

## H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Andrea Westermann. *Plastik und politische Kultur in Westdeutschland*. Interferenzen: Studien zur Kulturgeschichte der Technik. Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 2007. 392 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. EUR 38.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-0340-0849-5.

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### Plastic People and the Rise of a German Consumer Democracy

"From a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context." [1] Arjun Appadurai's theory, which in the 1980s helped shape an emergent field of study regarding the sociopolitical significance of commodities, also guided the scope of Andrea Westermann's newly published work. By including a reference to Appadurai in her introduction, Westermann suggests an appropriate, illuminating context for her research, which exists at the relatively unique intersection of several fields, including social history, cultural studies, and the history of science. The author's investigation centers upon the claim that the connection between the "economic/technical and the social/political" in the Federal Republic of Germany can be exposed and explored through a detailed study of the plastics industry there, itself an "exemplary object for the analysis of the German national consumer democracy" (p. 15). With this book, Westermann demonstrates an impressive mastery of both technical and cultural aspects of the subject that will appeal to a broad group of readers.

In order to demonstrate convincingly the validity of the thesis, two claims must be substantiated. First, one must be able to show how and why plastics in particular could link the social, political, economic, and scientific spheres in a quantifiable, meaningful manner. In order to address this concern, the first chapter traces the rise of the plastics industry from the late nineteenth century through the end of the Second World War within the political, intellectual, and cultural climate of Germany. The author reexamines the familiar narrative of the struggle between tradition and modernity (both lived and theoretical) with an eye

for how such debates impacted and were impacted by the nascent science of "technologically manufactured substitute" materials (p. 34), most notably polyvinyl chloride (PVC). Here, Westermann demonstrates a strong command of the relevant scientific knowledge, going into specific, technical detail to describe the qualities of the plastic and the process through which it was invented and developed. This aspect of the work is geared toward readers with a particular interest in the history of science, and may not appeal to a broader audience. Nevertheless, the chronological exposition of Westermann's argument and her clear, didactic writing style manage to make the book's technical passages readily comprehensible, even to the uninitiated.

Westermann's work orients itself toward a broader audience of social, cultural, and political historians at the point where it turns to a study of the rhetoric revolving around the new plastics industry. In so doing, Westermann illustrates the shifting social values of early-twentieth-century Germany, in which nature and "authenticity" lost popularity in favor of concepts such as objectivity, functionality, and science--all hallmarks of modernization. Westermann describes and attributes the recovery of plastic's reputation (from denigrated "substitute" to privileged medium) to the ability of the modern scientific object to create a new narrative of German existence, highlighting its role in all of the shifting spheres of the period. For example, the emergence of the new man-made material spoke to the technological prowess of Germany and the positive, "logical" applications of contemporary science, while plastic's use in areas as diverse as architecture and goods packaging economically aided the swift shift from agricultural to an industrial society. Plastic's military applications tied it to state politics and power, while its emerging, affordable presence in the lives of many citizens demonstrated a new social order that not only favored entrepreneurs and white-collar professionals over landowners, but also widened and leveled the developing national market of consumers.

This point leads to the second claim that must be substantiated in order to prove the central thesis of the work: after demonstrating the centrality and commonality of plastics in the social, political, economic, and technical spheres, Westermann must expose the role of the industry in the rise of a mass consumer society. While the identification of post-World War II West Germany with a culture of

commodification is certainly not novel,[2] Westermann contributes to current historiography on the subject by exploring the public life of plastic in the period, as both a symbolic and actual "vehicle for attaining economic and social progress" (p. 233). Chapters 2 and 3 of the book concern these topics, with the first chronicling the use of PVC and other plastics in the physical (and, thus, economic) recovery of West Germany in the 1950s and early 1960s. Westermann examines the various applications of plastic--considered an inexpensive, easily attainable material--in the period, studying how its prevalence helped to unify industry with science and increase plastic's political profile, as the business of plastic became a powerful entity unto itself.

Chapter 3 details the social and cultural ramifications of plastic's increasing predominance and popularity, identifying it as "a vehicle for social integration ... a leveling force, something that all could afford and use" (p. 180). By concurrently dominating and homogenizing the market, plastic (as Westermann shows) became an important initial shaper of mass consumer society in West Germany. Admittedly, the information about the pan-German technological, economic, political, and social climate of the first half of the twentieth century in chapter 1 prompts the reader to wonder how much the progression and reception of the plastic industry diverged on the other side of the Berlin Wall, where patterns and processes of consumption were different. Though a full comparison of the use and value of plastic in both German states lies outside the scope of this book, a consolidation of existing research on the public life of plastics in the GDR would have enhanced or complicated Westermann's work and contributed to ongoing developments in the realm of entangled history.[3]

Westermann's book concludes with a study of another sort of complication: an analysis of the struggles in the West German culture of mass consumption that the plastics industry helped form and was simultaneously molded by. In chapter 4, Westermann examines backlash against plastics in the 1970s and 1980s to illuminate the oft-conflicting interactions, rivalries, and alliances that can and do occur between private citizens, corporations, and the government in mass consumer society. West German debates and protests about the safety of PVC (for the environment, for consumers, and for industrial workers) and the responses (or lack thereof) by industry and the government highlighted the shortcomings of such a society for the individual; yet,

Westermann concludes, high levels of continued use of plastic even now demonstrate a broad unwillingness to abandon the mass consumer model.

Westermann's conclusion highlights the relevance of her study for contemporary audiences in a position that would have seemed familiar to West Germans of the 1970s and 1980s. While "plastic poisons" were of primary concern then, the problem of global warming concerns today's developed world. Science and technology still lie at the crux of debates and negotiations between government, industry, and citizens' coalitions struggling to weigh the individual and collective benefits and drawbacks of "mass consumer democracies." The consequent relevance of the book to a wide, international array of contemporary cultural climates suggests that the identification of any gaps in Westermann's work may provide useful avenues for future research on postwar Germany and the postindustrial world more generally.

Although Westermann's thorough analytical approach, based on archives from across Germany, is useful for substantiating claims about the broader nation, a comparative regional study might illustrate a localized response to "national" issues. Such a study could illuminate differences in power negotiations or economic relationships between individuals, the government, and industry. An alternative to Westermann's nationalized history of plastics might demonstrate the potential for heterogeneity within mass consumer societies and suggest ways in which individuals can effect change in contemporary political and economic realms. Likewise, future scholars could enhance the archival research that Westermann has already completed by relying less on "traditional" sources (government documents, national newspapers, or the annals of the Industrial Trade Union), which often convey the hegemonic ideology of an already powerful institution. New research could turn, instead, to personal narratives, documents, and anecdotes about individual experiences--for example, tracing the use of plastics in homes, patterns of purchasing, recycling, or boycotting the material--in order to craft a more human history of mass consumerism and its interaction with modern science. After all, according to Appadurai and the social, cultural, and political historians like Westermann who have followed his methodology, the human should be at the heart of this intellectual pursuit.

Notes

[1]. Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5.

[2]. Contemporary historiography on post-World War II West German consumer culture includes Alan Confino and Rudy Koshar, "Regimes of Consumer Culture: New Narratives in Twentieth Century German History," *German History* 19 (2001): 135-161; David Crew, ed., *Consuming Germany in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Arnold Gehlen, "Konsum und Kultur," *Einblicke, Gesamtausgabe* 7 (1978): 3-14; and Michael Prinz, "'Konsum' und 'Konsumgesellschaft,'" *Forschung zur Regionalgeschichte* 43 (2003): 11-34. The theoretical underpinnings of the ongoing research, however, can be traced at least as far back as the Frankfurt School and the mid-century work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.

[3]. The best study of the ongoing interest in comparative historiography is Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmerman, eds., *De la Comparaison à l'histoire croisée* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

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