

Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in Postwar Consumer Culture. *By Andrew Hurley*. New York: Basic Books, 2002. 416 pp. Paper, \$17.00. ISBN 0-465-03187-0.

Reviewed by Beth Bailey

Andrew Hurley's *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks* is, fundamentally, two books for the price of one. The first, which is most likely to be of interest to readers of this journal, is a beautifully researched institutional and cultural history of diners, bowling alleys, and trailer parks and their roles in postwar American culture. The second (presented primarily in a fifty-four-page conclusion) is a provocative and often polemical reinterpretation of postwar American history and the social crises of the 1960s, focused on the genesis and power of mass consumer culture. The specifics of the study don't really support the concluding essay, nor does the essay really provide a framework for the analysis of diners, bowling alleys, and trailer parks that forms the heart of this work. Nonetheless, each piece is well worthwhile.

Hurley's analysis of three institutions—the diners, bowling alleys, and trailer parks of his title—attributes a great deal of importance to the role of business in what he sees as a reconfiguration of American society. During World War II, he argues, income was distributed downward. In the relatively widespread prosperity of postwar America, the financial capabilities of working-class and middle-class Americans converged; large numbers of blue collar workers had incomes that placed them, economically, on a par with middle-class white-collar workers. American manufacturers and retailers, some more self-consciously than others, attempted to capitalize on the trend by creating or appealing to a huge “middle majority” market. Locating businesses on the boundaries of working- and middle-class life offered great potential for profit, Hurley argues, but was a precarious strategy, as economic homogeneity masked a “volatile mosaic of social agendas and historical experiences” (p. 13). Diners, bowling alleys, and trailer parks were obviously not the only such institutions in postwar America, but they played a very important transitional role in integrating working-class Americans into mass consumer society. To different degrees, each became a “testing ground for the nation's democratic

ideals,” demonstrating both the possibilities of a more pluralistic society and its all-too-real limits.

Hurley explores each of these institutions in a separate, substantial chapter. None was an invention of the postwar era. All had long prewar histories, and all carried associations with working-class disreputability. Diner owners enlarged their market by domesticating the diner, recreating it as an extension of the suburban home rather than of the factory floor. Bowling alleys were also transformed into domesticated respectability, as automated pinsetters replaced the rough young men who had set the pins and owners promoted the sport through appeals to family togetherness. While diners and bowling alleys were sites of some class fluidity in the forging of a middle-majority consumer culture, trailer parks represented the failure of that version of the American Dream. Trailer parks set the lower boundaries of the middle majority; they demonstrated the real boundaries that existed as class was negotiated through consumer institutions. Throughout these analyses, Hurley pays careful attention to both inclusion and exclusion; he charts the changing meanings of class and ethnicity and never forgets the critically important roles of race in his stories.

Hurley’s argument is strongest when he stays close to his chosen institutions, both as historical phenomena and as sites of negotiation over the shape of postwar American society. He is weakest when he moves to his larger analysis of consumer culture. In part that is because these local, independent institutions may not be the best sites for studying the creation and impact of a mass consumer society, which, after all, is a national, not a local, phenomenon. It is also because, in his desire to demonstrate the origins of contemporary consumer capitalism in the “era of consumer abundance,” as he calls the 1950s, he takes us further than his evidence suggests. Bowling-alley owners who promoted the sport to families, he claims disapprovingly, were “propagating the radical ideal that domestic bliss and social stability could be commodified and purchased” (p. 193). He even asserts that working-class Americans (largely of recent immigrant stock) in the 1950s increasingly sought happiness through consumer goods “rather than seeking honor solely through productive work like their Puritan forebears” (p. 4).

Though Hurley insists that his work not be read as a jeremiad against consumer capitalism, it is hard to read it otherwise. His study of diners, bowling alleys, and trailer

parks, he argues, is valuable in that it “brings us face to face with the roots of many of today’s most debilitating social problems,” among which he includes rampant hedonism, rising levels of personal debt, spiraling consumer ambition, and the fracturing of familial bonds (p. xvii). All these, he writes, can be traced to the contradictory messages put forth by the manufacturers, retailers, and advertisers who tried to expand the mass market for consumer goods and services in the 1950s. That leap of significance was too large for me. However, his nuanced analysis of Americans struggling over the shape of postwar society in diners, bowling alleys, and trailer parks is an important contribution to our understanding of postwar America.

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