Introduction

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The adage "Consumption, thy name is woman" resonates with such venerable authority that one might expect to find it cited in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations,* attributed to some Victorian savant or to an eminent critic of modern frippery. In Western societies, acts of exchange and consumption have long been obsessively gendered, usually as female. As the speculative bubbles of early-eighteenth-century capitalism burst, pamphleteering moralists excoriated the feminine volatility of nascent credit schemes and decried the foppish new rich. In scenes set in late-nineteenth-century French, British, and American department stores, novelists imagined that goods enraptured buyers, who fantasized about and fondled them before finally taking possession. Modernist intellectuals disparaged commercial mass culture as venal and vaporous, bewitching its customers with mercenary blandishments. Commercial artists sprawl idealized female figures across twentieth-century advertising copy, designing their forms and faces to elicit desirous gazes. And marketing agents probe the calculations and caprices imputed to Mrs. Consumer to survey the entity of household spending.

What more precisely is the nature of the identification of femininity, of the female sex, of womankind generally with sumptuary laws, shopping sprees, and domestic display, not to mention the mundane chores of purchase and provisioning with which women are familiarly associated? Is this identification only a timeworn trope of patriarchal culture? Or does it bear on deeper social processes? If women figure not only as the proverbial shoppers, the *Ur*-decorators, the perennial custodians of the bric-a-brac of daily life but also as objects of exchange and consumption, what then can be inferred about the relationship of man, males, and masculinity to the world of commodities? And why, skeptics might ask, should these issues concern

us at all? Why should contemporary investigations into the history of consumer society be so concerned to explore the workings of gender?

The essays gathered here endeavor to respond to these questions. From the outset, they confirm what readers might already suspect. Sexualized metaphors applied to the circulation and consumption of goods may be taken to stand for elusive social relations. Sexual difference lends itself to being talked about in deceptively self-evident polarities. Often these can reveal deep levels of conceptual discomfort, the kind that people experience in the face of inexplicable changes in their material life and new inequalities. If there is a perplexing constancy in the references to sexuality and gender, there is an equally baffling variety. Both the continuities and the variations are most susceptible to explanation by firm grounding in historical context.

That writing about the meaning of consumption requires writing its history may seem obvious, even banal. Yet the consumption of goods and services is one of those human activities, like sex, leisure, or family life, that is usually taken for granted. So much so, that although the development of consumption under capitalist exchange is relatively recent, many of the suppositions about why and how we consume remain unquestioned. In the mid–eighteenth century, with Adam Smith, François Quesnay, and other Enlightenment thinkers, it became axiomatic that man was born acquisitive. Suffice it for free rein to be given to commerce and the division of labor, and civilized people would trade, truck, and barter. Later ideologues of the capitalist order averred that people instinctively sought variety and pleasure, the only constraint on their desires being scarcity. Variety was most easily achieved by acquiring possessions, and acquisition occurred mainly through market exchange. Some time in the mid–twentieth century, it also became axiomatic that access to consumer goods was a fundamental right of all peoples, that this right was best fulfilled by free enterprise, and that free enterprise operated optimally if guided by the profit motive unimpeded by state or other interference.

All of these assumptions can be challenged. We used to do so by contrasting our contemporary acquisition and use of goods with an earlier, more rural, less commodified way of life. It was common, too, to turn to the experiences studied by anthropologists: the gift giving, barter, and other exchanges of so-called primitive peoples. It was also possible to envisage alternative notions of needs and other ways to satisfy wants through the prism of socialistically planned economies. But there is skepticism now whether any of these other experiences are relevant to late-twentieth-century consumer practices. This skepticism is not necessarily a healthy one, for the loss of these critical vantage points has diminished the capacity to construct a narrative about the advent of modern consumption habits and narrowed the imagination about the motives and meaning behind today's use of goods.

This collection presents a complex of issues related to what might usefully,

if not prettily, be called the sexual division of labor around consumption to show that there was nothing natural or inevitable about the development of modern consumption practices. The authors, to recall an archeological metaphor, have excavated mounds of truisms, verities, and antinomies: commonplaces about fickle femininity and dutiful female domesticity; the antonyms production and consumption, luxury and necessity; the dichotomized relationship between Mr. Breadwinner and Mrs. Consumer. They examine the forces that shaped these conventions of thinking, and they trace the often elusive linkages between discursive practices and social, political, and economic structures.

Thus we learn that in eighteenth-century Paris, public opinion indicted shop girls and female dress merchants as the embodiments of disorderly luxury, moreover, that these metaphoric disturbances were linked to the quarrels of Enlightenment thinkers, who, in the face of quickening urban commerce, were in their own way disputing definitions of the superfluous and necessary and casting about for new terms to express their uneasiness. We are piqued with curiosity, even a little appalled, at the immense economic and psychic investment in domesticity made by the mid-nineteenth-century bourgeois *maîtresse de maison.* How Proustian her agonizing over codes of decoration and etiquette! In this volume, we go beyond viewing her elaborately cultivated taste as symptomatic of a stultifying bourgeois home life to consider its multiple functions in preserving family lines, embellishing national hierarchies of taste, and eventually contributing to her own sense of individuality. Labor history has familiarized us with the making of the modern male wage earner who, with the support of militant trade unions and under the pressure of middle-class cultural norms, strove to provide wife and dependents with a decent standard of living. What a mythic and precarious figure he turns out to be once we know something of the accumulation of laws and social norms that persecuted workers who deserted their families as menaces to the "public purse," that adjudicated domestic squabbles over money, and that assisted impoverished families with collective social services, while simultaneously exalting the females of the household as modern and expert consumers and homemakers. By the time we finish, we will question the truism that women dress *up* and will wonder what is really happening when they put *on* their faces in the morning with makeup. But we will equally ask why Western men dress *down,* and, perhaps, wonder why, since the first decade of this century, they have scrupulously scraped *off* their faces by shaving daily with safety razors.

To make sense of the accretion of sexual meanings and gender identities around practices of consumption the authors could not be wedded to any single definition of the polymorphous term *consumption.* Within a collection that moves broadly from the late seventeenth to the late twentieth century and spans Western Europe and the United States, readers will find assorted

behaviors designated with the verb *to consume,* the subject *consumer,* the concept of *consumer sovereignty,* and the diverse forms of *individual* and *social,* or *collective, consumption,* together with the various movements and ideologies that go under the name of *consumerism.* Thus, consumption is discussed here in terms of processes of commodification, spectatorship, commercial exchanges, and social welfare reforms, processes that involve the desire for and sale, purchase, and use of durable and nondurable goods, collective services, and images.

These variegated practices of consumption are examined with a collective eye to a larger historical problematic, namely, the development of what is familiarly called consumer society. This concept is intended here to identify the emergence of a peculiar type of market society, the Western capitalist system of exchange, and especially to probe the ever more identifiably *modern* aspect of its development. This modernity lies first in carrying out acts of consumption within capitalist exchange networks and then in the organization of institutions, resources, and values around ever larger flows and accumulations of commodities. It also lies in the transformation of goods from being relatively static symbols around which hierarchies were ordered to being more directly constitutive of class, social status, and personal identity.

The time frame for this development embraces the transition from Old Regime to bourgeois institutions, a transition that started with the dual industrial and political revolutions of the late eighteenth century. It bridges the transformations of the age of fordized mass production starting in the early twentieth century, and it extends into the present to analyze the huge changes that have occurred globally since the 1970s, which go under the name of postfordism, postindustrialism, or postmodernity. Underlying all of the contributions are the beliefs that the development of consumer society bears interpretation in light of the inequalities in and intense conflict over the appropriation and use of commodities; that gender roles have inflected this dynamic of change and have been significantly inflected by it; and finally, that this tension around the meaning of gender is especially visible at the moments of transition—from aristocratic to bourgeois society, from bourgeois to mass consumption—and in times of scarcity and social distress.

Our central interest is the myriad conflicts over power that constitute the politics of consumption. This politics could have many specific objects—pornographic picture cards and movie melodramas, cosmetics, food staples, and the standard set of home appliances (refrigerators, vacuums, radios, and televisions). It could reside in the subtlest indicators of social station, such as the cut and fabric of a dandy's suit, which decisively marked the gulf between aristocratic gentleman and bourgeois bounder in eighteenth-century England. It lay in the makeup recommended for modern women, in the palette of skin colors squirted from a cosmetics tube that signaled the uneasy coexistence of ethnic identities in race-riven, socially mobile America.

Conflicts of power attached to the legal disputes that brought harrying shopkeepers and harassed husbands, along with portionless wives, before magistrates in Victorian England. They were especially visible and threatening to the constituted order in consumer-driven mass movements, like that spearheaded by famished civilians in World War I Berlin's breadlines, which challenged the legitimacy of Kaiser Wilhelm II's rule.

To assess the nature of the politics of consumers' demands—as a means of measuring economic well-being, as a way to examine hierarchies of social place, or as a test of political consensus—the authors have been attentive to three interpretative contexts. The first context regards the Euro-American framework within which the volume is cast; the second and third reflect two specialized fields of research, the history of consumer culture and the methods and purview of feminist analysis. By and large, the conflicts over consumption that are variously investigated occurred in Western societies in which the struggle for subsistence was largely (but not entirely or evenly) won. Moreover, starting in the nineteenth century, the application of technology to production and the democratization of consumption through economic growth and social reform promised ever greater abundance. Always in the background looms what was to become the dominant model by the mid–twentieth century, that advanced by the United States. This model established the predominance of individual acquisitiveness over collective entitlement and defined the measure of the good society as private well-being achieved through consumer spending.

To establish a critical perspective on this Euro-American model, all of the contributors to this volume could be said to stand at the confluence of two relatively new streams of historical inquiry. One, the study of consumer cultures, is still a mere rivulet compared to the other, a veritable torrent with headwaters in feminist studies of women and gender. In their sources, however, the two are not unrelated. Both have arisen since the 1960s as a new cycle of rapid and pervasive economic change has shaken a secular fixity of class, national, and sexual identities, along with the canons of analysis that since the nineteenth century were propounded to analyze them. Both originate from the attempt to translate new social concerns and cultural identities into new paradigms of research.

In particular, the more intense study of the symbolic and social dimensions of consumption responds to the disorienting new profile of the material world. In a scant thirty years, perhaps even more visibly in European society than in industry-scarred America, the balance between production and consumption has shifted strikingly. The assembly-line worker is fast going the way of the cottage spinner and craft worker of earlier centuries, service labor has become the predominant occupation, and pristine nature, perennially under threat from chronic industrial waste, has become extinct. Deindustrialization in the West has whisked away factories to the fields of China,

rural Mexico, and the Newly Industrializing Countries, while commercial malls and chains offering deep discounts, as well as tourist facilities of all kinds, crowd into the remaining open spaces of rural America and proliferate within view of the medieval towers of ancient Mediterranean townscapes. Not only the sheer profusion of objects but the commodification of things such as fetuses and of services such as reproduction, public education, and prisons, which formerly seemed excluded from market truck, casts doubt on what, if anything, exists outside of commodity exchange. These trends make it seem passé to think that labor and work time are the major determinants of our passions and interests. With commodities looming so large as principles of pleasure and pain, the question arises whether the asceticism and ambivalence about goods so deeply rooted in Western culture has not caused scholars to ignore the power of things to shape human subjectivities and social life.

Though the current impetus to study consumer society seems to come from common sources, the subject has not generated a unified field of inquiry. Generally speaking, current research shares some key words in common, such as "consumer culture." But on the one side, there are studies that work within the well-trod conventions of liberal historical paradigms on industrialization; these recapitulate debates about how early to date the "consumer revolution," emphasizing the demand for goods rather than innovations in the supply, and they add an important subjective-cultural dimension to the study of social-economic criteria. Thus, they emphasize the quality of life as opposed to the standard of living; instead of the structures of primary accumulation, such as the rural banks, they highlight the emergent institutions of retailing, first and foremost the department store. What they have not revised is their assumptions about how people in the past made decisions about consumption and what goods might have meant to their collective outlooks. Interpretations of motivation remain surprisingly wedded to the individualist conceptions of behavior common to present-day Western society.

On the other side, there are theoretically conceived cultural studies that challenge productivist perspectives on historical trends. These are especially concerned with cultural meanings and often use textual analysis applied to literature, film, and other cultural artifacts to delve into the psychical mechanisms as well as the social drives that shape and were shaped by consumption activities. Much of this study is present-minded, and some is influenced by psychoanalytic categories that are basically ahistorical. Hence it often lacks what the historian Marc Bloch, in his stimulating 1928 essay on comparative history, called "the sense of difference, of the exotic which is an indispensable condition for any sound understanding of the past." Some is also signally antagonistic to modernist, which is to say Marxist and Weberian, efforts to explain the social world with generalizable laws, on the grounds that

these deny important sources of difference and complexity. Such approaches have tended to discourage analysis of processes of signification in the light of varying historical legacies, such as might be shaped by diverse processes of state building, or by the relative power of the market, or by varying patterns of accumulation of what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has familiarized as "cultural capital." For our purposes, however, such interactions are central, for they may account for politically significant differences in the evolution of the responses to changes in consumption habits within and across societies, and the diverse play of institutions, state, market, and family that affect the outcomes.

In contrast, feminist inquiry has brought to the study of consumer practices an agenda of politically compelling issues as well as sound intuitions about method. From the 1960s, if not earlier, feminist thinkers have recognized the importance of consumption to the question of what processes transform a female into a woman. Feminist inquiry has identified commercial culture as an especially totalizing and exploitative force, to which women are more vulnerable than men because of their subordinate social, economic, and cultural position and because of the patriarchal nature of the organization and the semiotics of mass consumption. By the same token, feminist researchers have long been aware of the conventional association of women with consumption, as a consequence of their role in the household division of labor and as reified objects in the commodity exchange system.

This sensitivity to the impact of mass consumption on women has not been unproblematic from the point of view of research. Like students of consumer culture generally, feminists have been entangled in a moralizing debate about whether commercial culture, and consumption more broadly, is emancipatory or stultifying, liberating or repressive. Given the stakes, the quarrel can be ferocious. One side asserts that mass consumption victimizes women. Fashion codes and beauty standards are denounced as akin to purdah, foot binding, or the veil—public sexual impositions on women, which, beyond domesticating women's drive toward liberation, constrain them physically and violate their authentic selves. The other side argues that mass consumption liberates women by freeing them from the constraints of domesticity. Accordingly, they argue that women, out shopping or otherwise practicing what has been called "style politics," use the rituals of consumption in dress, cosmetics, hairstyle, and gesture to bend the norms ordained by the market and to flout family and other authority.

The essays here, though not indifferent to such debates, advance a different set of concerns. First, they focus on the construction of gender roles rather than on an unexamined acceptance of the category of "woman" and thus construe the process of gendering broadly, in terms of male as well as female identities. This expanded focus recognizes the capacity of commodities to move between the customarily female spaces of the market and

the household, between the world of production and the world of reproduction, wreaking havoc with the very polarities—of public and private, calculation and desire, commercial sphere and domestic space, male and female—that have forged modern definitions of womanhood in Western society, as well as the terms for interpreting women's subordination. The preeminent concern here is thus not with moral dilemmas, at least not as defined or resolved by judgments uncritically committed to the antinomies of private and public and of market and state—and which place oppression or freedom on one side of the equation or the other. Instead, the common task, in addition to establishing the claims and counterclaims of women and men, is precisely to capture the immense transformative powers of capitalist-driven consumption as it constantly refashions notions of authentic, essential woman- and mankind.

Second, these essays highlight not only gender but also the class relations embodied in consumption practices, an issue to which recent study of consumer cultures has been surprisingly indifferent. One can concur that an understanding of social relations requires that the realm of consumption be considered on a par with forces of production. But there is a risk here of subscribing to a couple of new fallacies. One is an aesthetic bias toward the object-laden as opposed to the object-less, toward those with the most attractive and abundant symbolic capital, often the rich and powerful, as against the dreary and "tasteless," who are usually the poor and powerless. The second fallacy is the interpretation of consumer desires as largely individual choices, motivated by the consumer's wish for self-actualization or therapeutic uplift. The gendered study of consumption brings class back through the front door. The changing meaning of consumption habits in successive forms of social stratification highlights very different roles for women and men, over time and from class to class. From an analysis of consumption styles, as practiced in households and played out in public spaces, we obtain another significant perspective on social reproduction.

The centrality of class is related to a third concern, the importance of the family. From the perspective of the history of changing consumption habits, this institution is astonishingly multiform. As a central institution of civil society, it is the site where resources derived from one form of power—purchasing power acquired and expended in the market—are recombined to shape self-identities, sense of status, and demands for entitlement. Most of what was consumed was once internally produced in the household; however, in the last two centuries, market-supplied goods and services have largely replaced homemade ones. Women have occupied a strategic place in this changeover, being positioned at the intersection of the household's three functions: reproduction, production, and consumption. Yet the process of negotiation among persons with an affective as well as material stake in this joint enterprise—usually wife and husband, but also older and younger gen-

erations—is as yet little explored, though it would seem to shape profoundly what kinds of goods are purchased, what services are delegated to or reappropriated from the market, and what values are attached to goods in the pursuit of family well-being.

Finally, this volume brings the state back into the study of consumption. It is a bias in Anglo-American studies that consumption is generally construed as individual rather than social, to the neglect of the numerous ways in which ruling institutions define practices and standards of consumption. Yet states ration goods and services even in peacetime; they govern credit and retailing practices; they define appropriate standards of consumption with statistics and property laws; they provide the framework of private consumption through social spending on infrastructure, housing, health, education, and pensions. Indeed, it could be said that the state, in the process of allocating resources, legitimating property, and defining social obligations, establishes the very notion of private as opposed to public consumption. By the same token, the state is central to the activity of gendering consumption. In the emergent credit economy we see this process at work in the laws formulated to shield businesses and family property against the less creditworthy members of society, who, often, given family and social structures, have been propertyless females. Under authoritarian regimes, as in fascist Italy, we see the state, in the name of autarchic command economies, appealing to patriotic housewives to exploit household resources to reduce demand on the market and state, staunching the flow of foreign commodities to contain the feminized symbolic world of mass culture, and demonizing high-spending bourgeois women as "luxury mammals." In the welfare state, we see governmental legislation to regulate access to the "public purse," reinforcing the division of labor between male producer-breadwinners and female consumer-providers.

In the last analysis, the gendered study of consumer practices offers a critical stance on the wide consensus in U.S. society that material abundance, procured by individual acquisition through market-driven systems of exchange, yields the "good" society, whether judged in terms of social equity, humane values, or the efficient management of societal resources. This consensus has only been reaffirmed by the failure of so-called Eastern utopias to guarantee a decent standard of living for their citizens. Yet the Western model of mass consumption hardly offers a solution to how to build, much less sustain a "good" society. In the first place, fledgling market systems don't deliver the goods without engendering immense new inequalities, with predictably turbulent social consequences. Even if they were able to deliver commodities on a mass scale to a historically unprecedented degree, the prospect of billions of people on earth consuming in the Western style—instead of the only eight hundred million who are forecast to be able to do so at the end of the century—seems unlikely. One obvious reason is that the advanced countries are unlikely to relinquish their monopoly over global resources.

Even if by some political miracle they did, the environmental effects of individualistic mass consumption on a global scale would be unconscionable. In the United States, meanwhile, the economic restructuring underway since the 1970s has produced huge income inequalities greatly magnified in socially-differentiated consumption practices and unparalleled since the early twentieth century. Disoriented by the rapidity of change in their material existence, people struggle against the sense of historical depthlessness. But the nostalgic and contrived images most profusely available through commercial culture form a kind of retro-pastiche that seems only to intensify their confusion.

In the hope that historical analysis can help people brave this sense of disorientation, we offer here some experiences of others, women and men, who have had to contend with an equally baffling proliferation of goods. We have tried to explain the meaning of these experiences, in the first section, by offering several perspectives on the great transition from an aristocratic to a bourgeois mode of consumption; in the second section, by framing the immensely complex set of issues involved in the sexual division of labor around consumption practices in families and households; and, finally, in the third section, by addressing the significance of a politics of consumption in the era of mass politics. With new axes of interpretation in place, we can anticipate a history that better responds to the imperative to know about material needs, wants, and desires.