

## Toward a Canadian Consumer History

Donica Belisle

---

Volume 52, 2003

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt52rn01>

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this article

Belisle, D. (2003). Toward a Canadian Consumer History. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 52, 181–206.

# RESEARCH NOTE / NOTE DE RECHERCHE

## Toward a Canadian Consumer History

Donica Belisle

IN 1992, CYNTHIA WRIGHT noted that “[r]emarkably little Canadian work has been done, whether by labour, social, or feminist historians, to document and to theorize the impact of consumer culture.”<sup>1</sup> Over the past decade, many scholars have altered this situation, and recently several works addressing Canadian consumer history have appeared. Together this scholarship tells historians much about the rise and transformation of consumption in Canada. Perhaps most importantly, we now know that the late 19th century was a formative moment in Canadian consumer history. Some of Canada’s inhabitants became interested in shopping for, purchasing, using, and enjoying commodities during this period. These interests in turn were related to state expansion, industrialization, urbanization, democratization, and immigration.<sup>2</sup> By the 1920s, many workers and farmers joined the urban middle class

<sup>1</sup>Cynthia Wright, “‘Feminine Trifles of Vast Importance’: Writing Gender into the History of Consumption,” in Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women’s History* (Toronto 1992), 230.

<sup>2</sup>David Monod, *Store Wars: Shopkeepers and the Culture of Mass Marketing, 1890-1939* (Toronto 1996), 99-148; Carolyn Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930* (Toronto 1996), 116-43; Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto 1997), 80-118. Also Alice Klein and Wayne Roberts, “Besieged Innocence: The ‘Problem’ and Problems of Working Women — Toronto, 1896-1914,” in Janice Acton, Penny Gold-

as consumers in the capitalist marketplace and, between the 1960s and 1990s, Canadian residents across social and economic spectrums became members of modern consumer society.<sup>3</sup>

The small explosion of interest in the history of Canadian consumption has generated important insights into the material, cultural, and political histories of North America. It also illustrates that a vast potential for more research into Canadian consumption exists. Arguing that a rigorous theorization of the field of Canadian consumer history would now be timely and beneficial, this essay highlights themes emerging in Canadian and international consumer historiography and suggests areas of further inquiry. Its comments are not meant to be definitive, but are rather intended to spark discussion on consumer history's past, present, and future.

Since the formation of commodity-centred capitalism, critical dialogue around consumption has been necessary, but it is our contemporary global political economy that makes such debate pressing. Although they rarely reflect on it, contemporary Canadian workers' consumer interests are helping to sustain economic globalization. Most often, the free market's expansion creates gains for northern consumers, corporations, and governments, and losses for southern producers and governments. Yet, northerners suffer its consequences. As multinationals close

smith, and Bonnie Shepard, eds., *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930* (Toronto 1974), 211-60; Joy L. Santink, *Timothy Eaton and the Rise of His Department Store* (Toronto 1991).

<sup>3</sup>Magda Fahmi, "Counting the Costs of Living: Gender, Citizenship, and a Politics of Prices in 1940s Montreal," *Canadian Historical Review*, 83 (December 2002), 483-504; Julie Guard, "Women Worth Watching: Radical Housewives in Cold War Canada," in Gary Kinsman, Dieter K. Buse, and Mercedes Steedman, eds., *Whose National Security: Canadian State Surveillance and the Creation of Enemies* (Toronto 2000), 73-88; Valerie J. Korinek, *Roughing it in the Suburbs: Reading Chatelaine Magazine in the Fifties and Sixties* (Toronto 2000); Franca Iacovetta, "Recipes for Democracy? Gender, Family, and Making Female Citizens in Cold War Canada," *Canadian Woman Studies*, 20 (Summer 2000), 12-21; Ian MacPherson, "Of Spheres, Perspectives, Cultures, and Stages: The Consumer Co-operative Movement in English-Speaking Canada, 1830-1980," in Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda, eds., *Consumers Against Capitalism? Consumer Cooperation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840-1990* (New York 1999), 331-58; Suzanne Morton, *Ideal Surroundings: Domestic Life in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s* (Toronto 1995), 32-50, 69-72, 123-30, 145-50; Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto 1992), 229-35, 226-339, 386-91; Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto 1999); Joy Parr, "Reinventing Consumption," *Beaver*, 80 (February 2000), 66-73; Joan Sangster, "Consuming Issues: Women on the Left, Political Protest, and the Organization of Homemakers, 1920-1960," in Sharon Anne Cook, Lorna R. McLean, and Kate O'Rourke, eds., *Framing Our Past: Canadian Women's History in the Twentieth Century* (Montréal and Kingston 2001), 240-7; Cynthia Wright, "Rewriting the Modern: Reflections on Race, Nation, and the Death of a Department Store," *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 35 (May 2000), 153-68; Wright, "'Feminine Trifles of Vast Importance.'"

northern factories and relocate to southern export zones; as corporations slash permanent jobs to replace them with “flexible” ones; and as governments around the world relax environmental laws, wage- and salary-earners all over the planet suffer the economic, social, and ecological devastations of the unfettered market.<sup>4</sup>

It is therefore crucial that we begin inquiring into consumption’s past. How have Canadian wage- and salary-earners’ consumer interests evolved? In what ways have 19th- and 20th-century transformations in production and distribution affected material and cultural life? What have notions about standards of living, material progress, and consumer satisfaction meant for wage- and salary-earners? And, what have been the political and cultural ramifications of such meanings? After outlining key concepts in consumer scholarship, this essay discusses topics consumer historians might explore, pinpoints contentious issues that may arise in consumer research, and offers methods consumer historians might employ.

### *Key Concepts*

Although international consumer historians often utilize the terms “consume,” “consumer,” “commodity,” and “fetishism,” they seldom define them.<sup>5</sup> Yet, these terms’ etymologies and uses are key to historical investigations of consumption. Not only do they explain some of consumption’s negative connotations, they also show that consumer culture evolved in tandem with global capitalism. First appearing in print in 1382, “consume” originally referred to fire’s destructive action. From the late 14th century, writers have invoked the verb to describe “evaporation,” “disease,” “wasting,” “devour[ing],” and “decay.” In 1460, writers also began using “consume” to describe the acquisition, use, and destruction of material goods. In the late 17th century, the link between “consume” and objects became explicit, and political economists began to use the word “consumption” to discuss the “utilization of the products of industry.” By the early 20th century, “consume” signified an entire sphere of economic activity: the binary opposite of “produce,” “consume” represented the demand side of free market capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A historical survey of globalization is Philip McMichael, *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA 1999). Labour studies relating to globalization include Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA’s Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labour* (Ithaca and London 1999); Dana Frank, *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (Boston 1999); Kim Moody and Mary McGinn, *Unions and Free Trade: Solidarity vs. Competition* (Detroit 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Two exceptions are Parr, *Domestic Goods*, 4-5; and Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York 1997), 1-4, 73-8.

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2nd ed., 1989, <<http://www.oed.com>> (28 January 2002). Also Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York 1976), 76-8.

The noun “consumer” also acquired its contemporary associations during the rise of the European bourgeoisie. In the 1500s, writers used the word to describe “he who or that which consumes, wastes, squanders, or destroys,” but not until 1745 did “consumer” begin describing anyone “who uses up an article produced.” In the early 20th century, the word “consumer” entered everyday discourse and referred to anyone “who purchases goods or pays for services; a customer, purchaser.” By 1965, the concept of the consumer became so commonplace that English-language writers began to use the term “consumerist” to describe anyone who “is involved in the protection of consumers’ interests; an advocate of consumerism.”<sup>7</sup>

Referring originally to that which is “convenient” and “useful,” writers began using “commodity” in the 1400s to refer to that which demonstrated “material advantages” and “wealth.” In 1460, the first written use of the word “commodity” to describe a “thing produced for use or sale” appeared. By the late 18th century, “commodity” referred primarily to “article[s] of commerce, ... goods, merchandise, wares, [and] produce.” Assuming a prominent place within 18th- and 19th-century political economic tracts, the commodity’s meaning today is tied to the market economy.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note that under capitalism, “commodity” has different significances for different social groups. In the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx states that the commodity has three attributes: it is a product of labour, it embodies exchange-value, and it represents use-value.<sup>9</sup> Marx’s elaboration of the commodity allows insight into why it holds different meanings for different people within market society. It also enables the identification of many of consumption’s complexities under capitalism. While in theory the commodity usually represents exchange-value for distributors and use-value for consumers, in practice these representations often blur. Manufacturers, retailers, and sometimes governments market their products with an eye to the presentation of use-values, and consumers often view exchange-value as a significant component of use-value.

Another concept sometimes associated with Marxist scholarship — “fetishism” — also illuminates consumption’s history. During the 20th century, the term “commodity fetishism” acquired negative connotations among social historians because some Marxists incorrectly applied this phrase to what they viewed as the false consciousness that arises from workers’ consuming activities.<sup>10</sup> Marx, however, did not employ “fetish” to refer to false consciousness; rather, fetishism oc-

<sup>7</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (28 January 2002).

<sup>8</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (28 January 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, Friedrich Engels, ed., Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, trans., in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York 1978), 302-36.

<sup>10</sup> Mica Nava, “Consumerism Reconsidered: Buying and Power,” *Cultural Studies*, 5 (May 1991), 164-5.

curred when people assumed that commodities' worth, or exchange-value, somehow springs from commodities themselves. Yet the origins of exchange-value are, first, those people who brought the commodity into being, or the producers; and second, the people who assign a use-value to a commodity, or the consumers. Fetishization, for Marx, occurs when people overlook value's social origins.<sup>11</sup>

Some recent feminist scholars have revised Marx's understanding of fetishism by blending it with Freudian fetish theory. Anne McClintock argues that Marx's and Freud's theories of fetishism are centred on a displacement of value: in Marx, the displaced value is labour-power and social utility; in Freud, the displaced value is the phallus. Both theorists used "fetish" to articulate what they felt was being erased by the historical transition to modernity. Fetishization occurs when people experience vast historical changes but are unable, socially and psychologically, to rationalize these changes successfully. They then project this inability on an object that reminds them of these changes and, through manipulating that object, control this inability. Examples of fetishes in McClintock's work include maps and uniforms. For her, these objects represent the political and military power of conquering states, and that they endlessly displace the knowledge of violence behind that power.<sup>12</sup>

This definition of the fetish as an object that embodies deep historical contradictions provides insights into why certain commodified objects, as well as certain commodified people, have assumed iconic status in (post)modern culture. Cultural historian Linda Mizejewski uses fetish theory to show how directors, choreographers, and audiences fetishized the bodies, identities, and costumes of early 20th-century showgirls.<sup>13</sup> Drawing from scholars like McClintock and Mizejewski, Canadian consumer historians might apply similar fetish analyses to images that have had particular resonance among Canadians. When it is bought and sold as a commodity, for instance, the Canadian flag becomes a fetish that signifies and displaces the violence of Canadian nation building. The representation of nature on the flag (the maple leaf) can be, on the one hand, interpreted as symbolizing the contradiction between the state's "empty lands" ideology, and on the other, the presence of indigenous peoples throughout Canada.

<sup>11</sup>Marx, *Capital*, 319-29. Also Norman Geras, "Marx and the Critique of Political Economy," in Robin Blackburn, ed., *Ideology in Social Science: Readings in Critical Social Theory* (New York 1973), 296-7.

<sup>12</sup>Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York and London 1995), 149-76, 181-203, and 368-78. For more on the cultural significances of fetishism refer to the essays in Emily Apter and William Pietz, eds., *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* (Ithaca 1993); and for Freud's own thoughts on fetishism consult Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume 21* (London 1927), 149-57.

<sup>13</sup>Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* (Durham and London 1999).

*Key Topics*

While consumer historians must be attuned to the meanings of “consume,” “consumer,” “commodity,” and “fetish,” they should also be sensitive to other topics. This section touches on some of these areas, including the links between consumption and critical thought, liberalism, citizenship, retail labour, and commodity distribution. Readers should note, though, that other topics within the field also demand close investigation. Among the most urgent are consumption’s roles in racialization and sexuality, international differences in consumption, and the building of consumer co-operatives in Canada.<sup>14</sup>

Leftist thought on consumption is the first place where consumer historians should direct attention. Sometimes, socialist researchers make derogatory comments about consumption without attending to the political ramifications of their comments. Influential academics like T. J. Jackson Lears offer such broad statements as: “[T]he [antimodern] therapeutic outlook has ... undermined personal moral responsibility and promoted an ethic of self-fulfillment well attuned to the consumer ethos of twentieth-century capitalism,” implying that the reader somehow shares his assumptions about consumption’s emptiness.<sup>15</sup> What he and some other socialist scholars miss, however, is the link between this type of criticism and conservative, religious-based commentaries on consumption — all of which stretch back into antiquity. From the Old Testament’s commandment, “Do not desire another man’s wife; ... his house, ... or anything else that he owns,” (Deuteronomy 5:21) through medieval mystics’ rejections of the Church’s wealth, and into 20th-century disenchanted youth’s attraction to Zen and other anti-materialist philosophies, many Western social critics have viewed consumption through spiritual and moral lenses. Spiritualists decry what they perceive as consumers’ materialism, and moralists critique consumers’ vanity.

<sup>14</sup>Fortunately, historians have begun conducting research into these subjects. On consumption and racialization see Karen Dubinsky, *The Second Greatest Disappointment: Honey-mooning and Tourism at Niagara Falls* (Toronto 1999), 55-84. On consumption and sexuality see Dubinsky, *The Second Greatest Disappointment*; Korinek, *Roughing it in the Suburbs*, 105-256; Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto 1997), 28-35; and Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montréal and Kingston 1994), 251-64. For work comparing Canadian consumer patterns with American ones consider Parr, *Domestic Goods*, 267-70. Regarding consumer co-operatives MacPherson provides a good starting point in “Of Spheres, Perspectives, Cultures, and Stages.” Still required within Canadian historiography on consumer co-ops, however, are works paying especial attention to gender. Dana Frank’s *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (Cambridge 1994) remains the best international study in this area.

<sup>15</sup>T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago 1981), 56-7.

Though they seldom mention it, these critiques are central to some Left writings about consumption.<sup>16</sup> Thorstein Veblen, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Stuart Ewen, Christopher Lasch, T. J. Jackson Lears, and Gary Cross, have all offered influential socialist critiques of consumer society.<sup>17</sup> Though their works differ significantly, each condemns the decadent, meaningless nature of capitalist culture and suggest that life would be more fulfilling if consumption were eradicated. In this way, these socialist thinkers avoid conducting sensitive and thoughtful investigations into the economic, social, and cultural contexts in which consumers are situated. Indeed, the very title of Stuart Ewen's famous book, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, suggests that capital is a "captain" that uses commodities as tools for governing the unsuspecting masses.

Avoiding the study of consumer subjectivity has caused these writers to be blind to the experiences of millions of working consumers. During the 19th-century rise of industrial capitalism many poor and working people became *de facto* consumers: they earned money in the labour market and they spent money in the consumer market. Equally importantly, within the contemporary Western sexual division of labour, men are imagined as breadwinners and women as homemakers; crucially, consumption is integral to women's homemaking role. For many poor, working, and middle-class women, therefore, consumption has been vital to social activity and cultural identity.<sup>18</sup> When scholars dismiss consumption, they inadvertently dismiss non-bourgeois and female consumer subjectivities. This in turn causes them to overlook important nuances within the lives of women and men. Yet as this essay will show, many consumer-related actions can be radical, and when leftist researchers avoid consumption, they become inattentive to this aspect of popular agency.

<sup>16</sup> Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, Joris De Bres, trans. (London 1975, 1972), 390-6; Frank Mort, "The Politics of Consumption," in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, eds., *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s* (London 1989), 163-5.

<sup>17</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899; New York 1934); Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, John Cumming, trans. (New York 1976), 120-67; Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality, and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, Robert Bock, trans. (London 1971); Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York 1976); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York 1979); Lears, *No Place of Grace*; T.J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York 1994); Gary Cross, *Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture* (New York 1993); Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: How Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1996).



Some leftists' unwillingness to consider consumers' wishes and actions also trods dangerously close to anti-feminism. At times, left-wing polemics against consumption pivot upon the masculine/feminine binary characteristic of 19th- and 20th-century Western capitalist societies. Within this binary, masculinity is imagined as productive, rational, strong, and heroic, and femininity is regarded as consumptive, irrational, weak, and defeatist. Of course, this oppositions' existence stems from the Western sexual division of labour, but in some male left-wing writings, it also appears as a mode of positive self-definition. That is, some authors appeal to the traditional masculine traits of rationalism and productivity as a way of legitimizing their social positions within the atomizing culture of modernity.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's 1944 essay, "The Culture Industry: Mass Culture as Mass Deception," provides the most well-known example of this form of misogyny. The authors imply that cultural products are feminine; thus, when men consume these products they become emasculated. When describing consumption, Adorno and Horkheimer use primarily female examples, including: the "'natural' faces of Texas girls" who strive to be "like the successful models by whom Hollywood has typecast them"; the "American girl" who watches films about Paris and is disappointingly driven into "the arms of the smart American boy"; and the "housewife" who "finds in the darkness of the movie theater a place of refuge where she can sit for a few hours with nobody watching." As well, "women's serials are an embarrassingly agreeable garnish" on the "mere twaddle" of the culture industry.<sup>19</sup> Defining passive consumers as weak and feminine, Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that non-consumers are non-alienated, vigorous individuals in dignified control of their consciousnesses and activities. While there is much to be admired in their work, historians conscious of gender must be attentive to how some Marxist social critics use consumption to construct idealized masculine identities against denigrated feminine ones.<sup>20</sup> In fact, traces of this equation of consumption with emasculation also appear in the influential works of Karl Marx, George Lukács, Wolfgang Fritz Haug, and Gary Cross.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry," 140, 148, 139, 144. Adorno and Horkheimer also describe men's consumer activities. These occur less frequently and are less critical than those about women's consumer activities; see 133-49. Adorno and Horkheimer also end their work with an example of a commodified, passive female consumer who, by a pat change in the sentence's subject's gender, becomes an emasculated male: "The way in which *a girl* accepts and keeps the obligatory date, the inflection on the telephone or in the most intimate situation, the choice of words in conversation, and the whole inner life as classified by the now somewhat devalued depth psychology, bear witness to *man's* attempt to make himself a proficient apparatus, similar (even in emotions) to the model served up by the cultural industry." (167) Emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup>Also Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Women: Modernism's Other," in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington 1986), 44-53.

<sup>21</sup>The first three authors' works are discussed in Donica Belisle, "Consuming Producers: Retail Workers and Commodity Culture at Eaton's in Mid-Twentieth-Century Toronto,"

Canadian consumer historians must therefore be attentive to the politics of consumption — both within the period they are studying and within their own work. A second topic Canadian historians might attend to closely is consumption's periodization. Within international English-language scholarship, two distinct perspectives on consumption's emergence exist. Cultural and intellectual historians argue that consumer society arose in Europe between the 1400s and 1700s. During this period, members of the bourgeoisie became interested in their relationship with the material world.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, social historians view the late 19th century as the pivotal moment in the formation of consumer society. For these scholars, consumer societies only emerge when all of a particular society's members — aristocratic, bourgeois, and working class — enter the marketplace as consumers. Until the 19th century, only the aristocracy and bourgeoisie possessed the wealth necessary to consume goods. By the latter half of that century, capitalists in western Europe and North America began engaging in manufacturing activities; as well, large numbers of people inhabiting western Europe and North America became wage-earners. These developments caused inexpensive goods to appear for sale on the market; they also provided working people with the cash necessary to spend on such goods.<sup>23</sup> Since that moment, consumption has been integral to many working people's actions.<sup>24</sup>

MA thesis, Queen's University, 2001, 26-57. In *Time and Money*, Gary Cross argues that labour's early 20th-century demands for "recreation" gave way to an emphasis on consumption. He views this as a negative development, for while recreation is productive, consumption is uncreative and exhausting. Thus Cross inadvertently appeals to the same masculine/feminine binary as do Adorno and Horkheimer. See Cross, *Time and Money*, 3-5.

<sup>22</sup>Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (London and New York 2001); Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York 1997); Jennifer Jones, "Coquettes and Grisettes: Women Buying and Selling in Ancien Régime Paris," in de Grazia and Furlough, *The Sex of Things*, 25-52; Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Other Side of Venus: The Visual Economy of Feminine Display," in de Grazia and Furlough, *The Sex of Things*, 113-49; Peter Burke, "Res et verba: conspicuous consumption in the early modern world," in John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London and New York 1993), 148-61; Joyce Appleby, "Consumption in Early Modern Social Thought," in Brewer and Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods*, 162-76; Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (New York 1983).

<sup>23</sup>Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience*, David Fernbach, trans. (1976: London and New York 1987), 111-97. Social historians' perspectives on consumer society appear throughout Lawrence B. Glickman, ed., *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Cornell 1999); Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judd, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge 1998).

<sup>24</sup>The Eight-Hour Movement in the United States, for example, partly turned on workers' demands for more leisure time — some of which was passed engaging in commercial activi-

Together, the intellectual, cultural, and social historians' works illustrate that while consumer interests emerged among the bourgeoisie during the early modern period, broad consumer society did not exist until the middle of the 19th century. Within Canada specifically, a handful of studies also address periodization. David Monod, Carolyn Strange, and Keith Walden all show that Ontario wage-earners began expressing consumer wishes in the late 19th century. They further reveal that Canadian merchants began to target mass audiences within this period.<sup>25</sup> In her study of 1920s working-class domestic life in Halifax, Suzanne Morton demonstrates that during this time many workers and their family members purchased goods like kitchen ranges and radios; they also participated in such forms of mass culture as attending the cinema.<sup>26</sup> In an article about women's protests against high food prices in Montréal during the 1940s, Magda Fahrni reveals that a consumer consciousness developed among female Montréalers during this time.<sup>27</sup> And, in her research on women and consumption in the postwar years, Joy Parr confronts the contemporary belief that the 1950s were an era of material abundance. Arguing that female consumers were cautious regarding household purchases, she demonstrates that families continued to "make do" with existing goods in their homes until well into the 1960s.<sup>28</sup>

Missing regarding periodization from the field of Canadian consumer history, though, are works taking broad approaches to the formation of consumer "demand" in Canada, beginning with the contact period and ending with the present. Among the most imperative questions in this area are: Did colonials transplant European modes of consumption into Canada? How did various First Nations people approach consumption during capitalism's formative years?<sup>29</sup> How did the emer-

ties like going to saloons and amusement parks. See Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers & Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge 1983); David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge 1993).

<sup>25</sup>Monod, *Store Wars*, 99-148; Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem*, 116-43; Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, 80-118.

<sup>26</sup>Morton, *Ideal Surroundings*, 32-50.

<sup>27</sup>Fahrni, "Counting the Costs," 483-504.

<sup>28</sup>Parr, *Domestic Goods*, 243-65.

<sup>29</sup>On aboriginal consumption of European goods in the 17th and 18th centuries consult E.E. Rich, "Trade Habits and Economic Motivation among the Indians of North America," *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 26 (February 1960), 25-53; Calvin Martin, "The Four Lives of a Micmac Copper Pot," *Ethnohistory*, 22 (Spring 1975), 111-33; Bruce G. Trigger, "The Road to Affluence: A Reassessment of Early Huron Responses to European Contact," in Richard F. Salisbury and Elisabeth Tooker, eds., *Affluence and Cultural Survival: 1981 Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society* (Washington, DC 1984), 12-25. For a similar study documenting the 20th century see Colin Scott, "Between 'Original Affluence' and Consumer Affluence: Domestic Production and Guaranteed Income for James Bay Cree Hunters," in Salisbury and Tooker, *Affluence and Cultural Survival*, 74-86.

gence of consumer society in Canada compare with that in other European ex-colonies? And most importantly, what have been the temporal variations in consumption across race, gender, class, and region?

Consumer historians might also explore the relationship of consumption to popular political thought. Liberalism has especially informed Canadian consumption, both within the past and within current historiographical interpretations of consumer culture. Following J. S. Mill in *On Liberty*, the ideal liberal individual is one who is "sovereign" over "himself, his own body and mind."<sup>30</sup> Crucial to liberalism, as Ian McKay notes, are the interconnecting tenets of "Liberty," "Property," and "Equality." For liberals, the tenet of property is "in a sense ... more 'fundamental' than 'liberty,' for if one's property ... is the precondition of one's liberty in the first place, the pursuit of property requires the further development of those characteristics that define one as a free-standing individual."<sup>31</sup> Since the ideals of individual sovereignty, liberty, property, and equality are integral to many consumer activities in democratized and industrialized nations, it is apparent that liberalism significantly shaped Canadian consumer history. Most obviously, the seeking and acquiring of private property is a basic component of consumption in this country. When one purchases a house, a personal computer, or an automobile, one both increases the quantity of one's material possessions and increases one's individual autonomy or sovereignty.

Consumption has also operated as a form of individual self-expression. Joy Parr illustrates that female homemakers in postwar Canada often furnished their homes with items they felt reflected their personal identities.<sup>32</sup> As well, activities such as "lifestyle shopping" have enabled individuals to become not only possessors of various items that reflect their personalities but also possessors of various *styles* of items that reflect their personalities. Desiring, purchasing, and using either a fuel-efficient hatchback or a 4x4 pickup truck, for example, has enabled some Canadians to express individual characters in different ways. Crucially, however, this mode of individualism operates ironically: although people have communicated particular personalities through consumer purchasing, thousands of other people have bought the same mass-produced commodities. Thus self-expression through commodity-consumption is at once individualizing and homogenizing.

<sup>30</sup>J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (1859; London 1974), 69.

<sup>31</sup>Ian McKay, "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review*, 81 (December 2000), 624. McKay's understanding of liberalism is drawn from Fernande Roy, *Progrès, harmonie, liberté: Le libéralisme des milieux d'affaires francophones de Montréal au tournant du siècle* (Montréal 1988), 45-58.

<sup>32</sup>Parr, *Domestic Goods*, 165-95. Also Joy Parr, "Household Choices as Politics and Pleasure in 1950s Canada," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 55 (Spring 1999), 112-28.

Liberalism may have further influenced consumption in the sense that some Canadians might have viewed shopping for, purchasing, and using certain commodities as liberating. Certainly, this view is one that advertisers promote endlessly, but it is also one that might have had special meaning for some socially- and economically-marginalized members of advanced capitalist societies. As Kathy Peiss, George Chauncey, William Leach, and Erika Diane Rappaport suggest, many Western women and men have used consumption as an avenue of self-creation, self-performance, and escape from the confines of everyday life.<sup>33</sup> Although the Canadian historiographical record is sketchier than the international one on how the use of consumables granted the possibility of individual liberation, there are indications this phenomenon occurred in Canada. Alice Klein and Wayne Roberts show that many youthful, working females turned to fashion and dime novels to escape the tedium of wage-labour jobs.<sup>34</sup> In a different vein, Doug Owrarn demonstrates that the fashion industry responded to 1960s radical movements by distributing mass-produced items like peasant blouses, which had originally been made popular by radical anti-materialists. In turn, Canadians in quest of the image of social subversion purchased such items in astonishing quantities.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, it is apparent that since the 1960s, dissident members of some Canadian social groups — such as teenagers — have displayed subversive consumables in order to announce their liberation from the constraints of what they have perceived to be mainstream society.<sup>36</sup>

By addressing how liberalism shaped Canadians' consumer practices, historians can pinpoint how belief systems constructed around individual sovereignty, equality, and property affected Canadian consumption. Studies of the relationship between consumption and liberalism will also illuminate some of the historical imperatives that have caused consuming levels in industrialized nations to increase in proportion with the rise of liberal democracy. They will further assist in identifying similarities and differences in consumption among members of social groups that are not usually studied together. These include not only affluent, property-owning

<sup>33</sup>Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York 1999), 37-60; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia 1986); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York 1994), 257-63; William R. Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925," *The Journal of American History*, 71 (September 1984), 319-42; Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton 2000), 74-107.

<sup>34</sup>Klein and Roberts, "Besieged Innocence," 211-60.

<sup>35</sup>Doug Owrarn, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto 1996), 185-215. Also Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counter Culture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago 1998).

<sup>36</sup>In a different context Dick Hebdige shows in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London 1988) how punk clothing was an important component of 1970s punk radicalism in England.

Canadians, but also working women, gay men, youths, and members of other marginalized social groups for whom consumption has offered varied forms of liberation. Finally, the investigation of the connections between liberalism and consumption will help clarify the cultural powers, if any, of those forms of advertising that promise liberation through commodities.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the most important contribution that studies of liberalism and consumption will make, however, is the creation of sensitivity toward the liberal thread that runs through some contemporary historical research into consumption. Some studies of consumer society situated within cultural studies and social history tend to celebrate the liberating possibilities offered to individuals by consumption, but at the same time minimize the political economy of consumption and downplay the social costs that consumption has on many members of modern consumer societies.<sup>38</sup> In these ways, these studies share surface similarities with recent trends in marketing research. Currently, the discipline of marketing boasts scores of journals that track changing patterns of "consumer behaviour." *The Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, for instance, is a quarterly dedicated toward studying "The Influence of Gender, Age and Ethnicity," "New Approaches in Consumer Research," "Avoiding and Reducing Post-Purchase Dissonance," "Relationship Marketing," "Family and Product Lifestyles," and "The Changing Values of Customers Over Time."<sup>39</sup> Employing a range of discourses common to the early 21st century, including those of pluralism, tolerance, emancipation, democratic entitlement, individualism, and *jouissance*, as well as drawing from many of the same theorists — including Pierre Bourdieu, Arjun Appadurai, Clifford Geertz, and Grant McCracken — as consumer historians, market research scholarship is theoretically sophisticated and "politically correct."<sup>40</sup> Focusing on diversity, identity, and

<sup>37</sup>Though she does not discuss liberalism, Susan J. Douglas does discuss liberation, consumption, and advertising in "Narcissism as Liberation," in Jennifer Scanlon, ed., *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader* (New York 2000), 267-82. Canadian historical works addressing advertising's effects are Korinek, *Roughing it in the Suburbs*, 105-77; Paul Rutherford, *Endless Propaganda: The Advertising of Public Goods* (Toronto 2000); Paul Rutherford, *The New Icons? The Art of Television Advertising* (Toronto 1994); McKay, *The Quest of the Folk*, 274-311.

<sup>38</sup>Many of these new studies have been influenced by John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Boston 1989); John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (New York 1989); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Steven F. Rendall, trans. (Berkeley 1984); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Robert Nice, trans. (Cambridge 1984).

<sup>39</sup>*The Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 2002, <<http://www.henrystewart.com/journals/comb/>> (30 January 2002).

<sup>40</sup>See for instance the essays in Janeen Arnold Costa and Gary J. Bamossy, eds., *Marketing in a Multicultural World: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cultural Identity* (Thousand Oaks, CA 1995), especially Annamma Joy *et al.*, "The Cultural Past in the Present: The Meaning of Home and Objects in the Homes of Working-Class Italian Immigrants in Montreal," 145-79.

agency, studies in market research often resemble some recent trends in social history and cultural studies.<sup>41</sup>

Obviously, an unbridgeable political gulf separates social history and cultural studies from market research. Representing the pursuit of profit, competition, and free trade, contemporary marketing scholarship is in many ways the antithesis of contemporary social history and cultural theory, which is often committed to exposing past injustices and deconstructing inegalitarian epistemologies. Nevertheless, that each of these disciplines prioritize agency, identity, and diversity over critical, and what is often perceived as pessimistic, analysis does suggest they share common discursive origins.<sup>42</sup> It is plausible that some social and cultural scholars might share some of the ethical values held by some marketers and despite the celebration of profit, competition, and free trade that is present in marketing discourse, it is possible that some market researchers are committed genuinely to the same political goals, including equality and tolerance, as some social historians and cultural studies scholars.<sup>43</sup> Both market research and some threads of social and cultural academic inquiry are thus influenced by some aspects of liberalism, especially the ideology's emphasis on individual development and expression, its focus on diversity, and its stressing of tolerance toward others.

To suggest that liberalism is present in both market research and some social and cultural analyses of consumption, however, is not to suggest that recent work in consumer studies is either the same as market research or compromised in orientation. Nor does this suggestion imply that Canadian historians should abandon the undertaking of social and cultural studies of consumption. Rather, these similarities are meant to illustrate that liberalism has played a prominent role in shaping not only modern consumer history, but also modern consumer historiography. A discussion of these similarities also demonstrates that inquiries into consumption focusing strictly on the creative and liberating possibilities of consumption, without attending to consumption's complex political, material, and social histories, are limited analytically. While it is important to show how consumption may have provided creative outlets and possibilities for liberation, it is also important to address the more problematic legacies of liberal consumption under capitalism, including the sustaining of acquisitive individualism and status divisions based on goods ownership. An awareness of how liberalism has informed both consumer history and historiography offers one way of understanding consumption in both its

<sup>41</sup> Rachel Bowlby has also compared marketing to scholarly inquiry. See "Soft Sell: Marketing Rhetoric in Feminist Criticism," in de Grazia and Furlough, *The Sex of Things*, 381-7.

<sup>42</sup> On pessimism and critical inquiry consult John Clarke, "Pessimism versus Populism: The Problematic Politics of Popular Culture," in Richard Butsch, ed., *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption* (Philadelphia 1990), 28-46.

<sup>43</sup> As Frank Mort writes, marketers are not "simply slaves of capital, but are the intermediaries who construct a dialogue between the market on the one hand and consumer culture on the other." Mort, "The Politics of Consumption," 167.

emancipatory and troubling guises, because on the one hand it shows how consumption is pleasurable, but on the other, it explores the social ramifications that liberal consumption has constructed.

Another area in Canadian consumer history that might be explored fruitfully is the relationship between consumption and civic participation. Historian Lizabeth Cohen notes that in the United States:

[m]ass consumption-driven economy made possible a more adequate standard of living for more people than ever before [and] the consumer in the economic realm became increasingly identified with the citizen in the political realm. Full participation in American postwar society came to mean a complicated intermeshing of the economic and political rights of 'citizen consumers'.<sup>44</sup>

For Cohen, this intermeshing helps to explain much of the character of the political organizing that dominated postwar American society. Regarding black participation in urban rebellions during the late 1960s, for instance, she contends that the television and furniture looting that occurred suggests that some rebels believed "people had a sense of rights and entitlements that included being able to live a certain way in this society."<sup>45</sup>

The concept of a consumer citizenry holds much promise for Canadian consumer historians. In fact, Canadian scholars Magda Fahmi, Cynthia Wright, and Franca Iacovetta have each published articles exploring this relationship, and together, they demonstrate that consumption has been as integral to some Canadians' civic identities as it has to others' racial and ethnic ones. Describing Montréalers' consumer activism during the 1940s, Fahmi shows that a sense of economic citizenship infused popular notions of consumer rights. On a different note, in an article about the demise of the T. Eaton Company, Wright demonstrates that Eaton's strove to imbue customers' shopping experiences with an ethnocentric and racist sense of citizenship that placed Anglo-Canadians at the top of the Canadian social hierarchy and immigrants of colour at the bottom. Finally, in an article about post-World War II immigrants and Canadian reception work, Iacovetta shows that

<sup>44</sup>Lizabeth Cohen, "The New Deal State and the Making of Citizen Consumers," in Strasser *et al.*, *Getting and Spending*, 111. Also Victoria de Grazia, "Introduction" to "Part III: Empowering Women as Citizen Consumers," in de Grazia and Furlough, *The Sex of Things*, 275-86.

<sup>45</sup>Lisa Kannenberg and Lisa Phillips, conductors, "A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Consumption in Postwar America: An Interview with Lizabeth Cohen," *Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries*, 57, 1-2 (1995), 18. Other explorations of American citizenship and consumption are Robert E. Weems, Jr., *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (New York 1998); Margaret Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes for Women* (New York 1999); and Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca 1997).



during the early years of the Cold War, English-Canadian philanthropists and social service workers attempted to contain immigrants' and refugees' class and ethnic identities by teaching them how to shop and cook in North American styles.<sup>46</sup>

Another aspect of Canadian consumer history that might be explored through the angle of citizenship is the contemporary trend in public policy that depicts Canadian citizens as the state's "customers," or consumers of public products.<sup>47</sup> For the fiscal year of 2001-02, one of the Treasury Board of Canada's primary mandates was to "continue to provide leadership [to other departments] in implementing approaches to improving both Canadians' access to a wide range of government services and citizen satisfaction with the quality of those services."<sup>48</sup> Certainly, this consumer-centred approach, which focuses on the achievement of citizen-as-customer satisfaction, has what some might view as positive short-term ramifications, including the streamlining of government services. What are significant for consumer historians, however, are the long-term effects of this approach. By depicting Canadians as consumers interested only in individual satisfaction, this type of governance denies alternative understandings of citizenship. It also refuses more collective, non-business models of civic participation and pre-empts non-consumer modes of political engagement. In suggesting that Canadians will only achieve fulfillment through the consumption of goods and services packaged and delivered by ruling political parties, this citizen-as-consumer model justifies the state's existence and actions as well as reinforces the government's position that it always acts in Canadians' best interests.

To understand how these developments occurred, as well as what political effects they had, historians might address how consumption and citizenship have interacted as mutually-reinforcing historical forces through the late 19th and 20th centuries. In particular, they might look at how policy around consumption has influenced people's sense of themselves as members of the Canadian populace. They also might examine how Canadians have interpreted their membership — or non-membership — in this democratic and industrialized state. As important as liberalism and citizenship are to consumer history, though, they are not the only areas toward which Canadian consumer historians might direct attention. In the 19th and 20th centuries, many forms of politicized consumer action have occurred that have not been related to either liberalism or to conventional understandings of citizenship. Scattered evidence exists that some grassroots protests in Canada have arisen

<sup>46</sup>Fahmi, "Counting the Costs," 483-504; Wright, "Rewriting the Modern," 153-68; Iacovetta, "Recipes for Democracy?" 14-20.

<sup>47</sup>For an extended discussion situated within public policy scholarship, refer to Leslie A. Pal, *Beyond Policy Analysis: Public Issue Management in Turbulent Times* (Scarborough, ON 1997), 269-91.

<sup>48</sup>Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, "2001-02 Estimates — Report on Plans and Priorities," <[http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/report/tbsplans/01-02/rpp01\\_1\\_e.html#the](http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/report/tbsplans/01-02/rpp01_1_e.html#the)> (02 February 2002). See especially Section D: "The Secretariat's Overall Plans and Priorities."

out of lower-income women's beliefs that they did not receive fair treatment from various public and private distributors of goods and services. Historians Tom Mitchell and Errol Black show that in 1925, 200 working-class women in Brandon, Manitoba, threw sticks and rocks at policemen and members of a municipal paving crew for not providing the city's North End neighbourhood with adequate streets.<sup>49</sup> During the Great Depression, working-class women in Brandon again participated in local forms of consumer protest: according to the newsletter of the Brandon Unemployed Council, a "large" group of unemployed women visited City Hall in 1936 to protest high food prices and demand "food for their children."<sup>50</sup>

More overt radical political organizing around consumption has also shaped Canadian consumer history. Joan Sangster and Julie Guard illustrate that in the late 1930s, female members of the Communist Party organized a Housewives' Consumers Association (HCA) to lobby the federal government to control food prices.<sup>51</sup> Throughout the late 1930s and 1940s, the HCA maintained a visible presence, and the T. Eaton Company even kept a file on the HCA in its Head Office.<sup>52</sup> Such radical consumer organizing has indeed threatened corporate interests and many Canadian retailers have consciously tried to demonstrate that they have their customers' best interests in mind.<sup>53</sup>

Through examining specific consumer demands made by radical organizations, historians will be able to reconstruct how progressive activists understood consumption. Sangster notes, for instance, that many youths in the HCA demanded price controls on chocolate bars and Coca-Cola.<sup>54</sup> Since these particular consumables symbolize the fruits of American capitalism, it is possible that some youths believed these commodities should be available to all. Similar demands were articulated by members of other left-wing groups during this period. During a union drive that occurred at Eaton's in Toronto between 1948 and 1954, which was led by members of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), organizers argued: "Working people should have access to the newest inventions," including automatic washers, record players, and electric refrigerators.<sup>55</sup> Employing the discourse of democratic entitlement, CCFers appealed to popular desires for new consumables in order to win Eaton's employees' support for the union. Their ap-

<sup>49</sup>Tom Mitchell and Errol Black, *A Square Deal for All: Historical Essays on Labour In Brandon* (St. John's 2001), 21.

<sup>50</sup>McKee Archives, Brandon, Manitoba, Errol Black Collection, *The Brandon Unemployed Worker*, April 1936.

<sup>51</sup>Sangster, "Consuming Issues," 240-47; and Guard, "Women Worth Watching," 73-88.

<sup>52</sup>Archives of Ontario (AO), T. Eaton Papers (TEP), Series 37, Box 9, File: "Housewives Consumers' Association," 1938.

<sup>53</sup>Parr, *Domestic Goods*, 40-63.

<sup>54</sup>Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950* (Toronto 1989), 187.

<sup>55</sup>National Archives of Canada, Eileen Tallman Sufirin Papers, MG 31 B 31, Vol. 1, "Employees' Opportunity Day," 26 July 1950.

peals, however, differed from those made by the HCA in one key respect: the HCA pushed for price controls so that all might enjoy the products of capitalism, CCF organizers pushed for higher salaries so that unionized workers might afford such products. The HCA's position on consumption was therefore more egalitarian than the CCF's. The HCA's demands for full participation in consumer society threatened established processes of capital accumulation, but the CCFers accepted high prices and strove instead to bring Eaton's employees into the postwar Keynesian consensus.

Research into the relationship between consumption and progressive political action thus illuminates how non-liberal, sometimes non-democratic, and often marginalized individuals have experienced consumption in Canada. Also illuminating these understandings are studies of those employed within consumption-related industries. People who sell goods and services have occupied a particularly symbolic position within consumer society: the commodity exchange. Since this exchange generates exchange-value for distributors and use-value for consumers, many of consumption's social and cultural meanings are magnified within consumption workers' occupational experiences.

Several works in Canadian women's and labour history underline the reasons behind workers' decisions to enter consumer-related occupations. Over the past 130 years, many consumption workers — including retail labourers, golf caddies, fast-food workers, and exotic dancers — were women and youths who sought work in the consumption industries for reasons such as financial need, flexibility, intellectual satisfaction, and socializing.<sup>56</sup> By building on existing works, and drawing from international scholarship, Canadian consumer historians might now explore consumption workers' subjectivities. Some American historians, for instance, have uncovered how fashion- and beauty-related trades afforded many socio-economically marginalized people occupational stability, career mobility, and intellectual fulfillment.<sup>57</sup> In Canada, similar material and cultural imperatives encouraged

<sup>56</sup>Sandra Aylward, "Experiencing Patriarchy: Women, Work, and Trade Unionism at Eaton's," PhD dissertation, McMaster University, 1991; Susan Forbes, "Gendering Corporate Welfare Practices: Female Sports and Recreation at Eaton's During the Depression," *Rethinking History*, 5 (Spring 2001), 59-74; Alison Howell, "Retail Unionization: An Historical Approach to the Suzy Shier Case," Undergraduate Honours thesis, Trent University, 2000; Ian P. MacMillan, "Strikes, Bogeys, Spares, and Misses: Pin-boy and Caddy Strikes in the 1930s," *Labour/Le Travail*, 44 (Fall 1999), 149-90; Bradley Pragnell, *Organizing Department Store Workers: The Case of the RWDSU at Eaton's, 1983-1987* (Kingston 1989); Esther Reiter, *Making Fast Food: From the Frying Pan into the Fryer* (Montréal and Kingston 1996); Becki L. Ross, "Bumping and Grinding on the Line: Making Nudity Pay," *Labour/Le Travail*, 46 (Fall 2000), 221-50; Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem*; Eileen Suffrin, *The Eaton Drive: The Campaign to Organize Canada's Largest Department Store, 1948-1952* (Toronto 1982).

<sup>57</sup>Tiffany Melissa Gill, "'I Had My Own Business ... So I Didn't Have to Worry': Beauty Salons, Beauty Culturists, and the Politics of African-American Female Entrepreneurship," in

women, youths, and some men to seek jobs in the consumption industries. Due to their intimate knowledge of fashion and traditional women's culture, for example, two women were able to assume the highly paid mantles of Fashion Co-ordinator and Wedding Bureau Consultant at Eaton's in mid-20th-century Toronto. Travelling to fashion shows in Paris and New York, they hosted similar events in Toronto and organized numerous weddings across Ontario.<sup>58</sup>

The majority of restaurant, retail, beauty, and other consumption labourers in Canada, however, have received low wages, ill treatment, no benefits, and little opportunities for mobility.<sup>59</sup> Their jobs have also been demanding: they have been expected to represent their employers to customers, convince customers to purchase commodities, and perform "emotional labor."<sup>60</sup> It is this contradiction between low remuneration and high expectations that makes their occupations significant. In this space between remuneration and expectation, many features of consumer culture are thrown into high relief, including the emphasis on image, style, product, and consumer satisfactions, which are themselves often fleeting because they demand constant replenishment and change.

A brief example from my research on the T. Eaton Company illustrates this point. World War II and the union drive that occurred at Eaton's in Toronto between 1948 and 1954 had devastating effects on the T. Eaton Company's fortunes.<sup>61</sup> As part of a larger attempt to retain its dominance in Canadian retailing, Eaton's revo-

---

Philip Scranton, ed., *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America* (New York and London 2001), 169-94; Vicki Howard, "'At the Curve Exchange': Postwar Beauty Culture and Working Women at Maidenform," in Scranton, *Beauty and Business*, 195-216; Nancy Koehn, "Estée Lauder: Self-Definition and the Modern Cosmetics Market," in Scranton, *Beauty and Business*, 217-53; Alison Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington 1999); Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 61-96; Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana and Chicago 1988), 227-82.

<sup>58</sup>AO, TEP, Series 141, MS 6769, "Wedding Bureau Her Brain Child," *Flash*, January 1954, 7; and AO, TEP, Series 141, MS 6769, "Eaton's Fashion Co-ordinator Named One of Toronto's Ten 'Best Dressed,'" *Flash*, April 1953, 15. Also Patricia Phenix, *Eatonians: The Story of the Family Behind the Family* (Toronto 2002), 92-5.

<sup>59</sup>See especially Sufrin, *The Eaton Drive*, 13-6, 203-26.

<sup>60</sup>The term "emotional labor" is Arlie Russell Hochschild's. See Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1983), ix.

<sup>61</sup>Throughout the early 1940s, government-imposed limits on pricing and goods production tore into Eaton's ability to realize profitable returns from its retailing enterprise. During the immediate postwar years, immense demographic changes took place in Toronto, all of which had detrimental effects on Eaton's economic and cultural status. Most important of these changes, at least from Eaton's managers' point of view, was that Eaton's regular customers of the pre-war years (Anglo, middle-class women) began moving in large numbers from downtown Toronto toward the suburbs. They began spending more of their time and money in suburban retail outlets than they did in downtown department stores.

lutionized its staff training methods in the postwar years. Prior to World War II, the company relied on an extensive system of paternalism and welfarism to promote employee loyalty to Eaton's and goodwill to customers. Later, it retained this system, but it also began focusing on the point of sale as a key moment in the movement of commodities and capital through the department store. In conjunction with this new focus, the Toronto Eaton's stores hired several staff trainers, expanded the functions of the staff training department, held frequent training sessions, and developed new approaches to selling. These approaches included codifying customer types, standardizing the selling process, and placing increased emphasis on customer satisfaction, commodity presentation, and employees' behaviour, appearances, and personalities.<sup>62</sup>

All of these approaches to selling reveal how consumer culture facilitates capitalist accumulation. The conscious classification of customer-types speaks to how business segmented consumers into predictable groups organized by taste, hobbies, spending levels, political persuasions, gender, and race. The standardization of the selling process illustrates how business streamlined its activities to engender profitable outcomes. Eaton's increased focus on consumer satisfaction shows how business profited from the general rise in importance of the Canadian consumer citizenry in the postwar years. Additionally, the heightened importance that Eaton's placed on salespeople's commodity-presentation reveals that image and style under capitalism are related to both exchange-value and use-value.

Finally, Eaton's emphasis on employee behaviour, appearance, and personality demonstrates how commodification affects the experiences of people living in market economies. Through their restructuring of prewar training programs, as well as through introducing new staff training programs, Eaton's personnel managers demanded that employees shape their bodies, mannerisms, speech, and appearances into attractive, non-threatening selling machines that would please Eaton's customers, engender company loyalty, provide Eaton's with opportunities for public relations work, and increase the profitability of the store.<sup>63</sup> In other words, Eaton's linked employee behaviour, appearance, and personality explicitly with the realization of profit, thus profoundly commodifying employees' beings.

<sup>62</sup>AO, TEP, Series 162, Boxes 22-26, Files 774 through 849: "Employees - Manuals"; and AO, TEP, Series 69, Box 36, Staff Training Files. As one of this essay's reader's has pointed out, forms of sales training did exist at Eaton's in the pre-World War II years. Nevertheless, in the postwar years, such training became more professional, more intensive, more frequent, and more focused on the point of sale.

<sup>63</sup>AO, TEP, Series 141, MS 6767-6770; AO, TEP, Series 162, Boxes 22-26, Files 774 through 849: "Employees — Manuals"; AO, TEP, Series 69, Box 36, Staff Training Files; and AO, TEP, Series 183, Boxes 1-2, Recreation Office Annual Reports and Miscellaneous Files. For an analysis of recreation initiatives at Eaton's during the 1930s that situates recreation at the department store within the literature on welfare capitalism refer to Forbes, "Gendering Corporate Welfare Practices," 59-74.

# How Does Your Appearance Rate?

Any woman can be good looking. Some are more beautiful than others but good grooming plus good cosmetics plus good style adds up to good looks. "Appearance is the expression of efficiency."

## Good Grooming

- |  | Yes                      | No                       |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| A daily bath . . . . .   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| A shampoo weekly or every ten days . . . . .   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| A manicure weekly . . . . .  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The use of deodorant winter and summer . . . . .                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Washing, cleaning and pressing, enough to keep everything in perfect order . . . . . | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Shoes suitable for business, polished and heels straight . . . . .                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Stockings seams straight . . . . .   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

## Good Skin

- |  |                          |                          |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Daily cleansing with soap and water . . . . .  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Special care for dryness or oiliness . . . . . | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Correct diet—fruit, vegetables, etc. . . . .   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8 glasses of water . . . . .                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7-8 hours sleep . . . . .                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Exercise in the fresh air . . . . .            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

## Good Figure

- |   | Yes                      | No                       |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| An erect, well balanced posture . . . . . | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Correct weight . . . . .                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| A girdle or corselette . . . . .          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

## Hair

- |                                       |                          |                          |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Brushed, smooth and shining . . . . . | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|

## Make-up

- |  |                          |                          |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Matching the skintone and smoothly blended . . . . . | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|

## Hands

- |  |                          |                          |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Smooth and well cared for . . . . .                        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Polish unchipped and not too brilliant in colour . . . . . | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Check (✓) Yes or No. Then count your "Yes" answers. If there are:

- |                  |                           |
|------------------|---------------------------|
| 19 yes . . . . . | You are there.            |
| 16 yes . . . . . | You are on your way.      |
| 12 yes . . . . . | Get going.                |
| 10 yes . . . . . | Look where you are going. |

The Commodificational Appearance. "How Does Your Appearance Rate," Archives of Ontario, T. Eaton Papers, Series 162, Box 28, File 910, 1947.

Eaton's staff trainers viewed employees in the same ways that merchandisers viewed Eaton's commodities: each understood display, image, and style to be fundamental to the department store. Imagining employees as pliable and docile objects, Eaton's staff trainers used commodification to immobilize and contain what they perceived to be Eaton's employees' dangerous political agency.

Employees' reactions to managers' commodifying efforts were mixed. Many quit, many refused to participate in Eaton's extracurricular training activities, and many joined the union drive. Numerous others, though, did participate in Eaton's training initiatives. For some, they offered avenues of skill development, and many enjoyed mastering the techniques of selling and developing their own approaches. For others, training was a source of pleasure and entertainment. Unlike Eaton's personnel managers, who viewed commodification as a tool of personnel management, these employees viewed commodification as a means of identity performance and self-creation. Shopping, selling, participating in fashion shows, experimenting with cosmetics, and wearing fashionable clothes and accessories were not only enjoyable, they also offered employees the ability to navigate difficult circumstances. On the selling floor, employees met customer and manager criticism with exaggerated performances that relied on superior consumer knowledge and often mocked expectations of servitude. Similarly, many employees used the theatrical possibilities offered by the products of the fashion and beauty industries to construct stylized images of themselves. These images, in turn, helped them achieve occupational and social success.<sup>64</sup>

At Eaton's, then, managers and employees approached commodification differently, and each person manipulated its possibilities in manners best suited to her or his needs. Other explorations into consumer-related occupations might also show how business used aspects of consumer culture, including focus on image, style, and product, to dampen class conflict and ensure profitable returns. Alternatively, historians might inquire into how workers have approached consumption, exploring how they used consumables to fashion new identities and cope with trying circumstances.

A final topic in Canadian consumer history that historians might research is the relationship between distribution and consumption. Fortunately, this subject has already received some attention, and scholars working in this area might build on published works. Studies of mass marketing, market research, consumer credit, and the advertising, media, and tourist industries in Canada provide a rich understanding of the "supply" side of the free market. This work also demonstrates that business and government have played significant roles in shaping the consumer interests of Canadians, especially in the way it reveals how business and govern-

<sup>64</sup>Employees' participation in consumer culture at Eaton's is discussed at length in Belisle, "Consuming Producers," 93-126.

ment attempted to manipulate cultural desires to sell commodities.<sup>65</sup> As well, because American developments have affected much of Canada's consumer past, several American works also contribute to Canadian distribution history. Studies of Hollywood, merchant cultures, and "cool" industries are only a few areas analyzed by American scholars that reveal the connections between consumption and distribution in Canada.<sup>66</sup>

Expanding this work, Canadian consumer historians might now ask certain questions of distribution history, including: How have distributors essentialized the social origins of exchange-value? How have corporations denied consumer demands, and why? Posing such questions, consumer historians will fill in the gaps between, on one hand, what have often been understood as radical consumer desires such as many socially- and economically-marginalized Canadians' demands for egalitarian access to consumables, and, on the other, what have often been perceived as oppressive distributive practices, including land expropriation justified by park creation and other tourist-related developments,<sup>67</sup> capital accumulation, and the exploitation of workers in the consumer industries.

<sup>65</sup> Monod, *Store Wars*, 99-147; Daniel J. Robinson, *The Measure of Democracy: Polling, Market Research, and Public Life, 1930-1945* (Toronto 1999); Cynthia Wright, "'The Most Prominent Rendezvous of the Feminine Toronto': Eaton's College Street and the Organization of Shopping in Toronto, 1920-1950," PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1992; Russell Johnston, *Selling Themselves: The Emergence of Canadian Advertising* (Toronto 2000); Paul Rutherford, *The Making of the Canadian Media* (Toronto 1978); Parr, *Domestic Goods*, 64-83, 121-42, 199-241; Korinek, *Roughing it in the Suburbs*, 105-218; Rutherford, *The New Icons?*; James Murton, "La 'Normandie du Nouveau Monde': la société Canada Steamship Lines, l'antimodernisme et la promotion du Québec ancien," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, 55 (Été 2001), 3-44; Tina Loo, "Making a Modern Wilderness: Conserving Wildlife in Twentieth-Century Canada," *Canadian Historical Review*, 82 (March 2001), 91-120; Karen Dubinsky, *The Second Greatest Disappointment*; James Overton, *Making a World of Difference: Essays on Tourism, Culture, and Development in Newfoundland* (St. John's 1996); Patricia Jasen, *Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914* (Toronto 1995); McKay, *Quest of the Folk*; E. J. Hart, *The Selling of Canada* (Banff 1983).

<sup>66</sup> See especially Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago 2000); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York 1994); Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*; Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," in Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks, eds., *The Jameson Reader* (New York 2000), 123-48. Extended bibliographies of American distribution studies are Lawrence B. Glickman, "Bibliographic Essay," *Consumer Society in American History*, 406-9; Ellen Furlough, "Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective: A Selected Bibliography," in de Grazia and Furlough, *The Sex of Things*, 394-402.

<sup>67</sup> On the relationships among tourist development, environmental devastation, and land expropriation refer especially to Alan MacEachren's *Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada* (Montréal and Kingston 2001). Also Bruce Hodgins and Jamie Benidickson,



*Key Approaches*

Though Canadian historians have established a solid base in distribution research, consumer historians should be cautious about the weight they give to state and corporate activities in shaping consumer culture. When consumer studies focus only on the activities of government or business, they risk portraying consumer society as controlled primarily by the state or capital. Such portrayals would be inaccurate because they would minimize consumer agency.<sup>68</sup> In the same way, consumer historians who focus primarily on consumption should be cautious in their portrayals of who controls the marketplace. In these cases, however, it is the power of the consumer that historians should avoid overemphasizing.<sup>69</sup>

To communicate the full significance of consumption within Canada's past, in fact, historians should portray consumption not as determined by either government, business, or consumers, but as a broad historical force shaping occurrences both within and across production, distribution, and consumption. Utilizing approaches that address the phenomenon's specific components is one way of achieving this goal. One approach is the conscious application of a particular type of history, such as political, economic, social, labour, cultural, or environmental, when studying consumption. By keeping one's scope within one of these types, historians will be able to explore fully the historical nuances that fall within their scope. That is, if a researcher chooses to utilize social history's methods, then many details about consumption's social aspects will be discovered. By remaining within methodological confines, but at the same time being conscious of consumption's existence across these confines, historians will achieve an outlook that is broad in scope but specific in inquiry.

As useful as this distinct disciplinary approach is, however, what might be referred to as the "circulation approach" is the most promising of consumer history methodologies.<sup>70</sup> This entails first pinpointing a specific kind of commodity, and

*The Temagami Experience: Recreation, Resources, and Aboriginal Rights in the Northern Ontario Wilderness* (Toronto 1989). I am grateful to James Murton for suggesting these sources.

<sup>68</sup>For scholarship that overprivileges government's role in shaping modern consumer society see especially John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (1936; New York 1997). For scholarship that overprivileges capitalists' activities see Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*.

<sup>69</sup>An example of scholarship that overemphasizes consumers' agency in the marketplace is Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (London 1979).

<sup>70</sup>The circulation approach is similar to the "commodity chain" approach employed by some sociologists of globalization. See for instance Gary Gereffi and Miguel Korzeniewicz, eds., *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism* (Westport, CT 1994). The circulation approach, however, differs slightly from the commodity chain approach because it examines both the social and the cultural circumstances that surround the commodity within not only the spheres of production and distribution, but also the sphere of consumption. Scholarship that

next tracing the political, economic, cultural, social, and environmental histories that surround this commodity as it circulates through the spheres of production, distribution, and consumption. A circulation analysis of the ready-to-wear clothing industry in Canada between 1890 and 1960, for example, would discuss, variously, the reasons that caused Canadian businesspeople to purchase, manufacture, and distribute ready-to-wear; garment workers' experiences; salesworkers' domains; how entrepreneurs displayed and priced ready-to-wear; opinions on such clothing and their variations among regional, social, and economic groups; the motivations that caused some Canadians to shop for this apparel; how Canadians incorporated it into their daily lives; and finally the contributions ready-to-wear manufacturing and distributing made to the Canadian economy.

Although the circulation approach tends to minimize important occurrences within the market's three spheres, it has the advantage of connecting important processes that are usually viewed in isolation from each other. This method, therefore, provides insights into how and why specific aspects of consumer society have evolved as well as broad perspectives on the history of market society. Whereas many historians interested in how the market affects people's lives tend to focus on the sphere of production, historians using the circulation approach will study not only production, but also distribution and consumption.

It is not only by using interdisciplinary methodologies, however, that historians might create a holistic analysis of Canadian consumption. Individual scholars, no matter how ingenious their research, can not single-handedly write the entirety of Canada's consumer past. A third way that historians may communicate consumption's impact, then, is by theorizing and expanding the field of Canadian consumer history. Sharing their work, publishing collections of articles about Canadian consumption, drawing from other academics' insights, and establishing rigorous theoretical approaches, consumer scholars will bring the study of consumption to the forefront of historical inquiry.

#### *Canadian Consumer Society: Past, Present, and Future*

To summarize, expanding the field of Canadian consumer history will create new perspectives on Canadian wage- and salary-earners' experiences. Since the history of consumption traverses the histories of women, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, imperialism, labour, culture, politics, economics, and the environment, it will also offer new insights into Canada's past. And, it will further provide innovative inter-

utilizes variants of the circulation approach include Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, which traces the production, distribution, and consumption of cosmetics in 19th and 20th-century America; Parr, *Domestic Goods*, which analyzes how and why certain domestic goods were produced, marketed, and consumed in postwar Canada; and Dubinsky, *The Second Greatest Disappointment*, which explores the experiences of those who marketed, worked at, and vacationed at Niagara Falls during the 19th and 20th centuries.

pretations of present and future market society. Currently, consumption's impacts show no signs of abating. People continue to politicize around consumption: wage- and salary-earners still demand more purchasing power, consumer activists still lobby for more regulation of production and distribution, and governments still claim to be raising the standard of living for people. The country's inhabitants are also still, as Fredric Jameson puts it, "bombarded by the ideological slogans of big business," and, within the social and cultural realms, many view the pursuit, acquisition, display, use, and enjoyment of commodities as significant practices.<sup>71</sup>

As consumption's importance grows, its paradoxes become more apparent. Affluent consumers, many of whom ostensibly support full social equality, continue to consume products and services produced and distributed by ill-remunerated workers in primary, secondary, and tertiary industries. Marketers, many of whose researchers ascribe to the tenets of political correctness and certain understandings of postmodernism, continue to advertise their commodities in sexist, racist, and classist ways. Multinationals, which produce goods bought by Canadian consumers, are closing Canadian branch plants and moving their operations to Economic Processing Zones (EPZs), where labour and environmental policies are often so lax as to be nonexistent. People in the consumer industries continue to be among the youngest, most unorganized, and most ill-treated of Canadian wage-earners, and the state continues to present itself as a neutral provider of its citizen-consumers' wants and needs.

And yet, there also exists a desire to change the way consumer society operates. Some people in Canada still organize around price controls, and several now fight for fair trade. Leading figures such as Naomi Klein are offering influential critiques of contemporary consumer culture, attacking the corporations and governments that are responsible for how production, distribution, and consumption are arranged.<sup>72</sup> Millions of young people are reading such critiques, expressing dissatisfaction with the organization of the contemporary marketplace at the local and global levels. For these reasons and others, Canadian scholars need to theorize and expand the field of Canadian consumer history. Such work will allow them to pinpoint how and why consumption has influenced Canada's cultural, material, and political histories. It will also allow them to address the implications of today's consumer interests. Most importantly, it will help them propose how Canada's inhabitants might start moving beyond consumption's contradictions in meaningful, positive manners.

*Thanks to Tom Mitchell, Bryan Palmer, Joan Sangster, Keith Walden, and Labour/Le Travail's anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.*

<sup>71</sup>Jameson, "Reification and Utopia," 147.

<sup>72</sup>Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Toronto 2000).