consumption in practice was somewhat difficult to find outside the working poor and poverty stricken. Americans were smitten by suburbia and mass market luxuries, a consumption style and attitude that Thomas Hine (1986) has dubbed “Populuxe.” Nevertheless, writers of the 1950s identified and criticized the excesses of post-war consumer culture. In *The Affluent Society*, for example, John Kenneth Galbraith (1958) complained about the manipulation of demand by business, and the over-emphasis on private consumption to the detriment of the quality of public services. In *The Waste Makers*, a popular muckraking journalist, Vance Packard (1960), took on seductive packaging, planned obsolescence, and the throwaway psychology of the masses. Frugality did become part of the lifestyle of some “beat” poets and artists in the 1950s (Shi 1985). Later, hippies and other highly committed adopters of the late 1960s counterculture practised alternatives to consumerism via experiments in communal living and through studied rejection of their parents’ suburban values (Reich 1970; Roszak 1969).

35 The first Earth Day, celebrated on 21 March 1970, marked the emergence of an environmental movement in the United States that reasserted the need for a frugality ethos in order to protect the planet from pollution and other afflictions (Fritsch 1974). Since then, numerous private sector companies and non-profit organizations, like the National Recycling Coalition founded in 1978, have taken initiatives to promote recycling, energy reduction, and solid waste management, while state governments and public utilities have often been leaders in promoting the conservation of resources such as water and electricity. The purely environmental concerns of the early 1970s were soon joined by worries about over-dependence on foreign oil, a point brought home to American drivers by the Arab oil embargo of 1973–74 and by the Iranian revolution of 1979. In 1975, Congress enacted CAFE (Corporate Average Fuel Economy) standards to boost national fuel efficiency. CAFE regulations have been highly controversial and were not seriously overhauled by Congress until December, 2007. Controlling demand through higher federal gasoline taxes has found virtually no political support in Washington.



During the 1990s, the “voluntary simplicity movement” became a widely disseminated frugality critique. Numerous newspaper and magazine articles, book-length anti-consumption guides, and a modest selection of scholarly analyses instructed readers about the meaning and practice of varying degrees of voluntary simplicity (see, e.g., Dominguez and Robin 1992; Elgin 1993; St. James 1996; Schor 1998). Anti-consumption activists held national conferences (Maniates 2002) and formed networks of local consciousness-raising groups, called “simplicity circles” (Andrews 1997; Thompson 1998). Estimates of the number of converts have varied, but the US total is probably in the millions. Simplifiers have tended to be in the middle quintile in terms of household income, and are much more educated than the average American (Maniates 2002). Unlike the working poor, who are saddled with involuntary simplicity, simplifiers have had enough control over their economic lives to rearrange work schedules or, if need be, change jobs. For many of its proponents, voluntary simplicity has had as much to do with the time pressures and pace of life dictated by a highly competitive and marketized economy as it has with over-consumption of material things.

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Etzioni (1998) distinguishes between “downshiffters,” who give up some consumer goods, such as new cars, but otherwise maintain a consumerist lifestyle; “strong simplifiers,” who give up significant income and, hence, some goods and services for discretionary time and leisure; and “the simple living movement,” people who adjust entire life patterns motivated by a coherently articulated philosophy. Shaw and Newholm (2002) refer to this last group as “ethical consumers” because their buyer behaviors and lifestyles are shaped by moral concerns about the environment, fair trade practices, and/or animal rights. Lastovicka (1999) and his colleagues find the frugal empirically “less susceptible to interpersonal influence, less materialistic, less compulsive in buying, and more price and value conscious” (96). Interestingly, their frugality scale was not related to their measure of ecocentricity.

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Since its founding in 1991 by the Media Foundation, *Adbusters* has actively espoused a humorously dissident ideology of frugality. Based in Vancouver, but with about two-thirds of its readers in the United States, this quarterly magazine, along with companion books, videos and a website, facilitate grassroots activities that resist the hegemony of the dominant consumerist system (Bordwell 2002; Lasn 1999; Rumbo 2002). For example, “culture jamming” creates “counter-messages that hack into a corporation’s own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended” (Klein 1999, 281). Parodies of Joe Camel (a sickly “Joe Chemo”) and Absolut Vodka (a limp bottle of “Absolut Impotence”) provide a critical “perspective by incongruity” (Bordwell 2002, 247). *Adbusters* has tried to place (usually without success, save for a few spots on CNN) “uncommercials” or “subvertisements” with anti-consumption messages on network television. It has also promoted an annual “TV Turnoff Week,” “World Car-Free Day,” and a “Buy Nothing Day” on the Friday after Thanksgiving, the busiest shopping day of the year in the United States (Figure 5). *Adbusters* has encouraged company and industry boycotts and, in the tradition of *The Ballyhoo* magazine in the early 1930s, has discussed guerilla tactics like defacing outdoor advertising, now known as “billboard liberation.”

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In a similarly subversive vein, the 2007 film, *What Would Jesus Buy?*, addresses tensions between Christmas as a religious holiday and Christmas as a commercial proposition. It is a documentary of the 2005 cross-country trek of the “Reverend Billy” (a character created by actor Bill Talen) and “The Church of Stop Shopping” gospel choir as these musicians and performance artists stage agitprop events at the

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Figure 5. Adbusters campaign material.
Source: www.adbusters.org.

Mall of America, Wal-Mart headquarters, Disneyland, and other retail venues. This troupe thus exploits long-standing religious social types – the loquacious, big-haired preacher and rocking, gospel singers – to ridicule excessive consumption, a harbinger of the “shopocalypse.”



Less strident frugality appeals have appeared in more mainstream media. The PBS program, “Affluenza,” and its sequel “Escape from Affluenza,” diagnosed an “epidemic of over-consumption” and provided viewers with teaching and program guides for changing consumer behavior (Affluenza 1998). Bill Maher (2002), a humorist and television host, wrote *When you Ride ALONE you Ride with Bin Laden*, a book that reworked the visual style of World War II posters in order to question American consumption habits in the aftermath of 9/11. Yet, frugality has also been co-opted and commoditized. Books on voluntary simplicity apparently have succeeded commercially. Two glossy, advertising-intensive magazines launched in 2000, *Simplicity* and *Real Simple*, fostered a postmodern kind of branded simplicity where frugality becomes actualized through consumerism (Maniates 2002). Frugality metamorphosed into hyperreal farce in late 2003 when the Fox TV “reality” show, *The Simple Life*, garnered high ratings by staging the travails of heiress Paris Hilton and her sidekick Nicole Richie, two shallow, pampered consumers, who had been assigned to live and work with an Altus, Arkansas farm family. A confrontation between state-of-the-art indulgence and more traditional virtues became a platform for mass entertainment sponsored by consumer products companies.

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Historical tensions in frugality discourses today

Historical analysis can provide insights into contemporary frugality discourses. Here, we examine three contested areas in today’s frugality discourses – religion, politics, and society – in terms of their historical antecedents and long-standing tensions.

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Religious tensions

From the seventeenth-century proponents of the Puritan and Quaker ethics to the twenty-first-century Evangelical Environmental Network, frugality discourses have had religious and morally prescriptive dimensions, where caution with material things honored God and preserved His creation. Yet, the stern vision of these jeremiads has seldom been a serious competitor to the simple pleasures of consumption. Worldly delights attracted the devotion of ordinary Americans far more than did religious asceticism. Even in colonial times, ministers may have played an ineffective role in combating the relatively low-level consumerism of the day. Droll stories were told about one itinerant preacher, the Reverend James Davenport, who in 1743 convinced true believers in New London to consign their British fineries and “Gay Cloaths” to a large bonfire of vanities. At the very last moment before the fire was lit, the semi-nude sinners had second thoughts about this path to salvation and rescued their offending garments (Breen 2004).

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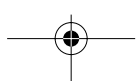
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For over 200 years, the majority of American faithful have seemed quite content to let their consumerist and religious lives coexist peacefully. By the twentieth century, the strong tradition of social criticism among Protestants had greatly diminished, while Catholics and Jews focused more on assimilation than on their prophetic traditions (Leach 1994). Lears (1996, 47) maintains that the Protestant ethic of self-control could often give way to a more emotional religiosity that paved the way for an eroticization of goods. Although religious rituals (fasting, observing a Sabbath) have sometimes dictated short-term consumption sacrifices, few faiths have made such practices a total lifestyle choice like the Amish or Hare Krishnas. Maniates (2002) argues that homilies on the immorality of consumption “too often overemphasize

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individual culpability for materialism at the cost of frank talk about the political and economic structures that manufacture desire and lock us into pattern of overconsumption” (209).

Indeed, religion, consumption, and commerce have had a long acquaintance in the United States (Lears 1996). Because of religious fragmentation and separation from state support, churches have had to compete for parishioners and their financial backing. Thus, various denominations have often been marketed as vigorously and as skillfully as any other product or service. Bruce Barton, co-founder of the BBDO advertising agency and an enthusiastic Christian, portrayed Jesus as a consummate salesman in *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus* (1926). Barton imagined Jesus in the modern world: “Jesus would be a national advertiser today. I am sure, as he was the great advertiser of his own day” (Barton 1926, 140). Twitchell (1999) observes that Barton’s religion and American advertising have the same allure. Salvation can be had through faith in the grace of God and faith in the efficacy of consumer goods, thus “melding therapeutic religiosity with an ideology of consumption” (Lears 1983, 31).

Numerous US Protestant congregations subscribe to a theology wherein material success is something granted by God. Based in Pentecostalism, but increasingly mainline, this “prosperity gospel” has been very attractive to the lower middle classes, particularly in the rural South (Lobdell 2004a, 2004b). As Pastor Paul Crouch of the highly successful Trinity Broadcasting Network has pronounced: “When you give to God, you’re simply loaning to the Lord and He gives it right on back” (Lobdell 2004a, A36). According to a 2006 representative sample of self-reported adult Christians, 61% agreed that “God wants people to be financially prosperous” (Van Biema and Chu 2006). Moreover, religious organizations often raise funds by serving the consumerist urges of their flocks. For example, the Trinity Broadcasting Network has a “Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh Web Store” featuring thousands of different religiously-themed items (TBN 2009). Independent sellers promote everything from baseball caps to flip-flops to golf balls imprinted with Christian icons and texts. A 2006 trade show in Denver had 400 vendors, and the retail Christian market was estimated to total \$4.3 billion in 2004 (Simon 2006).

Linking Jesus to resource conservation may have limited resonance because so many fundamentalist Christians, the so-called “Religious Right,” have been loyal foot soldiers in a Republican Party largely indifferent to environmental issues. However, fundamentalists should not be confused with evangelical Christians, who are a more diverse group. Moderate or “freestyle” evangelicals are socially more liberal and politically in play (Waldman 2003), while a number of prominent theologians and outspoken megachurch pastors, such as Rick Warren, the author of the best-selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002) find the prosperity gospel laughable and potentially heretical (Van Biema and Chu 2006). Perhaps the WWJD campaign and similarly themed messages will appeal to these groups as well as to socially attuned Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and others. The world’s major religions, as reflected in their texts and teachings, have a shared and ancient tradition of commenting on materialism and urging restraint in consumption (UNDP 1998).

Political tensions

Frugality has been used as a battle flag for political partisans. During late colonial times, if one word could represent the ideology of non-importation, “virtue” would



come closest. A person showed virtue by exercising self-restraint in the consumer marketplace. This was a secular characteristic that anyone – man or woman, city-dweller or farmer, richer or poorer – could possess. As long as someone was capable of purchasing British goods, then that person could demonstrate consumer virtue by giving them up. A patriotic style of dress, plain and homespun, became the most obvious measure of consumer virtue and ideological commitment. Politicized fashion also had implications for social class. Previous discourses had made the consumer aspirations and behavior of ordinary people a moral issue. Now the wealthy, who could afford better garments, had to make the larger sacrifice (Breen 2004).

For many years thereafter, frugality continued to be an important character trait of good “republican” citizenship, an ideal of plain, debt-free living praised by the founding fathers and their generation. Political frugality ebbed in the second half of the nineteenth century, but re-emerged during World Wars I and II, when it became a highly laudable activity that gave the home front a greater sense of participation in the war effort. Until the late twentieth century, political frugality had been determinedly secular. In his analysis of hundreds of government-sponsored posters from the 1940s, Witkowski (2003) found very few references to God and religion other than white crosses symbolizing dead soldiers.

Sport utility vehicles, and especially General Motors Hummer brand, became a political lightning-rod in the new millennium (Neil 2008). Forces from the left disapproved of their sheer excess – their size makes them visually prominent and a nuisance to other drivers – and deplored their environmental consequences, whereas forces on the right defended them vociferously and, in turn, scoffed at the claims of the critics. By linking alleged over-consumption of gasoline to the support of terrorism, the anti-SUV argument latched onto patriotism and national security as a rhetorical tactic. Whether this ploy persuaded many SUV owners, who consider themselves as pro-American as the next person, to give up their trucks in favor of more fuel-efficient, gas-electric hybrid automobiles is doubtful. However, trends that became noticeable in 2008 toward smaller sport utility vehicles based on car platforms, as well as gas-electric hybrid SUVs, indicate that the critique may have had some influence on companies and their customers. On the other hand, the market may simply have responded to rising gasoline prices and declining truck resale values.

Societal tensions

Frugality critiques reveal a dialectic in American consumer culture between private and public consumption. The colonial and frontier experiences, with their isolation and demand for self-reliance, fostered a brand of hyper-individualism (Potter 1954). In addition, Protestant and Enlightenment thinking favored an individual’s own soul and personal ability to reason. Rising affluence facilitated even more consumer individualism. In the United States, more and more people have chosen to live alone, drive their own cars, watch their own TVs, and eat their meals at the times most convenient for their hectic schedules (Cross 2000; Putnam 2001). This history has echoes in the modern marketplace, where Americans generally favor putting primacy on consumer sovereignty rather than on community needs and collective consumption (Galbraith 1958). The voluntary simplicity movement itself has been faulted for its focus on personal lifestyle choices and lack of collective action to reform larger political processes (Maniates 2002).

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5 Although frugality discourses often have reflected upon individual behavior (think about Thoreau reflecting on his solitary sojourn at Walden Pond), they also have called for collective consumption projects, such as the boycotts during the non-importation movement or the recycling and energy conservation drives initiated during World War II and rediscovered in the 1970s. Americans have made material sacrifices for the common good. History shows that these adjustments have been successful in times of crisis, but only temporarily, and that consumers inevitably have returned to their old ways as soon as they were able to do so. Americans have put a high premium on the exercise of personal freedom (Brownstein 2003), which has been equated with the freedom to buy. The anti-SUV campaigns have drawn from ideas of individual morality and responsibility, while at the same time trying to implement collective solutions through government mandates calling for more fuel-efficient vehicles. Thus, American frugality discourses have straddled two conflicting value systems.

15 **Future directions for historical research**

20 The account and analysis presented herein will surely not be, one hopes, the last word on the history of frugality discourses in the United States. Given the massive amount of source material available, this study does not pretend to be entirely comprehensive and representative. Additional historical research might lead to revisions in the narrative and to conclusions about the three areas of contention. Like scientific theories, historically derived knowledge remains open to new evidence. Moreover, frugality arguments have not been the only challenge to the ideology of American consumerism. Efforts to protect consumers from themselves by regulating alcohol, drugs, gambling, prostitution, and other vices have had an equally long history (Hollander 1984). In the twentieth century, the consumer's movement sought to give buyers market power over sellers through information, education, and regulation. Critiques of advertising, branding, and other so-called evils perpetrated on buyers by the marketing mix have been a cottage industry for quite some time (see, e.g., Klein 1999; Packard 1957). These alternative assessments of US consumer culture and how they have interacted with the multifaceted rhetoric of frugality should also be explored.

35 The history of American frugality discourses also raises questions for cross-cultural anti-consumption research. How have public expressions of frugal thought evolved in other countries? Have they been characterized by similar or by disparate religious, political, and societal tensions? For example, to what extent is the deep entanglement of faith and consumerism in the United States shared by the religious traditions of other parts of the world? Why do consumers in most other rich nations appear more amenable than Americans to public policies that ultimately limit private consumption, such as banning advertising to children, restricting retail promotions and store hours, and imposing high gasoline taxes? Finally, how do societies vary in judging and sanctioning consumer excess, and which brands and products become labeled as problematic? Comparative historical research can identify reasons for these and other international differences.

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