

WOMEN AND MASS CONSUMER SOCIETY IN POSTWAR FRANCE

Rebecca J. Pulju



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REBECCA J. PULJU

Kent State University



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For my parents, Holly and Edward Pulju

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Abbreviations

AC	Action Catholique
AFAP	Association française pour l'accroissement de la productivité
CAF	Caisses d'allocations familiales
CETEM	Crédit à l'électroménager (became Crédit à l'équipement des ménages)
CGT	Confédération générale du travail
CNC	Comité national de la consommation
CNP	Comité national de la productivité
CNRS	Centre national de la recherche scientifique
CREDOC	Centre de recherches et de documentation sur la consommation
IFOP	Institut français d'opinion publique
INC	Institut national de la consommation
INED	Institut national d'études démographiques
INSEE	Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques
JAC	Jeunesse agricole chrétienne
JOC	Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne
JOCF	Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne féminine
LOC	Ligue ouvrière chrétienne
MLF	Mouvement de libération des femmes
MLO	Mouvement de libération ouvrière
MLP	Mouvement de libération du peuple
MPF	Mouvement populaire des familles

MRP	Mouvement républicain populaire
MRU	Ministère de la reconstruction et de l'urbanisme
PSU	Parti socialiste unifié
RPF	Rassemblement du peuple français
SEEF	Service des études économiques et financières
SNCF	Société nationale des chemins de fer français
UFC	Union fédérale de la consommation
UFCS	Union féminine civique et sociale
UFF	Union des femmes françaises
UNAF	Union nationale des associations familiales
UNCAF	Union nationale des caisses d'allocations familiales

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Introduction

In 1953, the *Salon des arts ménagers*, the immensely popular annual exhibition of home appliances, décor, and housing plans sponsored by the French ministry of education, hosted a “Day of the Consumer” organized by the *Union fédérale de la consommation* (Federal Union of Consumption, UFC). The government’s minister of economic affairs, Robert Buron, spoke to the attendees, informing them, “I am, in effect, the minister of consumers; I would even prefer to say the minister of housewives.” Buron noted that since the war, shortages and inflation had made the French economy a “seller’s market,” but with the return of stability and market competition, it could become a “buyer’s market” in which the role of consumers would be determinant. To be a good consumer, “which is to say, a good housewife,” was complicated, however, and many consumers had neither the time to make good choices, nor the awareness that wise purchasing decisions were good both for themselves and the national economy. Buron had come to urge his audience to be intelligent and well-informed consumers. “Consumption is not a passive act, but a decisively important economic act,” he explained, “I count on consumers as much as on producers. It is with a balanced effort from each that we can expect economic expansion and a higher standard of living.”¹

The women in Buron’s audience – members of women’s, family, and consumer organizations, as well as members of the general public attracted by the commodities and lifestyles on display at the *Salon* – were as eager as Buron for economic expansion and a better standard

¹ “La ‘Journée du Consommateur’ au Salon des arts ménagers,” *Union fédérale de la consommation: Bulletin mensuel d’information* 10 (1953), 15–16.

of living in France. In hindsight, economic recovery and the arrival of a mass consumer economy following the Second World War appear to have been breathtakingly fast, but this was likely not the perception of women and families who had survived war, occupation, and Liberation followed by food shortages and high inflation. When Buron spoke in 1953, the economy was just beginning to make the turn from poverty to plenty. Over the next decade, average consumption in France would grow rapidly and the French populace would come to accept that all families deserved a standard of living that very few had enjoyed only ten years earlier. The demands of women and families coincided with a state-driven modernization effort whose planners, like Buron, were often suspicious of the rationality of ordinary women consumers, even as they recognized women's influence on the national economy. The agendas of planners and these advocates for women, families, and consumers coalesced in a common goal – creating a modern mass consumer economy – and in the conviction that it was necessary to educate and support citizen consumers who would inform planners and industrialists of their needs, and make wise purchasing decisions that would help the French economy expand in a healthy way. They conspired in creating the figure of the citizen consumer, a role that recognized the rationality and influence of recently enfranchised women, but, conveniently, did not conflict with the desire to find comfort in “normalcy” after years of upheaval, and which implied a particular gendered hierarchy in family, workplace, and polity.

This book examines how France became a mass consumer society in the decades following the Second World War, and in doing so, places the citizen consumer, her home, her family, and her purchases at the center of its analysis of postwar change. It explores the ways in which consumption became intertwined with definitions of women's citizenship and why the role of the citizen consumer – the consumer who benefits society through his or her purchases – was the preferred route to women's national influence at this moment in French history.² The

² I borrow the term “citizen consumer” from Lizabeth Cohen's work on the United States. See Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). Cohen argues for the importance of the citizen consumer during the Depression, when consumers sought the government as an ally and consumed for the good of the nation. After the war, the figure of the “purchaser consumer” won out in part because of resistance to government interference in the economy. Although primarily concerned with his or her own individual needs, the purchaser consumer could also be seen to serve the public good by driving the economy through his or her purchases. Historians of Europe have also increasingly begun to ask why, at certain moments, the category of consumer becomes a useful means of

home and the domestic consumer who managed it were central to the changes that occurred in this period. Becoming a mass consumer society required changes in notions of taste and value, luxury and necessity, new patterns of household spending, and new understandings of class and consumption. These adjustments were made in the realm of domestic consumption, and reflected in purchases for the home, which became a premier venue for the introduction of mass-produced consumer durables and the site where “modernization” was experienced through the arrival of conveniences such as hot running water, home appliances, and central heating. Although much has been written about the state modernization drive and the decisions of planners, politicians, and technocrats, relatively little has been said about how these postwar changes shaped the home, family, and gender roles. The ways in which women and their families embraced new methods of spending and ideas about consumption, helping drive economic expansion through their demands and purchases, is another subject we know little about. This book addresses this lacuna in scholarship by exploring the social, cultural, and economic changes of the postwar years through the lens of home, family, and gender, revealing how the push to create a mass consumer society in France helped to define women’s role in polity and home, at the same time as women’s consumer demands and the new consumer needs of the modern French family drove the creation of the mass consumer economy.

THE CONSENSUS FOR MODERNIZATION: STATE PLANNING

The desire for “normalcy” was common across much of Western Europe in the postwar years, as was the eventual creation of mass consumer economies. Until the 1940s, much of Europe was subject to what Victoria de Grazia has labeled the “bourgeois regime of consumption” in which consumption served to differentiate social classes. After the Second World War, European governments and populations came to accept for the first time that all people deserved a decent standard of living. The ability to provide that standard became necessary for government legitimacy and the consumer was granted new influence as Europeans accepted American notions of service and consumer

organization. See, for example, the introduction and essays in Frank Trentmann, ed., *The Making of the Consumer* (Oxford: Berg, 2006). Trentmann calls historians to examine “the construction of the consumer as an identity and category” rather than assuming this identity was a natural outgrowth of affluence in the 1950s and 1960s. Trentmann ed., *The Making of the Consumer*, 4.

sovereignty. Whereas differences in income and lifestyle obviously remained, these were based on income rather than notions of class privilege, and domestic consumption became less important for defining class status. Wide swathes of European populations started to live more like one another than they had in the past. More people had the option of buying beyond the basic necessities, allowing them to construct their identities through commodities. A variety of mass-produced goods became available to a large portion of the population, both because mass production made them cheaper and because more people were willing and able to supplement their cash purchases with consumer credit.³ The ability to realize an improved level of home comfort meant that in many places, it seemed a more “home-centered” lifestyle was emerging.⁴ Prosperity arrived at different rates across nations as well as across societies, appearing in Britain and West Germany slightly ahead of France and Italy, and achieved in all places by the urban middle class before the working class or rural dwellers. Nonetheless, the economies of all Western European countries expanded in the twenty years following the war. European nations lowered trade barriers, invested significant resources in infrastructure and state welfare systems, increased productivity, and experienced high birth rates, which spurred mass consumption and created millions of new consumers.⁵

Prewar conditions and the experience of the war itself, of course, affected the rate and character of change across Western Europe. For France, an important outcome of defeat and occupation was that whereas many continuities existed between the prewar, Vichy, and postwar periods, in the wake of the war French leaders and many citizens viewed the Third Republic as completely discredited, a system that had not withstood the Nazi challenge and had crumbled, resulting in the Vichy

³ For changes to European consumption habits over the course of the twentieth century, see Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through 20th Century Europe* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005). For definitions of mass consumer society, see Peter N. Stearns, “Stages of Consumerism: Recent Work on the Issues of Periodization,” *Journal of Modern History* 69 (1997): 102–117. For a collection of essays that shows change in European and American regimes of consumption over the twentieth century, see Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴ Claire Langhamer complicates this picture in her work on Britain, showing that the aspirations to this lifestyle existed before the war. See Langhamer, “The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 40 (2005): 341–362.

⁵ See Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 325–326, 331.

government.⁶ This national consensus on the need to change has caused both commentators at the time and historians since to describe the impetus behind postwar transformation as being in part, if not primarily, one of attitude. Contemporary critics of the Third Republic often used the term “Malthusian” – by which they meant inclined to decisions that ultimately limited productivity rather than taking risks that might lead to expansion – both when describing the prewar French economy and its declining and aging population.⁷ Despite the rapid return of partisan politics after the war, there was widespread agreement that France could not revert to former habits and policies. The man initially responsible

⁶ Philip Nord has emphasized how, despite their rhetoric of renewal, many of the postwar technocrats and modernizers were active in the 1930s, and even under the Vichy regime. See Philip Nord, *France's New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). See Herrick Chapman, “France's Liberation Era, 1944–47: A Social and Economic Settlement?” in *The Uncertain Foundation: France at the Liberation, 1944–47*, ed. Andrew Knapp (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2007), 103–120, for discussion of the roots of planning under the Third Republic and the Vichy regime. Chapman notes that one source of anger among Resisters was that the need for experts for postwar reconstruction meant turning to men who had also worked under the Vichy regime. See W. Brian Newsome, “The Struggle for a Voice in the City: The Development of Participatory Architectural and Urban Planning in France, 1940–1960,” (PhD diss., University of South Carolina, 2002), for discussion of urbanization and urban planning first under the Vichy Regime and then under the Fourth and Fifth Republics. See Stanley Hoffmann for discussion of continuities in terms of organizations and individuals involved in economic planning under Vichy and the postwar regime. He points to 1934 as the end of the Republican Consensus upholding the prewar “stalemate society” that valued stability over expansion. Hoffmann, “The Effects of World War II on French Society and Politics,” *French Historical Studies* 2 (1961): 28–63. For continuity in French notions of social democracy see Paul V. Dutton, *Origins of the French Welfare State: The Struggle for Social Reform in France, 1914–1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Richard Ivan Jobs points out that despite continuity, there was a postwar obsession with “the new” as France pinned its hopes on youth as a means of recovery and renovation. Jobs, *Riding the New Wave: Youth and the Rejuvenation of France after the Second World War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

⁷ For the importance of new attitudes in French economic planning, see Stephen S. Cohen, *Modern Capitalist Planning: The French Model* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). Analysts often pointed to the French family firm, more oriented to family financial stability than expansion, as a hindrance to the French economy. See David Landes, “French Business and the Businessman: A Social and Cultural Analysis,” in *Modern France*, ed. Edward Meade Earl (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 334–353. Historians have since both complicated this understanding and shown how some businesses were able to combine paternalism and economic expansion. See Marjorie Beale, *The Modernist Enterprise: French Elites and the Threat of Modernity, 1900–1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Stephen L. Harp, *Marketing Michelin: Advertising and Cultural Identity in Twentieth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869–1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

for the direction of postwar economic planning, Jean Monnet, famously asserted that France must choose either “modernization” or “decadence,” insisting that France needed to embrace change or continue to decline. Modernization meant abandoning the conservative economic practices of the past, eliminating inefficient and outdated producers, expanding productivity, and creating a mass consumer economy. All of this would happen in the context of an economic and social democracy.⁸

To foment this change rapidly, Monnet led the first *Plan de modernisation et d'équipement* of France after the war.⁹ The commissariat of the Plan was a body that coordinated between ministries, was autonomous, and answered directly to the prime minister in an attempt to steer clear of parliamentary politics. The atmosphere at the time was one of national imperative and the choice was clear: expansion or decline – and it seemed there was little room for negotiation. Historian Michael Bess uses the term “technological Darwinism” to describe the widespread sense that France needed to change, and quickly, if it was to maintain its autonomy and independence.¹⁰ Though the subsequent economic recovery in France was similar to that in other Western European nations, what made France unique, as historian Richard Kuisel has pointed out, was the “collective sense of national decline and disenchantment” that drove the abrupt changes of the period and inspired the creation of an interventionist state committed to national planning.¹¹ These methods, too, distinguished France from some of its neighbors, as both Britain and West Germany chose to forego intensive, long-term state planning.¹² The French state's postwar planners and modernizers embraced cooperation and collaboration among government, industry, workers, and consumers out of this imperative for change. The Plan's full-time secretariat set targets for expansion in specific industries,

⁸ For analysis of economic modernization, see Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁹ Hereafter, “the Plan” refers to the *Plan de modernisation et d'équipement*.

¹⁰ Michael Bess, *The Light Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960–2000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). For more on the consensus behind modernization see Robert Frost, “The Flood of ‘Progress’: Technocrats and Peasants at Tignes (Savoy), 1946–1952,” *French Historical Studies* 14 (1985): 117–140. For modernization and urbanization, see Rosemary Wakeman, *Modernizing the Provincial City: Toulouse, 1945–1975* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State*, 280.

¹² Judt, *Postwar*, 329–330. Judt points out that the German government intervened to mitigate tensions between social groups, but it did not attempt to direct economic behavior. Britain nationalized some parts of the economy between the end of the war and 1951, but did not embark on long-term planning.