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Revised seminar paper for history Minor  
History 135, American Social History  
April 30, 1999 (First edition April 18, 1999)

### Working-class women in a new consumer society

During the forty years around the turn of the century, conditions of wage work improved, the work day lessened, and leisure time increased for the working class as well as the middle class. Leisure became more commercial, with the rise of movie theaters and department stores. The kinds of work people pursued changed, with young working-class women moving out of domestic work into clerking and retail. College education became increasingly available to middle-class women, who moved into a variety of professions, often without marrying. People recognized a change in standards of womanhood as the triumph of the “New Woman” who was athletic, outgoing, and sexual, over the house-bound, asexual nineteenth century woman-type. All of these changes are related to the rise of a commercialized “consumer culture.” This consumer culture transformed work, leisure, gender, and perhaps, the “American Dream” as well.

In some ways, the development of consumer capitalism required a major ideological revolution. Nineteenth-century Americans purported not to value desire, indulging in vain luxuries, or impulsive buying; in fact, they thought such values were economically dangerous. In the twentieth century, such values had become the basis for prosperity, and people started to praise rather than criticize them. Nineteenth-century Americans also valued female domesticity, but by the early twentieth century women’s work and women’s higher education were accepted, and women pursued leisure with a new independence. Working class leisure in the late nineteenth century was an escape from the dominant middle-class values of individualism and upward mobility,<sup>1</sup> but the working class entered the twentieth century embracing consumerism, which was based on precisely those values. It might seem that minds had to have been changed by conflict, and that these social changes would therefore have been vehemently contested.

In other ways, however, the ideological changes were almost seamless. Although a woman could work in a factory, spend wages at Coney Island, and look for a mate on the streets rather than in the parlor, she was expected to become domestic upon marriage. The expectation of domesticity was not only a social expectation by her family, but an institutional expectation, since workplaces gave women lower wages under the assumption that only men were family breadwinners, and many employers expected women to quit work after marriage. As Kathy Peiss argued, the very changes that gave women freedom and pleasure oppressed them in new ways. Women had the wages to enter the world of homosocial leisure activity, but once there they depended on men, who received higher wages, for dates. Wage work was liberating; women worked at factories not only to support their families, but to rebel against the family, and earn money in order to have fun. Unfortunately, the work was so strenuous

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<sup>1</sup>Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight hours for what we will: Workers and leisure in an industrial city, 1870–1920* (New York: Cambridge, 1983), 212.

that women only worked while looking for a husband.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, no great ideological shift was required to usher women into the emerging consumer society, since women's dependency and domesticity remained intact.

The entry of women into politics and well-paying jobs did not necessarily challenge the ideology of dependency and domesticity. John Wanamaker, an entrepreneur whose department stores revolutionized shopping, spoke out in favor of women's suffrage, and allowed women workers to take time off from work to march in suffrage parades. In an advertising editorial he asked, "where is a woman's proper place?" and answered "anywhere." He was not merely trying to flatter his female customers, for he brought women into almost every level of his business, when retail had previously been an exclusively male business. At the same time, he praised homebound women, disregarded the exploitation of women in factory work, and was like other employers in that he favored men in promotions.<sup>3</sup> That Wanamaker could demonstrate both liberal and conventional attitudes about women while making money indicates that no radical or costly ideological transformation was necessary to support women's entry into the workplace and the voting booth.

Women's takeover of the activity of shopping was bound to strain existing gender roles. In a court case, John Wanamaker argued that he could demand payment from a man for purchases made by his wife under her own name. But while such an economic arrangement may have been legally feasible in Victorian times, where women had few opportunities to make decisions about money, women shoppers in the twentieth century were recognized by the courts as free agents. Beginning in the nineteenth century, store layout and advertising changed in order to attract female customers into what was once considered a men's realm.<sup>4</sup> The co-ed department store had to separate rigidly men's items from women's items in order to save male shoppers from having to walk down aisles decorated with feminine colors. The result was the polarization of gender roles: notions of masculinity and femininity were continually and explicitly defined by advertising, and reinforced by the proliferation of gendered (pink and blue) cultural commodities. Since the department store was a major cultural institution, this strategy undoubtedly shaped perceptions of gender meaning for every new generation,<sup>5</sup> since it is the nature of mass market advertising to transform social types, which may be complicated or unrealized, into autonomous stereo-types. Peiss argues that commercial leisure institutions exploited the "New Woman" type, linking her at different times with freer sexuality, consumption, social reform (called "municipal domesticity"), and respectability.<sup>6</sup>

The feminization of the department store<sup>7</sup> also took place in the personnel department.

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<sup>2</sup>Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1986), 45–51.

<sup>3</sup>Williams Leach, *Land of Desire* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 95–96.

<sup>4</sup>Kathy Peiss, "Commercial Leisure and the 'Woman Question,'" in Richard Butsch, ed., *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1990), 105–117, 108.

<sup>5</sup>William Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890–1925," *J. Amer. Hist.* 71 (Sept. 1984): 319–342, 331.

<sup>6</sup>Peiss, *supra* note 4 at 112–114.

<sup>7</sup>Edward Filene referred to his Boston department store as "an Adamless Eden," since most sales clerks and 90% of his customers were female. Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940* (Chicago: U. of Illinois, 1986), 76.

It was jarring for male managers, raised to dominate women, to submit their will to that of female customers and female, working-class clerks.<sup>8</sup> Stores hired many female sales clerks, and many female buyers, as well. From 1890 to 1915, women gradually took over a third of the positions as fashion buyers. Retailers welcomed integration not with an egalitarian spirit, but with refined notions of gender roles. One male buyer explained, “I chose carpets and rugs because floor coverings was a more mannish style of business.”<sup>9</sup> The perceived threat of feminine fashion must have been great if men were to be forced to include “carpets and rugs” into their notion of masculinity. The advancement of women within the ranks of sales clerks was premised on the belief that women could best sell to women because all women had “vanity” and “whims.”<sup>10</sup> Although kept within the domestic gender role, women were paid well, and their entry into the retail job market was a net gain for women.<sup>11</sup>

The department store offered occupational and material advancement primarily to the middle class, but benefited the working class in other ways. The stores offered extensive services to customers, including liberal return policies, live music, theater performances, elaborate decorations, and even in-house doctors.<sup>12</sup> The cost of these services was passed on to customers, so that only the middle class could afford the store’s goods. But the extra services meant that the store offered more job opportunities to the working class. Although only affluent women could afford shopping as a hobby, working class women enjoyed consumption vicariously, looking at store window displays, riding the escalators, and experiencing the same sensations that the store’s elaborate decorations evoked from middle class buyers.<sup>13</sup> Although department store fashion shows were sometimes closed to working-class spectators, working women read the fashion columns in newspapers and could find less expensive versions of rich clothing at other stores.<sup>14</sup> Kathy Peiss argued that although many women went without food in order to have good clothes and hair, they imitated but did not emulate the upper class, since they combined fashions worn by aristocrats with the gaudy colors worn by prostitutes.<sup>15</sup>

Consumer culture was the field of class interaction, change, and conflict. Roy Rosenzweig and others have argued that the commercialization of leisure caused classes and ethnicities to mingle that had not mingled before.<sup>16</sup> Saloon culture tended to be local and ethnically exclusive, but the movie theaters brought a new generation of workers from different neighborhoods together at a time when ethnicity was (and continued to be) a high social barrier. Although movie theaters were started in the rowdy image of working class-culture, they were tamed, with butlers and all, in order to attract middle-class customers. The change was not simply a takeover, but a compromise resulting from the limited number of establishments. In a similar way, amusement parks reinforced working-class cultures but attenuated pecu-

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>9</sup> Leach, *supra* note 3 at 95.

<sup>10</sup> Benson, *supra* note 7 at 5, 202.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>12</sup> Leach, *supra* note 3 at 78–84.

<sup>13</sup> Leach, *supra* note 5 at 335.

<sup>14</sup> Leach, *supra* note 3 at 101, Peiss, *supra* note 2 at 83.

<sup>15</sup> Peiss, *supra* note 2 at 66.

<sup>16</sup> Rosenzweig, *supra* note 1 at 212.

liarities in order to appeal to a variety of constituents.<sup>17</sup> Although the saloon persisted in working-class culture, the movie theater reduced class conflict, since it posed no risk to work discipline.<sup>18</sup>

Parks and beaches also underwent a civilizing transformation, to make way for women as well as the middle class. Before the 1890's, Coney Island in New York was divided, with gambling houses, saloons, and brothels for working-class and middle-class men on the west end, and respectable hotels for the wives and children of businessmen on the east end. In order to attract families, Coney Island replaced saloons with museum theaters and penny arcades, which supplied cheap amusements designed to appeal to the broadest audience. This had the effect of cleaning up the culture on the west end of Coney Island, and middle-class New Yorkers, who formerly avoided Coney Island, began going there. The new sights at Steeplechase included spectacular displays of foreign lands, simulations of city fires, and dramatizations of warfare.<sup>19</sup> There were few places for unescorted young working-class women to go, however. They were suspected to be loose, and so were kept out of dance halls and sexually harassed on the boardwalk.

The successful parks of Coney Island followed the same formula that worked for department stores: spectacle and orientalism. American culture before World War I was obsessed with the *Arabian Nights* and other exotic, sensual themes. Department stores made money by installing Japanese gardens, selling *chinoiserie*, and by exhibiting French fashions. Similar wonders of the world could be seen in spectacular form at Coney Island. When department store designers introduced artificial lighting, they created displays of colored lights that earned the stores praise as “refined Coney Islands.”<sup>20</sup> William Leach argues that Orientalism allowed Americans to indulge in primitive sensuality, desire, and impulsive behavior through consumption, while claiming that those values were unamerican and merely a curiosity.<sup>21</sup> His idea is a powerful one, because it helps explain how Americans eased the ideological transition from a culture which scorned desire to one which embraced it: they could indulge in desire without consciously making it part of their identity.

Women were the primary agents of the transformation of department stores, movie theaters, and the commercial parks. As Peiss argued, respectability was a primary value of New Womanhood.<sup>22</sup> When male spaces were changed to accommodate working-class female customers, they were not only domesticated but made “respectable.” Thus, accommodation of women had the side effect of making leisure activities palatable to the middle class. Because of the New Woman, gender and class integration went hand in hand.

By bringing the working class and the middle class together around a common “American” cultural denominator, commercial leisure decreased class conflict, but only to the extent that the classes conflicted over culture. In the 1920's, labor leaders complained that “young workers of all nationalities” were interested in “automobiles . . . dance halls and cheap amusement places, to the exclusion of union meetings and union business.”<sup>23</sup> Even if

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 181–82; Peiss, *supra* note 2 at 57, 150. Peiss argues that women also tamed the movies (155).

<sup>18</sup> Rosenzweig, *supra* note 1 at 218.

<sup>19</sup> Peiss, *supra* note 2 at 117–132.

<sup>20</sup> Leach, *supra* note 5 at 324.

<sup>21</sup> Leach, *supra* note 3 at 107.

<sup>22</sup> *Supra* note 6.

<sup>23</sup> Rosenzweig, *supra* note 1 at 227–28.

consumerism was an opiate of the masses, however, the power relation between the classes had not changed. The working-class New Woman consumer sought respectability, but she neither sought nor achieved middle class status.

Consumer society influenced class relations primarily by changing what people in each class expected out of life. But the expectations were puzzling: why were women upwardly mobile in their coiffure instead of saving money and moving up in occupation? Perhaps related, why did middle-class as well as working-class women shoplift fur coats?<sup>24</sup> The answer may be that the institutions of leisure, advertising fashioned a new “American Dream” that was accepted in different ways by different people.

In consumer society, capitalism showed its positive side: service. Social distinctions in the world of consumption were based not on family background or capital, but on the amount of money one was willing to spend at a particular time, resulting in what William Leach calls the aristocratization of consumption.<sup>25</sup> Middle-class women were particularly susceptible, since advertising was directed at their tastes. Working women were satisfied with the world of possibility represented by the almost infinite variety of things available for desire and for sale, and found that world preferable to the ascetic Protestant route of upward mobility. All that a woman could do for fulfillment, without depending on a man, was to work and to spend money. As youth, working men could shoplift, steal cars, or work to buy clothes,<sup>26</sup> and as adults, could unionize in order to demand the quality of living they saw in the movies.<sup>27</sup> Working-class men and women rearranged their lives around consumerism—but not in ways that capitalists expected.

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<sup>24</sup>Leach, *supra* note 3 at 79. Psychological illness, rooted in the female body, was prevalent explanation in the early twentieth century. See Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford, 1989).

<sup>25</sup>Leach, *supra* note 3 at 132. For example, when hotels began pretending that customers were “guests,” any customer willing to pay could be treated like royalty, regardless of social status.

<sup>26</sup>Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge U. P., 1990), 144.

<sup>27</sup>Rosenzweig, *supra* note 1 at 228.

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