

**Decoding Modern Consumer Societies:
Preliminary Results, Ongoing Research,
and Future Agendas**

Veranstalter: German Historical Institute Washington

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During the past two decades, the history of consumption has metamorphosed from a niche topic to one of the most stimulating and vital areas of historical research, which will be a primary focus of research at the German Historical Institute Washington in the coming years. This international workshop was dedicated to reflecting on the past achievements and current agendas of research in consumption studies, identifying crucial topics and areas for future research, and establishing active networks across divides within the historical community and across the various disciplines that share a common interest in consumption. In their introduction the two conveners, HARTMUT BERGHOFF (GHI) and UWE SPIEKERMANN, attributed the enduring vitality of the field to a variety of factors: first, consumption is an essential human activity that affects nearly every sphere; second, research is not dependent on one particular methodology, but requires multiple approaches and will therefore survive changing scholarly fashions; third, the history of consumption is a multidisciplinary and integrative field; and fourth, consumption remains a powerful and contested force in contemporary history. Knowing consumption policies and consumer practices will be a strategic point in handling existing problems in the economic, political, and social spheres.

The first section was devoted to reflecting on the current state of consumption history. It began with two overviews of European and American core studies and research efforts, which were then supplemented and differentiated by evaluations of sub-fields and other disciplines, namely global and business history, sociology, and environmental history. HEINZ-GERHARD HAUPT (European University Institute Florence) be-

gan with the point that one cannot speak of „European“ consumption history because historians are still writing national histories, although a transnational perspective on goods has opened up new perspectives. Haupt compared the heterogeneous historiographical traditions and approaches in Britain, Germany, France, and the Netherlands. Despite the fashionable label „consumer culture“, cultural studies on consumption are still missing. This field will be the most challenging one in the future. Quite different was the picture that GARY CROSS (Pennsylvania State University) drew in his lecture. The United States are not only the ideal of a consumer market with its promises of happiness, wealth, and identity and its ambivalence of fraud, vice, and death, but it has also developed a variety of forms of research. The cultural turn has yielded a loss of formerly dominant economic approaches. Consumption studies have explored race, class, and gender, using advertisements as a crucial source. Additionally, the flourishing historiography on marketing and retailing has tackled leisure activities and spatial aspects, and the consumer is more and more understood as a political actor. Nevertheless, Cross criticized a lack of comparison to other societies, the often overestimated relevance of „Americanization,“ and the diminishing role of economic history. In addition, he noted that scholars need a deeper understanding of the function and symbolism of goods, including the human senses.

JAMES P. WOODARD (Montclair State University) broadened the perspective of the workshop by providing some insights into Brazilian and Argentinean consumer culture. Woodard favored a transnational and global research perspective that integrates the global south – the so-called developing countries. There historians have found rather similar structures, attitudes, and practices. Consumer studies are still shaped by a kind of Cold War perspective, which marginalizes specific states. In contrast, cities such as Buenos Aires were not only prosperous but in some respects more advanced than many comparable European cities. In addition, actors often have transnational backgrounds. Radio shows and department stores are good examples for a hybrid consumer culture, far from plain cultural

colonialism. ALAN WARDE's (University of Manchester) contribution set a different tone. Warde analyzed the diverse sources of the sociological rediscovery of consumption in the 1980s. Based on the decline of neo-Marxism, an intensified critique of neoliberalism, and the growing importance of the individualization thesis, the consumer and his goods became increasingly important for sociologists, who were primarily interested in consumption and social practices. Since the late 1990s, the ecological consequences of consumption practices attracted more interest, and research on issues of morality and ethics was intensified. Warde saw many analytic achievements but only a very limited potential for behavioral change.

PAMELA W. LAIRD (University of Colorado) critically assessed the role of business. Corporations interact with consumers and the state, and these externalities were crucial for research. Consumer goods production, including research and development (R&D), packaging and marketing, marketing and communications companies are the most important institutions in analyzing these interactions. Laird recommended that business history take a broader analytical perspective, including not only topics such as security and confidence, risk, education, and different cultures, but also consumers' beliefs and practices. Similar to Laird, FRANK UEKÖTTER (Deutsches Museum München) argued for a new relationship of his subdiscipline to consumption. Environmental history should not only accentuate problems and the ugly flipside of consumption, because it could potentially add at least five narratives to complicate our understanding of consumer societies: first, the efficiency of resource use; second, the history of consumer protests; third, an evolutionary perspective on changing species; fourth the ambiguities of tourism; and fifth, the history and ideal of the green consumer.

The workshop's second section presented and discussed current projects in order to assess the variety and richness of contemporary research activities. The topics included religion and tourism, herbs and foods, as well as Nazi approaches to consumer policy. All speakers gave some insights into new book

projects. UTA A. BALBIER's (GHI) question was how religion, which in the U.S. is a matter of choice, was shaped and changed by an intense commercialization and utilization. Balbier emphasized that the success of religion in the United States resulted from its accommodation to modernity, above all an adaptation to changed social and cultural surroundings. The „super salesman“ Billy Graham, who propagated the mentality of Cold War America, was the most successful representative of this new evangelism. He used new media with virtuosity and combined entertainment and faith for the rising consumer culture of the middle classes. Medical herbs are another good located at the intersection of public and private, household and commercial sphere. SUSAN STRASSER (University of Delaware) examined the long-term changes of this „alternative“ medical sector. Herbs represented local knowledge and home gardening, which became commodified during the nineteenth century, although many doctors rejected them as quackery. This medicalization was different from that of other pharmaceuticals, as not only the renewal of the 1960s showed. Medical herbs still symbolize a modern combination of science, nature, and expertise, which complicates our understanding of modernization and professionalization.

ANKE ORTLEPP's (GHI) contribution used this new form of traveling as a tool for understanding the history of the twentieth century. From a cultural history perspective, air travel represented a new way of living. Ortlepp exemplified this thesis in four steps. First, she analyzed gender and family roles with the help of advertisements; then she examined race relations in a „free“ consumer society with its cash nexus. Third, Ortlepp explored airports as spaces of consumption and ended, fourth, with the in-flight experience. Uwe Spiekermann critically reflected on the often lacking knowledge perspective in consumption studies. In his view, consumer societies were always knowledge societies – and therefore the interaction of knowledge and consumption is crucial for any understanding of consumption and commodification. Spiekermann used the changing attitudes towards fruits and vegetables as examples to emphasize how problematic the use of terms such

as „household“, „consumer“, „state“, „economy“ and „science“ are, because different actors and institutions often shared the same forms of knowledge.

The second day of the workshop began with Hartmut Berghoff's lecture the Nazi response to the Western model of consumption. Based on Darwinist pessimism and an ideology of ongoing racial struggle, National Socialism tried to established wealth and the highest possible standard of living for the superior race – and misery for the beaten rest. The U.S. model of consumption was always a point of reference, but the Nazi regime gave priority to subsistence consumption and a combination of sacrifices and wealth. Berghoff argued that the Nazi model of consumption was typical of a Janus-faced dictatorship that was based on enticement and deprivation. Increased consumption in some sectors – automobiles and radios, for instance – was combined with suppressed and virtual consumption in other ones. JONATHAN WIESEN (Southern Illinois University) investigated the role and function of new knowledge producers in the changing German consumer market. Actors such as the Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung or the Institute for Economic Research, worked at the interface of state and society. They supported the regime's imperial and racial aims, but had their specific visions of a National Socialist consumer society. Apart from such different backgrounds, they worked in a manner that was very similar to that of Western market research institutes.

The function of the third section was to develop general outlines for prospective research. NICO STEHR's (Zeppelin University Friedrichshafen) manuscript was read in his absence by Scott Harrison (GHI). Stehr argued that the trend toward morally coded markets is long-term, self-intensifying, and amplifying, but not necessarily linear. Morality and moralization are open and underdetermined notions, which are given meaning by consumers in different markets at different speeds and at different times. Stehr's optimistic vision of modern consumer societies pointed out that more and more markets at home and abroad are gradually being transformed, reflecting growing prosperity and a rapid rise in

knowledge. As a consequence, future research must focus more on questions of knowledge, values, and consumer politics. DANIEL HOROWITZ (Smith College) backed a transnational perspective as a necessary broadening of current perspectives. In contrast to many economic historians, he argued that intellectual history can make important contributions to our understanding of the modern consumer because it discusses different kinds of models and visions.

Acknowledging quite different approaches in intellectual history, MATTHEW HILTON (University of Birmingham) argued for a three-phase chronology of modern consumer politics: While the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were characterized by the duties of consumers to respect the interests of others, consumer rights have become more important since the 1930s. Backed by an emerging international consumer society and new consumer-oriented politics, consumers became the partners of producers and retailers. Since the 1970s, questions of social and ecological justice have emerged and brought out the ambivalence of consumers' choices. Morally coded, these choices are also becoming duties. Hilton ended with remarks about the global inequalities and the deficits of commercialization. Consumption will remain a political problem – and research should be conducted in this direction. JAN LOGEMANN (Pennsylvania State University) investigated the different spatial developments of U.S. and West German retailing and consumption patterns. The U.S. model of a suburban consumer society was based on the car and the mall, while German urban consumer society was characterized by parallel developments of pedestrian malls and large stores in the outer districts of the cities and by both public transport and the car. According to Logemann, this led to very different public places and forms of communication. As a consequence, simple models of „Americanization“ must be carefully scrutinized.

The workshop was characterized by intense and often controversial discussion. The final discussion confirmed that there is a need for more comparative, global, and multidisciplinary research. Consumption studies should help to close the gaps between cultural and

economic history as well as between theory and practice. The conveners plan to publish a volume of essays based on the workshop.

Conference Overview

Introduction: Hartmut Berghoff/Uwe Spiekermann

Section I: Research in the History of Consumption: An Appraisal (Chair: Uta A. Balbier)

Heinz-Gerhard Haupt: Research on the History of Consumption in Europe: An Overview

Gary Cross: Research on the History of Consumption in the USA: An Overview

James P. Woodard: North Atlantic Models of Consumption and the Global South

Alan Warde: The Emergence of European Consumer Culture in Sociological Perspective

Pamela W. Laird: The Role of the Corporation: Business History and the History of Consumption

Frank Uekötter: Affluence and Sustainability: Environmental History and the History of Consumption

Section II: Current Projects (Chair: Hartmut Berghoff, Uwe Spiekermann)

Uta A. Balbier: God's Own Consumers: Promises and Consumption of Religion in the U.S.

Susan Strasser: Commercializing American Everyday Medicine

Anke Ortlepp: Air Travel and the History of Tourism

Uwe Spiekermann: Towards Science-based Nutrition: Science and Food Consumption in 19th and 20th Century Germany

Hartmut Berghoff: The Nazi Response towards the Western Model of Consumption

S. Jonathan Wiesen: Marketing and Consumer Research in Nazi Germany

Section III: Towards a Future Agenda (Chair: Uwe Spiekermann)

Nico Stehr: Morally Coded Markets

Daniel Horowitz: Pleasure and Symbolic Exchange: Understanding Consumer Cultures, 1951-1980

Matthew Hilton: Consumer Activism: Rights or Duties?

Jan Logemann: Consumption and Space: Economic and Ecological Consequences of Consumerism

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