

The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939–1979. By Daniel Horowitz. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004. ix + 339 pp. Tables, notes, index. Cloth, \$35.00; paper, \$22.95. ISBN: cloth, 1-558-49432-4; paper, 1-558-49504-5.

Reviewed by Gary Cross

Daniel Horowitz has long been a leading authority on the intellectual history of modern American consumer culture. He has written penetrating studies of the thought of Simon Patten, Vance Packard, Betty Friedan, and others, illuminating the American intellectual's often troubled relationship with emerging affluence. Capping off his many years of study is this wide-ranging and insightful work about a select group of commentators on American consumer culture between World War II and the Reagan era. Although his subjects mostly have ties to liberalism, they reflect significant historic shifts over two generations. *The Anxieties of Affluence* is primarily a set of mini-intellectual biographies with brief commentaries on key books, but Horowitz also provides a clear analysis of economic and social trends while giving the contexts for understanding the authors and their works.

Horowitz begins the book with Lewis Mumford's call for consumer restraint as part of a renewal of democracy and community during World War II. However, this dream quickly gave way to a postwar celebration of American affluence as an expression of anti-puritanical personal fulfillment and practical "anti-utopian" social equality. This view was stated most forcefully in the works of two European émigrés: the colorful psychologist, turned market researcher, turned consumer therapist Ernest Dichter, and the consumer economist George Katona. Dichter strove to undercut American ideals of self-denial by making the claim that self-realization could be achieved if Americans (especially housewives) gave themselves permission to enjoy the pleasures of consumption. Katona celebrated the rationality and economic importance of the American shopper in his famous series of consumer-research reports at the University of Michigan and in subsequent works.

Most of Horowitz's book, however, focuses on the "new moralism" in the disparate critiques of growing consumption after 1945. David Potter's *People of Plenty* may receive more attention than its impact on American culture warrants, but Potter, a conservative Yale historian from the South, provides an interesting perspective on how affluence undermined cultural stability. Horowitz's discussions of the lives and thought of John Kenneth Galbraith, Vance Packard, and Betty Friedan are more familiar and germane to his story. He writes in fascinating detail about the lives and values of these authors, often drawing from archival records. While Galbraith added a demand for more balance between private and public spending to the now common critique of consumer culture, Packard offered a popular update of Veblen's attack on emulative spending and wasteful consumption, as well as an incisive (if exaggerated) critique of manipulation in advertising. Horowitz's analysis of Friedan is his most original contribution: he places her firmly within the 1950s "new moralism" and shows how much of her attack on postwar housewifery in *The Feminine Mystique* was really a critique of Dichter's efforts to make the homemaker a happy consumer.

While Horowitz sees the works of Galbraith, Packard, and Friedan as "critiques from within," because they focus primarily on the perils of middle-class suburban consumption, his next group of authors, writing in the early 1960s, raised wider questions that ultimately led to social movements (Horowitz, curiously, does not include Friedan in this group). Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* had a large impact on the subsequent counterculture, with its insistence that modern affluence and the organization of society upon which it depended had created a disaffected youth by limiting young people's choices and creating the "false" culture of the "cool." Oscar Lewis, especially in his anthropological study of a poor urban Mexican family in *Children of Sanchez*, both explained the persistence of a culture of poverty and raised questions about the value of affluence in making people happy. Like Lewis, Michael Harrington, in *The Other America*, "rediscovered" poverty in "affluent" America. Horowitz also contextualizes Rachel Carson's famous *Silent Spring* in the history of the environmental movement.

He notes these mostly liberal or radical authors' gradual move from cold-war timidity into activism. This is especially evident in his balanced treatments of Ralph Nader and the consumer movement he created and, perhaps unexpectedly, of Martin

Luther King. Although known as a civil-rights leader, King is revealed as having been a critic of both the inequities and the vacuity of affluence, as he urged wealthy African Americans and white supporters to forgo personal spending in order to support the movement for black access to public facilities. Horowitz also situates Paul Erlich's *Population Bomb* of 1968 in the broader career of this Stanford scientist.

With the 1970s came a retreat from activism and a new sensitivity to the cultural consequences of consumption, leading to the story's culmination in the "malaise" speech of President Jimmy Carter in 1979. Daniel Bell's *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*, and Robert Bellah's *The Broken Covenant* are the pivotal texts here, as each questioned the viability of an American culture increasingly based on private, even obsessive, spending rather than on religion, positive tradition, and community. Horowitz points out how these authors, albeit in small ways, influenced Carter's speech, in which he criticized an American public that was unwilling to sacrifice personal consumption for the greater good of energy conservation and the future. Reagan's counter to Carter, celebrating American optimism and the right to spend freely, was a turning point, leading to the eclipse of this intellectual tradition, which still has not returned.

The Anxieties of Affluence is a wonderful summary of an age in which public intellectuals often critical of American culture wrote best-selling books. The popularity of these books says as much about the age in which they wrote as it does about the authors; they offer an alternative to the largely celebratory analyses of consumer culture that have appeared more recently. While Horowitz's writing is sometimes repetitive and would have benefited from a fuller treatment of the period after 1980, his study is nevertheless strikingly fair and thorough. It is ideal for classroom use and, especially for the generations that did not grow up with Goodman and Packard, a helpful entrée into a now fading intellectual tradition.

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