

Modernizing Tradition: Gender and Consumerism in Interwar France and Germany

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For obvious reasons, the inter-war period has long been a flourishing area of enquiry in German history; in comparison, the literature on France has looked like rather a poor relation. Certainly there has been a long-running debate about the nature and existence of French fascism, fuelled in part by the dominance of political history (and political science) within contemporary history in France. Since the 1990s, there have also been a number of stimulating contributions to the literature in English, such as Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes*, Daniel J. Sherman's *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* or Herman Lebovic's provocative *True France*.⁽¹⁾ Nonetheless, the historical output on French inter-war society and culture has been dwarfed by that on the Occupation and the history of collaboration and resistance. There are signs, however, that the inter-war period is now attracting sustained interest among English-speaking historians of France as recent studies by Laura Frader, Roxanne Panchasi and Elisa Camiscioli (as well as my own work on the culture of technicians) indicate.⁽²⁾ Adam C. Stanley's book might be seen in this context.

What distinguishes Stanley's study in this list is its comparative dimension. Franco-German comparative studies remain relatively rare but the question of gender and consumerism in the interwar period is certainly ripe for such a treatment, given the extent to which the existing national histories have explored parallel debates about 'the modern woman' and 'Americanization'. Stanley's study tackles these themes through an analysis of advertisements and promotional literature, the former drawn mainly from newspapers (with some reference to the illustrated press), the latter distributed notably by department stores and other retailers. Supported by 34 illustrations from this corpus of visual material, the book is divided into five thematic

chapters dealing in turn with representations of housewifery, motherhood, fashion and beauty, automobile culture and, finally, work and leisure. Each chapter deals with both countries and draws on evidence from across the 1920s and 1930s. Stanley's treatment of the sources often moves back and forward chronologically, mingling material from the late 1930s and the early 1920s and this is likely to raise questions in readers' minds about the extent to which it is possible to identify shifts in advertising discourse across the period, not least in the German case with the transition from Weimar to the Third Reich. Though he occasionally comments on this, Stanley's minimal attention to periodisation reflects his argument that definitions of masculinity and femininity were in fact remarkably stable in France and Germany in the interwar period (p. 11).

One of the central claims of the book is that these representations of men and women served to reassert gender differences and 'traditional' gender roles at a time when these were perceived to be under threat. As Stanley puts it, 'interwar French and German popular discourse sought to contain the allegedly liberated lifestyles of women by carrying out a reconstruction of definitions of femininity' (p. 8). Despite this, the first chapter emphasises empowerment rather than containment. Stanley rightly observes here that housework was increasingly represented in the interwar period as a respectable activity for middle-class women who, in a previous generation, would have been expected to have servants. Taking up Robert L. Frost's argument that a new domesticity was being constructed in inter-war France in which servants were replaced (symbolically as well as functionally) by domestic appliances, he suggests a similar logic was at work in both France and Germany, though in the latter case there was also a concern that material comforts might deprive the home of its 'soul'. For Stanley this new domesticity is a 'discourse of empowerment' for women, yet his own evidence reveals not so much a discourse about power or agency but one about the value or status of domestic work and the potential for feminine fulfilment within the domestic sphere. If the way in which domesticity was valorised here was certainly changing, the discursive strategy of valorisation itself was not new and given its historic role in contributing to women's exclusion from the public sphere and the labour market, it seems something of a leap to equate it with empowerment.

Elsewhere, Stanley's theme of containment comes through more strongly. In chapter four, for example, he shows how advertisements that featured a woman at the wheel of a car often responded to the potentially threatening nature of this image of female mobility and control by locating the use of the vehicle in a familial setting (pp. 114–7). Other ads used the female driver to emphasise the simplicity of the vehicle or pictured women turning to men for help when they ran into mechanical problems (pp. 122–6). In this way, while women were commonly constructed in both France and Germany as users of technology, technical knowledge continued to be represented as the preserve of men in these sources. Although in general Stanley finds more similarities than differences between the French and German corpuses he examines, his comparison of the representation of women drivers does throw up one notable point of contrast, as he observes that the representation of familial use of cars by women was in fact less prevalent in Germany than in France and that such imagery declined visibly in Germany in the mid to late 1930s. This retreat from an emphasis on purely domestic or maternal roles for women coincided with a shift in the discourse and policy of the Nazi government, he notes, for it was around this time that the government began to see women not just in terms of their reproductive function, but as an essential source of labour to support its remilitarisation plans.

This raises the question of the relationship between advertising discourse and other discursive fields such as political propaganda and hence the broader question of who is speaking in a given situation and in what conditions a particular discourse is produced. Though Stanley reiterates his interest in the discursive throughout the book, he takes surprisingly little account of these questions. His corpus of 'consumption-related sources' (p. 10) includes government propaganda for Nazi welfare organisations as well as commercial material and, while there may be good reasons to consider such material side by side, it would have been helpful to have a fuller discussion of the rationale for this. For example, in what sense and to what extent should publicity for a government programme such as *Hilfswerk Mutter und Kind* be seen as the same kind of thing as a shampoo advert (as Stanley implies, for example, on p. 64)? What *was* the relationship between commercial advertising and political propaganda in Nazi Germany? How does this compare with

the situation in France? To what extent did political discourse and commercial discourse converge and what does this tell us about gender, politics and consumer culture in this period?

In fact, despite its evidence base, Stanley's argument is not really about consumer culture at all. Instead, he makes a more ambitious claim for his sources, considering advertising materials not, as one might expect, in terms of an analysis of consumerism, but rather as an expression of what he variously terms 'the popular imagination' or 'French and German cultural ideology'. Such an approach poses some methodological problems that are only partially addressed in the relevant sections of the book's introduction. Certainly, Stanley points out that from the 1920s advertising became increasingly consumer-focused rather than product-focused – that is, it sought less to convey information about a product than to associate the product with ideals and aspirations that would appeal to potential consumers. He makes the case that, in such a context, the effectiveness of an advertisement rested on its ability to mobilise widely-held ideas and beliefs, and concludes that the attitudes expressed in such sources can be read as expressions of 'culture as a whole' (p. 22). National cultures thus appear in Stanley's analysis as monolithic blocs, with no plurality of voices. The process of mediation by which *particular* representations are constituted and disseminated by particular groups for particular purposes, such as selling goods or implementing government policies, is ignored. While it is perfectly reasonable to suggest that such representations tapped into existing or dominant ideologies, this surely does not mean that the work of advertisers and propagandists can be read off simply as expressions of some unanimous popular imagination.

There is a tension throughout the book between, on the one hand, Stanley's professed belief that 'culturally constructed categories are intrinsically dynamic and shifting' (p. 7) and, on the other, a mode of analysis which tends to reify culture. This tendency is worthy of comment partly because it situates Stanley's interpretation within a well-established historiography about 'modernity' and national identity in 20th-century Europe, a historiography in which 'modernity' tends to appear as an external force to which national cultures in 'Old Europe' must respond. This is particularly true of the work that has emerged from certain American historians of France, such as Richard Kuisel, Robert L. Frost or Marjorie Beale, on whose conceptual framework Stanley's analysis draws. What these authors offer is not so much a *cultural* history of 'modernization' but a *culturalist* one, a history which reproduces many of the assumptions that underpinned the work of an earlier generation of historians of France whose studies were more rooted in the social and political sciences and subscribed more explicitly to modernization theory.⁽³⁾ In the post-war historiography of both France and Germany, cultural traditions or mentalities were often treated as an explanation for alleged backwardness – as something that stood in the way of a 'normal' path of social, economic and political development. The rise of cultural history in the 1980s and 1990s is usually seen as representing a challenge to the dominance that modernization theory had enjoyed (especially in Germany) since the 1960s. Yet what culturalist historians such as Stanley provide is actually an amended version of the modernization narrative, in which gender relations become the test of 'modernity' but in which 'culture' still serves primarily to reassert tradition and national distinctiveness in the face of the threat of modernization.

This leads me to the question of what 'modernity' actually means in this context. Stanley's answer to this question is not very clearly delineated. He does claim that there is widespread scholarly agreement that 'consumption is utterly central to modernity' and observes that many interwar commentators saw 'consumer culture' as 'the very essence of modernity' (p. 14). What he seems to have in mind here is the emergence of a historically specific form of consumption or consumer culture associated with Fordist industrial capitalism, though this is not perhaps a term that he would use. 'Culture' seems to float free of any socio-economic dimension in Stanley's analysis (despite the fact that advertising so clearly has an economic as well as a cultural function). At the same time 'modernity' is equated with a particular set of socio-economic arrangements, embodied by 'American-style consumer culture' (p. 14), which are thus taken to embody a historical destiny towards which countries like France and Germany are being (somewhat reluctantly) dragged. Like old school modernization narratives then, the new culturalist narratives contain both a teleology and a cultural bias.

In some chapters, modernity appears to take on a more specific meaning, as Stanley equates 'modern sport', for example, with performance- and competition-centred activities, noting that these were gendered

masculine. The French female tennis champion Suzanne Lenglen (pp. 150–1) is seen as the exception that proves the rule. But to suggest that only competitive sport is ‘modern’ seems to narrow the focus unnecessarily and distracts attention from the evolution of other forms of physical culture in which women’s participation was more widely accepted, some of which are present in the advertising materials that Stanley discusses. A French winter sports advert from 1932, for example, shows an unaccompanied young woman with bobbed hair whizzing down a ski slope, with the words ‘joy’ and ‘health’ printed above her (p. 155). This image of speed and freedom of movement, not only offers an acceptable image of the ‘modern woman’ but speaks to the significance of the inter-war preoccupation with leisure and the healthy body (preoccupations which Stanley acknowledges elsewhere). While this image is very much of its time, Stanley’s concern is not so much with historicising such representations but with measuring them against an arbitrary and ahistorical standard of modernity. Whether the test of modernity is conformity with American-style mass consumption or (perhaps even more elusively) the achievement of gender equality, it is a test that is always destined to be failed. To my mind, this in itself raises questions about the usefulness of this approach as a framework for historical analysis.

Overall, then, *Modernizing Tradition* is a book that maintains rather than challenges the existing historiographical orthodoxies in the field but which applies this approach to a new corpus of material and moves beyond the existing single nation studies by offering a comparative perspective. Throughout the book, Stanley highlights the gendered nature of advertising imagery, noting in particular the limited repertoire of roles in which the women were represented in the interwar period. The analytical focus of the book is on mapping this gender differentiation and locating these findings within the debates about tradition and modernity in inter-war Europe. Other historians of gender ideology in a similar period, such as Mary Louise Roberts or Miranda Pollard, pursue more rigorously the conviction that culturally constructed categories are fluid and subject to change. They also do more to explain why discourse is important. Stanley belongs in a rather different school of cultural history which has perhaps inherited more from modernization theory than from feminism or from the type of gender history that was shaped by the reception of post-structuralism. In this sense, the questions I have raised here about methodology are partly questions about how we do cultural history.

Notes

1. Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes* (Chicago, IL, 1994); Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago, IL, 1999); Herman Lebovic, *True France* (Ithaca, NY, 1994). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See Laura L. Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens: Gender in the Making of the French Social Model* (Durham, NC, 2008); Roxanne Panchasi, *Future Tense: The Culture of Anticipation Between the Wars* (Ithaca, 2009); Elisa Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC, 2009); Jackie Clarke, *France in The Age of Organization* (New York, forthcoming). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jackie Clarke, ‘France, America and the meta-narrative of modernization: from postwar social science to the new culturalism’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 4 (2004), 365–77. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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