

MODERNITY TAMED? WOMEN SHOPPERS AND THE RATIONALISATION OF CONSUMPTION IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

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Virginia Woolf and Oxford Street

I was flicking through a coffee table collection of *The Best of Good Housekeeping 1922 - 1939* (Braithwaite 1989) in pursuit of personal accounts of consumption in the interwar years when I came across an article about Oxford Street - 'Oxford Street Tide' - by Virginia Woolf, first published in January 1932. Could this be *the* Virginia Woolf? I wonder, surprised to find work by her in this context. But yes, it is. The introductory editorial caption to what *Good Housekeeping* calls a 'word picture' reads: 'in the beautiful precision of its language and thought this reveals the name of its distinguished author - Virginia Woolf'. 'Precision', however, is not what strikes me first about this piece. I read it through trying to establish what Virginia Woolf's view of Oxford Street and shopping is, but she is elusive and ambivalent: alternatively disdainful and sympathetic. Is this one of the 'odd jobs cadged from newspapers in order to make a living' that Woolf refers to in *A Room of One's Own* (1963:39)? Some of the prose seems careless and unedited, florid even. The early part of the essay is dominated by an extended metaphor of nature: Oxford Street is 'the pebbly bed of a river whose stones are forever washed by a bright stream' where 'slips of coloured paper expand into bristling forests of splendidly tinted flora - a subaqueous flower garden' (1989:138). Meandering through this allegorical landscape is a drawn out comparison between the 'stately mansions of the Dukes of Somerset and Northumberland, the Earls of Dorset and Salisbury whose stately mansions lined the Strand in ancient days' and the 'modern aristocrats' - 'the great Lords of Oxford Street' - whose impermanent 'sugar icing palaces' now line the banks of this 'river of turning wheels'. And so it goes.

But there does seem to be an argument here too. Early on in the piece Woolf identifies a set of opinions about Oxford Street, even though she remains reticent about her own:

Oxford Street... is not London's most distinguished thoroughfare. Moralists have been known to point the finger of scorn at those who buy there and they have the support of the dandies. In Oxford Street there are too many bargains... The buying and selling is too blatant and raucous. But... the garishness and gaudiness of the great rolling ribbon of Oxford street has its fascination... Everything glitters and twinkles (Woolf 1989:138).

I read backwards and forwards, anxious to pin her down, but I am not able to judge how much irony inflects her prose when she commends first the 'twinkling' in the street and later the 'new Lords' of commerce, who are, she says:

as magnanimous as any Duke or Earl who... doled out loaves to the poor at his gates. Only their largesse takes... the form of excitement, of display, of entertainment, of windows lit up by night... They give us the latest news for nothing. Music streams from their banqueting rooms free. You need not spend more than one and eleven to enjoy all the shelter that high and airy halls provide; and the soft pile of carpets, and the luxury of gifts, and the glow of fabrics, and carpets and silver (1989:139).

Is this a textual strategy, an example of her refusal 'to be confined to one unifying angle of vision', a deliberate technique to represent 'multiple shifting perceptions' (Moi 1985:3)? Or is Woolf simply uncertain about what she thinks? How significant is it that her voice wavers, that she appears both to disparage and quite like what she represents to us as vulgar and superficial? But then as she proceeds, there seems to be a shift, her argument firms up and her depiction of Oxford Street ephemera becomes less equivocal, more generous. It is as though she has made up her mind in the course of writing:¹

The moralists point the finger in scorn... [at] the levity, the ostentation, the haste and irresponsibility of our age. Yet... The charm of modern London is that it is not built to last: it is built to pass. Its glassiness, its transparency, its surging waves of coloured plaster give a different pleasure and achieve a different end from that which was attempted by... the nobility of England. Their pride required the illusion of permanence. Ours, on the contrary, seems to delight in proving that we can make stone and brick as transitory as our own desires... We knock down and rebuild as we expect to be knocked down and rebuilt. It is an impulse that makes for creation and fertility. Discovery is stimulated and invention on the alert (Woolf 1989:139).

Here Woolf shows an unambiguous and, for 1932, a quite unusual, appreciation of the ingenuity and temporality of mass culture and modernity, and I will come back to what it might mean for a distinguished modernist and feminist author of her moment to take up such a position. First though, a comment on this 'we' she refers to so intriguingly: how should this collectivity be understood? Is it simply a stylistic convention, or should it be read as polemical assertion, a deliberate challenge to the reproving moralists and traditionalists of the moment? The latter I think. In my reading, Woolf's 'we' encompasses those who occupy and live off and through the shopping streets of the metropolis: the shop owners, the builders, the shop assistants, the customers, the onlookers like herself. Implicitly it acknowledges a new alliance of modernisers, however contradictory and unstable, and in this sense is emblematic of the modern democratising (and largely feminine) consumer culture which, as I will show, becomes increasingly entrenched and at the same time normalised during the interwar years. In Woolf's final paragraph, the representatives of the new alliance are treated sympathetically by her as they respond to the insistent accusations of the moralists and elitists who cling to the imperatives of an earlier regime:

True, says the great merchant, I am not thinking of educating the mass to a higher standard of aesthetic sensibility. It taxes all my wits to think how I can

display my goods with the minimum of waste and the maximum of effectiveness...I grant, says the middle-class woman, that I linger and look, and barter and cheapen...(that) I grab and pounce with disgusting greed. But my husband is a small clerk in a bank; I have only fifteen pounds a year to dress on; so here I come; to linger and loiter and look, if I can, as well dressed as my neighbours (Woolf 1989:132).

So finally Woolf's reflections in this unlikely piece of mass-circulation journalism lead her to invent and defend (albeit not unreservedly) what Marshall Berman has more recently called a 'modernism of the streets' (Berman: 1982). Woolf, the high modernist, also salutes popular pleasures: in this instance the ostentatious, the magical, the cheap, the fleeting. Like Berman she gives credit to the everyday processes and visions of modernity which allow ordinary men and women to become subjects as well as objects of their worlds (Berman 1982:16), to imagine a better future and transform the materiality of their lives - or at least of surface appearances - to improve the *look* of things. There is no doubt that Woolf was ahead of her time in her appreciation of these elements, as prescient, brave and experimental in this little-known rather clumsy piece as she was in her celebrated fiction and political essays. Indeed the very act of writing for *Good Housekeeping*, a popular magazine for women, ensured that the divisions between high, middlebrow and mass culture would be challenged and the concerns and pleasures of women foregrounded. Here as elsewhere she wrote against the current: 'I do my best work and feel most braced with my back to the wall. It's an odd feeling though, writing against the current: difficult entirely to disregard the current' (Woolf 1953, cited in Barrett 1979:4).

At the centre of the intellectual current against which she was braced were contemporary figures such as F R and Q D Leavis, among the most scathing and elitist critics of mass culture and popular writing and quite possibly models for 'the moralists' in Woolf's 'Oxford Street Tide'.² The Leavises were not alone however in adopting a highly critical and patronising response to mass entertainment and the 'feminisation' of popular culture, and moreover in making the links to the expansion of commerce and advertising. Such attitudes were widespread among critics of both the left and right during the nineteen thirties and forties, and occurred (with variations) in Germany and the USA as well.³ Indeed it was rare to find an intellectual anywhere who was prepared to consider seriously whether there might be positive implications of mass culture; even cinema was disregarded, let alone consumption and the expansion of metropolitan shopping streets.⁴ In this sense then Virginia Woolf's odd and marginal essay represents a breakthrough. It anticipates the tone of much more recent cultural studies work on popular culture and consumption (indeed even postmodernism in its appreciation of surface and parody) and appears to belong to a much more modern feminism insofar as it marks out and validates the terrain of everyday feminine experience and pleasures (since of course the shoppers on Oxford street were overwhelmingly women). In its recognition of an alliance of modernisers it contentiously refuses the simple theoretical polarities of class or of 'educated' and 'uneducated'. Implicitly it affirms the notion of a significant popular modernism worthy of the attention of cultural critics.

But this attention is complicated. My project in this article is to explore the widespread normalisation of shopping and the consolidation of consumer culture in England in the interwar period, and particularly in the nineteen thirties. Virginia Woolf's reflections in *Good Housekeeping* are worth looking at in this context, not merely because her concession

to the financial, social, aesthetic and libidinous economy of Oxford Street is interesting in itself, but also because it is ultimately part of a much more extensive, albeit contradictory, interwar discursive network, which includes market research, Marks & Spencer and Hollywood cinema, in which modern consumption is increasingly known, represented, rationalised and managed.

Modernity and Department Store Shopping Before World War I

In order to understand how this happens and what the components of this discursive network are it is necessary to go back to developments at the turn of the century, the period widely accepted as the high point of 'modernity'⁵ - a relatively disordered moment in which department store shopping was at its peak in all the major cities of the western world. The significance of this for women and for theorisations of modernity and consumption have been addressed in an earlier piece of work (Nava 1996). There I locate women in terms of the conceptual and imaginative features of modernity, and at the same time construct a genealogy of absence - I explore why consumption has been so neglected in the critical literature. This article is intended as a second instalment, and in order to develop my argument I need to sketch out briefly, as groundwork, the pertinent features of department store consumption for women of the middle classes prior to the First World War.

Shopping was of course both part of the wider economic process - the development of capitalism - and a leisure activity for upper-middle class women well before the emergence of the department store in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the department store marked a significant development. It coincided with improvements in urban public transport, an expansion in the production of ready made clothes and household goods, new methods of retailing, growing demand from a wider constituency of consumers and a social restlessness among many middle-class women for whom respectable meeting places in the city were limited. In this context the new stores offered much more than the sale of merchandise. They constituted an expansion of acceptable public space for women and provided a luxurious, modern and social venue in which to meet friends and be entertained, to learn about new fashions and commodities, and to develop consumer expertise. Often massive theatrical emporia, they offered a huge range of departments, products, entertainments and facilities (including restaurants, libraries, children's areas and delivery services) and were considered among the great show sights of the metropolis which visitors from the provinces and abroad would expect to see. Customers were encouraged to spend the day in the stores without obligation to buy, and in the years before restrictions were placed on hours of opening and the stores stayed open till late at night, and before the advent of radio and cinema, going shopping was certainly an excursion as well as work.⁶

Selfridges of Oxford Street was launched in 1909 by the American entrepreneur Gordon Selfridge and in the first week alone the store had an astonishing one and a quarter million visitors. The opening was a world event, reported on at length by the press throughout the colonies, in South Africa, Egypt, Jamaica and India.⁷ The newspaper cuttings do not comment on who the many ordinary visitors were, but everything we know about store customers suggests that they were overwhelmingly women. Indeed almost all of the forty five different full-page advertisements printed in the national newspapers in the week before the opening specifically address and aim to recruit women.⁸ So the stores were widely known for

their appeal to women. They were also increasingly associated in the public imagination with hedonism and the jettisoning of conservative values. The most reported event about Selfridges in the year following the launch was a private costume ball occupying three huge ballrooms and the entire roof garden of the store, where '4,000 lamps glittered in luxurious foliage'.⁹ The celebrated guests danced the tango, an exotic and subversive craze at the time (Savigliano 1995), to a rag-time orchestra until five in the morning when breakfast was served. The fascination with which the press reported the occasion is evidence that the association of the stores with glamour and modernity was established well before Hollywood stars were called on to promote consumption. The stores were also modern and must have been rather threatening in another sense as well, in that several of their owners (Gordon Selfridge in particular) were known to approve of women's emancipation (Leach 1984; Nava 1995); some stores loaned their premises for suffrage meetings while many supplied goods in purple, white and green, the symbolic colours of the struggle (Tickner 1987; Lancaster 1995). It must be remembered that the women's movement was at its most militant and conspicuous during the years preceding the war, so this unruly point of feminism coincided with the years in which the stores were at their most spectacular, innovative and commercially successful.

The imagined pleasures and dangers increasingly associated with shopping in metropolitan centres during this period were compounded by the public sense of women's growing, and sometimes uncontrolled and irrational, exercise of economic power. Women shoppers were often constructed (particularly in press cartoons at Christmas time¹⁰) as at once gullible, capricious, demanding and absurdly powerful. There were a few well-publicised cases of shoplifting by women from wealthy and respectable families (Abelson 1989). The fact that department store customers were often treated with extreme deference by male as well as female staff in an ambience of extravagant comfort and visual opulence added to the unease. In general therefore, the shopping experience provoked considerable anxieties, particularly among husbands and fathers constrained by more rationalised work places. So although the new stores intentionally constituted an expansion of acceptable public space for women, and although essential to economic growth, they were not unambiguously welcomed.

The Interwar Period: What did Women Want?

Store owners and managers were themselves confused about how to understand and treat their customers. What did they want? How could their tastes be catered to? How could they be satisfied? Women shoppers were not sufficiently predictable in marketing terms. This problem was exacerbated after the First World War in a context in which women's lives were to change quite markedly. The nineteen twenties saw a 'demographic crisis' of unprecedented proportions in which women of marriageable and working age heavily out-numbered men. Northcliffe (owner of the *Daily Mail*) was to describe this on a visit to America in 1921 as 'Britain's problem of two million superfluous women' and during the years following the war the popular press was full of hostile accounts of the new freedoms acquired and displayed by modern young women (Melman 1988:19). A number of authors (among them some of the moralists identified by Woolf) are critical of what they perceived as the 'feminisation' of England in the interwar period when women generally gained greater public visibility and wielded relatively more economic strength both on behalf of their families (real incomes for the employed working class and salaried middle class rose overall in the twenties and thirties¹¹) and on behalf of themselves as they were drawn increasingly into new sectors of

the labour market and influenced by Hollywood movies and the new women's magazines in their spending patterns and aspirations (Alexander 1995; Buckley 1995). One of these magazines was *Good Housekeeping* (aimed at a largely middle-class readership) which during the nineteen twenties frequently published challenging articles about marriage and work.¹² So how did these changes, which occurred across the social spectrum, relate to developments in consumption?

The information about English retailing practices during this period is still fairly sparse. We do know however that from the mid-nineteen twenties onwards many department stores (in both the United States and Britain) started slowly to decline from their earlier high points in terms of profitability and levels of service, despite an overall increase in consumption which was sustained - if unevenly - right through the depression (Filene 1938; Davis 1966; Porter Benson 1986; Stevenson 1984). They were unable to withstand the competition from the emerging chain stores. A number of factors contributed to this situation. First of all the comprehensiveness of merchandise and the convenience and comfort of the department store no longer had the same allure, even for middle-class women, who now had greater personal independence and other sources of entertainment. Chain stores were able to respond to the expansion of consumer demand for cheaper products and could offer goods at lower prices because they could take advantage of mass production, had lower operating costs, and provided fewer services - there were no door men, roof garden restaurants, orchestras and home deliveries - so they were inevitably going to be more popular with shoppers whose resources were limited (Rees 1969). They also offered a narrower range of goods so were less likely to suffer the costs of overproduction and supply. But one of the most significant factors in the transformation of both chain and department store shopping was the knowledgeableness of customers. As Edward Filene, the Boston department store owner put it, 'consumers are more value conscious and informed than ever before' (Filene 1938: xiii). Women shoppers were increasingly discriminating and business-like, and as a consequence they possessed what Christine Frederick, a keen contemporary advocate of 'efficiency in purchasing', called an 'ominous and ruthless power' (Marchand 1986:84).¹³ They were more likely to shop around for quality and good value, particularly in times of economic instability, as we saw the woman doing in Virginia Woolf's account. They could withdraw their custom and take it elsewhere if they wished.

Another factor which preoccupied shop owners and manufacturers during this period was fashion. The growing emphasis on the importance of new styles, matching colours, regular new clothes for all occasions and seasons at a range of quality and price levels, which was promoted partly by magazines, advertising and cinema and made possible by new fabrics like rayon, was commercially advantageous insofar as it contributed to enhanced production and demand (Lynd 1933). It was also increasingly widespread:

The American habit of buying cheap mass-produced goods for short use was a novel one to the British: it was gradually extended from clothes to shoes, handbags and household goods. If the old-fashioned shop assistants still mumbled 'I can guarantee this - it will last a lifetime', the modern come-back was 'Then for goodness' sake show me something else!' (Graves and Hodge 1991:178).

Yet although it was profitable, fashion also 'injected a new note of uncertainty and unpredictability into an already volatile retail environment' (Porter Benson 1986:109). Things went out of fashion as quickly and apparently capriciously as they came in, often despite magazines and advertising. It was difficult to keep track of what sold well and what did not, to supply where there was a demand and avoid overproduction. Retailers often had remarkably little information about customer preferences, what influenced shopping behaviour, and indeed even their own stock levels. Wholesale buying strategies were intuitive and usually based on traditional practices, much to the scorn of Filene, who recommended more of what he called 'scientific fact-finding' (Filene 1938) in order to understand what shoppers wanted (though his strategy was no guarantor of success either and will be returned to later).

Fluctuations in demand and astute yet fashion-conscious consumers were a concern for chain stores like Marks & Spencer as well. By the nineteen thirties there was a Marks & Spencer selling cheap goods in the high street of every major town and suburb in England, alongside other multiples like Woolworth's, Burton's, W. H. Smith and Sainsbury's. The major innovation of Marks & Spencer was its attempt to gauge the rapid changes in popular taste and aspirations and respond quickly by bypassing wholesalers and ordering directly from manufacturers (Rees 1969). Simon Marks first visited the United States in 1924 and wrote subsequently about how he encountered 'the value...of modern methods of administration and the statistical control of stocks in relation to sales', which enabled him to speed up the computation of necessary information from weeks to hours. The commercial success of Marks & Spencer relied on maintaining low prices which in turn depended on estimating what the consumer wanted. According to the store historian this was achieved by what he calls 'intimate day to day contact with the public' (Rees 1969:100). Marks & Spencer clearly made attempts to know the consumer and predict changes in taste but there is no evidence that their methods bore any relationship to the 'scientific fact-finding' recommended by Filene. Ultimately, despite gestures towards research, the retailing strategy of Marks & Spencer was based (as Rees acknowledges) on intuition and imagination rather than rationality (Rees 1969:78).

On the 1924 trip to the States, Marks also learned the importance of 'more imposing commodious premises' even for the sale of cheap good (Marks' autobiography cited in Rees 1969:61). The distinctive green and gold fascia of Marks & Spencer was introduced in 1924, and by the thirties the stores were becoming increasingly elegant and spacious, with high ceilings, wide aisles, walnut panelling, oak floors and diffused lighting. They 'tried to do for the mass of people what the great department stores had done for the middle classes' (Rees 1969:85). In 1932, the year Virginia Woolf wrote her *Good Housekeeping* essay, the Oxford Street branch of Marks & Spencer was honoured by a visit from the Queen; as a phenomenon it had arrived.

Mass Consumption and Suburban Modernity

The history of Marks & Spencer is interesting because it tells us about the spread of good quality, cheap, ready-made fashion and modern shop design to women of the working class and to the suburbs and the regions.¹⁴ Shopping in this kind of store was more modest than the department store, yet for many women it was popular and exciting nevertheless.

Attractive clothes made them feel good, enhanced their self esteem and enabled them to envisage a better future for themselves and their families: 'to *imagine* an end to domestic drudgery and chronic want' (Alexander 1995:205). Carolyn Steedman describes her mother's desire for glamour and commodities in these terms also, as a longing for things that a social system had withheld from her (1986:6). The appeal of fashion and make-up for working class young women - the much discussed attempts of factory girls to look like film stars - was an important element in the increase of the visibility of consumption and in the growth of its representation during the interwar period.

The massive expansion of house-building in the middle and lower middle-class suburbs and the development of new high streets for the new multiple stores was another significant factor in the conspicuous new universe of consumption. Shopping for the self, the family and the home was an everyday activity for a larger proportion of women than ever before. It was part of the new suburban domesticity which went with new houses and cheap mortgages, and was part of the process of becoming middle class. This new 'suburban modernity', as Deborah Ryan has called it, was on display each year at the enormous and hugely successful *Daily Mail* Ideal Home Exhibitions which promoted the most up-to-date goods and instructed visitors not only in the appropriate taste and lifestyle for people of their position, but also in skills of housekeeping and shopping. Its purpose was succinctly expressed by Winston Churchill at the 1934 opening of the exhibition:

This Ideal Home Exhibition goes on every year, giving pleasure to countless people, and guidance and instruction to very large numbers...It not only guides public thought and taste on these matters, but it is also stimulating those movements of optimism and progress, and above all expenditure which must be the most important elements in our social and economic regeneration (Pleydell-Bouverie 1944:20).¹⁵

Thus the Exhibition both incited and contained consumption. The suburban middle-class modernity which it represented was a *tamed* modernity, one regulated by a conservative desire to lead a more comfortable, labour-saving and private family life.¹⁶

The Exhibition was often ridiculed by English social commentators and intellectuals, along with other aspects of modern mass culture like the movies, variety chain stores, cheap and plastic 'luxuries' and tinned food, for being mass produced, popular, sentimental and Americanised. What exercised the critics so is not entirely consistent or clear. There was a widespread aversion to the suburbs which seemed to epitomise English dullness and narrow-mindedness as well as 'bad design'. Orwell in particular was afraid that cheap luxuries for the working class would avert the revolution (Orwell 1937) and the Leavises (Leavis 1932) that standards of taste were being 'levelled down'. In this general debate around the popular and consumption, accusations of greed and vulgarity co-existed with others of indolence and lack of control, and with yet others of boring predictability. The contempt and snobbery commonly attributed to the critics of the new mass culture in order to explain the diverse group of responses should perhaps be re-read as anxiety, as fear of being swamped, engulfed by hordes of women, and even consumed along with the cheap luxuries and tinned salmon.

Rationality and Irrationality

In any case what clearly emerges from the responses is a centre-staging of consumption and an unease about its perceived irrationality, even, paradoxically, where it was most rationalised; (Woolworths was often singled out as a target - the result of its symbolic positioning in the new order as American, modern, suburban, and cheap). Rationality and irrationality were major preoccupations in the commercial and advertising discursive worlds as well as among more literary groups. Most of the work on these sources so far has been done in the United States. Roland Marchand's extensive review of advertising agency records and trade magazines in the interwar years presents a fascinating picture of an industry quite unable to reconcile its own utterly distinct images of the women consumer (1986). (It must be said that Marchand himself makes no comment about these different representations which he reports to us in different sections of his book). Thus on the one hand (women) consumers are depicted in these sources - and often in the advertisements themselves - as conformist, impulsive, extravagant and easy to persuade, and on the other as rational, discriminating and astute.¹⁷ The rational consumer is part of a wider discourse of rationality in which the rhetoric of scientific management of the domestic sphere and modern business administration are together evoked increasingly in relation to buying and selling. During this period in America a growing number of advertisements construct the modern woman as the business executive of the home, as 'general purchasing agent' or GPA, with planning and decision making responsibilities (see for example the advertisement entitled 'Little Woman GPA' in which the executive housewife is standing at a modern desk surrounded by graphs, charts and telephones in Marchand 1986:169). Informed about new products and new technology, an authority on shopping, the housewife becomes the agent of domestic modernisation. This is also the image presented to us in women's magazines like *Ladies Home Journal* in America (Stein 1985) and the British *Good Housekeeping*, which are typically full of rational consumer advice throughout this period and present the woman consumer as a capable and knowledgeable person who derives pleasure from her expertise in shopping; these skills do not however preclude a more libidinous irrational pleasure in consumption derived from the physical adornment and nurturing of the self.

The American sociologist of everyday life, Robert Lynd (author with his wife Helen of the pioneering community study *Middletown*) was one of the few social scientists who showed an interest in these questions. In 1933 he produced a wide-ranging and detailed report entitled 'The People as Consumers' (for 'The President's Research Committee on Social Trends') which looked at issues such as the proliferation of consumer goods, changes in consumer spending and leisure patterns, the problem of overproduction, the development of branding, and so forth (Lynd 1933). Rationality and irrationality in relation to consumption were among his concerns also and the way in which he makes sense of their coexistence in the realm of shopping is to understand them as outcomes of the tension between unruly psychic impulses and the social values to which we must all adhere. In an uncharacteristically vivid and heartfelt sentence he says: 'Within each of us this exciting drama is played out in our every waking and sleeping hour until the end of the picture' (Lynd 1933:867). The tension is not however confined to the contradiction between infantile wants and societal expectations. Contemporary American society is also experiencing a conflict of historical significance between 'traditional' and 'modern' values in relation to consumption. Among these Lynd cites:

- The lingering Puritan tradition of abstinence which makes play, idleness and free spending sin; and the increasing secularisation of spending and the growing pleasure basis of society.
- The tradition that rigorous saving and paying cash are the marks of sound family economy and personal self respect; and the new gospel which encourages liberal spending to make the wheels of industry turn as a duty to the citizen (Lynd 1933:867).

The increasing pervasiveness of modern values and the need to be permissive in relation to the old moral imperatives in order to sustain and strengthen the economy, creates a social problem which requires, according to Lynd, more government intervention and the promotion of widespread consumer education by schools and other agencies. It is in this way, he implies, that the people's irrational impulses will be contained and deployed in a more productive manner:

The primary concern...is whether the government is prepared to give to the spending of the national income the same degree of concern that it at present bestows upon the earning of that income. Such coherent leadership is needed if schools and other agencies are to educate the individual consumer in the practice of the fine art of spending money (Lynd 1933:911).

So from a much more academic and policy oriented source we see the expression of similar concerns about the contradictions that beset consumption and the proposal of similar solutions. This kind of view also contributes to what emerges as a highly complex set of representations, in which elements from apparently distinct discursive fields combine into an uneasy web and the buying of things is increasingly marked out as an integral and necessary aspect of the new economic order, yet also unpredictable and untrammelled - fantasy as much as work. Shoppers (mainly women) are perceived to be full of contradictory responses and practices: at once irrational, capricious, pleasure seeking, and also 'ominously powerful' in their ability to withhold custom, shop for bargains and not reveal what it is that they want. It is from this nexus then that we see growing demands for a more disciplined and educated consumption, for a greater rationalisation and modernisation of retailing in order to increase efficiency,¹⁸ and above all, for more knowledge of the consumer, of what and how she buys, and increasingly of *why* she buys as she does, in order to develop a predictable and stable market.¹⁹ It must be remembered that underlying and compounding these insecurities about the shopper were the serious economic recessions and political crises of the interwar years.

Knowing the Consumer: Market Research and Mass Observation

This is the context in which the new 'discipline' of market research establishes its agenda. As far as I am aware, there is no authoritative critical historical account of the development of market and consumer research in America and Britain. The retailing and advertising histories that I have looked at offer different versions about when, where and how it started and when the term became current within the industry. There also are different opinions about what type of research was introduced and how valid or useful it was: retrospective readings suggest that most of it, in the United States as well as Britain, was haphazard, intuitive, and often

based on informal chats with customers or friends - as we saw in the case of Marks & Spencer (Rees 1969; Marchand 1986; Porter Benson 1986; Nevett 1982). Marchand claims about the United States that 'By present day standards...the research efforts of agencies were infrequent and often crude'; agencies derived their information about the public from popular cultural sources (such as women's magazines) and sociological surveys (1986:76). According to Nevett, American market research in the thirties in which researchers started 'to watch the housewife in the process of making purchases and investigated the contents of pantries and bathrooms' was treated by British advertisers with 'a high degree of scepticism' (Nevett 1982:150-1).

However some of the market research accounts of the nineteen thirties adhere, like much contemporary sociology, to a narrative of scientific truth: Filene, whom I have already mentioned, was a keen believer not only in the scientific management of retailing but also in the possibility of establishing by scientific means the fine detail of what customers really wanted (Filene 1938:293). Adler, writing in England in the nineteen fifties is another who insists on distinguishing what he calls scientific research from unscientific opinions, and whose own pretentious assertions I will quote for a bit of light relief:

Market research is a tool of management. It should be used only by responsible men who know how to handle it; for a tool can be dangerous. Put a sharp knife into the hands of a surgeon, and he may save a man's life. But it is also possible to cut one's finger on the same knife (Adler 1956:8).

What he feared that irresponsible men (or women) might actually do with the tool I leave the reader to speculate. His belief in the power of market research seems grounded as much in fantasy as scientific evidence.

Overall then there is no more consensus about the effectivity or usefulness of market research than there is about its origins. But the more general and important argument is that during this period, we see increasingly organised if still somewhat contingent and often crude attempts by advertisers and retailers to observe and classify the detailed tastes and habits of the consuming population in order to predict sales. The fact that these investigations are frequently haphazard and unreliable does not detract from their significance as constituent parts of a growing regime of 'knowledge' about the consumer. The relationship of this type of information to the regulation of populations must inevitably invoke the theoretical perspective of Foucault (Foucault 1972; 1980). Erica Carter, in her path-breaking analysis of consumption and femininity in Germany during the period after World War II (Carter 1997) has introduced into English the felicitously apposite German term for market research, *demoscopy*, which immediately makes the connection to surveillance, and which, Carter argues, drawing on Foucault, is a new 'science of government', part of a wider regime of knowledge-power, through which consumers in the market place are made subjects of disciplinary control and at the same time produced as citizens, as active subjects of the consumption and political processes.²⁰

Importantly then, Foucault's model is not only about 'disciplining' subjects. It is also about 'producing' them as visible and informed citizens. This extends the span of his regime of knowledge-power so that it encompasses also, for the period that we are looking at, the BBC listener research of the 1930s (Chaney 1987) and the British social survey, Mass-

Observation, which despite its academic provenance in anthropology and the social sciences and its declared political allegiance to the left, shares with market research the desire to know the thoughts, customs and taste of the people (Jeffrey 1978; Harrison and Madge 1986). The intention of Mass-Observation was to render visible the unnoticed accumulated detail of everyday beliefs and practices. Defining itself on the side of 'the people', it used qualitative research which drew on oral histories, private diaries and the people's own written accounts, and is therefore to be contrasted with the dominant approaches of market research. Nevertheless, in its scrutiny and recording of shopping habits, it too contributed to the proliferating discourses around consumption. It provided revelations about the practices of consumers which could be appropriated for the purposes of enhancing the stability of the market. These retailing implications, however, seem to have been largely unheeded at the time: in fact Mass-Observation, perhaps because of its left-wing associations, incurred much criticism from the right-wing press which accused it of 'prying' and 'eavesdropping' (Graves and Hodge 1991:402). The critics were right of course. Both the market researcher and the Mass-Observation scribe were part of what Denzin (1995) has called the emerging cinematic society in which the apparatus of cinema introduces new epistemologies of realism, and the 'voyeur's gaze' becomes increasingly ubiquitous, extending beyond the eye and frame of the camera to the social surveys and ethnographies which during this period remain founded on claims of truth and evidence.

What I have tried to describe in this article is a process and period in which consumption spreads increasingly into the employed sectors of the working class and recruits into its orbit larger numbers of people than ever before. It acquires an unprecedented economic, socio-moral and iconographic prominence. My object has also been to register the expanding regime of knowledge about the consumer - that is to say the growth in the *representation* of shops, shopping, shoppers and commodities - which, although massively dominated by marketing and advertising during this period, also includes contributions from women's magazines, the cinema, fiction and drama, journalism, critical comment and the social sciences. What this amounts to is an odd and often contradictory configuration of diverse imaginings, practices and epistemological frameworks which coalesce nonetheless into a complex network of knowledge. This set of representations operates, though inevitably in partial and uneven ways, to define and contain the woman consumer. Ideas about rational consumption and the housewife as manager become a means of regulating disorderly shoppers and in effect contribute to the management of consumption. Knowledge of the consumer, of her taste and aspirations as well as what she has to spend, contributes to a more predictable and stable retailing context, to a more domesticated market place. Yet in conclusion it is important to stress also that this process of normalisation and stabilisation, which gains so much momentum in the interwar years, is not inexorable. The market and consumption can never finally be contained. They are always precarious, always undermined by the complexity of psychic life, the anarchic nature of desire, the arbitrariness of fashion, the impossibility of market research²¹ and the acquisition of new knowledge (power) by the discriminating and sceptical woman consumer. As Porter Benson has put it: 'Customers, unlike store fixtures and accounting systems, are enduringly resistant to rationalisation' (1986:115).

Notes

1. This was indeed how she operated; see her *A Writer's Diary* (1953). Thanks to Sally Alexander for pointing this out to me.
2. Q D Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* was also published in 1932. Both Q D and F R Leavis write critically of Virginia Woolf in *Scrutiny* (Barrett 1979: 4 and 29). See also Alison Light (1991:161).
3. See eg Adorno and Horkheimer (1973) and Edmund Wilson cited in Leach (1994). For more recent comments on this type of perspective, see eg Hebdige (1988), Huyssen (1988), Carey (1992), Alexander (1995) and Nava (1992 and 1996).
4. Walter Benjamin was among the few, see eg Benjamin (1973) for cinema and his *Passagenwerk* for shopping, reconstructed by Buck-Morss (1989). See also Nava (1996) for further discussion of his approach to consumption.
5. See Alan O'Shea (1995) for an overview of the debates about this. For the position of women in modernity see Wolff (1985) and Nava (1996).
6. This history is drawn from a number of sources. See in particular Abelson (1989), Adburgham (1989), Bowlby (1985), Callery (1991) and Honeycombe (1984).
7. Press Cutting File, Selfridges Archive.
8. *Souvenir To Commemorate the Opening of Selfridge's 1909*, Selfridges Archive.
9. The ball took place on July 1st 1910. Press Cuttings File, Selfridges Archive.
10. Chris Hosgood, 'Christmas Shopping and Middle-class Culture in Victorian England', paper given at 16th Annual Conference of the Design History Society 'Design for Selling: The Culture and History of Shops, Shopping and Consumerism', Glasgow 16th-18th December 1994.
11. These figures are cited by John Stevenson (1984). The trend for the entire interwar period was up though the pace of increase was uneven and dipped somewhat during the early years of the depression, particularly in America (Hobsbawm 1994; Lynd 1933).
12. For instance 'Woman Earning Her Own Living', 'Should Married Women Work?', 'Should Wives Have Wages?', 'Superwoman in Business: Why are there not more?', 'To Marry or not to Marry?' all in Braithwaite et al (1989).
13. Frederick was a well-known writer in 'scientific home management' in the United States. The book referred to here, tantalisingly entitled *Selling Mrs Consumer* (New York Business Bourse 1929), is not available in Britain even at the British Library, an indication of how intellectually insignificant consumption has been thought to be.
14. See Buckley (1995) for an account how it contributed to the erosion of regional identity.

15. Thanks to Deborah Ryan for alerting me to this apposite quote. The information here is drawn from her PhD thesis *'The Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition and Suburban Modernity 1908-1951'*, University of East London, 1995.
16. See Oliver, Davis and Bentley (1994) for a defence of the suburban semi.
17. Rachel Bowlby also addresses these contradictory constructions in her 'Soft Sell: Marketing Rhetoric in Feminist Criticism' (1990).
18. This period sees a number of significant co-operative ventures (for instance common Christmas publicity campaigns) and mergers between large retail organisations (Leach 1994).
19. See for example Filene (1939)
20. See Erica Carter's Chapter 3 'The rationalization of the consuming woman' (1997). I am indebted to her innovative argument for the development of aspects of this article.
21. For further discussion of the limitations of market research see Nava (1997).

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