

Dictatorship and Demand: The Politics of Consumerism in East Germany. *By Mark Landsman*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. xii + 296 pp. Index, notes. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-674-01698-X.

Reviewed by James C. Van Hook

Histories of consumer culture have formed a growth industry in recent years. Despite the obvious significance of consumerism to economic and business history, most historians of the subject have followed the lead of Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School, who has articulated the cultural criticism of consumption most forcefully. Thus, while most historians have explored the aesthetics, psychology, and instrumentalization of consumer desires in modern capitalism, it is rare to find a study that addresses the simple economics of consumerism. Mark Landsman has done just that in his excellent book, *Dictatorship and Demand: The Politics of Consumerism in East Germany*.

In looking primarily at the period from 1945 until 1961, Landsman argues that despite growing recognition of the major role played by consumption in East Germany's cold war with West Germany, economists have not examined the reluctance of East German officials to relinquish their enduring faith in "productivism" and give free rein to consumer priorities. Officials of East Germany's Socialist Unity Party (SED) initially shared with communist intellectuals and Stalinist functionaries an aesthetic disdain for consumerism. But the social and political tensions that led to the uprising of June 17, 1953, combined with the ongoing consumerist challenge posed by West Germany, forced the East German government to take consumption seriously. Even so, the state's repeated efforts to support a planning mechanism that could supply the population with a desirable, or even an adequate, flow of consumer goods foundered on its enduring ideological faith in productivism. This faith manifested itself in the state's bureaucratic structure. The State Planning Commission, which was inherently biased toward increasing productivity in basic and manufacturing industries, held power over the Ministry of Trade and Provisioning, which was charged with providing the population with consumer goods. The final opportunity to develop a consumer-oriented system came with the celebrated call by the Main Economic Task Force at the fifth SED party

Congress in 1958 to overtake West Germany in all major categories of consumer goods by 1962. However, this goal was subsequently undermined by intensified efforts to expand agricultural collectivization, which at once decreased the availability of basic foods and encouraged the flood of emigration to West Germany that provided the pretext for constructing the Berlin Wall. Landsman argues that construction of the Wall effectively ended any serious attempts by the East German regime to integrate modern consumer needs into the socialist planning apparatus.

This book provides an excellent account of attempts by a communist regime to address the challenge of modern consumer culture. Until now, the literature on consumerism has concentrated on cultural and psychological meanings, the relationship between consumerism and gender, and the ability of the advertising industry, writ large, to develop new avenues of influence, or even of domination. Until now, Ina Merkel's study of gender and the fashion industry as applied to East Germany (*Utopie und Beduerfnis: Die Geschichte der Konsumkultur in der DDR* [1999]) has served as the foundational study of the subject. Landsman reminds us that whatever meaning individuals, groups, or elites may have attached to consumerism, someone actually had to produce the consumer goods. What's more, Landsman skillfully addresses the cultural challenge that consumerism posed to communism, describing the SED's attempts to translate an ambivalent attitude toward consumerism into a socialist approach that would accommodate the reality of the consumer economy.

Landsman also offers a theory of how consumer politics worked in communist regimes. Drawing on Soviet experiences of the 1930s, the SED sought to overcome East Germans' disdain of consumerism, although they were never able to abandon their ideological commitment to productivity. The regime adopted an educational approach, taking the viewpoint that if consumer desires had to be satisfied, it would at least attempt to elevate them. This imperative drove East German market research, such as it was. Gradually, however, the regime had to recognize the inadequacy of its attempts to channel consumer desires toward what it considered culturally and ideologically worthwhile ends. To a limited extent, the regime tried to listen to what consumers were telling them, with the result that the Ministry of Trade and Provisioning eventually assumed the function of consumer advocate.

This study is well written, thoroughly researched, and clearly organized. Landsman's central point, that the ideological and aesthetic centrality of productivism inhibited progress in consumer policy, is persuasive. Nevertheless, historians might find it interesting to consider the semantic issues surrounding his treatment of productivism. Historians of Western Europe generally assume that "productivism" as a system and/or an ideology also dominated Western European and American economic policy. Far from a criticism, this question suggests the need for further exploration of the rival economic perspectives of East and West.

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