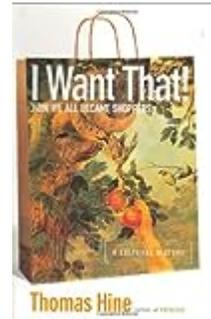




Thomas Hine. *I Want That! How We All Became Shoppers.* New York: HarperCollins, 2002. xviii + 222 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-018511-4.



Reviewed by Rachel Howse (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-USA (June, 2003)

The Harshest Generic Toilet Paper

The Harshest Generic Toilet Paper

As an avid shopper and observer of fashion trends, I was intrigued with the premise of Thomas Hine's latest cultural critique, even if the title did conjure images of lurid covers of self-help and pop-psychology books spilling over a discount table at a Friends of the Library sale. An *Atlantic Monthly* contributor and author of four previous books, including *Populuxe* and *The Total Package: The Secret History and Hidden Meanings of Boxes, Bottles, Cans, and Other Persuasive Containers*, Hine uses his range of knowledge and interest to provide brief historical and sociological sketches of the passions that burn within today's shoppers. He has even created new terminology for the 21st century: the "buyosphere." Hine's "buyosphere" is a cultural catch-all that consists of "a set of physical and virtual places and a state of mind" in which "we live much of our lives," a place illustrated by western culture's growing dependence on strip malls, department stores, fashion magazines, advertisements, and television to express the inner desires of shoppers (pp. xiv-xv). It is, he writes, an evolution so intense, it overwhelms almost any sense of how shopping used to be.

Hine delves deeply into pop-sociology with his chapter divisions, naming each of the nine chapters after an element he considers to be fundamental in building the quintessential shopping moment in America: "Power," "Responsibility," "Discovery," "Self-Expression," "Insecurity," "Attention," "Belonging," "Celebration," and "Convenience." The similarity of the cover art to self-help books becomes even more emphasized, as Hine allows himself to engage in gender-role assessments and pop-psychology overtures (he speaks of kleptomania and shop-lifting as though they are interchangeable and when discussing shopping compulsions and addictions, the nearest comparison he can draw is to gambling, as though drug addiction and alcoholism are too serious and real), as he tries to explain the manic shopping Americans were told to engage in after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as an act of patriotism, and the emotional displacement people feel when confronted with new trends.

Because I am a fervent shopper and try to be an informed consumer, I am interested in the dynamics of how shopping culture as it exists today has come about:

this delicious cross of high-end merchandise, elusive bargains, technology and the old-world marketplace, and accessibility that have fused together to put a new spin on commerce and consumerism. Initially Hine seems poised to fulfill this request, beginning with a comparison: "Shopping has a lot in common with sex: Just about everybody does it. Some people brag about how well they do it. Some keep it a secret. Most people worry, at least a little, about whether they do it right. And both sex and shopping provide ample opportunities to make really foolish choices" (p. ix).

But Hine's writing has the air of the struggling (and perhaps thwarted) intellectual about it. Clearly he is an educated man and he knows of what he speaks: his Wedgwood Museum shopping experience is a reminiscence of a bull clearly not afraid of the china shop (pp. 89-90.) And there is his curt reminder to his audience that fashion and taste are not interchangeable: "Taste is not the same as fashion. Fashions come and go, while taste evolves much more slowly. Most people encounter fashions as phenomena that come from somewhere else, even though they may have helped create or inspire them. While taste must be shared, it feels like something that comes from within. It sets the standards we use to filter fashions..." (p. 144). There is an elitist tone, a sense of snobbery here, but it does not seem out of place or inaccurate. In a recent edition of *The New Yorker* magazine, two lengthy articles on taste, shopping, and fashion can be found: one is on the Sao Paulo store Daslu and fashion-as-politics, the other on Suzy Mendes, fashion critic for the *International Herald Tribune*. Fashion and taste are as important to the ever-evolving class structure today as they were to ancient Egyptians or to Marie-Antoinette's court.

While trying to portray contemporary shoppers, Hine manages to pigeon-hole what he would have them be. For the most part, Hine views the contemporary shopper as a heterosexual female. She is most probably married or longs to be. And she is slow to transition from *The Donna Reed Show*. The quintessential woman shopper "pushes her cart through the store"; she is "constantly making judgments. She considers how to spend a limited budget, and balances this against the needs and desires of her family. She worries about whether her children are eating and whether her husband is getting too fat" (p. 23). The woman-cum-shopper is biologically predisposed to shop, as shopping is the modern equivalent to gathering, while the male shopper is hopeless at shopping, as overwhelmed by choice and shopping environment as his precursor was of being forced into the nurtur-

ing. Hine's second chapter, "Responsibility," is subtitled "Why Women Take Shopping Seriously," a backhanded compliment that stings as it demonstrates that feminism—which has brought gender roles to such new levels—still has a long way to go.

Though Hine writes about the evolution in shopping in connection with other countries and does so (however blandly) in terms of gender, there is little comparison between how Americans and the rest of the world shop. Consumerism in America has been different from that in any other country; slowly other countries are working toward what—for us—is commonplace: Sunday shopping, extended evening hours, twenty-four-hour convenience shopping. Even the advent of the Internet has not dampened American shoppers' love of tactile shopping in the way that public relations types predicted it would. That said, Hine never provides any cross-comparisons of other consumer markets in the present day, not even of those in neighboring Canada and Mexico. There are two chapters that chronicle branding and convenience shopping without ever scraping below a very glossy and shallow surface of presumption and conjecture. Convenience in the U.S. market, enhanced by the Internet, has caused a downfall in worker productivity, Hines says in mock-surprise, going on to comment that the real workday is now a ten-to-twelve-hour one (a point that he may well be correct about). There is little to connect this moment of clarity with any shopping culture outside of Hine's American one. Hine concludes his foray into shopping with the line "shopping must be what it has always been: a practical expression of freedom" (p. 204), a line that leaves the reader blinking in confusion and irritability with the question "Whose freedom?" moving through her/his mind.

There are two areas where *I Want That* is more than just adequate in its explanations, and those are modern retail history, and shopping for bargains and for purpose. Hine does a competent job—not brilliant, but certainly thorough and enjoyable—of detailing the rise of mass-produced clothing and the advent of the department store, which "were built on contradiction" as "they sought to be seen as very high-toned places, while appealing to the multitudes" (p. 135). From London's William Whitely and Paris's Aristide and Marguerite Boucicault to the United States's A. T. Stewart and John Wannamaker, Hine explains the advent of the modern department store with a grace and ease that one wishes he could have found for the rest of the book. When it comes to the women-as-gatherers theory, Hine inadvertently cancels out his own conclusions by showing that

his feminine shopper ideal could and can be a strategic maven, a hunter with murderously accurate instincts: "Status," Hine writes of Filene's Basement and the elusive bargain, "was fine as far as it went, but a bargain was better. The point was not to buy cheaply, but to pay less for items of quality and taste" (p. 193).

The problem with Hine's book stems from the work's vagueness. As a columnist, Hine is witty, visceral, and incredibly engaging; in book-length form, he drags. He attempts to straddle academia and mainstream culture but does so unsuccessfully. His creation of the "buyosphere," for example, is a hybrid of pop-psychology and marketing terms thrown together without ever managing cohesiveness or logic. The pop-culture tone is stiff and ar-

chaic, like one's great-great-grandfather touting the merits of rap. And there are no original ideas presented here, nor are there any exciting and engaging representations of familiar ones. The research is dated, as are many of the shopping-and-technology anecdotes. Hine completely overlooks the rise of on-line auction sites and relies much too heavily on trade publications and magazines for his "hard proof." The one area where the book has an opportunity to shine—as a cultural evolution of the marketplace and its history—is pushed aside in favor of sexist generalizations and droll anecdotes. In a book about shopping, the decision to turn down a chance to fulfill the reader's expectation is like buying the harshest generic toilet paper: it is sudden and certain death, even if it is on sale.

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

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

Citation: Rachel Howse. Review of Hine, Thomas, *I Want That! How We All Became Shoppers*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7711>

Copyright © 2003 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.