



## CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION PUBLIC LECTURE SERIES

# The Error of our Ways: historians and the birth of consumer society

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### ABSTRACT

This talk examines the origins and development of the historical debate about the birth of consumer society. It assesses its impact – both positive and negative – explains why it began in the 1980s, and what assumptions it brought to bear on the nature of consumerism. Historians can make an important contribution to understanding contemporary consumer cultures, but they need to avoid several pitfalls to which they have been prone. The language and categories – consumer society, consumer culture, consumerism – we use and have used to characterize consumer practices are not universal, transhistorical entities but the product of particular historical circumstances. They carry a great deal of moral and political freight which is precisely why they have been so vigorously debated and contested. It follows that the uncritical back projection of a term like consumer society – couched in terms of origins and birth – is not analytically helpful. It rejects such an approach in favour of one that seeks to particularise and historicise consumption practices and the ways they are characterised. Doing so, it argues, will help commentators on contemporary practices to understand what is at stake in the diverse phenomena we see as consumer cultures.