

INTRODUCTION

Representation, Style, and Taste

The Politics of Everyday Life



This book describes and explains the changing meaning of furniture in Parisians' lives from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth century. I will argue that the meaning borne by such objects was different to their makers, sellers, buyers, and arbiters; that production, distribution, and consumption were nonetheless interdependent systems, none necessarily having primacy over the others; and, that each of these systems and their interactions were as profoundly shaped by the form and logic of political regimes as by conjunctures in cultural and economic history.¹ Finally, I will argue that taste and style were the crystallizations of this complex dynamic. The goal of this book is thus less to explain the aesthetic forms of particular styles and tastes, than it is to explain the place of style and taste in the making of the political and social order, as well as of people's self-understandings.

Indeed, the analysis of both taste and style is crucial to grasp the interactions of these histories.² *Taste* has been, for at least the last two hundred years, a term laden with contradictions. It has been understood to be innate and emotional yet capable of improvement through education; individual and idiosyncratic yet absolute; transcendent of time and space yet socially constituted. *Style*, in contrast, has been understood to be historical and specific, resulting from either collective effort or individual genius. Almost always identified retrospectively, a style had characteristics,

1. Useful texts on the social and political history of objects are Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge, 1986); William M. Reddy, *The Rise of Market Culture* (Cambridge, 1984); Annie Phizacklea, *Unpacking the Fashion Industry* (London, 1990); Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire* (New York, 1986).

2. Helpful on taste have been Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, 1990); Luc Ferry, *Homo aestheticus* (Paris, 1990); and Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction: critique social du jugement* (Paris, 1977).

could be named and dated, and was understood to be pervasive within a given moment. Thus, the two terms have been in perpetual tension and contradiction. Through a historically grounded analysis I hope to illuminate the relation between style and taste and the correlative relation between two different problems of representation: first, the ways in which political regimes—absolute monarchies, empires, restoration monarchies, second-generation empires, fragile and solid republics—attempted to use style and taste to represent and construct their power. Second, the process by which objects—in this case furniture—served to represent and perhaps even generate subjectivity and identity for their makers and consumers through shared taste.

French governments from at least the reign of Louis XIV were actively engaged in patronage and debate on French style and French taste. The quality of both were viewed as matters of national import, although in radically different ways and with very different implications under the various forms of polity. This book attempts to sort out how and why the appearance of domestic goods was a matter of state.

In the domain of taste, this book takes as its premise that judgments of aesthetic value emerge from a complex interaction of desires for emulation, distinction, and solidarity. This is not to say that people simply “choose” to find certain things beautiful or ugly depending on what contemporaries and ancestors have judged. Rather people come to find certain aesthetic forms desirable for very good reasons. They are not necessarily aware of those reasons, nor do they find their judgments changeable at will.

The study of these two kinds of representation—the political (state-based) and the civil—through analysis of style and taste, bring the “grand” narratives of political and economic history together with the “everyday” history of the organization, discussion, and experience of relations of production, distribution, and consumption. There is some degree of consensus among scholars on the object and the importance of political and economic history; the everyday is far more elusive and controversial. The everyday is, for certain authors, what people do in the interstices of time and space—walking down the street, riding the subway, daydreaming—when not occupied at labor or leisure.³ Others use the everyday as a way

3. For examples, see Walter Benjamin’s arcades project and Susan Buck-Morss’s read of it in *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); Michel de Certeau’s approach in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, 1984); that of Allan Pred, *Lost Words and Lost Worlds* (Cambridge, 1990). I emphasize that neither these authors nor I understand the everyday to be a space beyond politics.

to think about long-term structural transformation, including changes in geography, weather, reproduction, and death.⁴ Still others employ the everyday almost mystically, characterizing it as the residuum of life, that which escapes from relations of production and from political institutions.⁵ Some scholars invoking this definition of the everyday see it as perhaps the only space of freedom in a capitalist world and search within its boundaries for evidence of resistance, for signs that even when inhabiting seemingly totalizing systems, people nonetheless fought back in small but crucial ways.⁶ More pessimistically, authors define the everyday as the private sphere, where false consciousness reigns.⁷ Last, it serves to justify and to conceptualize the histories of people who left behind only fragmentary relics and sparse documentation of their lives.⁸ The most interesting and important observation to emerge from this literature is that it is in the everyday world that politics and the polity, economics and the economy, aesthetics and beauty, are concretized, experienced, and perhaps transformed—in short, lived.⁹ The everyday is historical and contextual, its boundaries shifting with the changing landscape. The everyday is sensual, bodily, emotional, and intellectual. There is no escape from the everyday, no position outside of it, for either the subjects of history or its writers.

It is perhaps important to emphasize here that I am not advocating a form of history that dreams of recuperating ordinary people's unmediated experience. All experiences must pass through some kind of classificatory, meaning-generating process in order to lodge in memory. Such processes are not necessarily linguistic—the "languages" of the ears, eyes, tongue, and skin, including music, painting, sculpture, food, and fabric are neither the same as nor reducible to natural language.¹⁰ And there may be experiences that are not *expressible* through any communicative medium, but even these ineffable experiences are registered within memory—they are

4. Many of the French *annalistes* fall in this tradition; see, for example, Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life*, trans. Sian Reynolds (London, 1981).

5. Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (New Brunswick, 1990).

6. See especially Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life*, trans. Richard Deveson (New Haven, 1987).

7. Jean Baudrillard, *La société de consommation* (Paris, 1970), esp. 33.

8. That of the documentary includes much of the work from England's history workshop movement.

9. This usage is close to that of Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross in their introduction to *Everyday Life*, a special issue of *Yale French Studies* 73 (1988).

10. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), chap. 3 is especially eloquent on this point.

not unmediated, "immediate," or raw experience. Furthermore people are not in control of how an experience will be remembered.¹¹ Selves—neither unitary nor fully self-knowing—are thus made by complexly constituted, often mutually contradictory, experiences, some of which are known and expressed linguistically, some musically, some visually, and some in no known discursive framework. The multiplicities of experiences, of their inscription in memory, of their interpretation, and of their expression mean that neither experiences nor selves can be contained within such categories as class, gender, race, nation, or sexuality. Yet people who inhabit like locations within and among these categories often have similar experiences as well as similar memories and expressions of those experiences. The challenge, therefore, is to grasp the manifestations of the very large and abstract structures and transformations of the world within the small details of life; to recapture people's expressions—in all media—of their experiences of those abstractions, while also attempting to understand the forces shaping the multiple grids that mediate those expressions; and to analyze how concrete and mundane actions in the everyday may themselves transform the abstract structures of polity and economy.

This challenge is worthwhile because it is a means of thinking differently about the immensely influential feminist premise of the 1970s—the personal is political—to which parts of the current controversy over "political correctness" may be traced. That premise articulated the rage of the women of the New Left against their male allies' resistance to equality at home and in the movements for social change. It came out of a suspicion of a politics that seemed to do too little to transform the power relations of the everyday. It has proved to be a very rich, complex, and difficult precept by which part of a generation has tried to live. At its worst, it legitimates a kind of pettiness, of policing of the everyday, and, even more seriously, an assumption of rectifying through individual behavior injustices that operate on a structural level; it dissolves into a kind of moralism, into a liberal individualism. And yet, there is something of value in the slogan. Social

11. Denise Riley, Joan Wallach Scott, Dorothy Smith, and Konrad Jarausch have stimulated my thinking about this problem, although my own approach differs from each in specific ways. See Denise Riley, "Am I That Name?" *Feminism and the Category of "Women"* (Minneapolis, 1988); Joan Wallach Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (summer 1991): 773–97; Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic* (Boston, 1987); Konrad Jarausch, "Towards a Social History of Experience: Postmodern Predicaments in Theory and Interdisciplinarity," *Central European History* 22 (1989): 427–43. See also my "Erfahrung, Reflexion, Geschichtsarbeit. Oder: Was es heißen könnte, gebrauchsfähige Geschichte zu schreiben," *Historische Anthropologie* 3/2 (1995): 222–41.

relations whose causes may be traced to structural transformations *do* play out at the personal, individual level. Inquiries into power's capillary action and self-reflexiveness *do* have the potential for some kind of transformative politics; and politics devoid of them have been demonstrated to be highly problematic. A consequence of denying that the personal is political is unwittingly to change and stifle political transformation. And it is not only for the powerful that *power* works through the everyday.

Indeed, this very book emerged out of my preoccupation with the politics of the everyday and out of my own everyday life—produced from readings of fashion magazines, novels, newspapers, conversations, cities, music, furniture, buildings, advertisements, paintings, classrooms, meetings, conferences, and scholarly books. I am conscious of some of the multiplicity of experiences that produced this book, but I am no doubt ignorant of still others that may be relevant.¹² But since the point here is not self-revelation, nor even honesty, but rather the increased intelligibility of this project, the impossibility of complete transparency does not matter. Just as scholars critically select certain texts to cite, amid the many they read, so I have chosen to recount three lived experiences here (and cite others later), one from the world of production, one from the world of consumption, and one less classifiable within those categories.

When I began working as a cabinetmaker in a factory near Boston in the early 1980s, I assumed that my co-workers would be contesting hours, wages, and working conditions through union organizing.¹³ I soon discovered, however, that although they would have appreciated improved material circumstances, they were far more distraught about the *aesthetic* failure of their labor. They found the objects we made ugly, devoid of creativity, artistry, or imagination, and useless, contributing nothing of value to the world. The workers' response to this form of alienation of labor was not to organize collectively but to stay in the factory after hours, using

12. In this genre two books of importance to me are Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley, 1977); and Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

13. I worked at F. W. Dixon in Woburn, a company that included a cabinet shop, an architectural model shop, an experimental machine shop, a display shop, a pattern-making shop; at Brouwer Woodworks, a custom woodworking shop in Cambridge that specialized in spiral staircases with a small production shop in Boston, where we made good quality hardwood furniture of Japanese inspiration; and at the Emily Street Cooperative, a workshop where there were fifteen or so independent woodworkers, who collectively owned the big machines and purchased wood.

the machines and stealing wood to make things they considered beautiful and useful. Two colleagues built guitars—one acoustic and the other electric—while another crafted a maple sled with runners carved from bubinga (an African wood). A fourth even redid the interior of his '72 Ford in mahogany veneer.¹⁴ It was these objects that established respect among the workers in the factory, that gave them satisfaction, these objects that allowed them to talk with pride about their mastery. Here were artisans in full possession of their craft, but they were not being paid for its expert deployment on the job. Somewhat surprisingly, although deeply troubled by this loss, they did not perceive union organizing as a solution. The only response that made sense to them was to reclaim their trade for themselves, by making things they found to be beautiful and useful. Besides being impressed by their skill and perplexed by their lack of interest in collective action, I was intrigued and distressed by two of my co-workers' other reactions to their work. The first was their passivity in the face of an open labor market; these artisans could easily have found better (i.e., more interesting, better paid) work in the area, but they neither knew it nor, when told, really believed it. They appeared to have internalized or constructed a sense of the products of their paid labor as ugly and worthless and (perhaps consequently) their skills as valueless on the market. And yet they identified fully with their trade; they were proud to be cabinetmakers and outraged if mistakenly labeled carpenters. The second was the fierceness and rigidity of their definition of their work as masculine and their hostility to working beside a woman.¹⁵

Pained by these seemingly trapped lives, frustrated with my inability to intervene, and angered by their animosity toward women in the trade, I began to formulate the first questions that would ultimately produce this book: how had artisanal labor come to be devalued to the point that highly skilled and innovative artisans believed that they were doomed to making ugly and useless things? Could a kind of "aesthetic resistance" be an effective response to alienated labor, or were they simply trying to find

14. A well-known phenomenon analyzed most eloquently by de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Pred applies de Certeau's categories to late nineteenth-century Stockholm (*Lost Words and Lost Worlds*, 70–83). The contributions to John Calagione et al., eds., *Workers' Expressions: Beyond Accommodation and Resistance* (Albany, 1992) further this discussion.

15. I was the only woman on the shopfloor in a factory of sixty employees. The company, having recently won a contract for a partially federally-funded project, was subject to affirmative action. I happened to call looking for work the day the requirement became known and was, although completely untrained, precipitously hired.

apolitical solutions to what were ultimately political problems? How did the perception that they were being paid to make things of no value and that they could make worthwhile objects only on "their own time" influence their sense of self? Why did they cling so fiercely to the identity of cabinetmaker when it brought them so little in terms of pay or on-the-job satisfaction? Why did they so resent, even fear, the idea of sharing tools, machines, and the shop floor with women, even when they knew that women's labor posed no economic threat? The answers to these questions did not seem to be available on the shop floor, or accessible through discussion and thought confined exclusively to the present or even to the context of everyday experience and knowledge.

The historiography of industrialization, labor, and the working class, however fascinating and insightful, could not fully answer my questions either. Whereas my personal work experience had taught me that some late twentieth-century Boston woodworkers were most outraged by having to make objects lacking in beauty and utility, little hint of any such preoccupation appeared in the histories of artisans in late nineteenth-century Europe.¹⁶ Did this mean that late nineteenth-century European artisans were concerned only with hours, wages, control of the labor process, and working conditions—as the literature implies—or had labor historians, trapped by their own vision of what workers "should" want, neglected to look at the full range of artisanal desires?¹⁷

Although labor historians have been very sensitive to issues of deskilling and workplace control, they have been less engaged in questions of workers' job-satisfaction through the creation of objects they find aesthetically pleasing. Control over the labor process and control over the appearance of the finished object are related but are not the same. Having

16. I am referring here to the classics of the old "new" labor history of France published in the 1970s and early 1980s. I was especially influenced by Michael Hanagan, *The Logic of Solidarity: Artisans and Industrial Workers in Three French Towns, 1871–1914* (Urbana, 1980); Yves Lequin, *Les ouvriers de la région lyonnaise (1848–1914)* (Lyons, 1977); Michelle Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève, France 1871–1890* (Paris, 1974); Joan Wallach Scott, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974).

17. There are by now many critiques of labor literature aimed at uncovering "true consciousness" or denouncing the false. An eloquent plea for another approach is Michelle Perrot, "On the Formation of the French Working Class," in *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg (Princeton, 1986), esp. 71. A more general, theoretical critique of the concept is Stuart Hall, "The Problem of Ideology—Marxism without Guarantees," *Marx 100 Years On*, ed. Betty Matthews (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1983), 70.

accepted that by the nineteenth century workers were selling their labor rather than the product of their labor, labor historians largely ignored the relation between those alienated commodities and the people who made them. And after analyzing organized labor's systematic hostility to women's labor, historians are slowly turning to study the impact that the construction of labor as masculine had on the men who practiced those trades.¹⁸

Unlike most labor histories, this book assumes that workers may have been as concerned with the objects they made as with labor processes, wages, and working conditions. And, unlike most labor histories, the goal is not only to reexamine workers' relations to class-based politics but also to explore the broader range of questions concerning workers' relations to their labor and to the objects they produced. Why were particular pieces of furniture built, and how did their makers' think, feel, and speak about them? Did artisans simply make what they thought would sell or were they hindered by limitations in technique, skill, or materials? How did those possibilities and constraints change over time and how did artisans create and respond to those transformations? How did the persistent definition of the trade as masculine shape the expression of desire by its artisans as the terms of gender were transformed? Did the attitudes of the male producers change when furniture became something women consumed? No answers to these questions were in the extant labor histories because these are not the questions addressed by the classic productivist, labor, or working-class culture approaches.

This last silence was especially disappointing since studies of working-class culture had seemed initially closer to my preoccupations. Some studies of working-class culture take as their unit of analysis a "working-class community"; others focus on informal or organized leisure-time practices. They all cast their net beyond the workplace and union hall, to include the homes, churches, bars, streets, stores, and playing fields frequented by workers. But, by their choice of unit of analysis, studies of working-class culture tend to assume divisions between high and low culture, as well as to isolate the working class from the "general" culture.¹⁹

18. For further discussion of this point and historiographic references see chapter 6.

19. Michael Sonenscher effectively critiques the concept in the preface and conclusion to *The Hatters of Eighteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, 1987), as does Roger Chartier in the preface to *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton, 1987). For an interesting and insightful genealogy of the concepts of high and low culture see Peter Stallybrass and Allon

And, while it is clear that workers were denied access to certain aspects of elite culture—and in fact this book is in part the story of that exclusion—defining a study as falling solely within the boundaries of working-class culture, or a working-class community, posits a too completely isolated working class. Yet studies of social mobility, usages of urban space, urban-rural ties, the importance of kin, and neighborhood social structures all demonstrate the manifold sites and interactions among members of the working class and other classes.²⁰

So, just as I could find only partial answers to my questions on the shop floor or in the labor literature, answers were not forthcoming from the working-class culture literature either. Indeed, the constraints on, and possibilities for, my coworkers' lives at labor seemed to have been determined as much by the ultimate destiny of the goods they produced—or at least factory management's understanding of it—as by the culture of the shop floor and community. Some of what we made was being sold to other workers but most of it was not. Perceptions of the needs and desires of various consumers, as well as the organization of distribution, played fundamental roles in decision making about what objects would be produced. Thus to place the boundaries of the project either at the literal worksite walls or at some invisible fence marking the edges of the working-class community was clearly inappropriate. The constraints that management's perception of the market imposed on the choice of products to be crafted by my Woburn colleagues showed me that any attempt to analyze the labor process without analyzing consumer practices was doomed. I had to examine demand, both the structural and experiential aspects of consumerism. The structural aspects are how consumers' cumulative actions—what they bought at what price—affected the workplace. The experiential ones are why people bought what they did and what they said about it. Although I have distinguished between the structural and the experiential,

White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London, 1986). For impressive use of the concept, see Les révoltes logiques, ed., *Esthétiques du peuple* (Paris, 1985).

20. An analysis demonstrating the complexity and importance of social mobility for conceptions of class and culture is Maurizio Gribaudi, *Mondo operaio e mito operaio* (Turin, 1987). Using very different kinds of—contemporary rather than historical—evidence, the sociolinguist William Labov makes a similar argument. See his *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Philadelphia, 1972). For another kind of discussion again see the High Culture/Low Culture catalogue from the exhibit at MOMA 1991 and the example of Jelly Roll Morton's jazz, which combined a classical piano training and knowledge of "popular" black music to create a new form of music that was then deemed "black."

I know that they are interconnected. I know that in part because as I brooded about these things I started thinking about my grandmothers, their houses, and their conflicts over taste.

One of the things that bothered me as a child was why my two grandmothers did not get along, and why they used judgments of taste to express their disagreements. My paternal grandmother, Ida, often accused my maternal grandmother, Rose, of buying things that were ugly and common. Rose, in contrast, accused Ida of expressing her snobbishness, arrogance, and competitiveness through her acquisitions. I was even more confused about the conflict and the form of expression of that conflict because my grandmothers seemed to me to come from like worlds.

Despite quite similar origins, however, by the time they were in their sixties, my maternal and paternal grandparents had radically different consumption habits and aesthetic languages. All of them were either Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe or their children. They had all grown up in poverty but had fared better as adults. In both couples, the wife had the ultimate responsibility for the dwelling—its appearance, its cleanliness, and even who was invited into it. My father's father became a high-school English teacher in New York; and in the 1930s his wife, my grandmother, inherited the bankrupt plumbing supply business her father had founded in Philadelphia. Under her management the business eventually became profitable, sufficiently so that by the 1950s it employed both grandparents, enabling them to buy a small semidetached house. My maternal grandmother, after a stint doing piece-work at home for the garment industry, worked as a secretary for the Navy. Her husband, my grandfather, was a chemistry professor at the Columbia College of Pharmacy. Moving from the Lower East Side to Brooklyn, they always rented small apartments; they finally bought a modest condominium when they retired to Miami. According to contemporary sociological class definitions, my paternal grandparents were capitalists but, given the small scale of their business, hovered at the boundary of the *petite bourgeoisie*. My maternal grandparents, on the basis of my grandfather's position as a university professor, should have belonged to the *bourgeoisie*, although they occupied that problematic spot reserved for professional salaried workers, whose cultural capital outstrips their economic resources. But a man's relation to the means of production does not entirely determine the family's class position, and that of its members; even more pertinently, class location alone cannot contain or explain senses of self, and of solidarity. Understanding the likenesses and differences, as well as the con-

flicts between the two couples requires a much more complicated explanation, looking at other aspects of their lives besides their relation to the means of production.

One manifestation of the distance between the couples—and one that simultaneously provided a symbolic language for their differences and reified and concretized those differences—was their diverging definitions of the tasteful. My maternal grandparents maintained the taste of their youth throughout their lifetimes. Each apartment was furnished with a white “French Provincial” bedroom set, formica kitchen table and chairs, mahogany veneer living-room furniture in an “English” style, convertible sofa bed, a lazy-boy, and a TV. Despite the putative class status achieved through my grandfather’s job as a professor, they continued to live with aesthetic norms that would probably be described by a sociologist as working-class.

Critical to their senses of self, and to the selves they created and represented through their furnishings, were their religious identities, their geographic stability, their interpretation of gender roles, and the constitution of their social world. Rose and Sam were orthodox Jews and did not leave the city of their youth until they retired to a microcosm of it in Florida. They participated in Jewish social organizations and lived essentially among other Jews who were from similar backgrounds. My grandfather talked little about domestic things; my grandmother had a more elaborated discourse about what she was buying and why. Dominating her conversation were references to what her friends and relations had bought and where. Rose bragged about getting “good value” on something and was ashamed of expensive purchases. To her, they were admissions of weakness. Discoveries of bargains she shared with her friends, and possessing exactly the same thing as her neighbor was more than acceptable—it was a pleasure. Thus Rose used furniture, clothing, and food to anchor herself and her family firmly in the social context into which she and many of her generation had moved in her young adulthood during the 1920s. They had escaped from poverty and their children would, to their parents’ pride, establish themselves firmly in the middle class. My maternal grandparents themselves, however, were committed to the maintenance of the community of their youth, a community that had started as working-class and now cut across class differences. They used goods far more in the hopes of resembling their neighbors than in the hopes of differentiating themselves from them. Consumer solidarity was highly prized, and competition through goods frowned upon.

My paternal grandparents, in contrast, broke with the aesthetic of their youth and created a new definition of the tasteful. Their dwellings could not have looked less like those of my mother's family. Ida and Charles moved to Philadelphia and established a "modern" household. By the 1950s, they had acquired a house combining Danish modern with American "contemporary" furniture and even included a few custom pieces. The dining room was furnished with a matching contemporary pearwood set—table, chairs, sideboard, breakfront—in a moderately ornate design. The living room had carefully unmatched upholstered furniture with solid wood legs and arms, a glass and metal coffee table, and custom veneer cubes and display cabinets for some of their favorite crystal sculptures. Their bedroom was in Danish satinwood veneer, and the guestroom had also been purchased at Scandinavian Design. Furthermore, the basement housed a small dancing studio, with a hardwood floor and a very sophisticated sound system.

Any adequate explanation for my paternal grandparents' taste would have to include my grandmother's unusual role in taking over her father's business (and debts), the subsequent move from New York, their relative financial ease, their secularism, my grandfather's intellectual ambitions, and their love of dancing. On first glance, it would appear that they were trying to assimilate. They stopped practicing their religion, they bought international-style furniture, they had non-Jewish friends. But that is too simple; they did not want to be absorbed into WASP culture. Rather, they wanted to distinguish themselves from others for whom they might be mistaken (like my maternal grandparents). My grandmother appropriated from the dominant (i.e., middle-class WASP) culture its words of aesthetic praise—simplicity, elegance, quality, purity of line, originality—but gave different meanings to those words.²¹ Anything "simple" was beautiful, anything "gaudy" was ugly. (She deemed most of what Rose bought gaudy.) Judgments with which most members of the dominant classes would be in agreement, until they saw the objects in question. Ida took immense pride in her house and garden and was quick to point out the uniqueness, cost, and specialness of her acquisitions and interior design. Like Rose, Ida sought to use goods to create and consolidate social ties. But, unlike Rose, she chose to weave those ties by differentiating herself from the others, highlighting her individuality.

21. See the contributions to Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain* (London, 1976).

Both couples, then, used their material goods as a means of self-representation.²² Beyond the family, the primary audience for their domestic interiors was other Jews, often of similar geographic and class backgrounds. Despite one couple's secularism and the other's piety, both couples wanted their children to marry Jews and both wanted to be buried in Jewish cemeteries. Both had explicitly Jewish objects displayed prominently in their homes. My maternal grandmother bought and used things to create solidarity with others with whom she identified and to protect and reinforce those relationships in the face of material difference. My paternal grandmother created an interior that distanced her from those she feared she resembled and sought to flee through an insistence on the values of individuality, originality, modernity, and internationalism. But it was as much a process of differentiation from, as emulation of, the dominant culture, and both processes involved a complex use of objects and of the words to describe those objects. My grandmothers' consumer practices did not simply reflect their place in the world; they also defined that world and made that place.

Those consumer practices were not limited to the acquisition or arrangement of the goods themselves; the uses to which they were discursively put were equally critical. My maternal grandmother was terrified of standing out, of being different, of breaking rank with the friends and relations of her youth. She not only bought the same things they bought, but she talked about them in the same language and criticized those who deviated from the norm. My paternal grandmother either did not want to, or did not believe she could, be contained within the community in which she had come of age; she found other objects and other words with which to talk about them. Yet both used the language of taste as a language of social judgment, of inclusion and of exclusion. When they grew irritable with each other, their critiques were often in terms of taste.

My grandmothers, then, were anything but passive consumers, quietly buying what clever advertisers suggested to them. They were also doing something more complicated than dissolving unobtrusively into the American melting pot.²³ The identities they constructed and expressed

22. For a parallel discussion, but in contemporary Sweden, see Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren, *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-Class Life*, trans. Alan Crozier (New Brunswick, 1987), 148–50.

23. Stuart Ewen's discussion of immigrants' uses of goods in *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (New York, 1988), 76–77, is thus too simple, in its emphasis on assimilation and "passing," because it reduces immigrants to passive recipients of an ill-defined mainstream American culture. For

through the deployment of furniture in their homes were complex, fractured, and therefore by no means bounded by class, religion, or social or geographic origins. Even as my paternal grandparents described their taste in terms an American bourgeois of longer standing would recognize, they invented a personal and particular aesthetic. My maternal grandparents, seemingly less innovative in their consumer practices, likewise made a choice: not to produce an aesthetic representation of themselves that might distance them from the people they held dear. They chose to opt out of part of the American dream. Equally important—although by now a truism perhaps—is that this social labor was the responsibility of the women.

What relevance do observations about my grandparents have to the furniture makers in Woburn or in nineteenth-century Paris? My grandparents deployed their furnishings not simply as a source of sensual pleasure, but as a means of social differentiation and as the media to communicate those differences. Generalizing these observations, I began to ask myself if women had always had the final say on aesthetic matters, and whether furnishings had always been put to such uses. Had people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used consumer goods to construct themselves—if they had, which consumer goods, which people, and what does it mean to “construct oneself”? What was to be made of the relation between what people bought and used and how they and other people talked and wrote about it, between the making and selling of goods and their use after purchase? With these questions in mind I turned again to the experience of scholarship, but this time to texts on the theory and history of consumerism and on identity formation.

There is, by now, a rather massive—economic, anthropological, psychological, sociological, and historical—literature on consumption and consumer practices. Theoretical studies, when they try to find the commonalities in people’s use of objects across time and space, I have found of limited use. This work is often much more contextually and historically specific than its authors seem to realize: being a relatively young literature (in its modern form), it tends to start from consumption under late capitalism and unconsciously assumes either the uniqueness or the univer-

a very different example than my grandmothers’ of consumers’ creative use of objects, see Melanie Wallendorf and Michael D. Reilly, “Ethnic Migration, Assimilation, and Consumption,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 10 (December 1983): 292–302.

salinity of that formation.²⁴ Yet some of this work has been extremely useful in calling attention to the communicative capacity of objects, in their exchange and in their use.²⁵ Attempts to analyze consumer practices within a given time and space at a high level of abstraction have been more helpful in framing the analysis here.²⁶ This work is, however, most developed for the contemporary European and American world and is significantly less successful for distant times and places.²⁷ Furthermore, both the theoretical and empirical work on consumerism tend to come from either a liberal or neoliberal position, assuming the naturalness of demand, the autonomy of the consumer, and the justice of the market, or from a Marxist or neo-Marxist position that is often too critical of modern consumerism without a careful enough analysis of its particular historical manifestations.²⁸ I find neither approach fully adequate to the questions that troubled me.

More concretely, the historical debate over consumerism has concentrated on three issues: dating the onset of modern consumer practices; the relevance of demand as a causal agent for the first and second industrial revolutions; and the centrality of consumption to the class formation of the bourgeoisie. This literature is very rich but, in the case of work done on England, flawed for my purposes by the underlying agenda of making an argument for "home demand" as a catalyst for the first industrial

24. Economists and psychologists, in otherwise subtle analyses are most prone to these assumptions: see J. F. Bernard-Bécharies, *Le choix de consommation: rationalité et réalité du comportement du consommateur* (Paris, 1970); and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge, 1981).

25. Most salient here is Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York, 1979).

26. Jean Baudrillard, *Le système des objets* (Tournai, 1975); *Le miroir de la production* (Paris, 1968); and *La société de consommation*; also Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford, 1987).

27. An important exception is Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

28. Striking examples of the liberal approach are Timothy Breen, "'Baubles of Britain': The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 119 (1988): 73–104; Neil McKendrick, "Home Demand and Economic Growth: A New View of the Role of Women and Children in the Industrial Revolution," in *Historical Perspectives*, ed. Neil McKendrick (London, 1975), 152–210; of the Marxist genre see Ewen, *All Consuming Images*; Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, 1982); Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality, and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, trans. Robert Bock (Minneapolis, 1986).

revolution.²⁹ Scholars, caught up in the standard-of-living debate, are eager to demonstrate that the industrial revolution was sparked by demand as much as by transformations in production, and that that demand was in England rather than abroad. These arguments become circular: they assume that all people are inherently prone to consume when they can, that ultimately wage levels determine consumer practices and economic take-off.³⁰ Because of its divorce of the economic from the political, and its naturalization of demand, this work has little relevance to the social and political meaning of consumption.³¹ Efforts to think about both production and consumption in relation to the forms of political regime—a crucial linkage to an understanding of either—are few.

All of this work, the theoretical and the historical, set in Britain, the United States, and on the continent, did not satisfy my desire to understand what my grandmothers were doing in their homes. So I turned to the last of the scholarly literatures concerned with consumerism, in literary, film, and cultural studies, for analysis not just of what people bought but of what those acquisitions meant. This work, much of it feminist, much of it Gramscian or Lacanian in inspiration, some of it derived from the Frankfurt school cultural theorists, focuses on questions of subjectivity, identity, spectatorship, consumer-use, and resistance.³²

29. On the uses of consumption in class formation, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago, 1987); Marion Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1991); Bonnie G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1981) are especially impressive examples.

30. On the standard of living see Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behavior and Material Culture in Britain, 1660–1760* (New York, 1988); D. E. C. Everseley, “The Home Market and Economic Growth in England, 1750–1780,” in *Land, Labor, and Population in the Industrial Revolution*, ed. E. L. Jones, and G. E. Mingay (New York, 1967).

31. Important exceptions to this general trend are the work of historian Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, 1986); Peter Borsay in “The English Urban Renaissance: The Development of Provincial Urban Culture, c. 1680–1760,” *Social History* 5 (1977); and, in a very different register, the work of Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (Berkeley, 1988).

32. Most notably Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (New York, 1985); Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog, eds., *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body* (London, 1990); Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington, 1987); and Mica Nava, *Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth, and Consumerism* (London, 1992).

It is a literature I find to be very useful, but with one caveat: in some cases, the commitment to a construction of consumers as either active agents (with the assumption that that agency has direct implications for resistance) or passive victims blurs investigation of the nature of the relationship between resistance and identity production (which mirrors the liberal/Marxist split described above).³³ Consumers may make choices and objects may become critical for the formation of self, and even for the formation of group solidarities, without necessarily engaging in any kind of resistance. Some of the difficulties of this literature seem to stem from confusion about what identity is, might be, and has been; so I turned to the literature more specifically concerned with those issues.

The literature on the process of identity construction is immense and diverse. It ranges from psychoanalytic discussions of the making of subjectivity, to feminist inquiries into the formation of gendered selves, to recent work on sexuality as a category of identity, to Marxist and post-Marxist discussions of class identity, to the archaeology of race and racial difference, to theoretical, empirical and historical investigations into the concepts of "other" and of "stranger," and even to the deconstruction of the very desire for, and idea of, identity.³⁴ Given the lack of consensus among or even within these diverse but interrelated discussions, and given the immense scope and complexity of these debates, I will not attempt even a brief critique or summary here. Suffice it to say, however, the issues they raise have been central to the formulation of my work.³⁵ This book worries a great deal about identity; about what the concept means, and about how both the making and buying of goods were at certain conjunctures important means of inventing a sense of self and at other moments one or the other, or both, of those activities were quite irrelevant to the process of

33. The most helpful historical work using this approach is Kathy Peiss's *Cheap Amusements* (Philadelphia, 1986), especially her introduction with its elegant discussion of the pitfalls of models of both liberation and victimization. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London, 1979) tends to emphasize the "resistive" capacity.

34. For a recent reevaluation of the "gender discussions" see Judith Butler and Joan Wallach Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (London, 1992). Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (New York, 1990) does an archaeology of the category. Zygmunt Bauman, "Strangers: Social Construction of Universality and Particularity," *Telos* 78 (winter 1988-89): 7-42 is helpful on the concept of the stranger. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, 1903) is still one of the most compelling texts on raced identities.

35. See my critique and discussion of three texts within the feminist literature ("Feminist Theory and Social History: Explorations in the Politics of Identity," *Radical History Review* 54 [fall 1992]: 158-76).

self-creation. I also attempt to make some sense of the many identities in which producers and consumers found themselves—individual, familial, regional, gendered, classed, and national. Again, goods in general, and furniture in particular were not necessarily or inevitably used in the making of any or all of these potential identities.

It is important to emphasize here that I seek to not reproduce, in the domain of objects, the debate that reigns in the domain of discourse. I argue that objects cannot be understood to simply “re-present” an always-already-existing identity of the producer or the consumer, to the world. First of all there clearly has never been only *one* identity to represent. Second, the category of identity does not “cover” the problem of subjectivity, for it has misleading connotations, even when used in the plural, of the possibility of self-transparency, self-coherence, and the absence of internal contradiction. Within identity theory, contradictions tend to be understood as *externally* produced in adult social actors. But rather than explain the dissonance as the inability of others to let one simultaneously inhabit several identities, or let one choose an identity, I argue that contradictory desires and identifications are both internally and externally made and lived, that there are also contradictions *between* the internal and the external, and that one cannot always be conscious of these desires. Those desires are made in and through discourse, which I understand to mean language (and other symbolic systems) in use. Discourse does not merely reflect or represent realities or persons—it also constitutes them. Discourses have histories, sites of production, and levels of connotation. People use them with particular hopes, intents, and purposes in mind, but they do not always say what they mean, mean what they say, or even know what it is they mean.

In certain conjunctures, objects are likewise *both* constitutive and representative. They represent people’s conscious identities and unconscious desires and fears; they also constitute them, because objects carry multiple potential meanings to different users and to the same user. When I go into a store to buy a chair, I carry Rose and Ida (as well as the rest of my family and digested and undigested childhood experiences) with me, both consciously and unconsciously. I also carry my—complicatedly generated—interpretive grid of what certain styles signify, in terms of social and political position. This baggage produces a judgment, or taste. I choose a chair. I take that chair home. Over the next months and years guests respond to me and to my chair, some seeing in it one thing, some another. They cannot see in it what I hoped for them to see because what I hoped was itself necessarily contradictory and occluded. They respond with their

interpretations of my chair and me; I respond and am changed by their responses. I have been made by that chair and I have made the chair. The chair was full of meanings over which I had no control, and of which I had only partial knowledge when I acquired it. In my home it acquired new meanings. My guests have a certain understanding of me when they arrive in my home; as a result of viewing my chair they have somewhat different understandings. In their eyes I become different—perhaps also in my own.

This process is neither universal nor natural. It is a phenomenon of modernity, a creation of the bourgeois stylistic regime and its successor—the mass stylistic regime—and rests on the alienation of the producers from the product of their labor. When my co-workers' ancestors-in-trade had been paid to invent themselves (in all the infinitely complex meanings of that concept) through the making of things, "consumption" meant something very different than it does today. Likewise, when the political system was founded upon the concept of the embodiment of the nation in the king—when the king, the king's things, and the nation were one—objects meant something very different than they did under the republican system of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The changing meaning of these objects became clear to me early in the project when I read late nineteenth-century discussions of contemporary and *ancien régime* taste and style. The dominant furniture style of the late nineteenth century was a pastiche of Old Regime styles. The debaters engaged in questions of taste in the late nineteenth century kept asking, Why can't we be as innovative as our prerevolutionary ancestors? I became curious about the meaning of these pastiches and this debate. To understand it, without grasping what seemed to have been going on in the Old Regime, was impossible.

In order to grasp the historicity of the meaning of objects in political and social life, therefore, the time frame of this book reaches across nearly two centuries. Its span, which is admittedly both audacious and uneven, was necessitated by the problem I address. Although the intellectual and personal experiences of my present—a "mass" society and mass stylistic regime—stimulated the problem, I knew that I could not begin to address it without a much better understanding of what preceded my present—the bourgeois stylistic regime of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To understand that regime, therefore, is the primary object of this study. In the course of my investigations, I came to see that the key to explain this aspect of French bourgeois society lay in the era before the Revolution. To extend an originally late nineteenth-century project back into the *ancien régime* risks not only the conventional errors that a non-specialist is prone to but a teleological fallacy as well: to raid the *ancien*

régime solely to illuminate the modernity that followed. I decided to chance these risks because the contrast between the ancien and bourgeois regimes underscored so clearly the intricate interrelations between production, distribution, and consumption, between public and private spheres, and between the political and the social necessary to understanding the deployment and constitution of power in the everyday of absolutist and bourgeois political orders.

Consequently, the periodization of this story is determined by the approximate moments at which furniture came to occupy a different place in social and political negotiation than it had before. The story of shifts in the uses of furniture is divided into three periods: the Old Regime, the transition to the bourgeois stylistic regime, and the bourgeois regime. During the first period, domestic objects were constitutive of political power and the state served as a direct patron and determiner of style; the period from Revolution to 1871 was a transitional one, marked politically by two imperial regimes, two monarchies, war, civil war, two revolutions, the birth and death of the Second Republic, and the establishment of the Third. The state tried and failed to sustain its role as patron, but it was unable as yet to assume another role. Furnishings appear to have served both political and social ends, although neither very clearly. This transitional moment continued through the Second Empire and into the first decade of the Third Republic, marked by a strong renewed state involvement in matters of taste and rapid transformations in the organization of production and distribution. The period 1880 to 1930 may be characterized as a mature bourgeois stylistic regime, in which domestic goods became essentially irrelevant for the constitution of political power but crucial for the making of social power. The state was now largely absent as patron, although very present in the training of producers; meanwhile new market mechanisms trained consumers in taste. The story ends with the beginnings of a mass stylistic regime in the twentieth century.

I will argue that consumption as a set of actions constitutive of the social fabric was especially a phenomenon of the nineteenth century. During the Old Regime, and to a diminished extent until 1848, durable, symbolically rich objects were used primarily to represent royal and aristocratic political power; after mid-century they were used by the bourgeoisie as part of the process of class formation and to consolidate their power, excluding thereby both the aristocracy and the working class. In the twentieth century, the working class in its turn gained access to this system of class, identity, and subjectivity formation through consumption.

Furthermore, when consumption as an occupation constitutive of society came into being, it was defined as feminine or effeminate. From the Old Regime onward, acquiring subsistence for the family was a task that fell to women. But the nineteenth-century gendering of non-subsistence consumption was not simply an extension of women's traditional role in providing for their families. Rather, the nineteenth-century invention of the female consumer was closely linked to the transformation of the place of everyday objects in the making of social and political life. At the moment that domestic objects ceased to be important as means of representation of political power and became means of production and consolidation of the newly invented world of the "social," women were defined as consumers and men as producers. The redefinition was a matter of importance not only to the consumers, but also to the producers, for the possibility of being paid for making beauty diminished when beauty came to be defined as a feminine preserve. This re-gendering of the aesthetic was implicated in a shift in the mechanisms of power from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries and from an absolutist to a republican state.

The theme of my story is that domestic objects worked very differently in the constitution of social place, individual identity, and state power from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth. The nature of that difference was a product of the change in form of politics, including not only the move toward representative forms of government but also the changing nature of state intervention. In the Old Regime the crown regulated all relations of production and distribution and chose at moments to allow those regulations to be broken. But part of that process of regulation was granting great autonomy—for the internal policing of their trades and the training of successor generations—to the producers and distributors of goods. And, in this structure the appearance of goods was non-arbitrary; they had not yet become completely commodified. After the end of the guild structure, and the development of industrial capitalism, first the bourgeoisie and then the state became increasingly involved in direct control over the processes of training and production and less involved in patronage. Artisanal men came to be less able to produce themselves through creative work, as their labor became more fractured and divided. Bourgeois women came to be able, and obliged, to fashion themselves and their families through commodities. In a bourgeois stylistic regime, bourgeois men were to represent the family through the vote and women were to represent the family on and in their bodies and homes. After the First World War, with the move into mass consumption and mass politics, the

dynamic of commodities, and the gendering of production and consumption would change yet again.

For parallel reasons, this book uses both a synchronic and a diachronic organization. Each part represents a moment I have found to be crucial in tracing the trajectory of the meaning of domestic objects in the constitution of political and social life. The *ancien régime*, from the apogee of absolutism to its crisis in the eighteenth century; a transitional moment from the Revolution through the Second Empire; and the bourgeois stylistic regime of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The chapters within each part examine a particular aspect of its historical moment; their relation to each other is temporally concurrent rather than sequential. Each discusses a different aspect of the making of meaning through objects within that moment.

The broad sweep of this book and the nature of the questions it attempts to address require a wide variety of sources ranging from the objects themselves (and images of them); to archival documentation on production, distribution, and consumption; to primary printed texts (including government reports, memoirs, political theory, novels, magazine articles, and aesthetic treatises); to the work of other historians (writing in both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries); and to texts by theorists writing about production, consumption, and citizenship in abstract terms. Some chapters rely more on one kind of inspiration and evidence than another. To forestall readers' concern about such disparities, I point to the necessarily collective nature of scholarly production. That I should redo the labor of others merely to have the authority of an archival citation seems arrogant and foolish. That I should limit my interpretive work to those areas in which I have done "primary" work would be a fetishization of the archive and of the primary source. I choose instead to take advantage of all the tools available to me to address the problems posed by this project.

In parallel to the wide range of sources upon which this book is based, I also have recourse to diverse modes of argumentation. There are moments of abstract, theoretical arguments and moments of empirical, concrete narration. The movement between these two forms is deliberate and reflects the movement between the theoretical and empirical that marked the evolution of the research and writing of this book. The historical sources alone could not and did not tell the story, and the story I found in those historical sources was not merely an illustration or a case of an abstract or general argument. There are moments when I rely on a cited abstract argument concerning, for example, the power of the family metaphor in the structuring of social relations, to support an argument. The empirical

evidence is presented within that framework, and is intended to demonstrate the argument, just as the theory is intended to make the empirical evidence meaningful. Neither the empirical evidence nor the theoretical discussion alone is intended to prove the argument.

This movement between the abstract and the concrete is, therefore, partially a result of the sources used but is equally a reflection of the dialogues in which I have been and hope to continue to be engaged. This book is the result of an engagement with historians, anthropologists, art historians, and political, feminist, and critical theorists. I hope that the book will make a contribution to debates in that broad interdisciplinary arena. Despite this age of interdisciplinarity, however, all who have participated in interdisciplinary forums know how durable disciplinary conventions remain. There are, therefore, moments in this book that I fear will be read as painfully anecdotal to the theorists, and others as absurdly abstract to some historians, art historians, and anthropologists.

More specifically this introduction, the introductions to each of the three parts, and the epilogue all provide the conceptual architecture of the book. They both explain in broad strokes the historical unity of each part and offer the theoretical context of the discussion within the debates on representation, commodification, and nation building. They are, therefore, intentionally abstract. It is my hope that readers unfamiliar with French history, but engaged in similar questions in some other context, will find this material helpful in making this book speak to their own preoccupations.

This work emerges from the melding and contradictions of a complex array of experiences both within and outside the academy. Beginning as an effort to understand what artisans might have thought they were doing in the practice of their trade and what shaped those thoughts, the project came to focus instead on the biography through time of a particular object. This book uses an analysis of that one object to explore the general history of the place of things in the constitution of social and political life. The object is furniture, the place is Paris, and the time is from the seventeenth century to the early decades of the twentieth. In order to answer the questions that bothered me, I found it necessary to break the traditional chronological and substantive divisions into Old Regime or new, into design or production or distribution or consumption of furniture. The book could not be about only the working class, or only the bourgeoisie, nor just about women nor just about men. It could not analyze society while leaving the state and the economy as residual categories, nor vice versa.

Thus this book, which started from a small and not terribly significant object, turned out to be about a rather vast number of institutions and social

transformations. The choice of the time frame and the decision to reconstruct the cycle of design, production, distribution, and consumption I have already explained. But the questions remain, why France and why furniture? To start to explain both why I chose to explore these questions in modern France, and what this optic helps us understand about France, I will tell my last personal story.

My family changed countries and continents a number of times when I was a young child at an age to be taught to write. I learned, in the end, how to write three times in three different countries—the United States, Uruguay, and France—for no pedagogic culture could accept the handwriting learned in another. All agreed that there was *one* way for handwriting to look, and all tried to instill a unified style. The experience of mastering one hand only to be defined as in need of urgent instruction the next year made me realize that the judgment of small things, like how one shaped one's p's, was both arbitrary and a matter of great import. Its importance was made clearest in France, for despite competing efforts my handwriting became (and remains) far more French than American or Uruguayan. While acculturation of children into the nation was to be accomplished in all three countries in part through the disciplining of the body that handwriting norms represented, the French were at once the most insistent and the most successful at inscribing their nation on my hand. Both the determination and the skill with which French schools succeeded in remaking my style of writing—reflecting the capacity of French culture to remake individuals from other cultures in its own image—appeared to me to be unique. Consequently, while the story told in this book is at moments comparative and always has implications beyond France, it is specifically French. It is the emphatic French commitment to French modes of living the everyday and the role of the state in creating those modes that this book hopes to explain.

By the 1960s, when I was a child in France, the French state had a history of efforts to homogenize the speech, clothing, and habits of its inhabitants that reached back nearly two centuries to the Revolution. France became one of the most consistent and determined advocates and practitioners of nation making through culture as well as one of the most highly centralized states, in both political and bureaucratic terms, in Western Europe or in comparison with North America. Unlike in the United States or Germany or even, to a lesser extent, in England, notions of regional interests and regional differences were little tolerated by the French state. The country was divided into political districts because of the pragmatic exigencies of elections, not because it was understood that each region was entitled to

its own representative in the capital. Likewise, education was under national control from very early on with an explicit agenda to build a more unified nation through homogenized schooling. The French state attempted to eradicate regionalisms and to assimilate foreigners both out of a belief in the possibility of transformation through culture and in the interests of national cohesion and solidarity. The history of this intense centralization and homogenization has been told before but will be told again and differently here (see chapters 9–10). Whereas previous studies have analyzed the institutions through which the state clearly had a mandate to shape the nation—schools, universities, the army—this study tackles the problem more obliquely, tracing when and how the state was involved in matters of taste and when and how processes of nation building through taste occurred without direct state intervention. This book also demonstrates the ways and moments in which national identities competed with others and how those competitions were resolved or not.

Furniture is an especially apt object by which to tackle this set of problems in France for three reasons. First of all, furniture, unlike steel, bottles, or wheat is an object of style and requires taste for its production and consumption. Taste has been uniquely salient to both national identity and to export production in France. As early as the seventeenth century the French understood themselves as possessing, as a nation, more refined taste than other European nations. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while England and later the United States and Germany could export goods made more cheaply and more efficiently, France competed economically through taste. Furthermore, French commentators were more likely than others to declare “crises in national taste” and to argue that such crises were indicative of more profound upheavals in French society.

French conceptions of taste in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, contained a necessary paradox. Unified French taste was understood to be essential to the well-being of the nation and yet that nation was internally divided by class and gender and different tastes were thought appropriate to each class and gender. An investigation of the language in which these crises in taste in furniture were enunciated, the responses to these perceptions of crisis, and the styles and tastes which were in fact produced and used, all elucidate the ways in which the dynamics of representation and identity were constructed in France.

Second, because furniture is a good essential to both the domestic space of the home and the public space of the government, its analysis enables, indeed forces, a rethinking of the divisions between state and society, public and private, and ultimately masculine and feminine. After the Revolution,

in the era of *laissez-faire*, the state should no longer have had anything to do with the production or consumption of style. Both the workshop and the home were defined as private and beyond the purview of the state. And yet the state was deeply concerned with what people made and bought because it was understood that those who did not live in properly French homes were not properly French and that artisans' inability to produce distinctively French furniture endangered the French economy. Thus an examination of the complex and changing role of the state in the design, production, distribution, and consumption of furniture enables one to seize the limits and paradoxes of nineteenth-century republican liberalism as well as of nation and class in modern France.

Third, for the entire time period of this study furniture was an expensive and durable consumer item. Its acquisition was therefore a weightier act than for many other, more transient, consumer goods. Its making required elaborate expertise, both technical and aesthetic, and was therefore particularly vulnerable to transformations in the organization of production, including systems of training. And since furniture makers were notorious for their subversive and revolutionary tendencies, crises in the industry were perceived to have particularly worrisome political implications. Such tendencies, together with furniture's important place in the export economy, gave furniture a special interest for the state. Thus changes in furniture style reflected and produced changes in social relations in a more tangible way than did the stories of other objects.³⁶

At all moments of its life cycle, from its conception through its design, production, advertisement, display, sale, purchase or acquisition, use, gift, loan, legacy, and abandonment or destruction, furniture had the potential to crystallize social and political possibilities and tensions in French society.³⁷ It did not, of course, always do so in the same way. At some moments

36. In all these ways furniture differed from clothing, another obvious object of style by which one might address the set of questions I have outlined. Furniture had, because of its durability, its cost, its relative immobility and immutability particular capacities for expressing and representing political power and authority at certain moments. A parallel study of clothing would be fascinating but would reveal different things. On clothing see Philippe Perrot, *Les dessus et les dessous de la bourgeoisie* (Paris, 1981); Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams* (Berkeley, 1987). See also Rosalind Coward, *Female Desires* (New York, 1985); Hebdige, *Subculture*; and, Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (New York, 1981).

37. Others have, of course, noted the importance of interiors for the construction of bourgeois identities. For work on France see Adeline Daumard, *Les bourgeois et la bourgeoisie en France depuis 1815* (Paris, 1987), 56, 109–11, 115–17; Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley, 1989); Whitney Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace* (Berkeley, 1992).

furniture was important in constituting political power and legitimating regimes, and at others it was irrelevant in that domain but still crucial in producing and reproducing the social order. At some moments it was critical in constituting the symbolic repertoire of the nation, at others interior decoration served as a means of class consolidation, at still others as a means of making manifest intraclass schisms. At times it did many things at once. In some periods, but not all, furniture styles were used to differentiate gender and generational roles. The actors in this story—the producers, distributors, “taste professionals” both private and public, and consumers—engaged in an endless process of negotiation over who would control style, how they would learn to make aesthetic judgments, and what those styles would mean. Those battles occurred in the context of a changing kaleidoscope of institutions and terrains through which furniture passed or was discussed. These included the guilds, journeymen’s organizations, apprenticeship, royal workshops, antique dealers, specialized furniture stores, custom furniture stores, advertisements, schools, museums, universal exhibitions, department stores, trade unions, auction houses, etiquette books, and decorating magazines.

This book poses, then, from a different angle, the very classic problem of the relation of state, culture, and economy. For in talking about representation through goods and through politics, we are ultimately talking about capitalism and democracy. So while this book cannot hope, through the close study of only one commodity, to resolve the very long-standing debate on feudalism and absolutism, or on the nature of a capitalist state, I hope that by radically shifting the perspective from the very abstract and general, to the very concrete and specific, to shed some light on these crucial questions—questions all the more urgent in these times when the connection of mass consumption and democracy is too often assumed without any question at all.