

BOOK REVIEWS

Consumption and the World of Goods. Ed. by John Brewer and Roy Porter. Routledge, London [etc.] 1993. xix, 564 pp. Ill. £75.00.

Consumption and the World of Goods culls the tasty first fruits of the three-year research project that Professor John Brewer, now of the European University Institute, directed on “Culture and Consumption in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries” while he headed the Center for Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Studies at the Clark Library in Los Angeles. Though the major focus of the undertaking is the Atlantic World, the contributors move with verve and erudition across time and space, to yield a book that is rich not simply in sheer number of essays (twenty-five), but in the quality and range of their aperçus into fashion, reading, tea drinking, and other material cultural practices. Readers will find here arguments presented elsewhere in longer and more difficult to locate format, but also freshly-written exploratory essays chock-full of intriguing conceptualizations and citations.

If there is a problem, it is to orient oneself in this dazzling intellectual bazaar. The topics touched on are all related to what the introduction calls the history of consumerism, a field the purview of which has grown in the last couple of decades to encompass virtually every practice known to humankind, from spectatorship and sex, to eating and reading. Orienting oneself might be easier were this field only historical. But the new study of the cultural and social meaning of goods has enlisted cultural studies, art history, sociology and anthropology, the strategy being to seize back the subject of consumption from the hands of economists who, it is alleged, have proven incapable of conceptualizing the symbolic and social valence of goods, except to extrapolate from Thorstein Veblen’s observations about emulative spending. The common enemy is also the previous generation of “productionist” historian, usually left-wing, who in their focus on the world of the manufacture and labor, failed to capture the vast resonance of consumption.

If the old assumptions about consumption are on the way out, the priorities of a new research agenda are still vague, particular as regards the early industrial era. To a degree, historians of the twentieth century still operate with an older agenda, focusing on consumption to probe how Western working classes were incorporated into class society, to trace the eclipse of the critical public sphere under the weight of commodified signs, and to grasp the impact of US models of mass consumption on the old world. By contrast, eighteenth-century studies started with a more complicated and in some respects, conservative agenda. One of the original goals, as spelled out in *The Birth of Consumer Society* (1982) – one of whose authors, Neil McKendrick, here reiterates his thesis – was to highlight the key role of expanding consumer demand in early industrialization. Whatever its other merits, one point of this argument was to take the high ground in the perennial debate between optimists and pessimists. McKendrick’s ingenious, if undemonstrated, argument that the industrial revolution rested on the small but diffuse pleasures of new commodities seemed particularly designed to challenge E.P. Thompson who, in *The Making of the English Working*

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Class, compellingly argued the dismal view; no matter what statistical indicators revealed, the first generations of workers undergoing industrialization experienced it as a catastrophic change in quality of life.

The contributions to this volume, though fundamentally resting on the premise that there was some sort of “consumer revolution”, suggest still other priorities. One, gracefully argued by Jean Christophe Agnew, Joyce Appleby and Simon Schama, as well as by the sociologist Colin Campbell, is to dispute Max Weber’s vision of capitalist accumulation as demanding austerity and self-denial, to trace in the growing amounts of goods the origins of an acquisitive individualist selfhood that marked the shift from medieval world outlook to what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls the culture of ordinary life. Another, advanced by John E. Wills Jr. and Sidney W. Mintz is to place the first consumer revolution within the context of the vast shifts in terms of trade that saw Europe’s emergence as the center of the first global-world economy. Hither and yon, there are also glimpses of the antiquarian taste and empiricism of an old-fashioned kind of British social history, one that finds in consumer pastimes new evidence of how people “really” lived in the past, a worthy inquiry, surely, though not especially intellectually stimulating.

If something is not quite right with this big volume, it is that the editors not only refrain from spelling out an agenda, but intimate that one is unnecessary, as if the study of consumption in a world in which mass consumerism is widely touted as the ultimate goal of human sociability is self-explanatory. Yet it is hardly self-evident, to me at least, that Western consumer abundance not only transformed the material world, but did so in a way “to stabilize the social and political”, as is stated in the introduction. With this insouciant endorsement of the ideal of a universal consumer ethos, the authors surely subscribe to a whiggish interpretation of the last two centuries, as well as to an unduly optimistic prognosis about the effects of the so-called Revolutions of 1989. Scarcely five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, such views seem not just premature, but dreadfully wrong, the Western acquisitive model appearing now not only impossible to achieve universally, but if relentlessly pursued as a global strategy of development, truly awful for the conflicts that will be unleashed over the distribution of planetary resources and from unhinging local cultural identities. So problematic indeed is this scenario of global consumer abundance, that one wants to return to what is here characterized as square one, namely the Atlantic world of the eighteenth century to ponder its peculiarities rather than to propound it as a model.

That said, readers of this volume will quickly discover several veins of thought that are truly illuminating not just for the eighteenth century, but for analyzing other significant movements of change in the accumulation of material culture – one thinks of the US in the early twentieth century, or Europe in the so-called Silent revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. One major line of inquiry investigates the source of the new demand for goods. This theme is discussed especially expansively in Jan de Vries’s suggestive essay linking the micro-management of the household to the changing offer of goods bound up with cross-national trade. Another line of inquiry highlights the uses of goods in constructing social subjectivities. In a crisply elegant essay, Joyce Appleby illuminates the unique vision of the sociability and selfhood evinced in early modern social thought. A third line of inquiry suggests the importance of discussing consumption together

with social welfare. Historians tend to equate the two, perhaps because in reality, the confusion exists. As Carole Shammas shows in her careful studies of probate documents, individual caloric intake could decline at the same time that a psychological sense of well-being grew; if the paradigmatic case for the late twentieth century might be the unemployed urban youth traipsing about with his ghetto-blasters, that for the eighteenth was the anaemic rural housewife sipping sugary tea from new-fangled crockery.

Social historians will be especially challenged by de Vries's long essay, for he most directly takes up the challenge to discuss together "demand curves and desire", to reconcile the somber world of scarcity etched in wage and price statistics with the richly varied material culture depicted in visual, literary and other sources. Ingeniously reading the far-flung evidence of histories based on probate inventories, he suggests that over several generations people were indeed leaving more goods, though of lesser value. That consumer demand grew, even in the face of contrary real wage trends, could be explained by reallocations of resources within the household, the new goods stimulating a willingness on the part of the cottage household to orient its services – labor and production – to market. For de Vries, then, the operative term is not an abrupt consumer revolution, but a lengthy industrious revolution, the latter related to the former much in the way that proto-industrialization is related to the triumph of the factory system in the industrial revolution.

Now de Vries's argument will surely need to be discussed further. For example, without studying the nature of the supply, such as to highlight its novelty, perhaps as a result of new riches of empire, it is unclear why households began to substitute market goods for home supplies. Standards of living are notoriously tenacious, and short of a convincing analysis of the mechanisms of "proto-marketing", as well as the changed sexual division of labor within the household, the motives behind the shift from an autarchic to a goods-permeable household outlook remain unclear. Social historians, both for the early industrial period and for later times as well, will surely want to ask whether generalizations about levels of demand and consumer motivation based mainly on the study of a broad middle constituency are valid for wider swathes of population, or groups lying outside of protestant Europe, which, with the exception of Cissie Fairchild's study of "populuxe" goods in Paris, are by and large the subject of these essays.

Beyond that, they will surely want to ask what happens in the course of the nineteenth century, when the class pyramid of Western Europe became inscribed caste-like in the accumulation and display of material culture, most visibly in the domestic space of households. If the studies of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and others are correct, stratifications within the habits of consumption of a goods-rich bourgeoisie and a goods-poor working class did not change significantly until the early 1950s.

Indeed, it might prove helpful, if on some occasion, those who argue on behalf of the existence of a consumer revolution for the eighteenth century had a meeting of the minds with those who have used the term more conventionally, for twentieth-century US and post-1945 Europe. We might find many interesting parallels, first and foremost that the major shift in global commodity flows accompanying the ascendancy of a new global economic leader in both cases entailed shifts in kinds, if not levels of consumption. We might also find greatly illuminating differences in the social-political implications of such shifts.

In the meantime, the many probing hypotheses contained in essays in this volume reaffirm the importance of establishing this new field of study within a broad frame of reference. It may be that this book, because it is a collection and lacks an overarching thesis, will not itself generate debate. But single articles in it surely should, and for that we are greatly in debt to the editors, John Brewer and Roy Porter.

Victoria de Grazia

EGMOND, FLORIKE. *Underworlds. Organized Crime in the Netherlands 1650–1800.* Polity Press, Oxford 1993. x, 256 pp. £39.50.

One of the central topics in the history of crime, as distinct from the history of justice and punishment, is the question of the extent and nature of professional, organized crime; the question of whether there was a criminal “underworld”. Literary sources often indicate that underworlds, amounting to full-fledged alternatives to established society, can be found in two of the most ungovernable parts of European society in the past: its largest cities, and its border areas. Recent archival research has, however, deemphasized the importance of such underworlds: in England, John Beattie found few professional criminals in eighteenth-century London, and Alan MacFarlane characterized the activities of the Smorthwait gang in Westmorland in the late seventeenth century as highly unusual. And, although the bandits inhabiting Europe’s frontier regions were solidly entrenched, criminal gangs in other parts of the countryside have been characterized as fleeting and composed of constantly shifting memberships.

Florike Egmond’s painstaking reconstruction of Dutch criminal bands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sheds new light on this issue. From her trawl through a massive body of judicial records, Egmond has discovered extensive evidence of professional criminal activity in the Netherlands, involving gangs of up to 300 members which remained active for years. This was not a single, organized underworld, but a changing collection of gangs which, although they occasionally formed connections, are more notable for the numerous differences between them: differences in territory (based in towns or the countryside; in Holland or Brabant); the extent of kinship connections among the membership; the role played by women; criminal styles (types of crime perpetrated, degree of violence); and social and economic causes (war, economic hardship, ethnic persecution). One of the most impressive aspects of the book is the discussion of the participation of Jews and gypsies in some of the bands, and Egmond’s comments on their activities and distinctive lifestyles adds to our knowledge of the history of these groups in the Netherlands as well as our understanding of organized crime. While gangs were active throughout the period, in the second half of the eighteenth century there was an increase in cooperation between groups, which ultimately led to the formation of the Great Dutch Band in the 1790s, which involved extensive cooperation between Jews and Christians and “drew upon nearly the whole range of criminal traditions and cultures in the Netherlands” (p. 150).

For Egmond, the diversity of this underworld is her most important discovery, and indeed this adds an important new dimension to our understanding of the subject of organized crime. But what most impressed this reviewer (from an English perspective) is the sheer scale of this organized criminal activity. Egmond