Toys, Consumption, and Middle-class Childhood in Imperial Germany, 1871–1918
Introduction

Consumer culture is topical these days. Academics from disciplines as diverse as economics, sociology, advertising, literature and psychology continue to publish books analyzing how consumption impacts our society and shapes the way we understand ourselves. The prognosis, especially as it relates to children, is often grim. Juliet Schor warned that the growing commercialization of our society is undermining the well-being of children as marketers displace parents and dictate what constitutes a normal childhood. Leo Bogart, one of the leading public intellectuals in the United States, argued that advertising aimed at youth threatens to destroy the more civilized aspects of American culture in a sea of pointless crudity that precludes the formation of critical intellects. Literary critic Rachel Bowlby demonstrated that in both the United Kingdom and the United States children learn that the consumer is the ultimate modern citizen. The message is you cannot be patriotic if you do not rack up credit card debt around Christmas and you have not lived if you have not shopped. These interpretations suggest consumer culture has reached crisis proportions and threatens to fatally damage Western Civilization.¹ On the one hand their work shows academics at their best, utilizing their specialized knowledge to engage with issues of broad interest to our democratic society by highlighting real problems. On the other hand, however, these issues and fears are not new. Scholars who have looked back through the 20th century such as historian John Gillis and advertising expert Daniel Cook have shown that it is more accurate to state that consumption has

allowed adults to remake the meaning of childhood. A consumer culture that you and I would recognize has existed in North America and Europe for at least 100 years. If we want to understand what is happening in our own society, it is sometimes advantageous to return to a bygone exemplar. Not only is this politically simpler, but we have the advantage of knowing how changes worked themselves out. This book tries to answer questions about how consumer culture impacts the ways adults and children make sense of the world by taking a close look at toys in Imperial Germany from 1890 to 1918.

After World War II and the Holocaust it is understandable that we forget Germany was the original home of modern toys and the marketing of youth culture. Contemporaries accepted this as given. At the Columbian World Exhibition in 1893 an American reporter wrote, “Is it not wonderful that Germany should be the land of toys, and that the world should go to her for [them].” His comments on the German exhibit in Chicago reflected a view held by many in the West at the end of the nineteenth century. If one wanted modern, culturally sophisticated toys, one looked to the Kaiserreich. Sales figures confirmed the dominance of producers based in Germany. By 1900, companies located in the German Empire controlled 60% of the world market. This astonishing figure paled against their domination (95%) of domestic consumption. In 1890, Germany exported 27.8 million Marks of toys and 40 million Marks five years later. By 1901 this figure reached 33 million Marks, in 1906 70.5 million Marks, and in 1911 90.1 million Marks. On the eve of World War I, the Reich accounted for 125 million out of 230 million Marks of world toy production. Firms based in Germany held strangleholds over markets in Europe, North and South America, Asia and Australia. Great Britain and the United States represented by far the largest export region, accounting for 60 million


Marks (larger than domestic sales). France, Argentina, Russia and Japan provided another 10 million Marks of total revenue. Middle-class people in these regions bought German as opposed to British or French toys at an unprecedented rate from the 1890s onward.

With this impressive entrepreneurial dominance as a backdrop, I argue that consumer culture, specifically toys, enabled ordinary Germans to define their identity in relation to the nation, gender, class and technology far earlier than is generally imagined. Most scholars have assumed that Germany did not develop a consumer culture until after World War I. I define consumption as a process of personal self-fashioning revolving around shopping for standardized items. Since such a culture existed in Germany after 1890, this means that German concepts of nurturing, middle-class childhood developed in a distinctively consumer space. Buying toys allowed adults to fashion themselves as modern consumers committed to a progressive, unified vision of the nation-state as the logical form of political organization for all Westerners. It is also my opinion that recognizing Germany possessed a developed culture of consumption changes the way we make sense of the Imperial Period. It is not uncommon for historians


6 Victoria de Grazia defines consumer culture as “a society-wide structure of meaning and feeling organized primarily around the act of purchase.” See The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 7. I also find this to be an excellent definition but it is very broad. I want to emphasize the power of individuals to define themselves within certain broad limits provided by the market. While this definition is more limited I hope that it is also more precise.
of Germany to look at the late 19th century as a time when intellectuals and middle-class elites withdrew from the public sphere into the politics of cultural despair. According to this interpretation, they (and their compatriots in other parts of Europe) gave up the political playing field to extremists on the left and right. An examination of debates surrounding toys, consumption and childhood poses serious challenges to this interpretation. This was a project parents, artists, industrialists and intellectuals took very seriously, and it played out in industry periodicals, the daily press, specialty magazines, and in every middle-class home at Christmas and on birthdays. It was a public display. Nearly everyone agreed that girls needed to do feminine activities such as caring for dolls. Boys built erector sets or played with toy trains, developing technical proclivities. Most adults wanted to teach children about the superiority of middle-class lifestyles, but no consensus on how to do this emerged. Male producers wanted to present girls with life-like dolls, while female artists argued for more generic figurines possessing fewer feminine characteristics. Most entrepreneurs and parents trumpeted technology as the solution to the Reich’s many

problems. On the other side pedagogues rejected such a view of Bildung and demanded that mothers and fathers buy children handcrafted wooden toys that would connect youngsters to a more humanistic cultivation of the intellect. Toys form a site around which we can explore how these contentious political debates played out in everyday, middle-class spaces. Diaries from the period contain loving accounts of childhood memories centered on miniatures. Such reminiscences suggested Germany represented a particularly hopeful modern society with new possibilities. As much as anyone in Europe, Germans seemed to be engaged in fashioning a modern, middle-class utopia that promised to iron out all the troubling class and gender problems that pervaded fin-de-siècle society. While we may not be happy with the outcome, it is wrong to suggest that ordinary Germans did not publicly fight over the nature of their identity.

A brief look at images of a toy store and a playroom (Kinderstube) gives us insight into the stakes adults invested in miniatures, consumption, and childhood and the possibilities these offer modern researchers. Cartoonist and satirist Heinrich Zille produced a color print entitled In Front of the Christmas Shop at the beginning of the Weimar period. An impossibly bright picture window contained an array of toys including Zeppelins, dolls, drums, and toy soldiers, all arranged around a shiny Star of David. Outside in the cold, wet Berlin weather, nearly a dozen poor children pressed their faces against the shiny glass, trying to reach the wonders on the other side of the pane. They are clearly part of the great unwashed, the working classes that haunted the dreams of all middle-class citizens. Something remarkable has happened to these members of the Pöbel (dirty, unruly poor), however. The power of German toys metaphorically pulled them towards the values of middle-class life. Despite all the calls for a socialist revolution in 1919, these children wanted the commodities that symbolized entrance into polite society, even the toddlers so young they could not stand without help. To many middle-class reformers, this suggested that the Proletariat could be assimilated into mainstream culture.

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via commodities, much the same way that the Jewish owner of the shop has become the bearer of progressive middle-class values about the nation via toys. Commodities like miniatures held out the promise of remaking German identities in a nurturing and unifying fashion. Nonetheless Zille, an inveterate critic of capitalist society, illuminated the complex and contradictory nature of modern consumer cultures. Everyone wants to participate in them, but they seem to require the exclusion of part of society to function. In Imperial Germany, working class children like the ones in the cartoon worked eight hours a day making many of the wonderful toys in the shops, with little hope of ever playing with them.9

That is why the poor children outside the shop still present an unruly picture. There clothes are old and mis-matched. The one boy we can clearly see is not wearing a sailor uniform, the store-bought symbolization of loyalty to the idea and nation of Germany that dominated visual representations of male youth. Nonetheless, pedagogues insisted such children could be saved, but first they had to be symbolically moved from the outside to the inside of the shop window. Intellectuals maintained that socially constructive play could only take place in the privacy of a specially furnished playroom, not the public space of the street.10 There it could be regulated, controlled and directed in a nurturing fashion by loving mothers, caring builders of good citizens. The journal Kind und Kunst, conceived by members of the childhood reform movement as a means to disseminate artistic precepts, regularly contained photographic examples of ideal Kinderstuben. They were bright, orderly, airy rooms with high ceilings and white walls filled with things parents had to buy. Mostly these spaces consisted of Heimat (folk) motifs, numerous toys and functional furniture. One was as big as a living room; it included a table and chairs for doll tea parties, a doll kitchen, a rocking horse, a 1.5 meter Spielecke (play corner) that functioned as a dollhouse for the children (not the dolls), and numerous other

Introduction

The study of toys makes several important contributions to our understanding of German history. Although I claim that consumption was a primary means of self-fashioning for Germans in the late 19th century, this is not the position taken by most historians. Until very recently, Frankfurt School theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s critique of mass culture as merely an instrument of totalitarianism has dominated German historiography on consumption relating to this period. Walter Benjamin, peripherally connected to the Frankfurt School, is famous for arguing that the industrial production of goods removed the “aura” from unique things.

and turned them into commodities capable of manipulation by rulers, devoid of higher social value. The widespread acceptance of their views meant that until recently German historians generally disdained consumer culture as a field of study. Academics focusing on Central Europe can turn to Anglo-American scholars who have been more willing to engage with consumption as a model for political activity. Nonetheless, many famous studies also privilege the idea that elites manipulate the rest of the population. At the other extreme, some scholars posit consumption as an alternative model to industrialization, socialism or imperialism explaining the development of the modern world. This also seems too


all-encompassing; it is more likely that practices of consumption provided a framework within which citizens could debate the shape of their society by buying things. The key for us is to come up with a balanced conceptualization that grapples with the often ambivalent discourses emerging out of consumer culture. We need a theory that neither idealizes nor rejects consumption as a process of self-fashioning.

Recently, some scholars of Germany rediscovered another and more perceptive conceptualization of consumer culture from an overlooked colleague of Horkheimer and Adorno, Siegfried Krakauer. He agreed authoritarians could use practices of consumption to control the polity, but “the mass ornament is [also] ambivalent ... On the one hand its rationality reduces the natural in a manner that does not allow man to wither away, but that, on the contrary, were it only carried through to the end, would reveal man’s most essential element in all its purity.” Krakauer’s problem with consumer culture and capitalism in Weimar was that “it rationalizes not too much but rather too little.” The more people could participate in capitalism through consumption, he reasoned, the more receptive the system could become to new voices.

At any rate, he posited that in an advanced consumer culture ordinary individuals gained the possibility to self-fashion themselves. This model, as a problematic practice that nonetheless gives voice to individuals who otherwise are marginal to the political process, provides a better framework for understanding consumption in modern Germany. As we will see, practices of consumption enabled citizens, especially women, to participate in politics in ways that might otherwise

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have been impossible during times of crisis.\textsuperscript{18} For example, Belinda Davis has convincingly shown that Berlin housewives influenced government policy through buying food in World War I. Despite women not having the vote, Germany’s military dictatorship kept a nervous eye on Berlin kitchens and constantly switched policies in an attempt to head off discontent. Davis showed that the October revolution owed as much to these women as other groups. The new Weimar government wisely acknowledged the lessons of famine by giving women the vote and doing everything they could to make sure enough food got to the cities once the blockade ended. Davis argued “these efforts are testimony to the kind of societal power that consumers of little means—women in particular—won under the social, economic, and political conditions of the war.”\textsuperscript{19} I take this point further and argue

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\textsuperscript{18} Remarkably similar arguments have been made by scholars looking at post-1945 Germany. After WWII, Maria Höhn found that Germans in the Saarland consciously saw their engagement with democracy as mediated through encounters with American soldiers and consumer culture after 1950. Although interactions with US soldiers could be rocky on occasion, the German women who fraternized with these white and black men fought for their democratic right to consume lipstick, beer, clothes and domestic appliances in a society that still valued them as purely thrifty housewives. Many conservative politicians in Germany after 1949 wanted to rebuild a democratic society using these mothers as the foundation. German feminists took advantage of this situation to make a call for equal rights but also for a separate, female sphere of consumption that would be off-limits to men. They became guardians of consumption and demanded “free consumer choice” as an “inalienable freedom of humanity.” See Maria Höhn, \textit{GIs and Fräuleins: The German-American Encounter in 1950s West Germany}, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Covering the same period, Robert Moeller convincingly showed that Germans after 1945 used the media to talk a great deal about concentration camps, bombings and destruction but with themselves as the victims. Consumer culture permitted the individual and collective self-fashioning of a usable past that played an important role in people’s psyches as they rebuilt their country. See Robert G. Moeller, \textit{War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany}, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 1–20, 123–170.
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that consumers do not require a crisis such as military conflict. They were able to profoundly influence societal values, for good or ill, during stable periods of Wilhelmine Germany.

However, one of the most impressive attempts to show that consumption allowed personal self-fashioning in Germany only begins in 1919. In a path-breaking book on twentieth-century German history co-authored with Konrad Jarausch, Michael Geyer wrote, “mass consumption is increasingly presented as the destiny of German history, its refuge and redemption. The emergence of a consumer-oriented society is becoming the narrative of the age.” By no means is Geyer out to idealize consumer culture or smooth out its extremes, but he does think it created a space to negotiate political identities. Writing about post-war West Germany he argues that its citizens increasingly came to define themselves through “a common culture of commodities.” For a society in search of a usable past, buying things provided a welcome and flexible means of self-fashioning oneself as a good, democratic citizen of a nation-state anchored firmly in NATO. When Germans bought refrigerators, radios, cars and washing machines they did not conceptualize this as conspicuous consumption à la Thorstein Veblen but as the just rewards of years of hard work. Geyer also suggests the Federal Republic could be studied using gender, post-colonial and trans-national methodologies that rely heavily on consumer models. Indeed, practices of consumption may be akin to Jürgen Habermas’ notion of the public sphere. Members of a society meet to talk about and argue over issues of major political and cultural import via buying and displaying things. Unfortunately, Geyer does not push his analysis further back than

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Weimar, and leaves readers with the impression that something changed fundamentally only after 1919. As this book will show, this is not correct. Citizens of Wilhelmine Germany learned to define themselves through a culture of commodities in the same ways as residents of the Federal Republic as early as 1890.

For example, recent research shows that consumer culture enabled Germans to fashion gender and class identities for themselves independently of the state after 1945, but scholars have also been slow to see if this insight applies to earlier periods as well. Uta Poiger noted that teenagers in East and West Germany listening to Jazz or rock music made ideological statements whether they wanted to or not. In the Federal Republic the authorities worried about young women crossing gender boundaries and engaging in illegitimate sexuality at clubs, while in the East the Communist Party often associated jazz with black Americans and racial degeneration. Politicians in both countries eventually accepted these changes as permanent, showing that young people’s engagement with consumer culture broadened sexual and class choices over time. Maria Höhn found something similar in West German encounters with American soldiers in the Palatinate between 1950 and 1955. German concerns about female sexuality and race played out against a backdrop of Teutonic women engaging with African-American men at bars run by East European Jewish concentration camp survivors. Painfully aware that Nazi racial and sexual policies had been completely discredited, CDU officials on the right bank of the Rhine attached American discourses regarding miscegenation to their own concerns about illicit working-class, female sexuality to try and control interactions between troops and locals. Unfortunately for the central


government, the population made so much money that local administrators accepted a certain amount of violence and uncontrolled sexuality in order to participate in the economic boom accompanying the Americans. Höhn convincingly shows that this consumer encounter demolished older Nazi notions of thrift and sobriety associated with women and helped redefine them as independent consumers who helped the nation by engaging with Americans and purchasing goods.25 The fourth chapter of this book shows that similar kinds of female self-fashioning took place in Imperial Germany, although scholars of this period have not been as adventurous as Maria Höhn in probing the possibilities.26

Secondly, since my definition of consumer culture is based on shopping for standardized items, this book will also demonstrate that the development of this practice as a pleasurable, national duty is not a product of post-1945 world history. For example, Rosalind Williams argued that the appearance of department stores in Hausmann’s Paris—Walter Benjamin’s architectural markers of the modern condition—profoundly changed shopping practices. Where previously barter had been dominant, now money

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26 Historians of France, on the other hand, have already shown the possibilities of a focus on consumer culture for understanding political choices prior to 1900. Leora Auslander’s path-breaking work on furniture showed that this item could be ideological under widely different political regimes across time. Exploring the relationship between style and taste she demonstrated that ruling elites used “styles” to create public “tastes” that would legitimate their rule. Auslander’s approach demonstrates how commodities create identities and disseminate ideologies and is particularly interesting because she examines production, marketing and consumption as a whole. She concludes by arguing that one learned to see the French nation through commodities like furniture at a young age in much the same way that one was taught “to look French, sound French, write like the French” in school. This is exactly the same way toys also allowed men and women in Imperial Germany to shape gender and class identities independently of governmental desires. I will apply these same insights to Germany in order to arrive at a more balanced view of how people shaped themselves and made sense of the world. Leora Auslander, Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 422. For Russia see Richard Wortman, Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy, Vol. I & II, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, 2000).
always changed hand for commodities with fixed prices. Standardization, quantity and comfort of the shopper in the new palaces of consumption slowly became the norm. Williams refers to the department stores of the late 19th century as a “dream world” where women and men went for the joy of shopping and browsing; one did not have to purchase things to receive pleasure from the experience.\(^{27}\) In the American context, William Leach locates a similar aesthetization of shopping through department stores in the United States to the point that the ability to buy commodities became an essential part of the American dream.\(^{28}\) Rachel Bowlby also dates the invention of modern shopping to the years immediately prior to 1900 and detects the same aesthetization of buying things. One of her shoppers from 1913 “[made] numerous purchases” in Florence before going home in the evening and “undoing these parcels, pouncing, scissors in hand, on the strings, sending the papers flying around on to the carpets, intoxicating myself with the smell of newness on all these finely made things, sometimes kissing them.”\(^{29}\) The prospect of consumption is so all encompassing that the more historical attractions of Florence fade into the background as the protagonist moves from shop to shop. Citizens of Imperial Germany also learned that shopping in department stores was a prerequisite for being modern. The transformation of shopping from a dirty chore into a fun activity first for women and later for men and children was in full swing by 1890. Toys played a major role in this switch. Although German historians have done little to explore the significance of this development, shoppers in the Reich demonstrated their loyalty to the idea of Germany by purchasing miniatures.\(^{30}\)

\(^{27}\) Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

\(^{28}\) Leach, *Land of Desire*.


\(^{30}\) German historians have looked carefully at shopping after 1945. In the case of West Germany, Michael Wildt has shown that the CDU governments of the 1950s and 1960s portrayed buying as a cure for the shortages that had plagued German society since 1915. More importantly, West Germans learned they had to constantly purchase