

# H-Net Reviews

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Monica Neve. *Sold! Advertising and the Bourgeois Female Consumer in Munich, 1900-1914*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010. 224 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-515-09343-9.

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## Gender and Consumer Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Munich

The emergence of shopping as a nineteenth-century cultural phenomenon connected to the rise of the middle class and urbanization continues to fascinate scholars long after the publication of Michael Miller's seminal account of *The Bon Marché* over thirty years ago.[1] Since this time, understandings of the department store as a harbinger of modern business practices, a site of leisure, an extension of the modern city, and an architectural innovator have become more nuanced. Of particular interest for historians of gender is the way in which a reorientation of the public sphere, away from politics to commerce, affected assumptions about and relations between the sexes at the turn of the twentieth century.

Monica Neve makes several important contributions to this body of literature by broadening the analytical and methodological lens through which scholars study consumer culture. Utilizing nontraditional sources, such as trade journals and in-house magazines, Neve analyzes the role advertising played in the construction of the modern female consumer. How an ideology of consumption replaced an ideology of confinement, to paraphrase Ruth E. Iskin in a recent work on French advertising, drives this study of Bavarian retailers and the marketing strategies they used to encourage a socially diverse clientele to shop.[2] Complementing earlier studies by Victoria de Grazia, Erika Rappaport, Lisa Tiersten, and others, Neve sheds light on the formation of class and gender identities through consumption. Yet more importantly, she demonstrates the way in which advertising served as a linchpin for "the emotional and material world," cre-

ating, shaping, and mediating one's wants and desires through the representation and acquisition of consumer goods (p. 214).

Her selection of Munich within the defined chronological period 1900-14, is significant for several reasons. Prior to 1900, Munich experienced a rapid growth spurt which necessitated an extensive redesign of the city along the lines of Haussmannization. The construction of new thoroughfares and industrial exhibitions transformed the Bavarian capital into a dynamic metropolis where tensions related to dramatic social and economic change ran high. While a robust inventory of historical narratives addressing women and shopping in Paris, London, and Berlin dominate the historiography on consumer culture, *Sold!* shifts the spotlight to one of Europe's regional centers as a point of contrast and an extension of current scholarship.

The book itself is methodically laid out into six chapters which treat the history and theory of consumer culture before delving into an examination of the source material. The first group of documents examined includes German advertising manuals and trade journals that instructed retailers on how best to market their products. A case study of four Munich firms, two department stores and two apparel outfitters, constitutes the bulk of research in the fifth and longest chapter of the book. With an aim to "identify a continuity or pattern in the representation and construction of the female consumer in advertising and trade journals, and secondly, to follow the

practical application of advertising strategies," Neve relies upon discourse analysis and post-structuralist thinking to assess the meaning and significance of recurring parts of speech and visual motifs (p. 27).

Through the production of certain "fictions" about the ideal female consumer, Neve contends that department stores and small retailers interpreted the needs, desires, and changing lifestyles of the modern woman (p. 210). "Advertising directed towards women not only promoted a specific product, but also sold a particular type of femininity. The concept of femininity with relation to consumption moved along two primary tangents—pleasurable femininity and responsible femininity" (p. 207). Glove manufacturer Roeckl unabashedly catered to what Neve calls the "elegant consumer" whose passion for fashion and social distinction was visually communicated within placards that romanticized "the lady of leisure." In contrast, coat manufacturer Loden-Frey addressed the "outdoor woman," another female consumer type who was motivated by an entirely different set of concerns tied to the family's health and well-being. Rooted firmly in modernity and influenced by the life reform movement, the ideal Loden-Frey customer embraced more masculine virtues of physicality, frugality, and practicality. Although the extent to which an ad privileged text over the visual, used gender-specific adjectives, or exaggerated the desired effect a purchase may have had varied, retailers conveyed social expectations that were within the boundaries of acceptable bourgeois femininity.

One of the most interesting sections of the book addresses two of Munich's earliest and largest department stores, Warenhaus Hermann Tietz and Kaufhaus Oberpollinger, and their choice of advertising. In addition to full- and half-page ads that included product lists, department stores created in-house magazines as a new genre of reading material for the bourgeois housewife. Sent directly to the home, these magazines sought to legitimize a woman's "right to shop," asserting that her "authority as a consumer stemmed from her product knowledge and sense of taste" (p. 190). Through a combination of articles and advice columns on how to make a purchase based on style and budget, department stores visually bombarded their largely female clientele with images that promoted health and happiness and offered instruction on appropriate consumer behavior. Though the messages oftentimes seemed contradictory—encouraging women to purchase for the display of a family's wealth while promoting a sense of personal style—they collectively shared the basic assumption that all women were

irrational. Female consumers needed to be told what they liked and how they, their families, and homes should look if these commercial enterprises were to succeed. More than wistful fantasies of the ideal female consumer, these images functioned as a powerful semiotic force that actively shaped how women thought and behaved as individuals and consumers in the marketplace.

Theoretically informed by Judith Butler's notion of "doing gender," Neve acknowledges that there were many tropes of the male and female consumer circulating at the time, but that such tropes had to have some kind of appeal, either aesthetically or emotionally, in order to incite the consumer to act a certain way. Paradoxically, retailers' education of the perceived irrational female consumer created a space where women felt empowered by their newly acquired knowledge. The refusal to purchase a particular product was, Neve argues, a means by which the individual could redefine "the cultural category to which he or she belongs" (p. 143). In other words, the fictions that retailers perpetuated about the ideal female consumer were only as good as the degree to which women "bought into" them. The adoption of a particular stereotype depended on whether one internalized and performed it on a daily basis; only then did the stereotype lose its fictitious status and become an assumed and natural part of one's being. "Once rooted in the viewer's subconscious, the image of the female consumer is one that is accepted without question and the separation of the activity of shopping from the gender 'female' is almost impossible" (p. 91). Neve's attribution of agency to the text and to the targeted audience offers a dynamic account of advertising's role in the creation of socially constructed gender norms and convincingly argues for a more multivalent reading of material culture.

Color, as well as black-and-white, illustrations strengthen the author's argument about the psychologization of marketing tactics and the appeal that illustrated ads and product lists held for women on multiple levels. Moreover, Neve's expansive definition of consumer culture as that which "entails not only the consumption of particular products, but also a series of signs," complicates traditional top-down or individualist explanatory models of social emulation and hedonistic consumption put forward by Thorstein Veblen, Max Weber, and other social theorists (p. 130). By presenting consumer culture as a site of negotiation where individual wants and needs converge with societal values, Neve allows for a confluence of factors to inform her reading of the diverse marketing techniques at play in Munich a decade before the Great War.

*Sold!* successfully accomplishes its goal as a think piece about how early retailers at the end of the Kaiserreich developed a common group of gendered strategies that molded and naturalized women as shoppers. In trade journals, as well as advertisements, retail analysts and business owners deftly navigated and reconciled competing notions of femininity in their presentations of female consumption “as an act of discretion and economy,” familial duty, and personal pleasure (p. 215). Neve thoughtfully reframes earlier discussions of gender and consumer culture in an understudied regional context and demonstrates the value of using an interdisciplinary, sociocultural approach to explore the ideational and external aspects of twentieth-century consumerism.

*Sold!* should be a required reading for students and scholars in the fields of gender and cultural studies, history, and marketing. Its impressive handling of source material, application of theory to archival evidence, and attention to visual and textual detail is exemplary. Equally instructive is the organization of content and editorial formatting. The numbering system used to denote chapters and chapter subheadings cre-

ates more confusion than it aids in comprehension. This rigid accounting of information tends to compartmentalize the material, resulting in an unevenly balanced discussion. A more thematic framework would complement the book’s theoretical underpinning to eschew simplistic categorizations in favor of a more relational approach. Stylistic concerns aside, this text is a meticulously researched and welcome study that takes early twentieth-century German cultural history in a new and exciting direction.

#### Notes

[1]. Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[2]. Ruth E. Iskin, “The *Flâneuse* in French Fin-de-Siècle Posters: Advertising Images of Modern Women in Paris,” in *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, ed. Aruna D’Souza and Tom McDonough (Manchester University Press, 2006), 113-128.

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