

Goods, Power, History: Latin America's Material Culture. By *Arnold J. Bauer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xx + 245 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$59.95. ISBN 0-521-77208-7.

Reviewed by Marie Francois

Arnold Bauer presents a welcome synthesis of the literature in English and Spanish on material life in Latin America from pre-Columbian times to the present, supplementing scholarly sources with published contemporary accounts and some archival material. The scope of *Goods, Power, History* is ambitious. Bauer has forged an admirably readable narrative that is both broad in its findings about the relation between material life and power and attentive to diverse local histories of the Americas. Through examples from mainland Spanish-speaking America, Bauer argues that precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial residents of Latin American societies “scrambled for space” (p. 133) in political and economic hierarchies of ethnicity, class, and gender by constructing identities through their consumption of food, clothing, and shelter. He emphasizes “occidental” goods (those that came with Spanish rule, and then British, French, and North American imports of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), since their acquisition afforded powerful leverage, especially to *mestizos* (racially mixed people), in a “civilizing” process that involved voluntary and forced consumption in the colonial period and the creation of new social markers in the national era as ethnic distinctions continued to blur. The analysis of complex processes of identity construction—why it matters where one sleeps, what one eats, and what style of clothes one wears—makes fascinating reading.

The division of Latin American history into precolonial, colonial, and independent eras has been called into question after decades of social, cultural, and political studies that span these divides, especially the independence watershed. Bauer, however, identifies “six broad stages” of material culture (pre-Columbian, conquest, colonial rule, independence and free trade, economic nationalism, and globalization) that largely sustain the older period break at independence. He contrasts the *colonial* material culture of the eighteenth century, when Spanish state policies limited and/or mandated commerce and consumption, with a new material culture, beginning with independence in the early nineteenth century, that benefited from a free market in which an

emergent bourgeoisie turned culturally and economically to England and France for consumption models and trading partners. Bauer recognizes that measuring material culture can confound easy periodization. While staple foods varied throughout different ecosystems, food and housing in rural areas generally did not change much until the end of the nineteenth century (if then), but cloth and clothing available in country stores changed substantially by mid-century with more imports. Cities and towns experienced more change than rural areas over the long term.

While the first half of the book reflects the ethnic diversity and social hierarchies that have shaped Latin American history, the second half focuses on *mestizo* and white (mostly male) middle-class culture in the last two hundred years. This emphasis fits Bauer's larger argument about the civilizing power of goods; it was *mestizos* and whites who set the dominant cultural agendas as part of their roles as politicians, business owners, and consumers, and it is the changes wrought by the power relations of the mixed-race middle and white upper classes that we learn most about. Bauer certainly shows that there was cultural persistence in the face of changes pushed by emergent liberals, but what about open resistance to modernization by ethnic groups as well as urban and rural workers?

The first chapter discusses the dynamic material world in Mesoamerica and the Andes, emphasizing the ritual power of goods, especially cloth, in the indigenous empires. An enduring distinction between the Aztecs and the Inca was the difference in gender divisions of labor. "Contact Goods," the chapter describing the sixteenth century, charts changes in local consumption patterns, highlights racial mixture among the Spanish, indigenous, and imported African populations, and hints at the role women played in preserving and transforming cuisines and other elements of material culture. Bauer illustrates the "high stakes" attached to ethnic labels, and the "social-cultural construction" (p. 81) of ethnicity through the consumption of particular goods. There is little information about the influence of Africans on material culture over time in the fourth chapter on colonial "civilizing" goods, which focuses on the Hispanic and Catholic transformation of material life. Despite a growing modern literature on ethnicity, Indians (a majority in many Central American and Andean communities) are largely absent from chapters on the nineteenth and twentieth century, entitled "Modernizing" and "Developing Goods," though the commodification and appropriation of indigenous goods in the development of *mestizo* nationalism receives some treatment. Women appear alongside men as consumers of changing fashions, and the impact of mechanization on the labor-intensive tortilla work done by women is highlighted. But, as with ethnic and class hierarchies, Bauer is less concerned about gender in the modern chapters, or intersections of race, class, and gender. To what extent did the dominant culture depend on work done in the home by nonwhite female servants? We do learn

from the focus on *mestizos* and whites that cycles of homogenization have characterized modern Latin America material culture. The liberal “belle époque” of the late nineteenth century saw regionwide homogenization of elite fashions along French models. The “*mestizo* nationalist” period from the 1920s to the 1970s also saw homogenizing, but with local standards (the Mexican mariachi, for example). National and regional cultural forms again face a new homogenization project wrought by intensifying globalization.

This book will have many audiences. Business historians interested in ties between production, distribution, and consumption—part of Fernand Braudel’s “geography of production”—will find it useful. Supply and demand, utility and relative price, and social, cultural, and ecological determinants all shaped consumption in Bauer’s narrative. Bauer also evaluates the role of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial states in shaping consumption and developing cash economies. Aztecs pushed goods through the market system, while Incas relied on elaborate storage systems for goods distribution. For the colonial period, Bauer shows that while nonwhite subjects largely ignored Spanish sumptuary laws that limited the consumption of prestige goods, the colonial state more successfully forced consumption of cloth, mules, and iron goods in order to draw indigenous populations into the cash economy. By the 1840s, independent states continued to promote a consumer cash economy (still carried on the backs of mules until railroads appear toward the end of the century) to foment mostly international, but also domestic, business and industry, while nationalist governments in the twentieth century championed import substitution until the 1970s. Occasional snapshots of store inventories as a measurement of change over time will interest historians of small business. Those concerned with changes in the mechanization of production and industrialization will also find this book a useful reference. The last chapters lament the cultural influence of international business in Latin America that has led to brand-name homogenization. From the 1870s to the 1920s, and again beginning in the 1980s, foreign capital’s role has been both cultural imperialist and partner in development in the context of free trade expansion.

While many connections between consumption and politics are explored, Bauer’s early intriguing statement that “people consume their way into citizenship” (p. 6) is not taken up in the chapters on the national era, which would have allowed a fuller assessment of the material manifestations of liberalism beyond issues of trade and economic development. Is citizenship tied to ethnic or class identities? Bauer ends on a cautionary note, suggesting that the material progress charted in the book has run aground, and that the current “globalizing goods” are in effect “uncivilizing” Latin American society with potentially disastrous political and ecological consequences.

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