

Bulletin of the GHI Washington

Issue 18

Fall 1996

Copyright

Das Digitalisat wird Ihnen von perspectivia.net, der Online-Publikationsplattform der Max Weber Stiftung – Stiftung Deutsche Geisteswissenschaftliche Institute im Ausland, zur Verfügung gestellt. Bitte beachten Sie, dass das Digitalisat urheberrechtlich geschützt ist. Erlaubt ist aber das Lesen, das Ausdrucken des Textes, das Herunterladen, das Speichern der Daten auf einem eigenen Datenträger soweit die vorgenannten Handlungen ausschließlich zu privaten und nicht-kommerziellen Zwecken erfolgen. Eine darüber hinausgehende unerlaubte Verwendung, Reproduktion oder Weitergabe einzelner Inhalte oder Bilder können sowohl zivil- als auch strafrechtlich verfolgt werden.

II. Accounts of Recent Conferences and Workshops

"The Development of Twentieth-Century Consumer Society"

German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., October 19-21, 1995. Co-sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. Conveners: Matthias Judt, Charles McGovern, and Susan Strasser.

For more than a decade, American historians have been exploring shopping, advertising, and marketing as realms for consumer and corporate behavior; they have also studied the meanings of consumer goods as material culture and investigated the history of consumer political activism. New work is beginning to describe a distinctively late twentieth-century way of life, emphasizing consuming rather than producing. Historical scholarship on these issues in Germany is even more recent. It was the intention of the conveners to introduce German and other European scholars to American work in this field, and to provide Americans access to contemporary European scholarship. Because the field is so new, the conference was organized to promote as much discussion as possible. Participants came from Canada, France, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States.

The first session concerned "The Practices of Consumption." Susan Porter Benson discussed working-class consumers in the United States in the interwar period, emphasizing issues of gender, generation, and community. Ina Merkel spoke on the German Democratic Republic as an example of "mental traditions" and historical change in consumer mentalities. Stephen Kline discussed children's consumer socialization and the commodification of play. Michael Wildt focused on changes in consumption as social practice in West Germany during the 1950s.

The next session, "Framing Consumption," offered the theory and intellectual history of consumption and the consumer as concepts. Jackson Lears's paper was entitled "Reconsidering Abundance: A Plea for Ambiguity." Louis Pinto spoke on intellectual, political, and scholarly implications of the consumer concept. Ulrich Wyrwa's paper, "Consumption and Consumer Society: A Contribution to the History of Ideas," drew on *Begriffsgeschichte*. James Livingston discussed modern subjectivity and consumer culture.

The third session focused on marketing and selling. Roland Marchand gave a paper on customer research as public relations at General

Motors during the 1930s. Matthias Judt analyzed the reshaping of shopping environments in metropolitan Boston and the competition between downtown shopping and suburban malls. Fath Davis Ruffins gave a presentation illustrated with slides on "Race and Representation: Ethnic Imagery in American Advertising."

"Consumption and the Environment" featured the work of three scholars. Susan Strasser spoke on the marketing of the electric garbage disposer as a case study in household trash and American consumer culture. Arne Andersen's paper was entitled "From the 'Taste of Necessity' to the Mentality of Wasting: Ecological Consequences of Consumer Society." Christian Pfister's paper addressed what he calls "the syndrome of the fifties" and discussed social and environmental signals that indicate a transition from industrial to consumer society.

The next panel explored the topic "Consumption as a Social Act." Kathryn Kish Sklar spoke on the Consumers' White Label, a campaign of the National Consumers' League between 1898 and 1918. Nancy Reagan discussed housewives and the politics of consumption in Weimar and Nazi Germany. Robert Haddow's paper concerned U.S. policy, trade fairs, and consumer goods in Europe during the Cold War.

A session entitled "Shaping Demand: Consumers, Markets, and the State" brought together two German and two American scholars. Kurt Möser's paper dealt with the creation of desire for automobiles in Germany as an outgrowth of World War I. Andre Steiner spoke on consumer mentality and economic reform in the GDR in the 1960s. Lizabeth Cohen discussed "The Making of Citizen Consumers at MidCentury" in the United States. George Lipsitz's paper was on "Consumer Spending as State Project: Yesterday's Solutions and Today's Problems."

The final session, "Consumption Politics and Nationality," began with Victoria de Grazia's paper on changing consumption regimes in Europe between 1930 and 1970. Daniel Horowitz spoke about George Katona and Ernest Dichter, two emigrants who celebrated American consumer culture. Charles McGovern discussed democracy and political identity in the consumer society.

Revised versions of these papers will be published in the Institute's book series with Cambridge University Press.

Susan Strasser