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The Long History of Contemporary Consumer Society Chronologies, Practices, and Politics in Modern Europe

That contemporary societies are consumer societies is a common place in public as much as academic discourse. For Europe, this label is generally traced back to the era of affluence in the 1950s and 1960s. What precisely this means for a historical interpretation of contemporary Europe, however, is far from clear. Assumptions about what consumer society is vary widely.¹ Much writing continues to be coloured by a moralistic association of consumption with excess, alienation, and an addiction to things.² Consumer society is equated with the rise of life-style, an orientation towards pleasure, possessive individualism, and leisure-oriented sub-cultures, and an accompanying decline of older social structures and identities such as class and work. In these accounts, a consumerist ›liquid‹ society marked by individual choice, materialism, and fleeting attachments replaces a more fixed, work-oriented ›modern‹ society that, we are told, had been characterised by rootedness, stable hierarchies and structural constraints.³

Some have portrayed the very figure of the consumer as a recent product of ›advanced liberalism‹ through which societies since the 1950s have delegated the mechanisms of rule to the individual, relying on choice and self-monitoring.⁴ As people become consumers, they cease to be citizens. Other analysts, by contrast, have challenged this exclusive focus on individualism, choice, and materialist life-style. Older forms of social stratification continue to shape cultural consumption, although there is an on-going debate amongst sociologists whether Weber's idea of status or Bourdieu's of distinction remain useful analytical categories today or should be seen as limited to their own highly specific

1 The literature on this subject now includes several thousand publications and has spawned a range of dedicated journals. For a short, critical point of entry from a sociological perspective, see Alan Warde, Changing Conceptions of Consumption, in: Steven Miles/Alison Anderson/Kevin Meethan (eds.), *The Changing Consumer. Markets and Meanings*, London 2002, pp. 10–24; see further Daniel Miller (ed.), *Acknowledging Consumption. A Review of New Studies*, London 1995; Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, Cambridge 1997; Roberta Sassatelli, *Consumo, cultura e società*, Bologna 2004; John Brewer/Frank Trentmann (eds.), *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives*, Oxford 2006; and the first issue of the *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1, 2001, no. 1. For a bibliography, see URL: <<http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/publications.html#bibliography>> [17.2.2009]. The article is also a welcome opportunity to thank once more the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung for an international studentship 20 years ago.

2 See the critical discussion in Daniel Miller, *The Poverty of Morality*, in: *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1, 2001, pp. 225–243, and the historical perspectives in Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence. Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939–1979*, Amherst, MA 2004, and Frank Trentmann, *Beyond Consumerism. New Historical Perspectives on Consumption*, in: *JCH* 39, 2004, pp. 373–401.

3 Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life*, Cambridge/Malden 2007; *ibid.*, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, Buckingham 1998; *ibid.*, *Exit Homo Politicus, Enter Homo Consumens*, in: Kate Soper/Frank Trentmann (eds.), *Citizenship and Consumption*, Basingstoke 2007, pp. 139–153. Part of the problem with such theories is that they idealise classic ›modern‹ societies as more structured and less open than they were. In fact, in the United States, for example, marriage rates and religious affiliation were significantly higher in the 1950s (consumer society) than in the supposedly more rigid industrial society of the late nineteenth century.

4 Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom. Reframing Political Thought*, Cambridge 1999.

historical constellation.⁵ Much consumption involves routines and quotidian practices rather than symbolic value or conspicuous consumption.⁶ Historically, consumption has energised politics and citizenship as much as simply sapping civic attachments.⁷

General theories and research about consumption, then, reflect in no small part basic disagreements about what consumption is, and how best to study it. Early studies of consumer society tended to be moralistic because they overwhelmingly focused on individual purchase and the manipulation of desire in the marketplace. Here consumption was collapsed into commodification and alienation. Studies of subcultures, by contrast, have focused on the symbolic, even liberating function of consumer goods in creating group identity. The more recent interest in practices looks at consumption as a process of use, in which users, things, and technologies come together to accomplish certain tasks – the emphasis here is on the doing, not the commodity. As historians we should be wary of any essentialist definition of consumption and consumers – these are themselves concepts with changing meanings over time. Consumption is an umbrella term for a large set of different practices which have their own dynamics and characteristics (eating, doing home improvement, playing computer games, listening to opera, going on holiday, as well as shopping). Future historians would do well to complement the study of commodities, advertising and spending, where monetary data has a tendency to flatten out differences by creating the illusion of aggregate demand, with greater attention to how people have used things. Here studies of everyday life remain a useful starting point, though more attention needs to be given to materiality and technology.

The association of consumption with individual choice, and of consumers with private end-users, has been a tradition with particular force in Western societies after 1945, but it is worth emphasizing that it was always only one tradition amongst others, and as such contested not only by non-capitalist systems of provision but also by competing traditions of progressive politics and everyday life where consumption was tied to civic life and a life of things beyond the point of purchase.⁸

Research on contemporary history has been remarkably unaffected by this soul-searching in neighbouring disciplines about the scope, nature and dynamics of consumption. Most contemporary historians have treated ›consumer society‹ as a given, equating it with affluence and greater purchasing power. For Europe, three stories dominate. The first is that of a caesura around the middle of the twentieth century, from an industrial to a consumer society. Between 1850 and 1950, in this view, European societies were rigid and hierarchical, structured by class and industry and an associated ethic of duty, saving, and realisation through work. After 1950, these characteristics gave way to mobility, lifestyle islands, and a preoccupation with self-realisation through pleasure and consump-

5 Special Issue »Contesting Affluence«, in: *Contemporary British History* 22, 2008, no. 4; *T. W. Chan/J. H. Goldthorpe*, Is There a Status Order in Contemporary British Society?, in: *European Sociological Review* 20, 2004, pp. 383–401; *ibid.*, Social Stratification and Cultural Consumption. Music in England, in: *European Sociological Review* 23, 2007, pp. 1–19.

6 *Lizabeth Cohen*, A Consumer's Republic. The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America, New York 2003; *Frank Trentmann*, Free Trade Nation. Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain, Oxford 2008; *Soper/Trentmann*, Citizenship and Consumption; *Matthew Hilton*, Prosperity for All. Consumer Activism in an Era of Globalization, Ithaca/New York 2009.

7 *Jukka Gronow/Alan Warde* (eds.), Ordinary Consumption, London 2001.

8 *Frank Trentmann*, The Modern Genealogy of the Consumer. Meanings, Knowledge, and Identities, in: *Brewer/Trentmann*, Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives, pp. 19–69. For a different reading, see *Ulrich Wyrwa*, Consumption and Consumer Society. A Contribution to the History of Ideas, in: *Susan Strasser/Charles McGovern/Matthias Judt* (eds.), Getting and Spending. European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century, Cambridge 1998, pp. 431–448.

tion.⁹ A second, complementary approach is to see the spread of consumerism as a sign of the Americanization of Europe. In Victoria de Grazia's recent book »Irresistible Empire«, Europe appears as a fairly rigid class-based community, cracked open and infiltrated by the United States and its uniquely dynamic consumer culture.¹⁰ A third narrative, less dependent on external influences, sees post-1950s »mass consumer society« as following on an early twentieth-century stage of »mass consumption« and mass production.¹¹

All three accounts are essentially historical stage models. Consumer society is conceived as a block, presumed to reflect the logic of a historical era or mode of socio-economic organisation; the analytical roots of many accounts remain Werner Sombart, Thorstein Veblen, Theodor W. Adorno, and 1950s theories of »consumer society« imported from America. This has made it difficult to recognise consumption as a series of phenomena evolving over time. In other words, stage models distract from the longer histories which have made consumption an increasingly important sphere of human experience in the modern world. Consumer society is presumed to be *sui generis*, a novel phenomenon of the affluent 1950s–1960s. A recent study of youth cultures in contemporary Europe is symptomatic. It was only in the 1960s, we are told, that »[c]onsumption no longer focused on the safeguarding of basic survival such as shelter, clothing, or food, but on, strictly speaking, dispensable things and possessions which could be arbitrarily combined: the nicer apartment, the more palatable food, the different clothes.« »Excess and arbitrary selection« replaced »frugality and thrift [...] which had been authoritative for a long time.«¹²

What lurks underneath this portrayal is a highly problematic if widespread assumption that it was only in the 1960s that European societies crossed the threshold from »needs to wants«. This idea sits oddly with what we know from historical and anthropological work on earlier periods. Social scientists have stressed since Hobhouse and Malinowski that needs and wants are not fixed but relative. They evolve over time. Bernard Mandeville emphasized already three centuries ago that it was impossible to draw a stark distinction between »luxury« and »basic needs« for any human society, since people throughout history have made improvements to their habitat and clothing, thus changing the material yardstick.¹³ Of course, an affluent society had more consumer goods in 1970 than earlier societies; there were 14 million cars in West Germany alone. Aggregates matter, but a historical understanding of consumption stops short if it focuses on absolutes alone. The particular volume of new goods and consumer technologies in the post-1945 period should not distract from earlier periods marked by similar *processes* of changing consumer desires, values, and practices.

The singular fixation with mass-produced consumer goods as markers of a true consumer society has its roots in an older, production-oriented narrative of modernization: Mass consumption follows on mass production. This model has encouraged circular reasoning. The subjects of consumption (and the sources for its study) were mass consumer

9 Christian Pfister (ed.), *Das 1950er Syndrom. Der Weg in die Konsumgesellschaft*, Bern 1995.

10 Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire. America's Advance through 20th-Century Europe*, Cambridge, MA 2005.

11 Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, *Konsum und Handel. Europa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 2002. For the tensions between these narratives, see also Hannes Siegrist/Hartmut Kaelble/Jürgen Kocka (eds.), *Europäische Konsumgeschichte. Zur Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte des Konsums, 18. bis 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt 1997.

12 Axel Schildt/Detlef Siegfried, *Youth, Consumption, and Politics in the Age of Radical Change*, in: *ibid.* (eds.), *Between Marx and Coca-Cola. Youth Cultures in Changing European Societies, 1960–1980*, Oxford/New York 2006, pp. 1–35, here p. 13.

13 Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, London/New York 1989 (1st published 1724), Remark (L), pp. 136 f.

goods. Their documentation, in turn, reinforced the sociological model of »mass society« that was held to be unique to the mid-twentieth century affluent West. The 1950s have thus featured as axiomatic starting point in recent European histories of consumer society. Rather than probing the longer genealogies of consumption for new subjectivities, practices and communication, these accounts see the immediate post-war years as a watershed between »traditional« and »modern« ways of life.¹⁴ Clearly, the arrival of consumer durables in the home, of rising affluence and greater leisure time had significant consequences for European societies, especially from the late 1950s. But there is no reason to automatically presume that consumer culture and its associated effects such as self-expression and distinction have been weak or absent in societies lacking radios or washing machines. Many goods of mass consumption were the results of small-scale and artisanal production. More generally, it is debatable whether consumer practices and desires should be treated as derivatives or consequences of a prior and authentic world of production and labour.

The aim of this article is to place European consumer culture in a broader historical and conceptual framework. It confronts three core assumptions that have informed research: that since the 1950s–1960s consumer culture is a new phenomenon; that it has replaced diversity with homogeneity; and that the growing importance people have attached to things and leisure has eroded civic engagement. All three propositions are open to empirical and methodological challenges and raise questions for the study of consumer society in Europe after 1945. Our historical understanding will be enriched by examining a longer narrative and giving greater attention to the diversity of practices that make up consumption.

I. A RICHER, MORE GLOBAL PAST

The history of consumer society is intimately tied up with the period of the Cold War. The concept was initially popularised in the 1950s and 1960s, as American commenta-

14 For example, the model of »consumer society« needlessly frames the otherwise useful studies of German consumption in the 1950s and 1960s by Michael Wildt and Detlef Siegfried. Yet »consumer society« was a social theory, coloured by a strong moralistic critique, not an empirical portrayal of how people consumed at the time. Wildt follows Katona's ideal-typical contrast between a future-oriented mass consumption society of the United States and a traditional, grounded Germany: »Whereas in the United States, expanding the horizon of consumption and steadily increasing the standard of living became a mentality, and the satisfaction with what had been achieved engendered new needs and desires for new consumer goods, in Germany the values of solidity and durability were still in place«. *Michael Wildt, Continuities and Discontinuities of Consumer Mentality in West Germany in the 1950s*, in: *Richard Bessel/Dirk Schumann* (eds.), *Life after Death. Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe During the 1940s and 1950s*, Cambridge 2003, 211–230, here: p. 226. Such contrasts are debatable for both the United States and Germany. American working-class families in the late 1950s did not share the future-oriented optimism nor the outer-directed conformity implied by the model of »consumer society«. See, e.g., *Lee Rainwater/Richard P. Coleman/Gerald Handel, Workingman's Wife. Her Personality, World and Life Style*, New York 1959. Similarly, German spending and saving behaviour was internally differentiated, with one third of Germans taking out a loan at the time. See also the »modernization« thesis in *Arnold Sywottek, From Starvation to Excess? Trends in the Consumer Society from the 1940s to the 1970s*, in: *Bessel/Schumann, Life after Death*, pp. 341–358; *Michael Wildt, Vom Kleinen Wohlstand. Eine Konsumgeschichte der Fünfziger Jahre*, Frankfurt 1996. Similarly, Siegfried's recent study needlessly takes the 1950s as an axiomatic starting point into inquiries into youth culture, leisure culture, and symbolic forms of consumption, *Detlef Siegfried, Time Is on My Side. Konsum und Politik in der westdeutschen Jugendkultur der 60er Jahre*, Göttingen 2006. For the longer history of the teenager, see references in notes 29 and 30 below.

tors from David Riesman to Vance Packard came to worry about the effects of materialism on the national psyche and community life.¹⁵ Consumer society appeared the child of individual choice and of a new pleasure-oriented value-system. For critics, it produced a new social character, what Riesman christened the »outer-directed type« in constant search for conformity.¹⁶ For defenders, like the motivation research guru Ernest Dichter, by contrast, it promised greater fulfilment and individual creativity and freedom.¹⁷ Historians who turned to consumption in the 1970s and early 1980s were working under the shadow of this distinct American constellation, searching for historical antecedents. The British historian Neil McKendrick found »the birth of a consumer society« and the break-through of choice and distinction in eighteenth-century Britain.¹⁸

Far from a radical break, however, the post-1945 ›discovery‹ of consumer society developed out of an older ambivalence towards material abundance. The link between consumption, social mobility, and a belief in self-fulfilment, had been a trope much commented on by nineteenth-century visitors to America. In the 1880s Simon Patten argued that the United States had entered a new material era: an economy of abundance.¹⁹ By the early 1920s, politicians like Herbert Hoover, the US commerce secretary and future president, preached that the United States had a distinct national mission to advance the standard of living of the common man, spreading extras and luxuries as well as securing basic needs. To these observers, America's embrace of consumption was unique.

In the last decade, the Anglo-American story of the birth of consumer society has been undermined by more gradualist and global accounts. The rise of shopping has been documented for Renaissance Italy.²⁰ Above all, research has overturned meta-narratives of a uniquely dynamic West versus a backward East. Fashion and a desire for novelty existed in eighteenth century China and East Africa.²¹ From the tenth century onwards, the Indian Ocean was a vibrant commercial zone, across which cottons, dyed and block printed in India, found their way into clothes and soft furnishings in Egypt and East Africa. This was the platform for the spread of cottons into Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was transoceanic rivalry, emulation and catching-up, not some national genius, that spawned the take-off of the cotton industry in the North West of Europe. Instead of being in the lead, Europe and the American colonies were lagging behind in such consumer goods as fashionable clothes well into the middle of the eighteenth century.²²

15 *John Brewer*, *The Error of Our Ways. Historians and the Birth of Consumer Society*, URL: <<http://www.Consume.Bbk.Ac.uk>> [12.6.2004], Working Paper No. 012.

16 *David Riesman/Nathan Glazer/Reuel Denney*, *The Lonely Crowd. A Study of the Changing American Character*, New York 1953 (1st published 1950.)

17 *Ernest Dichter*, *The Strategy of Desire*, New York 1960.

18 *Neil McKendrick/John Brewer/John H. Plumb*, *The Birth of a Consumer Society. The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, Bloomington 1982.

19 *Daniel M. Fox*, *The Discovery of Abundance. Simon N. Patten and the Transformation of Social Theory*, Ithaca/New York 1967.

20 *Evelyn Welch*, *Shopping in the Renaissance. Consumer Cultures in Italy 1400–1600*, New Haven, CT 2005.

21 *Craig Clunas*, *Modernity Global and Local. Consumption and the Rise of the West*, in: *AHR* 104, 1999, pp. 1497–1509; *Antonia Finnane*, *Changing Clothes in China*, London 2007; *Jeremy Presthold*, *On the Global Repercussions of East African Consumerism*, in: *AHR* 109, 2004, pp. 755–781; *Robert Batchelor*, *On the Movement of Porcelains. Rethinking the Birth of the Consumer Society as Interactions of Exchange Networks, China and Britain, 1600–1750*, in: *Brewer/Trentmann*, *Consuming Cultures*, pp. 95–121.

22 *Maxine Berg*, *In Pursuit of Luxury. Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century*, in: *Past and Present* 182, 2004, pp. 85–142. *Prasanna Parthasarathi/Giorgio Riello* (eds.), *The Spinning World. A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200–1850*, Oxford 2009.

The scope of this transnational flow of consumer goods is worth stressing. By the 1680s, an average of 682,235 pieces of Indian textiles were imported into England every year. By 1700, 40 percent of all imported cottons were Chintzes, that is painted or printed in bright colours or adorned with floral and other patterns.²³ ›Mass‹ consumer markets are often seen as a result of early twentieth-century ›mass‹ production. This is a mistake.²⁴ Cotton goods came from highly productive and innovative small artisanal shops in India; later, in the nineteenth century, it would be small furniture makers that fed the new mass market for home furnishings. In England and France, cotton gowns, stockings, and cotton furnishings reached all social ranks, including servants, artisans, and ›plebeian‹ consumers. Alongside shops and markets, these new consumer goods spread through pawn and second hand shops, theft, inheritance and gifting (between master and servant). In Paris, upholsterers and other shops sold on ›demi-luxury‹ goods, acting as brokers between aristocratic and bourgeois clients.²⁵

Cotton brought a revolution in taste, self-formation, and communication, qualitatively not so different from the use of goods as a symbolic marker of identity associated with contemporary trends. Sense of body, appearance, and style changed, as people in eighteenth-century Britain, France, and Holland developed the habit of wearing new intimate clothes (underwear and nightclothes) and acquired a taste for greater variation, colour, and comfort. New fashionable clothes acquired unprecedented meaning for personal self-image, as witnessed by the detailed memories of patterns, feel, and colour recorded by those who had their favourite dresses stolen. These early signs of self-fashioning deserve emphasis because they were also tied to the symbolic function of clothes for status and distinction. In rapidly growing urban communities, goods signalled one's respectability and rank to strangers. And cities encouraged status competition. Commentators at the time were fully aware of this twin dynamic. There was a fundamental difference between close-knit rural communities and cities, the American writer John Rae observed in the early nineteenth century. In the country, where everyone was known, people could not successfully pass themselves off for someone they were not. »In town Molly Seagrim would have been admired as a fantastical fine lady; in the country she got herself mobbed.« »In proportion to the populousness of towns, the inhabitants are filled with notions of vanity, and actuated by an ambition of distinguishing themselves by trifles. If they are numerous, and most of them strangers to one another, their vanity redoubles, because there are greater hopes of success.«²⁶

23 Sergio Aiolfi, *Calicos und Gedrucktes Zeug. Die Entwicklung der englischen Textilveredelung und der Tuchhandel der East India Company 1650–1750* Stuttgart 1987, p. 217, tables 8 and 9.

24 Paul D. Glennie/Nigel J. Thrift, *Modernity, Urbanism, and Modern Consumption*, in: *Environment and Planning D* 10, 1992, pp. 423–443.

25 Natacha Coquery, *Bijoutiers et tapissiers. Le luxe et le demi-luxe à Paris dans le seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle*, in: Stéphane Casteluccio (ed.), *Le Commerce de luxe à Paris aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles. Échanges nationaux et internationaux*, Bern 2009; John Styles, *The Dress of the People. Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven, CT 2007; Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing. Dress and Fashion in the »Ancien Régime«*, Cambridge 1994 (1st published 1989); Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite. The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660–1800*, Oxford 1991.

26 John Rae, *Statement of Some New Principles on the Subject of Political Economy*, Boston 1834. That servants had begun to dress like their masters had been widely noted by English writers in the previous two centuries, e.g. Daniel Defoe, *Great Law of Subordination Considered*, s.l. 1724.

II. GROWING AFFLUENCE, UNEVEN DIFFUSION

The popular triumph of cotton was merely one part in the evolution of an increasingly diverse and dynamic material culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This included the diffusion of exotic spices and beverages, the spread of furniture and new comforts in the home, and an increasingly vibrant urban scene of shops and advertising. Not all Europeans shared in this trend alike. Social investigators found working families in Genoa or St. Petersburg living at subsistence level in 1900, with hardly any personal belongings or disposable income for comfort, let alone luxuries.²⁷ At the same time, the price of food and even more so clothing had dramatically declined for people in England and France²⁸, freeing up money to buy pianos and furniture on instalment plans, and to visit music-halls, early cinema or the race course.

A full appreciation of these earlier phases is beyond the scope of this article, but to recognise this long-term evolution has implications for how contemporary consumer culture is historicised and spatialised. The first point is that consumer desire, a drive for distinction, and the accumulation of things for purposes of self-fashioning are not peculiar to the age of affluence, or to the West. When American organisations and advertisers spread idealised images of affluence and domestic comfort in Western Europe after the Second World War they did not enter virgin lands. Many of the material aspirations of Western Europeans after 1945 had been sown in the previous half century. Film, radio, and gramophone opened up new material dream worlds. The rise in female employment in clerical jobs and the high wages of single young workers produced a dynamic, youth-oriented leisure scene.²⁹ The first signs of subcultures, in which youths developed their own clothing styles, can be traced to urban gangs around 1900.³⁰ More respectable couples went in their millions to home exhibitions in inter-war London, Paris, and Düsseldorf where homes with modern comforts and new consumer durables were showcased.

Many of these new durables would be out of the reach of the average worker until the 1960s; in 1928 a Mors vacuum cleaner would have cost a skilled French worker one month's salary.³¹ Still, the dream of a better life was abroad in fascist as well as liberal Europe.³² Critics of ›mass society‹ like Ortega y Gasset were already in 1930, in the middle of the world depression, asserting that Europeans had entered a dangerous ›land of plenty‹, where ever more choice, more things and more pleasures had made people ›self-satisfied‹: A person was no longer ›lord of himself. He feels lost amid his abundance.‹³³

27 Edward Young, *Labor in Europe and in America*, Washington 1875, p. 634; *Sergej Prokopowitsch*, *Haushaltungsbudgets Petersburger Arbeiter*, in: *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 30, 1910, pp. 66–99.

28 Carle C. Zimmerman, *Consumption and Standards of Living*, London 1936, p. 26.

29 Corey Ross, *Media and the Making of Modern Germany. Mass Communication, Society, and Politics from the Empire to the Third Reich*, Oxford, 2008; David Fowler, *The First Teenagers. The Lifestyle of Young Wage-Earners in Interwar Britain*, London 1995; Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Leisure in Interwar England*, in: *Historical Journal* 48, 2005, pp. 789–809. Detlev Peukert, *Jugend Zwischen Krieg und Krise*, Cologne 1987; *ibid.*, *Inside Nazi Germany*, Harmondsworth 1987, chapter 8.

30 Andrew Davies, *The Gangs of Manchester*, Preston 2008; Jon Savage, *Teenage. The Creation of Youth Culture*, New York 2007.

31 Robert L. Frost, *Machine Liberation. Inventing Housewives and Home Appliances in Interwar France*, in: *French Historical Studies* 18, 1993, pp. 109–130.

32 S. Jonathan Wiesen, *Creating the Nazi Marketplace. Public Relations and Consumer Citizenship in the Third Reich*, in: Geoff Eley/Jan Palmowski (eds.), *Citizenship and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Germany*, Stanford 2008.

33 Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, London 1932 (1st Spanish edition 1930), p. 47.

When after 1945 governments from Belgium to Norway introduced tax allowances and loans to encourage home ownership, they were less following the American model than resuming home-grown efforts to promote property-owning democracy in the 1930s; in Britain, mortgage policies were in fact more liberal than in the United States, enabling already one quarter of working families to own their home by the late 1930s.³⁴ Commentators have tended to write about the competitive race between Western and Eastern bloc over material goods as a phenomenon of the Cold War, symbolised by the famous kitchen debate between Nixon and Cruchschew. Once again, it is helpful to see this as a continuation of developments well under way in the inter-war years, such as the promotion of progress through material possessions and a cultured lifestyle (*kul'turnost'*) by Stalin in the mid-1930s.³⁵

The second point is to note the geographic myopia of the Americanization thesis. Non-Western influences and exchanges, so central now to our picture of the early modern world, virtually disappear from twentieth-century studies preoccupied with the impact on Germany, France and Italy of what de Grazia has called the American »market empire«. ³⁶ The Atlantic, however, was a two-way highway rather than a one-way street.³⁷ The imperial past cast a shadow, too, well after the formal end of de-colonization, tangible in a self-image of modernity and cleanliness as well as in ethical consumer initiatives of ›caring‹ for disadvantaged producers in the ›Third World‹.³⁸ There was a transnational traffic in goods and signs that side-stepped the United States altogether, such as Indian dress and patterns and the spread of new or invented ethnic cuisines from the Balkans and former Asian colonies.³⁹ Many European societies had lively cultural exchanges with Latin America, notably the flow between Brazilian song and popular Italian *cantautori* in the

34 *Heinz Umrath*, The Problem of Ownership in Workers' Housing Policy in Western Europe, in: *International Labor Review* 2, 1955, pp. 105–127; *Peter Scott*, Residential Real Estate Marketing and the Creation of the Modern Working-Class Consumer in Interwar Britain, in: *Business History*, 50, 2008, pp. 4–25.

35 *Sheila Fitzpatrick*, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, Oxford 1999; *Lewis H. Siegelbaum*, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935–41*, Cambridge 1988; *Julie Hessler*, *A Social History of Soviet Trade. Trade Policy, Retail Practices, and Consumption, 1917–53*, Princeton, NJ 2004; *Jukka Gronow*, *Caviar with Champagne. Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin's Russia*, Oxford/New York 2003.

36 *De Grazia*, *Irresistible Empire*. For a critical discussion of this concept, see *Roberta Sassatelli*, *Impero o mercato? Americanizzazione e regimi di consumo in europa*, in: *Stato e Mercato* 2, 2007, pp. 300–316.

37 *Heinz-Gerhard Haupt/Paul Nolte*, *Konsum und Marktgesellschaft. Deutschland und die USA*, in: *Christof Mauch/Kiran Klaus Patel* (eds.), *Wettlauf um die Moderne. Die USA und Deutschland seit 1890*, Munich 2008, pp. 187–223. For creolization effects, see *Richard Kuisel*, *Seducing the French. The Dilemma of Americanization*, Berkeley, CA 1993. See further *Alf Lüdtke/Inge Marssolek/Adelheid von Saldern* (eds.), *Amerikanisierung. Traum und Alptraum im Deutschland des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart 1996; *Philipp Gassert*, *Amerikanismus, Antiame- rikanismus, Amerikanisierung*, in: *AfS* 39, 1999, pp. 531–561.

38 *Kristin Ross*, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies. Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Cambridge, MA 1996; *Timothy Burke*, *Citebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commoditication, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe*, Durham, NC 1996; *Trentmann*, *Free Trade Nation*.

39 *Maren Möhring*, *Transnational Food Migration and the Internalization of Food Consumption. Ethnic Cuisine in West Germany*, in: *Alexander Nützenadel/Frank Trentmann* (eds.), *Food and Globalization. Consumption, Markets and Politics in the Modern World*, Oxford 2008, pp. 129–152; *Sonia Ashmore*, *Far Out and Way In. London as Fashion Cosmopolis 1945–1979*, in: *Christopher Beward/David Gilbert* (eds.), *Fashion's World Cities*, Oxford/New York 2006, pp. 201–215.

late 1960s, and the development of new hybrids, like Finnish tango, which since the 1930s has blended Argentinean music with folkloristic nostalgia for nature and the homestead, and, with its own stars, competitions and festivals, has been as central to leisure in post-war Finland as the sauna.⁴⁰

It is important to recognise the American model of a mass consumer society for just that: a normative ideal-type, not a mirror of material reality. This ideal-type in itself exercised considerable influence. American film in particular sharpened desires and frustrations. »I do get very dissatisfied with my way of life and neighbourhood«, one young female British typist confessed:

»After seeing marvellous places like New York, Hollywood, California, Cuba, Washington [...] on the screen, especially in technicolour, it makes me very miserable and unhappy sitting in my stuffy little office all day with nobody to talk to but myself (which I don't) and to go home to a house that should have been knocked down five years ago.«⁴¹

What was new about »the American dream« was its aspirational, democratic inflection. As a validation of consumption, however, it should be seen as part of a longer turn to material comforts as a source of self-formation. This had indigenous roots in Europe, too. Victorian middle classes defended the cult of home possessions as bringing out the richness of God's design.⁴² Already enlightenment authors had justified ›moderate‹ luxuries for nursing personal energy, industry, and self-fulfilment. That consumption had liberating, creative effects was part of modern European culture just as much as the better known fears of selfishness and conformity.

In Europe as in the United States, the diffusion of new technologies and new habits of consumption was long-drawn out and highly uneven, by region, race, and class. Londoners already had access to constant running water by the 1890s while one third of rural households had yet to be connected by the 1940s. Conditions could vary dramatically even within the same class and city. Workers who were fortunate to occupy a flat at the back of blocks in Berlin's Luisenstadt were twice as likely to have running water as in other working class areas of the city.⁴³ Societies that were early adopters of gas tended to be late with switching to electric durables. In Britain only 17 percent of households had an electric cooker in 1939 compared to 79 percent who had a gas cooker, whereas in Germany it were workers who already owned half of the electric ranges sold at that time. While the total amount of energy used would rise substantially in the 1950s–1960s with the penetration of the fridge, the washing machine and the television, electricity consumption in Britain and Germany increased a hundred fold between 1900 and 1938.⁴⁴ Consumer culture continued to differ in size and meaning by race and class. By the mid-1930s only every second African-American home had a bath, only 19 percent had a radio and 17 percent a car, slightly less than working class whites but hugely different from the top income group where 92 percent had a bath, 63 percent a radio and 83 percent a car.⁴⁵

40 Pirjo Kukkonen, *Tango Nostalgia, The Language of Love and Longing*, Helsinki 1996.

41 Jacob P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and Their Audiences*. Sociological Studies, London 1948, p. 116.

42 Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods. The British and Their Possessions*, New Haven 2006, esp. pp. 24–29.

43 Shahrooz Mohajeri, *100 Jahre Berliner Wasserversorgung und Abwasserentsorgung 1840–1940*, Stuttgart 2005, pp. 71 f.

44 From 4 KWH to 400 KWH per capita. Karl Ditt, *Energiepolitik und Energiekonsum. Gas, Elektrizität und Haushaltstechnik in Großbritannien und Deutschland 1880–1939*, in: AfS 46, 2006, pp. 107–152, here: pp. 147–149.

45 White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, *The Young Child in the Home. A Survey of Three Thousand American Families*, New York 1936, p. 274.

This pattern of diversity matters because it complicates the often simple use of national averages and aggregates that appear in comparisons between contemporary Europe and the United States, and between European societies themselves. There were leaders and laggards of new consumer technologies, but they were unequally distributed within as well as across societies. The same household might live in multiple historical periods. As the Lynds noted in »Middletown«, in 1925 many houses had no bathroom, a quarter did not even have running water or sewage, and yet in the same houses could be found electric washers, irons, vacuum cleaners and cars.⁴⁶ A large-scale inquiry by women's clubs in the 1930s found that in one-third of American homes there was no bathroom; 18 percent did not even have a flush toilet.⁴⁷ In 1950s and 1960s Europe, television entered homes without baths or washing machines. In 1963 Leeds, in a slum area marked for demolition, 74 percent of households had a TV, 41 percent a vacuum cleaner and 38 percent a washing machine, but hardly any houses had hot water, a fixed bath, or an indoor toilet.⁴⁸

Affluence in the 1950s and 1960s facilitated the spread of new consumer durables and technologies of comfort in Western Europe. With the exception of Bulgaria and Romania, most of Eastern Europe caught up in the 1980s–1990s. By 1995, 88 percent of EU households had a washing machine, 81 percent had central heating and 97 percent had hot running water.⁴⁹ For an understanding of consumer culture, however, what matters in the last analysis is not how many things people owned but about their uses and meanings. Here advocates of the American dream, reaching back at least to Hoover, envisaged a convergence around middle class values of property, comfort, self-fulfilment, sociability and social service. The Americanization thesis effectively stands or falls on whether consumer cultures are seen to have converged or diverged. A brief examination of a few illustrative areas must suffice: class, the use of leisure time, and the changing assembly of consumption practices.

That affluence would lead to social and cultural conformity was a running fear amongst critics of consumer society in Europe and the United States alike. Some historians have seen in the growing uniformity of mass consumption a crucial difference between »modern« and »archaic« forms of globalisation. As Chris Bayly has sharply put it: The »archaic« system prized the collection of diverse goods, whereas »modern complexity demands the uniformity of Levis and trainers.«⁵⁰ This is provocative, but too simple, since for every standardized product there are an equally large number of goods and services that have diversified. The diversification of popular music is a case in point. Consumption is more than a function of production systems, as Adorno thought. Standardized forms of retailing,

46 Robert S. Lynd/Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown. A Study in Modern American Culture*, New York 1929, pp. 97f.

47 Edith Elmer Wood, *Slums and Blighted Areas in the United States* (Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, Housing Division Bulletin No. 1), Washington DC 1935, p. 7.

48 Roy Wilkinson/Eric M. Sigsworth, *A Survey of Slum Clearance Areas in Leeds*, in: *Yorkshire Bull of Econ and Soc Res* 15, 1963, no. 1, pp. 25–47. Electrification did not automatically open the doors to new consumer durables. In the United States, providers were still preaching to farmers to use more electricity in the 1950s, because many farm households found new fridges unreliable or unnecessary or fell back on using a wood stove instead of an electric range. Only 22 percent in a 1945 Oregon study found electric ranges satisfactory; see Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country. Technology and Social Change in Rural America*, Baltimore, MD 2000, p. 256.

49 Eurostat data cited in Frank Trentmann, *Consumption*, in: John Merriman / Jay Winter (eds.), *Europe since 1914. Encyclopaedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction*, Vol. 2, Detroit 2006, p. 708.

50 Christopher A. Bayly, »Archaic« and »Modern« Globalization in the Eurasian and African Arena, c. 1750–1850, in: Anthony G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History*, London 2002, pp. 45–72, here: p. 52.

like the supermarket, have spread unevenly across Europe; as late as the early 1980s, Italians and the French bought only 2 percent and 14 percent of their food in supermarkets, compared to 32 percent in Germany and 70 percent in the United States. One quarter of French people today shop at least once a week in a local market. Modern tourism, similarly, has reinforced a taste for saving diversity from extinction and using personal collections to express one's individuality.⁵¹

These trends reflect the coming of a cultural system that is more open and flexible for personalised combinations of tastes and leisure activities. This does not automatically mean, however, that these combinations are unaffected by class, gender or other inequalities. Having a modern kitchen or a TV has meant different things for different classes. Ford workers who moved to the suburbs in the 1950s did not adopt the sociability and drink culture of their middle class neighbours.⁵² Most working class families did not see themselves rising up the ladder of social mobility. They preferred small neighbourhood shops and sales parties to department stores in the centre of town. Spending remained mixed with anxieties about wasting money. For Lee Rainwater and colleagues who studied families in Chicago, Trenton and Louisville in 1959, contrasting social mentalities were summed up by attitudes to the modern kitchen: »middle class women want such a kitchen in order ›to make it as easy as possible to get through with the work‹ and out of the kitchen. Working class women on the contrary, do not anticipate that they will ever accomplish so easy an escape from the kitchen. Nor are they quite that eager to escape.«⁵³

European studies since the 1950s have similarly debated the degree to which a new material lifestyle has eroded or even eliminated class-structures. Studies at the time document how moving out of overcrowded housing into one of the new council housing estates unleashed a whole sequence of new purchases and desires, new furniture, new clothes, and new family-oriented pleasures, including taking the family on a holiday.⁵⁴ Was the ›affluent worker‹ cutting himself and his family off from inherited solidarities of work and neighbourhood, withdrawing into a private world of television and family?⁵⁵ The problem with some of the research was that it did not sufficiently distinguish between the particular context of the affluent, high-employment 1960s and the general effects imputed to consumption. Researchers revisiting this subject in the 1970s during an era of unemployment stressed both the resilience of social and local community ties and of gender inequalities.⁵⁶

If there was one social identity that was truly transformed in contemporary consumer culture, it was arguably not class or gender but age, especially in Western Europe. Youth culture in the 1950s and 1960s reinforced new generational identities (the teenager), continuing a trend under way in the early twentieth century. One significant difference between the youth movements of 1900 and those of the 1960s was that the former looked mainly for emancipation from the authority of their elders by withdrawing from commercial culture to a more authentic, natural setting, whereas the latter looked for libera-

51 Russell W. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, London/New York 2001.

52 Bennet M. Berger, *Working-Class Suburb. A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia*, Berkeley, CA 1960.

53 Rainwater/Coleman/Handel, *Workingman's Wife*, p. 177.

54 John M. Moge, *Family and Neighborhood. Two Studies in Oxford*, Oxford 1956.

55 Ferdynand Zweig, *The Worker in an Affluent Society*, London 1961; John H. Goldthorpe/David Lockwood/Frank Bechhofer, *The Affluent Worker. Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, Cambridge 1968; John H. Goldthorpe et al., *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, Cambridge 1971. Compare the discussion in Frank Mort, *Democratic Subjects and Consuming Subjects*, in: Frank Trentmann (ed.), *The Making of the Consumer. Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*, Oxford/New York 2006, pp. 225–248. See now also the special issue »Contesting Affluence« in *Contemporary British History* 22, 2008, no. 4.

56 Fiona Devine, *Affluent Workers Revisited. Privatism and the Working Class*, Edinburgh 1992.

tion through commercial culture. The rebellious side of Sixties youth culture is easily exaggerated. Teenagers might have watched James Dean, but few were rebels without a cause. A 1966 British study found that the vast majority of 16–20 year olds felt that their mother and father were understanding.⁵⁷ When asked by researchers what they would do if they won the lottery, the greatest number of German youths said they would build a house; the second biggest answer was to invest it in an interest-earning account.⁵⁸ Two-thirds of 16–20 year old girls were keeping the tradition of the trousseau alive, regularly saving and storing up linen, clothes, cutlery, and china for marriage. These were hardly the excessive, myopic consumers associated with affluence.⁵⁹ At their own parties most adolescents wanted guests to behave, drink coke or syrup, and listen to »La Paloma« rather than get in an »ecstatic rage over Elvis.«⁶⁰

Certainly, consumption does not appear to have weakened ties between generations. One reason for the remarkable strength and adaptability of the family lies in the unprecedented improvement in living conditions of senior Europeans. This has facilitated reciprocal gift-exchange and caring between old and young. And rising incomes and well-being has facilitated the inclusion of elderly people as active consumers. We should note that the chronological markers of this story differ from the »golden« 1950s and 1960s. In Europe, the rise of the elderly consumer is a phenomenon of the last forty years, the result of changing welfare regimes. This part of the history of contemporary consumer culture has primarily to do with the state not with the market or choice. Pensions policies transformed old age: Retirement no longer meant a collapse in the standard of living.⁶¹ Whereas almost three quarters of European men aged 60–64 were in work in 1947, by the 1980s more than three quarters were living in retirement.⁶² An OECD study found that by the mid-1990s older Germans and Dutch people even had a higher standard of consumption than the young.⁶³ There remain interesting differences between EU member states – the average elderly German couple spends 115 percent of what a younger couple spends on recreation and culture, whereas older Finns only spend 77 percent.⁶⁴ Still, the overall lifting of the elderly population from poverty and exclusion to material comfort and leisure since the 1960s is a revolutionary change. Elderly people have second homes, cars, computers, travel abroad, eat out and work out.⁶⁵ Marketers report that elderly consumers today view

57 Peter Wilmott, *Adolescent Boys of East London*, rev. edition, Harmondsworth 1969 (1st published 1966), pp. 66–68.

58 Dorothea-Luise Scharmann, *Konsumverhalten von Jugendlichen*, Munich 1965, p. 48 (for lottery), p. 45 (for trousseau). Saving for marriage was less pronounced amongst youths from higher educational and social backgrounds; for trends of rising disposable income and saving behaviour, see Siegfried, *Time is on My Side*, pp. 43 ff.

59 The best recent study that focuses on the myopic effects of affluence is Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence. Self-Control and Well-Being in the United States and Britain since 1950*, Oxford 2006.

60 Quoted in Reinhold Berger, *Dimensionen der Wunsch- und Erlebniswelt Jugendlicher*, in: Ludwig von Friedeburg (ed.), *Jugend in der modernen Gesellschaft*, Cologne 1965, pp. 519f. (my translation).

61 While pensions are only a share of the working income, older people have lower expenses for housing and travel to work.

62 Women's respective share fell from 13 to 4 percent, Gilbert Dooghe, *The Ageing of the Population in Europe. Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Elderly Population*, Brussels 1992, p. 191.

63 Bernard Casey/Atsuhiko Yamada, *Getting Older, Getting Poorer? A Study of the Earnings, Pensions, Assets and Living Arrangements of Older People in Nine Countries*, OECD, Paris 2002, table 2.3.

64 *Ibid.*, table 2.4. In Japan it was even 132 percent.

65 Ian Rees Jones/David Ekerdt/Paul Higgs (eds.), *Consumption and Generational Change. The Rise of Consumer Lifestyles*, Edison, NJ 2008; Joachim Vogel, *Ageing and Living Conditions of the Elderly. Sweden 1980–1998*, in: *Social Indicators Research* 59, 2004, pp. 1–34.

travel and tourism as an »elementary need«⁶⁶, and can choose between 50-plus hotels, holiday tours for ›best agers‹, or a winter in Spain and Australia. Ironically, such has been the cultural break-through of ›active ageing‹ that by the early twenty-first century, in the face of an advancing fiscal and pensions crisis, European governments are thinking about how best to lure active seniors back to work.

III. TEMPORAL DIVERGENCE

The degree of cultural homogeneity and diversity in contemporary consumer culture is not only a result of relative affluence or how many goods people own, but is determined by patterns of use. How do people use their leisure time? One important difference between contemporary and earlier consumer cultures is the expansion of leisure time with the shortening of the working week and earlier retirement. By 2000, people in new and old member states of the European Union alike enjoyed between four and five and a half hours of free time a day. The main differences were between men and women rather than between countries. Italian men had 5.05 hours, one hour more than Italian women; only Norway had virtually no gender gap. TV and Video dominated in all societies, with some national differences; British men spent 45 percent of their free time in front of the box, compared to only 34 percent in Germany and Norway.

The changing temporalities of everyday life have been sidelined in most histories of consumption preoccupied with questions of purchase and desire.⁶⁷ Yet, as recent sociologists and theorists have shown, consumption is organised in rhythms and routines and involves the coordination of tasks in time and space. And these are the products of historically changing pressures and opportunities. Change in leisure time can be examined at three levels: aggregate national changes, the rhythms of everyday practices, and the distribution of these practices across the population.

National time-use surveys since the 1960s provide an opportunity to chart comparative trends in the aggregate use of time. In the last 40 years, people spent more time on travel, sport, eating out, and watching TV. The single most influential development here is the spread of television viewing and the decline of socializing. By 2000, Italians spent 37 percent of their free time watching TV or video, and only 17 percent socializing; Belgians 44 percent and 15 percent respectively.⁶⁸ Socializing has declined in *absolute* terms; only in France has it increased. Yet, socializing has held up *relatively* well in the last 30 years. People may watch a lot of television but visiting and socializing remains in a strong second position, well ahead of purely individual leisure pursuits such as reading, hobbies or entertainment. TV, in other words, mainly cut into going to the movies and much less into socializing. The picture for 2000 is not dramatically different from what we know about German workers in the early 1970s, who had visitors for an average of 46 minutes a day during the work week.⁶⁹

66 Cited in Fünfter Bericht zur Lage der älteren Generation in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Potenziale des Alters in Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, Berlin 2005, p. 242.

67 Rare exceptions and starting points are: Gary Cross, *Time and Money. The Making of Consumer Culture*, London 1993; Wildt, *Vom Kleinen Wohlstand*, esp. chapters 5 and 7; Paul Ginsborg, *The Politics of Everyday Life. Making Choices, Changing Lives*, New Haven/London 2005.

68 Eurostat data, cited Jukka Gronow/Dale Southerton, *Consumption and Leisure in Europe*, in: Göran Therborn/Stefan Immerfall (eds.), *Handbook of European Societies*, London (forthcoming), table 4.

69 Kaspar Maase, *Lebensweise der Lohnarbeiter in der Freizeit*, Frankfurt 1984; Informationsbericht des Instituts für Marxistische Studien und Forschungen 1984, no. 38, p. 76.

Greater affluence has also facilitated greater access to a variety of leisure activities. It is telling that people in the poorer new EU member states watch more television and spend less time on socializing, hobbies, sport, and volunteering than their richer neighbours. Once again, there may be longer historical trends at work here. Much to the frustration of party officials, youths in socialist Europe retreated to a private world of television rather than build a collective culture. A 1977 study in Eisenach, East Germany, found that young workers watched six hours television a week, but only contributed 40 minutes to volunteer work.⁷⁰ Even the more affluent old EU member states fall into two groups. Societies that watch relatively less TV (Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Norway) tend to spend more time socializing and eating out.⁷¹

Time, however, is not structured and experienced in bulk units. It is broken up and held together through different rhythms. A long, slow family meal is different from five or six snacks, even though the aggregate time might stack up the same. The rhythms of everyday life were a central research agenda in French studies by Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau in the 1960s–1980s, but as historians we still know far less about their evolution than would be desirable.⁷² European societies continue to have strikingly different rhythmic constitutions of everyday life. People in France not only spend a lot of time overall eating but tend to have a long lunch, whereas Finns tend to spread out eating across the day. Much of how we consume is the result of collective rhythms, and this is brought out sharply for people who move to a new country which runs on a different clock.

Time, as the sociologist Elizabeth Shove has remarked, is not only used up: It is also created through practices.⁷³ New practices compete with old. One can annihilate the other, or they can arrive at some kind of peace and co-existence. An example of the first belongs to visual entertainment and communication practices – watching TV meant fewer hours at the movies; since the 1990s, computers have encroached on the TV. Radio listening is a good case of the second type – more listening has been combined with more ironing and other household chores.⁷⁴

In the 1920s, young female textile workers in Westfalia spent on average two hours at the end of every work day at home helping with chores and housekeeping. Sundays was a day for walking, visiting and music and singing. Holidays were mainly spent with sewing or gardening; only 5 percent went hiking. Some went swimming three times a day. The way to work was short. There was a long lunch break of 75 to 90 minutes.⁷⁵ Compared to work and leisure time today, these women had a fairly structured day. A century ago, there were leisure activities but their number was small, requiring relatively little synchronisation from the women themselves.

To what degree has a relatively simple structure of everyday life been broken up by contemporary consumer culture? One big difference between Europeans in the early

70 Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung, *Freizeit und Freizeitnutzung junger Arbeiter und Schüler in der Wartburgstadt Eisenach*, Leipzig 1977, p. 65.

71 The United Kingdom is an exception, with high TV viewing and high socializing.

72 *Henri Lefebvre, Critique of Everyday Life: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, Vol. 2, London 2002 (1st published 1961); *ibid.*, *Rhythmanalysis. Space, Time and Everyday Life*, London 2004; *Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, CA 1984 (1st published 1974).

73 *Elizabeth Shove, Everyday Practice and the Production and Consumption of Time*, in: *Elizabeth Shove/Frank Trentmann/Richard Wilk* (eds.), *Time, Consumption, and Everyday Life*, Oxford 2009.

74 *Amy Hewes, Electrical Appliances in the Home*, in: *Social Forces* 2, 1930, December, pp. 235–242; *Ruth Palter, Radio's Attraction for Housewives*, in: *Hollywood Quarterly* 3, 1948, pp. 248–257.

75 *Lynda Lueb, Die Freizeit der Textilarbeiterinnen*, Münster 1927.

twenty-first century and their great-grandparents in the early twentieth century is that, thanks to greater personal mobility and electric connectivity, there are far greater opportunities and pressures to coordinate numerous practices. In addition to the overall density of leisure practices, however, we should also ask how these practices are distributed. Aggregate accounting and averages tend to presume that everyone does a little of everything. But this is, of course, a statistical illusion. Leisure activities are unevenly distributed. Some people play a bit of golf and like to go to the movies, the opera and eat out in restaurants, other people play golf and nothing else. We need to know about who participates in what type of consumption.

Sociologists who have compared participation rates between countries across time have found some suggestive and provocative divergence between advanced consumer societies. One research project tracked eating and reading in France, Holland, Norway, Great Britain and the United States. It found no overall convergence for trends in eating-out specifically or eating more generally. Whereas in the United States the time people spent eating at home shrank from 53 minutes in 1975 to 42 minutes in 2000, it stayed at 96 minutes in France. Above all, there was significant divergence in participation rates. Continental European countries were more homogenous, that is, people tended to share in general changes in how they spent their free time. Thus, in Holland, the decline in time spent reading was a trend shared across society. In the United States, by contrast, people moved in opposite directions in the 1970s to the 1990s: Those who already liked reading were reading more, while those who were less devoted readers were spending even less time on it; Britain was closer to the United States than to other European societies.⁷⁶ One possible interpretation is that consumer societies have evolved in opposite directions: Some typified by the United States, moving towards ever greater specialisation and fragmentation, the other, closer to the continental European cases, encouraging more evenly shared, homogenous national life-styles. American consumer culture may represent the opposite of the homogeneity so feared by 1950s critics predicting conformity and standardisation like David Riesman. The American ›way of life‹, at least in recent decades, has been marked by growing internal diversification, not by shared past-times. Put more positively, contemporary history has seen the evolution of rival types of ›consumer society‹, characterized by different logics of internal stratification and dynamics of practice.

IV. BETWEEN CHOICE AND COMPULSION

Together with patterns of homogenisation, contemporary consumer cultures has been associated with the triumph of choice and individualisation and a withdrawal from civic engagement: The more people buy, the more their individual consumer identity crowds out their civic spirit.⁷⁷ In this view, citizenship is hollowed out by consumerism, as evidenced by reform initiatives since the 1980s to make public policies, from education to health services, more consumer-oriented, introducing greater choice and quasi-market mechanisms. Citizenship is no longer directed towards public engagement, but encourages individuals to express themselves as active consumers.

This way of thinking has roots stretching back to ›republicanism‹ and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but it is probably not surprising that it gained a new attraction in the age of

76 Alan Warde/Shu-Li Cheng/Wendy Olsen et al., Changes in the Practice of Eating. A Comparative Analysis of Time-Use, in: *Acta Sociologica* 50, 2007, pp. 363–385.

77 From the large literature in this vein, see, for example, *Bauman*, *Consuming Life*; *ibid.*, *Exit Homo Politicus, Enter Homo Consumens*; *Michael Sandel*, *Democracy's Discontent*. America in Search of a Public Philosophy, Cambridge, MA 1996; *David Marquand*, *Decline of the Public*. The Hollowing-out of Citizenship, Cambridge 2004.

neo-liberalism in the 1980s–1990s, with its emphasis on de-regulation and marketization. Academics looking for a historical narrative have tended to reach backwards from the contemporary elevation of the individual consumer to several earlier developments: rational choice models; the advent of consumer testing-agencies reporting on the best deal; advertising, with its celebration of the desiring self; all the way to the marginalist revolution of the 1880s.⁷⁸ Some historians have stressed that even in inter-war America, consumer culture was never a uniform manifestation of corporate commerce and always divided by class and race⁷⁹, but overall the line towards individual choice and the commercial manipulation of desire seemed pretty straight, especially for the post-war period.

There are two problems with this narrative. The first concerns the present. Policy statements and initiatives that set out to consumerise public services are one thing. The reality on the ground is another. Researchers following local users and providers have found that consumerist reforms have had virtually no impact at all on identities. When going to a hospital, people continue to think of themselves as patients and members of the community, not as consumers.⁸⁰ In public swimming pools and other leisure services, users do not behave as the rational choice model would predict. Altruism, care, and a sense of civic belonging have not been extinguished.⁸¹

For the purposes of this article, a second weakness is more serious since it concerns the uses of the past. Reading backwards from current concerns over choice and market integration has produced an ahistorical, presentist narrative that has obscured alternative formations of the consumer. It has tended to conflate choice with individualism, and it has downplayed or ignored altogether the politics of consumption that occurs outside markets and shops, at home, in the realm of ordinary habits and routines, and in battles over needs and provisions in socialist and capitalist societies alike.

Far from being an essential post-war product of ›advanced liberalism‹, the consumer evolved as a point of reference through competing traditions in modern Europe.⁸² In Britain, the consumer had been firmly established on the map of politics by 1914. The consumer then stood for the public interest, an association forged through popular battles over free trade and taxation.⁸³ In France, by contrast, ›the consumer‹ was a self-image for reform-minded middle class groups who sought to improve the social conditions of workers, who were understood to be producers, not consumers.⁸⁴ The First World War gave the consumer a new significance as a national interest. In all these traditions, individual choice

78 This narrative does considerable injustice to the social ethics of economists like Marshall and to the continuities between Marshall and an earlier generation in their defence of consumer interests, see *Donald Winch*, *The Problematic Status of the Consumer in Orthodox Economic Thought*, in: *Trentmann*, *The Making of the Consumer*, pp. 31–52.

79 *Lizabeth Cohen*, *The Class Experience of Mass Consumption*, in: *Richard W. Fox/T. J. Jackson Lears* (eds.), *The Power of Culture*, Chicago 1993, pp. 135–162; *Cohen*, *A Consumer's Republic*.

80 *John Clarke/Janet Newmann/Nick Smith* et al., *Creating Citizen-Consumers. Changing Publics and Changing Public Services*, London 2007.

81 *Johnston Birchall/Richard Simmons*, *User Power. The Participation of Users in Public Services*, London 2004.

82 *Trentmann*, *The Modern Genealogy of the Consumer*.

83 *Trentmann*, *Free Trade Nation*.

84 *Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel*, *Catholicisme social et éducation du consommateur. La ligue sociale d'acheteurs au cœur des débats (1908–1910)*, in: *Catholicisme et modernisation de la société française (1890–1960) (Cahiers du Centre Pierre Léon d'histoire économique et sociale, No. 2)*, ed. by *Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel/Bruno Dumons*, Lyon 2003, pp. 19–39. See further the two volumes of essays: *Alain Chatriot/Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel/Matthew Hilton* (eds.), *Au nom du consommateur. Consommation et politique en Europe et aux États-Unis au XX^e siècle*, Paris 2004; *Trentmann*, *The Making of the Consumer*.

was linked to broader social or national ethics: the active citizen-consumer in Free Trade Britain; the consumer who used the power of the purse to help workers and shop-assistants in France; the consumer who bought and saved for the sake of the nation in war-time Germany. There was no straight line to individual choice and markets. In fact, in inter-war Britain many consumers aligned themselves with a popular conservative movement to »buy empire« goods to strengthen imperial solidarity. From this longer perspective, more recent consumer movements like »fairtrade«, and Max Havelaar appear more as one variation in a longer history of the social ethics of consumption, and less like the invention of newly reflexive affluent consumers.⁸⁵

Taking ordinary consumption more seriously opens up additional fields of consumer politics. Post-war affluence did not mean the end of a »politics of necessity«. Arguably, affluence expanded its scope. More wealth and more goods came with new battles over the health and safety of products from electronic goods to medical supplies and infant-feeding formulas. By the 1960s – 1970s, housing had become a magnet of consumer activism in many European countries, bubbling up from the grassroots through new rental associations (Mieterverbände), tenants' associations and irritation at the lack of accountability and provision in public housing.⁸⁶ Leisure itself was defined as a need, an entitlement belonging to the domain of social citizenship. As a House of Lords Committee stressed in 1973, as the state cared for »their other needs« the »state should not opt out of caring for people's leisure«.⁸⁷ Even the most routine of leisure activities, watching television, appears to have recreated a sense of public connection, rather than leading to disengagement.⁸⁸ Researchers who have studied political activism suggest that it is wrong to relate the decline in older forms of political action to the rise of consumerist protests. People who are active in ethical consumer movements are also disproportionately active in older community based forms of politics and volunteering.⁸⁹

In addition, there is a quotidian micro-politics of consumption that deserves fuller recognition. Consumer society was advertised as a world of shiny goods. But goods and services failed and faltered. More cars meant more traffic jams. Technical systems became more interdependent and vulnerable to breakdown. The democratisation of material comforts, epitomised by the fixed bath, the shower, washing machine and garden equipment, put new pressures on infrastructures. These pressures arising through ordinary consumption tend now to be linked to questions of environmental sustainability. They were also important new nodes of a quotidian politics of consumption, as influential as the drive for distinction or symbolic representation often seen as typifying contemporary consumer

85 *Frank Trentmann*, Before »Fair Trade«. Empire, Free Trade, and the Moral Economies of Food in the Modern World, in: *Environment and Planning D 25*, 2007, pp. 1079–1102; *Matthew Hilton*, Prosperity for All? Consumer Activism in an Era of Globalization, Ithaca/New York 2009; *Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier*, La consommation engagée, Paris 2009.

86 *Bernhard Wanders*, Zwischen Dienstleistungsunternehmen und politischer Basisbewegung. Mieterorganisation in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Untersuchung zur politischen Organisation wohnungsbezogener Verbraucherinteressen in Mietervereinen und Deutschem Mieterbund sowie in Mieterinitiativen, Munich 1984; *Peter Shapely*, The Politics of Housing. Power, Consumers and Urban Culture, Manchester 2007.

87 Cited in *Rhona Rapoport/Robert N. Rapoport*, Leisure and the Family Life Cycle, London 1975, p. 10.

88 *Nick Couldry/Sonia Livingstone/Tim Markham*, Media Consumption and Public Engagement. Beyond the Presumption of Attention, Basingstoke 2007.

89 *Michelle Micheletti/Dietlind Stolle/Marc Hoogh*, Zwischen Markt und Zivilgesellschaft. Politischer Konsum als bürgerliches Engagement, in: *Dieter Gosewinkel/Dieter Rucht/Wolfgang von Daele et al.* (eds.), Zivilgesellschaft – national und transnational, Berlin 2003, p. 151–171.

culture. New goods and technologies involve the delegation and coordination of tasks. When things break down, people are pressed into action.⁹⁰

Seeing consumption as a set of practices – rather than in terms of choice, markets and discretionary income – simply has not least the advantage of recognising socialist societies as also belonging to the family of consumer societies, although perhaps more a distant cousin than a sibling. Accounts of shortages, queuing and bad economic planning are legion, but they should not distract from the very real material accumulation in the 1960s. Flats were relatively smaller than in the West, with less central heating, but households in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR were major consuming units. In 1970, 79 percent of households in Czechoslovakia had a television (45 % in Poland, 84 % in GDR, 53 % in Hungary), 75 percent a washing machine (67 % in Poland, 54 % in GDR, 50 % in Hungary), 57 percent a fridge (28 % in Poland, 56 % in GDR, 32 % in Hungary).⁹¹ Pensioners, single and poorer households had fewer of these goods, but the overall trend was upward. In the GDR, free time increased by almost one hour between 1974 and 1985, to 4.2 hours a day. With car-ownership low, home decoration and home-based leisure assumed enormous importance. In a study of consumer desire, the GDR's youth research institute found in 1979 that 92 percent of youths dreamt of furnishing and decorating a nice flat, well ahead of other consumer desires such as travel (69 %), dressing fashionably (54 %) or acquiring a car (36 %).⁹² What set societies like the GDR aside was a relative lack of choice and a high level of home-made goods and passing on, although it would be wrong to presume that second-hand consumption and making goods at home have completely disappeared in market societies either.⁹³ In 1971 the average East German woman owned three skirts, four blouses, and five dresses she had tailored herself, more than a third of her wardrobe.⁹⁴ Lack of choice did not diminish a desire for fashion and distinction. It probably had the opposite effect. Lack of variety in patterns, colours, and sizes, enhanced the importance of a personal touch. Children's clothing is suggestive of this mix of recycling and personalisation. The average East German boy and girl had five shirts and 14 pullovers in 1980. Sewing and knitting were popular with rich as well as poor. 51 percent of households earning less than 600 Marks did it, but so did 34 percent of those earning 1,800 Marks or more. These domestic practices were not

90 For further discussion, see *Frank Trentmann*, *Disruption is Normal. Blackouts, Breakdowns and the Elasticity of Everyday Life*, in: *Shove/Trentmann/Wilk*, *Time, Consumption, and Everyday Life*, pp. 67–84.

91 Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (BArch), 01 C/450a, Institut für Marktforschung, Untersuchungen zur Spartätigkeit in ausgewählten RGW-Mitgliedsländern, Bericht Nr. 7; vertrauliche Dienstsache, 30.6.1975, table 4. For consumption in socialist Europe, see: *Ina Merkel*, *Utopie und Bedürfnis. Die Geschichte der Konsumkultur in der DDR*, Cologne 1999; *Katherine Pence*, *You as a Woman Will Understand. Consumption, Gender and the Relationship between State and Citizenry in the GDR's Crisis of 17 June 1953*, in: *German History* 19, 2001, pp. 218–252; *Susan E. Reid/David Crowley*, *Style and Socialism. Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, London 2000, *Victor Buchli*, *An Archaeology of Socialism*, Oxford/New York 1999; *Fitzpatrick*, *Everyday Stalinism*.

92 Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung, *Jugend und Mode*, Leipzig 1979, table 2. Male teenagers (88 %) and female teenagers (95 %) equally put »eine schöne Wohnung einrichten« first in their wish list.

93 *Nicky Gregson/Louise Crewe*, *Second-Hand Cultures*, Oxford/New York 2003; *Alison Clarke*, *Mother Swapping. The Trafficking of Second Hand Baby Wear in North London*, in: *Peter Jackson/Michelle Lowe/Daniel Miller et al.* (eds.), *Commercial Cultures. Economies, Practices, Spaces*, Oxford 2000; *Elizabeth Shove/Mathew Watson/Martin Hand et al.*, *The Design of Everyday Life*, Oxford 2007.

94 BArch Berlin-Lichterfelde, DL 102/543, *Zur Entwicklung Sozialistischer Verbrauchs- und Lebensgewohnheiten bei der Bevölkerung der DDR*, 30.6.1971, table 8.

driven purely by necessity, but because many people liked to choose their own style and colour and because they found them enjoyable.⁹⁵

That affluence breeds materialism is a popular cliché. Scholars like Ronald Inglehart, by contrast, have seen the age of affluence as promoting non-materialist dispositions, including social and environmental awareness.⁹⁶ Evidence from Eastern Europe adds a twist. Shortages, uneven distribution, the many broken promises of unfulfilled improvement, may have heightened a materialist outlook. In Poland, commentators in the late 1960s observed »ideal małej stabilizacji« or an ideal of small stabilisation as expressed in privatisation and a longing for material goods. Young workers pinned their hope on a higher standard of living. When they were asked in Rzeszów in 1973 what happiness meant, 59 percent gave the answer »a happy family«, 50 percent said »money and a higher standard of living«.⁹⁷

Riches and access to consumption are unevenly distributed in market and socialist societies alike. Indeed, the inequalities in the former have on average been higher in modern history. All societies have to cope with unfulfilled desires. Why, then, did consumption become increasingly politicised in societies like the GDR? One reason is that scarcities and lack of variety were connected to a growing sense of low social mobility and disempowerment, real and imagined. Here Adam Smith's insight in the »Theory of Moral Sentiment« about the quality of »the spectator« remains valuable. In a commercial society, Smith observed, inequality could be a source of stability because poor people could imagine themselves to be like a rich neighbour – and one does not steal from or attack one's (potential) self.⁹⁸ The socialist system of provision stifled such hopes. People felt at the mercy of plans and party bosses. That scarce goods like cars, telephones or housing were allocated to people with connections, access to Western currency or to zones designated of special international importance, like East Berlin, shook the faith of many ordinary loyal citizens. As one petitioner complained to Egon Krenz just a few months before the fall of the Berlin wall, how was he supposed to explain to his kids that the neighbour who had access to »Deutschmark« could buy a camper van while he himself had to wait for it for twelve years or more? He used to have a »good attitude to our state«, but in the last five years he had ever more often asked himself why he and his wife were working so hard, clocking up over-time, if it was impossible to fulfil one's modest desires (»be-scheidene Wünsche«).⁹⁹

95 BArch Berlin-Lichterfelde, DL 102/1476, Informationen aus Wiederholungsbefragungen – Befragungszyklus 1980/81 – Knaben von 1 bis unter 15 Jahren; *ibid.*, DL 102/1471, Informationen aus Wiederholungsbefragungen – Befragungszyklus 1980/81 – Mädchen von 1 bis unter 15 Jahren.

96 Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution. Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics*, Princeton, NJ 1977; *ibid.*, *Modernization and Postmodernization. Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies*, Princeton, NJ 1997. For critical discussion, see Russell Belk, *Materialism. Trait Aspects of Living in the Material World*, in: *Journal of Consumer Research* 12, 1985, pp. 265–280; Harold D. Clarke/Nitish Dutt/Jonathan Rapkin et al., *The Effect of Economic Priorities on the Measurement of Value Change. New Experimental Evidence*, in: *American Political Science Review* 93, 1999, pp. 637–647; Richard A. Easterlin/Eileen M. Crimmins, *Private Materialism, Personal Self-Fulfillment, Family Life, and Public Interest. The Nature, Effects and Causes of Recent Changes in the Values of American Youth*, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 55, 1991, pp. 499–533.

97 Wolf Oschlies, *Jugend in Osteuropa II: Polens Jugend*, Cologne 1982, here: p. 180. See also: Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*, Berkeley, CA 1991.

98 Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiment*, 1759, Edinburgh 1808, pp. 433–444.

99 BArch Berlin-Lichterfelde, DY 30/IV 2/2.039/154, Eingabe, 1.8.1989, no. 846.

The *Eingaben* or petitioning system, which this Berliner made use of, has been interpreted by some historians as a way of containing political opposition by turning grievances into separate, isolated instances with the illusion of a responsive regime.¹⁰⁰ This might have been the intention, but in reality, the petitioning system helped to politicise everyday life. As a way of containing unfulfilled desires it backfired. Unlike the complaints of frustrated consumers in market societies, which are scattered across the commercial landscape, unconnected to a central responsible source, socialist consumer complaints were bundled. In the process of adding letters and documentation to their dossier, many of the hundreds of thousands of East German who went through the petitioning system underwent a quotidian politicisation, where they learnt to translate their grievances as consumers into a critique of the regime. The growing visibility to Western cars and products in the mid-1980s, especially in East Berlin, sharpened the sense of injustice. As one man from Erfurt complained to the *Zentralkomitee* of the SED already in 1976: How was it possible for people to advertise boilers and entire radiator systems in exchange for a Wartburg in local newspapers at a time when new apartments could not be completed because of a shortage of heating equipment? »Surely something is rotten here.«¹⁰¹

V. OUTLOOK

The history of consumption in contemporary Europe is intimately tied up with the major ideological traditions that have expressed fears and critiques of consumer society since the Second World War. What we know (and what we don't) about how European consumers have led their lives in part expresses the kind of concerns and approaches that have been at the centre of larger social theories. Approaches have moved from a focus on mass production and standardisation (Frankfurt School), to a view of consumption as an instrument of status and social power (Bourdieu), to an emphasis on the symbolic value of consumption as a world of signs (Baudrillard). In their different ways, these traditions have had an interest in portraying consumer society as a new historic era and break with earlier societies. Contemporary historians have thus tended to use the ›affluent‹ 1950s and 1960s as a launch pad of consumer culture, looking forward to the diffusion of new goods and materialist values, rather than looking back to trace its roots and dynamics in an earlier history.

Coming down from the lofty heights of postmodernism affords a useful opening to revisit fundamental questions and approaches about the place of contemporary consumer culture in a longer history and its internal dynamics. For all their insights, most older views have had the habit of treating consumption as a means to an end, primarily concerned with answering a separate problem, such as the reproduction of social inequality through a habitus of consumption, the manipulation of desire or the workings of capitalist society. What these tended to leave out was the practice and stuff of the consuming itself, that is,

100 Recent discussions are *Jonathan Zatin*, *The Currency of Socialism*, Cambridge 2007, and *Mary Fulbrook*, *The People's State. East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*, New Haven, CT 2005, although the benign features of the petitioning system should not be exaggerated. For complaints, see also *Ina Merkel* (ed.), *Wir sind doch nicht die Mecker-Ecke der Nation*, Köln 1998, and comparatively *Frank Trentmann*, *Kurze Unterbrechung – Wir Entschuldigen die Störung. Zusammenbruch, Zäsur, und Zeitlichkeit im alltäglichen Konsum*, in: *Christina Benninghaus/Sven Oliver Müller/Jörg Requate* et al. (eds.), *Unterwegs in Europa – Beiträge zu einer pluralen europäischen Geschichte*, Frankfurt/New York 2008, pp. 219–245, here: pp. 224–234.

101 »Hier kann doch etwas nicht in Ordnung sein«, BArch Berlin-Lichterfelde, DY 30/3261, Eingaben an G. Mittag, 14.9.1976.

how people use things. After postmodernism we are rediscovering the materiality of everyday life.¹⁰²

This article has suggested ways of broadening the contemporary history of consumer culture, chronologically, conceptually, and analytically. It has deliberately criss-crossed 1945, often seen as an hour zero of consumerism. If we associate consumer culture with distinction, desire, self-fashioning and identity-formation, there are strong continuities between pre- and post-45 Europe. Future research on consumer cultures in post-45 Europe do well to integrate these earlier developments and to place them in broader imperial and comparative perspectives. The association of consumer society with affluence in the 1950s and 1960s has especially been coupled with an interest in how a fascist society like Germany adapted to peaceful democracy. The longer European experience of consumer culture, however, was neither inherently privatising nor inherently peaceful. It had an imperial past and was connected to a modernizing project of cultural uplift through material goods and manners. This project shared affinities with other regimes like Japan intent on civilizing manners through a material reform of the home, its goods and practices. We still know too little about the place of colonial and international knowledge in the everyday life of European consumers after 1945.

The age of affluence was not a watershed between needs and wants. The article has deliberately highlighted the mundane world of consumption, calling into question the conventional focus on choice and purchase. A very large part of what and how people consume remains the result of ordinary or routine forms of consumption. Of course, it would be foolish to suggest that contemporary Europe is exactly *like* other or less affluent societies, past or present. One distinctive feature remains high public sector consumption in health, transport, education and other areas of life that supports high levels of private consumption. A second, especially pronounced at the level of the European Union, is the attention given to an individual market-oriented citizen-consumer; once again, this needs to be understood as part of a longer history in the rise of the consumer as a subject of politics and discourse with roots in progressive as well as nationalist traditions. How much of the neo-liberal emphasis on choice and the market consumer will survive the current economic crises is uncertain. The singularity or homogeneity of Europe as a consumption zone, however, must not be exaggerated. Genuine comparative historical research is few and far between. What we do know from social science research about practices, tastes, and the role of consumption for identity and group formation in European countries suggests caution towards any generic talk of ›consumer society‹. It is wrong to draw a sharp qualitative distinction between societies as either living in a world of want, where there is no consumption because there is no choice, or in a world of needs, where there is choice and desire rules. Societies are a mix of both. What changes is the mix. Just as people in pre-twentieth century societies were not without desires and certain spectacular forms of consumption, so people in contemporary societies still pursue plenty of ordinary consumption practices. Arguably, affluence has increased both routine practices and choice; the rise in home improvement and gardening is a case in point. A focus on consumption as practice encourages a change in perspective from older social theories that continue to influence many histories of consumption and that have treated cultural inequalities as a result of social inequalities, notably Veblen and Bourdieu. Instead of seeing how individuals consume as an effect of social class or status, it starts with the individuals and their

102 Alan Warde, Consumption and Theories of Practice, in: Journal of Consumer Culture 5, 2005, pp. 131–153; Daniel Miller (ed.), Material Cultures. Why Some Things Matter, London 1998; Shove/Watson/Hand, Design of Everyday Life; Wim M. J. van Binsbergen/Peter L. Geschiere (eds.), Commodification. Things, Agency, and Identities. The Social Life of Things Revisited, Münster 2005; Frank Trentmann, Materiality in the Future of History. Things, Practices, and Politics, in: Journal of British Studies 48, 2009, no. 4.

practices, recognising that through their consumption they move between different cultural genres. Social differences, in other words, become visible as also being the result of how individuals consume, not just their income or status. Recent sociologists have emphasized the significant degree of intra-individual variation in cultural consumption, that is how the same individual can belong to many different publics and different cultural forms (e.g. TV entertainment shows, novels, opera and pop music).¹⁰³ How such social differences have evolved over time as a result of practice is an important, untapped field of research for future historians.

Through earlier social theories, historians have inherited a divide that sees consumption either as purely symbolic or as functional. This is unfortunate. Most consumption involves both dimensions. Closer attention to how people consume and to the distribution of practices within as well as between societies calls into question a simple thesis of homogenisation. Cultures of consumption remain diverse and differentiated.

103 *Bernard Lahire*, *La culture des individus*, Paris 2004; see also the special issue in: *Poetics* 36, 2008.