

Chapter Review from *INVENTING THE PUBLIC ENEMY: The gangster in american culture, 1918-1934* by David E. Ruth

Introduction

The chapter on style of gangsters suggests that many American men were being seduced by the joys of consumerism in the 20s and 30s. The rise of consumerism in America not just affected the general population but it also affected the gangsters in the 1920s & 1930s. Gangsters also got attracted to clothing, accessories, cars and luxury living. The attraction to all luxurious items & America's fascination with the flamboyant gangsters of the 1920s is reflected heavily in cultural studies. The chapter in this context makes a bold assertion about youth, gangsters and consumerism.

The issue of Consumerism

The chapter is a unique look at consumerism and its effects in society seen through gangster culture. In this context we can say, so many societies with rapidly rising populations now seek affluence as their primary domestic goal, the environmental, and psychological and other issues raised by consumerism are being faced on a scale. For instance, the undesirable side effects of intensive consumerism that once primarily concerned highly industrialized societies are now faced in a number of other countries. Finally, the transition from consumption tied to satisfaction of what are perceived as

basic needs (secure shelter, food, clothing and so on) to consumerism (the preoccupation with gaining ever higher levels of consumption, including a considerable measure of conspicuous consumption of status goods), seems to be more pronounced as societies become wealthier. Hence, a reexamination of the goals and lifestyles of mature capitalist societies is particularly timely as done in the book. The chapter explores its different manifestations and its effects on competitiveness should the need and urge to gain ever higher levels of income be curbed. It then considers whether greater income, and the additional consumption it enables, produces greater contentment and assimilation of gangster in the society. However happiness does not seem to be the issue with gangsters as higher levels of income do not buy happiness, then the question arises why do people work hard to gain higher income? The answer is complex. In part, high income in capitalistic consumerist societies "buys" prestige; others find purpose and meaning and contentment in the income-producing work per se. There is, however, also good reason to suggest that the combination of artificial fanning of needs and cultural pressures maintain people in consumerist roles when these are not truly or deeply satisfying. Consumerism sustains itself, in part, because it is visible. People who are "successful" in traditional capitalist terms need to signal their achievements in ways that are readily visible to others in order to gain their appreciation, approval, and respect. They do so by displaying their income by buying themselves (or, in earlier days, their wives) expensive status goods

Lifestyles

Early in the twentieth century, commentators on American life clearly differentiated towns and cities as socially different--the two kinds of place sustaining very different ways of life.

Demographically, American society experienced a spurt of rapid urbanization, based on many native rural folk flooding into the cities and a massive influx of immigrants.

Ethnically, assimilation processes instilled in foreign-born citizens a new identity as Americans in ever-increasing numbers and fostered the formation of powerful ethnic sub communities. The trends pertaining to student peer groups' lifestyles and behavioral codes prefigured the subsequent ideological and generational conflicts. Participants in the rebel or bohemian subculture that blossomed forth after 1910 were at once excited about ideas and hedonistic--like their fraternity-sorority counterparts--but they also recognized that beyond campus there existed a world of economics, politics, labor unrest, and the arts. So the trends launched by members of the student subculture quickly began to penetrate into the larger social order. These changes also pervaded the gangster and criminal culture. Economically, the robber barons reached their pinnacle of power, and muckraking exposures. A new lifestyle for gangsters emerged. Moreover, the sheer numbers of those in the working class who were moving through the process of becoming middle class help account for part of their influence. The rest of the story is that this rising class group was discovered by merchandisers, manufacturers, media programmers, politicians, and a whole succession of service-sector entrepreneurs.

Ultra wealth can vary with location because of differing costs of living and lifestyle expectations. At the same time lifestyle sounded more impressive than older terms from

the same cultural cluster-- terms such as moving on and self-help. People who could barely count change from a five-dollar bill had fantasies of designing and redesigning their precious selves as Picasso would approach a blank canvas. Partly, the pretentiousness of the word resulted from rhetorical battles of the times in which it came into use. But partly it reflected the decline of a countervailing norm that had set limits to the idea of styling oneself. The gangster culture was reflective of the same thought as they reinvented themselves. The generation that came of age about the same time probably cannot fathom the hold respectability have on the whole society. The better-educated and more affluent members of that generation are used to a portfolio mode of culture and were refined and cultivated as compared to gangsters and criminals.

The depiction in Movies

The depiction of gangsters was incarnations of the spirit of rugged American individualism, much like the earlier Western heroes, and tended to exercise superhuman powers and display invincibility. They exuded a sense of moral self-assurance not unlike that of the proponents of the Production Code, brushing aside corrupt or incompetent police in their pursuit of arch-criminals, meting out often very rough justice as they saw fit. The movies also started depicting criminals and gangsters in a way that changed their perception in the society. The popular culture that includes movies played a greater role in transforming the perceptions associated with criminals.

Importance of Stylish Clothing

The chapter also raises an important thought if stylish clothing makes one different as depicted in the case of gangsters. If one looks at clothing then there are suits and there are power suits, which are in a class by themselves, and with good reason. Power suits are the suits women and men of a certain class wear during those important moments, or when the money is on the line. Power suits display the charisma, the class, and, of course, the power needed to make a maximum impact on every person. They say the clothes make the man. Well, having a great power suit can help make one better but one also has to have a certain sense of style which was missing in cases of gangsters. It is generally believed that those who look current and contemporary are perceived to be equally up-to-date in their knowledge, thinking and attitudes but it may not be the case but at the same time clothes and accessories are expressions of how we wish to be treated by others. The problem that gangsters encountered was that they were able to buy clothes but were not stylish. Their styles were gaudy and stood out from the rest. This made a distinction that style cannot simply be bought. They did upgrade their sense of dressing and moved out of ghettos and started driving chic automobiles but they were not able to mingle with the chic crowd because of inherent crudeness.

Gangster and consumerism: Critique

Interestingly while the author has talked endlessly and quite aptly about gangster and his influence on the consumerism trends, he fails to notice the trend that

actually goes backwards. It was not really the gangster who showed what style was or how to dress well, it was actually the rising consumerism on the whole that forced the gangster to change the way he looked.

The gangster who belonged to the ghettos knew as much about good clothing and style when he lived in slums as when he became rich. The only difference was that he had no money or resources to maintain that style or to adopt it in the first place. What happened then was that he was captured by greed and when he became rich, his first desire was to get rid of all the things that reminded of his ghetto living and thus he got everything from fine clothes to diamonds and great urban dwellings to appear like a real businessman.

Strangely no such reference appears in the chapter. Instead the entire chapter talks about the rise of the gangster as a stylish person and how it triggered consumerism.

In a new movie, *American gangster*, that appears to match the description of gangster here, shows precisely how people in the ghettos lived. They lived like that not because they didn't know what style was but because they had no money to buy the style they craved. When Denzel Washington, the gang leader, gains money and power, he gets out of the ghettos and creates the style of any rich businessman.

Anyone who saw him on the road would be impressed by his style, walk and speech. But he was a gangster nonetheless- but a gangster who had learned the style of the rich and the famous. It is quite strange that this connection has not been discussed. Another point that I would like to make here is that why does the author talk about old movies and the 1920s era. The same culture is very much present even today as I just explained from the example of this very recent movie.

If this is not enough, we must watch Godfather, the ultimate gangster movie. This movie explains how the mafia lived and how rich and businesslike they appeared. However American gangster is a more fitting example here because it is very recent release and it shows that gangster culture still prevails in the country.

It must be made clear here that consumerism is not been given birth to by the gangster. It was actually the other way around. The gangster got their inspiration from consumerist trends. A person who sees all rich businessmen living in expensive condos and wearing great suits would like to have the same style. Not everyone however can afford it. So the poorest of the poor resort to gang activities and those who strike a jackpot through these activities are more than eager to adopt the lifestyle of rich businessmen.

It would have been more apt to say that all rich people have a certain style and their need and demand for good stuff gives rise to consumerism. Ordinary people are not really inspired by the diamonds on a gangster fingers as they are by the style of famous Hollywood actors.