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Conflicts of Capitalism: Condoms as a mass-produced commodity in the US, 1920s-1930s

Rasmus Randig·

The emergence of mass-produced condoms in the US during the 1920s and 1930s is considered a prime example of modern industry and big business. By retelling the history of condoms in the US during this period from production to circulation and impact, this article highlights the social and cultural conflicts that shaped the trajectory from brothel necessity to modern commodity. This history corresponds to Arjun Appadurai's assertion that capitalism is more than a 'techno-economic design' and manifests the cultural and social dimensions of modernity. Such a narrative also illuminates the concept of the 'medicalisation' of society and highlights its corporeal and material dimensions.

A social and cultural history of the large-scale production, circulation, and consumption of condoms illustrates Arjun Appadurai's assertion that 'capitalism represents not simply techno-economic design, but a complex cultural system with a very special history in the modern West'.[1] The commodification of condoms in the US during the 1920s and 1930s is commonly imagined now, as it was then, as a prime example of modern industry and big business. In 'American dream' narratives, entrepreneurs like Julius Schmid and Merle Youngs are portrayed as rags-to-riches individual geniuses who overcome technological obstacles in the production of rubber contraceptives. Once technologically possible, condoms become a mass commodity and are met with huge demand; the inventors soon dominate the market with large business corporations.[2] What escapes narratives like this are the socio-cultural contexts and struggles that conditioned and combined to transform a previously disdained brothel item into a modern mass-commodity. The first section of this article will illustrate how production

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[1] A. Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value' in A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge, 1986), 48-49.

[2] R. Ginzburg, 'State's Condom Makers Enjoy a Sales Boom' *The New York Times*, 23 August 1987; 'Julius Schmid' Who Made America? Available at :http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/theymadeamerica/whomade/schmid_hi.html [Accessed 4.12.14]; see also A. Tone, Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America (New York, 2001), 187-188.

processes and technological innovations pertaining to condom manufacture were embedded in historically-shaped global and national social structures. The next section will discuss how changes in the meaning of condoms, and shifting cultural attitudes, were necessary for the industry to gain access to an emerging mass market. This social history of condoms confirms that culture is more than an artificially created illusion, a 'fetish' or a 'spectacle'[3] whose only purpose is to make people buy 'stuff'. Instead, and as outlined by Appadurai, culture is fully embedded within wider socio-economic developments. The third section will explore the extent to which the impact of mass-produced male contraception, often represented as a history of progress, was more than the mere eventual success of humanity to control its own fate, but also a shift in the regulation of individuals and populations. A concluding section will discuss the implications of a social and cultural history of condoms as a mass commodity for the historiography and study of capitalism more generally.

PRODUCING CONDOMS: EMBEDDED TECNOLOGICAL INNVOATION AND GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAINS

Complex forms of technological diffusion and supply chains spanning the globe are commonly considered only a phenomenon of the 20th century's closing decades. Correspondingly, early 20th century industrialisation is imagined as a mostly national affair. Yet narratives focussing on national inventor-heroes eschew the contingency and embeddedness of wider technological changes that shaped early production processes of mass-produced condoms. Further, rubber being the central raw material, the supply chain of condoms reached over the Pacific along historically-shaped trade routes and transatlantic relations.

The inception of mass-produced condoms can be considered paradigmatic for the onset of modern production processes and big business during the 1920s and 1930s. Norman E. Himes, a contemporary observer, described the production process; his description is confirmed by Andrea Tone in a more recent study. [4] Basically, cylindrical glass moulds are dipped into liquid latex and are left to dry. Rotating brushes then roll the condoms from the moulds before a lubricator is added and they are individually packaged.

[3] G. Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption* (Thousand Oaks, 1999), 104.

[4] N. E. Himes, *Medical History of Contraception* (New York City, 1936), 202-206; Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 184.

Tellingly, this basic process has changed little in the intervening century.[5] By the mid-1930s, when technological innovation favoured capital-intensive, automated mass-production, only a few companies could follow the market leaders Schmid and Youngs.[6] Such increased productivity is commonly seen as a key characteristic of the 1920s, epitomized by the 'Ford Miracle' based on 'mechanization and innovative management'.[7] This echoes general notions of the US interwar years as a period not only of innovation in production methods but also, by association, the domination of national mass markets by big business.[8]

National perspectives of technological innovation often focus on a single creative inventor, which masks contingency and the integration of the condom industry in wider technological developments on a national level.[9] The pioneer of automated condom production was Fred Killian who, in 1926, registered a patent for a machine that rolled condoms. This made the (mostly female) work of manually rolling the condoms redundant. Court documents suggest that he had been advised by his wife, who had done this work. The same documents also disclose that the death of a family member in a fire at a condom factory in 1930 had given him the incentive to invent a fully-automated assembly line using latex instead of the highly inflammable cement rubber. But Killian was not the only person considering the use of latex. During the 1920s and 1930s, the company U.S. Rubber took up the challenge of substituting latex for rubber in all such industries, not just the manufacture of condoms.[10]

Moreover, thanks to the seminal 1934 study by Himes,[11] the origin of rubber condoms is still commonly linked to Charles Goodyear's invention of the vulcanization process in the mid-19th century. This national perspective historically locates the genesis of an

[5] Trojan, *Unrolled: A Tour of Trojan Brand Condoms Manufacturing Facility*. Available at: http://link.brightcove.com/services/player/bcpid1425961417001?bckey=AQ~~,AAABTGqp0-k~,q_Z_5liv0gJvlx7LJEfkFi7ErnO-N9lO&bctid=1615869173001 [Accessed 4.12.14].

[6] Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 194; J. Gamson, 'Rubber Wars: Struggles over the Condom in the United States' (1990) 1:2 *Journal of the History of Sexuality,* 265.

[7] L. Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York City, 1995), 6; see also D. J. Goldberg, 'Rethinking the 1920s: Historians and Changing Perspective' (2007) 21:3 *Magazines of History,* 8.

[8] Dumenil, *The Modern Temper,* 3-4, 7; Goldberg, 'Rethinking the 1920s', 8.

[9] 'Julius Schmid'; Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 187-188.

[10] Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 193-194; V. L. Bullough, 'A Brief Note on Rubber Technology and Contraception: The Diaphragm and the Condom' (1981) 22:1 *Technology and Culture,* 104.

[11] Himes, *Medical History*, 186; Bullough, 'A Brief Note', 106.

American product in the US, concealing the wider social and historical context. Instead, the aforementioned innovations were shaped by both the historical colonial relationship between the late British Empire and its North Atlantic colonies and the contemporary personal and economic relationships between the U.S. and its former metropolis. By the early 20th century, the rubber trade had moved from Brazil to the British Pacific colonies from which Britain was supplying its former colony, the US, with the material.[12] Thus the origin, and subsequent production, of a modern 'American' product like the condom was closely linked to historically-shaped relations encompassing almost the whole globe. These examples demonstrate why the mass-production of condoms cannot be understood simply in terms of single inventors. Creative individuals were key to transposing technologies from other industries to condom-production, but they did not work in isolation. Instead they were steeped in manufacturing coincidences and failures as well as wider social structures which connected and shaped a range of industries around the world.

These changes in production methods were central to the transformation of condoms from brothel accessories to a mass commodity. Appadurai holds that 'the decisive factor[s] in technological innovation … are often social and political rather than simply technological'.[13] As the following section will demonstrate, societal structures needed to change to enable the large-scale distribution necessary for condoms to be mass-produced. Such socio-cultural changes were implicit in amendments to the regulation of contraceptives and, therefore, closely connected to a transformation of what condoms signified in a new, emerging context.

DISTRIBUTING CONDOMS: DEMAND, MEDICALISATION AND ORIENTALISM

Mass production requires a market with a corresponding demand. To be deemed appropriate for circulation in the US market, and thus transformed into a commodity, the meaning of condoms had to be modified. Hitherto condoms had been considered brothel necessities; they were a means to, and therefore symbols of, illegitimate sex that

[12] Z. Frank & A. Musacchio, 'Brazil in the International Rubber Trade, 1870-1930' in S. Topik, *et al.*, (eds.), *From Silver to Cocaine* (London, 2006), 271-299; Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 183, referring to Himes.

[13] Appadurai, 'Introduction', 34.

was condemned by Victorian moral discourses. Interstate trade in, and the promotion of, means by which to prevent conception had been prohibited since the Comstock Act 1873. [14] Thus, in Appadurai's words, [15] the criteria of condoms for 'commodity candidacy'—the conditions a product must fulfil to qualify for circulation in public markets—had to change. After World War I, wide-ranging social changes threatened the existing Victorian moral order. One example is a public health discourse which enabled new notions of sexuality to develop and thereby created opportunities for the circulation of condoms. A refined understanding of condoms was integrated into shifting discourses of medicine and society at the same time as permission was sought to distribute condoms commercially. Then, when condoms were advertised, they were associated in subtle ways with new notions of sexuality and gender norms. By linking condoms symbolically to these wider discourses, producers suggested that their use was increasingly socially accepted in the context of wider social change. Thus, demand was shaped and fostered not through the creation of 'artificial' needs but by inserting the meaning of condoms into wider socio-cultural changes in understanding the body and sexuality.[16] Growing condom sales further established a mass market, which continually fed-back into promoting wider social and cultural changes; and so the cycle continued. This confirms Appadurai's assertion that '[d]emand is … neither a mechanical response to the structure and level of production nor a bottomless natural appetite. It is a complex social mechanism that mediates between short- and long-term patterns of commodity circulation.'[17]

Initially, new medical discourses were a necessary condition for policy makers to permit the US-wide circulation of condoms, thus undermining the Comstock Act. Professional organizations of physicians changed the nature of the State in the area of social policy by aligning more and smaller parts of the body with their remit. Then, rather than acting as a moral arbitrator, the State began receiving demands to 'manage' society in general and people's health in particular. Sexuality and reproduction were key to both the health of individuals in the context of broad concerns for congenital disease and the regulation of populations and classes. This process of 'medicalisation' is illustrated at one extreme

[14] Anthony Comstock was a Victorian moralist and, from his perspective, all types of contraception (except personal restraint) constituted a means to sin. J. M. Riddle, *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (London, 1997), 425-427.

[15] Appadurai, 'Introduction', 13-14.

[16] Ritzer, *Enchanting*, 95-116.

[17] Appadurai, 'Introduction', 40-41.

by the eugenic movement.[18] These changes had become increasingly pronounced even before the 1920s, so that 'by 1918, the Victorian ethos of self-control had yielded to new ideas and institutions that took male sexual activity for granted and strove to subdue, even eliminate, its undesired consequences'. [19] In this context, condom producers highlighted the benefit of condoms in the fight against venereal diseases, carefully avoiding implications for sexual behaviour, thereby making their products acceptable and palatable to the State and its emerging task of managing public health. Highlighting the prophylactic attributes of condoms, the industry prevailed in the New York Supreme Court's 1928 Crane ruling. This allowed the nation-wide distribution of condoms for contraceptive use and established a precedent for future rulings.[20] Thus, the dominant and officially-sanctioned meaning of condoms shifted from a symbol of illicit sex to a legitimate prophylaxis against disease. Nevertheless, the court rulings sat alongside the Comstock Act, meaning that condoms could only be advertised, if at all, in medical or neutral terms. This further privileged the big manufacturers like Schmid and Youngs, who were exclusively supplying drugstores and had already established their condoms as quality brands.[21]

While the medical dimension of condoms was highlighted in the public arena, the demand of mass circulation had to be approached differently. Strategies for marketing condoms were intricately linked to wider efforts to replace Victorian morals with more progressive notions of gender and sexuality. The 1920s witnessed the beginnings of systematic and ubiquitous advertisement.[22] However, the history of condoms shows that the expansion of advertising was not isolated from wider social change. As condoms were still a sensitive topic linked to new notions of sexuality and gender norms, they were not advertised as 'spectacularly' as other products, e.g. on large billboards spread across cities. Nevertheless, condom producers were able to suggest a subtler link with social change.[23] Denied huge marketing campaigns, they created brands by establishing their products within symbolic systems, thereby not just promising a new lifestyle as an

[18] Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 138-49; M. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1965-76*, (ed.) M. Bertani, *et al.*, (trans.) D. Macey (London, 2003), 239-264.
[19] Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 106.
[20] Ibid., 183-184; Gamson, 'Rubber Wars', 68-69.
[21] Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 188-189.
[22] Goldberg, 'Rethinking the 1920s', 8-9; Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 12.
[23] Ritzer, *Enchanting*, 95-116.

end in itself but also establishing socially-acceptable alternatives to Victorian morals.[24] One particular example is Schmid's brands of Sheik, Sphinx and Ramses (Fig. 1). The Oriental names are complemented by corresponding imagery of Oriental dress, Egyptian iconography and desert landscapes. These symbols attempt to connect condoms with figures and themes found in popular culture, such as films and literature. Thus, the horseman on the Sheik box linked the product with the protagonist in a series of contemporary Orientalist films.[25]

Fig. 1 Four condom tins from the 1930s. Hunter Oatman-Standford, 'Getting It On: The Covert History of the American Condom', *Collectors Weekly*, 16 August 2012.

[24] Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 189; G. D. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption II: Markets, Meaning and Brand Management* (Indianapolis, 2005), 97-115.

[25] J. Campanelli, 'The Full Cleveland: Tour of Contraceptive Museum', *Cleveland.com: The Plain Dealer Videos*, 23 September 2010, 3:55-4:15min. Available: http://videos.cleveland.com/plain-dealer/index.html?tag=birth%20control [Accessed 4.12.14].

Available: http://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/getting-it-on-the-covert-history-of-the-american-condom/ [Accessed 4.12.14].

In the context of hegemonic Victorian prudery, the cultural discourse of Orientalism projected the fulfilment of erotic desire and freedom from strict moral restraint onto the idea of an imaginary Middle-Eastern culture that became even more visible through the dissemination of film and visual advertisements. This emerging cultural theme interacted with the transition from Victorian ideals to the more modern social politics described above. Hence, it was increasingly possible to see Oriental tropes in the American cultural landscape of the time, heralding social, cultural and sexual change.[26] It was within this cultural revolution that the Sheik, Ramses and Sphinx brands were embedded, both contributing to and benefiting from it: men and women could well imagine what was permitted under the eyes of the sphinx but strictly prohibited under the gaze of a Victorian lady. Thus, the Orientalist advertisements created a 'spectacle', a 'dramatic public display',[27] by subtly transgressing established symbolic boundaries of what was acceptable.[28] These 'micro-scandals', however, were not an illusion that had been created out of nothing; they were the loci of cultural change that formed part of the social struggle between the old Victorian order and its newer competitors. Moreover, this Oriental discourse demonstrates the link between consumer culture, social relations, and global politics. The fictional Oriental desire was something to be either cherished or resented within a moral discourse, primarily because it was exotic and alien to Western culture. When politicised, this 'otherness' could potentially act as an imperative to 'civilise' the real people of the Middle East.[29]

For condoms to need modern production regimes, large-scale demand and distribution was required. This necessitated changes in State regulations and the symbolic meaning of condoms. This was precipitated not simply by the removal of moral imperatives but by diverse social demands and negotiations. All this encompassed a medical concern for the health of society plus advocacy for more permissive and liberal attitudes to sexuality; with such demands, an attentive industry happily aligned itself. This link with sexuality, and by extension corporeality, will be explored further in the next section.

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[26] N. Bowman, 'Questionable Beauty: The Dangers and Delights of the Cigarette in American Society, 1880-1930' in P. Scranton (ed.), *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender and Culture in Modern America* (Hobohen, 2014), 74.

[27] Ritzer, *Enchanting*, 104.

[28] Ibid., 104-107.

[29] E. W. Said, *Orientalism* (London,1978), 1-28.

CONSUMING CONDOMS; MEDICAL DISCOURSES IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERE

It is particularly clear that social struggles over the meaning of condoms are related to meanings of the body and sexual intercourse. Bryan S. Turner argues that the dimension of corporeality in human interaction has to be acknowledged in the analysis of social interaction and social order. According to Turner, bodily functions, such as hunger, the need for sleep, and sexual drive, must not be considered universal human needs but conceptualised as subject to cultural interpretation in the context of attempts at social control. They are, therefore, historically- and culturally-specific.[30] This dimension will be examined by exploring the general impact of the wider circulation and use of condoms. In the context of a greater medicalisation of society, the expanding presence of contraceptives in public retail outlets further established the medical approach to society in the public sphere. Additionally, with its practical and material implications, condoms influenced the discourse of medicalisation in the private sphere of sexual intercourse.

The process of society's medicalisation can be considered another form of social control and regulation that succeeded Victorian morals after World War I. Until recently, the history of contraceptives, and of condoms in particular, was a progress-fuelled narrative celebrating increased human domination over nature.[31] This history focussed on effectiveness and efficiency in technological terms, asserting that, 'for a contraceptive to be effective it has to be inexpensive, reliable and available'.[32] This reveals an assumption that condoms were a tool that had been much desired and, once invented, merely needed to be made accessible in sufficient quality and quantity. Yet, as demonstrated in the previous section, demand and desire for condoms was intricately linked to wider socio-cultural changes not adequately captured by a teleological narrative of modernity. Michel Foucault provided a seminal narrative of the process of medicalisation in Western culture, critiquing teleological notions of progress. He asserts that, rather than repressing desires, modern culture has created and shaped them through classificatory systems, with the consequence of disciplining and regulating individuals and

[30] B. S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*, 3rd edn. (London, 2008), 34.
[31] K. Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918-1960* (Oxford, 2006), 2; A. McLaren, *A History of Contraception: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Oxford, 1990), 1.
[32] Bullough, 'A Brief Note', 104.

populations. This requires greater regulation of sexuality and reproduction by increasingly defining social problems and aspects of human interaction in medical terms, which thereby requires the intervention of medical experts.[33] As such, Turner draws on Foucault when maintaining that 'it is possible to trace a secularization of the body in which the body ceases to be the object of a sacred discourse of flesh and becomes an object within a medical discourse, where the body is a machine to be controlled by appropriate scientific regimens.'[34] This suggests that the Victorian system of moral control was succeeded by yet another control regime: medicalisation.

This new concern for public health not only made a mass market for condoms possible but was also, in turn, broadened by it. Through greater visibility in retail outlets, condoms contributed to a growing perception of the body and social interaction in medical terms. When condoms were purchased and entered the private sphere, they signified a new sexuality but not one that was isolated from a medical context. It emphasised pleasure but connected it with the imperative to remain healthy; condoms symbolically aligned this new sexuality with health. It also confirmed the increasing authority of medical experts. More importantly, condoms illustrate persisting gender differences, despite social change and the rhetoric of equality in the context of modernity. Both female and male contraceptives were connected to medical discourses of society; however, whilst condoms became freely available in retail outlets, the female equivalent (the diaphragm) was available only by consulting a physician. This was a manifestation and extension of the control of (male) society over the female body.[35]

Moreover, the impact on private sexual intercourse was not restricted to symbolical links with social discourses; there was also a practical and material dimension. The material attributes of condoms and the circumstances of their application influence sexual intercourse and thus the actual enactment of gender relations. The use of a condom as a contraceptive requires the cooperation of both partners. It requires direct attention and obliges those involved to sequence their interaction around the condom.[36] As a consequence, even when the condom is bought exclusively for enjoying a new sexuality of pleasure and the users are completely ignorant of what doctors say on the matter, its

[33] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 239-264; Toner, *Devices and Desires*, 47.

[34] Turner, *The Body and Society*, 38.

[35] Tome, *Devices and Desires*., 7; R. A. Soloway, '"The Perfect Contraceptive": Eugenics and Birth Control Research in Britain and America in the Interwar Years' 1995 30(4) *Journal of Contemporary History* 630; Fisher, *Birth Control*, 9-12.

[36] McLaren, *A History of Contraception*, 9.

use requires partners to modify their behaviour in a way that is, to some degree, consistent with the health imperatives of a medicalised society beyond the mere prevention of conception.

Without doubt, the emergence of condoms has allowed individuals to enjoy sex, families to plan their size and societies to stay healthy. However, all of this was not achieved independent of wider social changes and controversies. Thus, pleasure in sex, family planning and the containment of disease were also linked to an increasing authority of the medical profession. So, too, was State expansion into ever-greater spheres of individual and group life, with particularly dire consequences for anyone not deemed 'normal', such as homosexuals.[37] In this context, the history of contraception can be seen seen as part of a changing pattern of social control, in which a more liberal sexuality plays a part. What the history of condoms in particular adds to this account is a business dimension, whereby the interests of professionals such as doctors became aligned with the interests of manufacturers.

CONCLUSION: CONFLICTS OF CAPITALISM

The emergence of mass-produced condoms illustrates that capitalism had cross-border implications as early as the 1920s. Thus, focus should shift from when 'globalisation' began towards when and why it expanded, becoming more visible and politicised, as well as the historical trajectory along which it developed.

However, technological capability and access to resources far beyond North America alone were insufficient to explain the emergence of condom mass-production and commodification. Without access to a growing US market, the large-scale manufacture of male contraceptives would have been unthinkable. Condoms, as an example, undermine the popular perspective that capitalism expands uninhibited once mass-production is technologically possible, creating the required markets and demand through advertisement and 'artificial' illusions of need and want.[38] They demonstrate that such expansion of capitalist production and distribution is shaped by conflicts between different actors who negotiate interests irreducible to mere financial gain. Developing ideas around the role of the State and social policy, gender norms, and sexuality negotiated the transformation of condoms from brothel items into a publicly

[37] M. Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Oxford, 2009), 1-6.

[38] Ritzer, *Enchanting*, 95-116.

circulated product. This transformation then fed-back into social change. Thus the expansion of a commodity like the condom is not predetermined but contingent; it must interact with wider social and cultural changes. It is important, therefore, not just to examine how capitalism shapes social relations and public culture but also how society and culture drive capitalism.

Through their cultural meaning, condoms shaped social discourses around medicalisation and public health. They symbolised what was socially acceptable, indicating and interacting with social developments, thereby distorting the stubbornly persistant analytical distinction between culture and capitalism. Furthermore, when consumed, many commodities literally transport public discourses into the private sphere, where ideas and even practices are shaped and reshaped by them. Thus, there is scope to examine not just how intimate practices are shaped by public rhetoric but also how they, in turn, influence developments in the public sphere.

Ultimately, the social and cultural history of condoms as a commodity confirms Appadurai's assertion 'that those commodities whose consumption is most intricately tied up with critical social messages are likely to be *least* responsive to crude shifts in supply or price, but most responsive to political manipulation at the social level'.[39] This highlights the need to complement existing histories and notions of capitalism with a consideration of the cultural dimension. This more-nuanced approach will demonstrate that the rapid expansion of capitalism throughout modernity is contingent upon, and shaped by, a variety of conflicts at every level of society.

[39] Appadurai, 'Introduction', 33 [emphasis original].

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