

The Grands Magasins Dufayel, the working class, and the  
origins of consumer culture in Paris, 1880-1916

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## ABSTRACT

France's transition from an agrarian-aristocratic to an industrial-consumer society accelerated in the late nineteenth century due to important innovations in the retail industry. The department store introduced fixed prices and rapid turnover of goods, making consumption easier and faster. These innovations were then spread to the working class of Paris at the Grands Magasins Dufayel. The store became more than merely a retail destination, however, as it supplied a form of leisure space and consumer entertainment in the working-class area of northern Paris. It also diffused advertising promoting a vision of a future consumer society in which the working class would enjoy greater material wealth and social opportunities, rendering traditional paternalism obsolete. In spite of its prominence in late nineteenth-century Paris, however, the Dufayel department store has been largely dismissed by current historiography which sees the advent of consumer culture as a fundamentally bourgeois phenomenon.

But by considering the Dufayel experiment on its own terms rather than as an imitation of bourgeois consumer culture we gain new insights on several aspects of late nineteenth-century consumer culture. We learn that in many ways the bourgeoisie was ambivalent with respect to the emergence of consumer culture, seeking whenever possible products or advertisements that hid their mass-produced origin. In this light the department store itself, far from being a tool for the dissemination of bourgeois values, was often a threat to those values, and its elaborate advertising was needed to distract the bourgeois shopper from this fact. Bourgeois ambivalence about consumer culture was expressed in the outbreak of food-adulteration anxiety in the late nineteenth-century press, when consumer culture was associated with the decline in quality and, more importantly, the loss of authenticity in French food. Finally we are able to see how one example of consumer technology--the phonograph--triumphed in turn-of-the-century Paris because promoters were able to exploit class divisions in order to shape the public into a common consumer market.

## RÉSUMÉ

La transformation de la France d'une nation agraire et aristocratique à une société de consommation industrielle s'est accélérée en fin du XIXe siècle en raison d'importantes innovations dans le secteur commercial. Le grand magasin a introduit les prix fixes et les taux de rotation rapide des marchandises, ce qui a rendu la consommation plus facile et plus rapide. Ces innovations ont ensuite été étendues à la classe ouvrière de Paris aux Grands Magasins Dufayel. Le magasin est devenu plus qu'une simple destination de détail en fournissant de l'espace de

loisir et de divertissement dans les quartiers populaires du nord de Paris. Il a également diffusé la publicité proposant une vision de la société de consommation future dans laquelle la classe ouvrière bénéficierait d'une nouvelle richesse matérielle ainsi que des opportunités sociales, rendant obsolète le paternalisme traditionnel. En dépit de son importance à la fin du XIXe siècle, Dufayel a été largement ignoré par l'historiographie actuelle qui voit la culture de la consommation comme un phénomène fondamentalement bourgeois.

Mais en considérant l'expérience Dufayel selon ses propres termes, plutôt que comme une imitation de la culture bourgeoise, nous pouvons acquérir de nouvelles connaissances sur plusieurs aspects de la culture de consommation à la fin du XIXe siècle. Nous apprenons que de nombreuses façons la bourgeoisie était ambivalente à l'égard de la culture de consommation, recherchant les produits ou les publicités qui déguisait leur origine industrielle. Dans cette perspective le grand magasin lui-même, loin d'être un outil pour la diffusion des valeurs bourgeoises, a souvent menacé ces valeurs; sa publicité était un moyen de détourner l'acheteur bourgeois de ce fait. Cette ambivalence a été exprimée dans la presse du XIXe siècle sous la forme de l'anxiété à propos du frelatage alimentaire quand la culture de consommation a été associée à une baisse de qualité et à la perte de l'authenticité de la cuisine française. Enfin nous pouvons voir comment une technologie de consommation - le phonographe - a triomphé à Paris quand les promoteurs ont réussi à exploiter les préjugés de classe afin de créer un marché de consommation commun.

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--J'entends bien, répondit-il. Vous vendez bon marché pour vendre beaucoup, et vous vendez beaucoup pour vendre bon marché ... Seulement, il faut vendre, et j'en reviens à ma question: à qui vendrez-vous? Comment espérez-vous entretenir une vente assez colossale?

*Au Bonheur des dames (1883)*

Au-dessus du quartier Clignancourt, le dôme du palais Dufayel resplendit embrasé... Un foyer électrique promène sur Paris d'immenses trainées lumineuses, tels les insolents reflets d'un monstrueux lingot d'or gisant, ironique, parmi la misère et le turbin de toute une cité de prolétaires.

*L'Aurore parisienne illustrée (1896)*

## INTRODUCTION

In July 1897 a quadruple suicide was discovered in a working-class Parisian neighborhood, the faubourg Poissonnière. Four young women, the *Journal des débats* reported, had asphyxiated themselves with carbonic acid. They left behind a terse statement written on a sheet of school paper: “Nous mourons toutes volontairement et sans regret,”<sup>1</sup> signed Marie Maréchal, Lucie Ravenel, Berthe Souchard and Emilia Chio.

The ordeals of the young working women would be familiar to any reader of Zola’s chronicle of working-class Paris, *L’Assommoir*: Marie’s husband had been committed to an asylum and she could no longer bear the twin burdens of loneliness and her failing business (she was a vest-maker); Emilia had been abandoned by her lover while pregnant. But the longest explanation came from Berthe Souchard who left a letter addressed to her aunt. She asked her aunt to forgive her suicide and expressed her regret at having nothing to leave to her surviving child. Or almost nothing: “Je ne possède que mon carnet Dufayel et un bon de l’Exposition. Tu garderas ce bon, et, s’il gagne, tu l’en feras profiter. Adieu, je t’embrasse une dernière fois.”

This story reveals more than mere urban despair. The two items mentioned in Mme Souchard’s last words indicated the beginnings of an

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<sup>1</sup> *Journal des débats*, July 10, 1897.

important change among the Parisian working class. In spite of the dreary life of labor and poverty that led them to suicide, both the “bon d’Exposition” and the carnet Dufayel were signs that the working class was beginning to escape from its traditionally exclusive function of production in the national economy. The “bon de l’Exposition” was a lottery ticket from the universal exposition, one of the great urban fairs of the late nineteenth century that crossed not only national borders but social ones as well, proposing that the working classes would be active participants in the new industrial-consumer society foretold by the technological wonders at the expo grounds. The “carnet Dufayel” was a credit book from the Grands Magasins Dufayel used to keep track of the small weekly payments that customers made towards their purchases.

Berthe Souchard’s mention of the carnet Dufayel testifies to the cultural and economic importance of the Grands Magasins Dufayel to the late nineteenth-century Parisian working class. Dufayel was not merely a department store. True, it was modeled after bourgeois stores like the Bon Marché: it sold the same vast range of merchandise, from clothing to draperies and furniture, and it adopted the same innovations of fixed prices and rapid turn-over of inventory. But Dufayel was unique not only in the fact that it opened in the working-class 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, but also that it sold its merchandise on credit. By extending short-term credit to workers like Berthe Souchard, it functioned as a kind of



cultural bridge between the already well-developed consumer culture of bourgeois Paris and a working class that still lived on the fringes of the emerging consumer economy.

Most workers in late nineteenth-century Paris were not “consumers” of anything but the food they ate and the clothes they wore. They largely spent their wages as fast as they earned them and, even when their salaries rose (however slowly), they did not save or buy the consumer items that mass-production was making more plentiful and affordable. The Grands Magasins Dufayel was designed to change this. In this sense it was much more than just a department store: it was an attempt to “educate” the working class to new and unfamiliar practices like buying new clothes or furnishing a home with factory-made furniture. Through advertising it tried to awaken workers to the possibility that they too could be consumers rather than mere producers for France’s traditional consuming classes.

It is difficult to overstate its influence from the mid 1890s to the death of its founder in 1916. Dufayel was by far the biggest department store in working-class Paris, but its influence exceeded its physical size. In 1902 it was estimated to have at least 600,000 customers in Paris alone.<sup>2</sup> In his 1908 study of working-class

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Steens, “De l’ouvrier contemporain,” *La Revue hebdomadaire*, September 1909, 293. This did not include mail order customers or sales at Dufayel branch stores around the country.

family budgets the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs observed that “dans presque tous nos ménages Parisiens, nous avons trouvé un compte Dufayel.”<sup>3</sup> Its main store in the Goutte d’Or became a cultural attraction in its own right. With its in-store cinema and cutting-edge electrical technology, it promoted consumer culture as the path to a better future for the working class. Its advertising, saturated with references to elevators, the cinema, the rooftop searchlight, was an unapologetic celebration of industrial technology.

One of the main arguments of this thesis is that the Dufayel project was at the centre--both geographically and chronologically--of the transformation of France into an industrial consumer society. Geographically, because in order for the French consumer society to grow it needed...consumers, and these had to be created from among the working-class majority located in areas like the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. Chronologically, because although in many ways France did not develop a truly mass consumer society until after the Second World War, the innovations that made mass-consumption possible were developed by the tripartite conspiracy of manufacturers, retailers and advertisers in the last third of the nineteenth century. The most important of these innovations were factory production of goods, rapid and reliable distribution by rail, and fixed-price, competitively-advertised retail sales.

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<sup>3</sup> “Budgets de familles,” *La Revue de Paris*, July, 1908, 543.

These innovations coalesced in the spectacular form of the Parisian bourgeois department store. But then Georges Dufayel adapted them to the working-class population of Paris. This was a crucial expansion of consumer culture from the narrow confines of the central boulevards of Paris to the masses of urban workers. It was crucial because this was the period when the productive capacity of French industry began to exceed domestic demand.<sup>4</sup> Due to France's stagnant birth rate manufacturers could not count on a rising population to "soak up" consumer goods, so consumers had to be "created," and the working class represented a huge pool of "potential" consumers.

But making a largely non-consuming worker into a shopper involved making significant changes in spending, saving and social habits. When studying the origins of the French consumer economy it is easy to lose sight of the fact that large economic changes are composed of thousands of individual decisions.<sup>5</sup> The worker who decided to forgo a night at the café concert in order to save his money for a new bed was making a decision that had both cultural and economic consequences. Georges Dufayel understood that he had to influence such

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Lévy-Loboy, "Innovation and Business Strategies in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century France," in *Enterprise and Entrepreneurs in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century France*, ed. Edward C. Carter and Robert Forster (Baltimore, MD & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 122. Although it would be more accurate to say that French industrial capacity preceded domestic demand. French manufacturers were capable of mass-production before there was a national mass-market for their goods.

<sup>5</sup> On the importance of thinking of individuals as active decision-makers rather than passive beings shaped by historical forces, I am grateful to E.A. Wrigley's argument in *People, Cities and Wealth* (Oxford, UK; New York: Blackwell, 1987).

decisions in order to mould the French worker into a reliable consumer of manufactured goods. He understood, in other words, the importance of advertising.

The era of Dufayel was an age when advertising had a lot of heavy intellectual work to do in order to change long-held cultural attitudes about consumption in France. Advertising aimed at the potential working-class consumer had to do several things at once: it had to introduce new products to the potential worker-consumers, explaining to them how these objects worked; it had to motivate them to buy these objects instead of spending money on traditional holy trinity of food, clothing and wine; it had to convince workers to aspire to greater material and domestic comforts than ever before; and most difficult, it had to create new cultural practices that would replace the older, non-consumer, practices of the working class. The ideal working-class consumer would spend more time and money furnishing his home with manufactured goods, and less time at the cabaret.

The prominence of advertising at the Grands Magasins Dufayel, the amount of money and effort it dedicated to the promotion of consumer culture, suggests that the creation of the working-class consumer was no easy task. In addition to its retail operations the Dufayel company was a publicity machine. Its advertising subsidiary, l’Affichage national, was one of the largest publicity

companies in Paris, and by 1905 it literally controlled the advertising on all the municipally-owned vertical surfaces in the city.<sup>6</sup> L’Affichage national played a large part in making turn-of-the-century Paris into a playground (or wasteland, depending on your critical perspective) of consumer advertising. Its ads were literally everywhere. It provide advertisements in every available medium, from the conventional (brochures, posters and flyers), to the innovative (billboards, rented walls), to the downright intrusive (walking “sandwich” signs, driving billboards).<sup>7</sup> Whenever a building was under construction, L’Affichage national would cover it with advertising. As it bragged in its own trade journal, the company could “établir autour des terrains ou des maisons en réparations ou en construction, des palissades recouvertes immédiatement d’innombrables affiches.”<sup>8</sup> Dufayel was proud of being the official publicity company in charge of the Exposition Universelle of 1889,<sup>9</sup> but the company really specialized in saturating those waste zones of the city--construction sites, derelict buildings, empty walls--with consumer culture.

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<sup>6</sup> The *Journal des débats* of January 26, 1905 reported: “Monsieur Dufayel vient d’être nommé adjudicateur du droit d’affichage sur tous les murs, soutènements et pignons appartenant à la Ville de Paris.”

<sup>7</sup> *La Grande Encyclopédie* (Paris: Société Anonyme de la Grande Encyclopédie, 1885-1902), s.v. “la publicité.”

<sup>8</sup> *Indicateur Dufayel* (Paris: Administration de l’Indicateur Dufayel, 1901), I.

<sup>9</sup> *Administration et Grands Magasins Dufayel* (1898), 7. Archives de Paris, D17 Z(2).

This brings us back to the Grands Magasins Dufayel itself. In the same way that Dufayel ads filled the empty spaces of Paris, the Dufayel store filled a cultural void in working-class Paris. In terms of urban space the main store provided a kind of “consumer” public square in the crowded neighborhoods of the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. The store also stepped in to provide a consumer version of culture for a working class that was largely excluded from the cosmopolitan culture of central Paris. By encouraging workers to come to the store and browse through the merchandise it taught them that consumption itself could be a form of leisure; more importantly it told them that consumer culture could be *their* leisure. The consumer society, as expressed by the new urban space of the Grands Magasins Dufayel, offered the working class of Paris material comforts that they had never enjoyed before, but it also offered them cultural experiences that had previously been unavailable to them. Its fusion of mass-produced goods and spectacular technology like the cinema was not an imitation of the style of bourgeois consumption, but was an early expression of modern mass-consumer culture. The fact that this cultural fusion took place in working class Paris, rather than on the bourgeois boulevards, presents a serious challenge to the current historical literature on consumer culture in late nineteenth-century France.

Any inquiry into a national consumer culture is part of the larger historiography on the rise of consumer society in Western Europe, and this thesis

owes a debt to works that introduce the general, international phenomenon of consumer culture, wrestle with its definition, and attempt to locate its chronological origins. The historiography of consumer culture has no shortage of “review of the literature” articles that attempt to define the subject by making lists of studies about it. However, due to the fact that consumer culture can be defined so differently from different historical and national perspectives, review essays do offer the best introductions to the subject. The most useful are those by Grant McCracken and Lisa Tiersten,<sup>10</sup> both of which explore critically what is perhaps the most important question in the field: is the history of consumer culture merely another aspect of social history--interesting, but limited--or is it more than just a subject but a new sub-discipline that may provide new ways of looking at post-industrial Western history. Of course this division of historians into two camps of “pro” and “anti” consumer history camps is more rhetorical than practical, as it is not really necessary to choose. Indeed in many ways the question remains unresolved to date, as many studies of consumer culture

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<sup>10</sup> Grant McCracken, “The History of Consumption: A Literature Review and Consumer Guide,” *Journal of Consumer Policy* 10 (1987): 139-66; Lisa Tiersten, “Redefining Consumer Culture: Recent Literature on Consumer Culture in Western Europe,” *Radical History Review* 57 (1993): 116-59. See also Sheryl Kroen, “A Political History of the Consumer,” *The Historical Journal* 47 (2004): 709-36.

continue to make this question--how important was consumer culture--the focus of their inquiry.<sup>11</sup>

The question of periodization in consumer studies is important for several reasons. First, it determines to what extent consumer culture was a product of industrialization. In general, the earlier one locates the origins of consumer culture, the less it is seen as an abrupt social change resulting from industrialization and the more one is likely to see it as outgrowth of traditional consumption habits. Second, if consumer culture is located prior to industrialization it is more likely to be associated with the middle and upper classes, those groups that *could* consume. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb argue that the consumer society, at least in England, was born in the 18<sup>th</sup> century among the bourgeoisie. Their definition of consumption is quite generous, however, including not only purchased objects but the "consumption" of public events like fairs and newspapers.<sup>12</sup> This view of a pre-industrial consumer society has not gone unchallenged; in fact most recent work on British consumer society, by focusing on the Victorian period or later, implicitly reject

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<sup>11</sup> Some examples of this approach include Gary Cross, "Time, money and labor history: encounters with consumer culture," *International Labor and Working Class History* 43 (1993): 2-17, and Victoria de Grazia's response in the same issue, "Beyond Time and Money," 24-30.

<sup>12</sup> *The Birth of a Consumer Society: the Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982). For another view on the continuity of consumer culture, see Peter N. Stearns, "Stages of Consumerism: Recent Work on the Issues of Periodization," *The Journal of Modern History* 69 (1997): 102-117.



this view. Recent works by Erika Rappaport on shopping in turn-of-the-century London and Judith Flanders' tour of the Victorian consumer culture propose that consumerism had a greater connection with late nineteenth-century modernity than with pre-industrial commerce.<sup>13</sup> Likewise Brian Lewis, in his recent study of William Hesketh Lever, locates the rise of consumer culture and advertising in the late-Victorian period.<sup>14</sup>

With one notable exception,<sup>15</sup> historians of consumer culture in France have located consumer culture in the late nineteenth century. Any discussion of the consumer society in France must begin with David Landes' famous portrayal of French "backwardness"<sup>16</sup> as so much subsequent work on French economic development was dedicated to refuting it. One example of this refutation, highly relevant to our current subject, is Maurice Lévy-Leboyer's discussion of how the conditions that Landes saw as "backwardness"--stagnant population growth,

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<sup>13</sup> Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Judith Flanders, *Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007). Other works that explore the relationship between consumer culture and industrialization include B. Fine and E. Leopold, "Consumerism and the Industrial Revolution," *Social History* 15 (1990): 151-80, and Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlen, "Historical Alternatives to Mass Production: Politics, Markets, and Technology in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Industrialization," *Past and Present* 108 (1985): 133-76.

<sup>14</sup> *So Clean: Leverhulme, Soap and Civilization* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> This exception being a rather significant one: Daniel Roche's *Histoire des choses banales: naissance de la consommation, XVIIe-XIXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1997) locates the beginnings of consumer culture in the eighteenth century.

<sup>16</sup> "French Entrepreneurship and Industrial Growth in the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of Economic History* 9 (1946): 45-61.

slow industrialization--may have prompted many of the unique innovations and energy of French consumer culture in the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> One of the most important works on French economic modernization is Roger Price's study of the development of the rail network in the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Price supplies strong evidence for the "rupture" view of the consumer capitalism. The advent of a reliable rail network supplied the foundation for the French consumer society by enabling a regular food supply from the provinces to urban markets. My thesis relies heavily on Price's emphasis on the centrality of food in the consumer economy, and my chapter (on food adulteration) attempts to link his work on the modernization of agriculture networks with urban consumer culture.

Before we zero in on the historical literature of the Parisian department store itself we must make a chronological detour to consider the influence of Walter Benjamin. One of the major reasons that nineteenth-century Paris has become synonymous with consumer culture is due to Benjamin, in particular his essay "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century."<sup>19</sup> This essay portrays Paris

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<sup>17</sup> "Innovation and Business Strategies in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century France," in *Enterprise and Entrepreneurs in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century France*, ed. Edward C. Carter II, Robert Forster, and Joseph N. Moody (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 87-135.

<sup>18</sup> *The Modernization of Rural France: Communications Networks and Agricultural Market Structures in 19<sup>th</sup> Century France* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983).

<sup>19</sup> "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writing*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 96-115.

as the place where the twin forces of consumer capitalism and artistic modernism met in the first half of the nineteenth century. Benjamin was most interested in the shopping “Arcades” of the 1820s and 1830s, the covered pedestrian malls which he considered the predecessors of the department store. Benjamin saw the Arcades as windows into the heart of industrial capitalism, serving both an economic and cultural function in the emerging consumer society. Many recent histories of the Parisian department store have implicitly followed Benjamin in seeing the stores as much more than mere retail spaces.<sup>20</sup> But perhaps Benjamin’s greatest influence was to establish French consumer culture as a serious field of inquiry.

The Parisian department store has an extensive literature of its own, and some of the best critical accounts of its economic, social and cultural influence remain those written during its heyday in the late nineteenth-century. The most influential of these remains Zola’s novel *Au Bonheur des dames*.<sup>21</sup> Zola was one of the first to recognize that the Parisian department store was the public face of

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<sup>20</sup> Although almost all recent works on the Parisian department store refer to Benjamin’s influence, the most comprehensive work of history directly inspired by Benjamin is Patrice Higonnet, *Paris, Capitale du Monde des Lumières au surréalisme* (Paris: Tallandier, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> *Au Bonheur des dames* [1883] Paris: Fasquelle, 1953. Other very useful contemporary studies of the department are Henri Garrigues, *Les Grands magasins de nouveautés et le petit commerce de détail* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle de Droit et de Jurisprudence, 1898), Georges Michel, “Une évolution économique. Le Commerce en grands magasins,” *Revue des deux mondes*, January, 1892, 133-65. For a more recent look inside a Parisian department store still at the height of turn-of-the-century splendor see Pierre MacOrlan, *Le Printemps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1930).

industrial capitalism in France. Its advertising displays, inventory and retail innovations were not merely frivolous distractions for the female bourgeois shopper (though they were these too), but portents of a new era of commerce. Zola's image of the vast Au Bonheur des dames department store forcing adjacent boutiques out of business represented the transition from the older world of personal consumption at small, local boutiques, to the emerging era of "shopping" which relied upon publicity, low prices and high-volume sales.

Zola's novel created a portrait of the Parisian department store at a historical moment when this new form of consumer culture was aimed almost exclusively at the bourgeoisie. Many modern works have continued to think of the Parisian department store fixed at this moment of bourgeois exclusivity, rather than as a cultural form in transition. The most influential recent work on the department store as bourgeois institution is certainly Michael Barry Miller's *The Bon Marché*.<sup>22</sup> A comprehensive, subtle and intelligent work, *The Bon Marché* remains the best account of the Parisian department store to date. Miller had unprecedented access to the Bon Marché archives and explored not only how founder Boucicaut attempted to merge modern retail commerce with traditional French paternalism, but also how the store functioned as an expression of

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<sup>22</sup> *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

bourgeois values and aspirations. Miller follows Zola, however, in viewing the department store as fixed in the historical moment of the bourgeoisie's ascendancy in the late nineteenth century. Although he observes how its retail innovations like fixed prices changed the way France consumed, his study implies that thereafter the department store was a very stable economic and cultural institution. Miller's work, I argue, by relying heavily on the store's own archives, depicts the Bon Marché much like the owners themselves depicted it in advertisements: as a confident, stable, successful and fundamentally bourgeois institution. This depiction neglects to note, however, the inherent instability in the new form of consumer culture, designed as it was not to express the values of a particular social class, but to take advantage of railway transport and industrial manufacturing in order to maximize profits. The department store as a "cultural form"<sup>23</sup> was not (as Miller argues) a bourgeois but a consumer institution.

Recent historians have built on Miller's work by expanding the study of consumer culture beyond the department store itself while largely following Miller in limiting their studies to the bourgeoisie. A major work that attempts to situate the rise of consumerism in French cultural history is Rosalind Williams'

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<sup>23</sup> The phrase is from David Chaney's article, "The Department Store as a Cultural Form," *Theory, Culture, Society* 1 (1983): 22-31.

*Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth Century France*.<sup>24</sup> For the most part Williams follows the “continuity” argument about consumer culture:

consumer credit and the department store permitted the bourgeois public to imitate aristocratic habits of consumption. Indeed Williams sees credit as the link which connects the pre-revolutionary noble to the modern shopper, as

courtiers had customarily bought their luxuries with borrowed money; at the other end of the social scale, the poor had long purchased food on credit. During the consumer revolution, the habit of borrowing permeated the ranks of the bourgeoisie, and credit buying began to be used for a wide range of consumer goods.<sup>25</sup>

Williams also sees the department store as a neo-aristocratic palace, albeit one fitted out with electric lights and elevators. In the end, in spite of her attempt to depict nineteenth-century consumer culture as the perpetuation of aristocratic accumulation, Williams’ argument is somewhat undermined by her own evidence which suggests it was in fact a uniquely modern fusion of consumption, technology and nostalgia.

Historians have also explored the challenge that consumer culture and the department store posed to French political and cultural traditions. Lisa Tiersten

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<sup>24</sup> *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth Century France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-3.

explores how French authorities, struggling to reconcile the burgeoning consumer society of late nineteenth-century Paris with Republican values, eventually convinced themselves that this could be achieved through the image of “Marianne in the market,” the bourgeois female shopper as embodiment of Republican virtue.<sup>26</sup> A related, subtle analysis of the relationship between late nineteenth-century French artists and the visual expressions of consumer culture is pursued by Ruth Iskin.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Tiersten, however, Iskin is not confident that the writers and painters she considers custodians of the French artistic tradition were able to reconcile themselves to consumer culture: rather, they avoided it, developed techniques of artistic “resistance” to it, and generally felt uneasy about its encroachment into the artistic harmony of their city.

The influential work of Vanessa Schwartz sees consumer culture, in the form of the commercial press, cinema, and popular expositions as natural outgrowths of the bourgeois boulevards of central Paris--the same boulevards that were home to the *grands magasins*.<sup>28</sup> For Schwartz bourgeois culture, urban

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<sup>26</sup> *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998). Schwarz’s argument has been developed by Hazel Hahn in “Boulevard Culture and Advertising as Spectacle in Nineteenth-Century Paris,” in *The City and the Senses: European Culture since 1500*, ed. Alexander Cowan and Jill Stewart (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 156-75, and “Du flâneur au consommateur: spectacle et consommation sur les Grands Boulevards, 1840-1914,” *Romantisme: revue du dix-neuvième siècle* 134 (2006): 67-78. The best

modernization and the emerging mass-consumer culture of spectacle were all closely interrelated in late nineteenth-century Paris. As she writes, “department stores traded in spectacle, which linked them to the boulevards in the Parisian imagination.”<sup>29</sup> (One is tempted to ask: which Parisian?) And the boulevards, for Schwartz, were practically the bourgeoisie made stone: “As an elaboration of modernization, the city’s [Hausmann’s] redesign expressed its material fulfillment as a site erected by and for the bourgeoisie in its transformation from an industrial to a commercial capital.”<sup>30</sup> Schwartz’s Paris is reduced to the central boulevards, and consumer culture reduced to its forms practiced there, omitting the vital and odd species of consumer culture that evolved in places like the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, far from the city centre. This argument, which suggests that modern mass-consumer culture (including cinema) had exclusively bourgeois origins, is directly challenged by the existence of the Grands Magasins Dufayel.

A few historians have questioned the bourgeois bias in late nineteenth-century consumer culture. Judith Coffin has suggested that working-class women were the main consumers of one quintessentially modern piece of

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introduction to other interpretations of the cultural significance of the department store is Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, ed., *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1850-1939* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1999). See also Robert Proctor’s exploration of the interaction between department stores and Parisian social space in “Constructing the Retail Monument: The Parisian Department Store and its Property,” *Urban History* 33, 3 (2006): 393-410.

<sup>29</sup> *Spectacular Realities*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.



technology: the sewing machine.<sup>31</sup> By studying advertisements for the sewing machine Coffin shows how manufacturers and merchants were beginning to recognize the potential of the worker as a future consumer. But Coffin does not pursue the wider implications of this argument. Other books that touch on working-class consumer culture include Helen Harden Chenut's study of textile workers and consumers in Troyes, and Michelle Perrot's surveys of urban working-class budgets and spending patterns.<sup>32</sup> Adeline Daumard's expansive work on death register estate records, though usually considered a reference work on bourgeois wealth, is a neglected source of data on working-class consumption.<sup>33</sup> However, the bourgeois consumer culture bias continues to predominate.

This is a surprise when one returns to contemporary accounts of Parisian consumer culture, many of which considered the rise of the working-class, rather

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<sup>31</sup> "Credit, Consumption, and Images of Women's Desires: Selling the Sewing Machine in Late Nineteenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* 18 (Spring 1994): 749-83. Also Judith Coffin, "Consumption, Production and Gender: The Sewing Machine in Nineteenth Century France," in *Gender and Class in Modern Europe*, ed. Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 111-141.

<sup>32</sup> Helen Harden Chenut, *The Fabric of Gender: Working-Class Culture in Third-Republic France* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005); Michelle Perrot, *Les Ouvriers en grève: France 1871-1890*, 2 vols. (Paris: Mouton, 1974) and "Les classes populaires urbaines," in *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*, vol. 4, *L'ère industrielle et la société d'aujourd'hui (siècle 1880-1980)*, ed. Ernest Labrousse and Fernand Braudel (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), 454-534.

<sup>33</sup> *Les fortunes françaises au XIXe siècle: enquête sur la répartition et la composition des capitaux privés à Paris, Lyon, Lille, Bordeaux et Toulouse d'après l'enregistrement des déclarations de succession* (Paris: Mouton, 1973).

than the bourgeois, consumer to be an important (and often quite unsettling) socio-economic development. Many pages of Georges D'Avenel's panoramic tour of turn-of-the-century France, *Le Mécanisme de la vie moderne*, contain observations about how the worker, aided by consumer credit and higher wages, was beginning to become a consumer of such hitherto bourgeois appurtenances as new furniture for the home. Similarly Henri Garrigues saw the function of the department store in the late nineteenth-century not as the *embourgeoisement* of the worker, but as something close to the opposite.<sup>34</sup>

With our attention focused on the bourgeois iteration of consumer culture in late nineteenth-century Paris, its working-class variations have gone largely unstudied. As Crossick and Jermain suggest, the equation of consumer culture with the bourgeoisie is a conclusion that rests on insufficient research, and should be challenged:

Research on the social base of different stores would also undermine the conception of the department store as an exclusively bourgeois institution; Lewis's of Liverpool who called themselves 'Friends of the People' to signal their intended market, or the French Dufayel chain with their extensive credit system reaching into popular urban quarters, are

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<sup>34</sup> D'Avenel, *Le Mécanisme de la vie moderne*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., vol. 4 (Paris: Armand Colin, 1902); Garrigues, *Les grands magasins de nouveautés*.

examples of a working-class involvement with department stores which remains virtually ignored by historians.<sup>35</sup>

I would suggest however that the Dufayel chain has not been ignored so much as deliberately minimized in the debate about consumer culture, as it does not fit easily into the bourgeois narrative. Not only is there is no store “biography” of the Dufayel department store in the Miller mould, it usually only receives cursory treatment in discussions of department stores and consumer culture. (In contrast, again, to contemporary works which considered it an influential, odd business enterprise, full of portents about the future.) Miller disposes of it in a footnote dealing with stores that sold on credit, suggesting that he considers it to have little relevance to the mainstream of French consumer culture.<sup>36</sup>

And indeed this is how most works have dealt with Dufayel: rather than deforming the narrative of bourgeois consumer culture they relegate the store to a footnote or anecdote.<sup>37</sup> Thus what was arguably the most culturally and socially influential of all the department stores in nineteenth-century Paris is dismissed as

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<sup>35</sup> *Cathedrals of Consumption*, 27.

<sup>36</sup> *The Bon Marché*, 178.

<sup>37</sup> The following examples give some idea of how most works on consumer culture in late nineteenth-century Paris deal with the problem of Dufayel. Judith G. Coffin describes it as an imitation of bourgeois stores, “the plebeian counterpart of such *grands magasins* as the Bon Marché.” “Credit, Consumption and Images of Women’s Desires,” 755. Rosalind Williams’ depiction of it as an imitation palace deprives it of its historical originality. *Dream Worlds*, 94. Patrice Higgonet portrays the Dufayel phenomenon not as part of a wider cultural movement, but as the result of an exceptional business man. *Paris, capitale du monde*, 192.

an aberration--a poor imitation of the bourgeois store. The few works that offer a counterbalance to the prevailing bourgeois bias include the aforementioned essays by Judith Coffin and Robert Proctor, but these studies are interested only in certain aspects of the store: sewing machines and architectural function respectively. There is no modern study of the Dufayel company as a whole which would assess its place in the history of the development of consumer culture in France.

Most of the modern work on Dufayel has focused on one facet of its business: its credit sales. Historians interested in the development of consumer credit in France have seen Dufayel as a great innovator in the nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup> The role of consumer credit at Dufayel was important and, in light of the recent credit crisis in North America, provides many interesting historical contrasts. But consumer credit was certainly not the company's defining quality. Dufayel did not charge interest on its loans and therefore it did not profit from the loans themselves. Its credit system was simply intended to supplement its advertising, changing the spending habits of the working class incrementally so as to ease them into their new roles as consumers.

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<sup>38</sup> The best introduction to consumer credit in France is Rosa-Maria Gelpi and Francois Julien-Labruyère, *Histoire du crédit à la consommation: doctrines et politiques* (Paris: Editions la découverte, 1994). Earlier works on the subject include M. Drancourt, *Une force inconnue: le crédit* (Paris: Hachette, 1961) and Henri Durand, *L'Abondance à crédit* (Paris: Seuil, 1966). A useful introduction to the French state's ambivalence towards consumer credit is provided in Alain Chatriot, "Protéger le consommateur contre lui-même: La régulation du crédit à la consommation," *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire* 91 (Jul.-Sep. 2006): 95-109.

A key argument of this thesis is that Dufayel's significance is best grasped by situating it in the context of two interrelated phenomena: the influence of manufacturing technology on traditional French ideas of cultural and social prestige, and the function of advertising in the promotion of consumer culture. Hence our discussion of sources must be enlarged beyond the standard historiography of the Parisian department store. On the origins of French popular mass-culture, both on the central boulevards and in working-class areas like Montmartre, Charles Rearick's work is essential.<sup>39</sup> Rearick shows not only how French mass-culture owes its beginnings to the cabarets on the working-class fringes of the city, but also how the cinema and the phonograph began to supplant the live performance experience at the turn of the century.

Industrial technology and consumer culture intersected in two main forms in late nineteenth-century Paris: the cinema and the phonograph. The early forms of the cinema, however, enjoy a much more extensive historiography.<sup>40</sup> Even

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<sup>39</sup> See especially *Pleasures of the Belle Époque: Entertainment and Festivity in Turn-of-the-Century France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985) and "Song and Society in Turn-of-the-Century France," *Journal of Social History* 22 (1988): 45-63.

<sup>40</sup> The most relevant for our purposes are Jean A. Gili's overview of the first permanent cinemas in Paris, among which Dufayel was one of the most important, "Les Débuts du spectacle cinématographique en France: premières projections, premières salles fixes," in *Histoire du Cinéma: nouvelles approches*, ed. Jacques Aumont, André Gaudreault and Michel Marie (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1989), 67-77; Emmanuelle Toulet's discussion of the cinema as Expo attraction in "Le cinéma à l'Exposition Universelle de 1900," *Revue d'Histoire moderne et contemporaine* 33 (1986): 179-209; and Jean Renoir's autobiographical notes on his first experience with cinema, which happened at the Grands Magasins Dufayel, in *My Life and My Films*, trans. Norman Denny (New York: Atheneum, 1974).

though the phonograph owes much of its modern success to its perfection and promotion in France, especially by the Pathé company, it remains surprisingly under-researched. Aside from general histories of the phonograph, the Pathé company has not been studied in any full-length monograph, and the story of the popular reception of the phonograph among the general public remains to be told.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the relationship between music, industrial technology and consumer culture has only been touched on by recent cultural histories of music in nineteenth-century France. The prominence of music, and sound in general, at the 1889 Exposition is one of the topics discussed by Annegret Fauser in her *Musical Encounters at the 1889 World's Fair*, but figures only tangentially in James H. Johnson's *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History*, which deals mainly with the concert experience. The influence of consumer culture on the reception of music forms only a small part of Jann Pasler's otherwise comprehensive work on the social role of music in the Third Republic.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The best introductory works on the cultural history of the phonograph, with good material on France, remain Roland Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph: 1877-1977*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1977) and Walter L. Lech, Leah Brodbeck Stenzel Burt and Oliver Read, *From Tinfoil to Stereo: The Acoustic Years of the Recording Industry, 1877-1929* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1994). Though not directly on the phonograph, the intersection between industrial technology, consumer goods and music is covered by Catherine Bertho-Lavenir in "Innovation technique et société du spectacle: le théâtrophone à l'Exposition de 1889," *Le Mouvement Social* 149 (1989): 59-69.

<sup>42</sup> Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005); James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995); Jann Pasler, *Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009). Although mainly about the middle class, William Weber provides valuable background on the commercialization of music prior to the

One aspect of Parisian consumer culture that has been recognized by observers at least since the time of Zola is the preeminence of women in that culture. Although I am arguing that consumer culture had important affinities with the working class, from its origins it seemed to offer greater potential benefits to women than to men. There has developed a rich historiography of works that explore how consumer culture simultaneously exploited and exalted the female consumer, offering her greater social status and freedom by providing spaces where she was free (to a certain extent) of the constraints of the domestic sphere. The bourgeois bias, however, pervades these works as well, as the vast majority of them regard the nineteenth-century shopper as *bourgeoise* by definition.<sup>43</sup> The working-class female, like her male equivalent, had arguably

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advent of the phonograph in *Music and the Middle Class: The Social Structure of Concert Life in London, Paris and Vienna* (London: Croom Helm, 1975).

<sup>43</sup> Two introductions to the literature on consumer culture and bourgeois women are Lynn Spiegel and Denise Mann, "Women and Culture: A Selective Bibliography," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11 (1989): 85-105, and Mary Louise Roberts, "Gender, Consumption, and Commodity Culture," *American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 817-44. In addition to aforementioned works by Tiersten (*Marianne in the Market*), Iskin (*Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture*), and Rappaport (*Shopping for Pleasure*), see also Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, ed. *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); Ruth Iskin, "The Pan-European Flâneuse in Fin-de-Siècle Posters: Advertising Modern Women in the City," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 25 (2003): 333-56. For the darker side of consumer culture's (perceived) influence on the *bourgeoise*, see Patricia O'Brien, "The Kleptomania Diagnosis: Bourgeois Women and Theft in Late Nineteenth-Century France," *Journal of Social History* 17 (1983): 65-77.

more to gain than the bourgeois by becoming a consumer, yet her participation in the nascent consumer society has received comparatively less attention.<sup>44</sup>

Finally it is important to note that the history of consumer culture cannot be written without relying heavily on a category of documents that many historians still consider only semi-respectable: advertising. An implicit argument throughout my thesis is that not only is advertising a serious and valuable historical source, but it demands to be read with the same care and attention that one would give to any other literary source. Some of the best recent work on French consumer culture follows this approach, delving into the deeper messages behind the promotion of material goods. In his essays on the promotion of “faux-artisanal” goods to the Parisian bourgeoisie shopper, for example, Manuel Charpy reveals a class deeply ambivalent about the benefits of consumer culture.<sup>45</sup> Charpy also expands the definition of advertising beyond visual ads to

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<sup>44</sup> Most of the sources on working-class women and consumer culture deal with their capacity as producers in the consumer economy, yet they are still valuable in showing how the emerging consumer economy had a greater immediate effect on women than on men. It provided them with a greater variety of employment opportunities (albeit many of them lousy) than industry or agriculture. See Claudie Lesselier, “Employés de grands magasins à Paris (avant 1914),” *Mouvement Social* 105 (1978): 109-26; Theresa M. McBride, “A Woman’s World: Department Stores and the Evolution of Women’s Employment, 1870-1920,” *French Historical Studies* 10 (1978): 664-83. For a contemporary account of female department store employees, see André Lainé, *La Situation des Femmes employées dans les Magasins de Vente à Paris* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle de Droit et de Jurisprudence, 1911).

<sup>45</sup> “La bourgeoisie en portrait: Albums familiaux de photographies des années 1860-1914,” *Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle* 34 (2007): 147-63; “L’ordre des choses. Sur quelques traits de la culture matérielle bourgeoise parisienne, 1830-1914,” *Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle* 34 (2007): 105-28. Other works that exploit advertising to pursue very interesting arguments about French consumer culture include Kolleen M. Guy, “‘Oiling the Wheels of Social Life’: Myths and Marketing in champagne during the Belle Époque,” *French Historical Studies* 22 (1999): 211-39;



include unconventional techniques of promotion. I have tried to incorporate this approach as well.

Historians may respond to my surprise at the lack of attention that Dufayel has received by arguing (edited for brevity): so what? Perhaps we have not been interested in Dufayel because Parisian consumer culture was in fact a profoundly bourgeois phenomenon, the Dufayel store in the working-class suburb was nothing more than a copy of the bourgeois stores, and its historical interest is in fact merely anecdotal--an odd variation on bourgeois consumerism that flourished for two decades and then vanished.

But in order to see how Dufayel was central to the development of consumer culture in late nineteenth-century Paris we have to expand our view beyond the historiography of the department store itself to include what I consider to be the main themes of early consumer capitalism in France: the interrelation between technology, culture and prestige, the social status of the (working-class) consumer, and the function of nostalgia and authenticity in consumer advertising. In short my thesis will argue that by studying the Grands Magasins Dufayel in its historical, cultural and geographic context we see that early mass-consumer culture had greater affinities with the Parisian working

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Alessandro Stanziani, "La falsification du vin en France, 1880-1905: un cas de fraude agro-alimentaire," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 50 2 (2003): 154-186; Pierre-Antoine Dessaux, "Chemical Expertise and Food Market Regulation in Belle-Époque France," *History and Technology* 23 (2007): 351-368.

class than with the bourgeoisie; that the bourgeoisie knew this and reacted with ambivalence to the encroachment of consumerism in French society, but ultimately were persuaded to embrace it anyway, thus joining the working class in a common consumer market.

In order to counter the overemphasis on the bourgeoisie in late nineteenth-century French consumer culture, I have exploited as many of the extant documents published by the Dufayel company as possible. By nature these are often publicity documents, albeit of a great variety of forms. On the personal background of the shadowy Georges Dufayel, the Legion of Honour dossier from the Archives nationales is indispensable. I have also relied heavily on Dufayel's trade journal, *L'Indicateur Dufayel*, for detailed information about the store and the company in general at the height of its influence. And the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris holds several important documents on Dufayel.

On the wider subject of late nineteenth-century consumer culture, I have relied on a combination of archival documents, primarily related to advertising in its various forms, contemporary works and periodicals. The Archives de Paris holds a remarkable collection of documents on all aspects of consumer culture in late nineteenth-century Paris, including handbills, catalogue clippings, "personalized" advertising correspondence, banquet menus and posters. I have consulted a wide range of periodicals from the entire political spectrum,

including both articles and advertisements, in an era when these were often difficult to distinguish from each other. Finally the resources of Gallica, the Bibliothèque nationale's digital archive, have been invaluable.

Practicality has required that I impose spatial and chronological limits on my research, although the latter are more defensible than the former. I have largely focused on the period of the rise to prominence of the Dufayel department store--from roughly the mid 1880s to the death of Georges Dufayel in 1916--because I believe this was the period when the working class of Paris was introduced to consumer culture; when advertisers and manufactures, having identified workers as future consumers, set out to change their traditional, non-consuming ways. This periodization also reflects my working definition of consumer culture, which I take to be based on fixed-price sales of relatively low-priced, mass-produced products accompanied by extensive advertising. I have focused on Paris mainly because the bourgeois arguments that I am up against have largely focused on the Paris market as well. I am aware, however, not only that Paris is not France, but that both the arguments for a bourgeois or a working-class French consumer culture could easily be expanded to consider many other cities. The Bon Marché was famous for its mail-order sales which spread its fashions and merchandise around the country, but the Grands Magasins Dufayel had vast mail-order operations as well.

The thesis is divided in two parts: part one deals specifically with Dufayel proper and the challenge it poses to current historiography; part two explores the implications of part one as applied to aspects of late nineteenth-century Parisian consumer culture.

My first chapter provides historical context for the rest of the thesis by exploring how the foundation for the French consumer was laid in the second half of the nineteenth century. After describing pre-industrial France as a fundamentally non-consumer society, I show how two crucial innovations--the railway and the department store--began to break down the traditional world of local, personal, expensive consumption. I then argue that these innovations, though initiated by and for the bourgeoisie, acquired greater social and economic relevance when taken up by Georges Dufayel and applied to the task of making the French urban worker into a consumer of mass-produced goods.

Chapter 2 situates the Grands Magasins Dufayel in the urban environment of the working-class Goutte d'Or neighborhood in northern Paris. After showing how this area, untouched by Haussmann's modernization campaign, had virtually no open public spaces in the form of parks or squares, I argue that the Dufayel department store filled this cultural void by providing a kind of consumer version of the public square. Dufayel proposed to residents of the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement that consumer culture could offer them experiences--including

the in-store cinema, concerts, its social spaces--that the mainstream culture of Paris neglected to provide. The Dufayel store therefore had a special importance for the Parisian working class, as it proposed that merely by entering it a worker acquired the status of consumer, entitled to all the spectacular benefits of technology.

Chapter 3 addresses the question of paternalism, working conditions and authority, both at the Grands Magasins Dufayel and at Parisian department stores in general. Although acknowledging that there were certainly discrepancies between Dufayel's advertised image of itself and its relationship with its employees, this chapter shows how even critics of Dufayel noted that an ethos of employee entrepreneurialism and consumer capitalism influenced its operations. Dufayel offered to its working-class employees the same vision it offered its working-class customers: that the technology of mass-production, aligned with the innovations of mass-retailing, would create a new consumer society in which their material lives (both as workers and as consumers) would be better than before, and in which traditional paternalism (of the sort practiced by the bourgeois stores like the Bon Marché) would be less relevant or even unnecessary.

Chapter 4 expands the discussion beyond the Dufayel department store itself to explore the wider implications of situating the working class at the centre

of French consumer culture. Essentially it calls for a re-evaluation of the cultural meaning of both the bourgeois department store and consumer advertising aimed at the bourgeoisie. It begins by suggesting that due to historians' equation of the consumer culture with the bourgeoisie they have failed to notice that in many ways the bourgeoisie was ambivalent about consumer culture. Through careful reading of bourgeois advertising slogans, I propose that bourgeois advertising can be seen as an expression of crisis rather than of confidence. The very luxury of the department store that historians such as Miller and Williams saw as an expression of bourgeois confidence and enthusiasm for consumer culture may be read instead as an elaborate advertising strategy aimed to distract the bourgeoisie from thinking too deeply about the decline in prestige that mass-consumption was creating.

Chapter 5 takes up this idea--that consumer culture threatened to erode the symbols of prestige in French culture--and applies it to an area that few historians have considered: the food adulteration crisis of late nineteenth-century Paris. I show the same feelings of anxiety about the loss of authenticity in consumer culture were expressed with respect to French food, which was perceived as declining into industrially manufactured imitations of the real thing. This view, expressed so clearly with respect to a quintessentially French food like wine, supports my contention that the bourgeoisie had a very ambivalent

relationship with mass-produced consumer goods, whether food or otherwise.

This chapter concludes by observing how consumer culture--through its central institution of advertising--was able to use the food adulteration crisis to its own advantage, making trademarks and brands, rather than the physically observable properties of food, as arbiters of authenticity, thus permanently inserting itself between consumers and goods, and making food into a consumer product like any other.

Finally chapter 6 analyzes how advertisers and manufacturers conspired to create a market for the phonograph in late nineteenth-century France. Though this chapter deals with the phonograph its real subject is the role of class in the emergence of consumer culture. I show how the strategies used by advertisers to promote the phonograph were class-dependent. Class biases against the phonograph--in the case of workers, the preference for live concerts; in the case of the bourgeoisie, the disdain for the use of technology in art--were anticipated and then dispensed through sophisticated advertising. The phonograph as a case study reveals what I see as an important characteristic of the nascent consumer culture in France: by understanding and exploiting traditional class differences manufacturers and advertisers were able to shape the French public into a national consumer market that minimized those differences.

## CHAPTER 1

### **The department store, Dufayel, and the creation of French consumers**

Before the twentieth century, France was a pre-consumer society. Most people bought very little throughout their lives, and most died with nothing to their names. This was in part the result of poverty and concentration of wealth in a few hands. But it was also because, at least until the First World War, the urban working class chose to survive without buying consumer goods. They knew how to make do with homemade or second-hand tools, furniture and clothing. They knew how to reuse and recycle. And most working-class people, even when they had some extra money, preferred to spend it on food, wine, clothing and social activities rather than on durable consumer goods.

But this was changing. In the second half of the nineteenth century, two forces emerged in Paris that would start to change France's pre-industrial consumption habits. The first was the invention of the department store. Giant stores like the Bon Marché centralized and streamlined the purchasing of mass-produced goods, making shopping faster, easier and less personal than ever before. This was a big change, but it only really affected the Parisian urban bourgeoisie, a small fraction of the French population.

The second change happened when a merchant named Georges Dufayel saw the business potential of introducing department store-style consumption to



the working class. He built a huge store in the poor Goutte d'Or neighbourhood in northern Paris, and later expanded throughout France via mail-order sales and branch stores. He used techniques such as consumer credit, fixed prices and advertising to make it easier and more appealing for workers to buy expensive items like furniture. In addition, he turned his store into a cultural attraction with a cinema and concerts so that shopping there could be a social activity.

In France's gradual shift from an agrarian-aristocratic to a mass-consumer society, the Dufayel project was at least as important as the invention of the bourgeois department store. In many ways it was more ambitious and influential. Where the bourgeois department store brought a new, faster form of consumption to a limited social class which was already used to consuming, Dufayel aimed to replace many long-held habits and values of the working class in order to transform them into modern consumers. This was the beginning of a much more radical social change.

### **Snapshot of a low consumption society**

In 1900, France was still a long way from becoming an urban consumer society. For one thing, it was not really urban. People were moving to the cities but, unlike in England where urbanisation happened quickly and was pretty

much a *fait-accompli* by 1900, in France this was going quite slowly. In 1881 the urban population had been 34.8%, and by 1911 it was still only 44.1%.<sup>1</sup>

Also, when it came to material non-perishable goods, the French were not yet really consuming. In her massive study of death register declarations in nineteenth-century urban France, Adeline Daumard showed that the vast majority of French people owned absolutely nothing when they died. In Paris in 1820, the portion of people who died indigent--that is, with an estate of zero or negative value--was 68%. In 1911, the portion of indigent had *increased* slightly to 71%.<sup>2</sup> The working class were even worse consumers than average. If we use Daumard's numbers for Paris, but this time isolate labouring groups, we find that these people were a particularly unencumbered gang. Of household domestic employees, for example, 76.1 % died indigent in 1820, and this number had not changed at all by 1911. Tradesmen were possession-free throughout the nineteenth century at a rate of about 90%. And manual labourers were the most likely to own nothing: 83.9 % of them died indigent in 1820; by 1911 nearly all of them did (94%). As Daumard writes, the French working class owned so little for so long that "[l]'insignifiance de la masse des biens possédés par les travailleurs

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Labrousse and F. Braudel, ed., *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*, vol. 4 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), 103.

<sup>2</sup> Adeline Daumard, ed., *Les fortunes françaises au XIXe siècle*, (Paris: Mouton, 1973), 193. Daumard studied death register declarations in Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux, Toulouse, and Lille from the beginning to the end of the nineteenth century.

manuels, manœuvres, ouvriers, gens de métier et faconniers, est la constante qui domine toute la période [...].”<sup>3</sup>

Why did the urban working class own so few things of value? Partly because they met many of their material requirements by reusing whatever discarded furniture or tools they could scrounge up, trade for, or make themselves. As Michelle Perrot writes, the working class could live “off the grid” through “l’utilisation des restes, le recyclage de l’usé, l’échange des dons et contredons dans une économie du quotidien qui échappe pour une part au marché monétaire [...]. Pour les classes pauvres, la ville est telle une forêt où braconner sa vie.”<sup>4</sup> The other reason they owned so little of value was because of the perishable nature of what they chose to buy. We can see how they chose to spend their money by looking at a typical urban working-class budget:

Food:	62%
Clothing:	16%
Housing:	12%
Misc:	8% <sup>5</sup>

As we can see, most of their cash went into keeping themselves fed, clothed and housed. The “housing” category referred to rent, not house ownership. Urban

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Perrot, “Manières d’habiter,” in vol 4 of *Histoire de la vie privée*, ed. Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby (Paris: Seuil, 1985), 316.

<sup>5</sup> Michelle Perrot, “Les classes populaires urbaines,” in vol. 4 of *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*, Labrousse and Braudel, 497.

housing was far too expensive for the working class to buy, but rental housing was relatively cheap, if uniformly shabby.<sup>6</sup> And the “miscellaneous” category mainly consisted of other non-durable expenses like medicine, tobacco, and social activities. The budget had no place for the kind of expensive items that would show up in an estate.

When urban working-class incomes started to rise in the nineteenth-century,<sup>7</sup> workers continued--by choice or by habit (a tricky distinction)--to spend within the same basic categories. Their spending philosophy can best be summed by the phrase “Let the good times roll!” They were not big on saving.<sup>8</sup> When money came in the first thing they did was improve their diet, usually by buying more good beef, but also pork or sometimes even poultry.<sup>9</sup> Since bread now took up less than 12% of their total budget, they could allocate more money for their beloved meat protein. Then there was wine. Wine had always been a fundamental part of the working-class diet and social culture, and even more so through the late nineteenth century. Zola’s *l’Assommoir* (1877) provides good

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 500.

<sup>7</sup> Daumard, 176.

<sup>8</sup> One thing that distinguished them from their rural counterparts who *did* save what they could. See Michelle Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève: France 1871-1890* vol. 1 (Paris: Mouton, 1974), 212; Guy P. Palmade, *French Capitalism in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Graeme M. Holmes (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1972; Fr. orig. 1961), 194-5; Gilles Postel-Vinay and Jean-Marc Robin, “Eating, Working, and Saving in an Unstable World: Consumers in Nineteenth-Century France,” *The Economic History Review* New Series 45 No.3 (August 1992): 508.

<sup>9</sup> Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève*, 244.

descriptions of working-class wine drinking, where daily consumption was counted by the litre, not by the glass.<sup>10</sup> In the 1890s the average urban worker spent about as much on wine as he did on all solid food combined. In 1905 there was nothing unusual about a working man drinking more than three litres per day.<sup>11</sup>

After getting some decent food and a wine transfusion, the worker's next priority was to spruce up his wardrobe. Clothes were very important to the urban working class because they allowed them to participate in the urban social scene. They spent more on clothing than they did on housing, which is not as strange as it may sound. Since housing was financially out of reach for most of them, they simply focused their aspirations on clothing instead. Again, Michelle Perrot provides insight into their thinking:

Au XIXe siècle, les priorités budgétaires des ouvriers vont non au logement, hors d'atteinte, mais au vêtement, plus accessible, poste en

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<sup>10</sup> For example the character Mes-Bottes, just sitting down to a wedding feast, "avait bien déjà ses deux litres". *L'Assommoir* (1877; repr. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1971), 97.

<sup>11</sup> Perrot, "Les classes populaires urbaines," 498. Wine-drinking was not solely a "leisure" activity either, as many workers received part of their salary in a daily wine ration. See Alessandro Stanziani, "Information, Quality and Legal Rules: Wine Adulteration in Nineteenth-Century France," *Business History* 51 (March 2009): 271.

expansion, qui permet justement de participer sans vergogne à l'espace public, d'y faire bonne figure [...].<sup>12</sup>

Clothing was especially important for the urban working class because most of their social life took place in the street or in public places, rather than in the home. And buying the best clothing you could afford (or better!) fit in with the working-class approach to consumption in general: you earned money so that you could eat well, drink with your neighbors, and sport some stylish threads on Sunday. The idea that earnings could, or should, be used to accumulate objects such as furniture instead of clothing would not have made any sense.

So, in the late nineteenth century urban France consisted mainly of hard-living working people who burned through their lifetime earnings without leaving much of a "footprint" of any kind. This may have been good for the environment, but it was not helping France to develop an economy of mass production and consumption such as those that were growing in the U.S. and Great Britain.<sup>13</sup>

But what about the bourgeoisie? Surely *they* were buying plenty of consumer goods? They were, but not in a way that would support mass production. The French upper and middle classes liked to buy high-quality, one-

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<sup>12</sup> Perrot, "Manières d'habiter," 316.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Stephen Smith, *The Emergence of Modern Business Enterprise in France, 1800-1930* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 293.

of-a-kind products rather than mass-produced ones. They liked to have the choice among a wide variety of products from small producers.<sup>14</sup> This way of spending supported the artisans and boutiques responsible for France's reputation for craftsmanship and luxury goods but, as Ernest Labrousse notes, was "peu propice aux développements des consommations de masse."<sup>15</sup>

At the same time many French business people, especially those involved in the emerging large-scale manufacturing sector, were starting to think that some kind of mass-consumer economy was the way of the future, if not for France as a whole, then at least for their own industries. A mass-consumer economy appealed to French industrialists who felt that the limited size of the domestic market with its stagnant population growth made it hard for them to expand to take advantage of economies of scale.<sup>16</sup> Since France did not have the fast-growing population of Great Britain or the U.S., the only option was to change the long-held consumption habits of the existing population. This would require all kinds of promotion, innovation and persuasion.<sup>17</sup> The invention of the

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<sup>14</sup> Labrousse & Braudel, 160.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Maurice Lévy-Loboyér, "Innovation and Business Strategies in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century France," in *Enterprise and Entrepreneurs in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century France*, ed. Edward C. Carter and Robert Forster (Baltimore, MD & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 122.

department store, and its later exploitation by Georges Dufayel, were the first two and most important steps in changing the French into modern consumers.

### **Consumption before the department store**

The Parisian department store--made possible by the development of railway transport in the second half of the nineteenth century--changed the way people consumed in France. Before the railway and mass urban transportation such as the tram, when people needed something they bought it locally. They bought from the neighbourhood shopkeeper. And they only bought when they really needed something, because buying from the local shop was not easy or quick. In fact it was very personal, deliberate and slow. It was personal because the shopkeeper usually knew them by name and would always "engage" them in a pre-purchase conversation. It was slow because prices were never marked, so they had to bargain, or "haggle," before they could buy. Since the shopkeeper made his profit from high margin, rather than volume sales, he had no reason to rush the customer.<sup>18</sup> After all, where else were they going to go? And the customer had no reason hurry either, because the more he haggled, the lower his price. Every purchase involved this same kind of time-consuming ritual.

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, 120.



Charming, maybe, this insular world of shopkeepers and their regulars, but not conducive to mass consumption.

The railway and the department store--almost simultaneously--began to change these traditional buying habits. As rail transport and urban tramways made people more mobile, shopkeepers no longer had a guaranteed "captive" clientele. Instead they had to seek out customers. They did this by advertising. One late nineteenth-century observer described how mobility led to competition among retailers:

D'une part, il devint possible au commerçant de saisir le client, non seulement d'un bout de la ville à l'autre, mais d'un bout du pays à l'autre, presque d'un bout du monde à l'autre. D'autre part, le client aussi pouvait se déplacer et choisir entre les concurrents, celui qui offrait le plus d'avantages.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast with the relatively passive shopkeeper, merchants became more aggressive in advertising their goods:

Il ne fallait plus considérer la clientèle, ignorante du vrai prix des choses, comme une proie incapable d'échapper aux filets adroitement dissimulés du commerçant. Le but à atteindre était tout autre: par tous les moyens, il

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<sup>19</sup> Henri Garrigues, *Les Grands Magasins de Nouveautés et le Petit Commerce de Détail* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle de Droit et de Jurisprudence, 1898), 16.

s'agissait d'attirer le consommateur; et le meilleur était de lui offrir des avantages sérieux, dont le plus attrayant était incontestablement le bon marché.<sup>20</sup>

This new and competitive retail scene, where advertising encouraged the French public to compare prices and search for the best value, was expressed perfectly in the name of the first Parisian department store: the “Bon Marché.”

The Bon Marché may or may not have been the world's first department store,<sup>21</sup> but it was certainly the first store in France to fully exploit the new possibilities of the rail age. The Bon Marché perfected techniques like competitive advertising, low prices and high-volume sales—techniques that all the other department stores would later copy. But one of its most important contributions was the simplest: by marking the prices of goods in fixed, clear figures, the Bon Marché eliminated haggling. This made consumption much faster and easier. As Henri Garrigues observed, in the department store there was only one thing the customer had to think about: “Le client voit tout de suite à quoi s'en tenir; il sait qu'il n'y a qu'un seul prix, le même pour tous et que c'est à prendre ou à laisser.”<sup>22</sup> In comparison with the old shopkeeper haggling system, which often

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Garrigues, 31.

seemed designed to *prevent* consumption, the department store made purchasing easy, pleasant and fast. And it brought mass consumption one step closer.

But only a step. For quite a long time--at least until after the Second World War--the two forms of consumption (shopkeeper bargaining and fixed-price department stores) coexisted, just as small artisans and large factories did. This “dualism” was one of the qualities that made French modernization unique.<sup>23</sup> It is also why nineteenth-century France is so interesting. Because France was “stuck” part way between an agrarian-aristocratic and an industrial-consumer society, people had time to observe the old ways and compare them to what was possibly going to replace them. Some people thought the traditional system of shops and small-scale producers was crucial to French society and even to the French character. They saw the department store as a destructive force that weakened the country by forcing boutiques out business.<sup>24</sup> They depicted the department store and the new society of mass-consumption it stood for as a symbol of cultural and social decline.<sup>25</sup> Even someone like Henri Garrigues, who generally praised the department store for lowering prices and making consumption more efficient, was worried about the long-term effect it might have

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<sup>23</sup> Labrousse & Braudel, 160.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Alexandre Weill, *Un Fléau national. Les grands magasins de Paris et les moyens de les combattre*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Paul Sévin, 1891).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. Weill even suggested that department stores were to blame for France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War.

on French society. He was afraid that “la recherche exclusive du bon marché, par ces magasins, a des conséquences déplorables. Ce n’est point seulement le public qui est trompé; le pays tout entier est frappé dans une de ses plus précieuses ressources: la qualité est sacrifiée, le goût artistique s’en va!”<sup>26</sup>

But even as these arguments were being made, department stores were multiplying. Following the success of the Bon Marché in the 1850s, several now-famous imitators sprang up: the Grands Magasins du Louvre in 1855 was followed by Au Printemps (1865) and La Samaritaine (1869). These stores, with their spectacular architecture and opulent interiors, became urban attractions in themselves where customers could come and browse, rest and even dine. They made “shopping” into a new leisure activity.<sup>27</sup> And, compared to the old shopkeeper system, they made consumption almost effortless. Fawning clerks gently encouraged customers to buy; generous return policies let them buy even when they could not decide. Consumption was the *raison d’être* of this new urban space. Its real purpose was not to sell a particular product, as the old shopkeepers rather laboriously did, but to put visitors into a “consuming” state of mind and make shopping a habit. However, as long as this kind of space was experienced only by the Parisian bourgeoisie, it remained a phenomenon of the

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<sup>26</sup> Garrigues, 51.

<sup>27</sup> Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 24, 167.

boulevards with limited social influence. Georges Dufayel's goal was to expand the "consuming" state of mind to the masses.

### **Democratizing consumption**

Department stores like the Bon Marché, Au Printemps, and the Grands Magasins du Louvre needed a large buying public. Because of the high costs of maintaining, staffing and stocking these opulent buildings, they needed their customer base to extend beyond the bourgeoisie which was their preferred clientele.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, even though they did sometimes attract less wealthy clients by holding end of season and sidewalk sales, the bourgeois stores of Paris preferred not to stray too far downmarket in their search for customers.<sup>29</sup> In most cases, owners like Boucicaut tried to maintain a delicate balance of selling to as many customers as possible while still preserving the illusion of exclusivity and prestige that (they believed) attracted the bourgeois customer.<sup>30</sup> By refusing to draw the working class into its consumer orbit, bourgeois owners fought against the logic of their own business, halting the expansionary momentum of an

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<sup>28</sup> Theresa M. McBride, "A Woman's World: Department Stores and the Evolution of Women's Employment, 1870-1920," *French Historical Studies* 10 (1978):665.

<sup>29</sup> The bourgeois stores' cash-only policy was one way of excluding working class customers, but Miller argues that their high-class décor and intimidating "attitude" were effective as well. See *The Bon Marché*, 178.

<sup>30</sup> On the balance between mass-produced affordability and prestige, see Manuel Charpy, "L'ordre des choses. Sur quelques traits de la culture matérielle bourgeoise parisienne, 1830-1914," *Revue d'histoire du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* 34 (January 2007):105-128.

institution designed to grow and profit from mass sales. This was why the *social* changes resulting from the bourgeois stores' innovations of fixed prices, advertising, and rapid turnover of mass-produced goods remained limited in scope. The owners of the bourgeois department store built the foundation of a consumer society, but chose not to expand it.

This is why the advertising slogan at the Grands Magasins Dufayel—"PRIX FIXE ET MARQUÉ EN CHIFFRES CONNUS"<sup>31</sup>--was still relevant in 1898, nearly fifty years after the Bon Marché had introduced fixed-price, efficient, non-personal consumption to the middle class. Georges Dufayel's business idea was as simple as it was ambitious. He wanted to make the working class of France into consumers—*his* consumers, of course. Like the owners of the bourgeois department stores, he understood that consumption in the rail age relied on mass production and high volume sales. But unlike the bourgeois owners, he saw no reason to place limits on the size of his clientele. For him the ideal customer was not the bourgeois but the worker, not because of any ideological or personal preference, but because he thought it was good business to target the largest potential market.<sup>32</sup> The problem with this plan was that, as we have seen, even though the nineteenth-century urban worker was a "producer" in the industrial

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<sup>31</sup> Brochure, *La vue à vol d'oiseau des Grands Magasins Dufayel*, (1898) Archives de Paris, D17 Z (2).

<sup>32</sup> M. Drancourt, *Une force inconnue: le crédit* (Paris: Hachette, 1961), 16.

economy, he still really did not “consume” anything other than food and clothing. His rented home was furnished with a few basic items: a blocky table and bed that lasted a lifetime or longer.<sup>33</sup> The nineteenth-century worker’s spending habits, desires and expectations all had to be changed. To accomplish this, Georges Dufayel combined the fixed prices and pleasant environment of the department store with consumer credit and advertising aimed directly at the working class.

### **Creating consumers**

Georges Dufayel was the force that brought consumer culture to the French masses in the late nineteenth century. He did this by establishing a large-scale, complex, credit sale business combined with aggressive advertising to promote consumption among the working class. This project was so successful that by 1904 the company was serving about 3,500,000 customers every year.<sup>34</sup> And most of these were from the working class. In his 1908 study of working-class household budgets, the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs noted that “dans presque tous nos ménages parisiens, nous avons trouvé un compte Dufayel.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Henri Durand, *L’Abondance à crédit* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 87-9.

<sup>34</sup> Patrice Higonnet, *Paris, capitale du monde: des Lumières au surréalisme* (Paris: Tallandier, 2005), 192.

<sup>35</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, “Budgets de Familles,” *La Revue de Paris*, July, 1908, 543.

The history of the Grand Magasins Dufayel is the story of how the French working class finally became consumers and is, therefore, also an important early chapter in the development of France as a consumer society.

From its earliest incarnation, the Dufayel company showed how credit could help stimulate consumption. In 1856, Dufayel's predecessor, Jules Crépin, became one of the first merchants to extend credit to the Paris working class so they could buy something we might call a "non-necessity." The working class had always used credit, but only as a way to pay the baker or butcher, who "ran a tab" for them.<sup>36</sup> This kind of credit was for very small amounts, and for a very short term: it was basically a way to keep food on the table between pay days.<sup>37</sup> But Crépin had in mind another use of credit.<sup>38</sup> He wanted to entice workers to buy something they never had before. He set up shop on the streets of Paris with a camera in order to sell the latest novelty--photographic portraits--at a price of

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<sup>36</sup> Drancourt, *Une force inconnue*, 37

<sup>37</sup> Perrot, "Les classes populaires urbaines," 505-6.

<sup>38</sup> The historiography of consumer credit, in France at least, is almost non-existent. The best introduction to the subject remains the brief and highly partisan (co-written by executives of the French credit company Cetelem!) *Histoire du crédit à la consommation: doctrines et pratiques* (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1994) by Rosa-Maria Gelpi and François Julien-Labruyère; on state regulation of consumer credit in France, see Alain Chatriot, "Protéger le consommateur contre lui-même: La régulation du crédit à la consommation," *Vingtième Siècle, Revue d'Histoire* 91 (July-September 2006): 95-109; see also M. Drancourt, *Une force inconnue*; Henri Durand, *L'Abondance à crédit*; on the American experience of consumer credit, which has served both as model and warning in France, see Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).



one franc each. But rather than selling single portraits for cash, he sold “packages” of twenty portraits for one franc up front and the rest to be paid in instalments.<sup>39</sup> As this scheme started to pay off, he started to sell more expensive things like furniture the same way. He gradually built up inventory and, in 1865, opened a store in the working class Goutte d’Or neighbourhood of northern Paris.

A few years later Georges Dufayel came into the picture. Biographical facts about him are rare, especially for the years prior to his ownership of the Dufayel department store, but we know the basics of his story. Born in 1855, he was hired at the Crépin store in 1871. For nine years he worked at various jobs there,<sup>40</sup> gradually gaining control over the store. He rose up through the ranks, becoming Director in 1880, Associate in 1885 and, in a classic example of paying by credit, he became sole proprietor in 1890 after paying for his shares in instalments.<sup>41</sup> Dufayel expanded Crépin’s credit sale business energetically. He built up a complex lending and collection system which extended into the working-class neighbourhoods of Paris, and combined this with a huge advertising “campaign” centred on the new store, the Grands Magasins Dufayel.

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<sup>39</sup> Georges d’Avenel, *Le Mécanisme de la vie moderne*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. vol. 4 (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1902), 377.

<sup>40</sup> Bernard Marrey, *Les Grands Magasins: des origines à 1939* (Paris: Librairie Picard, 1979), 261.

<sup>41</sup> D’Avenel, 378-9; Legion of Honour dossier on Dufayel, G.J. Archives nationales, LH 831/24, document 16.

Would the French working class have become consumers without the encouragement of advertising? Dufayel did not think so. At least this is what we have to conclude when we look at the effort and expense he threw into what was then called “publicity.” His biggest advertising project was the department store itself. In 1895 he expanded the original Crépin store, renamed it the Grands Magasins Dufayel, and made it into a cultural attraction in its own right. The store was huge, opulent, and included novel attractions like an in-store cinema. It gave the Parisian working class a taste of what bourgeois shopping was like. It exposed the working-class public to the practice of fixed-price sales and proposed that browsing in a consumer-oriented space was a kind of leisure. It was also an important tool for advertising consumer goods to the less literate of the working class who could not be reached through print.

But the store itself was only part of Dufayel’s advertising strategy. He also created a separate advertising division, l’Affichage national. L’Affichage national was an early “multi-media” ad company, producing and distributing a wide variety of visual and print promotional material. As we learn from Dufayel’s Legion of Honour dossier,

En 1887, Monsieur Dufayel créait et ajoutait à l’Administration  
d’abonnement de très importants Services de Publicité qui se chargent,  
dans Paris, toute la France et l’Algérie, d’Affichage, d’Élections,

d'Émissions, de distribution de journaux, Imprimés, brochures,  
prospectus, etc., etc.....<sup>42</sup>

If not (as Dufayel claimed) the largest advertising company in the world,<sup>43</sup>

l'Affichage national was one of the largest in France and handled all the publicity for the Universal Exhibition of 1889.<sup>44</sup> Although l'Affichage national was not solely meant to advertise consumer goods, it indirectly helped popularise the Dufayel name throughout Paris and gave him a much more prominent place in the public imagination than Crépin had ever had.<sup>45</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century Dufayel was known everywhere as the "inventor" of credit sales (les ventes par abonnement).<sup>46</sup>

Dufayel's working-class ad campaign went much deeper than the thousands of images of furniture, bicycles and other products he plastered all over Paris. His ads had a message designed to guide the working class into their new role as consumers. He encouraged them to think of themselves as

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<sup>42</sup> Legion of Honour dossier, document 16.

<sup>43</sup> *Indicateur Dufayel*, (Paris: Administration de l'Indicateur Dufayel, 1900), I.

<sup>44</sup> *Administration et Grands Magasins Dufayel* (1898), 7, Archives de Paris, D17 Z (2).

<sup>45</sup> Dufayel's ads really would have been hard to miss in late nineteenth-century Paris. Drancourt described how the company's omnipresence: "Il couvre d'affiches les murs Paris, jette les bases de la plus forte administration de publicité de la France de l'époque et devient concessionnaire du droit de l'affichage sur les murs, les palissades de la capitale et ceux de la Compagnie des chemins de fer de l'Ouest [...]." *Une force inconnue*, 17.

<sup>46</sup> Durand, 40.

respectable bourgeois who should acquire the same kinds of things that the bourgeoisie did. His ads also explained how consumer credit could help them buy these objects without having to make a big painful one-time payment. In fact, they could fit credit payments into their daily budget without really noticing them. Here is a typical Dufayel ad aimed at the working class:

Tous ceux qui ne possèdent que des revenus à échéances fixes et qui, sans les facilités accordées par la Maison Dufayel, seraient obligés d'attendre de longs mois pour réaliser leurs désirs, trouve dans la vente par abonnement le moyen pratique d'obtenir ce résultat sans grever leur budget.<sup>47</sup>

The ad showed the surreptitious way Dufayel tried to change traditional working-class (food and clothing) spending habits. Credit let them become consumers by baby steps. He was careful to reassure potential customers that there were no hidden costs. Credit sales simply gave them the “avantage de pouvoir entrer en possession d'un objet avant le paiement intégral de son prix et sans payer plus cher qu'au comptant [...] et ce sans aucune augmentation et sans intérêt ni frais d'aucune sorte.”<sup>48</sup> In order to dispel the possible stigma of credit being a poor-man's way of consuming, he assured them that “parmi ses clients, il ne faut pas compter seulement les bourses modestes, mais toutes les Classes de la

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<sup>47</sup> Dufayel “Prospectus” quoted in Drancourt, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Legion of Honour dossier, document 16.

Société.”<sup>49</sup> Paying on credit did not make you a second-rate consumer. On the contrary! Many respectable bourgeois used consumer credit: “Beaucoup de personnes, exerçant des professions libérales, des artistes, des fonctionnaires, etc., se mettant en ménage, s’installant à la campagne ou voulant s’établir, trouvent dans les avantages offerts par l’Administration Dufayel la facilité de gagner tout suite l’argent qu’ils auront à lui payer progressivement plus tard[...].”<sup>50</sup> The important word here is “facilité.” The subtle message of Dufayel’s advertising was that by buying consumer goods the working class could become more bourgeois, and that his store and his payment plans made doing so easier than ever before.

### **Consumer credit**

The whole purpose of Dufayel’s credit and advertising scheme was to encourage the working class to purchase relatively expensive manufactured goods which, as a class, they had never bought before. After using advertising to stimulate the desire for consumer goods, Dufayel then made it very easy for them to buy these goods by offering low-cost short-term credit. The best way to understand how this system worked is to look at an example. A worker from the

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<sup>49</sup> *Administrations et Grands Magasins Dufayel*, 11

<sup>50</sup> Dufayel “Prospectus” quoted in Drancourt, 17-18.

Goutte d'Or, after seeing a new table advertised in his neighbourhood, either at the Grands Magasins Dufayel, in local newspapers or on a billboard, might take a liking to it. It would probably be too expensive for him to buy it right away. Before Dufayel, this would have been enough of a reason for him to forget about the table and focus on the things he could afford. But now there was another option: the Dufayel "coupon."

For twenty francs cash he could buy a coupon with a face value of one hundred francs. He could buy this either directly from the sales desk at the Grands Magasins Dufayel or, even easier, from one of the canvassers who fanned out each morning into the working-class neighbourhoods soliciting customers. Then he could redeem this one hundred franc coupon for his furniture, whether at the Dufayel main store in Paris, at a Dufayel branch location elsewhere in France, or at any of the other stores, like the Samaritaine, that had negotiated agreements to accept the coupons as payment. He could take home the furniture right away; a Dufayel collector (known as a "receveur") would then come by his house each week to collect small payments from him until he had paid off his purchase. The participating stores, meanwhile, would be reimbursed for the face value of the coupons they accepted, minus Dufayel's "commission" of eighteen percent.

The plan worked very well. In a few years, the number of customers exploded. The Grands Magasins Dufayel expanded to rival the bourgeois stores in size and splendour. Modern historians have been impressed with this success and have described Dufayel as a business genius.<sup>51</sup> He may have been one. But Dufayel's more important achievement, as far as French history goes, is not the fact that he made money, but that he made customers. In fact, if we study the inner workings of the Dufayel system we will see that, for all its size and complexity, it may not have been as profitable as it appeared. The cost of doing business on credit, combined with the store's advertising expenses, would have required a constant increase in consumers to keep it going. The Dufayel business model was very successful in creating consumers, even if it was not the most efficient way of making a profit.

Our best source for the inner workings of the Dufayel project is Georges d'Avenel. The five volumes that make up d'Avenel's *Le Mécanisme de la vie moderne* (1902) contain not only some of the most valuable contemporary observations on Dufayel's project, but also on many other aspects of the French consumer society at the end of the nineteenth century. D'Avenel was a French social historian who became famous (for a historian, at least) through his studies of consumption and the rise of modern industry and technology in France. He

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<sup>51</sup> Higgonet, 192.

helped popularize the history of consumer culture, both in France and through translations of his works into English. On a lecture tour of the US in 1907, the New York Times called him the “Greatest Living Authority on Prices and Cost of Living.”<sup>52</sup> In his absorbing tour of the various industries and commercial innovations of modern France, his chapter on consumer credit dealt specifically with the Crépin-Dufayel experiment. This was because, although many companies offering popular credit had popped up in the mid nineteenth century, by 1900 most of them had either disappeared or were floundering, leaving Crépin-Dufayel as the unchallenged leader in the industry.<sup>53</sup>

D’Avenel’s account of consumer credit at Dufayel is especially valuable because he approached it solely from an economic or sociological, rather than a moral, position. This enabled him to see that consumer credit was a special kind of debt. It was really a marketing technique designed to influence the behaviour of the working class at a specific moment in its history. He began his critique of Crépin-Dufayel by pointing out just how new an idea it was to provide this kind of credit to the working class. In the past, he argued, “[l]es personnes sans fortune ne trouvaient naguère ni crédit, ni argent, précisément parce qu’elles sont dépourvues de l’un et de l’autre.” Though the advent of popular credit simply

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<sup>52</sup> The New York Times, March 3, 1907.

<sup>53</sup> Georges d’Avenel, 378.



provided the same service that had previously been available to those who already had money, it could be a much more influential for the working class for this same reason: “Leur confier des fonds en échange d’un gage, est déjà leur apporter un secours notable: c’est aussi rendre service à cette masse dénuée de ressources, que de lui livrer des objets nécessaires ou utiles, sans exiger d’elle le débours immédiat de leur valeur.”<sup>54</sup> Providing consumer credit to the working class was very powerful because it could change their lives immediately. It gave them their first taste of those “necessary or useful” manufactured objects they had always lived without before.

D’Avenel pointed out that consumer credit was a way of training the working class to consume in a more bourgeois manner—that is, by using their money to purchase high-priced manufactured goods rather than food. Selling goods in instalments (“par abonnement”), he argued, was good for society

puisqu’elle met le crédit à la portée des plus humbles et développe les habitudes d’économie, en aidant le prolétaire à acquérir des objets durables—les consommations de bouche sont exclus de la liste—sans nuire à ses besoins journaliers [...].<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 375-6.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

Here is a key to Dufayel's success. By keeping the instalment payments small he made it very easy for workers to fit these payments into their traditional budget. By doing this he changed their consumption habits without radically changing their spending habits.

We should pause here to observe that Dufayel had no interest in extending more credit than his customers could afford to pay back. This was an important difference between Dufayel's coupons and the types of consumer credit we have lately seen in the North American "sub-prime" crisis. In order to prevent over-lending, Dufayel collection agents spent a lot of time and effort compiling records on the financial state of potential customers.<sup>56</sup> Because of this close monitoring, few defaulted on their payments. D'Avenel estimated the default rate on Dufayel loans was below 2%.<sup>57</sup> Adeline Daumard's figures for 1911 show that, even after Dufayel's credit system had spread throughout the poorer neighbourhoods, working-class Parisians typically died with only small amounts of debt.<sup>58</sup>

Although the purpose of Dufayel's credit was to encourage the working class to consume, he did not profit from the loans themselves. Unlike the sub-prime merchants, he did not charge interest on his loans. As the store boasted in

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<sup>56</sup> Coffin, 754.

<sup>57</sup> d'Avenel, 382.

<sup>58</sup> Daumard, 226-7.

an advertising document, “[l]a Maison Dufayel ne fait rien payer pour les avances qu’elle fait. Elle devient ainsi le banquier gratuit de ses clients puisqu’elle n’exige d’eux ni billets à ordre, ni intérêts d’aucune sorte et qu’elle se contente, comme garantie, de leur probité et de leur moralité.”<sup>59</sup>

Of course it made good advertising copy to state that it was thanks to the “probity” of its clientele that Dufayel could afford to provide its credit services for free. But this “free” credit was actually an expensive service that was “subsidized” by the company. This is one of d’Avenel’s most interesting observations of the Dufayel project. Selling through consumer credit, he argued, was a very difficult way to make money. On top of the cost of issuing credit with no interest, the coupon and collection system was complex and expensive. Even though its eighteen percent cut of all sales at its affiliated stores like La Samaritaine may have seemed high,<sup>60</sup> it was quickly swallowed up in administrative costs:

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<sup>59</sup> Dufayel “Prospectus”, quoted in Drancourt, 18.

<sup>60</sup> Modern historians continue to be impressed by the income from this relationship, without factoring in administrative costs. Patrice Higonnet, for example, speaks of eighteen percent as if it were pure profit, and the work of a business genius: “Ingénieux, Dufayel vendit non seulement de la marchandise, mais des coupons que ses clients pouvaient utiliser dans quatre cent établissements différents, dont la Samaritaine, fondée par Cognacq au début de 1870. Il y gagnait du 18%. On frémit en pensant à la fortune immense que ce génie de la vente virtuelle aurait su réaliser sur le Net.” *Paris: capitale du monde*, 192.

Cependant cette part de 18 francs pour 100 francs, bénéfice brut de l'établissement Dufayel, qui paraît lui réserver un intérêt formidable, ne laisse qu'un profit assez mince, par suite des dépenses nécessaires pour assurer à des rouages aussi compliqués un fonctionnement sûr.<sup>61</sup>

These "complex workings" consisted not only of Dufayel's hundreds of collectors, but also the clerical workers who sold coupons to customers and reimbursed other merchants, as well as department store staff.

But if the Dufayel consumer credit retail business was such an expensive and cumbersome enterprise, how did it stay afloat? D'Avenel believed that part of the answer was to be found in the way Dufayel did business with other retailers. As the most influential credit merchant in Paris, Dufayel had access to the thousands of working-class consumers that other merchants began to covet. Dufayel exploited his ability to produce consumers as a bargaining chip with other retailers, requiring them to pay high commissions on any consumers that he sent their way. So high, in fact, that some stores came to regret ever having agreed to participate in Dufayel's scheme. Once in, however, the only way out was to raise their prices: "Ces marchands à leur tour, pour s'indemniser des commissions de 40 et 50 p. 100 qu'ils avaient consenties, se rattrapaient sur le public en livrant de pure 'camelote' ou en majorant effrontément leur prix."

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<sup>61</sup> d'Avenel, 382.

Because of Dufayel's high commissions, these stores came up with methods to deal with the dreaded "coupon" customers, training their clerks to spot them and then "les commis avaient l'ordre de dissimuler et, s'il le fallait, d'escamoter d'un coup de ciseau, la marque apposée en chiffres connus, lorsqu'ils soupçonnaient avoir affaire à un 'abonné', auquel était ménagée une fort 'surbine'."<sup>62</sup>

Dufayel did not treat all other stores in such an extortionate manner. In his unique business relationship with Ernest Cognacq, owner of the Samaritaine department store, Dufayel's ability to produce working class consumers was highly valued. Dufayel and Cognacq came to an arrangement whereby Cognacq would accept all Dufayel coupons at face value at his store, with no discrimination between "coupon" or "cash" customers. As d'Avenel noted, "[e]spèces ou papier furent au reste traités chez lui sur une égalité parfaite."<sup>63</sup> In return, Dufayel would supply Cognacq with new customers and give him a discount on his commission rate.

It was a simple business arrangement but, in d'Avenel's view, it was the key to Dufayel's rapid expansion, demonstrating that the true value of consumer credit was the manner in which it could boost volume by creating customers. In spite of all the costs involved, it could be a great tool for expanding a retail

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

business. D'Avenel described how the increase in volume from Dufayel's new customers allowed Cognacq to "streamline" his business:

M. Cognacq accueillait les 'bons', parce qu'en augmentant le total de ses ventes, ils lui permettaient de s'approvisionner en gros, à meilleur marché; ce dont il tirait un bénéfice positif pour les marchandises débitées contre espèces.<sup>64</sup>

And Dufayel's coupon customers, happy to be welcomed on an equal footing with cash customers at the Samaritaine, became an important source of word of mouth advertising for Cognacq: "Satisfaits de la Samaritaine, les abonnés de Crépin lui valurent une vogue rapide et, par la même, multiplièrent l'émission des bons dont les trois quarts vont à ses comptoirs."<sup>65</sup>

From the outside it looked like a great scheme. For the Grands Magasins Dufayel, the Samaritaine essentially became another branch of their credit enterprise, enabling them to offer a greater variety of merchandise to their customers while at the same time guaranteeing a constant source of commissions. In return, Cognacq got a steady influx of new customers, boosting his store's popularity and allowing him to buy merchandise in bulk at a discount. When

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

assessed in terms of sheer volume and number of customers, the Cognacq-Dufayel partnership resulted in a great period of growth for both businesses.

But d'Avenel cautioned that growth does not necessarily mean profitability. In spite of the apparent success of the Dufayel-Cognacq partnership he could not explain how Cognacq was able to afford to pay Dufayel the sixteen per cent (already discounted) commission on all the Dufayel coupon sales at his store. Their business arrangement, though clearly successful in generating publicity and boosting the sheer number of sales, still seemed to him extraordinarily expensive, and he could not really explain why both parties continued to pay for it:

Comment, dans le commerce des nouveautés, où le profit net est très mince, a-t-il été possible d'accepter un charge aussi lourde, même en économisant sur les autres frais généraux et en réduisant les gains au minimum, c'est ce que je ne me chargerai pas d'expliquer.<sup>66</sup>

Consumer credit, according to d'Avenel, was clearly an excellent way to create consumers, but it was expensive, inefficient, and would be unnecessary were it not for its ability to "help" working people acquire expensive consumer items for the first time. It created a lot of movement of capital and even of people, from the working class neighborhoods to the Dufayel coupon counter, to the

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

Samaritaine showroom, back to the Dufayel redemption desk and finally, through the Dufayel collectors, to all the working class neighborhoods of Paris. But all of this movement, he believed, was “subsidized” by the commissions that Dufayel charged its affiliates: “[P]ar les frais généraux qui lui incombent, cet organisme est amené à vendre, bien que de façon détournée, au prix exorbitant de 18 p. 100 le crédit de six mois qu’il procure.” Consumer credit, in short, cost French society eighteen percent. This expense could only be justified because it taught the working class how to consume. If the working class could learn to save in advance for big purchases, the whole expense of credit could be avoided. Nonetheless, d’Avenel did not think the working folk were able to do this yet:

L’ouvrier ou l’employé, qui placerait à la caisse d’épargne l’argent nécessaire à ses acquisitions, s’éviterait une pareille surcharge; mais beaucoup n’auraient pas le courage d’économiser par avance pour acheter l’objet convoité et seront néanmoins capables, une fois l’achat réalisé, de s’acquitter peu à peu de leur dette. Le système a donc un côté moralisateur, mais il coûte trop cher.<sup>67</sup>

Until such time as the worker had the “courage” to save in order to consume, credit provided it for him.

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.



The French working class has now become just as proficient at consuming manufactured goods as the rest of the industrialized world. Nearly all of them own refrigerators, freezers, microwaves, washing machines and automobiles. Nearly half--44%--own two or more cars.<sup>68</sup> Nearly all of them own a color television, 91% own a DVD player, and 84% own a cellular phone.<sup>69</sup> None of this surprises us. But perhaps it is surprising how completely the consumption patterns that defined the working class in the nineteenth century seem to have disappeared.

Workers now spend roughly the same proportions of their budgets on the same kinds of things as middle-class French society. This is to say that they no longer privilege food, wine and clothing over durable consumer products. Where they used to spend 62% of their budget on food, they now spend 15.5%. Where they used to spend 16% on clothing and 12% on housing, they now spend 18.4% on housing and a mere 7.9% on clothing. And their wine budget, which used to be at least 10% in good times and bad, has almost dried up. Workers now spend only 3.5% of their budget on tobacco and all alcoholic beverages combined. This

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<sup>68</sup> Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (hereafter INSEE), *Statistiques sur les ressources et les conditions de vie*, report entitled *Équipement des ménages en électroménager et voiture selon la catégorie socioprofessionnelle en 2006 en %* (Paris, 2006), <http://www.insee.fr>.

<sup>69</sup> INSEE, *Statistiques sur les ressources et les conditions de vie*, report entitled *Équipement des ménages en multimédia selon la catégorie socioprofessionnelle en 2006 en %*, (Paris, 2006), <http://www.insee.fr>.

is half of what they now spend on furniture and home appliances.<sup>70</sup> I don't know if there can be any clearer indication that the working class has abandoned its original ways of spending. It may have taken over a century, but Dufayel's goal of making the French worker into a consumer has now been achieved.

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<sup>70</sup> INSEE, *Enquête Budget de famille 2006* (Paris, 2006), <http://www.insee.fr>.

## CHAPTER 2

### Social space, technology and consumer culture at the Grands Magasins

#### Dufayel

In 1898 there was something new in the night sky above the working-class neighborhoods of northern Paris. A powerful electric beam from the rotating searchlight mounted on the Grands Magasins Dufayel sliced through the darkness for several kilometers. The department store's publicity documents described the searchlight in great detail: "Le phare tournant, qui surmonte le Dôme, est muni d'un projecteur à arc mesurant 1m 25 de diamètre et d'une puissance de dix millions de bougies."<sup>1</sup> This light, the advertisement bragged, was the brightest in the city: "Il projette ses reflets à sept kilomètres, ce qui donne un faisceau de lumière d'une intensité inouïe et six fois plus grande que celle des phares les plus connus."<sup>2</sup> Other "well-known" searchlights included the one on the Eiffel Tower.<sup>3</sup>

Dufayel's advertising could have taken the comparison between the boulevards and the outer *faubourgs* even further, for when it came to technology and consumer culture, central Paris had nothing that could match the Grands

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<sup>1</sup> *Administration et Grands Magasins Dufayel* (1898), 16. Archives de Paris, D17 Z.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Calmettes, "The 'Big Store' of Paris," *Architectural Record* 12 (September, 1902): 627.

Magasins Dufayel. Never mind Dufayel's vast range of merchandise that included everything from furniture and sewing machines to bicycles and sportswear, the store had great indoor spaces where visitors could go for a stroll, listen to phonograph demonstrations, watch "scientific" exhibits of new devices like X-Rays, enjoy concerts put on by the resident orchestra (the Harmonie Dufayel), or even watch a film at the in-store cinema. They could not do these things at the Bon Marché, Au Printemps, or at any of the other famous bourgeois stores of central Paris.

And yet the Grands Magasins Dufayel has received very little attention in the historiography of the French department store. As noted earlier, most recent work in this field has been influenced by Michael B. Miller, whose study of the Bon Marché argued that the Parisian department store--a product of the efficient rail transport and urban prosperity of the Third Republic--was essentially a bourgeois institution that reflected the desires and ambitions of this rising class.<sup>4</sup> Since Miller, historians have moved beyond the "store biography" approach to consider the department store as one of the many new "cultural forms" of consumer culture that flourished in late nineteenth-century Paris, like

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Barry Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

advertising, the cinema, popular newspapers, commercial concerts and fairs.<sup>5</sup> But they have largely followed Miller in their view that both the department store and related forms of consumer culture were products of the boulevards of central Paris and their bourgeois habitués. When historians have studied Dufayel they have struggled to fit it into the narrative of bourgeois consumer history, often dismissing it as poor copy of the famous stores and therefore unimportant. Rosalind Williams has interpreted the Grands Magasins Dufayel as a mere imitation palace that gave the masses a taste of aristocratic luxury.<sup>6</sup> Judith Coffin, who has helped bring attention to the social influence of the store, nevertheless has described it as “the plebeian counterpart of such *grands magasins* as the Bon Marché” whose interior “deliberately mirrored those of the Bon Marché and other middle-class stores.”<sup>7</sup> When the Grands Magasins Dufayel has not been described as a down-market imitation it has been ignored entirely, even in works

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<sup>5</sup> David Chaney, “The Department Store as a Cultural Form,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 1 (1983); Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, eds., *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1850-1939* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1999); Lisa Tiersten, *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Ruth E. Iskin, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting* (Cambridge, MA and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 94.

<sup>7</sup> Judith G. Coffin, “Credit, Consumption and Images of Women’s Desires: Selling the Sewing Machine in Late Nineteenth-Century France,” *French Historical Studies* 18 (1994): 753-4, 755, n.18.

where it might have provided valuable insights. For example, the store is not even mentioned in Helen Harden Chenut's recent study of working-class culture and the expansion of the consumer market in the Third Republic.<sup>8</sup>

When studied on its own terms, rather than as an imitation of the bourgeois department store, the Grands Magasins Dufayel presents several challenges to the established historiography of consumer culture in France. From 1895 until at least 1914 it was at Dufayel, and not the bourgeois stores, where the most interesting innovations in consumer culture were happening, and where many characteristics of our own consumer society may be glimpsed for the first time. Many of these innovations were departures from the bourgeois department store model, and were directly related to the working-class social conditions of the 18th arrondissement. In its efforts to promote consumer culture among the working class of Paris, the Grands Magasins Dufayel took advantage of its marginal location in the Goutte d'Or to establish a local prominence that the bourgeois stores never had. It then broke away from the mould of the bourgeois department store to create a new kind of urban space which combined consumption and entertainment in original ways, and which celebrated technology as the foundation of an emerging consumer society.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Fabric of Gender: Working-Class Culture in Third Republic France* (University Park, PA.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

## Consumer culture in the Goutte d'Or

By the late nineteenth century Montmartre was thriving on its reputation for cheap drinks and risqué entertainment. But just a short walk east, in the neighbourhood of the Goutte d'Or, Montmartre's bohemian street life gave way to a bleak landscape of small factories, railway workshops, and some of the most crowded and decrepit housing in Paris. Although the 18th arrondissement was the most highly populated in the city, it had little in the way of cosmopolitan culture or urban infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> In contrast with the theatrical rough edge of Montmartre which drew otherwise respectable Parisians north for a *frisson* of danger,<sup>10</sup> the Goutte d'Or was a rough and utilitarian place. Police kept close watch on streets like *Charbonnière* where migrants, recently arrived via the Gare du Nord and the Gare de l'Est, stayed in hotels while looking for work in the railroad shops and carriage ateliers in the region.<sup>11</sup>

The Goutte d'Or was untouched by Haussmann's grand schemes and remained largely outside the influence of Parisian civil society. With its narrow streets--many of them still unpaved or semi-paved--and its small, densely packed dwellings it remained, like Montmartre, fundamentally a part of old Paris. In the

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<sup>9</sup> Pierre Casselle, *Nouvelle Histoire de Paris: Paris Républicain, 1871-1914* (Paris: Association pour la publication d'une histoire de Paris, Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris, 2003), 223.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Rearick, *The Pleasures of the Belle-Epoque: Entertainment and Festivity in Turn-of-the-Century France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 62.

<sup>11</sup> Casselle, 225.

last third of the nineteenth century its population had roughly doubled as Haussmann's redeveloped central Paris became too expensive for new migrants.<sup>12</sup> To make the crowding worse, the Goutte d'Or had very little in the way of public space. There were no parks or squares within walking distance. There was no equivalent in northern Paris to the Buttes-Chaumont park, Napoleon III and Haussmann's gift to the working-class east end.<sup>13</sup> This meant that, other than spending time at one of the area's many drinking establishments, there were few places where residents could go during their free time. This void is illustrated by a scene in Zola's 1877 novel, *L'Assommoir*, when a working-class family, gathered in a Goutte d'Or wine shop with a free afternoon, try to find something to do nearby. Unable to think of anywhere, they finally decide to walk all the way down to the Louvre instead.<sup>14</sup>

Although the Goutte d'Or had almost no public spaces and few cultural institutions, it was fertile ground for consumer culture. We can already see how consumer culture was filling these voids in 1877 by reading through Zola's notes

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<sup>12</sup> Colin Jones, *Paris: Biography of a City* (New York: Viking, 2004), 318.

<sup>13</sup> David H. Pinkney, *Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 103.

<sup>14</sup> Zola's "realism" seems a bit shaky here. He has his poor family walk -- in full wedding dress -- from the Goutte d'Or down to the Louvre, tour it for two hours, then walk through the Tuileries, up and down the stairs of the Vendôme column, then back up rue Poissonnière all the way to the 18th arrondissement, in time for dinner and with enough energy to party through the night. *L'Assommoir* (1877; repr. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1971), 84-95.



in preparation for *L'Assommoir*. Zola depicted it as a chaotic, semi-urban zone of jarring contrasts which had developed outside the civilizing influence of central Paris. He observed that the Goutte d'Or, though highly populated, was within sight of the countryside: "Du côté de la rue des Poissonniers, très populeux. Du côté opposé, province."<sup>15</sup> On the whole, the streets were dirty and poorly paved. Zola described Rue de la Nation as " Large, montante, dégoûtante, à moitié pavée, les flaques d'eau qui croupissaient."<sup>16</sup> Rue des Poissonniers was always " noire et boueuse, surtout à l'entrée du boulevard."<sup>17</sup> Although the area was full of commercial establishments, these were intermixed with abandoned buildings, construction projects and closed shops, giving an impression of a haphazard, inharmonious landscape. His description of boulevard Rochechouart gives the flavor:

Par-dessus les maisons basses, à un étage, on aperçoit de hautes constructions sales, des derrières d'autres maisons, avec des linges aux fenêtres et leur intérieur noir. Un café abandonné, qui a fait faillite, des brasseries alsaciennes; volets fermés, affiches collées, la lanterne cassée et

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<sup>15</sup> Emile Zola, *Carnets d'Enquêtes: Une ethnographie inédite de la France*, ed. Henri Mitterand (Paris: Plon, 1986), 420.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

poussiéreuse. Des hôtels meublés borgnes, trois ou quatre chambres.

Quelques hautes maisons isolées, réclames géantes peintes.<sup>18</sup>

What emerged from his descriptions was a neighbourhood that, although on the fringe of Paris, nonetheless bore important traces of industry, commerce and especially advertising. The “réclames” or advertising posters, recurred frequently in Zola’s sketches, and to judge from his account these were omnipresent in the 18th arrondissement. The area around Rochechouart and Barbès in particular had “des réclames gigantesques de tous les côtés,”<sup>19</sup> and the sheet-metal covering a bridge was “couverte d’affiches.”<sup>20</sup>

Even by 1907 it seemed that much of what Zola had described in the Goutte d’Or still obtained. Henri Bonnet provided a wonderfully evocative description of this poor yet commercially busy neighbourhood:

Le territoire de la Goutte d’Or est occupé pour plus de moitié par les ateliers et la gare aux marchandises de la Compagnie du Nord; pour le reste, la densité de la population est très forte. Dans cet espace, qui est

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* On the ubiquity of advertising in late nineteenth-century Paris, see Hazel Hahn, “Boulevard Culture and Advertizing as Spectacle in Nineteenth-Century Paris,” in *The City and the Senses: European Culture Since 1500*, ed. Alexander Cowan and Jill Stewart (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 161-2, 166, 174; Ruth Iskin, “Savages into Spectators/Consumers: Globalization in Advertising Posters. 1890s-1900s,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 29 (2007): 128; Aaron Jeffrey Segal, “The Republic of Goods: Advertising and National Identity in France, 1875-1918,” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1995), 48.

<sup>20</sup> Zola, *Carnets d’Enquêtes*, 424.

grand comme le quart de Clignancourt, bien des points sollicitent à la fois l'attention. Ce sont les hôtels de la rue de la Charbonnière, des rues Caplat et des Islettes qui sont autant de refuges de déclassés, épaves des gares d'arrivée du Nord et de l'Est, suspects au premier chef et surveillés de près par une police toujours inquiète. Ce sont les brocanteurs de la rue Myrha éparés au milieu des petits boutiquiers, dont les étalages se pressent au hasard les uns auprès des autres: crémiers, marchands de vins, blanchisseurs, épiciers, coiffeurs, charbonniers, boulangers, tous ceux en un mot qui composent le petit commerce.[...] Et pour l'ensemble du quartier, c'est une population d'employés et ouvriers du chemin de fer, d'écrivains à la tâche qui font des bandes chez Dufayel, de garçons de course et de recouvrement, de livreurs, hommes de peine, tous gens de petits emplois, dont quelques-uns malheureusement n'échappent pas au chômage. La Goutte d'Or est très chargée d'indigents et de nécessiteux; ils sont à peu près partout [...] Peut-être ce quartier, sauf pour les employés de chemin de fer, a-t-il pour caractéristique l'imprécision et l'instabilité des éléments variés qui le composent. Il doit être très difficile d'y faire œuvre utile.<sup>21</sup>

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21 *Paris qui souffre, la misère à Paris, les agents de l'assistance à domicile* (Paris: V. Girard et E. Brière, 1907), 81-2.

The Goutte d'Or, then, was a crowded utilitarian neighbourhood with virtually no public spaces. It was largely untouched by Haussmann's modernization, and was only marginally influenced by Parisian civil society. Though densely populated, it was also home to light industry and railway workshops, all manner of small business, and was bombarded by consumer advertizing posters. The Grands Magasins Dufayel took advantage of these conditions to create a new urban space in the Goutte d'Or, and to impose consumer culture as the dominant cultural force in an area that lacked other options.

#### **"A kind of grand covered square"**

Although the Grands Magasins Dufayel would eventually assume an architectural form similar to those of the bourgeois department stores of central Paris, its originality derives from its origins in the working-class social conditions of the Goutte d'Or. As we have seen, the business began when Dufayel's predecessor, Jules Crépin, started selling photographs on credit, which made them easier and more attractive for workers to buy. The success of credit sales to workers allowed Crépin to expand to offer more merchandise, also on credit, and eventually build a permanent store. Although Dufayel soon greatly expanded the store's operations by branching out into advertising and building the Grands Magasins Dufayel into its monumental form, the working-class origins of the store were an enduring influence.

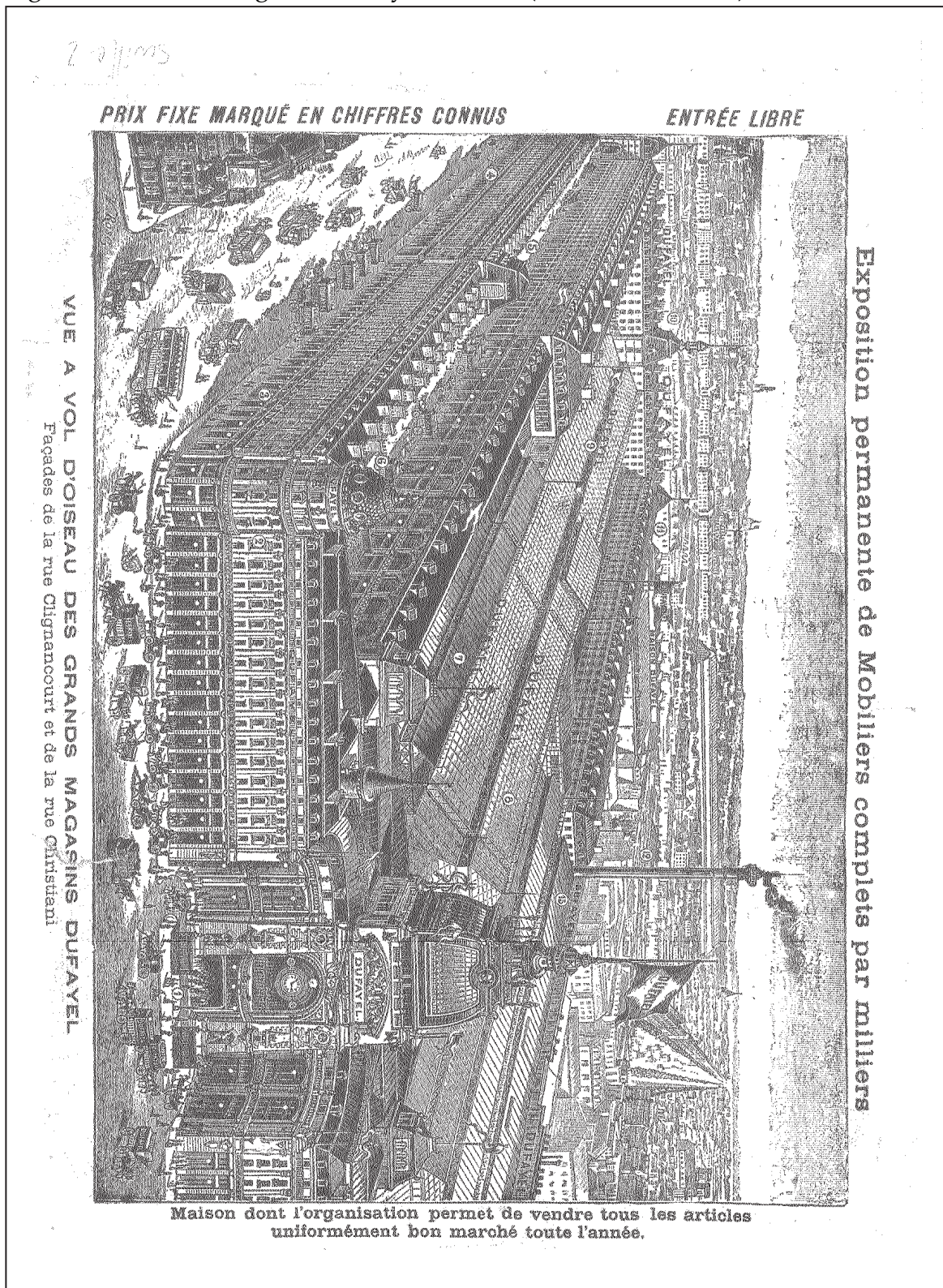
The Grands Magasins Dufayel dominated the Goutte d'Or, standing out as the largest and most impressive structure in the area. In 1898 the store occupied 18,760 square meters (figure 1.1). Bernard Marrey, in his *Histoire des Grands Magasins Parisiens*, described Dufayel as “heavy and ostentatious” with little architectural merit, but conceded that the sheer size of the store made it command attention.<sup>22</sup> The overall impression of the exterior of the store (now home to BNP Paribas and a Virgin Megastore) is one of solidity and bulk, and we can only imagine that it would have felt even more imposing in the late nineteenth century. The memoirs of the film maker Jean Renoir give some idea of how it would have appeared to contemporaries. In 1897 Renoir, then a small child, was taken on an outing from his home in Montmartre to visit the Grands Magasins Dufayel. Renoir looked back on the visit in his memoirs: “The building, with its walls of real stone and large glass windows shedding their light on imitation Henri II sideboards, gave to those privileged to enter that temple of mass-produced goods an impression of solidity capable of withstanding anything.”<sup>23</sup> Dufayel’s “solidity” would have contrasted sharply with the rickety buildings that surrounded it.

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<sup>22</sup> Bernard Marrey, *Les Grands Magasins: des origines à 1939* (Paris: Librairie Picard, 1979), 111.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Renoir, *My Life and My Films*, trans. Norman Denny (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 18.

Figure 1.1 Grands Magasins Dufayel, c. 1898. (Archives de Paris)





But it was inside the store where the real innovations in urban space were taking place. The Grand Magasins Dufayel initially borrowed the bourgeois store's idea of making the shopping centre into a kind of leisure destination. However, Dufayel pushed the idea much further, taking advantage of its size and marginal location to make its interior into a new kind of consumer space that was as much a leisure destination as it was a shopping centre. The store included several non-commercial areas where the public could stroll and even have a picnic, such as the Salon de Lecture, the Salle des Fêtes, and the Palmarium. An ad from 1903 described how the "Winter Garden" was becoming a popular destination for family outings:

Depuis l'inauguration du Jardin d'hiver, du Salon de lecture et du Buffet-glacier des Grands Magasins Dufayel, on prend de plus en plus l'habitude d'y venir luncher en famille, aux accords de la Symphonie Dufayel qui s'y fait entendre tous les jours, de deux heures à six heures.<sup>24</sup>

This was exactly the kind of place Zola's family was unable to find on their free afternoon.

The enjoyment of the interior space of the store was a central element in Dufayel's advertising strategy. Our best source for the interior of the store is Dufayel's own publicity material. Around 1900, Dufayel published the *Indicateur*

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<sup>24</sup> *Journal des débats*, December 3, 1903.

*Dufayel*, a real-estate listing catalogue which carried house and apartment rental and sales advertisements from throughout France. It also served as one of the most detailed pictorial and textual advertisements for the Grands Magasins Dufayel. Like all advertising material, it is generically prone to exaggeration and must be used with caution. However, it can be very useful in the way it reflected how contemporaries struggled to understand and describe the new kind of urban space that was being developed at the Grands Magasins Dufayel.

The *Indicateur* was most revealing when it described the new space of the store and suggested how this space should be experienced:

Ces attractions, jointes au plaisir que chacun éprouve à admirer les superbes constructions et l'immense choix des articles des Grands Magasins Dufayel, font de ceux-ci une sorte de grand square couvert, où clients et visiteurs peuvent passer une agréable après-midi.<sup>25</sup>

This common advertising spiel points to an important early development in consumer culture. This is the idea that consumption could be a leisure activity, and that the place where one shopped could be an attraction in its own right. This was a radical change from the way consumption had worked before the department store. This change was made possible by the bourgeois department store's innovation of encouraging customers to enter and roam the store with no

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<sup>25</sup> *Indicateur Dufayel*, (Paris: Administration de l'Indicateur Dufayel, 1900), 8.



obligation to buy anything.<sup>26</sup> Although Claire Walsh has recently argued that this innovation in retailing has been overstated,<sup>27</sup> I would argue, rather, that we have yet to appreciate the long-term influence of this change in consumption habits. The great novelty of department stores was in how they transformed the experience of consumption from a personal relationship between customer and merchant (pre-nineteenth century) into a closer relationship between customer and goods. Where purchasing had previously involved the slow, cumbersome “drama” of haggling,<sup>28</sup> the department store allowed customers to drift through this new space and see up close--even touch--the consumer goods that mass-production was making available. Fixed prices and efficient clerks made purchasing easy and quick. The department store’s genius was that by creating a space that imposed no immediate obligation to buy, it (paradoxically) made the experience of consumption more pleasant and, therefore, more likely to be repeated. This was particularly important for the still tentative working-class consumers who were Dufayel’s main target. For them, the department store was like a training ground for their new role as consumers.

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<sup>26</sup> Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 167; Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, “The world of the department store: distribution, culture and social change,” in Crossick and Jaumain, *Cathedrals of Consumption*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> “Claire Walsh, “The Newness of the Department Store: A View from the Eighteenth Century,” in Crossick and Jaumain, *Cathedrals of Consumption*, 46-71.

<sup>28</sup> Chaney, 24.

The originality of Dufayel's interior space has so far eluded most historians of consumer culture. In her influential work on consumer culture in late nineteenth-century Paris, Rosalind Williams has argued that the Dufayel interior can best be understood as an imitation palace built to convince the working class that finally they, too, could indulge in aristocratic luxuries. Williams draws a parallel between aristocratic debt and consumer credit, arguing that Dufayel's displays promoted the belief that "to sell credit was to sell the illusion of princely wealth to the masses."<sup>29</sup> Williams has trouble, however, reconciling this view of Dufayel as palace with the technological sophistication of the store. As she writes, "Dufayel's establishment was more than a reproduction of the *ancien régime*: it also incorporated the most up-to-date attractions of consumer society."<sup>30</sup> According to this account, the store was designed to be experienced as private space--an imitation palace designed to dazzle and to initiate the masses into the pleasures of aristocratic accumulation.

I would argue, rather, that the Grands Magasins Dufayel was meant to be experienced as a new kind of public space designed to promote consumer culture. As we saw in the extract from the *Indicateur Dufayel* above, the store advertised itself as a public space--"a kind of grand covered square." However,

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<sup>29</sup> Williams, *Dream Worlds*, 94.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-4.

the qualifier “a kind of” is important because it points us to the paradox inherent to the commercial space of the department store. The Grands Magasins Dufayel was only a “kind” of public square because although it may have felt public, it never disguised its private ownership or its character as a consumer business. Dufayel’s novelty was that it incorporated the illusion of public space into its commercial identity, making this experience one more among the possibilities of consumer culture. Strolling in Dufayel’s covered Palmarium was like strolling in a public square, even though it was not really one, and this ambiguity was exploited as part of its attraction. As one observer wrote of Whiteley’s department store in Victorian London, “[it] is truly a public square, dotted with a mass of stalls, while seeming to belong to everyone but the firm which owns it.”<sup>31</sup> “Seeming” public is what the Grands Magasins Dufayel offered its customers.

Dufayel went much further than any of the bourgeois department stores in the creation of non-commercial space under its roof. Part of the reason it could do this was because it was a credit-based retailer catering primarily to the working class. To clarify this point it is useful to begin with a contrast. In his notes in preparation for *Au Bonheur des dames*, Emile Zola observed how Boucicaut, the owner of the Bon Marché, conceived of the purpose of interior space at his store:

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<sup>31</sup> Hector Lambrechts, *Les Classes Moyennes dans le Commerce et l’Industrie. XXIX<sup>e</sup> Congrès de la Société internationale d’économie sociale* (Paris: 1910), 402-3, quoted in Crossick and Jaumain, “The World of the Department Store,” 32.

“Le principe du magasin est de ne laisser aucun coin désert, mort, sans affaire.”<sup>32</sup>

According to this approach any space that was not occupied by merchandise was “dead space,” and so all areas of the store were to be filled with potential sales goods at all times. The only exceptions to this were when the store put on events such as winter concerts, when the merchandise was cleared away and replaced with a stage and seats.<sup>33</sup>

The Grands Magasins Dufayel, by contrast, could afford to maintain large sections of commercially “dead space” because sales at its main store only accounted for a portion of its revenue. As we saw in the previous chapter, the way the Dufayel system worked was to sell credit “coupons” to his primarily working-class customer base. These could then be redeemed for merchandise at any of the “partner” stores throughout France which participated in Dufayel’s credit program.<sup>34</sup> This meant that the main Dufayel store did not have to dedicate itself entirely to sales and could set aside entire rooms for “attractions.” As we can see in the 1901 edition of the *Indicateur Dufayel*, these non-sales interior spaces were promoted as an essential part of the store: “Enfin le public a également à sa disposition des salles de conférences, de lecture, d’exposition de photographie en

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<sup>32</sup> Zola, *Carnets d’Enquêtes*, 168.

<sup>33</sup> Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 172-3.

<sup>34</sup> *Administration et Grands Magasins Dufayel*, 13.

couleurs, d'auditions de phonographes, de graphophones, etc., etc...."<sup>35</sup> As the store expanded, it spent more energy and money on developing spaces that were strictly non-commercial, like the cinema, the Salle des Fêtes, and even the expensive and commercially irrelevant dome that had to be cleverly negotiated with the city of Paris to pass the building codes.<sup>36</sup>

Some historians have argued that the motivation behind the development of the non-sales sections of the department store was to soften the commercial edge of the consumer enterprise by integrating the store into the urban milieu of Parisian parks and public buildings, thereby elevating bourgeois commerce to a more dignified status. In David Chaney's view, the provision of "ancillary facilities" like nurseries and reading rooms was really the owner's attempt to elevate the department store from mere commercial centre to "the dignity of public service."<sup>37</sup> But this view presupposes that store owners had a secret disdain for commerce, and that all non-commercial department store space was merely a kind of donation or concession to civil society intended to mask their shameful profit motive. This interpretation is more persuasive with respect to the bourgeois stores, especially the Bon Marché, where Boucicaut cultivated a

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<sup>35</sup> *Indicateur Dufayel*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Proctor, "Constructing the Retail Monument: The Parisian Department Store and its Property, 1855-1914," *Urban History* 33, 3 (2006): 409.

<sup>37</sup> Chaney, 28.

paternalistic and (outwardly at least) moral and even religious corporate culture in an attempt to render his enterprise more acceptable to (his own?) bourgeois sensibilities.<sup>38</sup>

But for Dufayel the motivations were more complex. Dufayel created non-commercial spaces in its store to make the store into a leisure destination for the working class, to encourage them to associate consumption with entertainment, and to enhance the public image of his store as a socially useful business. Rather than attempting to soften his commercial image by creating “ancillary services” at his store, Dufayel celebrated consumer culture itself as a socially beneficial force. If we look past the obvious paternalistic self-promotion in a catalogue excerpt from 1898 regarding the new X-Ray machine at the store, we can see that Dufayel was arguing for the social usefulness of consumer culture: “M. Dufayel ne se contente pas d’offrir l’utile à ses nombreux clients, il songe toujours à y joindre l’agréable.”<sup>39</sup> Usefulness, not respectability, was both the foundation upon which Dufayel built its corporate self-image and the way it justified its social and architectural prominence. The creation of semi-public spaces under the roof of the Dufayel department store was not a concession to the civil bourgeois

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<sup>38</sup> Miller, *The Bon Marché*, 221.

<sup>39</sup> *Administration et Grands Magasins Dufayel* (1898), 17.

society to make its commercial operations more acceptable but was, rather, an integral part of its corporate and cultural identity.

Similarly, although Dufayel, like the other big stores of Paris, tried to situate itself in the “monumental” tradition of grand tourist sites and curiosities of Paris, it did so not out of any desire to hide its commercial nature, but to celebrate it. For Dufayel there was no contradiction in being both a public attraction that might be experienced in the same way as a church, railway station or fair exhibit,<sup>40</sup> and a shopping centre. As the *Indicateur Dufayel* put it, the store was both a shop and “ en même temps une des curiosités de Paris et une des promenades préférées du public.”<sup>41</sup> Whereas the bourgeois department stores’ classically-inspired architecture was intended to elevate them to the status of non-commercial monuments suitable for a respectable travel itinerary, like museums, theatres, and palaces,<sup>42</sup> Dufayel’s grand design was meant to attract customers, most of them from the working class. This is not to say that Dufayel did not want his store to be perceived as prestigious or elegant. This was good publicity as well. But even when Dufayel’s publicity made claims about the store’s aesthetic features, it never pretended to be anything other than a

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<sup>40</sup> Chaney, 25.

<sup>41</sup> *Indicateur Dufayel*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Proctor, 394.

department store. Neither its aesthetic veneer nor its “monumental” status were intended to hide its status as a consumer institution.

Another important way in which the Grand Magasins Dufayel differed from the bourgeois stores was in its approach to technology. Dufayel embraced technology in a way that the bourgeois stores ideologically could not. The unique combination of culture, consumption, and technology that defined the social space of Dufayel was possible because of its desire to appeal to a working class clientele. To explain this it may be helpful by first looking at the relationship between the bourgeois department stores and technology. Although the bourgeois stores owed their existence to the high sales volumes at low prices made possible by mass production, their advertising sought to conceal this fact. As Crossick and Jaumain have noted, part of the function of luxurious décor of stores like the Bon Marché was intended to imbue their merchandise with an aura of class or, more importantly, pre mass-production cachet.<sup>43</sup>

By contrast Dufayel acknowledged, and celebrated, the fact that consumer culture could not exist without technology. Where the bourgeois stores integrated technology discreetly into their designs, the Grand Magasins Dufayel flaunted its technological wonders. The searchlight, the electric lighting and the

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<sup>43</sup> “The world of the department store,” 27; On the many ingenious ways nineteenth century manufacturers devised to artificially “age” mass-produced goods, see Manuel Charpy, “L’ordre des choses. Sur quelques traits de la culture matérielle bourgeoise parisienne, 1830-1914,” *Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle* 34 (2007): 105-128.



popular science exhibits that took place in its space were all advertisements for the close relationship between consumer culture and mass production. The concrete structure of the store was described with reference to its technological sophistication. The store's elevators, in addition to being "fort artistiques," were also "hydro-électriques, et peuvent, par suite, fonctionner à volonté par l'eau ou par l'électricité."<sup>44</sup> Even the accounts of the decorative aspects of the store stressed their association with electricity. The description of how Dufayel's statues were lifted into the store, far from emphasizing any "timeless" artistic or aristocratic qualities, focused instead on the fact that electricity was required to lift the things: " L'électricité a été exclusivement employée comme moteur pour manœuvrer ces énormes masses, dont certaines mesuraient de six à sept mètres."<sup>45</sup> In short, the message was that technology made mass consumption possible, and mass consumption, in turn, enabled all the other attractions of the Grands Magasins Dufayel. The reason Dufayel did not try to hide its dependence on mass production was because for many of its clients, purchasing consumer goods (on credit) was itself a new experience which would have been impossible but for mass-production. It made no sense, therefore, to try to create an aura of pre-industrial prestige at Dufayel. Dufayel embraced the fusion of technology

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<sup>44</sup> *Administrations et Grands Magasins Dufayel*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

and culture because it served its own business and advertising goals to promote, rather than conceal, the essential relationship between industrial production and mass-consumption.

### **Cinema, X-Rays and classical music**

As a direct result of its close relationship with technology, the Grands Magasins Dufayel became one of the few institutions in Paris that exploited cinema in the era when film was merely an experimental novelty. After its debut at universal exhibitions as a technical wonder, cinema rode a wave of popularity in Paris,<sup>46</sup> but this was followed by a dead period from 1900 when virtually no new cinemas opened, profits from film were low, and when there were really no purpose-built cinemas to speak of.<sup>47</sup> In his article on the nature of early French cinema, Jean Gili notes that for “ Pendant dix ans [1895 to 1905], le cinéma a été intermittent, itinérant, confié a des forains ou à des entrepreneurs de spectacle dont il n’est pas l’activité unique.”<sup>48</sup> During this period the Grands Magasins Dufayel, showing the films of Pathé and Méliès, was one of the few permanent film exhibition sites in the city. These early films were not great art. Most of them

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<sup>46</sup> Emmanuelle Toulet, “Le cinéma à l’Exposition Universelle de 1900,” *Revue d’Histoire moderne et contemporaine* 33 (1986): 179-209.

<sup>47</sup> Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 189.

<sup>48</sup> Jean A. Gili, “Les Débuts du spectacle cinématographique en France: premières projections, premières salles fixes,” in *L’Histoire du Cinéma: Nouvelles Approches*, ed. Jacques Aumont, André Gaudreault and Michel Marie (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1989), 73.

were simple vignettes, like the one from 1898 which depicted “scènes de la vie parisienne avec commentaires humoristiques.”<sup>49</sup> But they fit in well with Dufayel’s other entertainments. The cinema was advertised and exhibited alongside other new “spectacular” technologies like X-Rays and the phonograph. This combination of technological novelty, popular science and entertainment was perfectly captured in a Dufayel promotional poster from 1901 which advertised “des séances de Cinématographe Lumière et des Conférences et expériences sur les Rayons X, ce qui constitue un spectacle à la fois amusant et instructif.”<sup>50</sup>

The intermingling of new technologies capable of representing reality and their later development into mass-produced culture was, as Vanessa Schwartz has pointed out, one of the defining moments of modernity.<sup>51</sup> But where Schwartz sees film as being an outgrowth of “boulevard culture” with affinities with the popular press, I believe that the fact that this intermingling occurred in the Goutte d’Or at the Grands Magasins Dufayel was significant. There were many things about being a working-class store on the margins of the city that made it a good place to foster the early technologies of mass culture. The store provided a location where a new cultural form like the cinema could be tried out

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<sup>49</sup> *Administration et Grands Magasins Dufayel*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Schwartz, 178.

free from the constraints (both aesthetic and commercial) of the boulevards.

Dufayel was able to serve as a testing ground for the cinema not only because its financial survival did not depend on it, but also because it did not have to conform to the values which bourgeois stores (like the Bon Marché) believed to confer respectability--values like modesty, elegance and taste. At Dufayel promotion superseded all these. When the two year-old Jean Renoir arrived at the entrance of the Grands Magasins Dufayel in 1897, before he was able to enter, he was "greeted" by a member of the Dufayel team. As Renoir recounts, "[at] the entrance to the store a man wearing a braided cap asked us if we wanted to see the 'cinema.'"<sup>52</sup> Renoir accepted the offer and it was his first experience of film. It is easy to dismiss such tactics as "hucksterism." The Dufayel free cinema, one may argue, was just a cynical advertising ploy to lure customers into the store. It certainly was. But Renoir also described it as a "daring innovation."<sup>53</sup> And if this combination of cynical commercial manipulation and daring cultural (or at least technical) innovation reminds us of the modern mass entertainment industry, then the Grands Magasins Dufayel deserves a more prominent place in the history of mass-consumer culture.

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<sup>52</sup> Renoir, *My Life and My Films*, 17.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

But Dufayel also was a great innovator in the way it sought to combine consumption with other kinds of entertainment, from novelties like the X-Ray to classical music, and integrate these into its new urban space. These various kinds of entertainment were integrated with the retail operations of the store and their coexistence became an important feature of Dufayel's advertising message. It implied that consumption, technology, entertainment and pop science were all somehow interrelated by virtue of being contained in the same space, and all this was possible thanks to the magic of consumer culture. An ad from 1898 made the connection between consumption and mass entertainment explicit:

Demain jeudi il sera offert un étui de suprêmes Pernot et un échantillon de Dentol à [...] toute personne assistant à une séance du cinématographe Lumière, suivie de conférences et expériences sur les rayons X à l'aide de la lorgnette humaine de l'ingénieur Séguy.<sup>54</sup>

The store was portrayed as an electrified realm which embodied the wonders of a new consumer age. The store's promotional literature was saturated with references to the brilliant, almost hyperreal electric illumination of the store. A concert program from 1897 advised the public to watch for the daily "éclairage général de la salle des fêtes et du dôme Clignancourt de 5H à 6H ¼."<sup>55</sup> This was

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<sup>54</sup> *Journal des débats*, January 13, 1898.

<sup>55</sup> *Programme du 21e Concert du Jeudi 14 Janvier 1897*, Archives de Paris, D17 Z (2).

an attraction in its own right, as this description attested: “Le plafond lumineux qui couvre cette sale et qui, les jours des fêtes, est éclairé par une installation électrique d’au moins trois mille lampes, est un immense vitrail de cinq cents mètres de superficie.”<sup>56</sup> An 1898 flyer advertising an exhibition of X-Ray technology explicitly linked the store with the luminous, otherworldly qualities of the “Rayons X.” The Dufayel ad for its X-Ray exhibit featured the “Lorgnette Humaine” through which “l’on peut voir aussi bien un objet dans une caisse que le squelette et le cœur d’un sujet vivant.”<sup>57</sup> The X-Ray show fit in with the store’s image of electrification and light, but also reinforced the message of the store’s social usefulness. Dufayel’s ads explained the medical benefits of X-Rays, and claimed to have “prêté à l’Institut Radiographique une des galeries de Dôme Clignancourt pour y installer un cabinet modèle de radiographie médicale.”<sup>58</sup> In this way the space of the store--and the consumer society it stood for--became associated with the new possibilities of science.

We might be surprised by the way Dufayel ventured into the popularization of science and its apparently sincere interest in public education, but really this was just another example how it tried to portray itself as a socially

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<sup>56</sup> *Administrations et Grands Magasins Dufayel*, 28.

<sup>57</sup> Rayons X brochure, 1898, Archives de Paris, D17 z (2).

<sup>58</sup> *Administration et Grands Magasins Dufayel*, 20.

useful service provider. Miller refers to this trait (in reference to the Bon Marché) as paternalism, but paternalism implies a condescension that was not evident in Dufayel's advertising. X-Rays were promoted as a scientific breakthrough with admittedly entertaining side effects, and if part of the store's usefulness was in providing a venue where "professors" from the Institut Radiographique de France would give lectures on the technology, it was equally important that visitors could come to see for themselves how the X-Ray worked:

Des conférences et des expériences sont faites tous les jours par des professeurs de l'institut. Le mercredi et le samedi, le public est admis à défiler devant les appareils et à examiner, à l'aide de la Lorgnette, des objets lui appartenant, et même le squelette de sa main. De plus, ces jours-là, les professeurs placent devant l'écran un sujet dont on peut voir distinctement le squelette, les côtes et tous les os du buste.<sup>59</sup>

Although it would be interesting to know how many "subjects" were irradiated each Wednesday and Saturday, this advertising is more important for what it tells us about the way Dufayel portrayed its cultural function. The store was idealized as a space where the working-class visitor could not just observe but also participate in new and exciting forms of entertainment and technology.

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<sup>59</sup> Rayons X brochure.

Even if set aside these cinema and pop-science exhibits, Dufayel went further than the bourgeois stores in its effort to integrate traditional forms of entertainment into its consumer space. Its promotion of in-store concerts was a radical attempt to absorb traditional European culture into the new world of consumer culture symbolized by the department store. Our best source for Dufayel's venture into music is its own concert brochures. One typical brochure from 1897 is illustrative. On one side it depicted the usual "bird's eye view" of the Magasins Dufayel; on the other, a program for an "Exposition Concert" to be held in the Salle des Fêtes on Thursday, January 14, 1897. The concert was to take place from three to six in the afternoon and featured, as an accompaniment to the music, "Tableaux animés et scènes parlantes" from the Cinématographe Lumière. The orchestra was described as "une sélection de l'Harmonie Dufayel, composée de 125 exécutants," with the Chef d'Orchestre Félix Garnier.<sup>60</sup> The concert, divided into three sections with five pieces in each section, was a mixture of familiar composers (Bizet, Verdi, Offenbach) with less familiar (F. Thomé, Tavan, Audran). The credentials of the piano and the pianist were noted (in that order): "Le Piano de la Marque A Bord, sera tenu par Mlle Fulcran, prix du Conservatoire."<sup>61</sup> And, not only was the concert/exposition free, but the program

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<sup>60</sup> Brochure for Concert, 1897, Archives de Paris D17 Z (2).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*



noted that “il sera offert à toute personne assistant aux Projections du Cinématographe, un flacon de Bénédictine de l’Abbaye de Fécamp, et un étui de Suprêmes Pernot.”<sup>62</sup>

Now, even though the program noted that this was the “twenty first” Thursday afternoon concert to be held at the Grands Magasins Dufayel that year, we should be careful not to draw too many conclusions about these early concerts/expositions from the program. Without contemporary accounts we do not know to what extent they were treated as cultural events (of some kind) or merely as background noise among the general din of a crowded department store. Customers may have zipped in, grabbed their free Benedictine and left after five minutes without even noticing the music. But one account written in 1911 suggests the concerts had an important function in defining the cultural space of the store.

One of the few and most revealing contemporary descriptions of the concert/expositions at Dufayel comes from a journalist who was opposed to almost everything that the store represented. Francis Delaisi wrote a series of articles critical of the business practices of Dufayel for the *Bataille syndicaliste*. His description of a performance at Dufayel tells us some very interesting things about how the concerts fit into the cultural ambience of the store:

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

Dans le quartier de la literie, un cinématographe attire les enfants qui amènent leurs mères. Au milieu des meubles chics, un orchestre de jeunes femmes...charment les petites bourgeoises qui viennent là prendre le thé en papotant de leurs achats et de leurs amants. Un peu partout des gramophones font nasiller nos meilleurs chanteurs de l'Opéra et du café-conc'. Et cette colossale boutique apparaît au populaire comme un palais de féerie.<sup>63</sup>

This passage drips with disdain, but the source of the disdain is not obvious. Although the author clearly did not think much of the cultural value of the concerts at the store, he did not say that the performance itself was bad, or that the selection of music was poor. He implied, rather, that the concert was trivial because of its context. In the midst of consumer merchandise (furniture), the role of the concert was to “charm” the customers, whom he refers to as “petites” bourgeoises whose conversation was trivial as well. Technology contributed to the prevailing trashiness of the scene, with the gramophones cheapening or “nasalizing” authentic performances. The whole description implied that the Grands Magasins Dufayel was a place where a traditional form of culture was contaminated by the consumer products, the low class crowd, and the inauthentic technological reproductions that surrounded it. At Dufayel, music

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<sup>63</sup> Francis Delaisi, “Dufayel Contre le Petit Commerce,” *Bataille syndicaliste*, November 12, 1911.

became “consumerized.” And the worst thing of all, according to Delaisi, was that the crowd seemed to like it.

As revealing as Francis Delaisi’s description is, I believe it tells us more about the reaction of the French intelligentsia to an emerging mass culture than it does about the way the store was experienced by the majority of its customers. Delaisi articulated an anxiety felt among many of the French intellectual elite, including Zola. He understood (and feared) that what was happening to culture at the Grands Magasins Dufayel was the “avant-garde” of a much larger social change whereby culture was being absorbed or appropriated by consumer culture and technology. The threat was not merely a matter of a loss of cultural prestige but of the political authority of the social class whose prestige had been confirmed by their possession and mastery of things (music, fancy furniture, books) that mass production and credit sales were bringing within reach of the masses. The Grands Magasins Dufayel may have been the focus of Delaisi’s attack because it fostered this breakdown of prestige as did no other Parisian department store.

But if the aim of Dufayel was to bring the classical concert into its consumer atmosphere, did this not involve some risk? By separating the performances from the commercial activities of the store, would this not confirm that elite culture was superior to the lower entertainments of consumer culture

like movies and X-Ray exhibits? Was Dufayel, like Boucicaut at the Bon Marché, trying to attain bourgeois respectability by branching out into non-commercial cultural activities? Were these concerts, in other words, a denial of everything the Grands Magasins Dufayel “stood for”?

There was never any danger of consumption taking second place to any external authority at the Grands Magasins Dufayel, artistic or otherwise. We only need to refer back to the Dufayel publicity documents to see how classical music was carefully and deliberately integrated into the space and consumer culture of the store. If we look at any of the ads that Dufayel placed in newspapers over the years, we can see that music was treated just like any other consumer product. In an ad from 1896, the concert is on an equal footing with the furniture displays:

“Dimanche 29 mars, à deux heures, concert-promenade. Orchestre de 105 musiciens. Séances du cinématographe Lumière. Exposition de mobiliers par centaines dans les Grands Magasins Dufayel. Entrée Libre.”<sup>64</sup> Perhaps the best example of how Dufayel integrated classical music into its consumer culture is from a program (figure 1.2) for another “Concert du jeudi” from June 1899.<sup>65</sup> This concert again featured a mixture of headline composers (Mozart, Gounod, Haydn) with lesser-knowns (Gillet, Lebey, Auvray). The concert was held from

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<sup>64</sup> *Journal des débats*, March 29, 1896.

<sup>65</sup> Brochure for Concert, 1899, Archives de Paris D 17Z (2).

Figure 1.2 Brochure for concert at the Grands Magasins Dufayel, 1899.  
(Archives de Paris)

# Grands Magasins Dufayel

## Concert du Jeudi 22 Juin 1899

De 2 h. 1/2 à 6 heures  
Avec le concours de

**M<sup>ME</sup> AUGUEZ DE MONTALANT**  
*de l'Opéra-Comique*

**M. AUGUEZ**  
*de l'Opéra*

**M<sup>ME</sup> GRISY**  
*dans son répertoire*

**M<sup>LLE</sup> MARY LEBEY**  
*du Théâtre-Lyrique*

**M. GODEFROY**  
*du Théâtre-Lyrique*

### PROGRAMME

#### PREMIÈRE PARTIE

1. Marche des Amoureux . . . . .	GANNE.	4. a. Primerose, gavotte . . . . .	G. AUVRAY.
2. Le Trouvère, fantaisie. . . . .	VERDI.	b. En Sourdisine . . . . .	TELLAM.
Orchestre.			
3. Valse du Bonheur . . . . .	G. HESSE.	5. Les Saisons . . . . .	HAYDN.
M <sup>ME</sup> GRISY.		Air du <i>Laboureur</i> , M. AUGUEZ.	
Accompagnée par l'auteur.			

#### DEUXIÈME PARTIE

## LE BARBIER DE SÉVILLE

de ROSSINI

Ouverture . . . . .	Orchestre.
Air de Figaro . . . . .	M. GODEFROY.
Cavatine . . . . .	M <sup>ME</sup> MARY LEBEY.
Duo . . . . .	M <sup>ME</sup> MARY LEBEY et M. GODEFROY.

#### TROISIÈME PARTIE

1. Chanson de route . . . . .	G. MARIE.	4. Duo de la Flûte enchantée. . . . .	MOZART.
a. Le Rêve du prisonnier . . . . .	RUBENSTEIN.	M <sup>ME</sup> AUGUEZ DE MONTALANT.	
b. Noël . . . . .	A. HOLMÈS.	M. AUGUEZ.	
M <sup>ME</sup> AUGUEZ DE MONTALANT.			
a. Berceuse de Jocelyn. . . . .	B. GODART.	5. Faust, fantaisie. . . . .	GOUNOD.
b. Brise du Soir . . . . .	GILLET.	Orchestre.	

**Chef d'orchestre : JACQUES PARÈS**

Le Piano de la Maison BORD sera tenu par M<sup>ME</sup> GILBERT-THOUVENEL, prix du Conservatoire

**Entr'acte de 15 minutes entre chaque partie**

A chaque entr'acte le public peut se rendre au Petit Théâtre, où des attractions variées ont lieu à 2 h., 3 h., 4 h. et 5 heures :

**LE CINÉMATOGRAPHE. — LE STENTOR**

**LE TÉLÉPHONE HAUT PARLEUR DU D<sup>R</sup> DUSSAUD**

**EXPÉRIENCES SUR LES RAYONS X ET LES NOUVELLES CONQUÊTES DE LA SCIENCE**

Le jeudi le Public est admis à visiter les écuries.

ARCHIVES  
des séances  
\* PARIS \*

Voir au verso la vue à vol d'oiseau des Grands Magasins DUFAYEL

F. JOURDAN  
rue de la Goutte-d'Or.

two thirty until six in the afternoon, and it consisted of three parts with an “Entr’acte de 15 minutes entre chaque partie.” While listening to music, lest the customers forget they were at the Dufayel store, the program told them what to do during the intermissions: “A chaque entr’acte le public peut se rendre au Petit Théâtre où d’attractions variées ont lieu à 2h., 3h., 4h et 5 heures.” There the varied attractions were the Cinématographe, the “téléphone haut parleur de Dr. Dussaud,” and of course the “expériences sur les Rayons X et les Nouvelles Conquêtes de la Science.”

This, then, was the way music was to be experienced at Dufayel: listen to Mozart until intermission, look at the bones of your hand through the X-Ray machine, play with Dussaud’s telephone and all the new conquests of science before hopping back into your seat for Haydn. The concert hall, as with Dufayel Orchestra itself, was an attempt to integrate classical European music into Dufayel’s in-store consumer variety show, thereby making “high” culture another of the products that consumer culture could provide. No doubt listening to classical music at Dufayel was not the same as listening at the Opéra de Paris. But before we agree with Francis Delaisi’s argument that this was a contamination of high culture, it would be interesting to know if the residents of the Goutte d’Or, for whom the Grands Magasins Dufayel may have provided their first and only experience of a grand concert hall, felt the same way.

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This essay has called for a re-evaluation of the Grands Magasins Dufayel in the history of French consumer culture. Dufayel was a great presence in late nineteenth-century working-class Paris. It filled a physical and cultural void in the Goutte d'Or, exerting a much greater influence there than the bourgeois stores did on the central boulevards. In the absence of public spaces like parks and squares, it provided residents with a new kind of semi-public consumer space. It could do this thanks both to its unique situation on the edge of the city, and to its status as a de-centralized credit-based retailer. It filled its space with new kinds of spectacular entertainments that enhanced the store's publicized image as a technologically advanced, socially-useful consumer institution. As a result of its unique fusion of entertainment and technology, it was able to support an experimental cultural form like the cinema long before any other Parisian institution dared to. This made the Grands Magasins Dufayel one of the earliest supporters of mass-consumer media. But Dufayel was also innovative in the way it integrated traditional culture like classical music into its space, providing its working-class clientele with a "consumer" version of high culture while at the same time exploiting the prestige of high culture as an advertising tool. Many of these innovations were the result of Dufayel's working-class orientation, and were deliberate departures from the very different kind of consumer culture that

was being promoted at the bourgeois stores. Where the bourgeois stores looked to the past, flattering their customers with the illusion of hand-made exclusive products, Dufayel looked to the future, celebrating mass-produced goods and the technology that made them possible. Its interior space proposed a bright future for the working class, where mass-production would continually make more products, spectacular entertainments and scientific wonders available to more and more people. But perhaps Dufayel's most attractive illusion was its claim--repeated in all its advertising--that admission to the store and, by implication, to the consumer society it represented, was free.



## CHAPTER 3

### **Consumer culture as the new paternalism at the Grands Magasins Dufayel**

On August 14th, 1902, Georges Dufayel got a very nice letter from the French government. He was being “promoted,” the letter told him, from “Chevalier” to “Officier” of the Legion of Honour. He had been named Chevalier back in 1897, and since then his consumer retail business, built around his department store in working-class Paris, had continued to flourish. To claim his award he had to write up a short, flattering bio explaining why he deserved this distinction. And he had to pay 117 francs to the Department of the Seine to cover the cost of the Legion of Honour medal and certificate.

Having to pay a fee for a state honour would not have bothered Dufayel. He was used to paying for advertising, and this was a bargain. He described himself to the Legion of Honour big wigs as “Propriétaire des Grands Magasins de Marchandises diverses occupant un nombreux personnel pour lequel il a crée des institutions de philanthropie et de prévoyance. Chevalier du 31 décembre 1897.”<sup>1</sup> It was probably not necessary to remind the government about his earlier Legion of Honour, but more interesting was how this apparently simple description contained several different, potentially conflicting occupations. Dufayel was a capitalist and merchant, philanthropist and *patron*, all combined

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<sup>1</sup> Legion of Honour dossier on Dufayel, G.J. Archives nationales, LH 831/24, document 7.

into one guy. His description suggested not only that individual profit could coexist with the social good, but also that these roles could be mutually reinforcing. It was also interesting how he implied that his Legion of Honour-worthy achievements were inseparable from his “numerous personnel.”

This is not as idealistic as it may sound. One of the reasons Dufayel linked his personal success with his staff was because the nature of his consumer enterprise meant that his relationship with the working class was a kind of business relationship. This applied both to his thousands of employees at the Grands Magasins Dufayel in the poor Goutte d’Or neighbourhood in northern Paris, and to his millions of mainly working class customers throughout France. Because he had deliberately made the working class his clientele, his own business success depended on their rising wealth and spending power. In this he was different from the other Parisian department store owners of the nineteenth century. Aristide Boucicaut, owner of the Bon Marché, was also a philanthropist who provided generous benefits to his store personnel. But for him philanthropy was classical charity--a way of redistributing some of the wealth he gained from his (mainly bourgeois) customers, and of raising his own reputation above the level of mere merchant. His relationship with the working class was paternalistic: he cared for them, hoped to educate and moralise them so that some day they too might be respectable bourgeois and—who knows?—shop at the Bon Marché!

For Dufayel, philanthropy and paternalism were both exploited as forms of publicity, and as steps toward the ultimate goal of expanding consumer culture throughout the French working class. By advertising his philanthropic gestures he tried to create a public image of himself as a caring, friendly ally who provided the working class with useful and pleasant consumer goods. It was a way of easing first-time working-class customers into the unfamiliar environment of the department store, where anonymous clerks and fixed prices replaced face-to-face bargaining with the small shopkeeper. If paternalism could help make the working class into more confident and reliable consumers, it would extend the benefits of industry and technology to a larger public and would be beneficial to society as a whole. Thus the ultimate purpose of Dufayel's paternalism was exactly the same as that of his advertising: to change working-class behaviour by attracting them to a new lifestyle of consumption of mass-produced goods and thereby, eventually, create a mass-consumer society.

In order to appreciate the novelty of Dufayel's consumer-oriented paternalism, we should first sketch the main outline of "classic" industrial paternalism in late nineteenth-century France. According to Maurice Lévy-Leboyer, paternalism was a management technique developed by late nineteenth-century industrialists to mould the working class into reliable factory workers. As he writes, paternalism, "that is, a practice in which the work force is

trained and protected by its managers, was to some extent forced upon the employers by the very conditions of the labor market and became a permanent feature of management-labor relations.”<sup>2</sup> French paternalism originated in the artisanal shop, where a close relationship between master and apprentice was necessary to transmit skills. The new institutions of industrial capitalism, whether factories or department stores, found that an expanded form of this traditional paternalism was required not only to train unskilled laborers to work in factories on an industrial and not a rural schedule, but to retain them once they were trained. This meant that in addition to their job training, factory employees got all sorts of benefits previously unheard of, such as food and lodging at or near the workplace, savings plans, some forms of health and life insurance, and even education programs and music lessons.<sup>3</sup> Marxist-inspired historians have, however, noted the darker side of paternalism. Michelle Perrot has argued that, no matter what the benefits provided, the goal of all corporate philanthropy and paternalism was ultimately control--control over employees’ time, movement,

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice Lévy-Loboy, “Innovation and Business Strategies in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century France,” in *Enterprise and Entrepreneurs in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century France*, ed. Edward C. Carter and Robert Forster (Baltimore, MD & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 94-5.

<sup>3</sup> André Gueslin, “Le paternalisme revisité en Europe occidentale (second moitié du XIXe siècle, début du XXe siècle),” *Genèses* 7 (1992): 201.

productivity and loyalty.<sup>4</sup> According to this argument, the superficially attractive benefits of paternalism concealed the employer's true aim, which was to force the worker who was usually a recent migrant from the countryside to conform to the new rhythm and discipline demanded by industrial society.<sup>5</sup>

There were elements of both Levy-Leboyer's economic necessity and Michelle Perrot's social control in the paternalism at the Grands Magasins Dufayel. The complex operations of the department store required a skilled and stable workforce, and employee benefits were an important strategy for retaining experienced staff. And, as we will see, in exchange for these benefits the store did exert a great deal of control over its employees. I would like to argue, however, that paternalism had another role at the Grands Magasins Dufayel. Dufayel combined traditional paternalism with new advertising techniques to promote his company as the means by which the French working class could gain access to the benefits of consumer culture. Dufayel went further than other contemporary department store magnates in the way he exploited paternalism as a branch of consumer advertising. He advertised his paternalistic gestures in order to create an image of his department store as a generous, working class-

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<sup>4</sup> Michelle Perrot, "Les classes populaires urbaines," in vol. 4 of *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*, ed. Ernest Labrousse and F. Braudel (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), 470-1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 463. As Michelle Perrot writes, industrial society "exige que tous aient un travail suivi, un emploi de temps réglé, un domicile fixe: une case bien définie dans ce damier qui dessine, de plus en plus, le quadrillage des disciplines dont Michel Foucault a décrit la progressive emprise," 463.

friendly consumer institution. In this respect Dufayel was an important transitional figure in the development of a French consumer society because, while industrial paternalism in France had largely been concerned with the production side of the economic equation, Dufayel saw the importance of using paternalism to enhance consumption as well. Traditional paternalism, Gueslin writes, was intended to transform “l’homme à tout faire, souvent d’origine rurale, sans culture industrielle, en un ouvrier qualifié.”<sup>6</sup> Dufayel’s paternalism took this transformation a step further to make the modern French worker into a “*consommateur qualifié*.”

We will approach Dufayel’s paternalism from three angles. First we will show how Dufayel attempted to combine traditional paternalism and philanthropy with new consumer advertising to craft an image of himself as a good employer and working-class ally who was bringing the benefits of consumerism to the working class. Of course Dufayel, being an ad man at heart, painted a flattering portrait of himself, and no doubt exaggerated both his benevolence and his originality. In an attempt to balance this image we will then compare his store’s paternalism with that of the more traditional department stores in Paris. We will then hear what Dufayel’s critics thought of his

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<sup>6</sup> Gueslin, 209.

paternalism and his social influence before concluding with a reflection on Dufayel's long-term influence on development of the French consumer society.

### **Paternalism as advertising**

Among French business magnates in the nineteenth century, Georges Dufayel was one of the leading innovators in the exploitation of what we now call public relations. He believed that in the newly emerging consumer economy publicity and promotion would play increasingly prominent roles. He affirmed that advertising was "the soul of commerce."<sup>7</sup> Through store catalogues, posters, newspaper advertisements and distribution through his own advertising division, *l'Affichage national*, he crafted a carefully designed public image for himself and for his company. In comparison with the traditional bourgeois paternalism practiced by the Bon Marché's Boucicaut, Dufayel's advertising tentacles, which branched out to cover vast areas of Parisian public space, spread the news of his good deeds much further. In many ways Dufayel was as much an early "ad man" as he was a merchant. He served as president of the *Chambre syndicale des entrepreneurs d'affichages et de distribution d'imprimés*.<sup>8</sup> Dufayel was very well connected with the city government. *L'Affichage national* had

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<sup>7</sup> Dufayel brochure, quoted in Judith Coffin, "Credit, Consumption, and Images of Women's Desires: Selling the Sewing Machine in Late Nineteenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* 18 (Spring 1994): 764.

<sup>8</sup> *Journal des débats*, June 5, 1901.

already been the official supplier of publicity for the 1889 Universal Exposition, and in 1905, for a price of 814,500 francs, Dufayel acquired the rights to sell advertising space on all the walls belonging to the city of Paris.<sup>9</sup>

The originality of Dufayel was simply in its use of the new techniques of advertising to promote a public image of the Grands Magasins Dufayel, and of consumer culture itself, that would be attractive to the working-class public. And this applied equally to employees and customers. Dufayel's advertising pushed the message that consumer culture, of which his store was working-class Paris's foremost example, provided opportunities for the worker, both as consumer and as employee. This was a very different form of paternalism than the version practiced at the bourgeois stores. Whereas paternalism at the Bon Marché was intended to create a disciplined and "respectable" staff that could both serve and imitate its bourgeois customers,<sup>10</sup> at Dufayel paternalism was more concerned with creating a positive public image for the store which would appeal to its working-class customers. The difference was that whereas for Boucicaut the working class was a source of employees, at Dufayel the working class was a source both of employees and of customers.

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<sup>9</sup> *Indicateur Dufayel*, (Paris: Administration de l'Indicateur Dufayel, 1901), 7; *Journal des débats*, January 26, 1905.

<sup>10</sup> On the connection between paternalism and bourgeois values at the Bon Marché, see Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 75-164.



The best way to observe how paternalism and the promotion of consumer culture were combined at the Grands Magasins Dufayel is to study the store's advertising documents. It is important to note, first, that Georges Dufayel did often donate to "conventional" philanthropic causes that had nothing to do with the promotion of consumer culture. For example, in 1896 he donated one thousand francs to factory workers displaced by a fire on rue Rochechouart in the Goutte d'Or.<sup>11</sup> In 1914 he provided space in his store and in his home on the Champs-Élysées for the Red Cross to treat war victims.<sup>12</sup> But for the most part, the Dufayel advertising machine did not bother to publicize these conventional donations, leaving them to be reported by the newspapers independently. Dufayel spent its promotional energy--and money--on those acts of charity that were directly related to the Grands Magasins Dufayel and its working-class consumer culture. It is this aspect of Dufayel's paternalism, therefore, that will occupy our attention here.

One of the best ads in which to observe Dufayel's combination of paternalism and consumer culture is in the "review" of the annual staff party at the Grands Magasins Dufayel. These ads were common enough that it would not take long for a reader of popular newspapers in late nineteenth-century Paris to

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<sup>11</sup> *Journal des débats*, July 4, 1895.

<sup>12</sup> *Journal des débats*, August 6, 1914.

come across one. Once every year, in a display of (carefully calculated) generosity, Dufayel provided his staff with elaborate parties at the department store, out of which he made a great self-promotional splash. Whatever benefits these parties may have had for the staff, they were used by Dufayel's advertising machinery to help craft the store's public image. The parties featured free buffets, music and prizes. Accounts of the parties were then published in popular newspapers. The ads of course emphasized the generosity of Dufayel the *patron*. For example, the party on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1901, "[à] l'occasion du 44<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la fondation de sa Maison," featured "[c]inq buffets gratuits tenus par la maison Josephine[...]" But the ads also pointed out that the parties were occasions where Dufayel employees could partake in some of the bounty that consumer society made available. There was usually a raffle for a grand prize of some kind: the prize on May 19<sup>th</sup> was a "jolie maison de campagne meublée."<sup>13</sup>

In an ad recounting a staff party in 1898, we can see how Dufayel took the traditional depiction of the paternalistic business owner and combined it with his own unique consumer twist. Although the account stressed the generosity of Dufayel, the staff appeared in the account (by name), suggesting that the store was a place where consumer business created opportunities. Under the headline "Une Fête Industrielle," this is how the party was described:

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<sup>13</sup> *Indicateur Dufayel*, (Paris: Administration de l'Indicateur Dufayel, 1901), xxiii.

Dimanche, à Villemonble, inauguration de la maison de campagne que M. Dufayel a l'habitude d'offrir, chaque année, en tombola gratuite, à ses employés ayant au moins cinq années de présence, et dont l'heureux gagnant a été, cette fois, le receveur Penseron. Comme tous les ans, la fête a été splendide. MM. les maires de Villemonble et du Raincy, ainsi que leurs adjoints, assistaient au banquet servi dans la salle du Casino. Après le banquet, M. Dufayel et 200 de ses employés, choisis parmi les plus anciens et les plus méritants, se rendirent, musique en tête, à la villa, dont Mme Penseron leur fit les honneurs. L'Harmonie Dufayel, composée de 100 exécutants, donna sur la place un concert très applaudi. A sept heures, musiciens et invités retournaient à la gare, charmés de l'accueil enthousiaste de la population. Bonne journée pour tous, et aussi pour le commerce local. Chacun s'en retourna ravi, M. Dufayel ayant promis de recommencer la même fête, l'année prochaine.<sup>14</sup>

In this formulation, Dufayel appeared as a generous boss, certainly, especially to the lucky Penseron with his new villa. But there was a more subtle message. The ad implied that Dufayel employees (the loyal and worthy ones, of course--this part of his paternalism was very conventional) had entered a world that provided them with at least the opportunity to aspire to material wealth and

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<sup>14</sup> *Journal des débats*, August 10, 1898.

cultural fulfillment. This was a world where consumer culture coexisted with, and enhanced, traditional paternalism. The generosity of the great *patron* was crucial, and he was still the force that held the enterprise together. But the employees were not depicted as passively receiving his generosity. Rather they were portrayed as striving, miniature capitalists who want to claim their share of the (as yet barely perceptible) new consumer prosperity. They had some money in their pockets; their presence in Villemonble gave a boost to the local economy.

Dufayel's parties were occasions where the working class enjoyed fine food and won consumer goods while either surrounded by the opulence of the department store, or enjoying a taste of the emerging society of leisure and "vacation homes." Surely the employees must have appreciated it. In Dufayel's own advertising, of course they did. According to his own confident assessment, his staff loved the parties and he assured them that this "générosité, si appréciée par le personnel, sera renouvelée cette année...." <sup>15</sup> But pleasing the employees was merely a traditional paternalistic reason for the parties. Their more important function in Dufayel's greater project of creating working-class consumers was to show how well his business harnessed the benefits of consumer culture and distributed them through its credit-based working relationship with the working class.

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<sup>15</sup> *Administration et Grands Magasins Dufayel*, 12.

In short, the promotional message sent out by Dufayel's publicity machine ran as follows: he was a friend of the working man, provider of opportunities both cultural and financial, and largely (not single-handedly, no!) responsible for bringing working-class Paris into the modern era of mass-produced convenience and plenty. Dufayel adopted traditional techniques of French paternalism and used them to attract the working class to participate in a new consumer society that was anything but traditional. He created an image of his company that encouraged the public to associate it with his own personal image. He portrayed his store as a caring environment in which he, the grand *patron*, created an environment where the benefits of consumer culture could spread. Of course, the disadvantage of being such a public and highly advertised consumer business was that it opened itself up to public attacks from critics who saw discrepancies between what Dufayel claimed, and what he delivered.

Dufayel claimed to provide, through consumer credit and mass-produced goods, great material improvements to working-class life. But how, if at all, did this business direction influence the way working class employees were treated at the Grands Magasins Dufayel? Were conditions there better, worse, or even just different from those at other Parisian department stores? How well, in other words, was Dufayel's advertised business philosophy reflected in working conditions at the store? Our answers to these questions will reflect the usual

distortion in social history which favours the voice of the well-documented institution as against the poorly documented individual. We know quite a lot about store policies, paternalism, and the way people like Dufayel *wanted* themselves to be seen, and almost nothing about the thoughts of store employees. Nevertheless, by exploiting the few extant documents, and by reviewing store policies at the Grands Magasins Dufayel and similar businesses in late nineteenth century Paris, we can at least provide a rough idea of its daily reality.

We can start by giving some context for the working conditions of department stores in general before looking at the specifics of Dufayel. Working at a department store in the late nineteenth century was a not-bad job *if* you could handle the stressful and all-consuming work environment, and were able to stick to it long enough to obtain the top wages for senior employees.<sup>16</sup> The salary of a department store clerk was relatively low to start off, and summer “vacations” were not paid<sup>17</sup>, but wages could rise to well above average after many years’ service.<sup>18</sup> It was one of the most desirable jobs available in the city

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<sup>16</sup> On working conditions at department stores, see Claude Lesselier, “Employées des grands magasins à Paris (avant 1914),” *Mouvement Social* 105 (1978): 109-26; André Lainé, *La Situation des Femmes employées dans les Magasins de Vente à Paris* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle de Droit et de Jurisprudence, 1911); Theresa McBride, “A Woman’s World: Department Stores and the Evolution of Women’s Employment, 1870-1920,” *French Historical Studies* 10 (1978): 664-83.

<sup>17</sup> Perrot, 466-7.

<sup>18</sup> As Michael Miller notes, “Compared to other working men, most of whom were fortunate to earn 5 or 6 francs a day, department store clerks were considerably well off. An income of 3 500 to 4 000 francs a year in nineteenth century France was sufficient to enable one to live a modest bourgeois existence....” *The Bon Marché*, 91.

for working-class women because the work environment was clean, there was a possibility of retirement, and the position was considered more respectable than factory work<sup>19</sup>. In any case, whatever drawbacks they may have had department store jobs were highly desirable. Hiring sessions at the big stores typically attracted crowds of applicants.<sup>20</sup> We must keep in mind that these were the conditions near the turn of the century, and they had no doubt improved a lot since Lainé had written his tract on the poor treatment of women at the stores of Paris.<sup>21</sup>

For department store clerks a typical day started at eight in the morning and finished at eight in the evening, or nine in the summer. The schedule was strictly enforced, with fines as high as a day's wages for lateness.<sup>22</sup> Employees had an hour break for lunch, which was usually provided by the store, and during which they were required to remain on the premises.<sup>23</sup> Often housing was

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<sup>19</sup> McBride, "A Woman's World," 675; Perrot, 467.

<sup>20</sup> Perrot, 467.

<sup>21</sup> Lainé's tract was a critique in very general terms of the way female store workers were exploited by the Grands Magasins of Paris and a call for legislation to protect them. Its main rhetorical tactic was to contrast the luxury of the stores with the conditions of female clerks. A single passage is representative: "La femme riche trouve à Paris la facilité de satisfaire tous ses caprices; la travailleuse y est, plus qu'ailleurs, une exploitée...." *La Situation des Femmes*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> McBride, "A Woman's World," 673.

<sup>23</sup> On the dark side of paternalism, Theresa McBride notes how department store *patrons* were serious about controlling their employees' time and movement: "Despite protests, women employees were never allowed to leave the store nor return to their rooms during their breaks. At Galeries Lafayette, they were locked into their dining hall during the meal," 672-3.

provided, either at the store itself (as at the Bon Marché), or in rooms close to the store (The Louvre). Probably the most irritating thing about working at one of the big department stores was that the job claimed nearly all your time. In exchange for the relatively generous material benefits you received you spent almost all your time either working at the store or taking your breaks there; and all this with store management constantly looking over your shoulder.

As we discussed above, there were many self-serving reasons for owners to provide “benefits” for store employees. They wanted to ensure the loyalty of long-term (hence trustworthy) workers, and they wanted to cultivate their reputations as philanthropists. Also, they believed that things like savings plans could be a good moral influence on their employees. But whatever the motives of the owner, department store workers could end up with a quite good “benefits package.” At the Bon Marché, for example, Boucicaut provided various savings plans, health care, maternity payments, education, death benefits and a fund for long service employees,<sup>24</sup> along with free language and music lessons.<sup>25</sup> The Louvre subsidized employee vacation homes, and Cognacq’s Samaritaine offered

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<sup>24</sup> Lesselier, “Employées des grands magasins,” 121.

<sup>25</sup> Henri Garrigues, *Les Grands Magasins de Nouveautés et le Petit Commerce de Détail* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle de Droit et de Jurisprudence, 1898), 67.



subsidized housing.<sup>26</sup> Working at a department store may have been a claustrophobic existence where your movements were constantly monitored by a hovering *patron*, but if you could play that game, the material rewards were better than most. In 1898 Henri Garrigues conducted “random” interviews with clerks at the Grands Magasins du Louvre and found them to be generally happier to work for a big store, where “on est toujours libre le dimanche,” than at a boutique where “le petit commerçant règne en despote....”<sup>27</sup> This anecdotal evidence was corroborated by a parliamentary committee of 1914 that concluded that department store employees were better treated than their counterparts in family-run shops<sup>28</sup>

Although most of what we know about working conditions at the Grand Magasins Dufayel comes from publicity documents from the store itself,<sup>29</sup> and should therefore be read critically, they appear to be broadly similar to the other large department stores of Paris. The working hours were roughly the same:

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<sup>26</sup> McBride, “A Woman’s World,” 675-6.

<sup>27</sup> Garrigues, 71-2.

<sup>28</sup> McBride, 676.

<sup>29</sup> See for example, *Administrations et Grands Magasins Dufayel* (1898). The late nineteenth-century was a kind of golden age of advertising and publicity in France. The form was still very new, and this novelty seemed to inspire its creators to great heights of exaggeration, and Dufayel was no exception. I believe, however, that this does not disqualify it from being treated as a serious primary source for cultural history, as long as we understand the conventions of the form.

eight until seven weekdays, and eight until one in the afternoon on Sundays.<sup>30</sup>

Where Dufayel differed from the bourgeois stores was in the emphasis it placed on the role of consumer culture in making its paternalism possible. As we saw in the descriptions of the annual party, Dufayel portrayed itself as a benevolent consumer enterprise. Its generosity was possible because of its status as a consumer business, and consumer culture was particularly suited to improving both living and working conditions for the working class. Dufayel's unique way of advertising its paternalism can be illustrated with the example of life insurance for its staff. In addition to the store "savings" programs which allowed employees to set aside part of their earnings toward future purchases of store merchandise (which will be discussed below), Dufayel also claimed to offer free life insurance for newly married female employees.<sup>31</sup> It also sold the same kind of life insurance to the general working class public. In fact, this was one of the key non-material benefits that Dufayel promoted in his advertising and enabled him to make an explicit link between paternalism and consumer culture. Life insurance for the working class was almost non-existent at the time,<sup>32</sup> so Dufayel could legitimately claim that his life insurance, payable in monthly premiums,

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<sup>30</sup> *Administration et Grands Magasins Dufayel*, 8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>32</sup> Georges d'Avenel, *Le Mécanisme de la vie moderne*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. vol. 2 (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1902), 285.

was a valuable service unavailable elsewhere. For roughly half a franc per month, he would provide insurance against fire as well as the (apparently) omnipresent danger of explosions, “les explosions de gaz, de la vapeur, de l’électricité, de la dynamite et autres explosifs....”<sup>33</sup> This insurance “product,” moreover, was specifically targeted at the working class, as it did not require “certaines formalités toujours ennuyeuses,” that might deter potential customers, like a “visite médicale....”<sup>34</sup> In promoting products like this Dufayel clearly portrayed himself as a friend of the worker, implying, in effect, that his unique relationship with working class consumers rendered classic, charity-based philanthropy unnecessary, because it made services like life insurance affordable and accessible to them.

Dufayel *was* helping to bring more and more working-class people into the emerging consumer economy. But what did the French working class think of his portrayal of consumer culture as a replacement for classic paternalism? As usual, the people we would most like to hear from—the working-class shoppers from the Goutte d’Or and other poor *faubourgs*—are largely lost to us. The strongest written critiques of Dufayel are therefore to be found among the intelligentsia, both radical and conservative. One of most thorough of these is to be found in the

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<sup>33</sup> Legion of Honour dossier, document 16.

<sup>34</sup> *Administration et Grands Magasins Dufayel*, 22-24.

pages of the left-wing *Bataille syndicaliste*, wherein the journalist Francis Delaisi wrote a series of articles debunking the core Dufayel myths as so much advertising hokum. Delaisi's articles are valuable not only because they are some of the best-researched and detailed empirical counterstatements to the Dufayel advertising record, but they also give us insight into the way the upper class was reacting with unease to larger social changes, like commercialization and the increasing prominence of the working class in the national economy. Delaisi attacked not merely Dufayel's image, but also the consumer culture it represented.

The main themes of Delaisi's attack on Dufayel were summed up in his article "Dufayel contre le Petit Commerce."<sup>35</sup> Here Delaisi argued that, although Dufayel was very good at portraying himself as friend of the working man and ally of small business, his business practices produced the opposite results.

M. Dufayel se pose volontiers en protecteur du petit commerce. Par ses bons de crédit, il double la puissance d'achat de la classe ouvrière; il répartit ensuite cette clientèle sur plus d'un millier de magasins de toutes sortes dont il augmente le chiffre d'affaires.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Bataille syndicaliste*, December 11, 1911.

<sup>36</sup> Francis Delaisi, "Dufayel Contre le Petit Commerce," 2.

His “spectacular” main store combined with ubiquitous advertising and easy credit with low minimum payments to seduce the worker into a destructive world of consumption. As for being a supporter of small business, Delaisi argued that Dufayel’s collusion with Cognacq was an attempt to force out all competition and establish a monopoly in the credit-sale business. The Dufayel-Cognacq business arrangement, he argued, was never intended to provide greater choice or convenience for the consumer, but was really just a “hard-ball” (and successful) tactic to undercut other retailers. As Delaisi wrote, “tandis qu’il exige de tous les autres magasins une remise de 18,60%, il a conclut un traité spécial avec la Samaritaine et ne lui demande que 16,50%.” The result was that “...la Samaritaine peut [...] baisser ses prix de 2% et ruiner les petites maisons rivales.”<sup>37</sup> This is an argument, incidentally, that has not received enough attention from historians who too often explain the subsequent success of the Dufayel-Cognacq credit network as a result of industrialisation, rising consumer income, or other changes associated with modernity, while side-stepping the question of why, if consumer credit was in fact such a “natural” response to a rising consumer society, was Dufayel one of the very few suppliers of this service. As d’Avenel noted, selling on credit was a very expensive and complex form of business. Like d’Avenel, Delaisi was one of the few observers to suggest

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<sup>37</sup> Delaisi, “Petit Commerce,” 10-11.

that a credit-based consumer business like Dufayel's was, in spite of its impressive size, actually quite fragile, and could only succeed under "unnatural" market conditions where its size allowed it to squeeze out the competition for the steady stream of new customers required to maintain its growth.

Delaisi then took aim at specific practices at Dufayel. In "M. Dufayel et le Fisc.," he challenged Dufayel's claim to be a philanthropic "banker" to the working class by analysing the store "lay-away" policy, whereby employees could have a portion of their salary "saved" for them until they had accumulated enough to buy something from the store.<sup>38</sup> Delaisi pointed out that not only did the employees not receive interest on these "savings," but they would often forget about their money, or move away, or die before they had a chance to cash in. The remaining amounts were then appropriated by Dufayel. Delaisi argued that this was unjust and illegal, as these deposits should be considered "biens sans maître" and should become the property of the state.<sup>39</sup> In Delaisi's view, the whole practice was a large-scale fraud: "Les sommes ainsi encaissées montent à plusieurs millions. Elles ne rapportent aux clients aucun intérêt et Dufayel s'en

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<sup>38</sup> "M. Dufayel et le Fisc. Comment plusieurs millions de biens en déshérence qui devraient entrer dans les caisses de l'Etat restent dans celles de M. Dufayel," *Bataille syndicaliste*, December 7, 1911.

<sup>39</sup> As he wrote, "la loi est formelle: elle stipule que tous les 'biens sans maître' appartiennent à l'Etat. En particulier les sommes d'argent, les titres déposés dans les banques et qu'après la mort de leur propriétaire personne ne réclame, sont qualifiés 'biens en déshérence' et doivent être remis au trésor." "Dufayel et le Fisc."

sert pour couvrir ses avances, en sorte que, pour une bonne part, il prête à ses 'abonnés' leur propre argent...."<sup>40</sup>

Although Delaisi was writing about Dufayel in particular, his real target was not Dufayel as such but rather the practice of drawing the working class into the false world of consumer culture. Dufayel was not the only one guilty of this. Delaisi admitted, for example, that *all* of the big department stores that sold on credit misappropriated employee deposits: "En somme, des millions dorment aujourd'hui dans les caisses non seulement de M. Dufayel, mais de toutes les grandes maisons de vente par abonnement."<sup>41</sup> The common theme in his critique of Dufayel was that the working-class employees of the store—as with the working-class public—were being tricked by the novelty of consumer credit and consumer culture into thinking that these offered them greater prosperity and opportunities than ever before. Delaisi's goal was to show how all of the innovations of consumer culture had one ultimate purpose: the enrichment of capitalists like Dufayel. The possibility that the working class could intelligently accept or reject Dufayel's enticements, or that Dufayel's success derived from a kind of *business* relationship (however imperfect and lopsided) with a new species known as the working-class consumer, though never considered

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

explicitly in Delaisi's articles, hovered constantly in the background. In fact, it came very close to the surface in his article on the Dufayel collectors and salesmen known as the "receveurs."<sup>42</sup>

In "Dufayel et ses receveurs," Delaisi scrutinized the way Dufayel paid the several hundred collectors/sales agents who went out into the working class neighbourhoods of Paris each morning to collect debts as well as to sign up new customers. He described how the salesmen were allowed to keep a percentage of the purchases made by all the new clients they were able to sign up. Since the collectors would receive their percentage only if the new customer could make his payments, it was in their own interest to seek out the most credit-worthy new clients. The collectors, then, worked as credit evaluators as well as salesmen and debt collectors. Delaisi acknowledged that this was, for Dufayel at least, a clever and lucrative system. But what about the collectors? Were they being tricked into an illusion of entrepreneurial independence? Even Delaisi had to admit this kind of job was not exactly textbook old-school capitalist exploitation. The collectors, he noted, were well-known throughout Paris for their signature "D" hats and their sprightly bounce on stairs:

Ce sont ces agents en uniforme avec casquette marquée de la lettre D, que

l'on rencontre sans cesse parcourant les rues de la grande ville, montant

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<sup>42</sup> "Dufayel et ses Receveurs. Comment le grand philanthrope s'approprie les courtages de ses vieux receveurs," *Bataille syndicaliste*, December 19, 1911.



infatigablement les étages et qui rapportent chaque soir à la caisse du grand capitaliste les économies des petits ménages ouvriers.<sup>43</sup>

This admirable energy was due in part, Delaisi acknowledged, to a kind of entrepreneurial profit motive, however unfavourably it compared with the total amounts collected:

Ainsi s'explique le zèle admirable des receveurs de Dufayel. Chacun a l'impression de travailler pour lui-même. Aussi, dès le matin, il se met en chasse, interroge les concierges, grimpe allégrement les étages, guette toutes les occasions d'étendre ses relations, et ne rentre content de sa tournée que s'il a placé un nouveau livret d'abonnement.<sup>44</sup>

Delaisi estimated that after fifteen or twenty years of work a Dufayel collector could establish "une clientèle qui est son bien propre, qui fait 100 000 ou 150 000 francs d'achats en moyenne à la maison et rapporte au courtier 2000 à 3000 francs par an."<sup>45</sup> This salary was higher than the average factory worker, though lower than the salaries of department store clerks. In any case, Delaisi did not comment on it. The real injustice toward the collectors, he argued, was what happened to them at the end of their twenty years when they were too old for such physical

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<sup>43</sup> Delaisi, "Dufayel et ses receveurs."

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

work. They had to transfer their “clients” to Dufayel, and were given a desk job.<sup>46</sup> No doubt this was rather unfair, but it was hardly the shocking case of capitalist exploitation the readers of the *Bataille syndicaliste* might have been expecting.

In fact, Dufayel emerged from this series of attack articles without much damage to his reputation, as Delaisi’s articles did not quite live up to their combative titles. At worst, Dufayel came across as a typical capitalist and profiteer, no more likely to exploit labour than any other. But Delaisi actually provided enough evidence to suggest that workers at Dufayel were not really suffering. If we read him closely, most of Delaisi’s strongest critiques of Dufayel did not relate to concrete problems with working conditions which we would expect from a pro-union newspaper like the *Bataille Syndicaliste*, but were directed at the problems deriving from consumer credit and consumer culture. In “Dufayel et le Fisc.,” employees lost money not because of deliberate subterfuge on Dufayel’s part, but because of a new system of consumption (“par abonnement”) at the Grands Magasins which led to careless losses of savings. In “Dufayel et ses receveurs,” he did not accuse Dufayel of abusing the collector, but rather of falsely getting his hopes up by giving him “*l’impression de travailler*

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<sup>46</sup> Delaisi described exactly how Dufayel got out of his contracts with the collectors while retaining them as employees: “Il [Dufayel] exige d’abord que le vieux courtier donne formellement sa démission et déclare quitter la maison. Le patron acquiert ainsi le droit de s’approprier sa clientèle. Puis, au bout de vingt-quatre heures, l’ancienne employé adresse une demande d’emploi; on l’accepte dans les bureaux, mais c’est un nouveau contrat: Dufayel ne lui doit plus rien. C’est ainsi que ce grand philanthrope s’approprie la clientèle de ces vieux receveurs!” *Ibid.*

pour lui-même,” [my emphasis] only to destroy this illusion by appropriating his clients near the end of his working life. For Delaisi the real danger of the Grands Magasins Dufayel, as with consumer culture in general, was that it hid its exploitation behind superficially attractive innovations like new jobs, new purchasing schemes, employee benefits and incentives, all of which deceived the worker into thinking his material situation was better than it was. The nascent world of consumer culture was a sham that distracted those caught in its seductive trap from the class exploitation inherent in it. It has been pointed out that one of the effects of paternalism in late nineteenth-century Europe was that it made it harder for socialist critics to depict the industrialist as a classic exploiter of labour.<sup>47</sup> Dufayel, by explicitly linking his store’s paternalism with consumer capitalism, made Delaisi’s task that much more difficult.

Aside from Delaisi’s articles, the only other extended contemporary critique of Dufayel’s paternalistic record is from the pen of one A. Bodéchon, a one-time employee of the Grands Magasins Dufayel. Unlike Delaisi, however, Bodéchon did not attempt to persuade with evidence and analysis, but rather through the accumulation of insults and exclamation marks. A. Bodéchon worked at the Grands Magasins Dufayel for nine years (though he does not tell

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<sup>47</sup> For example, Gueslin: “Il est évident que le système paternaliste brouille l’interprétation que le mouvement ouvrier naissant faisait du capitaliste,” 208.

us in what position) until he was fired, as he wrote, “par M. Dufayel sous le fallacieux prétexte de suppression d’emploi, après neuf années de services sans punition d’aucune sorte.”<sup>48</sup> Bodéchon was also a labour activist, serving as “Secrétaire de la Section syndicale Dufayel (Intérieur)” and “Secrétaire Général du Syndicat des Courtiers, représentant de commerce et personnel des Maisons d’abonnements.”<sup>49</sup> M. Bodéchon’s bitterness about being fired for what he considered no good reason led him to write and publish (possibly with union funding) his rant against Dufayel and specific senior managers at the store. Although the article purported to criticize Dufayel for his “bad taste” and “false philanthropy,” it (unfortunately for historians) provided very little information about specific practices or conditions at the store that might support these claims, relying, instead, on generic anti-capitalist rhetoric (“J’accuse la collectivité financière et capitaliste d’exploitation éhontée,”<sup>50</sup>) and, at times, simple rage. A brief extract will give the flavor. Dufayel’s character was described as consisting of “une méchanceté sans nom, une brutalité stupide, une sottise dont rien n’approche, un orgueil et une vanité incommensurables....”<sup>51</sup> He accused Dufayel of being a purveyor of “mauvais goût” — a legitimate charge, and fertile

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<sup>48</sup> A. Bodéchon, *Dufayel tourmenteur des pauvres, parvenu du mauvais goût* (Paris: Imprimerie Spéciale, A. Bodéchon, n.d.), 1, Bibliothèque nationale de France, FOL-LN27-53516.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

ground for a critique of Dufayel's mass-produced goods like furniture, for example--but then, disappointingly, provided no insider's examples of this bad taste. At his most coherent, Bodéchon addressed his work directly to current Dufayel employees, advising them to always be on the watch for their jobs, "car il [Dufayel] n'a pour vous comme pour tout, que le plus profond mépris." He also argued that whatever benefits the employees enjoyed at the Grands Magasins Dufayel had nothing to do with the owner's so-called philanthropy, but was the result of pressure from organized labour: "C'est grâce à l'action syndicale et à votre nombre que vous avez obtenu tout ce que vous possédez encore."<sup>52</sup> When discussing specific working conditions, however, Bodéchon did not really muster any horror stories. In fact, he only touched briefly on the serious issue of the physical discomfort employees endured in department stores: "Vous m'avez donc payé mon travail, mais jamais vous n'avez tenu compte de mon temps ou de ma liberté, cependant j'ai pâli et vieilli [...] en vos locaux privés d'air et d'hygiène."<sup>53</sup> One would have hoped for at least one descriptive passage that would help us visualize this work environment. Nevertheless, in spite of its excess, Bodéchon's tract remains one of the few documents extant which can offer an insider's counter-perspective to Dufayel's many self-glorifying

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

promotional documents. Its closing sentences *almost* leave us with a succinct and persuasive anti-Dufayel argument, but then get carried away with indignant rhetoric:

Je vous accuse, vous, Dufayel, en particulier, de faire étalage d'une fausse philanthropie. Je vous ai prouvé que votre véritable état d'âme, se traduit, au contraire, par une suprême et cynique antipathie, qui consiste à semer autour de vous, de propos délibéré, douleurs et misère. Vous vous constituez gratuitement un spectacle avec toutes ces monstruosité. C'est le seul qui soit susceptible d'intéresser votre mentalité fielleuse, arrogante et abjecte. Je vous dis...au revoir!!!.....

One wishes that Bodéchon had had the self-restraint to carry his accusation of "fausse philanthropie" further, because this is where Dufayel is potentially most vulnerable. If the whole consumer enterprise, with its "bad taste" and stuffy working environments, was what Dufayel stood for, then Bodéchon's tract could have been a memorable anti-consumerist manifesto. It now reads primarily as sour grapes from a disgruntled employee, and does not contribute a great deal to our knowledge of working conditions at the Grands Magasins Dufayel or what Bodéchon's colleagues at the store thought of their boss's paternalism.

We do know, however, that Dufayel was not immune to labour unrest among his staff. In December 1905 there was a strike at the Grands Magasins

Dufayel, and some surviving documents from that period may provide some insight into working conditions there, as well as how the local working class viewed the store. The strike, initiated by the collectors, was held to protest against a recent round of firings which the collectors felt were the “capricious” and unjustified actions of two managers, who they demanded be terminated.<sup>54</sup> By late December it seemed like things were going the collectors’ way. A police report from December 21<sup>st</sup> predicted that Dufayel would have to give in to the strikers’ demands: “Il paraît que M. Dufayel ne pourra avoir raison de cette grève et qu’il sera, probablement, amené à céder s’il ne veut pas sacrifier ses intérêts.”<sup>55</sup> According to the report, the strike was popular among the local population. It was attracting big crowds and donations:

Les grévistes rencontrent parmi la population un accueil sympathique et les musiciens font de bonnes collectes. La grande salle de la Bourse était ce soir comble pour leur réunion et l’Internationale jouée par les musiciens a été acclamée par toute l’assistance qui l’a écoutée debout et chapeau bas.<sup>56</sup>

Although union (or socialist) support was not necessarily the same thing as anti-Dufayel sentiment, the police felt the strike was a symptom of real labor unrest

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<sup>54</sup> Lesselier, “Employées des grands magasins à Paris,” 125.

<sup>55</sup> Police Report, (Dec. 21, 1905), 1, Archives nationales, F/7/15952.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

with potential consequences for the whole of the Parisian mass retail industry.

They believed that other retailers, fearing that a Dufayel defeat might encourage labor agitation at other Paris stores, threw their support behind Dufayel:

Il paraîtrait que les maisons Damoy et Potin auraient fait des démarches auprès de Dufayel pour l'engager à la résistance, car une capitulation de sa part donnerait au mouvement qu'on essaye de faire dans l'épicerie une grande force, et le patronat dans cette partie se trouverait dans une très mauvaise posture.<sup>57</sup>

Though the strike was ultimately unsuccessful,<sup>58</sup> we do not know if this was because the strikers' cause was not as popular as the police believed, or because Dufayel and his cohorts defeated the strikers despite their popularity. On the whole, the 1905 strike left behind only an ambiguous record that does not help us much in trying to reconstruct the relationship between the working class and the owner.

However, we do have a good idea of what Dufayel thought of his employees who went on strike. In his will, made public in 1922, Dufayel left four company shares to each employee.<sup>59</sup> But, as a contemporary newspaper revealed,

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Lessellier, "Employées des grands magasins à Paris," 125.

<sup>59</sup> *Le Figaro*, November 27, 1922.



there were some employees who were excluded: “M. Dufayel, dans son testament, a prévu des legs pour tout son personnel; mais, par une clause spéciale, il a exclu de ses libéralités tous ses employés ayant fait grève.”<sup>60</sup> For Dufayel strikers were clearly considered ungrateful for his paternalistic generosity, but they were also a threat to the consumer society he envisioned. This society was based on a compact between industry and consumer in which organized labor had no place.<sup>61</sup>

### **“L’Immortel Dufayel”**

Writing in 1966, Henri Durand claimed that old-timers (*real* old timers-- “des centenaires”) still remembered Georges Dufayel as an important figure. For them he was “l’immortel Dufayel,”<sup>62</sup> inventor of popular credit, omnipresent publicity hound, and a household name. When Dufayel died in 1916, *Le Figaro* described how he had become a high-profile member of Parisian society:

Dufayel fut [...] quelqu’un dont la chronique s’occupe; quelqu’un qu’on regarde, qu’on jalouse, qu’on blague; quelqu’un que soutiennent beaucoup

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<sup>60</sup> *Journal des débats*, October 28, 1922.

<sup>61</sup> In this aspect Dufayel’s paternalism was consistent with French industrial paternalism in general which, as Gueslin notes, “exclut ou a les plus grosses difficultés à tolérer le syndicalisme ouvrier,” 202.

<sup>62</sup> Henri Durand, *L’Abondance à crédit* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 40.

d'amis chauds, et que dénigrent beaucoup de mécontents; quelqu'un qu'on se montre aux premières ou dans les restaurants [...].<sup>63</sup>

Another obituary notice described him as “une des physionomies les plus marquantes du grand commerce parisien.”<sup>64</sup> By 2010, however, he has been, if not forgotten, then definitely knocked down to the status of an aside in most histories of consumption. In a sense this is proof of the success of his consumer-oriented paternalism. By helping to create the working-class consumer Dufayel had a wider social influence than any other department store owner of the late nineteenth century, but he also helped to create the conditions that would virtually erase his own personal and historical legacy.

Even as early as 1913 his role as France's sole provider of working-class consumer goods and services in was being challenged. In 1913 the Associated Press announced a “gros événements dans le monde de la *vente à crédit*.”<sup>65</sup> Two high-level employees, the article claimed, had left the Grands Magasins Dufayel to set up their own store:

Nous croyons savoir que deux importants chefs de service de  
*l'Administration Dufayel*, démissionnaires depuis peu, s'occuperaient de

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<sup>63</sup> *Le Figaro*, December 29, 1916.

<sup>64</sup> *Journal des débats*, December 12, 1916.

<sup>65</sup> AP clipping (October 10, 1913), Archives nationales, F/7/15952.

constituer une Société anonyme, au capital de début de 5 millions de francs, dont l'objet social serait le même que celui de la *Maison Dufayel*.

In itself this was bad news for Dufayel, but it got much worse: "Non contents de concurrencer leur ancien patron, les promoteurs de la nouvelle Société lui enlèveraient, dit-on, une grande partie de son personnel de courtiers et d'encaisseurs."<sup>66</sup> Dufayel was facing a serious competitor who sought to skim off his clientele and poach his employees. No doubt he would have been disappointed, too, to find out who was one of the main investors behind this project. As the article tells us: "Parmi les gros actionnaires de cette combinaison financière, on cite Mme du Gast, la sportswoman bien connue." Camille du Gast was not only a "well-known sportswoman" but also the widow of Jules Crépin and the one who had, twenty years earlier, supported Dufayel as successor to her husband.

Everything in the Associated Press article came to pass. La Semeuse was founded in 1913, and quickly became a strong competitor to Dufayel in the credit sales market.<sup>67</sup> Dufayel still might have been able to struggle through this adversity, if not for one further disaster. This came courtesy of his old associate Ernest Cognacq. The AP clipping explained:

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Rosa-Maria Gelpi and François Julien-Labruyère, *Histoire du crédit à la consommation: doctrines et pratiques* (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1994), 184.

Nous apprenons, d'autre part, que les *Grands Magasins de la Samaritaine*, dont le propriétaire est M. Cognacq[...]auraient dénoncé le traité qui les lie à l'*Administration Dufayel*. Ce serait là, pour cette dernière, un coup des plus graves, puisqu'il s'agit de quelques 40 millions d'affaires; d'autant plus grave qu'il coïnciderait avec l'apparition d'une redoutable concurrence.

Ernest Cognacq was taking his forty million francs worth of business elsewhere, and it did not take much effort for our trusty AP writer to guess where: "Il est d'ailleurs difficile de ne pas établir une corrélation entre ces deux événements et de ne pas supposer que M. Cognacq fournit au nouveau groupement un appui effectif."<sup>68</sup> This was in fact what happened. Cognacq, perhaps miffed because Dufayel had recently opened his own clothing division which competed directly with the Samaritaine, severed his ties with Dufayel and made an alliance with La Semeuse. This partnership was as successful as the Dufayel-Cognacq duopoly had been, and La Semeuse replaced the Grands Magasins Dufayel as the pre-eminent credit sales store in Paris.

The arrival of La Semeuse signalled the end of Georges Dufayel's personal influence in the retail industry. The Dufayel name, and Georges Dufayel's public image as a friend of the worker, had played an important role in introducing

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<sup>68</sup> AP clipping.

thousands of the French working class to the new world of consumer culture. But it had worked too well. The success of the La Semeuse showed that the working class had learned how to consume by 1913, and that they no longer needed the guidance of the great *patron*. Once Dufayel's project of reshaping the French worker into a consumer had gained enough momentum, his personal influence faded away, leading to the near-disappearance of his name from social history.

Even at his own store he was a transitional figure who would disappear in the rising current of consumer culture he had helped to create. Though the Dufayel department store survived for almost ten years after his death on December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1916, it did so as the Palais de la Nouveauté, having dropped the founder's name to style itself after, and hopefully compete with, the bourgeois stores of central Paris. It did not last long in this new role. Directionless and on the verge of bankruptcy the Palais de la Nouveauté was bought by the Bon Marché in December 1924. A police report from 1925 described the pathetic end of the once-vital business:

Depuis longtemps déjà on savait que le 'Palais de la Nouveauté' (ancienne maison DUFAYEL) se trouvait dans une situation des plus précaires. Sa mauvaise direction, d'une part, et d'autre part, un capital-réserve insignifiant, ne permettaient pas à cette maison d'envisager un avenir bien lointain. A la veille d'une faillite certaine, les dirigeants se sont donc

adressés au 'Bon Marché' dans le but d'être renfloués. C'est aujourd'hui chose faite.<sup>69</sup>

For 9 300 000 francs the Bon Marché absorbed the Palais de la Nouveauté into the mainstream of Parisian consumer culture, and Dufayel's paternalistic relationship with the working-class consumer came to an end.

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Dufayel was a key figure in helping to initiate the transformation of France from an agrarian-artisan to an industrial-consumer society. He combined paternalism with consumer advertising to help attract the working class to his store, both as employees and as customers. Where owners of bourgeois department stores, like Boucicaut of the Bon Marché, had used paternalism in a very limited way to promote "bourgeois" values, encourage employee loyalty, and create a "family" environment out of a retail business, Dufayel was more innovative, and turned this model upside down. He used the old-fashioned image of the boss as caring "paternal" figure to help ease the working class into a new consumer economy which was characterised by anonymous consumption and had nothing to do with family. Dufayel's unconventional use of paternalism, therefore, presents a challenge to the dominant historiography of nineteenth-

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<sup>69</sup> Police Report titled "Un événement commercial inattendu," (January 10, 1925), Archives nationales, F/7/15952.

century European paternalism. It is not surprising, however, that his influence has largely been forgotten. Paternalism, as Gueslin notes, “suppose enfin la présence physique du patron qui noue des relations interpersonnelles avec ses ouvriers et qui reste le centre de l’entreprise.”<sup>70</sup> Without the physical presence of the *patron*, the Grands Magasins Dufayel did not offer anything to the French working-class consumer that he could not seek elsewhere. But the fact that there was such a creature as a working class consumer in turn-of-the-century France owed a great deal to Dufayel’s paternalistic advertisements for the consumer society still to come.

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<sup>70</sup> “Le paternalisme revisité,” 202.

## CHAPTER 4

### **The bourgeois Parisian department store re-evaluated: consumer culture and the erosion of French prestige**

An argument running through the preceding chapters is that there was an important relationship between the working-class and the advent of consumer culture in late nineteenth-century France. This relationship has not received enough attention from historians who have been more interested in the more visible manifestations of bourgeois consumer culture on the boulevards of central Paris. But if one accepts the argument that mass-produced consumer culture had a fundamental affinity with the working masses, it leads to significant reinterpretations of phenomena we thought we knew well, like, for example, the Parisian bourgeois department store.

As we have seen, in the now-classic historiography of the French department store it has been depicted as the quintessential bourgeois institution. In Michael B. Miller's standard work the *Bon Marché* appears the symbol of the bourgeoisie's social triumph, the material expression of its rising wealth, prestige and confidence during the Second Empire and Third Republic.<sup>1</sup> This view is replicates the department store's own advertising quite closely. In other words, it is very much the way department stores *wanted* to be perceived.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Barry Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).



One of the brilliant successes of the *grands magasins* was in the way they crafted an image of themselves as the inheritors of French elegance and good taste. This was no accident but was the result of advertising campaigns that had been in progress since the Second Empire.<sup>2</sup> In their advertising they discreetly fused the modernity of their architecture with the pseudo-aristocratic opulence of their interiors. The complexity and contradictions in this advertising has been passed over too quickly by historians of nineteenth-century consumer culture in France who have largely portrayed the department store as a symbol of bourgeois power and confidence. However, it is possible to see the department store's attempt to combine consumer culture with traditional French prestige not as an expression of bourgeois confidence, but rather as a sign of crisis. The department store, like much of the consumer advertising aimed at the bourgeoisie, was in part a kind of compensation for the loss of prestige that accompanied mass-produced goods. The department store's opulence was, as Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain argue, a necessity of marketing, as it imbued the mass-produced goods for sale therein with an aura of "luxury,

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<sup>2</sup> Parisian department stores were pioneers in exploiting modern advertising techniques, creating in-house publicity departments long before most other French businesses. See Aaron Jeffrey Segal, "The Republic of Goods: Advertising and National Identity in France, 1875-1918," (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1995), 54.

indulgence and good taste” which would appeal to the bourgeois customer.<sup>3</sup> This marketing or “context” for the goods on sale was a necessity because those goods, literally, were not what they used to be. The department store peaked at the moment when the bourgeoisie became aware that the commercial and technological changes that had allowed them to gain material wealth--mechanized production, rail transport, customer mobility and merchant competition--would also make that wealth available to the wider French population. The department store’s role in diluting the sartorial symbols of wealth was noted by one observer in 1897 when, in arguing for the social benefits brought about by the department store, he noted that they contributed to social equalization: “Toujours à l’affût des progrès à réaliser, le grand magasin propage le goût de l’élégance. Les soldes vendus à bas prix à la fin de chaque saison permettent aux pauvres de s’habiller presque luxueusement sans grandes dépenses. Ainsi s’établit une sorte d’uniformité ou d’égalité démocratique dans la costume.”<sup>4</sup> The department store may have been disseminating bourgeois elegance to a wider public, but in doing so it was also undermining the bourgeoisie’s material basis of prestige.

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, “The World of the Department Store: Distribution, Culture and Social Change,” in *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1850-1939*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1999), 27.

<sup>4</sup> J.-B.-Maurice Vignes, *La Science sociale. D’après les principes de Le Play et de ses continuateurs* T. 2 (Paris: V. Girard & E. Brière, 1897), 348.

The story begins with clothing. For most of French history the possession of fine clothing and exclusive objects like jewelry had distinguished the upper classes from the peasants and laborers. Domestic and personal objects such as clothing, jewelry and home furnishings expressed a continuity of social prestige that went back past the French Revolution to the days evoked by Georges Duby, when the nobleman's fine dress and material wealth simultaneously demonstrated and confirmed his status a "great man." Social power was reflected in material display and was primarily expressed through dress as the noble, surrounded by "des esclaves de leur maison, de leurs concubines, couverts de bracelets, de dorures, d'accoutrements multicolores qui montrent à tous leur richesse," dominated the peasantry they scarcely resembled.<sup>5</sup> Dress retained its power as an indicator of social prestige at least until the last third of the nineteenth century and the encroachment of modern technology, as shown by the extreme care taken by the bourgeoisie when being photographed to be captured only in their finest outfits.<sup>6</sup>

The proliferation of mass-produced consumer goods in the late nineteenth century, however, began to change this. Mass-production, as Gary Cross has

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<sup>5</sup> Georges Duby and Robert Mandrou, *Histoire de la civilisation française*, vol.1 (Paris: Armand Colin, 1968), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Manuel Charpy, "La bourgeoisie en portrait: Albums familiaux de photographies des années 1860-1914," *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle* 34 (2007): 156-7.

noted, “undermined the status of the wealthy and even threatened to diminish the value of their goods by crowding the ‘court’ of consumption.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, mass production compelled French society to redefine the material basis of prestige. As industrial technology, along with related innovations in promotion and distribution like consumer credit and the department store, made consumer objects increasingly accessible to the *grand public*, the objects became less exclusive, and less powerful as indicators of social distinction. Again, this can best be illustrated through the example of clothing. The French urban worker had always been *soucieux* of his clothing, but in the late nineteenth century factory production and the efficiencies of the department store made new clothing more and more affordable. Workers could assemble a truly impressive Sunday wardrobe; so fancy, in fact, that on Sundays it was becoming difficult to distinguish the worker from the bourgeois. In the mid-Third Republic one carpenter and his wife were described as “semblables à ceux de la petite bourgeoisie,” sporting Sunday clothing that included,

pour lui, un pardessus, un paletot, et un pantalon de drap, un gilet, un chapeau de feutre, une cravate en soie, une cravate en coton, deux

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<sup>7</sup> Gary S. Cross, “Time, money and labor history: encounters with consumer culture,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 43 (1993): 6-7.

chemises de toile, une paire de bottines, une montre en argent; pour elle, robe, manteau, chapeau, bottines, bague en or.<sup>8</sup>

Bourgeois observers mocked this working-class penchant for dressing to the nines on Sundays. In Zola, for example, the term “endimanché” came to mean something like “workers humorously overdressed in a vain attempt to rise above their true social status.”<sup>9</sup> But there was anxiety behind the mockery, for the ancient signs were losing their meaning. It was not that consumer culture was in any way dissolving class differences in France: the bourgeoisie knew that a worker dressed in his Sunday best was still a worker. It was only that one could no longer rely on traditional methods to spot him. Consumer culture created a crisis, not of class relations, but of representation. Purchased objects, like post-graduate degrees today, were becoming more common and therefore less prestigious, less valuable in and of themselves.

This is where advertising came in to help. We have seen earlier how advertising played an essential role in encouraging the French working class to participate in the consumer economy. With respect to the middle class, however,

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<sup>8</sup> Michelle Perrot, *Les Ouvriers en grève: France 1871-1890*, vol. 1 (Paris: Mouton, 1974), 226-7. On working class clothing, see also Helen Harden Chenut, *The Fabric of Gender: Working-Class Culture in Third Republic France* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> For example, in a scene where working-class guests arrive for a dinner party, the normally prolix Zola relies on the term to tell us all we need to know about the characters: “Vers cinq heures, les invités commencèrent à arriver. Ce furent d’abord les deux ouvrières, Clémence et Mme Putois, toutes deux endimanchées, la première en bleu, la seconde en noire [...]” *L’Assommoir*. [1877] (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1971), 229.

its purpose was more complex. Nineteenth century advertising, in addition to its obvious role of selling merchandise, had to reconcile the French bourgeoisie with the benefits and losses of consumer culture. One way in which advertisers tried to do this was by compensating for the object's loss of inherent value by imparting contextual and "superficial" value to it. Manufacturers and advertisers understood very well the bourgeoisie's ambivalence towards consumer culture. As Manuel Sharpy observes, the bourgeoisie "cherche de la singularité et de l'authenticité face à un monde industriel."<sup>10</sup> This search for authenticity manifested itself in an obsession with antiques: "La bourgeoisie, tout au long de la seconde partie du siècle, prend soin d'habiller ainsi les objets de la modernité des signes du passé."<sup>11</sup> There were several layers of irony in this preference. The Parisian bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century, which owed much of its prominence to the emerging industry and commerce of the rail age, and which flocked to the *grands magasins* that embodied the new era of advertising and mass-consumption (cheerfully abandoning the old boutiques in the process), nonetheless continued to profess an attachment to traditional French craftsmanship and expensive hand-made goods.

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<sup>10</sup> Manuel Charpy, "L'ordre des choses. Sur quelques traits de la culture matérielle bourgeoise parisienne, 1830-1914," *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle* 34 (2007): 113.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

In response to this demand for the “authentic” there developed a flourishing trade in the regions around Paris dedicated to altering mass-produced goods to get rid of their “mass-producedness.” Artificial “ageing” factories sprung up to cater to this desire for pre-industrial appearances, essentially mass-producing the anti-mass production process. As Charpy observes at Parisian workshops new, factory-made objects “sont traités afin d’imiter les traces du temps. Toute l’industrie du faubourg Saint-Antoine se consacre à récréer l’aspect des métaux et des bois anciens.”<sup>12</sup> Special chemical processes were developed to give these objects an instant antique patina, essentially wearing away the shine of the factory, the stamp of mass-production. Like the high-end phonographs that were encased in heavy mahogany boxes,<sup>13</sup> or the department store elevators covered with a thick layer of velour,<sup>14</sup> the technology of mass production aimed at the bourgeois consumer was discreetly hidden behind a veneer of tradition and luxury.

This artificially “old” surface on mass-produced objects helped the French bourgeoisie deceive itself about the origins of its consumer goods, but it was not

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Phonograph ad from the *Petit Journal Illustré*, late 1899, reproduced in *Histoire de France à travers les journaux du temps passé*, Vol. 2, *La Belle-Epoque, 1898-1914* (Paris: L’Arbre Verdoyant, 1982), 73.

<sup>14</sup> As Zola writes how the owner of the Au Bonheur des dames department store: “Voulant éviter la fatigue des étages aux dames délicates, [...] avait fait installer deux ascenseurs capitonnés de velours.” *Au Bonheur des dames*, 249.

enough on its own. Context, otherwise known as advertising, was also necessary. In addition to the small army of artisans scratching and etching the furniture in Saint-Antoine, there was also a team of “real peasants” on the outskirts of the city who would then sell these goods as “genuine antiques” at further inflated prices.<sup>15</sup> The rural, pre-industrial, context made the object more valuable still by imparting a plausible narrative for its origin. The practice was becoming so common in the late nineteenth century that guidebooks warned against the scam.<sup>16</sup> The trip into the country, the negotiation with the peasant-merchant, all this was a form of play--the re-creation of some of the cumbersomeness of shopping before the railway and the department store. Was the bourgeoisie flirtation with the illusion of scarcity an attempt to restore some of the meaning that mass-production had drained from their actual or potential possessions? In any case even though these were early days in the French consumer society we can already see to what extent the various forms of advertising, the ageing factories, the country shop, the faux-peasant, were dedicated as much to concealing the reality of the industrial consumer economy as to the practice of selling its products.

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<sup>15</sup> Charpy, “L’ordre des choses,” 112-3.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Paul Eudel, *Le truquage: les contrefaçons dévoilées* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1884), quoted in “L’ordre des choses,” 113.



The same dual function of promotion and (self) deception characterized the bourgeois advertising of Paris. As we know, the bourgeois areas of late nineteenth-century Paris were saturated with commercial advertising.<sup>17</sup> Around the turn of the century, as Parisians increasingly became irritated by the proliferation of overt ads,<sup>18</sup> new techniques of more subtle advertising emerged. Advertising agencies tried to produce ads that did not feel like ads.<sup>19</sup> This was not a philosophical decision but a practical move. Although the ultimate goal of the advertiser was to sell the product in question, their immediate goal was to hold the attention of the potential consumer, however briefly. The *Grande Encyclopédie* gives us a wonderful snapshot of French advertising strategy in the late nineteenth century. The first principle was that, in order to grab one's attention, the ad must not be dull: "Il faut, tout d'abord, [...] pour cela qu'il sorte de la banalité, qu'il se présente sous une forme et dans une forme qui plaisent, qui intéressent." Standard, mass-printed advertising material like the "prospectus" was considered junk which people instantly threw away. One way around this was to make the ad look like a hand-written letter, hence "certains

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<sup>17</sup> On the proliferation of various forms of advertising in Paris, see Ruth Iskin, "Savages into Spectators/Consumers: Globalization in Advertising Posters. 1890s-1900s," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*. 29 (June/September, 2007): 128; Hazel Hahn, "Boulevard Culture and Advertising as Spectacle in Nineteenth-Century Paris," in *The City and the Senses: European Culture Since 1500*, ed. Alexander Cowan and Jill Stewart (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 162.

<sup>18</sup> After 1900 advertising became subjected to greater regulation. As Hahn writes, "public pressure led to the reduction and even suppression of various forms of street advertising, including the complete banning of handbill distribution." *Ibid.*, 174.

commerçants ont essayé de dissimuler leur [the prospectus, or direct-mail advert] véritable caractère en imitant le mieux possible la lettre particulière.”<sup>20</sup> The practice of disguising ads in ostensibly non-commercial forms was developed into something of an art in late nineteenth-century France. In addition to the various forms of “unique” invitations, personal letters and post-cards printed to prevent being thrown away as junk mail,<sup>21</sup> the press was full of cases of paid ads masquerading as impartial articles.<sup>22</sup>

The ad companies understood that although the bourgeoisie wanted the benefits of modern consumer culture, they were best approached obliquely, through the language of an earlier age. It is not surprising that advertisers understood the bourgeoisie so well because the large firms mainly employed bourgeois writers for their ads. According to *La Grande Encyclopédie L’Affichage national*, Dufayel’s publicity division, employed “un personnel considérable, mais fort maigrement rétribué, d’écrivains et de facteurs distributeurs.”<sup>23</sup> These

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<sup>20</sup> *La Grande Encyclopédie*, vol. 27 (Paris: Société Anonyme de la Grande Encyclopédie, 1885-1902), s.v. “la publicité.”

<sup>21</sup> Haejong Hazel Hahn, “Street Picturesque: Advertising in Paris, 1830-1914,” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1997), 3; Segal, 107-8.

<sup>22</sup> Though this practice was criticized at the time by being an abuse of a free press, the articles themselves were so lacking in subtlety that they were easy to spot. One “advertorial” from 1902 was ostensibly a “petite chronique” of a visit to the Grands Magasins Dufayel, but the text was nearly identical to paid ads appearing in the press elsewhere. If this were not enough to betray its true nature, the article was signed by the preposterous Ali Vial de Sabligny. *L’Echo des jeunes. Journal littéraire*, January 1, 1902, 3.

<sup>23</sup> *La Grande Encyclopédie* s.v. “la publicité.”

writers, though poorly paid, were mostly middle class, literate and often highly educated. An article in *La Réforme sociale* claimed that applicants for jobs writing ad “copy” for the big firms like Dufayel frequently included “des gens ayant reçu une éducation classique, des journalistes, des hommes de lettres, des professeurs et même des médecins et des avocats.”<sup>24</sup> The fact that many ad writers were not just bourgeois but cultured non-commercial bourgeois is important, because they could anticipate resistance to consumer culture and, of course, figure out how to get around it.

I believe that a great deal of the creative energy in French advertising in the late nineteenth century derived from the necessity of reconciling the bourgeoisie with the changes inherent in the consumer economy. One important way of doing this was to create new social and symbolic hierarchies in which the bourgeois consumer could situate herself. As Kolleen Guy has noted in her study of Belle Époque champagne advertisements, the promoters of the sparkling wine appealed to the bourgeois customers by offering an escape from the industrial society: through bottle labels and print ads they created a “brand” that conjured images of timeless prestige that belied the modern techniques of champagne production.<sup>25</sup> Champagne *négociants* bought noble titles to place on their bottles

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<sup>24</sup> *La Réforme sociale*, January 1, 1900, 199. On the social background of people who worked in turn-of-the-century French advertising, see Segal, 63-76.

<sup>25</sup> Kolleen M. Guy, “‘Oiling the Wheels of Social Life’: Myths and Marketing in champagne during the Belle Époque,” *French Historical Studies* 22 (1999): 229.

beside the firm's name, "giving it an air of distinction and evoking a connection with a pre-industrial tradition that could be more comforting than the dizzying reality of the industrial world."<sup>26</sup> Like the artificially old furniture from the faubourg Saint-Antoine the nostalgia evoked by champagne brands was itself a modern consumer product, carefully designed to allow the bourgeois consumer to imagine herself in a tradition of aristocratic elegance. Guy's closing comments are relevant to most advertising aimed at the bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century:

In the changing world of the late nineteenth century, brand names and material goods denoting social status became particularly important for creating group identity. Commodities such as champagne could be employed in new rituals and traditions of membership in place of increasingly obsolete or irrelevant routines, customs, and structures. The 'old'--whether noble titles or aristocratic standards of consumption--could be refashioned and reinvented both to create something 'modern' and to offer a reassuring sense of continuity with a mythic past.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

As consumer culture threatened to erode the old structures of prestige, advertising leapt in to supply new structures and new symbols, thereby providing the cure to its own disease.

In many ways advertising at the bourgeois department store was characterized by the same complexity, inventiveness and contradictions. The advertising produced both inside it through its architecture, design and display, and its external publicity such as posters and catalogues, often worked to conceal its fundamental nature as a commercial institution designed to sell high volumes of relatively low-priced, mass-produced goods. A deep ambivalence regarding prestige and material wealth permeated its advertising. It proposed to offer elegance and luxury, but at the lowest prices. Its advertising flattered its clients by suggesting they were members of an elite, but it held “side-walk sales” in order to sell its discounted goods to the widest possible public. Like the champagne merchants, stores often tried to situate their business in a kind of vague, timeless aristocratic tradition of luxury and grace. A technique used by stores like Au Printemps was to print small catalogues advertising a sale in the form of personal invitations to a banquet or soirée. In keeping with the strategy of concealing the true nature of consumer ads, these “invitations” were artfully designed, printed on fine paper, and used old-regime phrases that would have made Talleyrand proud: “Madame, la fête des fleurs, qui est de tradition au

'Printemps' aura lieu le lundi 16 mars. Nous serions particulièrement flattés si vous vouliez l'honorer de votre présence."<sup>28</sup> But the advertisements could not rely too heavily on aristocratic imagery, because these did not leave room for a mention of prices.

Aristocrats did not have to comparison shop, and it was best not to remind the bourgeois too bluntly of this fact.<sup>29</sup> The stores, therefore, crafted remarkable narratives that positioned themselves as being able to provide both traditional French prestige and modern savings. We can see this in the way an ad for the Galeries Lafayette began with a celebration of aristocratic elegance and artistic timelessness, but then quickly reminded the potential customer of the low prices of its goods: "Nos créations, toutes de formes et de compositions nouvelles, réunies à profusion, constitueront autant d'occasions d'une élégance aussi pratique que captivante à des prix tout à fait exceptionnels."<sup>30</sup> Elegance and practicality, therefore, were inseparable in the large-scale consumer world of the department store. But just in case the bourgeois consumer might ponder this

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<sup>28</sup> Au Printemps miniature catalogue advertising the Fête des Fleurs, n.d. Archives de Paris, D 17z (1). Here again the veneer of Old Regime elegance concealed strikingly modern advertising techniques. Advertising firms maintained "direct mail" lists of hundreds of thousands of Parisian names and addresses, then crafted and mailed such invitations on behalf of their clients, of whom Printemps was one of the earliest. See Segal, 104-7.

<sup>29</sup> In fact advertising for luxury brands like Hermès was comparatively simple, providing only images and brief descriptions of the products offered, with no mention of prices. See Jean-Pierre Blay, "La maison Hermès, du dernier siècle du cheval à l'ère de l'automobile. Une histoire sociale de la consommation urbaine à l'époque contemporaine," *Histoire urbaine* 12(2005): 79-80.

<sup>30</sup> Galeries Lafayette advertising brochure, 16 April, 1909, Archives de Paris, D 17z (1).

sentence and question the quality of department store goods, the ad moved quickly away from a discussion of the merchandise to a celebration of the department store's size and grandeur as a whole: "Présentée dans le cadre de plus en plus vaste de nos magasins, cette grande mise en vente marquera une nouvelle et brillante étape dans le succès toujours grandissant des Galeries Lafayette." This ad reproduced, in condensed form, the crisis of prestige at the bourgeois department store: faced with goods which, compared with the pre-industrial period, had lost much of their symbolic value, the consumer had to be compensated with a grand context for the acquisition of those goods. The act of buying, and the context in which this act took place, therefore gained importance as the fact of owning became less important. The rise of the phenomenon of shopping as a form of leisure is partly explained by this: the department store distracted the bourgeois from the diminished meaning of the objects he owned and the clothes he wore. Shopping filled the void left when owning became less meaningful.

When it came to department store advertising quality was always a tricky subject. The bourgeois stores boasted that their products were very good, but shied away from declaring them "excellent," for excellence was not the safest ground for the department store. The pursuit of excellence could lure the bourgeois customer to a small boutique where price was less important than the

quality of the goods. Even worse, she might even stop shopping for a few months to save for one big luxury item. Better, then, to avoid the term altogether and craft a narrative better suited to the department store's forte. This often led to some rather awkward but, from a historical perspective, very interesting, ads. Take for example the following poster for a sale at the Galeries Lafayette. The store claimed that thanks to "l'activité incessante de nos ateliers où l'étude vers la perfection est poussée au plus haut degré, les articles mis en vente seront de meilleure qualité et à meilleur marché que partout ailleurs."<sup>31</sup> This requires a close reading. The store claimed that due to the industry and perfectionism of its workshops it was able to sell products that were both better quality and cheaper than anywhere else. But note the wonderfully vague phrase "l'étude vers la perfection." The second clause of the sentence unintentionally revealed the department store's definition of perfection: selling products that were better than those available for the same price elsewhere. The challenge for the department store advertisers was to come up with tactful ways of saying "our products are good enough considering what we charge" without damaging the bourgeois self-image.

The advertising culture of the department store, like bourgeois advertising in general, expressed the fragility of traditional standards of prestige in the new

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<sup>31</sup> Advertising brochure for a sale at Galeries Lafayette on 19 January (c. 1909), Archives de Paris D17z (3).



consumer society. While it promoted elitism, exclusivity, tradition and luxury its commercial machinery was helping to break down those same traditions of prestige and exclusivity. Likewise the interior of the department store was a highly unstable social space characterized by this tension between pre-industrial elitism and the as yet undefined structures of the consumer society.<sup>32</sup> The duality of the department store was literally expressed in concrete form at the Samaritaine when its owner built an additional store, the “Samaritaine de luxe,” with a separate entrance intended to isolate the more elite customers (or those who saw themselves as such) from the mass of consumers at the main store.<sup>33</sup> But this was an exception. For the most part the luxurious surroundings of the bourgeois department store were theoretically open to all. This luxury, therefore, was an essential illusion, because it concealed the fact that the department store, was far more egalitarian than the boutiques it had largely replaced.

The complexity and contradictions of the bourgeois department store have largely been passed over too quickly by historians of nineteenth century French consumer culture. Much of our understanding of the nineteenth-century Parisian department store as the quintessential bourgeois institution derives from two sources: Michael Miller’s now classic study of the Bon Marché, and Zola’s novel

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<sup>32</sup> For discussions of consumer culture eroding social barriers, see Conlin, 200 and Victoria De Grazia, “Beyond Time and Money.” *International Labour and Working-Class History* 43 (1993): 28.

<sup>33</sup> Conlin, 195.

based on the Bon Marché, *Au Bonheur des dames*. I will argue, however, that these two works, for different reasons, do not grasp the full significance of the department store, characterizing it as a typically bourgeois institution when in fact it was a consumer institution with many anti-bourgeois, or at the very least non-bourgeois, characteristics. A return to contemporary sources will show how the department store was understood to be not the instrument of a social class, but a radical extension of the consumer society that was altering the material bases of prestige in French society. In short I propose that we must disentangle the economic reality of the department store from its own promotional narrative.

Michael Miller's exhaustive work on the Bon Marché remains to date the only monograph dedicated to a single French department store. Virtually a biography of the store and its owner, Aristide Boucicaut, the strength of Miller's work is his extensive use of the store's archives. Granted unprecedented access to the store's financial records, advertising and correspondence, Miller was able to tell the story of how the Bon Marché became a central institution in bourgeois culture. The problem with Miller's account is that, being based so heavily on the store's own documents, it places too much emphasis on the Bon Marché's narrative about itself. The Bon Marché portrayed itself as the quintessential bourgeois institution, and Miller largely replicates this narrative. Miller claims that the Bon Marché (and by implication the Parisian department stores that

imitated it) was a tool of the French bourgeoisie through which their values were spread to a wider public. Like the school system under the Third Republic, the Bon Marché “became a bourgeois instrument of social homogenization, a means for disseminating the values and life style of the Parisian upper middle-class to French middle-class society as a whole.”<sup>34</sup> In this characterization the department store is seen as a kind civilizing force, expanding the values and style of the bourgeoisie to a wider public and thereby raising the general standard of dress and manners. No doubt the Bon Marché advertisers would have been pleased with this image.

At times Miller suggests that the department store had influence beyond the propagation of bourgeois style and values. In the following passage he notes how it contributed to the spread of consumer culture:

The department store alone did not lead to the appearance of a consumer society, but it did stand at the centre of this phenomenon. As an economic mechanism it made that society possible, and as an institution with a large provincial trade it made the culture of consumption a national one.

With his next sentence, however, he stops short of pursuing these observations to their conclusion, and we come up against the limits of his store biography approach to consumer culture: “Above all, as a business enterprise predicated

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<sup>34</sup> Miller, 183.

upon mass retailing, it played an active role in cultivating consumption as a way of life *among the French bourgeoisie* [my emph.].”<sup>35</sup> The Bon Marché may have targeted the bourgeoisie and built its image as a bourgeois institution, but a business “predicated on mass retailing” was not a bourgeois but a consumer institution. Whatever limits the Bon Marché set on its customer base were artificial and contrary to the high-volume low-price strategy that made it, and department stores in general, successful. Though Miller’s work is indispensable in understanding the relationship between the Bon Marché and its bourgeois public, it needs to be supplemented with analyses of the department store from contemporary observers in the late nineteenth century who, as we will see shortly, saw through its advertising. But first we must deal with Zola.

Zola’s depiction of the department store, though fictional, has been no less influential on historians. His story of the fictional Parisian department store, *Au Bonheur des dames*, sketches the interactions between Gustave Mouret, owner and ambitious retail genius, his working-class shop girls, and the small boutiques being eclipsed by the new reality of mass consumer culture. Though based on Zola’s typically exhaustive research, (his notes on the store interior are valuable historical documents in themselves) he is primarily interested in exploring the effect of the store’s vast displays of consumer goods on bourgeois customers.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-6.

Published in 1883, these were still early days in the department store's development, and much of the excitement (I use the term loosely) of *Au Bonheur des dames* derives from its evocation of the effect of a phenomenon--sophisticated display of large quantities of mass-produced goods--that was unprecedented. As Jonathan Conlin has argued, the huge inventories and overflowing counters of the *grands magasins* were not merely economic necessities, but were exploited as attractions in their own right, as "they seemed to turn the very machinery of supplying [consumer] demand into a spectacle."<sup>36</sup> Zola was interested in how Mouret used these new techniques to whip up and profit from the materialistic desires of those who were, at the time, the store's main customers: bourgeois women. Zola's department store, "cette chapelle élevée au culte des grâces de la femme,"<sup>37</sup> was still mainly selling fabrics and clothing like the smaller "magasins de nouveautés" it had evolved from.<sup>38</sup> Though meticulously drawn, it is frozen in its historical moment a decade or so before the department store expanded its range of merchandise and consumer culture began to spread beyond the bourgeoisie into French society as a whole. I would also argue that Zola's own

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<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Conlin, "The Origins of the Musée Cognacq-Jay," *Journal of the History of Collections*. 12 (2000): 194.

<sup>37</sup> *Au Bonheur des dames*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> For more on the predecessors of the Parisian department store, see B. Juillard, "Les Magasins de Nouveautés à Paris de 1810 au début du XXe siècle," PhD diss., l'Université de Paris, 1997; and Claire Walsh, "The Newness of the Department Store: A View from the Eighteenth Century," in *Cathedrals of Consumption*, 46-71.

prejudice regarding the working class prevented him from understanding the socially subversive potential of the department store. Zola viewed the working class primarily as producers, not consumers. The idea that the principles of promotion and mass sales embodied by the department store would gradually lure them to become consumers too is never explicitly entertained in the novel.<sup>39</sup>

Much recent scholarship on consumer culture in Paris relies heavily on the mythology propagated by Zola and buttressed by Miller's empiricism.<sup>40</sup> But if we return to the writings of contemporaries at the turn of the century we find that, even at this early date, there were observers in France who felt that the Parisian department store was not an expression or tool of a particular class but was, rather, part of a much larger change in material culture, a change that threatened to erode the material bases of class distinction. Contemporaries observed that the

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<sup>39</sup> Zola depicts the store clerks as hopeless spendthrifts who blew their whole salaries on Sundays at restaurants, balls and racetracks. They could never acquire material goods as the bourgeoisie did because of their cavalier attitude to money, which he summed up as "jamais une économie, pas une avance, le gain aussitôt dévoré que touché, l'insouciance absolue du lendemain." *Au Bonheur des dames*, 145. There was a lot of truth to this characterization; Zola's only shortcoming was in failing to consider that this "insouciance du lendemain" could change.

<sup>40</sup> Since the publication of Miller's work historians have explored many facets of consumer culture in Paris, but for the most part they do not challenge the Miller/Zola assumption of the bourgeois nature of the department store and its related advertising. See for example Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth Century France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982); Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); Lisa Tiersten, *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Ruth Iskin, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Hazel Hahn, *Scenes of Parisian Modernity: Culture and Consumption in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

department store was fundamentally a tool for the dissemination of consumer culture and not bourgeois culture, in spite of its advertising claims to the contrary.

For J.-B.-Maurice Vignes, author of a work of social analysis in the spirit of the social reformer Le Play, the department store was an economic mechanism whose chief social contribution was to lower the price of durable goods. He listed the two main reasons for the success of the *grands magasins* in the late nineteenth century: “Elle consistent principalement dans le bon marché et la bonne qualité des marchandises offertes au public. A la différence du petit boutiquier qui vend peu et cher, le grand magasin vend beaucoup et à bas prix.”<sup>41</sup> It is worth noting how Vignes captured the essence of the department store’s appeal: it offered a compromise between low prices and quality. Vignes then observed how the department store had the effect not just of lowering prices at the stores, but in society as a whole: “Enfin, les grands magasins sont utiles, même à ceux qui n’achètent pas, car ils contribuent à modérer les prix de détail: les prix des grands magasins, publiés dans les journaux et les prospectus, ne peuvent guère être dépassés par les autres marchands, sans cela la clientèle protesterait.”<sup>42</sup>

According to Vignes the department store was socially useful not because it

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<sup>41</sup> Vignes, 347.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 348-9.

spread bourgeois cultural values but because it encouraged consumption by lowering the prices of manufactured goods.

Henri Garrigues was a French barrister and author who wrote one of the most thorough and nuanced studies of the department store in the late nineteenth century. In one remarkable section of his book he provided one of the best analyses of the social and economic meaning of the department store that I have found. His account contrasts with modern historians like Miller and Rosalind Williams who view the department store in terms of its continuity with traditional French culture.<sup>43</sup> For Garrigues the store represented a break with traditional society and the beginning of a larger historical change:

Ces gigantesques entreprises commerciales sont des causes certainement, mais non par des causes premières: des effets-causes, plutôt, produit du mouvement irrésistible qui, né de la liberté commerciale et industrielle, entraine le monde moderne vers la production en grandes masses, vers le bon marché, vers la division du travail.<sup>44</sup>

Garrigues situated department stores against the backdrop of industrialization and mass production. Far from seeing them as cultural expressions of bourgeois style and values, he conceived of the stores as crucial components of industrial

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<sup>43</sup> On the department store as a neo-aristocratic palace, see Williams' *Dream Worlds*, 94.

<sup>44</sup> Henri Garrigues, *Les Grands Magasins de Nouveautés et le Petit Commerce de Détail* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle de Droit et de Jurisprudence, 1898), 132.



consumer society. As such they were fundamentally economic, not cultural, entities. Garrigues pursued this idea further, observing that the ability to offer goods “à bon marché” was only possible because of mass production: “Pour obtenir le bon marché, il est nécessaire de produire en masse; et cette production elle-même a pour base l’emploi des machines et la division du travail.” Note the order of priorities: low prices leading to high volume sales were the goal; factory production was the way to meet that goal. The department store signaled a break with traditional French material culture because it made price, rather than artistry, quality or originality, the guiding principle of the manufacturing process.

For Garrigues, a whole series of consequences followed from this inversion of priorities. Having shown that the department store, whatever the cultural pretensions of its bourgeois façade, was primarily an economic mechanism that relied on factories, machines and mass-produced goods, he then linked the department store to wider social and cultural changes: “Il y a là un phénomène tout à fait analogue à celui qu’a engendré en littérature, la liberté de la presse, et son produit, la presse à bon marché; à celui que, dans les arts, ont fait naître la lithographie, la reproduction en plâtre, la foute à bon marché.”

Although the department store’s structure was determined solely by economic criteria, by making more objects widely available at lower prices it nevertheless

had cultural influence. In the same way that mechanical reproduction of plastic art and the newspaper press disseminated them to a wider audience, so the department store did with clothing and consumer goods. But Garrigues went further:

Partout, pour se conformer au goût d'un public avide d'avoir, du moins, les apparences dont il ne pouvait s'offrir la réalité, se contentant d'une copie rendant de très loin les aspects de l'original; partout l'art industriel a remplacé l'art: aussi bien aux étalages du marchand de chromolithographies et de plâtres, qu'aux rez-de-chaussée des journaux. Une production hâtive, ne cherchant que l'à peu près, ne pensant qu'à arriver au plus vite, ne pouvait aboutir à un autre résultat.<sup>45</sup>

This passage captured the idea of the department store as crisis. "Industrial art" included everything from photography and commercial statues to mass-produced clothing. As such the department store was at the centre of cultural change through which material goods were losing their value or, to use Garrigues' term, their "authenticity." The department store, by selling at the lowest prices, made it possible for people to appear better than they were "in reality." This is the key point that Miller does not acknowledge: even though the department store may have portrayed itself of the disseminator of bourgeois

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

values, style and material culture, in extending that culture to a wider audience through mass production it changed the culture it was disseminating. Rather than being a “top-down” disseminator or educator that spread bourgeois style throughout the land, the department store sold a copy, an approximation of the bourgeois ideal. For Garrigues the department store was like the central bank of material currency: it pumped great quantities of that currency into circulation in French society, and in doing so drove down its value. The department store, its very *raison d'être* being to sell in quantity at low prices, played an important part in this loss of value.

It should be apparent by now that for writers like Garrigues and Vignes the *grands magasins* were virtually synonymous with the emerging consumer society itself. As they saw it the function of the department store was to spread values and styles to society at large; but these were not bourgeois values, they were consumer values. For Garrigues the defining quality of the consumer society was the disappearance of authenticity: purchased objects in that society no longer had their full meaning, or full value. The emerging consumer society was one in which goods were more plentiful and easier to get, but less meaningful as a consequence. This created a crisis of prestige and identity. Cultural historians following Miller and Zola have noted this crisis but, because of their insistence on the centrality of the bourgeoisie in the advent of

consumerism, they have (in my opinion) misrepresented it. Lisa Tiersten, for example, notes that many contemporaries felt that late nineteenth century France (especially Paris) was being besieged by consumer culture and potentially losing its cultural preeminence as result.<sup>46</sup> But she argues that the ultimate cause of this crisis was the bourgeoisie's rise to political power:

Middle class elites and their critics alike thus feared that the entrenchment of a bourgeois republic in 1877 had put France's aesthetic patrimony in jeopardy by launching the presumably tasteless bourgeoisie into a position of political power from which it threatened to squander that inheritance.<sup>47</sup>

Though I agree with Tiersten's linkage of the aesthetic crisis in late nineteenth-century France with the rise of consumer culture, I do not think it was the result of bourgeois political power. On the contrary, it was caused by the bourgeoisie's choice to embrace an economic system that challenged traditional social, cultural and aesthetic hierarchies.

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<sup>46</sup> *Marianne in the Market*, 55. For a good discussion of Tiersten's work and the conflict between the Republic and the consumer market, see Sheryl Kroen, "A Political History of the Consumer," *The Historical Journal* 47 (2004): 718-20. For a provocative new interpretation of the aesthetic crisis and the French response to consumer culture see Ruth Iskin, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting*, especially chapter four: "Inconspicuous Subversion: Parisian Consumer Culture in 1870s City Views."

<sup>47</sup> Tiersten, 3.

This reassessment of the department store as a cultural form in nineteenth century France grew from research into the prominence of the working class in French consumer history, a prominence that has largely been overlooked by modern historians. By situating the bourgeois department store in the context of nineteenth-century consumer culture and its disruption of traditional social and aesthetic hierarchies it possible to challenge the accepted view of the store as the expression of bourgeois confidence and political power and see it, instead, as a kind of crisis. Like the advertising aimed at the bourgeoisie, the department store borrowed the language and imagery of pre-industrial French prestige to distract their public from the industrialized mass-production that made consumer culture possible. This view of the department store as crisis is further supported by contemporary observers who saw the *grands magasins* not as instruments of cultural dissemination of bourgeois values, but as forces promulgating a consumer culture that threatened to erode those values.

Nineteenth century advertising aimed at the French bourgeoisie was permeated with ambivalence. The fundamental contradiction it had to address was that consumer culture, by providing unprecedented amounts of affordable material goods, also made those goods less valuable and less meaningful. It therefore tried to compensate for this loss of value by presenting mass-produced goods in a prestigious context, whether in a luxurious department store or in a

hand-lettered promotional brochure. This was a form of deception, no doubt, but it could not succeed without a complicit public. The French bourgeoisie, after all, was not forced to embrace mass-consumption. Faced with the possible loss of hand-crafted, pre-industrial prestige, the bourgeoisie did not revolt but rather embraced the euphoria of consumer culture with all its imitations. Advertising provided them with narratives that allowed them to consume what were essentially mass-produced goods in a pleasant state of hypocrisy. The department store was an essential part of this self-deception.

**“L’industrie des falsifications”: food adulteration anxiety and the invention of authenticity in consumer culture**

As we have seen in the preceding chapter the rise of consumer culture weakened traditional French symbols of prestige. As the quantity of manufactured goods increased their value declined correspondingly. Mass production created material goods that may have looked roughly the same as their pre-industrial equivalents but, being more common, were less valuable. In the vocabulary of the time, they were not “authentic.” But the rise of consumer capitalism did not only affect material goods like clothing and furniture. A closely related phenomenon is that in the second half of the nineteenth century Parisians became afraid of their food. More specifically they became afraid of food additives, substitutions, and alterations. They became increasingly worried that the food they were buying, though more plentiful and of a greater variety than ever before, was not what it appeared to be: the wine they were buying was not real wine; the bread not real bread. One writer described the public mood: “Actuellement tout Parisien croit, et il a dû croire, qu’il n’avait qu’une chance sur dix d’acheter un vin naturel; environ trois chances sur dix de se procurer de bon lait; une sur deux pour le beurre et le fromage; une sur trois pour les sels, poivre

et épices, et pour le chocolat.”<sup>1</sup> By the late nineteenth century the average Parisian assumed that most of the food on the market was not real.

Although it is impossible to know with any precision how much of the food sold in Parisian markets was adulterated in the late nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> we do know that this was a great era of fear of food adulteration. A wide range of periodicals, from general-interest magazines to learned, trade and scientific journals, published disturbing accounts of foods containing additives, fillers, chemical substitutions and downright poison. Thick tomes on adulteration were published and prominently reviewed, like the *Dictionnaire des altérations et falsifications alimentaires* which ran to over 1,500 pages and went through several editions.<sup>3</sup> This dictionary covered every conceivable type of adulteration in pseudo-scientific detail and exhorted the French public to be suspicious of everything that came near their plate.

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<sup>1</sup> Denys Cochin, “Les falsificateurs et le laboratoire municipal,” *Revue des deux mondes*, June 15, 1883, 879.

<sup>2</sup> Our best evidence of food adulteration in the nineteenth century is anecdotal rather than quantitative. For the last third of the nineteenth century the only statistics available are based on samples of foods already suspected of adulteration which were then submitted to the authorities for testing. As such they give no idea of the total incidents of adulteration, and even if they did they could not be used to compare against earlier periods for which we have no statistics at all. There is a good contemporary account of the difficulties of quantifying food adulteration in “Les falsificateurs et le laboratoire municipal,” 879-80.

<sup>3</sup> Alphonse Chevalier and Ernest Baudrimont, *Dictionnaire des altérations et falsifications des substances alimentaires, médicamenteuses et commerciales, avec l’indication des moyens de les reconnaître*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: Asselin, 1882).



Of course there was nothing new about food adulteration. Indeed, most of the contemporary works themselves acknowledged this, pointing out that all kinds of food-related fraud, from bread fillers to artificial coloring, had been going on for ages. One article claimed that adulteration had existed as long as agriculture itself because “le paysan est fraudeur de nature, c’est dans son sang.”<sup>4</sup> However, while these works admitted that adulteration had always been around, they believed that its modern iteration was fundamentally different. The older kinds of food fraud had been the result of a peasant or merchant rather clumsily scheming for his own small profit. The new kind of adulteration was no longer seen merely as the fault of greedy or corrupt individuals but was related to the increasing complexity of the food supply, distribution, and promotion systems. It was more sophisticated, more prevalent, and harder to avoid. The old peasant trickery appeared quaint by comparison.<sup>5</sup>

Historians have only begun exploring these connections between the modernization of the European food supply system, food adulteration and consumer capitalism. British social historians in particular have, until very

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<sup>4</sup> *La Conserve alimentaire*, June 1914, 468.

<sup>5</sup> This shift is summed up well by Pierre-Antoine Dessaux: “In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, food was no longer seen as potentially dangerous because of voluntary poisoning, natural decomposition or even fraud. Threats now came from denaturation, additives and new techniques aimed at producing adulterated products or improving preservation. New chemical applications and production techniques led to increasing uncertainty as to the quality of food products and most experts had reached the limits of their knowledge. “Chemical Expertise and Food Market Regulation in Belle-Époque France,” *History and Technology* 23 (December 2007), 351.

recently, been more enthusiastic than their French counterparts in studying the links between food, industrialization and urbanization.<sup>6</sup> But lately some exciting work is being done in France. Building on the work of Jean-Paul Aron, who studied working-class eating habits in the late nineteenth century,<sup>7</sup> Jean-Michel Roy's work on public markets has helped place food adulteration in the wider context required to understand it,<sup>8</sup> while Allesandro Stanziani and Pierre-Antoine Dessaux have explored how notions of authenticity underlay attempts to regulate the food market in turn-of-the-century France.

Historians, however, have yet to make an explicit connection between the advent of consumerism and the public obsession with food adulteration in late nineteenth-century Paris. I believe that by considering food adulteration anxiety in the context of emerging consumerism we can see it for what it really was:

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<sup>6</sup> The interconnections between urban history, public health and hygiene, food and diet and consumer culture have been explored in classic works of social history such as Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1983), and more recently Eric J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain, 1783-1870* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London; New York: Longman, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Aron's works include *Essai sur la sensibilité alimentaire à Paris au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: A. Colin, 1967), *Le Mangeur du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1973). It is only within the last ten years that the themes of food, adulteration, regulation and consumer culture have been addressed again by Pierre-Antoine Dessaux and Allesandro Stanziani, "La falsification du vin en France, 1880-1905: un cas de fraude agro-alimentaire," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 50 2 (2003): 154-186. The international nature of the subject has led to some comparative studies, such as Roger Horowitz, Jeffrey M. Pilcher and Sydney Watts, "Meat for the Multitudes: Market Culture in Paris, New York City, Mexico City over the Long Nineteenth Century," *American Historical Review* 109 (2004): 1054-1083, and Marie-Emmanuelle Chessell, "From America to Europe: Educating Consumers," *Contemporary European History* 11 (2002): 165-75, but these works have surveyed the terrain of late-nineteenth century urban culture from a distance that leaves much of the detail to be filled in.

<sup>8</sup> "Les marchés alimentaires parisiens et l'espace urbain du XVII<sup>e</sup> au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Histoire, économie et société* 4 (1988): 693-710.

anxiety about the loss of authenticity in French culture. Anxiety about the transformation of authentic foods that were central to French culture like wine, bread and butter, into more or less synthetic consumer products. I will argue, therefore, that expressions of suspicion about the authenticity of food in late nineteenth-century France were prompted by fears that food was becoming a consumer product. What do I mean by “becoming a consumer product”? I mean that food was becoming increasingly subject to the methods of production, distribution, promotion and sales as any other kind of consumer good. If we look closely at France’s food adulteration crisis we can identify the same anxiety about the wider availability of manufactured goods that the consumer economy enabled. While conceding that the consumer food market made a variety of food products more widely available and more affordable to more people, many believed this availability came with a cost, and the cost was authenticity.

Our essay will first examine how the food supply and consumption system of late nineteenth-century Paris incorporated many of the characteristics of consumer capitalism. Next we will examine the phenomenon of food adulteration anxiety in the French press. We will then, using wine and margarine as two case studies, explore how food adulteration anxiety opened the door for state authorities, scientists, manufacturers and advertisers to become important arbiters of authenticity in French culture. Finally we will conclude with

observations about how many modern conceptions of authenticity, purity and nostalgia can be traced back to these nineteenth century discussions of food adulteration.

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In the last third of the nineteenth century food became a consumer product in France. That is, it was integrated into the national system of production, distribution and promotion of consumer goods. This was largely the result of the development of a reliable rail transportation network. As Roger Price has shown the rail network changed the way agricultural products were grown, shipped and sold. A reliable and efficient transportation system meant that regional farmers no longer had to produce a full range of foods to meet local dietary needs.<sup>9</sup> Instead they could specialize in those products for which their land and climate were best suited, while purchasing foods from other regions with different specializations. This modernization of transport not only increased productivity and eliminated the danger of food shortages and famines caused by local crop failures, it also resulted in the creation of nationally famous products from specific French regions, or what we would now call brands: Isigny butter, Périgord truffles, and of course unique cheeses from practically every

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<sup>9</sup> *The Modernization of Rural France: Communications Networks and Agricultural Market Structures in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), esp. 22-93; 196-214.

*département*. These agricultural products were then shipped to cities and promoted using the same advertising techniques as other consumer goods.<sup>10</sup>

The development of the railway food supply network was a crucial development in the change from a rural/aristocratic world to an urban/consumer one. An important characteristic of this change was an increase in complexity, both in the technological sophistication of the transport system, but also in the sheer number of people involved in the sale of agricultural goods. In short, as French agriculture became more integrated with the market system it required more middle-men. The cultural importance of this change should not be underestimated. In his history of Paris during the Restoration, Guillaume de Bertier de Sauvigny notes how the city's markets, restaurants and private kitchens were supplied almost entirely by the peasants who grew the products and raised the livestock: "Dans la mesure où le permettent les distances, tous ces produits périssables sont généralement apportés par les producteurs eux-mêmes sur les marchés parisiens."<sup>11</sup> This not only provided a link between urban residents and their rural food sources, but also meant that consumers could inquire about the origin of the food and complain about the quality. What they could not do, however, was buy their food from a distant source. Like clothes

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Michel Roy, "Les marchés alimentaires parisiens," 709.

<sup>11</sup> *Nouvelle Histoire de Paris: La Restauration, 1815-1830* (Paris: Hachette, 1977), 111.

shoppers before the department store, pre-rail food consumers were a captive market: they had no choice but to buy from their local suppliers.

Rail brought more variety of food at lower prices to the French table. It was during the period from 1870 to 1900 that the diet of the mass of the French population gradually began to improve. The working-class diet began to include more meat and less bread than ever before even while the proportion of the urban working-class budget allocated to food declined.<sup>12</sup> At the same time the food supply system was becoming much more complex. Where the Restoration peasant had brought his wagon full of potatoes to sell at market, the same peasant in the Third Republic was much more likely to sell his produce for cash and leave the transportation and retailing of his potatoes to professionals. Moreover, the longer the potatoes went unsold the more likely they would be bought by “resellers”--ambulatory entrepreneurs who would circulate through neighborhoods selling the potatoes at a discount.<sup>13</sup> By the time an urban worker bought one of those faded spuds they would have passed through three, four or

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<sup>12</sup> The major contribution of rail-based food transportation was, of course, the elimination of regional famine. The longer term benefits were improved diet due to a greater variety of more affordable foods. On working-class diets see Cécile Dauphin and Pierette Pézerat, “Les consommations populaires dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle à travers les monographies de l’école de Le Play,” *Annales* 30 (1975): 537-552; Michelle Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève: France 1871-1890* vol. 1 (Paris: Mouton, 1974), 212; Maurice Halbwachs, “Les budgets de familles,” *La Revue de Paris*, August 1, 1908, 535-62.

<sup>13</sup> The best account of re-selling food in Paris is Jean-Paul Aron, “Sur les consommations avariées à Paris dans la deuxième moitié du XIXe siècle,” *Annales* 30 (1975): 556-61.

five layers of consumer capitalism. And if he had questions about the provenance of said potato? His merchant might come up with an answer but it would be unadulterated nonsense as he would have not the faintest clue where it came from. As the food supply system became more complex it built up layers of suppliers, retailers and several sub-levels of resellers, all of which put greater distance between the people who grew, butchered or made the food and the consumers who eventually ate it.<sup>14</sup> Urbanization resulted in the greater anonymity of food merchants selling wares in one place only to be gone the next, depriving their customers of the time-honored method of dealing with unsatisfactory food purchases: revenge.<sup>15</sup>

Anxieties about food adulteration grew out of these new economic realities of the market. As Alessandro Stanziani notes, in the late nineteenth century “the debate on food and drink adulteration took place in a context marked by powerful economic, social, and institutional shocks, which were the formation of a national market, urbanization, and the separation between production and consumption, and the increasing role of commercial

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<sup>14</sup> Jean-Michel Roy, “Les marchés alimentaires parisiens,” 702-10.

<sup>15</sup> Alessandro Stanziani phrases it very theoretically, but the image of a disgruntled consumer still comes through: “In markets where information is imperfect before purchase, but where quality can be accurately assessed after purchase, repeated purchases and the reputation effect may assure an efficient outcome.” “Negotiating Innovation in a Market Economy: Foodstuffs and Beverage Adulteration in Nineteenth-Century France,” *Enterprise and Society* (May 29, 2007), doi:10.1093/es/khm025, <http://es.oxfordjournals.org>

intermediaries.”<sup>16</sup> In this climate of change and uncertainty adulteration, or “le frelatage,” became a subject of great interest in a wide variety of popular and learned publications. Before looking at these, however, we should note that the word itself underwent a revealing evolution during this period. In 1872 it was defined rather narrowly as “l’action de mêler, dans du vin ou dans tout autre liquide, des corps étrangers propres à en déguiser la qualité.”<sup>17</sup> But by 1892 the verb “frelater” had taken on an added nuance of deception: it no longer merely compensated for a poor quality wine; it altered its nature making something false. “Frelater” was defined as “falsifier” or figuratively “altérer, déguiser.”<sup>18</sup> In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, adulteration was no longer considered merely fraud, but was deception combined with science in pursuit of profit. As one article defined it, “le grand art de frelatage est celui qui, rompant avec la loyauté commerciale et dédaignant la santé publique, sait utiliser les découvertes de la chimie.”<sup>19</sup> I believe this subtle change in definition reflected a rising concern

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<sup>16</sup> “Negotiating Innovation in a Market Economy,” doi:10.1093/es/khm025, <http://es.oxfordjournals.org>.

<sup>17</sup> M. Saint-Bonnet, *Nouveau dictionnaire de droit français, à l’usage de tout le monde* (Paris: A. Durand et Pedone-Lauriel, 1872), s.v. “frelatage.”

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Vincent, *Dictionnaire illustré: langue française, histoire, géographie* (Paris: G. Delarue, 1892), s.v. “frelater.”

<sup>19</sup> *Le Moniteur scientifique*, t. XIII, 1883, 109.



about the way industrial technology and consumer capitalism were combining to alter French food.

The phenomenon of food adulteration anxiety coincided with the development of consumer capitalism in late nineteenth-century France. Although there were occasional mentions of food adulteration in the 1870s, in the early days of the French consumer society these accounts did not come to any kind of consensus as to the source of it. One writer argued that adulteration was caused by a lack of capitalist competition. He observed that the Parisian market was controlled by an oligopoly of “des capitalistes et commerçants en gros et demi-gros, qui tiennent presque tous les marchands au détail sous leur dépendance absolue.” These wholesalers, he argued, fixed prices so that “les marchands au détail, après avoir payé une dîme considérable à leurs fournisseurs, ne peuvent se tirer d’affaire que par le frelatage de la marchandise.”<sup>20</sup> Although the author referred to the wholesalers as capitalists, he did not blame the system itself for the adulteration of goods for sale in Parisian markets. In fact the simplicity of the system of price fixing was the problem. Another observer writing in 1879 believed, similarly, that food adulteration resulted from lack of competition:

S’il n’y avait qu’un épicier permis par commune, c’est pour le coup qu’on en avalerait du saron pour du poivre et de la chicorée pour café! Mais la

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<sup>20</sup> Alix Sauzeau, *Manuel des docks, warrants, ventes publiques, comptes-courants, chèques et virements à l’usage de tout le monde* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1877), 138.

libre concurrence les oblige, les uns et les autres, à ne pas trop frelater et à ne pas trop faire mauvais poids; sinon la pratique les abandonnerait pour passer au voisin.<sup>21</sup>

In this view consumer capitalism, far from being the cause, was proposed as a way to prevent food adulteration, as competition between merchants would inhibit their (apparently) inherent tendency to defraud the public. Far from idealizing the traditional village merchant, these writers believed consumer capitalism would bring better service, prices, and more reliable and authentic products.

In the 1880s, however, food adulteration paranoia became something of a minor publishing phenomenon as observers began to portray it as a problem coincident with, if not caused by, consumer capitalism. Articles posited the existence of an “industrie des falsifications” that used chemistry and modern manufacturing techniques to produce adulterated foods.<sup>22</sup> Many of these works argued that adulteration had become so prevalent that French food was to be assumed fake until proven otherwise. All food types were suspect: coffee was feared to contain potato starch, wheat, corn, barley, oats, carrots and beets, while chocolate contained everything from wheat and ground lentils to sawdust and

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<sup>21</sup> Denis Fiolet, *Lettres Bressanes* (Paris: Imprimerie de Villefranche, 1879), 68-9.

<sup>22</sup> Cochin, “Les falsificateurs,” 869.

mercury oxide.<sup>23</sup> Candies and fruit syrups were sweetened with a new ingredient, saccharine, which, though not considered a food “car elle est éliminée en nature et en totalité par les urines et les matières fécales,” could cheaply produce “l’illusion du sucre” and so was valuable “au point de vue industriel.”<sup>24</sup> Wine, one of the most commonly falsified substances, was a fearful concoction containing natural additives “la morelle noire, la myrtille, la betterave, le tournesol, le coquelicot, les mûres, les baies de sureau,” exotic extracts “le caramel, la préparation de Fismes, l’indigo, le campêche, les bois de santal,” and chemicals “la cochenille ammoniacale, l’urine cochenillée, enfin, pour le bouquet, la fuchsine arsenicale.”<sup>25</sup>

Adulteration anxiety was expressed in more technical journals as well. In an article in *Science Populaire*, a dental surgeon warned that it was important for contemporary people to get their teeth checked regularly as they were living in “ce temps de frelatage éhonté de tous les aliments qui ruine l’estomac et dévore les dents en en rongant l’émail.”<sup>26</sup> He claimed that the poor state of his patients’

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 856, 864.

<sup>24</sup> *Rapport général sur les travaux du conseil d’hygiène publique et de salubrité* (Paris: Imprimerie et Librairie Centrales des Chemins de fers, 1894), 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Le Moniteur scientifique*, t. XIII, 1883, 109.

<sup>26</sup> E. Taillebois, “Dents Artificielles,” *La Science Populaire*, August 24, 1882, 446.

teeth was proof of how food adulteration had become especially bad in the late nineteenth-century:

Le frelatage chaque jour plus éhonté et criminel de la plupart des denrées alimentaires solides et liquides, bien d'autres éléments de destruction qu'il serait trop long d'énumérer ont atteint gravement dans leur santé les deux dernières générations, principalement au point de vue dentaire.<sup>27</sup>

To his patients in their forties who could not understand why their teeth were falling out, while their parents died with theirs intact, he explained:

C'est que de leur temps le vin était du jus de la taille, les bières sans orge ni houblon n'avaient pas cours, les graisses margarines ne faisaient pas concurrence au beurre, le glucose n'avait pas remplacé le sucre, [...] les salades ne s'arrosaient pas d'un affreux mélange d'acide acétique, sulfurique..., etc..., vendu comme vinaigre.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast with previous generations when French food was real and healthy, modern French food was depicted as a frightening mélange of chemicals--not merely phony but toxic.

Food adulteration anxiety found its ultimate expression in the aforementioned *Dictionnaire des altérations et falsifications des substances*

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<sup>27</sup> "Dents Artificielles," *La Science Populaire*, June 15, 1882, 276.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

*alimentaires, médicamenteuses et commerciales, avec l'indication des moyens de les reconnaître.* This work, whose sixth edition was published in 1882, was a serious work of scholarship but also aimed for a wide readership. The authors were both prominent scientists (professors at l'Ecole de Pharmacie de Paris) and the work, full of detailed instructions for laboratory tests, was intended primarily as a resource for pharmacists or chemists. As they wrote in the preface, they hoped the dictionary would help pharmacists "[à] repousser de leurs officines les substances altérées, les médicaments qui auraient été sophistiqués." But they also felt the work had a wider audience, as it would help "faire connaître aux négociants, chefs de fabrique et à tous ceux qui achètent des substances alimentaires et commerciales, les moyens d'en reconnaître les falsifications et d'y soustraire." [My emph.]<sup>29</sup> Of course the relevance of the work relied on two assumptions: first, that adulteration was commonplace in French society. Of this the authors had no doubt. They believed adulteration was the rule rather than the exception in late nineteenth-century France: "Aujourd'hui il est rare de rencontrer une matière quelconque exempte de falsification ou d'altération: les aliments, les boissons, les condiments, destinés à soutenir l'existence de l'homme, les médicaments qui doivent le soulager dans ses nombreuses maladies, sont altérés, dénaturés."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Alphonse Chevalier and Ernest Baudrimont, *Dictionnaire des altérations et falsifications*, vii.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

Second, they assumed that falsification could be spotted because there was standard agreement on such qualities as “purity” or “authenticity.” The authors defined falsification as “l’addition volontaire à une matière quelconque d’un produit étranger, dans un but de fraude et de lucre,” while an altered substance was one which “contient des corps étrangers dont la présence peut être attribuée à une purification incomplète ou à une préparation imparfaite.”<sup>31</sup> In both cases the existence of a “pure” substance of reference was posited. As we will see, the opposition of pure and adulterated food would become increasingly difficult with the advent of new consumer food products.

It is a sign of the importance of the issue of food adulteration in late nineteenth-century France that the *Dictionnaire*, despite its dense technical prose, received significant attention in the general press. It was the subject of a long article in the *Revue des deux mondes* that took its publication as an opportunity to reflect on the phenomenon of food adulteration in France. The article began by affirming that adulteration techniques had advanced in tandem with science: “Parmi les plus remarquables progrès de notre siècle, si fécond en découvertes, il faut assurément compter les progrès accomplis dans l’art de falsifier les aliments, de frelater les boissons, de frauder les octrois. La falsification est devenue un des

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

chapitres les plus intéressants de la chimie.”<sup>32</sup> It affirmed that contemporary adulteration was fundamentally different from its earlier forms because it incorporated science into its methods. Older trickery was rustic, clumsy and rather pathetic by comparison:

Autrefois une laitière installée au coin d’une rue puisait à la dérobée un peu de l’eau du ruisseau et la versait dans ses boîtes de fer-blanc. Un marchand de vin, enfermé dans sa cave, fabriquait mystérieusement, à la lueur d’une chandelle, des décoctions de bois de campêche. C’était là les plus habiles falsificateurs. Mais aujourd’hui la science a porté partout ses lumières. La laitière et le marchand de vin ont marché avec leur siècle. Leur petit commerce est devenu scientifique. Ils peuvent maintenant consulter des dictionnaires et des traités de falsification. Cette branche de nos connaissances est arrivée à son complet développement.<sup>33</sup>

The idea of food adulterers using the *Dictionnaire* to concoct new recipes may have been meant as a joke, but the article made the serious point that the production of modern adulterated food had become technologically sophisticated, much like that of manufactured goods.

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<sup>32</sup> Cochin, “Les falsificateurs et le laboratoire municipal,” 861.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

In fact the article established a direct parallel between falsified manufactured goods and adulterated food:

Toute marchandise peut être falsifiée, c'est-à-dire qu'un marchand malhonnête peut toujours livrer autre chose que ce qu'il annonce. Les métaux, les étoffes, les cuirs, les vernis, les drogues de parfumerie ou de pharmacie, les savons, les huiles, etc., peuvent en réalité différer étrangement de ce que le nom et l'apparence de l'objet nous font croire.<sup>34</sup>

Falsification occurred whenever the purchased item (food or object) ended being "strangely different" from its appearance and name. This anxiety was, I believe, closely related to the sense of loss of authenticity in the emerging consumer society. The French public began to worry that consumer capitalism tended to produce objects that only appeared to be real, but would later (in the course of wearing or eating) disappoint. But food adulteration was more immediately worrisome than false manufactured goods, not only because the food adulterers' "science a fait le plus de progrès," in recent years, but also because it could be physically harmful. The article noted that two of the most commonly falsified foods were staples in French diet and culture, milk and wine:

Le lait qui devrait nous aider à élever des enfants vigoureux; et le vin, qui devrait soutenir et ranimer les forces de l'homme fait. S'il y a beaucoup

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 862.



d'enfants rachitiques et s'il y a beaucoup d'hommes abrutis par  
l'alcoolisme, le mal ne vient pas seulement des excès et des mauvaises  
mœurs; les falsificateurs ont leur part de responsabilité.<sup>35</sup>

By tricking people into thinking they were consuming authentic ingredients,  
falsification literally weakened French society.

A consumer society fed on images of food rather than the real thing would  
soon become malnourished. The article considered the darkly humorous  
prospect of an unlucky Parisian sitting down to a meal composed entirely of  
phony food. Although spectacular to look at, nothing in this meal would be what  
it appeared. Butter looked real but "le beurre ne se fait guère aujourd'hui avec de  
la crème et au moyen d'une baratte. Les différents genres de margarines ont  
supplanté ce produit démodé." The fake jam actually looked better than the real  
thing: "Avec un peu de jus de betteraves ou même un peu de carmin, du glucose,  
pour sucrer, et une cuillerée de sirop, pour faire illusion, on prépare une gelée de  
groseilles plus appétissante que celle qui est faite avec des groseilles."<sup>36</sup>

But if these foods looked so good, how was one to know that they were  
not real? Unfortunately the only way was to eat them, which was no help at all.  
This was another important theme that distinguished turn-of-the-century food

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 864.

adulteration from its earlier forms: modern food adulteration was different because technology and the complexity of the consumer market meant that one's senses and traditional, intuitive methods were of no help in avoiding it. Modern fake food usually looked very good because so much effort had gone into perfecting its appearance. Even with a copy of the *Dictionnaire des falsifications*, few consumers had a kitchen equipped with test tubes and laboratory chemicals. One article on falsified olive oil noted that consumers were helpless to detect fraud because they were distant from the origins of the product:

Tout le monde sait que l'huile d'olive est, de la part des falsificateurs, l'objet de toutes sortes de fraudes; les huiles de coton, sésame, arachide, y entrent pour une si grande part que les consommateurs, qui ne sont pas placés sur les lieux de production, en arrivent, par les mélanges successifs opérés d'abord au moulin même, puis chez l'exportateur, et enfin chez le détaillant, à ne plus connaître le goût de l'huile qu'ils croient acheter.<sup>37</sup>

Here the consumer was removed from the origin of the product not just by physical distance but by the layers of the distribution system. The oil on the shelf looked fine but its origins were as mysterious as its oliveless taste. Like oil, fake wine looked so realistic that there was no way to spot it, and "le client est ainsi

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<sup>37</sup> "Moyen de découvrir la fraude des huiles," *La science illustrée*, February 12, 1893, 146-7.

dans l'impossibilité de savoir ce qu'on lui vend."<sup>38</sup> It seemed that the technology of mass-production had created a situation where the consumer could do everything right, purchase the best-looking product on offer, and still end up with a bottle of garbage.

Many authors saw food adulteration as one of the many signs of French cultural and social decline. Some authors believed systemic fraud was the inevitable result of mass-production: lower prices had to result in loss of quality. One author believed this meant French food would never be good or safe again: "L'abaissement du prix des aliments amène le frelatage. C'est ainsi que tout le monde aujourd'hui ne consomme plus que des aliments frelatés, et de plus en plus frelatés, beurre, café, vin, poivre, huile. Nous n'aurons bientôt plus de nourriture qui ne soit empoisonnée."<sup>39</sup> A bleak vision of the future, to be sure, but not unusual. Another article claimed that falsification had destroyed wine drinking altogether: "Les hommes ont tout gâté, jusqu'au plaisir de boire."<sup>40</sup> According to these authors, adulteration was a permanent feature of French society and a symptom of social decline. There were dissenters from this argument. An article on wine fraud in the *Journal des viticulteurs*, for example,

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<sup>38</sup> *Ce que l'on boit aujourd'hui quand on croit boire du vin* (Paris: A. Ghio, Librairie au Palais-Royal, 1883), 9.

<sup>39</sup> J.-Emile Ivanouël, *De la vie simple: étude sociale* (Paris: A. Girard et E. Brière, 1893), 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> *La Médecine internationale*, November, 1909, 361.

argued that there was nothing new about adulteration and that it was therefore unfair to vilify the current era: “Il n’y a rien de nouveau sous le soleil et [...] le laboratoire municipal parisien, dont on a tant parlé, n’a rien découvert qui ne fut connu dès la plus haute antiquité. Cessons donc de déblatérer contre l’avilissement du siècle.”<sup>41</sup> This view, however, was in the minority in the press, as most observers made connections between worsening food adulteration and the socio-economic system in turn-of-the-century France.

Observers were trying to make sense of the new urban world of food supply and consumption in which the old ways of guarding against fraud no longer seemed to work. Although some authors may have considered adulteration no worse than in the old days, the emergence of scientific tomes like the *Dictionnaire des falsifications* signaled an important change in the French attitude toward consumer goods. The idea that the adulteration of food products required the attention of scientific experts meant that the public could no longer rely on traditional methods of caveat emptor, which depended on the buyer and seller both having a clear understanding of the nature of the product being sold.<sup>42</sup> The combination of technologically-enhanced adulteration and the complexity of

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<sup>41</sup> *Journal des viticulteurs*, August 20, 1883, 131.

<sup>42</sup> As Pierre-Antoine Dessaux notes, in the traditional free market system “transactions were supposed to be agreed upon freely on the basis of sellers and buyers’ perfect knowledge of the goods exchanged. If tainted or dangerous goods were traded, buyers could be blamed for negligence if the nature or quality of the goods was not as described.” “Chemical Expertise and Food Market Regulation,” 353.

the food supply system meant that consumers could no longer be expected to have “perfect knowledge of the goods exchanged.” Consumers, unable to distinguish authentic from adulterated goods, would come to rely more and more on external authorities to help them sort the good from the bad, the real from the fake. The door was opened for advertisers and manufacturers to step in and define food authenticity in the emerging consumer culture.

### **Arbiters of authenticity**

The question of whether or not food adulteration was rampant in late nineteenth-century is less important than the fact that the public believed it was. The anxiety surrounding the origins of French food products resulted in two important developments in consumer culture: first, the state and industry collaborated to create definitions of “authentic” foods and food products; second, manufacturers and merchants used advertising and created brand names to assure the public of the authenticity of their products. The result was the establishment of a permanent layer of cultural mediation between the consumer and food products. Just as the department store and advertising mediated between manufactured products and consumers, state authorities and brand names insinuated themselves between consumers and their food. We will explore these developments with reference to wine and margarine.

Everybody knows a wine snob who complains about the industrialization of wine, the use of chemicals to create generic, market-pleasing swill and who yearns nostalgically for “real” wine made only of grapes, the *vigneron’s* wisdom and the nuances of the terroir. There is nothing new about this narrative. As Alessandro Stanziani notes in his important work on wine falsification in this period, discussions about how industrial methods were affecting wine arose out of a combination of factors in the French economic and agricultural spheres in the late nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup> The loss of wine production caused by the phylloxera epidemic in the 1880s, combined with the rising demand for wine in urban France, resulted in the dramatic rise in the production of altered wine. This forced authorities in government, industry and the press into a debate about what, in fact, constituted “real wine.” As Stanziani notes, many of our modern notions of what wine should consist of were formulated during these debates.<sup>44</sup> Stanziani observes that there was a direct connection between the above developments and the advent of the idea of traditional “quality”. For Stanziani, authentic wine was a concept that was invented as a result of the wine adulteration crisis of the late nineteenth century. As he writes, “la qualité

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<sup>43</sup> “La falsification du vin en France,” 156.

<sup>44</sup> Many current studies, he argues, “tendent à considérer comme un acquis la définition du vin telle qu’elle est institutionnalisée aujourd’hui, alors que, précisément, la définition du vin et de manière générale celle de ‘produit naturel’ a été un des résultats du débat du tournant du siècle.” *Ibid.*

associée au maintien d'une tradition a été inventée au tournant du siècle, justement au moment où les progrès agro-chimiques mettaient pour la première fois en doute les définitions traditionnelles de produit agricole ou naturel."<sup>45</sup> In the section that follows we explore how wine adulteration anxiety prompted French authorities and manufacturers to define "wine" in the industrial age.

Food adulteration anxiety in France was, in many ways, wine adulteration anxiety. In newspapers and magazines, wine was portrayed as one of the foods most likely falsified in some way. In an article on "falsifications" the author wrote that although many kinds of food could be falsified, "c'est surtout l'art du fraudeur du vin qui a fait des progrès peu rassurants."<sup>46</sup> These methods and the state of the industry were the subject of a fascinating and humorous pamphlet published in 1888 entitled *Ce que l'on boit aujourd'hui quand on croit boire du vin*. The pamphlet began with an economic observation: "Comment se fait-il qu'en dépit des ravages toujours croissants du phylloxera, le prix du vin n'augmente pas d'une manière plus sensible? C'est que, moins les vignes en donnent, plus l'industrie en fabrique."<sup>47</sup> The decline of wine production resulting from the phylloxera outbreak led wine producers to use the techniques of modern bio-

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>46</sup> *Le Moniteur scientifique*, t. XIII, 1883, 109.

<sup>47</sup> *Ce que l'on boit aujourd'hui*, 1.

chemistry to boost volume.<sup>48</sup> The practice of wine adulteration was becoming so common that it was even celebrated in the industry. Wine trade journals carried advertisements for ingredients for making “des vins à l’eau sucrée,” made from grape juice stretched with sugar water. Even the most respected wine-makers, the pamphlet alleged, did not conceal the fact that they were producing adulterated wine, and in this environment only the most naïve consumers “ont la bonhomie de croire qu’en prenant du vin moderne, ils boivent encore, comme leurs pères, le produit bienfaisant de la vigne.”<sup>49</sup> The pamphlet encouraged the public to confront the fact that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century “wine” had, in many respects, already become an agro-industrial product, with older methods of “stretching” wine (like “le mouillage,” the dilution of wine with water) being supplanted by newer, more sophisticated methods.<sup>50</sup> Though hard to quantify, Stanziani suggests that for the period between 1885 and 1890 dried grape and sugared wine accounted for roughly 20 percent of the wine produced in France.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Alessandro Stanziani, “Information, quality and legal rules: Wine adulteration in nineteenth century France,” *Business History* 51 (2009), 269.

<sup>49</sup> *Ce que l’on boit aujourd’hui*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Stanziani, “La falsification du vin,” 154-5. The most common of the modern adulteration techniques, aside from persistent *mouillage*, were sugared wine, dry grape wine, and plastered wine. Sugared wine was essentially weak wine with sugared water added. Dry grape wine was made by fermenting raisins in warm water. Plastered wine originated mainly in wines from the Midi and hotter climates like Spain. It involved the addition of plaster to prevent spoilage.

<sup>51</sup> “Information, quality and legal rules,” 276.



We can see many parallels between the discussion of wine and food adulteration and the discussion of manufactured consumer goods. On one hand, observers could see that there were real benefits to such new products, even if they were not “authentic.” Dry grape wine, for example, was a harmless drink that could offer the working-class a wine-like experience. As senator A. Mathey noted, since the phylloxera epidemic grape-less wine had become almost a necessity for the working class:

il s’est établi une industrie très lucrative, qui consiste à fabriquer du vin sans l’intervention de la vigne, en remplaçant le jus du raisin frais par de l’eau, des raisins secs, du sucre, de l’alcool et trop souvent des colorants. Rien de plus légitime assurément, que cette fabrication d’une boisson qui peut remplacer, jusqu’à un certain point, le vin naturel et rendre d’incontestables services à nos populations laborieuses.<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, for much of the public this *was* wine: a drink composed of “les vins du pays, les vins étrangers, et l’infusion de raisins secs, de façon à produire le liquide fourni, sous le nom de vin, à la consommation courante.” They were used

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<sup>52</sup> Archives nationales, F126873, no. 400, June 22, 1888, quoted in Stanziani, “La falsification du vin en France,” 172.

to it and seemed to like it--even prefer it to the real thing as its taste was more consistent and it usually looked better.<sup>53</sup>

To phrase the issue differently, what was the problem if the forces of consumer capitalism produced new, synthetic versions of traditional goods, as long as they were not harmful to health? This brings us to the point where we can see most clearly how the debate about food adulteration addressed the way consumerism threatened traditional French culture. Although French authorities were concerned that food adulteration was a public health risk, this was not the animating force behind their concerns. Rather, I believe that the primary concern of both observers (journalists, writers) and legislators was that food adulteration threatened the authenticity of French material culture.

As we saw above, senator A. Mathey had no problem with French workers drinking any kind of dry grape mystery swill they fancied. If technology could create cheap, harmless booze for the masses, that was fine with him, but with one condition: “c’est que cette boisson, ce vin factice, soit vendue pour ce qu’elle est et pour ce qu’elle vaut, et ne soit pas livrée à la consommation sous le nom de vin, qui ne lui appartient pas, mais sous son véritable nom de vin fictif.”<sup>54</sup> The

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<sup>53</sup> *Ce que l’on boit aujourd’hui*, 9. The author claimed: “Le public, habitué au goût et à la couleur de ce mélange, le préfère généralement aux vins naturels, qui ont chacun la saveur du cru et souvent moins belle apparence.”

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Stanziani, “La falsification du vin en France,” 172.

problem, as he saw it, was not that dry grape wine was a bad drink; the problem was in calling it wine. The real danger was not physical, in other words, but cultural. Calling a synthetic beverage “wine” led to confusion which robbed the traditional *vigneron* of his earnings and eroded an important source of French prestige: “elle déprécie nos vins naturels à l’étranger et leur enlève cette bonne renommée.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the necessity of adding the adjective “natural” to distinguish fresh from dry grape wine shows to what extent adulteration anxiety had already challenged the public’s “common knowledge” of traditional substances.<sup>56</sup> Critics argued that adulterated products deprived the public not necessarily of their money, for they were usually cheap, but of the genuine experience that money should have provided. Hence dry grape wine, though cheap to buy, when sold as “wine” was considered “trois ou quatre fois sa valeur réelle.”<sup>57</sup> (Note again the need for an adjective.) Synthetic wine was like a parasite on “natural” wine, slowly sucking away its prestige.

As we can see this was much more than a debate about food terminology: adulteration anxiety prompted France to figure out how to define quality in an industrial age. This response took two main institutional forms: first, the

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> The term “natural” was used to differentiate foods from those that were either “adulterated” or “manufactured.” Stanziani, “Information, quality and legal rules,” 274.

<sup>57</sup> *Ce que l’on boit aujourd’hui*, 9

establishment of hygienist organizations like the Conseil de salubrité and the Parisian anti-fraud laboratory in the last third of the nineteenth century; second, the 1905 law on food adulteration.

The Conseil de salubrité was perhaps the earliest incarnation of food adulteration anxiety. Though primarily a hygienist organization concerned with public health and safety, its work occasionally required it to make statements beyond this purview. Perhaps the most interesting case in our context was its position with respect to margarine. In 1872 the conseil investigated margarine, which had been sold as a cheaper alternative to butter in the French market for a few years under such euphemisms as “simili-beurre de la Grande Ferme,” “beurre de la Couronne,” or simply “beurre.”<sup>58</sup> After careful testing the conseil deemed margarine a rather delightful and resilient product that withstood heat better than butter, did not go stale, and was great for general cooking. If, however, “le beurre artificiel n’avait pas, pour être mangé sur du pain ou être employé dans les préparations culinaires les plus délicates, le goût fin et aromatique du beurre de Normandie, il offrait pour les autres usages les qualités du beurre ordinaire.” The conseil pronounced it a safe and beneficial product, but it was artificial and should not use the word “butter” in its name. It was

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<sup>58</sup> *Rapport général sur les travaux du Conseil de salubrité*, (Paris: Imprimerie de la Préfecture de Police, 1880-81), 9-13.

approved for sale “sous la seule condition que le public fut averti de la nature réelle de la marchandise qui lui était offerte.” Industrial chemistry could produce beneficial goods for the masses, but these should not be passed off as authentic French produce.

Likewise the Laboratoire municipal, established in Paris in 1876 to investigate claims of fraud and food adulteration made against merchants and suppliers in Paris,<sup>59</sup> also became something of an arbiter of authenticity in French food. Anyone, whether merchant, retailer or ordinary citizen, if he had what he suspected were adulterated goods, could drop off a sample at any police department and it would be brought to the lab to be tested for dilution, coloring, or other common frauds.<sup>60</sup> The lab, as a division of the police department, had power to punish fraudulent merchants<sup>61</sup> and, thanks largely to the forceful personality of its director, Charles Girard, became an important authority on matters of adulteration, frequently advising government officials. The laboratory was instrumental in establishing the role of chemical experts in distinguishing between “natural” and “adulterated” or “manufactured” foodstuffs. The lab’s

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<sup>59</sup> Dessaux, “Chemical Expertise,” 354-61.

<sup>60</sup> Cochin, “Les falsificateurs et le laboratoire municipal,” 875.

<sup>61</sup> In spite of its affiliation with the police department, its role was informative rather than punitive as it was usually impossible to prove the source of food adulteration. As Cochin noted: “En effet, rien ne prouve absolument que le vendeur accusé ait fabriqué, ou mis en vente, le produit falsifié, dès que ce produit est entré dans la maison de l’acheteur,” *Ibid.*, 876.

prominence helped make scientific expertise an important requirement for determining quality and authenticity in food products in the industrial age.

Although initially intended as a public hygiene and safety institution, the lab often went beyond this mandate to make pronouncements and recommendations about what it considered adulterated products even when these same posed no risk to public health. In 1891 the lab was asked for its opinion on the practice of using strontium salts to remove plaster from wine. M. Alfred Riche, a scientist working as a consultant to the lab, concluded “non seulement que les sels de strontium sont dépourvus de toxicité, mais encore qu’ils paraissent bienfaisants et favorables à la nutrition.” In spite of this conclusion M. Riche still recommended against the practice, not because it was bad for the public, but because adulteration itself “devalued” products:

Il est urgent de réagir contre la tendance qui consiste à modifier les produits naturels destinés à l’alimentation. En supposant que cette altération soit sans résultats fâcheux sur la santé, elle est une cause de dépréciation de ces substances; dans ce cas spécial, les vins représentant une branche considérable d’exportation, je crois qu’il est d’un grand

intérêt pour la France qu'on reste convaincu que ses vins sont des produits naturels et non pas des mélanges plus ou moins artificiels.<sup>62</sup>

In this remarkable statement M. Riche argued that France's prestige was contingent on its produce--in particular wine, its "special case"--remaining "natural" and not manufactured. Or rather *appearing* to be natural. The role of the lab was not to prevent adulteration or scientifically define the nature of "true" wine,<sup>63</sup> but rather to make sure that everyone believed ("reste convaincu") that it was unadulterated. Already in 1891 French scientific authorities were subtly entering the world of public relations and image-management.

At first the authority of the lab was contested by manufacturers and merchants who felt that scientists were arrogating the authority to define authentic wine and food. As Cochin noted, "les marchands de vin furent les plus actifs et les plus bruyants ennemis du laboratoire."<sup>64</sup> Merchants and producers, accustomed to profiting from their synthetic concoctions, argued that chemists should not be allowed to determine what wine could be, and as long as their "wine-like" products did not harm anyone, then where was the harm? Cochin mocked their defense of adulteration as a legal right: "Le droit de mouillage fait

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<sup>62</sup> *Rapport général sur les travaux du Conseil de salubrité* (Paris: Imprimerie et Librairie Centrales des Chemins de fer, 1890-94), 5.

<sup>63</sup> Scientists eventually conceded that the chemical composition of wine was for too complex for any common definition to be useful. See Dessaux, "Chemical Expertise," 356.

<sup>64</sup> Cochin, "Le laboratoire municipal," 877.

partie de nos libertés. Il n'est pas inscrit dans la Déclaration des droits de l'homme; il est venu après: c'est une conquête postérieure, qu'il ne faut pas se laisser arracher."<sup>65</sup> Merchants and producers soon realized, however, that regulation could be in their own best-interest so long as their own experts drew the line between the false and the real, the good and the bad, and they would play an important role in creation of the 1905 law on food adulteration.

This law was thus the second important step in defining the quality of food as a consumer product.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps the first thing to note about the 1905 law was that it was absolutely not intended as a hygienist measure or public health act. As Dessaux writes, the law was a response to fears in industry that adulteration was eroding the prestige of French agricultural goods: "France was immediately concerned because its food and drink industries claimed to sell high-value, high quality products."<sup>67</sup> It was in fact it was opposed by hygienists like Charles Girard who viewed it as a tool of industry.<sup>68</sup> Girard was largely correct as indeed it was primarily the result of food and wine industry lobbyists as a way to maintain the perception food "quality" (i.e. value) when faced with

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> For a discussion of the law and its influence, see Pierre-Antoine Dessaux, "Comment définir les produits alimentaires? L'élaboration des références pour l'application de la loi du 1er août 1905 entre expertise et consensus professionnel," *Histoire, économie et société* 25 (2006): 83-108.

<sup>67</sup> Dessaux, "Chemical Expertise," 356.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.



the appearance of widespread adulteration. As Stanziani notes its function was informational rather than prosecutorial:

This law essentially aimed to regulate the economy by ensuring fair transactions. Protection of public health was only an additional consequence of these measures. The law was devised to ensure the circulation of product information, after which consumers were free to buy what they wished. From this perspective, if the rules were clear and commercial fraud punished, the consumer would automatically be protected.<sup>69</sup>

Chemists were recruited along with teams of professional “tasters” from the wine industry to set up product standards against which samples would be judged. The law thus united two forms of expertise--scientific and industrial--to be the arbiters of quality in the consumer economy.

I believe that we gain a new understanding of the two innovations mentioned above--the Laboratoire municipal and the 1905 law--when we consider them in the context of encroaching consumer culture. They were both attempts to clarify and simplify the nature of a product that industry had made too complex for its own good. They were attempts, in other words, to reestablish the prestige that wine had enjoyed before its integration into the consumer

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<sup>69</sup> Stanziani, “Information, quality and legal rules,” 283.

economy. And prestige, crucially, was linked with the notion of pre-industrial simplicity, the direct connection between artisanal supplier (in this case the *vigneron*) and the consumer. The complexity of the consumer economy--the mechanized production and distribution systems, the middlemen, the chemical sophistication--made wine more affordable for the general public, and were laudable advances in that regard. Dry grape "wine-style beverage" was a fine and harmless product for the masses, but calling it "wine" diluted the image of France's quintessential produce. In the case of wine, food adulteration anxiety took the form of nostalgia. "Natural" wine seemed incompatible with the modern economic system. As one observer complained: "Quant au vin vraiment naturel, c'est à dire le jus pur d'une première cuvée, il faut reconnaître qu'il tend à devenir un mythe, un souvenir du temps passé, et qu'il serait ridicule de le demander au commerce de nos jours, du moins tant que dureront les ravages du phylloxera."<sup>70</sup> The 1905 law against adulteration was a reaction against the effect that consumer capitalism had had on the image of French wine in both the domestic and international markets. Its goal was to purge the concept of "wine" of its industrial connotations in order to restore its value. But while the law could help to subtract undesirable commercial traits from wine's image, it could not construct a new image for it.

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<sup>70</sup> *Ce que l'on boit*, 12.

Trade marks and advertising could, however, with wine as with other consumer products. In reconstructing the image of products that had been altered by their absorption into the consumer economy, advertisers exploited the public's "*souvenir du temps passé*," showing once again how consumer capitalism was adept at providing the solution to problems it had created. This is not the place for a detailed investigation into the meaning of trademarks and brand names in late nineteenth-century France.<sup>71</sup> I only wish to suggest that food adulteration anxiety may provide a new angle on this phenomenon. It may be helpful to consider the rise of brand names and trademarks as an attempt to reconstruct the authenticity of products that consumer culture was threatening. As the food adulteration crisis showed, consumers in late nineteenth-century France believed that production technology and the complexity of the supply system made it nearly impossible to recognize "natural" products. The Laboratoire municipal and the 1905 law acknowledged this, but only helped the consumer after a purchase had been made. Brand names and advertizing campaigns emerged as both educational and promotional tools, advising consumers as to which products were safe and authentic.

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<sup>71</sup> A subject which has received very little attention in current French historiography.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw a dramatic rise in the number of consumer brand names and trade marks in France.<sup>72</sup> The proliferation of trade marks in the late nineteenth century was, I believe, a sign that the consumer had lost confidence both in the quality of products he was being sold and in his ability to evaluate them unaided by “expert” advice of some kind. Food products truly became consumer goods when trade marks displaced physical properties as indicators of quality. Where buyers once would have held their bottle of wine or oil up to the light to examine it, by the end of the nineteenth century it was becoming more and more common for them to simply glance at a familiar trade mark. As one trade journal noted, the trade mark became the public’s defense against adulteration: “Le public consommateur exige qu’une marque authentique lui certifie que le produit est loyal et marchand et n’a aucune similitude avec les boulettes pharmaceutiques ou cubistes si à la mode.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> In this period the number of trade marks were registered annually in France rose dramatically, from 3 270 in 1880 to 8 398 in 1900. The rise after 1900 was even more impressive and 19 758 trade marks registered in 1913. “Résumé rétrospectif: Brevets d’invention, certificats d’addition, marques de fabrique, dessins et modèles industriels,” *Annuaire statistique*, 1916. This rise applied as much to food and wine as it did to durable consumer goods. For example, if we compare the years 1894 and 1903, the number of brand names for chocolate rose from 70 to 139, for coffee, chicory and tea the number of brands rose from 112 to 342, for “conserves alimentaires” the number rose from 107 to 229, and the number of brands for wines and sparkling wines rose from 536 to 834. “Etat des marques de fabrique et commerce déposée,” *Annuaire statistique*, 1895 and 1904.

<sup>73</sup> *La Conserve alimentaire*, June 1914, 468. This is the period when advertisers told consumers to demand (“exiger”) many things from their products. By phrasing it this way advertisers skillfully suggested it was consumer demand, rather than a collusion between manufacturers and advertisers, that resulted in the rise of brand names. In this way they perpetuated the illusion that consumers were in charge all along.

Advertising was the real beneficiary of food adulteration anxiety because it offered the general public a *point de repère* in the increasingly bewildering world of consumer culture. Advertising encouraged consumers to redirect their attention from the goods themselves to the ads and trade marks that surrounded these goods. Their main argument for this was persuasive: while any food could be made to look real, trade marks were much harder to imitate: “Alors, l’acheteur, le consommateur, celui qui paie et qui enrichit l’épicier en gros, demande que ce qu’il a acheté lui soit garanti par une contremarque que l’épicier ne puisse frelater.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, trade marks could be trusted, whereas one’s own observations no longer could. Advertising thus gained a greatly enhanced role in French culture. Its role was no longer merely to promote one good against another, or create the desire for new products--it became an arbiter of authenticity. As in the following 1895 ad for toothpaste, brand names not only told consumers what was safe, but also what was real.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *La Conserve alimentaire*.

<sup>75</sup> Ad for Botot toothpaste, *Le journal amusant*, January 5, 1895.



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The history of food adulteration and its attendant anxiety is informed by situating it in the context of emerging consumer culture. Food adulteration anxiety was a variation on the prevalent concern about the rise of consumerism and the consequent loss of authenticity in French culture. In response to the possible decline of prestige of French wine and food due to adulteration in the consumer economy, state hygiene authorities and the food industry collaborated in an effort to reestablish the perceived authenticity of traditional French food products. The concept of “authentic” food was in many ways the result of collusion between producers and advertisers who benefitted from public concern over adulteration. Foods increasingly were sold under brand names (which proliferated in this period) which assured consumers that the products they were

buying were real. Food adulteration anxiety thus produced a greater level of cultural mediation between food and consumers and greatly enhanced the cultural role of advertising. In the consumer society authentic food would increasingly be determined less by observable qualities like taste or appearance than by brand names and packaging.

The study of food adulteration anxiety shows, also, that we should be suspicious of the concept of authenticity. French critics of industrial adulterated foods frequently invoked the concept in their defense. But at the end of the nineteenth century “authenticity” was exploited as a marketing ploy by important players in manufacturing and advertising. Authenticity, in other words, was in many ways a fiction created by the consumer society itself. Eugen Weber reminds us that the only people who had any reason to feel nostalgic for the authenticity of pre-industrial France were those few for whom the simplicity of the rural economy provided fine and abundant food, which is to say the very wealthy.<sup>76</sup> The important fact we must remember about the history of French food is that there was never a period that offered the general population both the simplicity and transparency of the peasant-merchant economy along with the variety and affordability of rail-age agriculture. Abundant authenticity is a

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<sup>76</sup> *France, Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1986), 244.

contradiction that could only be resolved in a nostalgic reverie, or in a consumer advertisement.



## CHAPTER 6

### **Class, culture and consumer technology: selling the phonograph in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Paris**

A curious article appeared in the *Figaro* of July 1911. Aptly titled the “Poet’s Notebook,” it began with a description of an exquisite summer evening in Paris:

La lumière tombe d’un ciel sans nuages. Les fleurs s’avivent dans les jardins, une brise nouvelle fait remuer les verdure saines; l’horizon est rouge et calme, les hirondelles font dans l’azur leurs jeux éperdus. Le soleil est tombé dans un gros orme d’où il ne pourra plus se dégager et dont toutes les feuilles l’éborgnent. Tout est lisse. On sent que, dans les champs, les lièvres doivent avancer la tête entre les tiges. Enfin le silence, enfin la paix.<sup>1</sup>

But not for long. The reverie was interrupted by “une espèce de croassement, où l’on reconnaît la parodie d’une voix humaine, un bruit cocasse, trivial, dérisoire, qui profite de cette paix, qui envahit ce silence.” The spell was broken. The bunnies scattered.

The “croaking” was from a phonograph, this one set up to play non-stop on the street outside a cabaret. For many in France’s artistic and social elite, this

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<sup>1</sup> Abel Bonnard, “Le Carnet du Poète,” *Figaro*, July 29, 1911.

summed up their feelings toward the phonograph. It was an intruder from the machine age. It pumped noise into the streets, destroying the urban grace it had taken Paris centuries to cultivate. But it was not so much the noise which irked the literati--it was the *way* it made noise. The phonograph was inherently inartistic because it did not interpret music as an artist would; it made poor quality reproductions of it. And it did so tirelessly. Its “nasalized” (a favorite term of phonograph bashers) versions of songs were mechanical parodies of real music. Loud, mass-produced, trivial and cheap, it represented everything the elite hated about the consumer culture it saw emerging all around.

And yet they were buying them. By the time this article appeared in *Figaro*, the phonograph had become more popular in France than in any nation outside the US.<sup>2</sup> This success, moreover, had happened very quickly. Although a scratchy prototype had first been heard in France in 1878, the Edison phonograph was really introduced to the public at the 1889 Universal Exposition. Ten years later Paris was a world centre of phonograph manufacture and consumption. By the early 1900s the French phonograph was a commercial and cultural success.<sup>3</sup>

At French factories the Edison model was refined to make it easier to produce

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<sup>2</sup> On the phonograph's early success in France, see Roland Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph: 1877-1977*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1977), 101.

<sup>3</sup> I use “success” here in a Darwinian sense: the phonograph was a commercial and cultural success because music recordings proliferated in France. Whether they were any good or, more interesting, what influence the recording “industry” was beginning to have on performing and listening habits in France, are questions which await further research.

and cheaper to buy. By 1905 Charles and Emile Pathé's phonograph and film company had a factory at Chatou, near Paris, that supplied cylinders and phonographs to all of Europe. Their phonographs, like the "Gaulois," were top quality, affordable and proudly French. Their catalogue of recorded works contained 12,000 different items by 1904.<sup>4</sup>

Phonograph listening was not limited to those who could buy the device. People from all social classes dropped into the Pathés' "Salon du Phonographe" on the boulevard des Italiens to listen to recordings for a small fee.

Advertisements for phonographs, which appeared everywhere from the popular newspapers to the high-end magazines, contained detailed technical information about the attributes of various brands, suggesting that the public had become quite knowledgeable about how the machine worked. By 1911 phonographs were common in Paris; common enough for a columnist in a major magazine to complain about them.

That the phonograph became popular so soon, in France of all places, is surprising. Surprising because France had many social and cultural characteristics that, on the surface, should have led it to be resistant, or at best lukewarm, to the phonograph as a consumer product. As we have seen above, the upper classes, and defenders of "high art," were inclined to reject the idea

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<sup>4</sup> Gelatt, 168-170.

that industrial consumer technology had any serious role in French culture whatsoever. They described musicians who recorded for the phonograph as third-rate hacks with no hope of a “real” concert career. And they dismissed the phonograph, as they would the cinema, as nothing more than a technological novelty and a fairground attraction for the masses.<sup>5</sup> But the masses were perhaps an even tougher nut for the phonograph sellers to crack. They did not, as a class, spend their wages on domestic consumer goods of any kind, let alone on a device that would require them to divert funds from one of their favourite activities: the French working class preferred to spend their wages on nights out at cabarets that featured live music and stage performances (and sometimes the odd drink). In fact, the turn-of-the-century was the golden age of popular song and the café concert.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in many ways the phonograph was foreign to the working class approach to music and social life.

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<sup>5</sup> The predictions in the serious press regarding the future of the phonograph and of the cinema were almost identically dismissive. From the *Nouvelle revue* of 1880: “[I]l ne paraît pas que l’on doive désormais regarder le phonographe autrement que comme une curiosité scientifique.” And Maurice Leblanc, writing in the *Excelsior*, predicted: “Je ne crois pas, d’ailleurs, que le cinéma poursuive très longtemps encore sa marche ascendante.” This was because, unlike real art, it was just a novelty, and would soon settle into its proper (low) place in the cultural order: “Quand l’attrait de la nouveauté -- et il est énorme -- sera épuisé, [...] chaque chose reprendra sa place. Le théâtre continuera à remuer de belles idées et à susciter de nobles émotions. Les cinémas continueront à divertir nos yeux et à faciliter nos digestions.” Maurice Leblanc, “Le Cinéma contre le Théâtre,” *Excelsior*, October 27, 1913, quoted in André Rossel, *Histoire de France à travers les journaux du temps passé*, Vol. 2, *La Belle-Epoque, 1898-1914* (Paris: L’Arbre Verdoyant, 1982), 296.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Rearick, “Song and Society in Turn-of-the-Century France,” *Journal of Social History* 22 (Autumn, 1988): 45.

The unexpected success of the phonograph as a consumer product in turn-of-the-century France was due to a combination of factors, some coincidental or accidental, some deliberate and strategic. On the coincidental side, the phonograph made its second appearance in France at the Universal Exposition of 1889 at a time when consumer culture was beginning to invade and transform French society. Musical culture in particular was becoming more commercialized, and this made the idea of a musical consumer product more acceptable than it would have been a decade earlier when the phonograph had made its first entrance (and quick exit). A second coincidental factor was that the phonograph appeared when incomes were rising and even workers were beginning to have a little bit of what we may call--the anachronism is deliberate--"leisure time."<sup>7</sup>

But rising incomes and the commercialization of music did not, on their own, make the phonograph popular in France. This required a change in both the leisure practices and spending habits of a wide public and this, I argue, required advertising. French phonograph promoters devised sophisticated ad "campaigns" designed to create demand for their product among all classes of

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<sup>7</sup> Grant McCracken is right to warn against imposing the post-World War II concept of "leisure time" on historical periods when no such term existed. However, I believe that in France the origins of "leisure time" (as distinct from "work time") are to be found in the late twentieth-century. The term "leisure time," therefore, may accurately describe a phenomenon that existed before it was named. See McCracken, "The History of Consumption: A Literature Review and Consumer Guide," *Journal of Consumer Policy* 10 (1987): 142.

society. Their promotional strategy was deceptively simple. It really consisted of two main ideas: first, educate the public (especially during its early years) about the basic technology of the device and suggest potential uses of it; second, create a new cultural activity (home listening) which required the purchase of a phonograph. Although the strategy was simple, its execution was complex. In order to create a mass market for the phonograph in France, that “mass” had first to be divided into its component parts and persuaded separately, taking into account the cultural traditions, ambitions and prejudices specific to each social class. Thus, I propose that the phonograph succeeded in turn-of-the-century France partly because it came along at the right time, but also because promoters figured out how to make phonograph listening attractive to all social levels of the French public. I hope to show that the phonograph’s early success in France was not accidental, but was the result of the emerging alliance between manufacturers and the advertising industry, and their combined ability not only to create new consumer goods, but also to promote new social and cultural activities that required them.

My essay will first analyse the cultural reception of the phonograph in what I call its “novelty” stage. Here I will set the phonograph against the background of an increasingly consumer-oriented French musical culture. I then show that, in spite of this commercialization, the phonograph did not

“inevitably” fall into its role as a home-listening product. During its early years in France it was used quite creatively for public performance, recording and other non-consumer roles. I will then show how French manufacturers like Pathé, having grasped the potential of the phonograph as a consumer product, worked to make it both more affordable and desirable as a home listening device. I then conclude with an analysis of the advertising “narratives” that sought to make the French into phonograph consumers.

The historiography of the phonograph in late nineteenth-century Paris has to be one of the least-developed fields in French social and consumer history. There is no general study of the impact of the phonograph in French society. What little has been written on the development of the phonograph has been mainly interested in the technological aspects of the device itself, contributing little to our understanding of its integration into French society or its complex relationship with traditional French culture. When works do address the cultural impact of the phonograph they focus either on the United States or Great Britain. To date the most thorough work on the cultural history of the phonograph remains Roland Gelatt’s *The Fabulous Phonograph: 1877-1977*. Although this work has some useful material on the early years of the Pathé company it is very limited on France and has not been revised since its publication in 1977. Amazingly, considering their international influence on the culture of recording

and film, the Pathé brothers have not yet been the subject of a full-length study in any language. What little has been written on them deals primarily with their film, rather than their phonograph, business. As for literature on the cultural impact of the phonograph in France, it simply does not exist.

I can only guess as to the reasons for the lack of works on the phonograph in France. Part of the reason may simply be the overwhelming importance that cultural historians still assign to written sources. Even though historians have become more aware of non-traditional sources like recordings, it is still a great challenge to imagine the auditory world of the past, and even harder to reconstruct it for the reader. Although we have seen some improvement in the way historians treat audio and video sources since Marc Ferro's "wake-up call" in 1968, these sources are still underexploited.<sup>8</sup> But it is not only question of methodology, but of opening up historians' auditory imagination. As Annegret Fauser has pointed out, historians of even such a noisy occasion as the 1889 Universal Exposition have described it almost as though it were quiet.<sup>9</sup> A few years ago it seemed like the cultural history of listening was becoming an exciting, though minor, new field of cultural history. William Weber's work on

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<sup>8</sup> Marc Ferro, "Société du XXe siècle et histoire cinématographique," *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 23, no. 3 (1968): 581-585.

<sup>9</sup> Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 11.



European concert life showed how the twin developments of professional musicians and commercial concerts helped consumer culture penetrate the aristocratic domain of classical music.<sup>10</sup> More recently, James H. Johnson's study of the concert-going public in Paris from the Revolutionary to the Napoleonic periods proposed that the change from rowdy crowds to quiet and attentive bourgeois audiences signalled a shift in French society beyond the concert hall.<sup>11</sup> But these works, innovative and promising though they were, did not inspire followers to carry the story forward into the late nineteenth-century. As such they do not shed much light on our subject, as they are concerned primarily with the bourgeoisie and with the pre-industrial period.

In his article on the "achievement" of Paris in the nineteenth century<sup>12</sup> François Caron argued that the advent of the consumer society involved both economic change and new cultural practices--that, in fact, one of the characteristics of the consumer society is that the interaction between economic forces and cultural practices becomes more complex and intimate than in the pre-industrial society. The transition from an agrarian-aristocratic to an industrial-consumer society was not, however, an abstract process, but was composed of

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<sup>10</sup> *Music and the Middle Class: The Social Structure of Concert Life in London, Paris and Vienna*. (London: Croom Helm, 1975).

<sup>11</sup> *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> François Caron, "L'embellie parisienne à la Belle Epoque: l'invention d'un modèle de consommation," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 47, no. 1 (1995): 42-57.

thousands of individuals making decisions about what do with their money and their time. This transition has yet to be studied in its specifics, which is to say by looking at how various objects became consumer goods. As Professor Caron observed: “L’histoire de la diffusion dans la société parisienne des différents objets de consommation reste à faire.”<sup>13</sup> It is hoped that this essay will leave somewhat less to do.

### **The early years**

The French public got its first chance to listen to Edison’s “sound-writer” at the Académie des Sciences in Paris in March, 1878. The account of the demonstration that appeared in the *Journal des débats* is one of the most valuable descriptions we have of this new device. When Edison’s assistant cranked the arm of the phonograph, it repeated the words he had spoken into its “mouth” moments earlier: “Le phonographe est très honoré d’être présenté à l’Académie des Sciences.”<sup>14</sup> The voice that came out of the phonograph was “un peu nasillarde mais distincte.” (The term “nasal,” and variations thereof, would be used to criticise the phonographs for decades to come, but at this stage the audience was simply amazed to hear the magical sound.) The room burst into applause. The experience of hearing the human voice reproduced was thrilling

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>14</sup> *Journal des débats*, March 14, 1878.

and quite unsettling to the audience. Its first reaction was to assume there was some kind of trickery going on. As the journalist wrote: “On a toutes les peines du monde à ne pas croire à une mystification.” At least one member of the Academy accused Edison’s assistant of ventriloquism.

This early description of a small audience’s reaction to the phonograph is a very valuable historical document because it gives us a fresh look at the possibilities and limitations inherent in the basic technology of the machine. A close look at this description, moreover, already reveals the future obstacles to the phonograph’s cultural acceptance in France. It is a sign of how successful the phonograph’s promoters have been over the years that we now consider faithful mechanical reproduction of sound to be a virtue. At this first listening in Paris, however, “fidelity” was initially viewed with great scepticism. The audience was surprised, and actually rather disturbed, by the machine’s ruthless reproduction of detail. As the article noted, Edison’s assistant was “Américain; il parle le français parfaitement, mais avec un petit accent. *La Machine reproduisit l’accent avec une fidélité surprenante.* [My emph.]” When the audience listened to songs that had been sung and recorded by passengers on the phonograph’s trip from New York, they were amused to find that the machine even reproduced the singers’ mistakes. The machine was “indiscret et impitoyable. Quand on tourna la manivelle, il reproduisit les fautes avec une scrupuleuse exactitude.”

We have become accustomed to near-perfect reproduction of auditory data, but in these early days of sound reproduction the device's mechanical precision clashed with the world of human and instrumental sounds. After all, it did not interpret sounds like a performer would; it replicated them, faults and all. Mechanical reproduction of images, by contrast, had already been absorbed into contemporary French culture, and our listeners saw parallels right away. The recorded voice was "comme une image parfaite de cette voix, une photographie réduite en quelque sorte, avec tous les détails, toutes les imperfections de la prononciation." It was clear to the author that the invention of the phonograph represented a turning point of some kind but he did not speculate on the future of the device, other than to affirm that "[l]'heure des applications viendra, et tout le monde pressent si elles seront nombreuses et surtout curieuses!" But he mainly conceived it as a kind of archiving tool: "[L]'on peut certainement considérer comme résolu le singulier problème de la conservation et de la reproduction infinie de la voix humaine."

After its initial enthusiastic demonstration the phonograph enjoyed an intense but brief popularity in Paris as a public attraction. In September 1878, crowds had to be turned away from demonstrations at the Salle des Capucines.<sup>15</sup> In December of the same year, a phonograph at the Opéra was still bringing in

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<sup>15</sup> *Journal des débats*, September 25, 1878.

the crowds and its Sunday afternoon shows were “le divertissement favori des enfants et des collégiens.”<sup>16</sup> But this did not last. The public became bored with the device almost overnight. Once the novelty of listening to a tinny disembodied voice speak out of a machine wore off, people soon came to view the invention as nothing more than a fairground curiosity--good for a brief diversion, but not worth going back to. People were initially surprised by hearing a mechanized voice but were then almost immediately disappointed by how thin and metallic it sounded next to the real thing. They described the phonograph voice as “clown-like,” or a “Pulcinella,” or a “clown with a cold.” And nobody wanted to listen to the clown for very long. One journalist captured the general disappointment with the machine: “Malheureusement le phonographe ne reproduit ni le timbre ni les intonations des paroles qu’il a recueillies [...] et il ne paraît pas que l’on doive désormais regarder le phonographe autrement que comme une curiosité scientifique.”<sup>17</sup> As a result, the phonograph nearly vanished, in France as elsewhere.

According to Roland Gelatt, the phonograph went into “torpid retirement” from 1879 to 1887 because of its technological limitations.<sup>18</sup> This is indeed part of the explanation. The phonograph was, paradoxically, cursed by its

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<sup>16</sup> *La Presse*, December 2, 1878.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Bianchon, “Thomas Edison et ses inventions,” *La Nouvelle Revue*, 1880, T. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Gelatt, 31-3.

primitive fidelity. It raised expectations for performance that it was not yet good enough to meet. When allowed closer and repeated listening, the public found its reproductive powers to be rather feeble. However, there were more important contextual reasons for the phonograph's stillbirth. First, it arrived too early. Coming before the advent of film, it was introduced at a time when culture and technology were distinct entities; therefore it had no potential social role other than as a "scientific curiosity." It also appeared before French musical culture had become commercialized. This made it difficult to conceive of the phonograph as a musical device. Most importantly perhaps, the early phonograph faded away because its function was so new that nobody knew how to promote it. After the 1878 audition, the phonograph was mainly exhibited in Paris as a traditional fairground "spectacle." In such a setting it had to compete with performers, musicians, and ambient street sounds, all of which (whatever their entertainment value) had the virtue of being "live." Beside them, the phonograph inevitably sounded weak and unsatisfying. It would take at least a decade before promoters learned that the future of the phonograph was not in the public square.

The rebirth of the French phonograph began when Edison brought an improved phonograph to the international exposition in Paris in 1889. No doubt it sounded quite a bit better than its predecessor, but critics continued to complain about its nasal and metallic voice. What had really changed by 1889

was the social and cultural context of Paris. The public was being exposed to the possibilities of combining technology, culture and consumer goods in unprecedented ways. The Universal Exposition played an important role in introducing the public to new technologies as forms of entertainment.

A good example in this context of sound culture is the théâtrophone. The théâtrophone exhibit helped to introduce the idea of sound as consumer product. (The théâtrophone was, in fact, a direct competitor to the Edison phonograph, and was exhibited in the same pavilion at the Expo.<sup>19</sup>) Essentially a miniature telephone network, the théâtrophone allowed “spectators”<sup>20</sup> to listen to live concerts taking place in concert halls by listening through earphones connected to the network. Ten minutes of listening cost one franc per person (half that in the afternoon).<sup>21</sup> After the Expo, the théâtrophone was sold to the Parisian public as a subscription service. As Annegret Fauser explains, “théâtrophones were widely distributed in public, and soon, Parisians could subscribe to them at their house for 180 francs per year [...]”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Catherine Bertho-Lavenir, “Innovation technique et société du spectacle: le théâtrophone à l’Exposition de 1889,” *Le Mouvement Social* 149 (Oct. - Dec. 1989): 64.

<sup>20</sup> I use the term in quotes here because I believe one of the characteristics of the new forms of consumer culture in Paris (like the théâtrophone) was that it began to make the term “spectator” obsolete. By paying for ten minutes of music on the théâtrophone one became more of a “listener-consumer” than a spectator.

<sup>21</sup> Fauser, 284

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

The théâtrophone helped to make the idea of combining music, technology, and consumer culture more acceptable to the French public. But it was only one element of a larger trend: the commercialization of French musical culture. Musical culture in France was becoming more and more consumer-oriented since the first third of the nineteenth century. The ticketed concert season featuring professional musicians emerged roughly in the period from 1830 to 1848. This was followed by the increasing popularity of music lessons in middle class homes.<sup>23</sup> As music became more commercial, it also became a status symbol for the middle class. As Weber notes, industrial technology was making music itself into a consumer product long before the phonograph existed: “Technological advance had opened up mass-production of instruments and printed music, and new methods of promotion and sales enabled successful distribution of the products.”<sup>24</sup>

If we return to the primary sources surrounding musical culture in late nineteenth-century Paris, we can see to what extent it was becoming intermixed with--and in many ways indistinguishable from--consumer culture. Concert programmes and brochures, for example, show how the musical experience had become saturated with advertising for consumer products. Advertisers

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<sup>23</sup> Weber, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Weber, 6.



understood that musical concerts (along with billboards and the popular press) provided a way of reaching a large audience or, to use a later term, a “market.” Many concert programs sold advertising space and thus featured ads for various consumer goods, either interspersed with the songs or on the last page of the program.<sup>25</sup> And ads were customized and “targeted” at a specific *musical* market. Thus a concert featuring Swiss music included an ad for Nestle milk powder.<sup>26</sup>

Nor was “high” culture exempt from this consumerization of music--far from it, in fact. Advertising was plentiful in classical concert programs, and the audience was encouraged to associate the prestige of the occasion with the products being promoted. A highly fancy program for a concert by the Berlin Philharmonic (under the direction of Richard Strauss no less) featured three pages of ads for women’s hats, “chocolat à la tasse Prévost,” and a full page ad for an obviously expensive perfume.<sup>27</sup> Sometimes the strategy of associating consumer products with the prestige of music was not very subtle. One ad began by flattering the audience’s sophistication and taste: “Vous Monsieur, vous Madame, ou vous Mademoiselle qui applaudissez ces merveilleux Artistes et goûtez une délicieuse impression d’Art, vous paraissez éprouvez la plus entière

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<sup>25</sup> Archives de Paris, D17z (1).

<sup>26</sup> Program for Concert at the Salle des Fêtes du Trocadero, May 9, 1908. Archives de Paris, D17z (1).

<sup>27</sup> Concert program for l’Orchestre de la Philharmonie de Berlin sous la direction de Richard Strauss, April 26, 1908. Archives de Paris, D17z (1).

satisfaction.” It then urged them to reflect on how the beautiful surroundings of the concert hall created “les meilleures conditions pour goûter un plaisir absolu.” It was even possible, the ad continued, to experience the same aesthetic pleasure at home, but only with the requisite brand of paint: “Ce résultat, une seule peinture serait capable de le donner, c’est le ‘Matolin’”.<sup>28</sup>

Along with concert brochures, newspaper and magazine ads also promoted specific “brand name” musical instruments by associating them with famous musicians or composers. These ads often implied that by buying a fine musical instrument one could somehow partake of musical excellence. Thus an ad for the “Estey” organ featured a testimonial, purportedly by Richard Wagner himself. The Estey organ, “Wagner” wrote, “est merveilleux et noble; l’instrument magnifique que j’ai acquis me fait beaucoup de joie, il me procure un agréable amusement. Mon grand ami Franz Liszt aussi est ravi et se montre hautement satisfait de cet Orgue. Signé: Richard Wagner, Bayreuth.”<sup>29</sup> By purchasing *this* organ one could, presumably, have just as much fun as Richard and Franz.

This use of musical prestige to “elevate” consumer goods above their mass-produced origins was one side of the *rapprochement* between French musical

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<sup>28</sup> Concert program from May 9, 1908. Archives de Paris, D17z (1).

<sup>29</sup> Advertizing brochure for organs, n.d. Archives de Paris, D17z (2) envelope “Pianos-Musique”.

culture and consumer culture. But there was an opposite tendency as well.

Advertisers used the sales techniques of consumer culture to make music more accessible (in effect *less* prestigious) in order to sell it, whether in the form of lessons, instruments, sheet music or new mechanical devices, to a growing buying public who had previously been excluded from the world of high art. A concert program for a group called the Quatuor Parent provides us with an excellent example of this technique. The program featured an ad for the device known as the Pianola, which was a type of player piano. The ad began by pointing out that many people would like to play music, but encounter great obstacles: “Nous naissons tous avec un tempérament plus ou moins musicien; mais il n’y a que ceux qui osent affronter l’étude laborieuse de la technique qui arrivent à développer ce tempérament, Dieu sait au prix de quels efforts.” Short of subjecting oneself to the arduous and virtually insurmountable task of practicing, how was one to enjoy music? The technology of the Pianola, of course, provided the solution. It eliminated the need for painful preparation: “[I]l supprime totalement toute connaissance spéciale et il rend toutes les œuvres écrites pour le piano avec une perfection impeccable.” The Pianola was aimed at a public for whom music had been an intimidating and exclusive practice. It allowed them, for the first time in their lives, to express their artistic potential: “C’est le grand art musical à la portée de ceux qui ont du goût, et le

développement rapide et sans aucun effort d'un tempérament musical." The Pianola offered musical culture as a consumer product; the potential customer merely had to make his way to the Aeolian music shop on Avenue de l'Opéra to buy one.<sup>30</sup>

The great illusion of consumer culture--that any skill or experience could be reduced to a product one could easily buy--applied not only to the "brand name" musical instruments but to music lessons as well. Lessons were advertised as "new and improved" products--consumer-friendly versions of what used to be a slow and difficult discipline. One ad, for example, claimed to offer to "chanteurs des deux sexes, et à ceux qui sont gênés pour se faire entendre en parlant" the ability to "se faire entendre sans éprouver aucune fatigue, dans les plus vastes salles ou dans les foules les plus bruyantes." These new super-lessons, far from being the slogging old-fashioned lessons of yore, were quick and easy. Students "n'auront plus besoin, comme cela a lieu d'habitude, de ces longues vocalises ou d'autres épreuves généralement très fatigantes pour la santé: en un temps variant de 15 à 50 secondes au plus, ils obtiendront une voix plus vibrante et plus timbrée."<sup>31</sup> In fifty effortless seconds (at the most!)

"Professor" J. Dekler would have you singing and speaking like a stentor. This

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<sup>30</sup> Concert brochure for the Quatuor Parent, May 22, 1903. Archives de Paris, D 17z (1).

<sup>31</sup> Ad for vocal lessons, n.d. (c. 1905). Archives de Paris, D17z (2), envelope "Pianos-Musique."

kind of exaggeration, full of the specious claims of advertising, is now very familiar to us, but in turn-of-the-century France this was a new approach to traditional culture. Music, previously a forbidding discipline, was presented instead as an attractive item which anyone could buy. The proliferation of such advertising helped to create the cultural environment in which the phonograph could be successfully promoted and sold.

Before this could happen, however, the phonograph went through a “transition” period during which its cultural role was unstable. Immediately after its second “introduction” to France, the phonograph was used, and more frequently imagined, in wildly different and often very creative roles. During this period, roughly from 1889 and 1900, the French press was full of observations about these different uses and of speculation about what the future cultural role of the phonograph might be. Above all, this was a period of possibilities, before French manufacturers and advertisers were able to shape the device into a single-function consumer item. Revisiting the primary documents during this transitional period reminds us that there was nothing inevitable about the future path of the phonograph and that alternative uses were--and are--possible.

In Paris the phonograph continued for several years to be exhibited as a fairground attraction, just as it was at the 1889 Universal Exposition. It was set up to “perform” for a gathered crowd. As phonographs became more common, they

were increasingly used as “attractions” intended to entice the public to patronize a shop or business. In this role the phonograph was a kind of public music machine, much like a diner juke box. An article in *Le Monde Artiste illustré* from 1895 described a variation on this fairground theme. It noted how a barber in London used a phonograph to attract customers to his shop:

A Londres, un barbier vient d’avoir une idée très originale. Il a fait installer dans sa boutique un phonographe de grande dimension. Des fauteuils sont ranges en cercle, de façon à ce que les habitués, -- ceux que l’on rase, aussi bien que ceux qui attendent leur tour -- puissent entendre des morceaux tirés du répertoire de l’orchestre Don Godfrey ou les chansons les plus populaires. On assure qu’en un mois de temps, le Figaro Londonien a doublé sa clientèle!<sup>32</sup>

Though it was no doubt unusual to incorporate a phonograph into a business at the time (hence the interest of the article), the form it took was still a traditional public performance. While waiting for their shave, the barber’s clients were spectators.

However, the phonograph was soon being imagined in more unconventional roles. In fact, one benefit of revisiting these early accounts is that we are reminded of how extensively its recording function was exploited.

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<sup>32</sup> *Le Monde Artiste illustré*, July 7, 1895.

Accounts of amusing applications of this recording quality appeared frequently in the French press, and many speculated about its cultural implications. An article in the *Bulletin Scientifique* of 1889 noted how, in America, “les hommes d’affaires très occupés” would dictate their memos to a phonograph cylinder. The article predicted that phonograph cylinders sent through the mail (or “phonogrammes”) would soon replace letters altogether.<sup>33</sup> Another French magazine from 1890 delighted in describing how an American pastor had used a phonograph to record his own funeral oration. The pastor, the article recounted, “craignant sans doute de confier à des collègues trop peu bienveillants la délicate mission de prononcer son oraison funèbre,” decided to write his own speech and then “il la récita devant un phonographe, et s’en remit, pour le surplus, au fidèle instrument d’Edison.” At the funeral, two phonographs were used: the first played pre-recorded music followed by the weeping of the deceased’s widow, then the second “prit la parole et, avec l’accent, les intonations même du défunt,

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<sup>33</sup> The article uncannily described the benefits of “voice mail”: Mais on a la prétention de remplacer les lettres ordinaires, confiées à la poste, par des phonogrammes. Cela n’a rien d’irréalisable; le cylindre d’écorce coûte seulement 15 centimes; il peut aisément voyager dans une petite boîte de bois [...] la dépense totale est donc à peine supérieure à une lettre. L’expéditeur gagne à la substitution un temps précieux; le destinataire y gagne d’entendre la voix même de son correspondant, avec les diverses inflexions qui font mieux comprendre la pensée.” *Bulletin scientifique*, 1889-90. In many cases these French accounts of the business applications of the phonograph in America were pure speculation (no doubt influenced by Edisonian propaganda) as the business use of dictation machines never actually caught on, perhaps because dictation loses much of its *raison d’être* if there is nobody around to dictate to. On the business use of the phonograph, see Delphine Gardey, “Mécaniser l’écriture et photographier la parole: Utopies, monde du bureau et histoires de genres et de techniques,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 54, no. 3 (May - Jun. 1999): 597-600.

esquissa une rapide mais complète autobiographie du regretté prédicateur.”<sup>34</sup>

Although this article no doubt fulfilled the popular press’s requirement for sensationalism, it also explored (in its way) some of the metaphysical implications of sound reproduction.<sup>35</sup>

Some articles noted how the phonograph’s recording function could be used to supply a form of social entertainment that combined elements of traditional musical culture (singing) with new technology. To borrow a term from our era, they explored how the phonograph could be used “interactively” at a social gathering. One article described how none other than the Prince of Bismarck, when presented with a new Edison phonograph, amused himself by singing songs into the phonograph, and then playing them back:

Le chancelier s’est amusé à réciter, devant l’appareil, des chansons en plusieurs langues. Il a commence par: ‘Allons, enfants de la patrie...’; puis, passant à l’anglais: ‘In old colony times, when we had a king...’; vieille chanson révolutionnaire américaine; il a termine par le fameux lied des étudiants allemands: ‘Gaudeamus igitur!’ Puis il a dicté à l’appareil une

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<sup>34</sup> *La Revue pour tous*, March 8, 1890.

<sup>35</sup> Articles like this, which dealt with the cultural implications of recorded sound, largely disappeared as the phonograph became more familiar.



dépêche pour son fils Herbert. Il a accepté un phonographe que M. Edison lui a fait offrir.”<sup>36</sup>

In this account the phonograph, still very much a novelty, was portrayed as an amusing device that could enhance the real spectacle, which was the Prince’s display of musical and linguistic skill. Rather than an attraction in its own right, it could be integrated into a social gathering like an odd new musical instrument at a salon.

For about ten years the French public was free to imagine the phonograph in many different social and cultural roles. Although most of the predictions made during this period did not foresee the future standardization of the phonograph as a consumer item, one of the earliest ones proved to be the most accurate. In 1889 one H. Gros, writing in the *Magasin Pittoresque*, predicted that the phonograph would soon be mass-produced and affordable, and that when it was “[il] nous suffira de choisir dans les cylindres en cire que l’industrie livrera à bon marche, pour nous offrir, soit un tour de force de vocalise de la Patti, soit une chanson de Judic ou le dernier discours prononcé à la Chambre des députés par le leader à la mode.” This phonograph, Gros imagined, could be used for entertainment or for listening to political speeches, but either way it would be up to the individual who owned it to decide. He concluded by looking forward to

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<sup>36</sup> *Journal des débats*, October 9, 1889.

the “innombrables résultats qui seront produits par ce merveilleux instrument qui, avant peu d’années, sera dans toutes les familles.”<sup>37</sup> Although M. Gros overestimated the affordability of the machine, he saw that its future lay in private domestic listening. It may have been obvious to him but, as we will see, French advertisers would work for hard for the next twenty years to persuade the public to accept this view.

### **Pathé and the phonograph**

Much of the reason why the phonograph became a popular consumer product in France before most other countries has to do with the influence of Charles and Emile Pathé. The Pathé brothers were among the very first to conceive of the possibility of selling the phonograph both as a form of entertainment and a mass consumer object. During the period when the phonograph was still a novelty with a range of disparate uses, the Pathé brothers saw the business potential of a widely marketed, affordable phonograph, and set about bringing it to life through a combination of improvements in manufacturing and creative promotion. They bought the rights to sell the Edison phonograph in France shortly after Edison’s demonstration at the 1889 Universal Exposition. They set one up to play and attract customers to their “Bar Américain” at the Place Pigalle, and they soon found that many customers

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<sup>37</sup> *Magasin Pittoresque*, 1889, (A57,SER2,T7).

offered to buy the device from them.<sup>38</sup> Encouraged by this early enthusiasm, the Pathé brothers then opened the world's first establishment for listening to recorded music: the Salon du Phonographe.

This Salon was a highly innovative institution that contributed to the flourishing "boulevard culture" of central Paris, but it has not received the attention it deserves in cultural history.<sup>39</sup> It offered a glimpse of the unique combination of forces that would come to define mass culture in the twentieth century. It provided a venue where traditional musical culture, through the medium of new technology, was offered to the public as a consumer product. Customers would take a seat in the lushly furnished room, speak into a tube to order the selection they wanted to hear, and pay fifteen centimes. An unseen worker in the basement would find the requested cylinder and place it on a phonograph machine so the customer could listen to it through ear tubes.<sup>40</sup> The Salon was remarkable not only for its novelty and impressive size (by 1899 it already had a selection of 1,500 cylinders), but for its immediate appeal to a wide

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<sup>38</sup> Gelatt, 101-2.

<sup>39</sup> The salon, located at 26 boulevard des Italiens, contributed an important "audio" component to the emerging "mass culture" of the central boulevards. On Parisian boulevard culture as precursor to modern mass media, see Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> Walter L. Welch, Leah Brodbeck Stenzel Burt, and Oliver Read, *From Tinfoil to Stereo: The Acoustic Years of the Recording Industry, 1877-1929* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994), 92.

audience. In spite of its luxurious ambience, the Salon was very affordable and, as Roland Gelatt writes, “was patronized alike by easygoing gentlemen with an hour or more to kill and frugal midinettes with an eye for inexpensive entertainment.”<sup>41</sup> In addition to its cross-class appeal, the Salon represented an important transitional moment in French cultural history, combining elements of traditional public spectacle while anticipating the domestic listening of the solitary phonograph listener-consumer of the future. Just as the Kinetoscope booths, precursors to the cinema, partook of both public spectacle and private viewing,<sup>42</sup> the Salon du Phonographe combined these two cultural experiences in one space. Although it was open to the public, it enveloped its customers in the plush carpeting and solitude of a middle class home. Can we still refer to these listeners, isolated and listening to separate tunes on their headphones, as “spectators”?

At the same time as they were promoting the phonograph as a form of public consumer entertainment, the Pathé brothers were also working to produce a version of the Edison phonograph they could sell to a mass public. They decided to “market” the device as a consumer object for what we can only call, without anachronism, “home entertainment.” In 1894 they set up a factory in

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<sup>41</sup> Gelatt, 103.

<sup>42</sup> As Shlomo Sand wrote of the kinétoscope: “Le spectateur était sollicité pour une forme de spectacle alliant à la fois l’aspect public, hors du domicile, et particulier puisque la visualisation revêtait une dimension solitaire.” *Le Mouvement social* 172 (Jul. - Sep. 1995): 8.

Belleville that could manufacture copies of the Edison phonograph that were relatively cheap.<sup>43</sup> Soon they had a range of phonographs for sale under the Pathé name and though by 1899 prices for the Pathé phonograph ranged widely, for 36 francs one could buy the Pathé “Gaulois,” model, which was described in the Pathé advertising as the “phonographe des familles.”<sup>44</sup>

Very early on, the Pathé brothers decided to market the phonograph to the widest possible public. Of course this included the upper and middle classes, groups already familiar with purchasing non-essential or “luxury” items; but it also included the large mass of the working class who were not yet really consumers. This approach--so familiar to us now in the age of mass culture--was unusual in turn-of-the-century France. The only consumer product comparable to the phonograph, the théâtrophone, had been promoted in completely the opposite manner. It was sold to an exclusive clientele (essentially bourgeois concert-goers--Proust had a subscription), was kept deliberately expensive so as not to compete with concert ticket sales, and as a result never became very popular or profitable.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, the Pathé brothers envisioned the phonograph as a mass-produced consumer entertainment technology. They--and the manufacturers and promoters who followed their lead--used a variety of

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<sup>43</sup> Gelatt, 102.

<sup>44</sup> Advertisement for the “Phonographe Pathé,” *Journal des débats*, December 24, 1899.

<sup>45</sup> Bertho-Lavenir, 67.

sales and promotional techniques to help make the phonograph appealing to the widest range of potential consumers. They succeeded in doing so because they were able to identify the component parts of the French public and appeal to them separately, often in the same ad. We will first look at how they went after the working class.

The Pathé brothers, like Georges Dufayel, believed that mass production would only be profitable if there was a mass consumer market for their products. But because the phonograph was so new, and because the working class consumer was still such a rare animal, the Pathé brothers also knew that they would largely have to create their own market. The only way a mass market for the phonograph could be created in France was by making the working class into phonograph buyers. Like Dufayel, the Pathé company and their followers used a combination of advertising, street promotion and consumer credit in order to achieve this.

Pathé phonograph advertisements, especially in the period from 1895 to 1905, are extremely valuable sources which reveal how the company tried to transform the French working class into phonograph buyers. It is no accident that this period overlaps nicely with the period when Dufayel was trying to convert the working class into regular department store customers. I believe this was a kind of “golden age” of publicity in France because advertising (for the

phonograph in this case) had to perform several tasks at once: educate people about the sheer existence and basic technology of the phonograph; persuade the working class to spend money on a durable, consumer good, something they had never done before as a class; and, perhaps its most subtle and difficult task, it had to reassure these new consumers that consumption itself was a good, healthy activity that opened new possibilities for them, however much it seemed a departure from their traditional values.

Here I must make a brief digression to discuss my use of advertisements as a historical source. Advertisements are extremely valuable documents, especially in the period when consumer culture was just taking hold in France, deserving of a special kind of attention if we wish to use them to the full. We live, now, in a culture saturated with advertising, and as a result have developed mental defences to it. Most advertising we have learned to ignore, and the small amount that we choose to pay attention to we “read” quickly and then mentally dispose of and move on to other things. Nonetheless, in order to read advertising as a historical source, we have to disable temporarily our mental anti-advertising filter and give it the same kind of patient attention we would give to a more traditional document. If we do this, as I will try to do below, I think advertisements can tell us things about early consumer culture and society that no other source can.

Of all the challenges faced by early advertisements for the phonograph in France, perhaps the greatest was convincing the mass working-class public to buy something so completely outside its traditional purchasing habits. Not only was the phonograph something that could not be eaten, imbibed or worn, it could not even be sat or slept on. In other words, it was not among those purchases that, at least until 1900, the working class privileged to the exclusion of almost all others. It was not even in the category of those domestic “necessities” like furniture that merchants such as Dufayel were gradually persuading the working class to consume. By reading these early phonograph ads, we learn that manufacturers like Pathé resorted to the same techniques used by Dufayel in order to entice workers to become consumers. One of the most important of these techniques was providing consumer credit. Almost all of the early French phonographs could be purchased by instalments, with a very small or no initial payment. For example, an ad for the “Virtuose du Foyer,” a French-manufactured phonograph similar to the Pathé model, explained that its total cost was 130 francs, but that it could be paid for in monthly instalments of 6 francs 50, with no down payment. The main purpose of consumer credit was to make it easier for first-time working-class consumers to buy relatively expensive things without drastically affecting their budgets. Accordingly, the merchant selling the “Virtuose du Foyer” made buying it almost effortless. The only thing a



potential consumer had to do was fill out the form attached to the ad, which read:

“Je soussigné déclare acheter [...] 1 Phonographe ‘Virtuose’, avec tous les accessoires indiqués, et m’engage à payer la somme de 130 francs par acomptes de 6 Fr. 50 par mois [...]”<sup>46</sup> The phonograph and a case full of cylinders would then be delivered to his door.

But no matter how easy it was to buy the phonograph, the consumer still had to decide to do so. If we read our ad more closely, we will see that one of its main “arguments” (and which I believe was central to the emerging consumer culture in France) was that workers should buy the phonograph because it made culture into a thing that was easy to acquire. This apparently simple idea was, in fact, a complex and potentially revolutionary argument. We can best illustrate this by analysing its component parts. First, it pointed out that the phonograph made music into a thing. In this early ad, it was very important to explain this transformation to a public who still would have been unfamiliar with the phonograph. Hence the need to explain that, by buying the phonograph, one also acquired songs “enregistrés sur des cylindres en cire que nous mettons en vente.” After 1900, as the French public became more familiar with commercial recording, ads would no longer contain such didactic information. Second, the phonograph made culture *easy*. The ad stated that the reason the phonograph

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<sup>46</sup> Phonograph ad from the *Petit Journal Illustré*, late 1899, reproduced in Rossel, *Histoire de France à travers les journaux du temps passé*, 73.

was “une des plus merveilleuses inventions de ce siècle” was because it made it so easy to consume culture. Like the player piano or user-friendly music lessons, consumer technology made music accessible to the masses. As the ad claimed, with the purchase of the phonograph, anybody could produce music: “Avec le Virtuose du Foyer, d’un mécanisme simple et facile, toute personne, même un enfant, peut sans aucun apprentissage reproduire toutes partitions musicales vocales ou instrumentales [...]” Finally the phonograph was a domestic consumer object, and as such acquiring it was a way of gaining prestige. The ad presented the phonograph as a piece of furniture, “renfermée dans un jolie Boite en ébénisterie acajou ou noyer massif modèle très riche [...]” By emphasizing the machine’s wooden trim the phonograph could be sold as an attractive piece of home furnishing, easily integrated into the working-class *foyer*. Presented in this way, the phonograph fit in well with the theme of Dufayel’s project to make the working class into buyers of new home furniture. It is not surprising that the phonograph was one of the most prominently advertised items at the Grands Magasins Dufayel.

Thus, according to the advertisers, the working class could gain access to unprecedented cultural and material opportunities simply by becoming consumers. However, it still would have been difficult to convince the working class to buy the phonograph because it presented such a completely different

approach to musical culture than the one it was accustomed to. The phonograph was introduced in the period that Charles Rearick has described as a kind of “Golden Age” of popular song in France. In the working-class neighbourhoods of Paris, live music performances in the various Café Concert venues were the main form of leisure. As Rearick writes, in the last third of the nineteenth century “when even the most basic phonographs were still a rare novelty to the great majority, ‘live’ singing was the commonplace, almost ubiquitous entertainment.”<sup>47</sup> For the working class, entertainment was something that one sought *outside* the home. This was not only because working-class homes were small and uncomfortable, but because music was enjoyed as a social, not a private, activity. One went out to enjoy the songs which were associated with the social milieu--the cafes, cabarets and concert-halls--in which they were performed. It is important to emphasize this point: for the French working class, musical entertainment was practically the opposite of domesticity. In fact, as I show in my chapter on the consumption habits of the working class, spending on socializing and entertainment, until at least 1900, precluded the consumption of domestic goods. The challenge of the phonograph advertisers was to break down the cultural attitudes of the working class who saw domestic consumption as a burden that competed with the enjoyment of wine and song. And in order to do

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<sup>47</sup> Rearick, “Song and Society in Turn-of-the-Century France,” 45.

this, they had to make the phonograph an object of desire that could compete with the allure of the cabaret.

At first phonograph promoters simply tried to integrate the machine into the traditional social world of working-class music, like the phonograph at the Pathé bar in the Place Pigalle. Phonographs were also set up to play during the intermission at the afternoon concerts at the Grands Magasins Dufayel.<sup>48</sup> But in order for the Pathé company and others to sell it as a mass-produced consumer product, they had to more than just expose the public to the new device: they had to redefine the popular notion of musical entertainment. This redefinition, I believe, was the most difficult challenge faced by the early phonograph advertisers.

The Café Concert, of course, offered many things that a phonograph could not: social interaction, visual stimulation, inebriation, unpredictability, etc. Phonograph ads never sought to deny these compelling attractions or to imply that the phonograph was intended to replace them. They proposed, rather, that mechanically-reproduced sound offered one significant pleasure that live music, by definition, could not: the novel pleasure of listening to--and owning--a machine that could make music. Like the bourgeois who bought a Wagner-endorsed organ, buying a phonograph allowed one to participate in the artistic

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<sup>48</sup> Ad for concert at the Grands Magasins Dufayel, June 22, 1899. Archives de Paris, D17z (2).

process. The phonograph did not replace live music but it created a new kind of aesthetic pleasure in which the listener delighted as much in the smooth functioning of technology as in the reproduced “performance.” This is what Francois Caron has referred to as the “second step” that promoters and manufacturers resorted to in order to sell new consumer products to the French public. After public curiosity had been sparked by the early, didactic ads, promoters sought to create “une pratique culturelle nouvelle, entièrement construite sur un nouveau produit.”<sup>49</sup> In the case of the phonograph the new cultural practice was home listening to recorded music.

Because it was so new, and so different from traditional music-listening, promoters had to educate the public about the pleasures to be derived from this new cultural practice. In an ad for a Pathé phonograph, published in a Paris newspaper in 1900, the listener-consumer was clearly expected to do two things at once: enjoy the recorded voice, and evaluate the felicity with which the machine reproduced it. In a deceptively complex statement, the ad suggested that the machine’s technological prowess and “faithful” reproduction of the human voice were what made it valuable: “Un cylindre de la plus haute valeur, signé et chanté par nos plus illustres artistes désignés ci-après, qui ont bien voulu nous

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<sup>49</sup> Francois Caron, “L’offre créatrice: perspective historique. La France de 1880 à 1929,” in *Institut de l’Entreprise. L’Offre Créatrice. Inventer le client* (Paris: Les Editions d’organisation, 1987), 102, quoted in Caron, “L’embellie parisienne,” 55.

honorer de cette marque d'estime pour prouver la supériorité de nos Phonographes donnant réellement la voix nature au moyen de nos nouveaux procédés d'enregistrement."<sup>50</sup> This single sentence points to important new ideas about music and consumer culture, proclaiming that a unique experience--a fusion of technological and traditional artistic excellence--was available to the discerning consumer who bought this particular phonograph. Nowhere did it propose that this experience could replace the traditional live performance; it was, instead, a completely new cultural experience.

Here we come to the phonograph promoter's strategy for appealing to the artistic and social elite. After all, we have not yet explained why, if the phonograph purported to offer the working class access to aesthetic pleasure and cultural prestige, it would appeal to those who already enjoyed these things. Nor have we discussed how promoters overcame elite disdain for consumer technology. They did this, quite brilliantly, by transforming the phonograph's "fidelity" from an aesthetic liability into a virtue, even a luxury.

In order to appreciate this twist, we must consider how much had changed in the public's understanding of the phonograph in merely twenty years. Where the early listeners just after the Universal Exposition were unnerved by the machine's ruthless "fidelity"--its insensitive and inartistically

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<sup>50</sup> *Journal des débats*, December 24, 1899.

exact rendering of the original voice or instrument--by 1900 the public could appreciate and compare the audio fidelity of competing phonograph brands. In other words, the public became literate in a completely new kind of aesthetic evaluation. Listeners no longer regarded the machine as inferior to art, but as an aid to its appreciation. An important reason for this change was that the fledgling French recording industry began to attract more and more famous artists. The cultural press had initially dismissed phonograph performers as mere novelty singers who, because of their unusually loud or shrill voices, sounded good on cylinders.<sup>51</sup> An 1899 article in the *Monde artiste illustré*, for example, said that only “les artistes qui ont renoncé définitivement à l’ambition de la gloire” would condescend to sing for the microphone. But this changed after 1900 as many top-notch musicians began to record for the Pathé label.<sup>52</sup> Cylinder ads then made it clear that their recordings were not sung by some anonymous phonograph hack, but by the finest, most “illustrious” artists of the day.<sup>53</sup> When a true concert performer recorded a song, the phonograph that could reproduce this performance as accurately as possible was the most valuable. In these early days of mechanical sound reproduction, fidelity was becoming a source of prestige. If

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<sup>51</sup> *Magasin Pittoresque*, 1895.

<sup>52</sup> Gelatt, 170.

<sup>53</sup> *Journal des débats*, December 24, 1899.

one could own a machine that recreated fine music, then perhaps there was a place for technology in art after all. As a result, the French elite was becoming interested in consumer culture.

It was very important, however, for advertisers to conceal this fact from the French elite. Although it may have been starting to enjoy the benefits of consumer culture, it still preferred to think of itself as discerning pseudo-aristocratic buyers of artisanal goods. Or at least that is what phonograph advertisers believed, which is why they tried to conceal the mass-produced nature of the machine as much as possible. Although the Pathé phonograph factory in Belleville was designed to produce the phonograph and its media as cheaply as possible,<sup>54</sup> it also produced much more expensive phonographs for sale as “luxury” models, like the 800 franc “Stentor,” described in the advertising as “le plus puissant de tous les Phonographes.”<sup>55</sup> Adorning these phonographs with wooden trim and fancy cases was another way of making them seem more traditionally luxurious and less “modern”.

This sales strategy of creating mass-produced goods accessible to the lower class, while marketing fancier versions of the same goods to appeal to the wealthy, was the same technique employed by the bourgeois department stores:

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<sup>54</sup> For images of the Pathé factory at Chatou, and its cost-driven technology and manufacturing techniques, see <http://www.delabellepoqueauxanneesfolles.com/PatheHistoire.htm>.

<sup>55</sup> Advertisement for the “Phonographe Pathé,” *Journal des débats*, Dec. 24, 1899.



mass-produced goods were disguised, through superficial changes, as luxury products in order to appeal to the bourgeoisie's (real or imagined) desire for hand-made, exclusive products. This kind of dual advertising aimed at the masses and the elite was not unique to the phonograph and may well be an essential characteristic of the consumer society. François Caron has described this "dual" advertising strategy as an important characteristic of the emerging consumption model of the consumer society. Promoters, he argues, "ont fait appel à un public beaucoup plus large en combinant, de manière subtil, la mobilisation des foules et le snobisme aristocratique."<sup>56</sup> One of the paradoxes inherent in phonograph advertising in late nineteenth-century Paris was that it exploited and reinforced the social and cultural divisions of traditional French society in an attempt to dissolve those divisions in a common consumer market.

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By about 1910 the phonograph had been shaped into its role as a home music player and phonograph-listening had become a normal cultural activity. The French phonograph industry, led by the Pathé company, had been able to penetrate the cultural barriers of both the working class and the elite to clear a space for this strange practice. In welcoming the phonograph, the various classes of the French public had to renounce a measure of their traditional cultural

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<sup>56</sup> Caron, 55.

values. The working class turned away, if only gradually, from its favorite form of leisure: the social enjoyment of music. The phonograph, by bringing music into the home, helped guide the working class away from the cabaret and the Café Concert into lives that were more domestic, more similar to those of the bourgeoisie. The elite, by accepting that the phonograph could play a role in French musical culture, helped erode the prestige of “high art.” Mechanical reproduction made even the greatest musical works into consumer products like any other. These choices, seemingly minor, even trivial, would nevertheless help push France closer to becoming a consumer society. It is a measure of the advertisers’ skill that few were aware at the time that embracing the phonograph required them to give up anything of value.

## CONCLUSION

In 1906 the satirical magazine *Jean qui rit* published a cartoon showing three children in a playground. One girl asked the other: “Ta maman n’est pas riche et elle t’a encore acheté un petit frère. Comment fait-elle?” She answered: “Tiens, et Dufayel, parbleu!”<sup>1</sup> The cartoon effectively located the whole Dufayel project in the realm of the ridiculous. It implied that the transformation of the working class into consumers--whether through credit or low prices--had something preposterous about it. This was not an isolated example: in the press at the time the name “Dufayel” was often used as shorthand for the social disruption caused by the working-class consumer.

By 1919, however, ideas began to change. The Dufayel project was even the subject of a short play with a very different message.<sup>2</sup> At the start of the play Dufayel launches into a passionate ode to the idea of working-class consumer goods: “Je vois...je vois la chambre où naitront les enfants de l’humble ménage: armoire et lit de milieu acajou.” Then, in great materialistic detail, he declaims his furniture for the masses manifesto:

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<sup>1</sup> *Jean qui rit*, May 13, 1906, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Pellerin, “Dufayel: Pièce en 5 actes,” in *Copiste indiscret de Hugo, Vigny, Barbey d’Aurevilly, Albert Samain, Rimbaud, Jules Renard, Anatole France,...etc. Les poètes fantaisistes, le roman cinéma*, 63-77 (Paris: Albin Michel, 1919).

Je vois la salle à manger du modeste employé, le buffet orné de la cave à liqueurs offerte par l'oncle Rodolphe, le salon crème et framboise de la femme du sous-chef aux Finances. (Avec des larmes dans la voix.) La table de toilette Louis XVI, façon marqueterie, de Mimi Pinson, la machine à coudre de Jenny l'Ouvrière. Venez, mes enfants! Prenez, installez-vous! Et pour quelle faible somme!<sup>3</sup>

Dufayel's closing calls for "mobiliers par milliers!" are met with ridicule from the assembled bourgeois investors who boo, laugh and pelt him with canes and chairs.

But in 1919 the audience would have known that Dufayel was right. The play ends when Dufayel, now very rich, is visited by the working-class woman who, years ago, was his first customer. The woman, now stylishly dressed and purged of slang, explains that the furniture she bought from him changed her life. She started a business. Even her husband changed his ways: "Il est resté à la maison, le soir. Plus de bistro! Il s'est mis d'une société de tempérance, il a apporté toute sa paye. (Dufayel, mystique, montre le ciel.)"<sup>4</sup>

While joking about the idea that new furniture could change a worker into a respectable petit-bourgeois, the play nevertheless concedes that this was pretty much what was happening in Paris: Dufayel's wealth was the proof. Although

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

the play pokes fun at Dufayel, its real targets were those bourgeois investors who underestimated the social transformation he had initiated.

This thesis has argued that the creation of French working-class class consumers was an important development that resulted in dramatic cultural, economic and social changes in France. The origins of this change can be located in the late nineteenth century when the twin innovations of rail transport and efficient retail sales were expanded beyond the population of the Parisian bourgeoisie to include the Parisian working class. This expansion was first accomplished at the Grands Magasins Dufayel in the working-class neighborhood of the Goutte d'Or. At the Dufayel store consumer culture gained a greater social, economic, and even architectural significance than it had enjoyed on the central boulevards. The spectacular interior of the Grands Magasins Dufayel offered the working class a kind of consumer substitute for the urban spaces of leisure of central Paris. Its electric wonders celebrated technology as the force that would create a better future for the urban working class, where traditional French paternalism would be supplanted by consumer capitalism.

When we see how Dufayel proposed to transform the thousands of Parisian workers into consumers we become more aware of the socially subversive potential of consumer culture and the variety of challenges it posed to traditional French social and aesthetic hierarchies. We notice how the department

store itself, though conventionally depicted as a bourgeois institution, was in many ways a threat to bourgeois social status as it eroded the prestige of material goods by making them more affordable. We notice, also, how the phenomenon of food adulteration anxiety in the Parisian press around the turn of the century was in many ways a reaction against the expansion of consumer culture to include food, a product central to French identity.

But perhaps the greatest feat of consumer culture was that, in spite of the threats it posed to French social and aesthetic traditions, it ultimately was embraced by all classes of French society. One of its first triumphs was when the phonograph was successfully promoted in turn-of-the-century Paris by advertisers who understood how to superficially exploit French class divisions while undermining those divisions through a common consumer market.

I hope that this thesis will help us to think differently about French consumer culture, not only in the late-nineteenth century, but how the intellectual foundations laid in that period continue to shape its development. Perhaps one of the keys to the enduring success of consumer capitalism was first illustrated in late nineteenth-century France. Advertisers learned that consumer culture appealed to workers because it promised them a better, technologically-aided, future; it appealed to the bourgeoisie because it offered them an imitation of the luxury of the past. Although these two yearnings were in fundamental,

even revolutionary, opposition in the political sphere, consumer culture created a space--a "dream world"--where they could coexist.

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