

Book Review



Consumers, Tinkerers, Rebels: The People Who Shaped Europe

Ruth Oldenziel and Mikael Hård, *Palgrave Macmillan*, 2013. 440 pp., 78 b&w illus, cloth, £65.00. ISBN: 9780230308015.

Consumers, Tinkerers, Rebels: The People Who Shaped Europe is the first of six volumes in the book series *Making Europe: Technology and Transformations, 1850–2000*, edited by Johan Schot and Phil Scranton. The series emerges from Tension of Europe, a well-established, extensive international research network coordinated by the Dutch Foundation for the History of Technology.

A key ambition in the activities of the Tension of Europe network has been to apply a transnational perspective onto the history of technology in Europe and thus bypass tried-and-tested national narratives in favour of alternative frameworks. In this inaugural volume, Ruth Oldenziel and Mikael Hård have skilfully drawn on a large body of research from across Europe and crafted an engaging account of how European society has been ‘made’ by ‘user-citizens’ in their individual and collective negotiations of technology.

In an academic atmosphere where scholarship tends to become more and more specialized, leading to ever new subgenres of history writing, it is rare to see sustained efforts at synthesizing the staggering amount of available information. *Consumers, Tinkerers, Rebels* is necessarily eclectic and particular, but in their hard priorities the authors have still managed to construct a narrative that feels coherent, representative and inclusive. Oldenziel and Hård’s definition of technology is refreshingly broad—so broad, in fact, that labelling the book a history of technology seems unnecessarily restrictive. It is just as much a history of social relations, of politics, of culture—and of design.

The book opens with an introduction to the *Making Europe* series by its editors Schot and Scranton, outlining the scope and rationale of the project. Its key tenet, that ‘recent European history is as much about building connections across national borders as it is about playing out conflicts between nation-states’ (p. x) provides a point of departure for both the series and the book. Following a brief introduction by the authors, the book is structured into three parts, dividing ‘The Long Twentieth Century’ into three periods, using the First World War and the cultural upheavals of the 1960s as watersheds. The eight chapters each focus on one ‘large technological system’, selected for its ability to shed light on broader developments. The case studies are exemplary rather than representative. This is Oldenziel and Hård’s solution to the nightmarish problem, in writing the history of a continent spanning a century and a half, of inclusion/exclusion. As a result, the book can hardly be described as a survey.

Untypically for a history of technology, but typically for the broad definition of technology applied here, the first chapter is devoted to the Parisian fashion system developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. But rather than retelling the story of the genesis of *haute couture*, Oldenziel and Hård hone in on how masses of women across Europe and across social strata devised many and creative strategies for appropriating a design culture which, in its 'sanctioned' form, remained an exclusive privilege of the few. Technology never disappears from view, though, as the enabling capacities of the sewing machine and widely circulated paper patterns are crucial to the analysis. The relevance to design history continues with the second chapter, which discusses living conditions, domesticity and home-making practices, masterfully demonstrating differences as well as similarities between national contexts as varied as Russia, Turkey, Germany and Sweden. Rounding up part one, the third chapter singles out yet another sector of obvious centrality to design history: railways. A lucid example is the account of how the design of carriage compartments was steeped in, and in turn perpetuated, class structures, and the many social anxieties associated with this. In fact, class issues loom large, not only in this chapter, but throughout the book. In the railway case, this extends to highly differentiated border controls, which effectively made transnational travel a pleasant experience for the upper classes, and an extremely testing one for people of lesser means.

Opening part two of the book, chapter four continues the transport systems theme by examining the bicycle as the great provider of personal transport, from its initial use for sports and exploration by the upper classes to its later incarnation as commuter tool for the working class. Chapter five takes us into the less familiar terrain of the technologies and infrastructures of food. From the tracing of colonial food chains to the Europe-wide appropriation of the supermarket, the authors here deftly demonstrate that their transnational approach does not conflate internationalism and homogeneity. Revisiting the topic of home-making, chapter six moves from food practices to kitchen design—yet another mainstay of design history. Taking the infamous 'kitchen debate' between Nixon and Khrushchev in Moscow in 1959 as a point of departure, Oldenziel and Hård trace the politics of the kitchen back at least to the beginning of the century. Much of this will of course be well known to design historians, from contested experiments with communal kitchens via the

home economics movement to the Frankfurt kitchen, but the broader context of how different expert groups sought to negotiate with users and vied for hegemony sets this material beautifully in play in the characteristic transnational perspective.

For unknown reasons, the third and final part of the book consists of two rather than three chapters. Chapter seven, 'Saving the Nation, Saving the Earth', comprises perhaps the book's most original contribution, as it maps out an environmental history of consumer activism, from interwar and wartime salvage and recycling practices via alternative energy experiments to campaigns against littering, toxic waste and nuclear weapons—topics that required transnational action and now require transnational historical analyses. The final chapter centres on material culture and practices of play, which are portrayed as interactive and creative endeavours with significant social and political overtones. From the gendered worlds of Meccano and Barbie, via contraband and modified blue jeans as expressions of rebellion, to hacker culture emerging around computer clubs on both sides of the Iron Curtain, this account highlights the perseverance, creativity and savviness of users across Europe in crafting their own identities and design cultures.

Consumers, Tinkerers, Rebels is an impressive achievement. Prioritizing the humble and mundane material culture and positioning consumers and users as *The People Who Shaped Europe* is a bold and provocative move in a field where the master narratives at least have been dominated by great inventors and entrepreneurs, spectacular innovations and heavy technology. An equally important feature of the book, which is also deeply embedded in the Tensions of Europe network, is the remarkably broad geographical coverage. Although both authors are North-West Europeans, they have accomplished an outstandingly balanced treatment of west versus east, north versus south and large versus small. Design historians would do well to consult *Consumers, Tinkerers, Rebels*, both as an example of how transnational history can be written, but also as proof of the potential relevance of design history to a broader academic community.

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