



David D. Hamlin. *Work and Play: The Production and Consumption of Toys in Germany, 1870-1914.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007. x + 286 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11588-4.



Reviewed by Bryan Ganaway (Department of History, College of Charleston)

Published on H-German (January, 2008)

Toys and Production: Work or Play?

In his first book, David Hamlin focuses on toy production to show how “consumerist” practices molded individuals in a modern society “shot through with tensions and contradictions” (p. 20). As someone who also studied miniatures in the *Kaiserreich*, I have been eagerly looking forward to this book. I was intrigued by his argument that many contemporaries saw the consumption of toys as “a magic spear” that adults could use to overcome the serious problems that plagued Germany.

The first three chapters focus on the creation of demand for, production, and distribution of toys in Germany around 1900. In the opening chapter, Hamlin argues that the increasing importance of the domestic sphere after 1871 as a place where children could be molded into good adults created demand for various miniatures relating to the military, technology, and gender. The following chapter shows how this demand shaped a diverse production regime that relied on mechanization or handcrafting, depending on region and product. The next chapter explains how new marketing strategies and locations evolved to handle consumer demand. This chapter offers the strongest argumentation

in the book; Hamlin convincingly shows that we need a holistic understanding of toy production. Manufacturers and handcrafters could meet demand because they benefited from lower transportation and raw material costs as well as new technology, such as offset lithography. Furthermore, consumer desire was diverse enough to support a rapidly developing factory system and keep traditional craftsmen and women in business. After 1890, they could sell their products to sales representatives with contacts in the new department stores. While many scholars look at production and consumption separately, Hamlin works to show their intimate connections; the book demonstrates the utility of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

The final two chapters move away from the nexus of demand, production, and marketing to focus on social debates that involved toys. For example, many commentators made the connection between exporting consumer goods and national power. However, they did not necessarily agree on whether products such as toys increased or lessened Teutonic strength. Liberals, including Friedrich Naumann, believed wholly in the free

market, but worried that poor conditions for workers weakened the nation. Marxist scholars lambasted the entire factory system and saw consumer culture as another form of false consciousness. Certain middle-class reformers hoped to alter production and toys in an effort to protect or nurture children and women. Similarly, almost all adults accepted that miniatures should educate children, but they disagreed on the specific goals of this process. Konrad Lange (from Hamburg) wanted toys to nurture children's intellect and protect them from the uncultivated excesses of the free market, while most factory producers wanted miniatures to train girls as homemakers. Hamlin works hard to demonstrate that these debates about the nature of the individual in the *Kaiserreich* show the importance of consumption to our understanding of modernity. He effectively demonstrates that members of the educated elite in Germany utilized consumer items like toys as vernacular items to persuade fellow citizens about the possibilities and pitfalls of capitalism. This conclusion draws even further into question the common notion that one cannot really speak of a modern consumer culture in Germany much before the Weimar period. While Hamlin takes toys as his object, one could undertake a similar study using clothing, furniture, books, soap, and colonial goods from around 1900.

Readers who agree with Hamlin that toys helped Germans define what it meant to be modern may, however, be surprised that everyday Germans and their toys are often obscured in this argument. The ordinary consumer as a "modern" individual with agency does not appear as often as one expects. The first chapter identifies toys by type, but in the remaining sections, Hamlin generally focuses on intellectual and entrepreneurial discussions about miniatures, rather than explaining why parents bought them. He does not probe how children played with the dolls, trains, or stuffed animals that inhabited the playroom—although certainly not for a lack of potential examples from diaries, magazines, and advertisements. Hamlin states directly his suspicions about memoir sources, noting that many were written decades later. While he is correct to counsel due diligence, other researchers from this period have effectively made use of diaries while acknowledging their limitations.[1] Since we never learn how consumers chose or utilized toys, part of Hamlin's fascinating equation of demand, production, and marketing seems undefined. For example, he argues that consumers interested in domesticity after 1870 created demand for dolls, but the rest of the book focuses mostly on how entrepreneurs, producers, and intellectuals used the market to shape the way peo-

ple thought about modernity. We do not learn how subsequent consumer voices altered doll shape, or if their shifting tastes influenced broader social or political issues regarding gender roles. The book hardly treats consumption of the personal, self-fashioning variety among ordinary people.

This omission is conceivably due to Hamlin's conclusion that the "slowly, painstakingly, and ambivalently constructed" modern consumerist project (designed to create critically thinking citizens) collapsed due to "friction" and "outright contradiction" (p. 222). Since the project failed, it is less important to understand individual consumer choices that participated in it. Clearly, he is correct that consumption did not create utopia, but I am not sure that is the end of the story. A different view of modernity might stress its role in opening new opportunities for self-expression to note that people enjoyed consumption, regardless of whether the outcome was hypocritical. And at least some scholarship suggests that its outcomes were larger and more successful: within the German context, for example, Belinda Davis and Maria HÃ¶hn have shown how women used practices of consumption to affect the political landscape and alter social values.[2] While I admire Hamlin for connecting the demand for, production and marketing of, and discourse about toys, the book might have done even more. After pointing out that the consumer project failed to reconcile all the problems in Germany, he might have offered some insight into the matter of why people kept buying nonetheless and the messages they hoped to send to their fellow citizens. My own attempts to answer these questions have suggested that practices of consumption allowed ordinary consumers, including those with no political voice, to fashion themselves in surprising ways, even if their activity also reinforced existing power structures. Regardless of whether or not we like the outcome, this action was something they enjoyed. Hamlin's intriguing first book is thus strong on production and work, but it sometimes loses sight of consumption and play.

Notes

[1]. Paul Fussell and Jay Winter gained useful insights into the way British and French veterans understood World War I from memoirs, many of which were written years after the fact and contained factual inaccuracies, by paying careful attention to broad themes. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); and Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University

Press, 2006).

[2]. Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill: Uni-

versity of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Maria Hä¶hn, *GIs and FrÄ¶uleins: The German American Encounter in 1950s West Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Bryan Ganaway. Review of Hamlin, David D., *Work and Play: The Production and Consumption of Toys in Germany, 1870-1914*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14108>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.