TWO FIGURES DOMINATE the nineteenth-century European landscape of female depravity—the prostitute and the kleptomaniac. From Emile Zola’s Nana to Edouard Manet’s Olympia, the prostitute claimed the imagination of the most gifted and prominent European artists of the century.1 Like a stain on the bright surface of bourgeois liberal culture, the prostitute stood ready to spread disease and confusion; she posed the insuppressible danger of social and sexual disorder.2 In addition, as “saleswoman and wares in one,” to use Walter Benjamin’s phrase, the prostitute inscribed in her body the growing commodification of social and cultural relations in late nineteenth-century Europe. Both literally and metaphorically, she was inseparable from the new public spaces—arcades, cafés, theaters, department stores—of an increasingly urban, consumer-oriented European society.3

If the prostitute represented woman-as-commodity, the kleptomaniac was both

I would like to thank my students for their constant inspiration, enthusiasm, and insight into the world of consumer culture. In particular, I would like to acknowledge those students in my “Shopping: A History” and “Women and Gender in Modern Europe” classes at Stanford University, where I formulated many of the ideas in this essay. In addition, warm thanks go to M. C. Belgairn, Tim Brown, Jacqueline Dirks, Michael Grossberg, Allyn Roberts, Richard Roberts, Amy Robinson, Daniel Sherman, Jeffrey Wasserstrom, and the three very helpful anonymous reviewers of the AHR.


her antithesis and evil twin: woman-as-consumer. In the later decades of the nineteenth century, case studies concerning “kleptomaniacs”—women who stole obsessively—began to appear in French forensic medicine. This so-called “disease” was investigated by physicians and psychologists throughout Europe. While they disagreed on a great many things, they did agree on two: that shoplifting was on the rise in the new department stores and that, like prostitution, it was a “crime” committed by women. According to the experts, kleptomaniacs were predominantly bourgeois and aristocratic women, and they almost never needed what they stole. Rarely prosecuted, they were considered hysterics who had little rational control over their desire to consume. According to Zola in his Au bonheur des dames (1883), these women “stole from a perverse desire, a new sort of nervous affection which a mad doctor had classed, proving the results of the temptation provided by the big shops.” In this glittery tale of a large Parisian department store, Zola depicted the shoplifter Madame de Boves not so much as a medical aberration as a symbol of consumer “temptation” and its ugly consequences. The store, itself a character in the novel, seemed able to arouse in any woman a “rage of unsated desire” that can literally “consume” her, as in the disease. In this sense, the kleptomaniac was everywoman-as-consumer but also everywoman as consumed by shopping—in short, a symbol of the two-way traffic of consumption in the aisles of the department store.

As cultural types, the kleptomaniac and the prostitute served as projections for a particular set of nineteenth-century anxieties concerning the growth of consumerism, the commodification of modern life, and the impact of these processes on the social relations of gender, race, and class. These two types also nicely encapsulate the double relation women held in the nineteenth century to the new consumer culture. In the “specularized” urban culture of arcades, boulevards, and department stores, woman was inscribed as both consumer and commodity, purchaser and purchase, buyer and bought.8


6 Zola, Ladies’ Paradise, 234.

7 For example, critics of the mass press in France often represented it as a prostitute in order to express their worry that it had become politically and morally corrupt. See Mary Louise Roberts, “Subversive Copy: Feminist Journalism in Fin-de-siècle France,” in Making the News: Modernity and the Mass Press in Nineteenth-Century France (Amherst, Mass., forthcoming, 1998).

8 As Rita Felski says of women in nineteenth-century Europe, “But if women could be seen as objects of consumption, some women were also becoming consuming subjects.” See The Gender of Modernity (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 64. See also Bowlby, Just Looking, 11. In When Ladies Go A-thieving, 9, Elaine Abelson argues that the kleptomaniac and the prostitute posed different but parallel threats to American morality.

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This notion of a dual, contradictory relation of women to consumer culture was perhaps first put forth by Thorstein Veblen, whose *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) is widely regarded as the most important early critique of the social and cultural dimensions of mass consumerism. Veblen's work was shaped by Darwinian theories popular in the academic writing of the 1890s. In probing the dynamics of consumption, therefore, Veblen sought out its earliest roots in the origins of personal property. The earliest form of property in ancient cultures, he believed, was the “ownership of the women by the able-bodied men of the community.” In archaic cultures, women served as “trophies,” the spoils of war that proved the prowess of young warriors. Like all wealth for Veblen, the aim of this earliest form of property was to confer “invidious distinction.” While in modern society, women are no longer seen straightforwardly as slaves of men, according to Veblen, their status in marriage still bears a trace of their former servitude. In a modern consumer society, the wife “has become the ceremonial consumer of goods which he produces. But she still quite unmistakably remains his chattel in theory; for the habitual rendering of vicarious leisure and consumption is the abiding mark of the unfree servant.” Rather than pursue her own interests or career, the wife of a wealthy man must consume “conspicuously,” that is, purchase valuable goods for herself, her husband, and his household—goods that provide evidence of his wealth and dominance in a social hierarchy of invidious distinction. But by this very act of consumption, the wife also demonstrates her status as property. For although, unlike a slave, she is allowed to consume, that consumption is always vicarious—for another, not her. It marks her as a commodity herself, no less than the big house or fancy car. She provides tangible proof of her husband’s wealth through her self-ornamentation and vicarious leisure.

Veblen’s evolutionary framework may seem quaint to late twentieth-century intellectual sensibilities. But his analysis of woman—as marked culturally both as commodity and consumer—raises some fascinating questions for historians. Why, for instance, are acts of consumption gendered female in the cultural imaginary? Why are women identified as the primary consumers of Western society? And how are men imagined in their relation to commodities? Why has woman—as eroticized object of desire—come to represent consumer culture? Why is this metaphor (as well as the female act of consumption) so thoroughly eroticized? Finally, what is the

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13 In his famous critique, Adorno noted this double role of woman as consumer/commodity in Veblen’s theory: “If one would follow this trend of thought further, one might say that women have escaped the sphere of capitalistic production only to fall the more completely into theclutches of the sphere of consumption. They are fascinated and restricted by the immediacy of the surface world of commodities no less than men are fascinated and restricted by the immediacy of profit.” See Theodor Adorno, “Veblen’s Attack on Culture,” in Wood, *Thorstein Veblen: Critical Assessments*, 3: 9.
relationship, if any, between a woman's social role as consumer and her symbolic role as commodity?

In both the European and American cases, which I examine here, historians have only begun to answer these questions. To put it crudely, they have been more interested in the "supply" than in the "demand" side of the modern market equation. While whole literatures arose in the 1960s and 1970s to investigate the lives of industrial workers and labor politics, the backward cultural pull of American Puritanism inspired condescension for any activity, like consumption, that was premised on materialism, self-indulgence, and pleasure. By this view, "work" was a legitimate object of study, but "shopping" was not. More recently, following the lead of Fernand Braudel, historians such as John Brewer and Neil McKendrick explored the growth of consumerism in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe within a context of thriving commerce and developments in merchandising. But, at least in the European case, little comparable work has been done for the modern era, perhaps because this period was shadowed by twentieth-century Marxist critics who painted consumer culture in the gloomiest colors possible—as a form of totalitarianism that admits no individual creativity or resistance.

By contrast, of course, work on American consumption overwhelmingly centers on the last two centuries. Here, much of the earliest work sprang from interest in the relation between consumerism and class or generational tastes, particularly the youth generation of the 1920s. As the field developed, it also began to examine the widespread perception that consumption in the modern period was the domain of women. But the topic of consumption has been viewed with some suspicion by many women's historians. Influenced by Marxist critics, they have steered away from consumerism, condemning it, in Victoria de Grazia's words, "as an especially totalizing and exploitative force to which women are more vulnerable than men because of their subordinate social, economic and cultural position." According to

14 As Jean-Christophe Agnew puts it in "The Consuming Vision of Henry James," The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980, T. J. Jackson Lears and Richard Wightman Fox, eds. (New York, 1983), 67: "Not only do we wish to distance ourselves from the materialism associated with acts of acquisition, but we are even more anxious to deny any semblance of the vulgar and debased symbolism of needs that cultural critics have so persistently associated with consumer culture."


18 Victoria de Grazia, "Introduction," The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective (Berkeley, Calif., 1996), 7. For a statement of this view, see Rayna Rapp and Ellen Ross, "The Twenties: Feminism, Consumerism and Political Backlash in the United States," in Women in Culture and Politics: A Century of Change, Judith Friedlander, ed. (Bloomington, Ind. 1986); Showalter,
this view (not unlike Zola's version), the female consumer was a subject without will or agency, manipulated by commercial interests and diverted from political activism in her preoccupation with shopping. Although this figure of the woman consumer is changing, as Jacqueline Dirks's provocative work on the National Consumer League in the United States shows, these prejudices have crippled historical interest in the past.¹⁹

In a society such as ours, in which there is virtually no area of life—from biological fertility to religious spirituality—that remains uncommodified, and in which commodities play an ever-increasing role in shaping social identity and cultural meaning, we can hardly afford to continue our historical neglect of consumerism. Scholars of women and gender, in particular, ignore the topic at their own risk. If the woman-as-consumer is a familiar figure of modern life, central to narratives of family and household, the woman-as-commodity, usually figured as a prostitute, is situated where capital and sexuality meet and, as such, can tell us a great deal about the workings of gender and power in modern Western cultures.

How fortunate we are, then, to have The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective, edited by Victoria de Grazia with Ellen Furlough. The collection is skillfully introduced by de Grazia and divided by theme into three parts—women's changing relation to consumption from the mid-eighteenth to the twentieth century, the historical role of the woman as head of the modern consumer household, and finally, the issue of consumption and empowerment.²⁰ Furlough adds an absolutely superb, partially annotated bibliography—an indispensable tool for further work on the topic.²¹ The meaning of “consumption” here ranges broadly, and is associated with the processes of commercial exchange, commodification, and spectatorship. The time frame is broad as well, stretching from the eighteenth-century ancien régime to the globalization movement begun in the 1970s. If any one theme unites the volume, de Grazia argues, it is “the myriad conflicts over power that constitute the politics of consumption,” particularly those conflicts in some way inflected by gender roles.²² The aim of the collection, in her own words, is “to show that there was nothing natural or inevitable about the development of modern

These Modern Women. I try to argue against such views in “Samson and Delilah Revisited: The Politics of Women's Fashions in 1920s France,” AHR 98 (June 1993): 657–84.


consumption practices,” including “the dichotomized relationship between Mr. Breadwinner and Mrs. Consumer.”

The genesis of that “dichotomized relationship” is the first topic taken up in the volume. Beginning with the eve of the French Revolution, Jennifer Jones deftly uses the censure of Marie Antoinette’s relationship with her dressmaker, Rose Bertin, in order to explore the cultural connections between women and consumerism. When the famous wife of Louis XVI was attacked for her sartorial excesses, the finger of blame fell on Bertin, a marchande de mode, or top retailer in the fashion industry, for causing the queen to spend recklessly and bankrupt the French state. According to Jones, the assault on Bertin represents anxiety concerning what was perceived to be the rising commercial prominence of women both as retailers and consumers. In the popular and literary imagination, the act of retail buying had traditionally meant a male consumer and a female merchant. Women’s wardrobes may have out-valued those of men in the eighteenth century, but it was men, not women, who were believed to frequent the boutiques at the Palais-Royal or on the Rue St.-Honoré, where the retailers were most often poor shop girls. Towards the end of the century, however, contemporaries began to observe an “increasing volume of female shoppers” in the streets of Paris. At the same time, retailing, it was feared, was increasingly conducted by “haughty and pretentious marchandes de modes in transactions with submissive clients.” The result of this turn of affairs was widespread cultural anxiety, based on the assumption that “in the realm of commerce, as in the realm of politics, when women ruled women, disorder, chaos and folly inevitably reigned.”

According to Jones, at the very moment that women became linked to consumption in a new way, this change, in turn, helped to usher in a novel notion of womanhood. Because of “the liveliness, yet passivity, of women’s sense of sight and imagination,” it was argued, they were particularly vulnerable to the allure of beautiful but frivolous commodities. The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, wrote in 1762 that from childhood onward, “little girls love everything visual, mirrors, jewels, cloth.” In this way, women’s so-called new interest in luxury goods was “naturalized,” that is, seen as an inevitable part of their psychology. In this argument, Jones challenges anthropologists such as Arjan Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, who have seen luxury goods as “singularized” or “enclaved” commodities that establish social status rather than gender identity. While Jones refers to the

cultural construction of the very wealthy female consumer here, Cissie Fairchilds has shown how imitation luxury or “populuxe” goods (stockings, umbrellas) were also consumed in large numbers by the French lower classes during this period.\(^{30}\)

One wonders, then, to what extent were middle-class and working-class women “naturalized” as consumers in the same way? What, in other words, were the social origins of the female consumer? Jones implies that she arose from the very top of the social hierarchy, among the aristocracy, but we cannot assume this is true without more research.\(^{31}\) Further, if Jones’s premise is correct, of what significance is it that the eighteenth-century cultural image of the aristocratic woman widely associated her with seduction and the erotic?\(^{32}\) At the same time that contemporaries defined women as “naturally” attracted to luxury goods, they also “attributed a new importance to the role of the commodities themselves in the process of seduction and the creation of desire.”\(^{33}\)

Could the eroticized nature of female consumption—the prostitute as dominant symbol, Zola’s kleptomaniac as irrationally seduced by goods—be traced back to this original link between female consumption and an eroticized, feminized aristocratic culture?

Certainly, as Jones herself would no doubt agree, the figure of the passive, overly sensitive woman had multiple origins in the turbulent late eighteenth century and cannot be traced solely to shifting regimes of consumption. While Jones confines her analysis to changes in cultural perception, de Grazia, in her introduction, suggests some other structural causes linking women and consumption during this period. Among these are the increasing differentiation between household and workplace and “the exclusion of women from the rising bourgeois public sphere of modern politics.”\(^{34}\) If her arguments are sketchy here, the blame must fall on our own lack of a viable metanarrative concerning the impact of the industrial and French revolutions on the socio-cultural construction of gender—the so-called

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\(^{32}\) The debate concerning the social origins of consumerism is far from resolved. While the literature is massive, the following sampling of works can provide some idea of the contending views in the European case. In *Dream Worlds*, Rosalind Williams, like Jones, concentrates on the "closed world of courtly consumption." More recently, Leora Auslander has also focused on the French aristocracy and the "courtly stylistic regime" in her study of furniture and consumption, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996), chaps. 1–3. Other historians, however, have paid a great deal of attention to the role of the middle classes, arguing that it was they who gave birth to modern consumerism in their efforts to emulate the aristocratic class. See, for example, McKendrick, *et al.*, *Birth of a Consumer Society*; and more recently, Colin Jones, who has used a Habermasian framework to argue that consumption flourished among the middle classes in the years before the French Revolution, creating a community based on market and information exchange that contributed to that great upheaval. See Jones, “The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution,” *AHR* 101 (February 1996): 13–40. Finally, by closely scrutinizing the inventaires après décès of small shopkeepers, master artisans, journeymen, day laborers, and domestic servants, Cissie Fairchilds makes a convincing case that the consumer revolution began among the lower classes. See “Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods.”


\(^{34}\) Jones, “Coquettes and Grisettes,” 37.

exclusion of women from democratic politics and their increasing confinement within the home. On the one hand, there is the Marxist narrative that focuses on structural changes associated with industrialization—the division of labor, the identification of male and wage labor, for example—that transformed the household into women’s domain. But in the wake of historians such as François Furet, who has largely discredited the Marxist interpretation of revolutionary change in this period, this interpretation has become outmoded. On the other hand, there is the narrative based on the ideas of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, which focuses on the marginalization of women following her exclusion from democratic politics. But this narrative, besides requiring historians to use overly general, awkward terms such as “bourgeois political sphere,” has been criticized as seriously misconstruing Habermas’s own vision of transformation in the eighteenth century.

Rewriting that metanarrative, as we clearly need to do, might require us to look in some unexpected places, to explore markers of transformation that have been discounted as trivial and apolitical. In this sense, David Kuchta’s contribution to The Sex of Things is extremely suggestive. In “The Making of the Self-Made Man,” Kuchta explores the political meanings attached to the “great masculine renunciation”—the widespread embrace of modesty and simplicity in dress by British gentlemen during the revolutionary era. Begun by eighteenth-century aristocrats, this form of “inconspicuous consumption,” to invert Veblen’s term, conferred political legitimacy, for it was seen as an expression of manly, public virtue that freed men from the corrupting force of luxury. In eighteenth-century aristocratic culture, luxury was considered to be a menacing political vice, “the debased, debauched, and debilitating form of consumption that effeminated and impoverished England.” Heterosexual aristocratic men used the label of effeminacy to exclude from power men of other classes and sexual practices. In addition, by portraying elite women as conspicuous consumers and lovers of luxury, they justified their exclusion from politics.

Like Jones in the case of France, Kuchta focuses on fashion—a commodity form whose unique qualities have yet to be adequately explored by historians. (For...
example, why does so much debate about gender identity center on fashion?) Like Jones again, Kuchta describes the rise of a “naturalized equation” between femininity, luxury, and consumption in eighteenth-century England. This new equation, in turn, was used as a rationalization for women’s expulsion from the realm of politics, most importantly, after the “great masculine renunciation” migrated from aristocratic to bourgeois culture. In this way, Kuchta is able to link fashion to what is arguably the most significant crisis of the revolutionary period for women. By hinging political legitimacy on a sharp contrast between masculine simplicity and feminine consumerism, English gentlemen necessarily separated the world of politics from that of fashion. Perhaps it is the legacy of that divorce that has kept historians from taking fashion seriously as a marker of political change. But as Kuchta’s work shows, issues of dress and consumption can tell us much about transitions in political culture and should not be overlooked—particularly as we search for creative new ways to construct narratives of transformation in the revolutionary period.

Kuchta is one of the few contributors to the volume to explore the relation between masculinity and consumption, in this case, male fashion. In “The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth-Century France,” Leora Auslander also challenges the feminization of consumption, arguing that, during the nineteenth century in France, “the bourgeoisie of both genders were cast as consumers, albeit consuming to different ends.” For men, an acceptable form of consumption was the collecting of art, conceptualized as an investment that relied on expertise and conferred social status. For women, consumption became attached to the rising cultural ideal of female domesticity. Here, Auslander’s findings complement those of Jennifer Jones, who argues that, while the naturalization of the female consumer calmed fears about women’s rising commercial prominence, one worry did linger: that the “natural” female bent for shopping would be exhausted in “the dangerous pastime of coquetry.” The newly erotic investment of consumption—the late eighteenth-century linking of commodities with seduction and the creation of desire—worried contemporaries who wanted women’s proclivity for shopping to be “channeled into the sweet pleasures of domesticity.” A few decades later, their dream was totally realized. The focus of bourgeois consumption by the early years of the next century, according to Auslander, had become no less than the “making of the family and the class.” Like Veblen, Auslander defines wealth as essentially social; “bourgeois women,” she argues, “not only had to produce themselves as cultural objects but also needed to acquire, arrange and use those goods—especially furnishings—defined as necessary for representing and constituting the...

40 For a fascinating look at the garment industry behind the fashion scene in both Paris and New York, see Nancy L. Green, Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York (Durham, N.C., 1997).
family's social position.” These social obligations were clearly dealt out in housewife manuals that, as Auslander shows, gave precise instructions on how to buy objects of taste, durability, comfort, and utility.

But the meaning of female consumption was hardly static through the modern period, as many historians have assumed. After mid-century, argues Auslander, female consumers were expected to take on the extra burden of representing their nation as well as their family and class: “the idea of fostering national as well as class-based taste in domestic goods was becoming more widespread, both out of fear of economic competition and in the hopes of disseminating Frenchness.” To show how consumption increasingly became constructed in this way, Auslander draws on women’s magazines such as Le conseiller des dames, which make taste and beauty matters of French patriotism. (Whether or not French women actually perceived consumption in this way is not a question she explores.) Such a theme gained even more importance in the Third Republic, during which, it was believed, “the nation was made, in part at least, of French goods.” Auslander’s analysis of woman-as-consumer disseminating “Frenchness” brings us back full circle to the developments of the revolutionary era. If Kuchta shows how the naturalization of woman-as-consumer led to women’s exclusion from the nation state, Auslander reveals the back door through which they found their reentry. Unable to participate in national politics because of the cultural perception that they were frivolous consumers, women nevertheless gained civic (if not) political legitimacy qua consumers giving concrete substance and value to the nation.

The nineteenth-century fetishization of commodities—as capable of “producing” national identity—had its dangers as well as its benefits for the French. As Auslander points out, women were supposed to desire goods, and were made to do so by advertising and marketing strategies. But when they coveted them too much, they became “victims of the new disease of kleptomania,” hardly the model of the nation they were supposed to produce. Whether she was Marie Antoinette or the common bourgeois housewife, Mrs. Consumer, as de Grazia calls her, was an unruly figure of desire. Her love for luxury was a constant threat to the social and moral order, a drive that demanded to be contained and channeled into appropriate domestic outlets. This eroticized potential for disorder is what unites the kleptomaniac and the prostitute. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues in her fascinating essay “The Other Side of Venus: The Visual Economy of Feminine Display,” one “conspicuous” feature of consumer culture is “its sexualization of the commodity, its eroticization of objects.” No wonder, then, that the prostitute, as an image of “desirable femininity,” became a “major trope” and emblem of consumer culture.

itself.49 Just as Jones, Kuchta, and Auslander explore the rise of the woman-as-consumer in the modern era, Solomon-Godeau historicizes the image of woman-as-commodity and the relationship it posits between consumption and female-centered erotic desire.

To do so, Solomon-Godeau looks at the explosion of pornographic images of women in non-elite forms of culture, specifically lithography after the 1820s. Such images were evidence of a budding “mass culture,” in her view, inasmuch as they issued from a “quasi-industrial production of considerable scale” and bridged the chasm between elite and popular cultures. Sometime between the French Revolution and the later years of the Restoration, Solomon-Godeau argues, the “erotically invested” male body, traditionally occupying “the central place in art theory, pedagogy, and academic practice,” was eclipsed by the female body.50 Why the female body? “It is as though the real absence of women as actors in the bourgeois civil sphere was filled by compensatory fantasies—or constellations of fantasies—about femininity. And where law, medicine, the church, and the state all operated to ‘contain’ women and to police female sexuality, the image world of high and mass cultural forms conversely manifested femininity’s untrammeled expansion.” By the end of the century, this fantasy of uncontained female desire, usually imaged as a prostitute, became, the “most powerful icon” of modern mass consumer culture.51 In Solomon-Godeau’s text, the lithographic images of femininity as display communicate an unbridled energy, a kind of last-resort pleasure that the author makes no attempt to reproach (Figure 1).

Although Solomon-Godeau’s argument here can never be more than an intuition (can you find evidence for the rise of a compensatory fantasy?), it is a richly suggestive idea, one worthy of at least speculative exploration. If we are to believe the other contributors to this volume, the naturalized links between femininity, erotic coquetry, and the consumption of luxury goods contributed both to women’s exclusion from politics and their containment in the domestic household. By this scheme, then, as female consumer energies were sublimated into appropriate domestic and nation-building channels, the feminized, erotic investment of consumption, established (according to Jones) in the eighteenth century, was repressed. With nowhere else to go, then, that erotic investment retreated into a fantasy world only to resurface in pornography and, if we are to believe European doctors, in the form of neuroses like kleptomania. In this sense, the nineteenth-century woman-as-commodity is the repressed, fantasy version of the eighteenth-century woman-as-consumer.

Unlike most other authors in de Grazia’s volume, Solomon-Godeau focuses on “commodity” rather than “consumer” culture. Convinced that capitalism “is as much a semiotic as an economic system,” she is not so much interested in consumer activity as she is in the cultural forms of commodities—how the growing emphasis on consumer activity in European society found visual representation in all areas of

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cultural life, even those that seem to bear little relation to consumer acts. The prostitutes and other pornographic images can be described as commodities, she argues, because they represent a fetishized form of femininity. Divorced from any real referent, they represent woman-as-image rather than image-of-woman. As such, they conform to what Marx described as the fetishized commodity form generally. In addition, these images are "aligned with a condition of exaggerated specularity, a condition ... famously described by Laura Mulvey as "to-be-looked-at-ness." In other words, these images of female bodies exist only to be looked at


53 T. J. Clark also talks about pictures of nudes in this way. See *Painting of Modern Life*, chap. 2.

54 Solomon-Godeau, "Other Side of Venus," 128.
and desired; these are not women of human will and individuality but erotic tokens designed for visual consumption. And that very “specularity,” according to Solomon-Godeau, is “commodity culture’s primary and privileged mode of address.” Commodities, like erotic female nudes, are made to be looked at, desired, and consumed. These correspondences between the commodity and the woman-as-image—their mutually fetishized, specularized natures—explain to Solomon-Godeau why, as a commodity culture developed in nineteenth-century France, it resulted in “the heightened visibility of femininity” under the guise of erotic display. Solomon-Godeau’s logic here seems circular and her argument, once again, impossible to determine. Nevertheless, she gives us an early glimpse of the prostitute-as-woman-as-commodity—an image that will seize the European imagination by the dawn of the Third Republic. That image, we now see, reveals how gender was implicated in the representation of commodities as they moved to the very center of the European cultural imaginary.

By describing the century as one of “heightened visibility” for female images, Solomon-Godeau runs counter to a historian of nineteenth-century American consumer culture—T. J. Jackson Lears. In his massive history of advertising, Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America, Lears pictures the modern period as one in which images of femininity increasingly lose, not gain, their power to represent commodities.

Lears’s analysis of the advertising industry begins with a wistful look back to the age of exploration. In visualizing the new American landscape, European travelers had borrowed the medieval image of the Land of Cockaigne, where food abounded and rivers flowed with wine or milk. As these magical images began to shape accounts of the New World, American abundance lodged in the popular imagination as a maternal, nurturing woman. When commercial life expanded in nineteenth-century America, notions of abundance began to be projected onto factory-produced commodities. In trying to sell their products, advertisers relied on the commercial appeal of plenitude and the magical transformation of the self. By the twentieth century, however, advertisers began to change the meaning and purpose of commodities: once the source of enjoyment and magic, they increasingly became subordinate to the quest for social status. (A transition, it could be argued, that Veblen was documenting in 1899.) At the same time, advertisers moved “away from the ancient impulse to symbolize the source of plenitude as a female.” When women appeared at all in advertisements, it was as “giggly teenagers” and “mere passive consumers of the stuff generated by the male genius of mass production.” Abundance was “disembodied” inasmuch as it sprang from “the efficient factory” rather than the woman-as-fecund-earth.

57 Lears, Fables of Abundance, 28.
58 Lears, Fables of Abundance, 19, 102, 118. In great part, Lears must have been inspired by Benjamin here, or at least as Buck-Morss describes, Dialectics of Seeing, 99, Benjamin’s notion of
The fantasy woman of Lears's analysis, like that of Solomon-Godeau, represented uncontrollable energies. But here, abundance is maternalist rather than erotic, agricultural rather than commercial. For Lears, there is no erotically invested woman-as-commodity. At the crucial hour in the early twentieth century, she was pushed off the stage of visual culture and transfigured into the giddy woman-as-consumer—a mere ghost of her former self. Lears explains this shift in terms of an effort to appease male anxiety about certain cultural tropes of abundance. Cockaigne had been a world of reversals as well as plenty: women dominated men, whom they emasculated by corrupting them with luxury or prodigality. (By associating women with "effeminate luxury," Americans disclosed their European roots.) Hence the earliest female images of abundance promised sustenance but also threatened emasculation: "the land-as-woman evoked a desire for nurturance—but nurturance threatened to turn into suffocating superabundance and provoked the alternative dream of mastery through possession."60

Again, as commercial life expanded and the notion of abundance was projected onto commodities themselves, so were these fears. As in the case of Marie Antoinette, the menacing female addiction to luxury needed to be effectively checked and harnessed. In this case, however, according to Lears, the solution was not pornography but bureaucratic rationality. (We are, after all, moving from a Gallic to a Protestant culture.) The triumph of the rationalized, productive factory, the managerial corporate bureaucracy, and the efficient, Taylorized household reveals, for Lears, "the success of the masculine effort to contain and productively channel the chaotic energies of a metaphorically female nature."61 Led by "prim" northeastern WASP elites, advertising agencies sought "to stabilize the sorcery of the marketplace by containing dreams of personal transformation within a broader rhetoric of control." They produced images that "reflected the marginalizing of female generativity in the managerial worldview."62 Lears's argument here, like that of Solomon-Godeau, essentially evades empirical analysis and thus remains, like hers, speculation, albeit fascinating. Large socioeconomic movements such as rational managerialism cannot be reduced in their causality to psychic investments such as fear of "a metaphorically female nature."

Ironically, the element of Lears's analysis that makes it so exciting to read—its synthetic, creative boldness—also makes it problematic as history. In this text, attributions of masculinity and femininity fly fast and loose, their historicity rarely established ("masculine productivist ethos," Republicanism as a "masculine" point

59 Lears, Fables of Abundance, 120.
60 Lears, Fables of Abundance, 30.
61 Lears, Fables of Abundance, 31.
62 Lears, Fables of Abundance, 10, 111, 184.
of view). Slipperiness also characterizes the relation in Lears’s analysis between cultural and social registers. When mentioning the hapless Mrs. Consumer, Lears refers to her one moment as an icon and the next as a social entity. In addition, Lears’s obvious emotional sympathy for the myths and images of the past saturates his narrative with nostalgia. (Most recently, Lears has defended nostalgia as a “justifiable American value” that “deserves to be treated as more than a symptom of intellectual weakness.”) In the introduction to *Fables of Abundance*, Lears openly confesses his longing to escape the corporate, managerial twentieth century, characterized, in his words, by “the preoccupation with an empty pursuit of efficiency that impoverishes personal as well as public life.” He chides both Marx and Veblen for having too much of a “utilitarian, work-obsessed orientation toward the material world.” Such nostalgia for pre-corporate values is morally laudable but methodologically troubling inasmuch as it can all too easily warp Lears’s vision of historical change. For example, Lears uses cultural phenomena such as advertisements to make general conclusions about Americans, for instance the argument that they experienced anxiety concerning the changing iconography of advertisements because they “preserved some attachment to the land-as-mother . . . in a pastoral world of warmth and plenty.” How does he know Americans felt such anxiety and attachment? To what extent is Lears displacing his own nostalgia onto Americans here? Since Lears’s view evades empirical analysis, it is possible that his argument is functioning as a projection of his own yearning for the past.

Lears’s book shows just how difficult and tricky it is to read advertisements as historical evidence. This is also the lesson of Lori Anne Loeb’s book *Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women*. Like Solomon-Godeau, Loeb focuses her attention on the role of gender in the new visual economy of commodity culture, although unfortunately she shares little of Solomon-Godeau’s theoretical sophistication. A “qualitative and quantitative examination of over 250,000 advertisements,” mostly from the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera in the Bodleian Library, Loeb’s book explores women’s “empowerment” as consumers in late Victorian culture. Loeb disagrees with Veblen that consumer demand was fueled by invidious distinction among wealthy elites. In an argument that claims to borrow from but radically oversimplifies Colin Campbell’s notion of hedonism in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, she argues that late Victorians shared the desire for “access of all to a good life, increasingly defined in

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64 See, for example, Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 120.
65 Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 129.

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material terms.” By the late Victorian era, she claims, the British had achieved equal access to “political participation” but not to “consumer participation”; they therefore turned their attention to mass consumption as “the material analogue of political democratization.” This argument is odd, considering that Loeb’s emphasis is on women as the era’s primary consumers: she overlooked the fact that in the late nineteenth century, access to political participation for this group was hardly a fait accompli.

Loeb’s oversight here typifies her headstrong insistence on empowering the woman-as-consumer as the all-controlling force of the new consumer culture—even when she has to overlook the evidence to do so. Unlike Lear’s model of a ghostly, passive female consumer, Loeb’s exemplar wielded not only the power of the purse but that of the advertising image as well. In her role as household purchaser, Loeb’s female consumer exercised choice and the pursuit of pleasure; she also influenced the way advertisers tried to sell their products. For this reason, argues Loeb, historians can use advertisements as evidence of contemporary notions of feminine ideals.

But Loeb makes little effort to explain what we already know about those ideals—by using either the secondary literature or other kinds of cultural sources, such as novels or magazines. Furthermore, she often fails to reconstruct the historical meaning of her advertising images within a wider set of cultural references. Frequently, she treats advertisements as culturally self-evident artifacts that are instantly legible to the viewer in a specific and unequivocal way. For example, many of the figures in these advertisements are dressed in revealing Greek robes and set against neo-classical backgrounds. But rather than see the influence of, perhaps, late Victorian popular art or post–Golden Jubilee kitsch in such images, Loeb argues that the Greek settings allowed advertisers both to challenge conventional female modesty and to neutralize that challenge by deploying an image distant in time and place. If Lear’s images of women have an origin in the early modern carnivalesque, Loeb’s images sometimes have no past at all. But one cannot help but see these interpretations as subjective, unsupported as they are by reference to any cultural or historical context. In addition, they are clearly influenced by Loeb’s objective to empower the woman-as-consumer, and even the woman-as-commodity. A supine woman plucking lasciviously at a bunch of grapes in one advertisement is, in Loeb’s view, “no passive sexual object”; the image of a fairy in another becomes “a whimsical reminder of feminine power.”


73 Loeb, Consuming Angels, 158.

74 In general, Loeb’s study suffers from a lack of a feminist analytic framework, which she dismisses; see 191, n. 53.


76 For an analysis of post-Jubilee kitsch, see Richards, Commodity Culture, chap. 2.

77 Loeb, Consuming Angels, 38. Here Loeb does provide some iconographical context, noting that the fairy motif was adopted from “a pictorial form popularized by a school of fairy painters (Paton, Fitzgerald, Doyle).” To buttress her argument about “feminine power” here, Loeb refers to Nina Auerbach’s work, specifically Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth (Cambridge, Mass.,
In the absence of a sustained iconographic analysis, Loeb is forced to explain the choice of a particular image in terms of the motives of advertisers involved, without any evidence to justify such an approach. The Victorian advertiser, she claims at one point, “realized that images of sexy women would sell products.” But while the advertiser was “attracted to a sexual image of hedonistic self-indulgence, even on an unconscious level, he is unable to surrender his moral vision. Accordingly, he qualifies his images of feminine sexuality, freezes them, links them to the Fall.” Since Loeb apparently read neither trade journals nor agency archives, how can she possibly know what is on the minds of advertisers?

Historians can at best make educated guesses about advertisements as visual or verbal strategies. As historical sources, they can tell us a great deal about how commodities are defined culturally. In the 1920s, for example, advertisers linked the low-cut dresses and short haircuts of the era with wartime liberation and freedom from constraint—meanings already attached to these fashions in the cultural imaginary. (The issue of origins here is difficult: to what extent are these meanings created or simply reiterated by advertisers?) Women often bought this style just to follow convention, to be sure, but also to embrace these meanings by inscribing them visually on their bodies.79 To understand how a commodity is defined in this way, the historian must rely on a whole range of evidence—the cultural production of the commodity in contemporaneous novels, films, debate, as well as retrospective memory; the advertisement alone does not suffice.

It is this painstaking kind of research that distinguishes Timothy Burke's Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe. Based on the premise that “consumption played an important role in the development and maintenance of colonial domination,” this excellent study examines changing patterns of consumption in colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe.80 In particular, Burke is interested in cosmetic products, a choice he justifies by noting that toiletries were “one of the most developed sectors of light manufacturing” in southern Africa, as well as an important area of marketing and advertisement in the postwar years.81 Drawing on the work of Judith Williamson, he begins by laying out what he calls “a detailed map of ‘prior meanings’” that have become attached to such commodities as soap, defining their cultural significance in

1982). In doing so, Loeb does not do justice to the subtlety and complexity of Auerbach’s argument, which concerns “the disruptive spiritual energy which also engorges the divine” in Victorian images of women (p. 1). Bram Dijkstra’s Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture (New York, 1986) would also have been extremely helpful to Loeb.

78 Loeb, Consuming Angels, 57. Loeb makes the same kinds of generalizations about her audience. See, for example, 62.


81 Burke, Lifebuoy Men, 5.
Although Burke expresses ambivalence about aspects of Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, he finds Marx's argument "that commodities are able to assume an independent life, that relations between things . . . accompany, conceal, or displace the actual state of relations between people," to be a richly suggestive starting point for his own analysis. Using Igor Kopytoff's notion of a "cultural biography" or "social history" of commodities, Burke argues that things have their own biographies, including "prior meanings" that give them "their rich individuality within a specific place and time."

As an effort to establish what he calls the "historical weight" of these prior meanings, Burke begins his study of toiletries with a social history of hygiene in traditional and colonial Zimbabwe, then explores the economic context, including the pre-1945 development of merchant capital and the postwar boom in manufacturing. While Burke is apologetic about such a long prologue to his proper subject, the analysis of advertisements, when it comes in the final two chapters, is worth the wait. In short, this approach—etching in fine detail the cultural and economic contexts in which toiletries as commodities operate—allows Burke to analyze postwar advertisements with richness, clarity, and exactitude.

One of the earliest and most culturally embedded expressions of racism in this area was the belief that Africans were dirty or diseased. Because nineteenth-century Africans cleaned themselves by rubbing oil all over their bodies, they had no previous experience with soap as an item of hygiene. Scholars such as Richard Thomas and Anne McClintock have also shown that, throughout the colonial period, images of cleanliness and filth were used to establish social hierarchies and to justify the segregation, surveillance, and control of African populations. Cleanliness was essential to differences of gender as well as race, for hygiene was represented as a "key attribute of feminine domesticity." When European gender roles were also imposed on Africans, domestic labor such as housework and laundry was increasingly seen as the responsibility of women. If among mission schools and colonial officials, hygiene was considered to be a primary marker of civilization, women were central to this "civilizing" process. African women were considered to be linchpins in the colonial effort to institutionalize hygiene through "native education," state propaganda, and the work of the "homecraft" movement and women's clubs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such an effort to "clean up" the African home had economic as well as cultural objectives. A female education in "proper domesticity," it was believed, would create a more stable and hygienic environment at home, alleviate social problems in African

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83 Burke, Lifebuoy Men, 5–6. For Burke's source here, see Kopytoff, "Cultural Biography of Things"; Appadurai, "Commodities and the Politics of Value."
84 Burke, Lifebuoy Men, 12.
85 See Richards, Commodity Culture, chap. 3; and McClintock, "Soft-Soaping Empire," in Imperial Leather.
communities, and create a healthier, steadier labor force. Drawing from a rich variety of sources, Burke shows how African domesticity was "produced" through "home demonstrators" such as the "Jeanes teachers," African women's clubs, newspapers, and novels.

After World War II, this same process of ideological production continued but through different channels. As Zimbabwe experienced a manufacturing boom, commodities moved more and more to the center of cultural life. The production of "modern" African bodies and manners, hygiene and domesticity, began to take place through the meanings and practices surrounding toiletries. "By the 1960s," argues Burke, "the hegemonic promotion of manners, hygiene, and appearance was increasingly expressed in terms of products and ad slogans." For example, demonstration vans, modeled after the "native education" programs of the 1930s, became a favorite way to sell products in Zimbabwe. Whereas colonial advisers in the earlier period simply recommended frequent washing, they now had in mind a particular soap to use. Besides his knowledge of prior meanings attached to toiletries, Burke draws on records from professional conventions, Rhodesian Federated Chambers of Commerce, and marketing trade manuals in order to analyze advertising slogans and images. These give Burke an extensive, extremely detailed repertoire of cultural referents in his analysis. He presents advertisements as multi-layered, complex cultural artifacts that both reenact and produce social differences.

For example, Lifebuoy soap was known as a "strong" soap suitable for particularly dirty bodies. "As a consequence," argues Burke, "the advertised image of Lifebuoy ultimately drifted inexorably toward both masculinity and blackness." Although the advertisers of Lifebuoy were reiterating links between dirt, masculinity, and the African body that were already deeply embedded in the colonial imaginary, they also gave them new life by transcribing these old cultural hieroglyphs into a new commodity language. In this way, advertisers, no less than colonial officials, policed the borders of both racial and gender hierarchies. While soap ads for men played on worries about remaining healthy enough to work, similar ads for women exploited so-called female concerns like pleasing husbands or running an efficient household. Advertisers singled out the African woman as "the most important by far" target group for marketing. They did so, argues Burke, for much the same reason that missionaries had seen women as the primary "civilizers" a century before: they "believed fervently that women were the key to changing the material composition of the African home," this time as consumers as well as housekeepers. Unlike Loeb, however, Burke does not equate female consumerism with empowerment. For Burke, it was the advertisers who exerted control, rivaled only by African patriarchs who also viewed women as a central cultural force, in this case, for the preservation of African traditions. In this sense, the cultural manipulation of the African woman became a contest for the soul of Africa. If

87 Burke, Lifebuoy Men, 150.
88 Burke, Lifebuoy Men, 151.
89 Burke, Lifebuoy Men, 136.
woman-as-consumer acted as a power broker for modernity, the woman-as-commodity did the same for “traditional” Africa.90

Burke provides a model for how historians should analyze advertisements as cultural artifacts, and as other recent work shows, a book-length analysis is not always necessary to reap the rewards of this approach.91 In addition, Burke’s study illuminates the merits of what Jean-Christophe Agnew has called the “world-system” approach to consumer culture. Rather than locate the origins of consumerism in domestic factors such as social emulation, as Neil McKendrick has done, “world-system” theorists examine circuits of international trade, influence, and domination that, they believe, generated a new orientation toward material objects.92 For example, in her book From Graven Images, Chandra Mukerji examines the trade in prints, maps, and calico cottons as part of a global commercial venture fostering a widespread preoccupation with material goods among Europeans. In doing so, she challenges the Weberian orthodoxy that early capitalism was associated with asceticism rather than hedonism. Pointing to an abundant supply of imported silks, pottery, woolens, spices, and woods in sixteenth-century European markets, she argues that mass consumption was as much a product of global commerce as of industrial capitalism.93 By showing how commodities support and are supported by a culture of colonial domination, Burke’s analysis unfolds in a similarly global frame, revealing the key links between consumerism and empire.

These links also preoccupy Kristin Ross in her history of France during the late 1950s and 1960s, Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture. Her subject is the “sudden descent of large appliances into war-torn French households and streets in the wake of the Marshall Plan,” a transition so

90 By woman-as-commodity here, I refer to the fact that at the time of an African woman’s marriage, her male guardian is given a “bride price” as compensation for the loss of her reproductive power as well as the loss of her labor to the family. What is actually being commodified is not so much the woman per se as her labor and reproductive power. In addition, it is important to qualify Burke’s argument in two ways: first, Burke is talking primarily about urban areas, where changes such as commodification of markets are occurring much more rapidly than in rural areas. Secondly, while it is true that colonial officials and African heads of family competed for power, these two groups also reinforced each other’s power by working together to enforce social order. Finally, it is important to note that when speaking of women as the “soul” of Africa, I am talking about an “invented tradition” rather than any essential female trait. My thanks to Richard Roberts for his expertise on these issues.

91 Judith Coffin’s skillful study of sewing machine advertisements constitutes a single chapter in a larger study of women’s work in France. In the space of only a few pages, she manages to detail the technological and manufacturing basis of the sewing machine industry, the consumer practices, such as working-class credit, that surrounded this commodity, as well as the visual history of working women in France, the late nineteenth-century symbolic equation of the sewing machine with modernity, and the medical anxiety that it excited women sexually. See Judith G. Coffin, The Politics of Women’s Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750–1915 (Princeton, N.J., 1996), chap. 3.

92 Agnew provides a good synopsis of the “world-system” vs. “nationalist” approach in “Coming Up for Air,” 23. For an argument that focuses on domestically driven consumer trends, see McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, Birth of a Consumer Society, 9–33. Amy Robinson brought this issue to my attention. See her unpublished ms. “The Place of the Commodity in a Modern World.”

93 Chandra Mukerji, From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism (New York, 1983), 1–2, 8–11. It is important to note explicitly the differences between “world-system” theorists. Although Agnew groups Mukerji with Immanuel Wallerstein and Fernand Braudel, arguing that her work built on theirs, Mukerji distinguishes herself from both of them in her book. Wallerstein, she argues, describes the global commercial system in strictly economic terms, whereas she is more interested in commodity objects as cultural objects that carry ideas and, as such, act as social forces. Braudel, she argues, is more interested in a “general model of historical change than with explaining capitalist development to challenge Weber’s thesis.” See 15, 18, 24–25.
“headlong, dramatic, and breathless,” that the same rural housewife could acquire electricity, running water, stove, refrigerator, washing machine, car, and television all within the space of ten years.94 Ross presents this postwar development as doubly inscribed in global, capitalist circuits of domination: first as a product of Americanization and secondly as inseparable from France’s reluctant process of decolonization. In her view, France’s global position was contradictory inasmuch as the country was forced to act both as colonizer and colonized, “exploiting colonial populations at the same time” that it was “dominated by, or more precisely, entering more and more into collaboration or fusion with, American capitalism.”95 In theory, Ross convincingly advocates for the “world-systems” approach by creating a comprehensive analytic framework, one that brings together two postwar historiographical narratives—modernization and decolonization—that have until now remained separate in the literature. The problem is, the scope of the argument—the connection between the headlong rush for consumer durables and the violent reaction against Algerian independence—far exceeds the reach of any available historical evidence. Her analysis is a frustrating set of brilliant insights that remain, as in the case of Solomon-Godeau, speculations.

Like Burke, Ross is interested in the postwar obsession with hygiene. (In fact, an interesting question is why soap as a commodity has emerged as such a preoccupation of historians of consumerism. Burke is perhaps right to wonder whether the body acts as a “uniquely powerful site in the process of commodification.”96) Following the lead of Roland Barthes, Ross maintains that the postwar period brought “a qualitatively new, French, lived relationship to cleanliness”—an unprecedented obsession with commodities such as soaps and detergents.97 The January 10, 1955, issue of Elle, for example, was devoted entirely to whiteness—in the form of bleaches, linens, baby layette, and pasteurized milk. Ross asks the right historical question—why would such an obsession with cleanliness emerge at this moment? Like Burke, she sketches out the cultural biography of these commodities, establishing a set of “prior meanings” that would explain their emergence at this particular historical time.

But unlike Burke, she makes arguments without the evidence to support them. “Certainly,” she claims, “the immediate postwar purges (called épurations, or ‘purifications’) and attempts to rid the nation of the traces of German Occupation and Pétainist compromise and complicity set the tone for a new emphasis on French national purity.”98 This is an imaginative idea, all the more attractive because it puts some political bite into postwar consumerism. However, Ross offers no explicit links—except at the level of metaphor—between repression of the moral stains of the occupation and obsession with the stubborn ones in the sink. And language, in

95 Ross, Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, 7.
96 Burke, Lifebuoy Men, 11. In addition, soap is used as a cheap entry into a market for companies with highly varied, complex product lines. The aim of manufacturing soap within a particular market is to gain company loyalty that will translate into higher sales for the entire product line. An anonymous reviewer for the AHR brought this fact to my attention.
97 Ross, Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, 73. See Roland Barthes, Mythologies (Paris, 1957). Ross also draws from the insights of Jean Baudrillard, Le système des objets (Paris, 1968), in this chapter; see 208, n. 5.
98 Ross, Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, 74.
this case, a set of tropes having to do with cleanliness, is much too fickle a thing—much too capable of mutation and inversion—to serve as a causal link between disparate historical phenomena (the occupation and postwar household commodities). The play of language should not be forced to carry the logical weight of any argument, let alone one ascribing psychological motivation (such as guilt) to an entire nation. Lurking behind Ross’s analysis, like that of Lear, is an implicit assumption that political events, social movements, and cultural trends are shaped by collective, even “national,” psychic investments, such as anxiety, guilt, and shame.

Ross is more convincing in her attempt to link the postwar cleaning mania to the Algerian War—the “dirty war” (sale de guerre), as it was called—but she still builds her argument on the very shaky foundation of common discursive tropes. She offers an astounding cartoon of a French paratrooper administering an ice bath—a form of torture in the war—with a PAX soapbox standing nearby. The caption reads: “Torture Must Be Clean” (Figure 2).99 Ross provides no information about the cartoon—its date, in what periodical it appears, its political context but instead interprets it in very broad psychic terms: as evidence that Algeria, no longer France’s “other,” had become its “monstrous and distorted double.” Yet the cartoon offers firmer evidence of “spectacle” than it does Doppelgänger. It confirms that, by the 1960s, as Guy Debord claimed in La société du spectacle (1967), the commodity had moved to the very center of cultural representation,

99 Ross, Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, 109.
working within a system of metaphors deployed in countless, unpredictable ways—here, ironically, for sarcastic political effect.\textsuperscript{100}

There is no doubt that Ross's book suffers from quite serious problems of argument and evidence, as other historians have pointed out. But even after acknowledging these flaws, it seems rash to conclude, as did Richard Kuisel in the pages of this journal, that "historians can ignore this book."\textsuperscript{101} In fact, Ross has a great deal to say about how commodities construct notions of gender in the postwar period, and here her evidence—films, novels, advertisements—serves her well. For example, through analysis of film, she argues persuasively that the automobile as a cultural symbol shaped a new notion of masculinity—"the new and complex image of 'l'homme disponible'—Available Man, relatively indifferent to the distances where he'll be sent."\textsuperscript{102} In the films of the 1950s and 1960s, the car was used as a symbol of social opportunity and geographical mobility, and the Available Man behind the wheel was the primary agent, and sometimes victim, of this new independence. (Car crashes are a major theme in the films of these years.) As such, the Available Man enabled the French to debate the impact of modernization—with all its implicit freedoms and dangers—on cultural and community life. In this way, new tropes of gender helped the French to negotiate commodification as a process of rapid change.

If the car was named "the man's friend" in Renault advertising, household appliances were dubbed "the woman's friends." Despite Ross's interest in postwar couples, to which she devotes an entire chapter, she never explores in detail why men and women were "coupled" with consumer purchases in this fascinating way. Instead, she focuses on women's increasing isolation in the private home as the managers of efficient households. Ross argues that rational administrative techniques moved in this era from the colonies, where they had been first used and perfected, to the domestic interior and the "everyday life" of French citizens. In doing so, she ignores the growing influence of household management and other rationalizing trends in France throughout the century, such as Augusta Moll-Weiss's domestic science movement of the 1920s and 1930s.\textsuperscript{103} In addition, the strategy of using the colonies to "test out" methods of social control had been characteristic of the French Empire (as well as others) since its inception.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{100} Strangely, Debord seems to be missing almost altogether from Ross's text. See La société du spectacle (Paris, 1967; English trans. of new edn., Detroit, Mich., 1977). Debord's notion of the spectacle was a response to French consumer culture in the 1960s, but it has often been applied, perhaps erroneously, to mid-nineteenth-century consumer culture. See, for example, Richards, Commodity Culture; Clark, Painting of Modern Life; Schwartz, Spectacular Realities.

\textsuperscript{101} Richard Kuisel, review, AHR 101 (June 1996): 859–60, quote 860.

\textsuperscript{102} Ross, Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, 23.


\textsuperscript{104} See Paul Rabinow, French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); Timothy Mitchell, Colonising Egypt (Cambridge, 1988); Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World (Berkeley, Calif., 1997).
“intense” pressure to be modern, rational, clean, and forward-thinking, and that pressure “fell on women” in particular. “If the woman is clean, the family is clean, the nation is clean. If the French woman is dirty, then France is dirty and backward.” Like Lears again, then, Ross interprets the late twentieth century as a triumph of rationalized corporate bureaucracy, here put to the service of empire rather than the unruly desires stirred by the American marketplace. And like Auslander, Ross views the housewife as a pivotal figure in the construction of national identity. The French woman, assisted only by her small army of household products and appliances, bore the shifting weight of the civilizing mission, a national project whose livelihood now depended on something as unreliable as an ensemble of commodities.

But commodities are the real colonizing force here, remaking women in their own image within the household dystopia of everyday life. To the old question of consumption and power—did woman’s role as household manager empower or infantilize her?—Ross sings an old song of political despair, not unlike that of Jackson Lears. As housewives increasingly relied on their husbands to purchase appliances, and on scientific experts to operate them, “the real decision-making power, the savoir-faire . . . shifted outside of the woman’s immediate sphere of control.” For all the novelty of Ross’s argument, her judgment here—that commodities are bad, that housework is bad, and that rationalization is bad—recalls the old, now largely outdated, feminist view of consumption as a totalizing, exploitative force in women’s lives.

Despite its flaws, Ross’s study points out the paths where historians have to go: how commodities entangle colony and metropole in circuits of consumer desire, how they act to construct national identity, and how they create new tropes of gender identity in the way that they are culturally imagined through films and novels. In this spirit, then, I want to conclude by sketching an itinerary concerning two issues—method and power—that seem to me particularly pressing for future historians of consumerism and commodity culture.

This review has shown diverse approaches to studying commodities as cultural artifacts. If I have been hard-nosed about matters of logic and evidence in these books, that is because advertisements, pornography, and films are all relatively new sources for historians. In approaching these forms of documentation, we are obliged to be fastidious about what we can and cannot learn from them, and how we must or must not employ them in conjunction with other forms of evidence. Particularly slippery, it seems to me, are arguments that assume collective psychic investments: Solomon-Godeau’s example of pornography as expressing a male compensatory fantasy of femininity in the absence of women in the public sphere, Lears’s corporate rationalism as a male effort to tame the “chaotic energies of a metaphorically female nature,” Loeb’s advertisers feeling guilty about the sexual.

105 Ross, Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, 87.
106 Ross, Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, 104–05. For a different and equally fascinating look at women consumers in the 1950s, see Lizabeth Cohen, “From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in Postwar America,” AHR 101 (October 1996): 1050–81.
imagery they deployed, or Ross’s housewives, like present-day Lady Macbeths, scrubbing out the damned spots of the occupation. Such arguments can be made when certain kinds of evidence are available: for example, if Loeb had been able to find advertisers expressing moral ambivalence in their trade journals or correspondence. But that possibility diminishes to the vanishing point as the collective entity—the French nation, American men—becomes larger and more diffuse.

In addition to method, historians need to direct their attention closely to the connections between women, commodities, and power. As we have seen, interpretations concerning this issue have tacked wildly back and forth across a shallow analytic frame: was consumption “good” or “bad” for women? In the books under review, housewives are portrayed either as mighty consumers with advertisers at their beck and call or as pathetic victims of male expertise and control. Such Manichean views spring from a definition of power as simply the “power of the purse”—the economic ability to make consumer decisions and purchases. But more recent work has shown just how narrow this definition of power is, by exploring how commodities act as more than economic forces. Chandra Mukerji has pointed out that commodities are “carriers of ideas and, as such, often act as the social forces that analysts have identified with ideology-as-words.”107 Clearly, as Burke’s analysis of soap shows, commodities can carry meanings such as “blackness” or “whiteness” that police the borders of social difference. If we were to adopt Michel Foucault’s notion of power relations, we could say as well that commodities constitute a set of forms of cultural domination through which power is exercised and social organization constituted.108 David Kuchta’s analysis of “inconspicuous consumption” among bourgeois English men, for example, shows just how much the discourse of fashion, as such a form of cultural domination, shaped eighteenth-century politics by justifying women’s exclusion from this activity.109 By broadening our notion of the power operative in commodities—as more than just the “power of the purse”—we can explore a fuller range of ways that they shaped subjectivity and experience.

Nor should we confine our explorations to the literal act of consumption. The process of commodification may have begun, but did not end, with the corner store. In fact, for many historians of consumer culture, the department store has gained a kind of totemic status completely out of proportion to its relative significance in the nineteenth century. During this period, as Solomon-Godeau has claimed, commodities became a focal point of daily life, colonizing forms of representation

107 Mukerji, From Graven Images, 15.
as different as art, theater, and newspapers. Warren Susman has explored the impact of this commodity culture on human subjectivity by tracing the transition in the United States from a belief in identity as essentially fixed, rooted in family, class, and social position, to a belief in identity as a matter of display, appearance, and merchandising. While Susman never explored the gendered implications of this transition, Kathy Peiss does so in “Making Up, Making Over,” her exploration of the 1920s culture of cosmetics in The Sex of Things. According to Peiss, commodities such as cosmetics had the power to destabilize “social identities that had once been fundamental to women’s consciousness, fixed in parentage, class position, conventions of respectability, and sexual codes.” Lipsticks with names such as “Lady” and “Hussy” made female identities that had once been “moral poles of womanhood” now a matter of “purchasable style.” In this way, according to Peiss, cosmetic products served to constitute rather than falsify female identity, thus destabilizing the notion of an essentialized, interior self and producing important political effects. In the case of African Americans especially, she argues, “these commodities offered women a language through which they could articulate new demands, concerns, and desires.” Hair-care and skin supplies marketed by women such as Madame C. J. Walker (Sarah Breedlove Walker) promoted an image of respectability for African-American women in the 1920s, allowing them to challenge stereotyped representations of themselves.

Like Burke and Kuchta, Peiss grounds her analysis in a notion of power that allows us to see commodities as more than indices of economic value. In fact, Peiss invites us to think about politics in very different ways here—not as a sustained, collective movement with a strategic set of goals but as a series of personal changes in subjectivity and self-presentation that have real effects on how people act in the world. In this sense, her work illustrates the so-called “politics of the everyday” explored by historians Leora Auslander, Robin D. G. Kelley, and others. One challenge of this approach lies in figuring out how these personal gestures connect to larger structural transformations, or how these expressions of “power’s capillary action,” to use Auslander’s deft phrase, circulate within a larger rhythm of political change. As Jean-Christophe Agnew reminds us, the use of commodities is marked by an absence of responsibility. Commodities do not, in themselves, encourage one to be accountable or responsible to any set of political ideals. No one would deny that structural forces, whether economic or social, play out at the

10 Most helpful to me in defining commodity culture was Richards, Commodity Culture; and Buck-Morss, Dialectics of Seeing.


14 Agnew, “Coming Up for Air.”
individual level. But what are the possibilities and limits of commodities as “everyday” objects that can affect larger social and political change?

Another approach, which I can only sketch out briefly here, would be to move still one more step away from consumption as a literal act, to think less of the concrete “objects” of consumption (cosmetics, for example) and more about the commodification of culture as a process with multiple social and political effects. We might follow the lead of Solomon-Godeau in her attempt to acknowledge the visual forms of femininity, such as prostitutes, at the center of commodity culture. As we have seen, the prostitute-as-commodity of early nineteenth-century pornography was made solely to be desired and consumed; she represented woman-as-image rather than image-of-woman. It seems worthwhile to consider whether this (admittedly problematic) tendency in commodity culture to “specularize” women might also promise a “positive” or subversive political effect. If we are to believe Warren Susman, such a culture of display and appearance undermined belief in identity as essentially fixed in class, family, and social position. Thus it had the capability to destabilize gender identities, such as domestic motherhood, that had been naturalized or essentialized throughout the nineteenth century. For women seeking to escape the inexorable call of convention, that “destabilizing” effect of commodity culture could be very useful indeed.

In my own research on fin-de-siècle France, for example, it can’t be just coincidence that the so-called “New Women”—a group of bourgeois women who rejected domesticity in order to pursue radical lifestyles—are over-represented in the twin worlds of journalism and theater. For, in the 1880s, the daily newspaper and boulevard comedy were the two most prominent cultural commodities of their day, constituting, with the café, the three pillars of life on the boulevards of Paris. With its glitz, its anonymous social mixing, its prostitution of business and political interests, its emphasis on being seen as someone over and above actually being someone, this commodified boulevard culture invited urban participants, including women, to perform identity.15 By that, I mean that whether the “New Women” were assuming a newspaper pseudonym, taking on a stage role, posing as a “reporter,” or posing for the camera, they seemed to play at identity. Particularly skilled in making spectacles of themselves, at once flirts and feminists, compassionate mothers and hard-nosed journalists, courtesans and powerful stage directors, they assumed multiple, often conflicting, identities. In short, the worlds of journalism and theater, which lay at the heart of commodity culture in this period, enabled these women literally to act out the instability of gender identity, and thus to refashion themselves as women. In this way, the commodified cultural landscape of Paris acted as a crucial site for the transgression of conventional gender identities at the fin de siècle, allowing and even encouraging women to shape new, often subversive, selves.

Hence the New Woman should take her place alongside the prostitute and the kleptomaniac as a central figure in the history of gender and consumption. Her presence signals to us that women were not simply consumers of commodities or their eroticized symbols. In addition, women learned to exploit the logic and forms

15 On boulevard culture, see particularly Vanessa Schwartz’s important Spectacular Realities.
of commodity culture to their own advantage. The challenge, again, will be to understand the personal transgressions of the fin-de-siècle New Women as cooperative and transformative. Like commodities themselves, the culture governed by the commodity cultivates little accountability or responsibility to anything, let alone a set of strategic political goals, such as feminism. But to think of politics only as a sustained, formal, or collective effort is to ignore the multiple sites and workings of power in our modern world. What cosmetics, fashion, and the “New Women” can teach us about politics in the twentieth century is that—as we are perhaps beginning to recognize just now—it resides as much in the fluid nature of appearances as in the substance of ideas, as much on the street as in the legislative chamber, and as much in the media as in the campaign speech.

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