

Arwen P. Mohun
University of Delaware

All rights reserved

Consumption is Work or Why the Consumption Junction is a Labor Junction

A confession up front: I don't usually think of myself as a historian of consumption. Historian of technology, industrialization, labor, gender—these labels all fit more comfortably. It's not that I haven't spent a lot of time thinking about consumers—I have. Most of that thinking has been about why people choose to purchase and/or use certain technologies rather than others.¹ And, more recently, I've thought a lot about commodities and commodification—particularly about how ideas about risk get commodified.

Even for historians who think they're not interested in consumption, it's becoming increasingly difficult to dispute the significance of this subject for understanding the broad patterns of historical change. The process of industrialization now seems incomprehensible without taking consumption into account.² Moreover, the gender literature makes a convincing case that this is a crucial site for the formation of identity in the modern world.³ Perhaps my discomfort comes from the ambiguous boundaries of the

¹ Arwen P. Mohun, Steam Laundries: Gender, Technology, and Work in the United States and Great Britain, 1880-1940 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). Like many historians of technology, I'm particularly indebted to the work of Ruth Schwartz Cowan for helping me think about these questions. See More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave (New York: Basic Books, 1983) and "The Consumption Junction: A Proposal for Research Strategies in the Sociology of Technology" in The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology, Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor Pinch, eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987): 261-280.

² Perhaps most influentially Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England (London: Hutchinson, 1982).

³ See, for example Victoria de Grazia with Ellen Furlough, eds., The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

field (what is a “consumer” anyway?) but as a historian of technology, I’m used to mushy disciplinary boundaries.

The real problem, I’ve concluded, rests in assumptions underlying much of the mainstream consumption historiography. To begin with, the dichotomization of production and consumption is a frequently used to draw boundaries around the field. The history of consumption tends to become whatever is “not production.”⁴ I’m wary of decoupling production from consumption or cutting production out of the analytic picture entirely. Moreover, I worry about the tendency among cultural historians to “black box” the material aspects of what is being consumed. How things work (in a material sense) is as important as what they mean to consumers. However powerful their symbolic functions, washing machines still have to wash clothes, automobiles still have to travel from one point to another, and umbrellas still have to keep off the rain. Finally, as I’ll argue at length in the rest of this paper, consumption can be a leisure activity or an exercise in the construction of identity, but it is also about work, paid and unpaid.

So, what would happen if we thought of consumption as involving work and work as a useful subject of study for understanding consumption? What if we asked: how is the process of making, buying, and using goods a process of deciding how work will be done, who will do it, and how much it will be worth (in financial or other terms)? Suppose we thought of the processes of consumption as involving a variety of skills susceptible to the same historical processes of deskilling, mechanization, and reskilling as wage labor.

⁴ The advertising and marketing literature is the somewhat perverse exception. It deals with the production of meanings rather than things. I suspect this exception is the result of the historiographical accident of historians believing that one could understand consumers by looking at advertisements.

Why bother? Firstly, simply to assert the historical realities that work (paid and unpaid) isn't necessarily analytically separable from shopping and that people consume material things for material as well as symbolic reasons. Taking on this framework can also help make visible some of the problematic assumptions of the producer/consumer dichotomy. If consumption is a site from which to consider the formation of identity, considering work might provide some continuity between the identity of "consumer" and the rest of our subjects' lives. It might also help inject social class and class relations into the discussion of consumption in a way that goes beyond how much money one has to spend or how the symbolic meanings of objects consumed assert class distinctions.

* * *

If this is an exercise in rethinking consumption, let's begin by reconsidering a piece of the master narrative of industrialization as many of us learned it. The story I have in mind describes how the home came to be the center of consumption and the industrial workplace the center of production. Work moved out of the kitchen, the barn, and the workshop and into the factory and the office. Wage labor came to substitute for subsistence or self-employed labor. Mechanization deskilled both domestic and wage workers. As a result, people bought what they once would have made, using the wages they earned making something for somebody else. Or, if one follows the narrative very explicitly, women bought what they once would have done or made using the money their menfolk earned or expropriated from the process of making something for someone else.⁵

⁵ In some versions, this narrative also implies a prelapsarian Eden of pre-modern consumption. As Paul Glennie describes it: "Modern consumption (however defined) is juxtaposed to a dichotomous phenomenon

While this narrative isn't necessarily wrong, it can be misleading. In particular, it is very easy to overexaggerate the completeness of the process. Even in the 21st century, most consumer goods are used by consumers in ways that require further work.

Appliances are not ends in themselves; they are tools that facilitate (largely) unpaid domestic labor. Automobiles are technologies employed in the work of transporting people and objects from place to place. Many products are ingredients or elements which consumers use to create a final product or to make a process faster or easier.

Industrialization has removed **steps** from the home, but not the whole process.

Foodstuffs, cleaning products, and all that stuff at Home Depot are means to an end as well as ends in themselves. Even consumer goods that require no further assembly, still need repair--forms of work that must be done by the user or a third party. It is quite striking how willing consumers are to accept new technologies (such as automobiles and photocopiers) that they know will require regular fixing and maintenance. With the exception of knick-knacks from the Franklin Mint, very few consumer goods go directly from point of purchase to a comfortable home on a dusty shelf, requiring no more effort on the part of their owners.

If this is true now, it was even more true fifty, one hundred, or two hundred years ago. Furthermore, because of the incompleteness of industrialization, consumers are rarely just shoppers; they are also real or potential producers or competitors for work that might also be done in industrial capitalist settings. Because industrial capitalism also relies on novelty and technological innovation to fuel the market and aid competition, consumers are continually confronted with products they must learn how to use.

called pre-modern consumption, in which people are 'users of things', engaged in a natural activity oriented to use values rather than consumers of commodities (even though most would admit that any task oriented

Consumer capitalism both inside and outside the home is not only a process of deskilling but also reskilling—learning how to do new forms of work.

How does work get distributed among producers and consumers? The question is intimately tied to the valuation of work itself. Consumers are willing to pay for the labor of others when they believe the cost is a fair tradeoff for the labor they would otherwise have to do themselves. Is it cheaper to make it one's self? Is it worth the time involved? One does not have to look very deeply to realize that both social structure and cultural meanings complexify this seemingly straightforward economic equation. For instance, the low market value of women's work throughout the 19th (and perhaps the 20th century) was influenced by identification with unpaid domestic labor.⁶ By the same token, middle class women have long benefited as shoppers and employers of domestic workers from this same undervaluation.

It's also important to recognize that labor saving (or "convenience" as it's often called) and money saving are not always the highest priorities for consumers. Even in a market economy, the calculus of how much a good or service is worth is not just a question of economics.⁷ Since at least the 1920s, home economists and advertisers have been trying to attach a cash value to the work of housewives, often to make the argument that it should be farmed out as wage work. This assertion ignores the value implicit in who does the work. Unpaid labor and consumption of certain kinds might seem uneconomical and irrational, but are rewarded socially. This might be termed the "Martha

society is hard to find." From Paul Glennie, "Consumption Within Historical Studies" [full cite] 165.

⁶ Jeanne Boydston, Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) xviii.

⁷ Cowan, More Work, 149-150.

Stewart phenomena”—one pays more and does more work. Conspicuous consumption sometimes involves conspicuous labor.

Consumers must also enter the market when they lack the knowledge, skill, equipment, etc. to do a process themselves (e.g. grind flour). One could argue that the transference of domestic processes to the marketplace and the factory often involve a transitional period in which a substantial number of consumers can still make a product or do a process themselves. Technological innovations and social trends can also reverse this transference, temporarily or permanently. Wendy Gamber’s work on the introduction of paper patterns, for instance, illustrates how dressmaking temporarily and partially moved back into the home in the late 19th century.⁸ Very cheap factory made clothing has now reversed the trend again. Since fewer and fewer people own a sewing machine or even a needle and thread (let alone the requisite knowledge), they no longer have the option of making their own clothes.

Many of the generalizations made above are based on scholarship about the middle and upper classes. We know much less about the calculus of work and consumption in the context of scarcity.⁹ The industrial proletariat was drawn into the marketplace by some of the some of the same factors described above, but lack of time and lack of access to alternative modes of domestic production probably played a more significant role.¹⁰ I think in particular of Sidney Mintz’ descriptions of the changing diet of workers to tea,

⁸ Wendy Gamber, “Reduced to Science: Gender, Technology, and Power in the American Dressmaking Trade, 1860-1910,” *Technology and Culture* 36 (July 1995): 455-82.

⁹ A notable exception is Susan Porter Benson’s recent work, see “Gender Generation, and Consumption in the United States: Working Class Families in the Interwar Period” in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and “Living on the Margin: Working-Class Marriage and Family Survival in the United States, 1919-1941,” in *The Sex of Things*.

sugar, and bread—making a meal that was quick to put together out of ingredients pre-prepared in industrial processes.¹¹ Susan Strasser’s work on trash, suggests a 19th century urban proletariat for whom the work of domestic production involves remaking and reusing industrially produced items rather than conversion of raw materials into usable forms.¹² What about farmers and slaves? How do ethnicity and race shape these patterns?

Where work gets done also depends on what is technologically possible. Changing the way things are done or made is an inherently haphazard, piecemeal, and risky process. While new technologies partly result from producers responding to their perception of what the market will bear (or the idiosyncratic inventive itch¹³), generations of frustrated inventors, engineers, and entrepreneurs have come to the bitter realization that one cannot just wave a magic wand to get a functional technology. Some products or work processes are stubbornly resistant to adaptation to factory methods, systematization, or mechanization. As anyone who has ever tried to eat canned bean sprouts knows, it is particularly difficult to transcend the organic—which partly explains why so much food production still goes on in the home.

By the same token, some processes, which are relatively cheap and easy to carry out in an industrial setting, resist mechanization in the home. Pin-making and nail-making are not likely to return to the basement workshop anytime soon. It is technically difficult to work metal economically on a small scale and nails and pins are, by their nature, not

¹⁰ For a provocative discussion of this question, see Gary Cross, “Time, Money, and Labor History’s Encounter with Consumer Culture,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 43 (Spring 1993): 2-17 and responses in the same volume by Michael Rusin and Victoria de Grazia.

¹¹ Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995) 116.

¹² Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999) [p #]

¹³ See for example, Robert Friedel, *Zipper: An Exploration in Novelty* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).

the kind of objects of conspicuous display that lend themselves to the Martha Stewart Syndrome.

To complicate matters further, consumers and producers do not always agree on a definition of what is functional even after a product has reached the market. Computer software firms routinely put their products on the market without debugging them to the satisfaction of their customers. Mechanized laundries in the 1920s counted on destroying or losing up to 5% of the clothes and linens they processed. As Joy Parr has shown, 1950s stove manufactures added bells and whistles that pleased salesmen more than female users.¹⁴

Products that do allow people to do work themselves, products that take out steps or reconfigure domestic processes, and novel forms of domestic work also require instruction or “reskilling”. Getting consumers to believe that they need or want a new product is only the first step. New products cannot be successfully marketed if the consumer has no way of knowing how to use the product or if use is so frustrating or time consuming that pre-existing alternatives remain more appealing.¹⁵

Traditionally, new tools or products were introduced by word of mouth. Often the maker taught the buyer how to use the product. Despite the growing distance between

¹⁴ Joy Parr, “Shopping for a Good Stove: A Parable About Gender, Design, and the Market,” in His and Hers: Gender, Consumption, and Technology Roger Horowitz and Arwen Mohun, eds. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998) 165-188.

¹⁵ Sociologists of technology describe this phenomenon in terms of the roles of consumers and producers in “redistributing competences.” See Madeleine Akrich, “The De-Description of Technical Objects,” 206 and Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour, “A Summary of a Convenient Vocabulary for the Semiotics of Human and Non-Human Assemblies,” 262 both in Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change, Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law, eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). For some historical examples of consumer reactions to new technologies, see Carolyn Marvin, When Old Technologies were New: Thinking about Electric Communications in the Late Nineteenth Century (New York: Oxford, 1988); Claude S. Fischer, America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). See also Ronald Kline and Trevor Pinch, “Users as Agents of Technological Change: The Social Construction of the Automobile in the Rural United States,” Technology

producers and consumers, instruction and advice remains a widespread part of the sales process. During the consumer-durable revolution of the 1910s through the 1940s, producers and retailers resorted to a corps of specialized experts to demonstrate and instruct on the use of new technologies, especially those identified with domestic labor.¹⁶

To my knowledge, appliance demonstrations have largely gone the way of the side-mounted wringer, perhaps because the technologies are no longer novel. The most persistent forms of advice giving and instruction seem to involve body technologies—clothes, makeup, etc.—and high status purchases to which personal attention adds value.¹⁷ Alison Clarke's recent book on Tupperware also suggests that teaching consumers how to "burp" their Tupperware, helped distinguish it from other plastic containers in the marketplace and in the popular imagination.¹⁸

When the seller isn't the producer, instruction at the point of purchase can be problematic for a number of reasons. The selling process gives power to salespeople to decide who's going to get the knowledge they need to use a product effectively and who isn't. Hardware and automobile parts stores are two classic examples of places where a lot of advice gets passed out, but women don't necessarily get the same advice as men (this differential instruction is probably also raced and classed). Is there a female gendered consumption space where men don't get told what they need to know?

and Culture 37 (October 1996): 763-795 for a historical example of the concepts of "closure" and "interpretive flexibility" of new consumer products.

¹⁶ Carolyn Goldstein has termed these experts "mediators". See "From Service to Sales: Home Economics in Light and Power, 1920-1940," *Technology and Culture* 38 (January 1997): 121-152 and "Mediating Consumption: Home Economics and American Consumers, 1900-1940," Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1994.

¹⁷ See, for example Tina Manko, "Avon Ladies and Fullerbrush Men," forthcoming University of Delaware Ph.D. dissertation; Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998)

¹⁸ Alison Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999).

Sellers don't always have adequate knowledge to teach consumers how to use a product or to help a consumer choose which product will best help them do the kind of work they want to do. Since learning often involves doing instruction at the point of purchase also can involve a longer-term commitment to consumers that is uneconomic for retailers. I would also suspect that as the cost of labor has risen over the last century, service in the form of instruction has gradually disappeared out of retailing.

Written instructions offer an alternative. Whether directions on the back of a box of cake mix or a computer manual, they allow producers to communicate more directly with consumers. Written instructions also cut out the uncomfortable personal relationships that consumers sometimes dread and allow producers to offer caveats and disclaimers. Some forms of directions such as recipes on cans and boxes can also create a form of chain consumption. The rice crispies treats recipe offers a classic example: "add one package of Kraft marshmallow cream, one stick of Kraft margarine..."

In a society saturated with this kind of instruction, we tend to take for granted the inventive process that has gone into figuring out how to transmit this kind of information. It's also easy to overlook the amount of tacit knowledge consumers must have in order to interpret and successfully use instructions. As a form of communication between producers and consumers, instructions deserve more attention from historians.¹⁹

Learning to use new technologies is only one of many ways shopping involves work. The marketplace, by definition, creates adversarial relationships between buyers

¹⁹ I know of no published research that specific connects instructions with consumer products. However, several historians have explored the process through which technical ideas came to be embodied in symbolic forms. See Eugene Ferguson, *Engineering and the Mind's Eye* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) and Alfred Crosby, *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250-1600* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). See also Graham Tomlinson, "Thought for Food: A Study of Written Instructions," *Symbolic Interaction* 9 (Fall 1986): 201-216.

and sellers. Sellers want to maximize price, buyers want a bargain. Sellers want to hide flaws in their wares, buyers want to discover those flaws. “Caveat emptor” –buyer beware, the law warns. The buyer who comes to the marketplace without previous experience will pay the price.

Learning how to consume—how to engage in the social interactions of buying, how to judge products, is an increasingly important life skill children in a cash economy must acquire. Because consumers in an industrial society are continually being confronted with new options, they must also constantly re-educate themselves. We also take for granted the extensive amount of tacit knowledge consumers, particularly female consumers, have about consumer products. That knowledge is also not evenly distributed. Children are notoriously susceptible to hucksters of all varieties because they have not yet learned these skills. Other dishonest producers and brokers target the vulnerable on the basis of poverty, gender, or position outside information networks (e.g. farmers and rural people).²⁰

For nearly as long as there have been marketplaces, the state and its agents have been third parties to the negotiations between buyers and sellers. The traditional role of the state was to protect the ignorant buyer from sellers’ deceits, thereby doing some of the work of consumption. However, the triumph of caveat emptor as a legal principle in the 1840s meant the most heated years of industrialization were characterized by courts that avoided stepping in to protect consumers from fraud or negligence on the part of producers. Consumers rarely successfully sued for accidents caused by defectively

²⁰ On some of the ways women learned the “art of consumption” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, see Susan Porter Benson, Countercultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 79.

manufactured products unless they had bought that product directly from the maker until 1917. Injuries from poorly designed products were not compensable until 1957.²¹

Novel products also made the work of consumption more challenging. How was one to judge the soundness or functionality of a product one had never seen before; how to estimate what constituted a fair price? To complexify matters, producers themselves often didn't know how a product would perform. In effect, the state asked consumers to bear some of the costs of the uncertainty of new products. The safety and effectiveness of new products (especially technologies) was often tested in the marketplace, the public street, and the home. It is mostly since the consumer rights movement and tort revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, that the regulatory state and civil court system has done an increasing amount of the work of assessing the safety and effectiveness of consumer products (the Pure Food and Drug Act of course regulated these substances much earlier).

The work of selling can also literally be redistributed between producers and consumers through the reorganization of shopping and the introduction of new technologies. The general trend in retailing over the last century has been to convince consumers to take on the work of selling themselves goods. Self-service grocery stores such as Piggly Wiggly in the 1920s and more recently self-service gas stations embody this tendency. A variety of ingenious technologies facilitates self-service. The packaging revolution of the 1880s and the introduction of cellophane wrapping in the 1930s freed consumers to select products from the shelves without help from a grocer. Vending

²¹ John Kolb and Steven S. Ross, Product Safety and Liability: A Desk Reference (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1980) 8-11

machines, catalogues, and on-line shopping also provide ways for consumers to sell goods to themselves.²²

Consumers are most willing to sell to themselves when the cost of a product is a primary concern. Or they may prefer to serve themselves rather than endure the work of interacting with a salesperson and the scrutiny of their personal choices (cigarettes and condoms). Self-service also broadens the range of hours and locations at which goods may profitably be sold, allowing consumers to shop at their own convenience. (the coke from the machine in the basement at 2 am). Other forms of self-service such as catalogue shopping don't eliminate the work of selling but rather redefine it, making it possible to shop at a distance. Consumers aren't willing to give up personal service with high status purchases or purchases where value added comes from instruction or advice. The main point of self-service, of course, is to save employers wages and to deskill and control employees. It is part and parcel with the adoption of other techniques and technologies aimed at controlling work at the point of sale: cash registers, scanners, and UPC codes.

Finally, why do we find it difficult to think about consumption as involving work, particularly the unpaid work of consumers? When we exchanged rough drafts of our papers, Susan Strasser and I discussed this question. She suggested that in our culture, we don't think of work as pleasurable and we don't think of work as something one does outside the wage nexus. On reflection, I suspect we do think of consumption as work but work of a very peculiar, very gendered kind. Women justify shopping as a time-consuming activity because it is part of their cultural job. \$45 and two hours spent finding the perfect pair of shoes is more justifiable than \$45 and two hours spent at the

²² I began thinking about this in response to Chris Rasmussen's paper for the Hagley seminar on vending machines. [cite]

symphony even if those shoes are never worn again (unless one is doing the cultural work of self-improvement). Part of the pleasure of shopping for women resides in the sense of a job well done. Most men don't allow themselves to participate in this pleasure (and aren't rewarded for it) except when a well-executed purchase involves forms of expertise defined as masculine such as buying a car, or when a purchase (usually of tools in the narrowest sense of the term) is explicitly recognized as a step towards doing some kind of productive labor.

Conclusion

I'm doubtful that rethinking the history of consumption is going to result in any single grand synthesis. From the outsider's view, the emerging historiography of consumption suggests persistent fragmentation. It is tenuously located in time and place - did the consumer society emerge in 17th century England or late 19th century America? Ambiguous as to subject and agency—what is a “consumer” anyway? Is one a consumer at all times (like being a worker or a woman) or only at the moment of consumption? And what is “consumption”? Shopping? Thinking about shopping? Using what one has bought?

Besides, these ambiguities are too useful. Any effort to harden definitions (consumers are shoppers) seems to lead down the path to trivialization. Instead, perhaps rethinking consumption is most useful for reconsidering old questions in new perspectives and for sharing questions across disciplinary lines when we might not otherwise have anything to talk about.