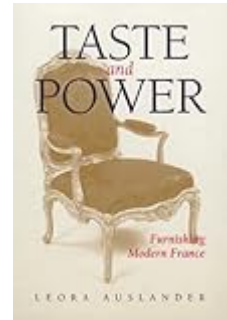


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Leora Auslander.** *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. xv + 495 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-08894-8.



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*Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* is an expansive history of changing furniture styles in France, from the late seventeenth century through World War I. Leora Auslander embeds her descriptions of furniture in the dramatic social, political and economic changes which transformed France during this period. The book is composed of several seemingly disparate stories: the longevity of ancien regime furniture styles, women's increasing responsibility for the home and its furnishings, France's long road to a stable republic, and finally, mechanization and the growth of a liberal, industrial, economy. Auslander's stated goal is to demonstrate that those stories are not, in fact, disparate, but rather interdependent. The focus is not the changing aesthetics of furniture but the relationship between economics, politics, and culture—in Auslander's words "... the place of style and taste in the making of the political and social order, as well as of people's self-understandings" (p. 1). That is a lofty goal, and it is no small thing that Auslander succeeds at all.

Auslander's argument is not, on the face of it, relevant to business history. It does, however, have serious implications for business historians. The book marks an important historiographic moment. Historians in greater and greater numbers are focusing their work around distribution and the ways in which demand is constructed,

contained and sustained. Auslander's book was published the same year that a new anthology of articles on distribution and consumption came out—*The Sex of Things* (ed., Victoria de Grazia with Ellen Furlough, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) and both of these works follow on the heels of Elizabeth Cohen's path-breaking work on the role of mass consumption in the lives of Chicago's working-class populations. The recent publication of several works on advertising, demand and distribution and the promise of several forthcoming works, all point to the increasing importance of distribution in scholars' analyses of economic, political, and social change (see, e.g., Bean, *Beyond the Broker State: Federal Policies toward Small Business, 1936-1961* [1996]; Erica Carter, *How German is She? Postwar German Reconstruction and the Consuming Woman* [1997]; and Elizabeth Cohen *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Consumption in Postwar America* [Houghton Mifflin, forthcoming]). These works, like Auslander's, suggest how industrialization and mechanization look very different when the requirements of sustained demand are factored into scholars' analysis.

Auslander has made an important contribution to this new area of scholarship. She does, indeed, often show the links between social, political, and economic history. Just as often, however, she relies on cultural history and

theories of identity-formation, so that her claims are oriented around arguments which are likely to be unfamiliar to many business historians. Moreover, because she has focused on theoretical literature, the central thread of her argument is not about what actually happened, but about the implications of what happened—there is not a concrete, central argument to connect the very broad sweep of topics Auslander includes. That is a shame, because there is no single central argument which runs throughout the book, and because, quite often, Auslander's accounts of specific episodes are thoughtful and suggestive. The result is an important and intriguing book which is often difficult to read.

With those caveats in mind, however, the book is well worth exploring. Auslander traces the ways in which control of furniture production shifted from close negotiations between nobility and artisans to the tightly-held control of "taste professionals," and the owners of large stores and large factories. The shift came about, she argues, because of changing production methods and work culture, the growth of a liberal state and economy, and consequent changes in cultural norms surrounding the uses of furniture. Without the regulations and the market provided by a king and his court, furniture-making in France became far more standardized than it had been. Furniture makers had less status, less elaborate training, and less control over what they made. Consumers, in turn, had little control over what they bought, since they were both physically and culturally prevented from making contact with furniture makers. The argument challenges conventional accounts of industrialization and of consumer culture by arguing that both were intimately connected to government policies.

The narrative is organized into three time periods, each of which are divided by topic into individual chapters and treated topically within each time period. For each period, Auslander treats the state's relationship to furniture and to furniture makers, the way that furniture looked in a particular period, and the social norms which certain styles were expected to sustain. The organization highlights the connections between economic, political and cultural change. We can see, for instance, how the king's ability to control furniture production shaped the styles which were produced, and facilitated both creativity and a variety of styles. In the transitional period (from the early- to mid-nineteenth century) Auslander argues that increasing investment in large factories, machinery and large stores, the state's increasing control over workers' lives and training (and indirect control over factories themselves) and a general concern among social critics

with creating a single French style led to a reliance on old designs. From the late-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century, those trends reached their apex, as both furniture and beauty came to seem the exclusive domain of women, and as artisans assumed the position of waged labor, with relatively narrow training.

This main story is convincing, but smaller arguments within each chapter are, while very interesting, less compelling on the face of it. It is certainly possible, for instance, that furniture was constitutive of a king's power, but the claim needs far more clarification than Auslander provides (p. 38). Similarly, it is an intriguing possibility that male "dandies" did, as Auslander says make "aesthetic sensibility suspect as a masculine virtue ..." It is less clear precisely how that happened, or why aesthetic sensibility should have been feminized in places where dandies did not have a strong presence. Finally, Auslander's very definition of who can possess style and taste—those with social and political power—might be useful for the purposes of the book, but is itself problematic. Not only does it exclude much of the French population from her study but it effectively reinforces the division between production and consumption, since it allows her to treat workers solely as producers. While they certainly did not have much of the furniture she describes in the book, the ways in which non-powerful people furnished their homes would have enriched her analysis, and further illustrated the constructed, power-laden nature of "taste" and "style."

The proof Auslander does provide often stems from her orientation to cultural history. Much of her primary sources are prescriptive in nature. They describe what people ought to do—but shed little light on how people actually lived. It is reasonable to assume that the styles promoted by advice books and catalogs were popular, but, particularly given the stark distinctions between the uses of different styles, it is less clear how accurately they reflect people's actual lives. It may be, for instance, that many advice books assumed that women had "fundamental responsibility for furnishing the home," but, given social and financial constraints, it seems unlikely that women actually assumed full responsibility for home furnishings.

Shortcomings like those I have illustrated are important, but should not outweigh the usefulness of *Taste and Power*. It is as important that Leora Auslander chose to write a book on demand and distribution as it is that she writes about a particular topic. Her work illustrates the challenges and the rewards of analyzing something as

seemingly intangible as consumers' "taste." It is notoriously difficult to identify the factors that shape demand, but seems increasingly important to attempt. Explaining demand requires pushing sub-disciplinary boundaries and reconstructing a coherent, cohesive narrative. Auslander's contribution to this project raises issues which

other scholars would do well to consider.

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