# CLASS AND CONSUMPTION

## Introduction

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Historians of the working classes used not to write about *consumption* per se. They wrote about leisure pastimes, subsistence, cooperativism, moral economy, material life, the standard of living, even popular culture. The fact is that the constitution of the "problem" of consumption as an object of historical study is relatively recent. And initially, rightly or wrongly, it was identified with comparatively affluent societies' notions of consumer behavior and with the individualistic acquisitiveness and antisocialist political stances that went with that identification. Indeed, consumption as the main line of approach to studying working-class conditions, community, and consciousness not only seemed ill-suited to understanding people living under regimes of penury, but deeply misplaced. Insofar as consumption was about class, it appeared to be only about the bourgeoisie or the false consciousness of workers succumbing to commodity fetishism and class envy. To write about the consumption habits of the working class, as if they were similar in motivation and form to the consumption of the elites, seemed therefore to undercut the notions of class formation and consciousness as defined by relations of production and hence to be antagonistic to the very project of writing a critical history of class relations.

Today's burgeoning cottage industry of study devoted to "consumer culture" draws its impulse not from the study of the working class but from other issues, chiefly the problem of postmodernity and the fluid social and personal identities it appears to have instated; its major disciplinary sources have been ethnography, cultural history, and cultural studies rather than social history. The point of departure for at least one strong current of consumption studies is identity politics and, specifically, how people use material and cultural goods to fashion a changing sense of community and self. "Identity" is of course a far more capacious and flexible notion than class, and even more elusive. Loosely used, as it almost invariably is in historical writing, it has allowed a far more wide-ranging discussion of empowerment and disempowerment of subjects and subjectivities—of the gendered and ethnic, for example, and of social groups as well as the self. The cost, however, has been the loss of focus on class as a central category of analysis. Admittedly, the point of departure of cultural studies was the study of the post-Fordist working class. However, cultural studies too has lost this initial focus as it has shifted to the popular, which is broadly understood as the symbolic and material–cultural means by which subaltern groups express resistance against social hierarchies and hegemonic cultures.

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What questions, then, should historians with a sympathy for studying class relations and class power be asking about consumption? The vast literature at the disposal of historians basically poses three questions of relevance here. The first asks how consumption generally or, better, demand is related to economic growth. Reintroducing class modifies this central question to highlight the politics of distribution: namely, who gets what, how, when, where, and with what messages? The second question asks how commodities are used to express social relations. With so much emphasis put on the use of goods for personal identity, clearly the question needs to be recast: How are consumption goods, including services, used in group solidarities? If consumption behavior is constitutive of social stratification, what relationship does this constituent bear to employment, cultural capital, and other forms of accumulated wealth, family status, etc.? A third type of question relates to the complex problem of commodification and the fetishistic form goods take when they appear to be divested of their human labor content. Does commodity fetishism have any significance in social analysis regarding specific classes of producers or consumers? How does the commodification or decommodification of goods and services bear on economic and social citizenship?

Considering these many approaches and questions, there is for now at least no unified agenda for studying how class relations inflect consumption or consumption inflects class relations. The effort here has therefore focused on gathering essays broadly related to these themes from three regions characterized by mass consumption, namely, Europe, North America including the US and Canada, and Japan (which as a rich, recent literature shows, has a distinct and early trajectory of development, beginning as early as the Tokogawa period). Each region suggests that the problematic has a very different valence: In Europe, it is bound up with the enduring problem of social injustice, economic inequality, and the exclusion of the working class from social and economic citizenship; in the United States, our problematic is tied to the competition between middle and working class to define standards for a national "middle-mass" consumption; in Japan, it is tied to the formation of a modern middle-salaried class, one that legitimated itself with respect to old class stratifications by its capacity to master Western-type technologies and patterns of consumption.

To clarify the problematic relationship of class to consumption, we must first revisit the writings of classical sociology. In her essay, Judith Coffin focuses on Maurice Halbwachs who, though better known to Anglophone audiences for his studies of collective memory, pioneered early twentieth-century continental European studies on consumption. His focus was originally the "standard of living" or "styles of living." What is so notable about his initial study, at least compared to American contemporaries, was his insistence on the "animal-like" and static nature of working-class consumption. This position, Coffin argues, reflected his own austere tastes as an engaged intellectual, a certain status-bound notion of needs common to the cultured elite, and his Durkheimian methodological premises. What is perhaps equally remarkable, as Coffin suggests, is the subtle shift of his analysis: In recognition of the evolution the standard of living was undergoing in contemporary America, Halbwachs was suggesting by 1930

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that increased income could change class tastes and thereby perhaps lines of stratification between the lower middle and the working class.

Meg Jacobs's "Democracy's Third Estate" highlights precisely the emergence of "consumption politics" during the 1920s and its crystallization as a political movement under the New Deal. As prescient European observers like Halbwachs perceived, mass consumption was emerging as the idiom for class politics in the United States, absent a strong social-democratic movement. The 1930s saw mobiliziation of the working-class interest, mainly articulated by middle-class reformers around "purchasing power," to contest the advance of the middle-class model of consumption at the expense of redistribution. Unlike Europe, where reform movements generally supported strong state social welfare programs as measures of redistributive justice, in the US the model of economic citizenship rested on collective movements providing individual access to consumer goods.

There is no estimating the importance of institutions of consumption, especially retailing, to reinforcing broad class solidarities around consumption habits. The earliest pioneers of this effort were perhaps working-class organizations themselves, in the form of cooperative movements, although at the outset their offerings were so austere and their notions of class so narrowly solidaristic and territorially limited that their sphere of action was very restricted. The great entrepreneurs of retailing were of course the bourgeois department store magnates—akin to the fictional Mourot of Emile Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames* and at home in all of the great capital cities from Paris, London, and Brussels, to New York, Chicago, and Tokyo.

In her essay, Louise Young underscores the early development of the Japanese department store and the specific ways it pitched its appeal to a new middle class. With a keen eye to the life style of the salary man, the department store anchored the central city as the place of consumption, leisure, and culture. Particularly notable, with respect to American and European counterparts of the epoch, is the emphasis on the consumption of technologies in the form of radios and other household equipment. These goods embodied a multiple affirmation of identity, reinforcing the status of the middle class with the power of the male gender and with appeals to Japanese nationality. They presented the technological expertise of the male purchasers as superior to those in society who lacked it (women and the low-statused) and as being equal to if not superior to Western modernity.

In Belgium, the heartland of continental European labor reformism, Peter Scholliers shows the entrepreneurs of socialist cooperativism incorporating lessons from bourgeois enterprise, most visibly in the dazzling facade of the cooperative department store. The illustration has a deeper meaning. How did a population living in a regime of penury, its needs per force pivoting around bread, shelter, and clothing, become mass consumers? Detailing the calculations made by cooperator managers and by worker consumers, Scholliers shows how appeal based on price, combined with the incalculable pleasure of belonging to the new world of consumption embedded in this proletarian palace of consumption, gradually gave way to appeal based on style. Scholliers also shows the

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subtle costs that this mass production of stylish goods at low prices exacted on older notions of solidarity as cooperative members in search of low prices accepted the piece work and putting out systems that enabled producers to cut costs to the consumer. At the same time, Scholliers highlights how precarious this new mass consumption actually was for Belgian workers. Through the 1920s at least, fluctuations in wages were immediately reflected in sharp drops in expenditure for clothing.

How goods are used remains perhaps the hardest question to answer, as anybody knows who has studied problems of reception. In American culture, the ideology that says that goods consumption is or should be primarily the expression of one's own and one's family's individuality has never rested only with that. High levels of mass consumption for the "average" American household were a matter of national state policy, strategically central to the "Nylon Wars" against the Soviet Empire, to recall David Riesman's satire. Its culminating point was Richard Nixon's notorious 1959 kitchen debate with Nikita Khrushchev that purportedly demonstrated to the benighted citizenry behind the Iron Curtain the vast material superiority of American civilization.

Two studies on what would seem utterly incomparable cases, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Canada, highlight the interaction between state policy emphasizing social welfare and state policy de-emphasizing the value of consumer obsolescence and abundance. Both policies occurred under the shadow of high-profile neighboring models of consumer affluence—the German Federal Republic in the case of the GDR and the United States for Canada.

Ina Merkel challenges a common assumption of Western sociology—that, in the absence of mass consumption and under an authoritarian power, the East Germans, workers in particular, were deprived of a crucial source of self-definition and choice. The GDR was never classless, of course. But neither was it stratified exclusively or even significantly by the distribution of government privileges. In any case, privileges in the realm of consumption at first favored workers and only later certain categories of functionaries. Other kinds of societal cleavages mattered all the more as class cleavages were radically eliminated by wartime destruction, population resettlement, and the abolition of many kinds of property. Consumption patterns were thus more and more determined by criteria such as age, gender, place of residence, education, and family connections—and especially by the luck of having relatives in the West. Because of the relatively slow turnover, standardization, and scarcity of goods, and because of the close proximity of West Germany's model of high-level consumption, strong notions of selfhood were constituted in the GDR through high-culture-oriented leisure and a rather fanciful consumption of low-tone goods (such as paper doilies, embroidered ties, and sundry knickknacks). The result was modern mass consumption which clearly marched to a different drummer from the capitalist West.

Joy Parr sees in postwar Canada what appears to be an even slower, more provincial refashioning of household goods. Canada, returning to prosperity, its government leaders basically conservative in their concerns about stability and

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balances of trade, clearly encouraged inconspicuous consumption, perhaps to contrast with the flashy American affluence on its border and certainly to discourage costly imports. As Parr's interviews show, working-class homemakers, whether married to skilled or unskilled workers, interpreted consumer goods with a startling sense that the household was partly if not wholly autarchic, quite without any explicit reference to social stratification. Indeed, their memories of goods are so wholly about self and lineage as to suggest how goods could be used within worker homes to make one respectable, decent, and comfortable, and how they yielded to a conserving, if not a conservative, impulse.

To empathize with a worldview that sees its equipoise in frumpy maple furniture heirlooms is a notable challenge. Taste is the outcome of struggles over social distinction as Pierre Bourdieu tells us. Historians, whose own subject position—just as much as anybody else's—is bound up with accumulating cultural capital and having that accumulation recognized by others, might well want to take their distance from these creature comforts of domesticity, characterizing them as crass, petty bourgeois, and depoliticized. In that, they would be one with a long line of illustrious social critics of mass consumption. It is intellectually heroic to want to understand poor consumers.

E. P. Thompson's injunction to rescue the working class from the "condescension of history" would seem to speak to this issue. But the Thompson that is most germane to the idea of consumption and class lies is his still vital and salient essays on the "moral economy of the crowd." In these, his concern, obviously, was to understand the making as opposed to the unmaking of the modern working class. Yet for the historian who wants to grasp the total socioeconomic context in which market exchanges take place and to probe the solidarities, moral assumptions, and notions of social obligation underlying them, they provide an altogether inspired starting point.

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