H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sharon Zukin. *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture.* New York: Routledge, 2004. 325 pp. $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-95043-5; $31.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-94597-4.

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Published on H-Urban (December, 2005)

In Which the Middle Class Goes Shopping

In *Point of Purchase*, sociologist Sharon Zukin makes the often complicated ideas of consumer culture and history accessible to the people who are most directly affected by such a culture. Through an examination of both the social geographies of shopping and the less tangible consumer mentalities found therein, Zukin presents a convincing argument of how, as the subtitle of the book implies, shopping has changed American culture. While many other books have successfully linked culture with consumption, they have done so at the expense of readability.[1] Zukin's book for a general audience suffers no such problem.

That said, however, Zukin's approach is notably inflected by her personal experiences as an upper-middle-class, female sociology professor living in New York City's Greenwich Village. When Zukin writes of the Internet, *Zagat's* dining guide, or a farmers market, she presents an accurate, albeit narrow, depiction of a particular type of culture, one less accessible to those outside of Zukin's general demographic profile.

Point of Purchase could be viewed as a type of consumer ethnography and thus prone to many of the same merits and flaws of traditional or even critical ethnographies. While the use of individual stories, such as those of Julia and Artemio, can be useful in problematizing larger issues, they can also fall prey to nuanced individual concerns. For example, while the discussion of the Internet is fruitful to those of us privileged to have access to it and certainly one important way that an upper crust of American society has changed, it generally suffers from a sort of technological elitism. Similarly, a cultural elitism appears in the discussions of consumer guides woven throughout the book. Zukin sees consumer guides–most notably *Zagat's*–as honest brokers between producers and consumers and performing a type of market research in reverse. To consult a guide like *Zagat's*, however, requires a certain amount of cultural and economic capital–a requirement not only to eat at the restaurants it surveys, but to buy the guide in the first place. Private issues do not always make for public concerns. To this end, Zukin's larger point about a change in American culture–or what should really be called consumer culture–relies more on the reader's ability to identify with the specific examples used rather than on any hard-nosed empirical or theoretical evidence.

"Low" culture, however, is not absent from the analysis. There are substantive references to middle-class consumption icons such as the Gap, and working-class favorites such as Wal-Mart. These institutions, however, are discussed primarily in terms of the cultural domains from which they originate. For example, Zukin's discussion of Wal-Mart is mostly limited to its effects on small-town middle America, with no consideration of its impact in major cities. The reverse is also true: her analyses of Neiman-Marcus and Woolworth's are restricted to their impacts in major cities, with little indication of how these companies have affected rural America.

Zukin treats one retail establishment in particular, K-Mart, out of its main context, in contrast to her analyses of Woolworth's or Wal-Mart. In recent years, K-Mart has run the gamut of retail fortunes from bankruptcy to renewed profits, and thus could represent a range of issues related to shopping in American culture, especially in terms of contemporary "low" culture consumption. But Zukin uses anecdotes drawn from her local K-Mart in Greenwich Village, a store located anomalously in a major metropolis and thus not likely representative of the "true" K-Mart experience. K-Mart, and other discount stores, are most often located in the outskirts, suburbs, and exurbs of major cities and only very rarely in their downtowns. Presumably, K-Mart shoppers from these areas would not come into the city simply to shop at a retailer they can find closer to home (where it is probably larger to boot). Consequently, one can assume that the shoppers at the K-Mart near Zukin are most likely residents of Greenwich Village and therefore of an economic, social, and cultural demographic not characteristic of K-Mart shoppers elsewhere. Zukin does not address this disparity in her analysis.

The author argues for the importance of social status over social class and, by doing so, again highlights the middle-class shopper. The glass front display window, the emergence of the discount store, and even Wal-Mart are cited as evidence that through consumption, one can achieve at least the appearance of a middle-class lifestyle. For example, when discussing Wal-Mart, Zukin says that the key to its success lies in its promise that "by shopping for brand names at bargain prices, all shoppers can be 'middle class' " (p. 84). Zukin even asserts that "the great achievement of the universal store [Wal-Mart] is to surround us with both democracy and humanity" (p. 88). While others have made similar arguments about the democratizing possibilities of consumption settings, I do not believe that any one setting itself–least of all Wal-Mart–has become the realization of a status- rather than a class-based society.[2] At any rate, status and class in the world of retail can be seen as so highly correlated that to separate the two hinders our understanding.

One of the most insightful and well-supported sections of the book is concerned with consumer mentality. Zukin makes the case for consumption as involving not only economic, but also cultural, capital, and drawing on not just markets, but also values. Thus, shopping is a process of learning about goods, not simply acquiring them. Zukin describes waves of consumer mentality–first in the 1930s with the earliest reviews of consumer products, then again in the 1960s when social changes shaped a new consumer mentality, and more recently in the 1980s when Reaganomics increasingly emphasized a company's performance in the stock market. Zukin asserts: "Ultimately, a new culture depends not just on the production of consumer goods but on the production of consumers" (p. 257).

Zukin also turns a keen eye to sex differences in consumer culture. She sees consumption as a democratizing force but one that also segregates the sexes in many respects. For example, she asserts that men spend more time researching their purchases, picturing themselves in physical activities, while women are more attuned to clothes-shopping, picturing themselves in the perfect outfit. Women shop more for the home and family, while men shop more for electronics and cars. Men are more likely to purchase brand names, while women are more apt to go bargain-hunting. These are indeed cultural truisms, but I, as a man quite attuned to shopping, with many visions of myself in the perfect outfit, still hunt for bargains. Would the democratizing potential of consumption really stop at sex lines? Is there a discrepancy between actual and reported activities–particularly among men in this country who might fear admitting to their fashion sensitivity? Or are women, in fact, more capable navigators of the seas of consumption?

These objections aside, Zukin's analysis of the department store and her approach to shopping in general make a number of powerful arguments about not only the effects of shopping on American culture but also the effects of American culture–particularly with respect to race, demeanor, and Internet access–on shopping. For example, in her case study of Artemio, a young, dark-skinned male who tries to shop at Tiffany's, but is tailed by security staff, we are able to see both how shopping has influenced race in American culture and how American culture has influenced shopping. Zukin does not clarify, however, whether in Artemio's case it is the color of his

skin or his "urban style" of clothing that led to his mistreatment. As Zukin points out elsewhere, one must also learn how to dress to shop.

True to her goal, Zukin does not leave us feeling hopeless OR awash in a sea of unbridled consumer ecstasy, but rather more sensitized to why, and how, (some) Americans shop. Zukin offers an epilogue with several useful approaches to counter prevailing aggressive marketing strategies, chief among them being her local farmer's market. A farmer's market, she argues, not only allows one to get back in touch with the products, but it also provides, much like the Greek agora, a public space, where political activism and civic engagement can potentially flourish. While I can certainly appreciate the potential of a farmer's market to act as a rejuvenating space for community-building in a commercial setting, I do not view these markets as widely prescriptive. They are still limited in accessibility, both geographically and to those who have sufficient time to seek them out and peruse their offerings. Thus, like her analysis of many of the problems presented throughout the book, the solutions Zukin offers are keenly insightful but woefully limited.

Notes

[1]. For example, see Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998).

[2]. See, for example, Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic : The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

Citation: J. Michael Ryan. Review of Zukin, Sharon, *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10999