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H-France Review Vol. 11 (July 2011), No. 162

Rebecca J. Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Xiv + 260 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-107-00135-0.

Review by Kenneth Mouré, University of Alberta.

In Georges Perec's 1965 novel *Les choses*, a young couple who work as part-time market researchers dream of what they will be able to buy, impatient to consume: "In the world that was theirs it was almost a regulation always to wish for more than you could have."<sup>[1]</sup> Such a world, for young adults from working-class background, had only just arrived with the surge in economic output, per capita income, and the commercialization of mass-produced consumer goods since 1945. In *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France*, Rebecca Pulju provides a multi-layered analysis of the development of consumerism in France from 1945 into the 1960s with careful attention to the commercial, gender, and class dimensions of this major shift in French consumption. Pulju focuses on women and domestic consumption as key elements in France's passage from a regime of limited, class-based consumption to a consumer society in which individuals like Perec's Sylvie and Jérôme imagine their lives according to what they want to buy.

The transitional nature of the postwar era was first assessed in the classic collection of essays by Stanley Hoffmann and company *In Search of France* in 1962,<sup>[2]</sup> and explored at greater distance as the path and scale of change became clearer in landmark volumes by scholars such as Henri Mendras, Jean Fourastié, Richard Kuisel, and James Adams.<sup>[3]</sup> Rebecca Pulju joins a newer generation of scholarship attentive to the cultural dimensions of change in the first decades after the Second World War.<sup>[4]</sup> Pulju looks at the role of domestic consumption and women as consumers. Vichy's conservative and technocratic programs for national renovation had produced severe material want, social regression, and an accelerated decline in French economic power (under conditions of war and German Occupation).

She begins with the conditions of material deprivation at the end of the war and the role for women as "consumer citizens" in the period of reconstruction. During the war, women's street demonstrations had been a highly visible form of challenge to the state and consumer advocacy demanding more food and clothing for their families. Pulju shows how these demonstrations evolved from public protests demanding adequate food supplies at affordable prices to advocacy of new forms of household consumption. Most striking among such groups, the Communist-backed *Union des femmes françaises*, the major organizer of food demonstrations, became an advocate for an increased birth rate with improved health, welfare, and homes for mothers and families. Groups created by and for women urged them to exercise their right to vote and play active roles, helping the national economic recovery by responsible purchasing and increased productivity in the home. As well as the UFF, these groups included the Catholic *Mouvement populaire des familles*, the *Union fédérale de la consommation*, and the *Union féminine civique et sociale*. They all sought to mobilize, educate, and advocate for women as mothers and consumers.

The *trente glorieuses* of French economic growth from 1945 to 1975 were glorious statistically, but climbing out of the deep trough of wartime contraction after economic stagnation in the 1930s meant that ordinary consumers saw little glory in consumer choice until the 1950s. When the *Salon des Arts*

*Ménagers* reopened in 1948, an annual exposition for household appliances and furnishings, most of the goods on display were not just unaffordable, but unavailable, with waiting lists for appliances stretching from six months to two years (p. 184). In the postwar “Battle for Production,” women were enlisted as citizen consumers, told to purchase wisely in order to guide economic renewal, to improve productivity in their own homes, and to monitor prices against the persistent threat of inflation. “The most important French industry, in terms of quantity of work expended, is the industry of housework,” the journal *Productivité française* proclaimed in 1952 (pp. 69-70). But as Pulju observes, the mobilization of women and the condescension in education programs and contests for wise consumption and household management provided women with neither an influential voice nor a durable role. The shortage of housing was a major constraint on the quality of domestic life, and liberation by the purchase of home appliances made good advertising without significantly altering or increasing opportunities for women. But this era of productivity drives marked a phase of unusual cooperation and collaboration between industry, state officials, and women as newly-enfranchised citizen consumers, with great attention to the need to increase domestic consumption.

Pulju’s study is original in its focus on the home as a site for modernization, with emphasis on the promotion of domestic appliances, education about domestic management, and a reconfiguring of marriage and family life to be structured by domestic consumption. She pays close attention to the way family needs were defined in the 1950s in relation to the state support for families, social scientists’ prescriptions for the modern family, and social status as displayed through consumption. The development of mass consumption required major changes to traditional attitudes about savings, credit, purchasing, and the status of goods. Opposition to borrowing money and class-based opposition to wage dependency (the PCF feared that consumer debt would make workers more conservative, preferring to work to meet payments rather than strike) made arguments for the importance of using credit a difficult task. There were efforts to differentiate wise consumption using credit from frivolous overconsumption; the wise use of credit was “the modern form of saving” according to *Marie-France* in advocating its use to purchase “useful and durable equipment” for the home (p. 82). Conceptions of marriage and the family were reconfigured to emphasize privacy, intimacy, and comfort within modern homes. The purchase of appliances and modern home furnishings penetrated rural areas where the change from reluctance to enthusiasm for consumer durables marked a much greater disjuncture in attitudes and in lifestyles.

Pulju’s analysis is guided by several key authors for the evolution of twentieth-century consumer regimes and the concept of the “consumer citizen”<sup>[5]</sup> and how changes to consumption patterns linked to reconfigurations of class and its defining characteristics.<sup>[6]</sup> Unlike the 1930s, when bourgeois consumers scorned mass-produced goods and working-class consumers could not afford them,<sup>[7]</sup> the 1950s brought a convergence of state-promoted modernization, rising increasing productivity and incomes, and strong desire to increase consumption. The United States was the model for this new consumer society, a model both tempting and challenging, as its material abundance was compromised by values that threatened traditional beliefs in taste and individuality. Pulju draws on contemporary press, women’s magazines, consumption surveys, and commentaries from a wide range of sociologists, economists and cultural critics to give a complex and nuanced account of the transition to mass consumption. Her case for the significance of domestic consumption in French economic modernization might have been strengthened by more attention to when and how domestic consumption contributed to overall growth and how demand for domestic goods affected employment patterns in this period of exceptional growth.

In a short epilogue Pulju summarizes how the needs that unified the postwar “market community” were satisfied and the extraordinary coordination of effort to promote productivity and mass consumption fractured in the 1960s and 1970s. Her focus on the home as the critical center for the development of mass consumption allows emphasis on social change, particularly the nature of the family and the role of women in stressing the quality of material life at home, and her book provides a new perspective that is innovative, engaging, and enlightening.

## NOTES

[1] Georges Perec, *Things: A Story of the Sixties*, translated by David Bellos (Boston, Mass.: David R. Godine, 1990), p. 49.

[2] Stanley Hoffmann et al., *In Search of France: The Economy, Society, and Political System in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963).

[3] Henri Mendras, *The Vanishing Peasant: Innovation and Change in French Agriculture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970); Jean Fourastié, *Les trente glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible* (Paris: Fayard, 1979); Richard F. Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and William James Adams, *Restructuring the French Economy: Government and the Rise of Market Competition since World War II* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1989).

[4] Works such as Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization in the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995); Susan Weiner, *Enfants Terribles: Youth and Femininity in the Mass Media in France, 1945-1968* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); and Rosemary Wakeman, *The Heroic City: Paris 1945-1958* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[5] Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); and Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[6] Luc Boltanski, *The Making of a Class: Cadres in French Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[7] Robert L. Frost, "Machine Liberation: Inventing Housewives and Home Appliances in Interwar France," *French Historical Studies* 18 (1993): 109-130.

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