Getting and Spending

EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN CONSUMER SOCIETIES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

This collection brings together essays that suggest that the developing history of consumption is not so much a separate field as a prism through which many aspects of social and political life may be viewed. The essays, by many of the historians who have defined contemporary discussion of consumer history, along with younger scholars, represent a variety of approaches to consumption in Europe and America. Yet their commonalities suggest recent directions in the scholarship, raising such themes as consumption and democracy; the development of a global economy; the role of the state; the centrality of consumption to Cold War politics; the importance of the Second World War as a historical divide; the language of consumption; the contexts of locality, race, ethnicity, gender, and class; and the environmental consequences of twentieth-century consumer society. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, they explore the role of the historian as social, political, and moral critic.

The essays discuss products – rye bread to garbage disposers to automobiles; corporate strategies, including customer research and chain store development; government policies as different as the American GI Bill and the consumption practices of the former German Democratic Republic; and ideas about consumption, including the language used to express them. Unlike most other studies of twentieth-century consumption, this book provides international comparisons.


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The German Historical Institute is a center for advanced study and research whose purpose is to provide a permanent basis for scholarly cooperation among historians from the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States. The Institute conducts, promotes, and supports research into both American and German political, social, economic, and cultural history; into transatlantic migration, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and into the history of international relations, with special emphasis on the roles played by the United States and Germany.

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Edited by
SUSAN STRASSER, CHARLES MCGOVERN, and MATTHIAS JUDT

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In memory of
Roland Marchand
(1933–1997)
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Preface

On October 19–21, 1995, twenty-four scholars from the United States, Canada, Germany (both the former East and the former West), Switzerland, and France met at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., to discuss American and European consumption in the twentieth century. The call for the conference was broad, encouraging participants to think about the relationship between consumption and democracy; the role of consumption in the history of capitalist industry and of the state; the roles of both elites and ordinary people in the shaping of consumption; stratification and variance along lines of class, gender, race, ethnicity, age, and geography; the linkage of identity and consumption; and the environmental consequences of twentieth-century consumer society. Papers were circulated beforehand rather than delivered at the conference, and our time together was spent in stimulating discussions of the intersections and relationships among them rather than on hearing and critiquing individual papers. The chapters in this book are post-conference revisions of most of the original submissions. Besides the authors, thanks are owed to those who participated in the conference and who, for various reasons, are not represented here.

The editors wish to thank the staff of the German Historical Institute for attending to the many details of the conference and the book. Hartmut Lehmann and Hartmut Keil encouraged the conference planning, while Detlef Junker and Martin Geyer kindly provided hospitality for the event, both at the Institute and in their homes. David B. Morris helped to prepare the manuscript for publication. Special thanks go to the series editor, Daniel S. Mattern, who was involved in this book at every stage, from attending the
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conference to working on the prose of the nonnative speakers to shepherding the manuscript through production.

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