One indication of the maturity of a relatively new but rapidly growing field of scholarly inquiry is the number and sophistication of attempts to outline overarching narratives based on both theoretical concerns and empirical findings. *Der lange Weg in den Überfluss* represents one such measuring stick. Like many attempts during the last two decades to define and examine the most salient aspects of the genesis and development of “modern consumer society,” the volume offers provocative arguments and fascinating empirical material while revealing the limitations and pitfalls of certain assumptions, perspectives, and agendas.

Containing twenty-four contributions from twenty-three authors in nearly six hundred pages, the edited volume encompasses an unusually long timeframe, from the Middle Ages to the present, and is divided into five sections. The first three reflect the volume’s periodization of its subject: “Premodern Consumption: Secular and Religious Regulation,” “The Era of the Consumer Revolution: New Impulses and Needs,” and “Modernity: Progress and Ambivalences.” The fourth section, “Consumption and Environment,” consists of a single chapter by Martin Fiedler on industrialized whaling in the Antarctic and its ecological consequences. The fifth section groups three disparate chapters under the title “Theoretical Problems and Interpretative Outlines.” The book’s geographical scope is also broad but focuses on Germany and western Europe: international comparisons and general and theoretical overviews are balanced by regional and local case studies. The latter concentrate on Westphalia and northwest Germany, reflecting the volume’s origins at the Westfälisches Institut fÃ¼r Regionalgeschichte (WIR) in Münster.

Considering the overwhelming number and variety of approaches to the history of consumption, the book presents a remarkably consistent overall narrative, perhaps in large part because most of its contributors seem to generally accept the definitions and periodizations of “consumption” and “consumer society” outlined by its editor. Students of the history of consumption will be familiar with most of the ground covered by Prinz as well as the previously published findings of some of the chapters, but those new to the field will benefit from Prinz’s concise and competent, if necessarily selective, overview of many of the major themes and issues of the literature. The six chapters of the first section examine various factors that “fettered” consumption before the mid-eighteenth century, including limited agricultural productivity and trade, restricted purchasing power, social hierarchies and regulations, and religious and moral strictures. This section includes essays by Allen Grieco on food and social hierarchies, Neithard Bulst on the shift from bans on luxury to luxury taxes, Rainer Driever on festivals, Andreas Holzem on religious aspects of consumption in village communities in the bishopric of Münster, Marcus Weidner on the bishopric of Münster’s nobility, and Thomas Spohn on material culture in the Westphalian town of Unna.

The five chapters of the second section build on the argument advanced more than two decades ago by Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb that a “consumer revolution” in eighteenth-century England was the critical moment in the genesis of modern consumer society. This revolution was marked by radical transformations in the economy, society, and attitudes toward consumption, which gradually spread over western Europe and the United States and then at least parts of the rest of the world. In addition to Prinz’s assessment of the last two decades of literature on the topic, the section includes chapters by Margit Szendi-Jenze on the his-
historical shift in the conceptualization of needs reflected in the terms Notdurft and Bedürfnis, Manuel Frey on the moral economy of hygiene and consumption, Daniel Purdy on fashion journals, and Michael Huhn on regional price policies.

The process and results of the “freeing” of consumption during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are examined in the volume’s third section, which is divided into two subsections of four chapters each (“Unfettering and Autonomy” and “Contradiction and Formative Outlines”). The first subsection consists of articles by AndrÁ© Steiner on the shift from self-made to commercialized clothing, Karl-Peter Ellerbrock on the beginnings of industrialized food production in Prussia, Stefan Haas on advertising, and Karl Ditt on service. The second subsection includes chapters by Bernd Holtwick on artisans, Rita Guermann on autarky, Stefan Goch on milieus, and Brett Fairbairn on consumer cooperatives. The book’s fifth section contains chapters by Hannes Siegrist on the “regionalization” of consumption, Christian Eisenberg on sport as a topic in the history of consumption, and Sheryl Kroen on the concept of the consumer citizen.

As with most large edited volumes, the quality of different chapters is as varied as their content and methodologies. While some essays offer masterful international comparisons and thought-provoking theoretical insights, others seem banal or fail to connect the plethora of microscopic details to any larger themes or arguments. Prinz nevertheless does an admirable job of highlighting and bringing together the chapters’ commonalities. The shared underlying narrative of many of the contributions is reflected in the volume’s title, which suggests a single long and tortuous but nevertheless inexorable and teleological “path” to the “superabundance” of today’s most industrialized (western) countries. But the consumer society at the end of this path is problematic for several reasons. First, Prinz and several of the volume’s contributors propose largely normative (and at least implicitly moral) definitions of consumption and consumer society. Although the chapters by Bulst and Szilágyi-Janze demonstrate that notions of “needs” are historically contingent, most of the authors who define “modern consumer society” identify the ability of large parts of the population to consume above and beyond “basic needs” as one of its essential characteristics. Second, Prinz hopes that this book will help to demonstrate that the investigation of the origins and development of consumer society is a worthy and productive part of Gesellschaftsgeschichte (history of society) and of the history of modernity. But the normative and teleological definitions of the consumer society proposed by Prinz and several of the volume’s other contributors cannot help us understand other types of modern consumer regimes that did not exhibit the proposed characteristics, including “superabundance.” For example, recent scholarship has explored how state socialist societies developed their own distinctive consumer cultures that must be considered just as “modern” as the capitalist ones against which they defined themselves. The volume’s definitions also cannot help us to investigate the important differences among many western European countries and the United States as well as the question of if and when they became “postindustrial” or “postmodern” consumer societies, a topic that only one contributor, Stefan Haas, briefly touches on.

In addition to providing much food for thought about attempts to define the origins, periodization, and perhaps even end-point of “modern consumer society,” the volume reflects many of the differences and disconnections between German and Anglo-American scholarship on the topic, even as Prinz hopes that the volume will help to bridge the gap. The differences, as Prinz notes, are partly the result of the Anglo-American “head start” in the field (p. 12). But that does not explain the prevalence of out-of-date references to English-language literature in the contributions of many of the volume’s nineteen German authors. The disparity is also a matter of approach and choice of topics. The volume by and large does not depart from the usual emphasis among German scholars on impersonal, structural factors and on consumption as an economic function rather than a social and cultural phenomenon. It is perhaps more than a linguistic coincidence that the German term for “consumer society” (Konsumgesellschaft) translates literally as “consumption society.” Like the majority of German scholarship on the topic, this volume contains virtually no examinations of the practices, attitudes, and imaginations of individual consumers, perspectives that are perhaps too dominant in Anglo-American scholarship. Gender, an extremely popular if not essential analytical category in most scholarship on consumption in the English-speaking world, is also almost entirely missing from this volume—a particularly curious circumstance given that the volume, according to Prinz, partly stems from a conference entitled “Consumption and Gender” organized by Gisela Bock at the Zentrum für Vergleichende Geschichte Europas in Berlin.

Der lange Weg in den Überfluss certainly deserves a place alongside other recent significant attempts to take
stock of the overwhelming volume and variety of more than two decades of scholarship on consumption and consumer societies. In addition to providing a wealth of fascinating empirical material, the book can help to foster debate about a master narrative of modern consumer society—not only about its potential outlines but also about its very desirability or legitimacy. It is unfortunate that language barriers will prevent this book from finding a wide audience among Anglo-American historians who do not specialize in Germany, for it could encourage a much-needed growth in comparative and transnational perspectives as well as the cross-fertilization of approaches and methodologies. Historians in all fields should take this volume as yet another challenge to not simply add consumption to established narratives of modernity—and perhaps also premodernity—but rather to radically revise and complicate those narratives as a result of more than two decades of scholarship and new perspectives.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10669

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.