WHY NOT BUY? MAKING THINGS ONESELF IN AN AGE OF CONSUMPTION

Reinhild Kreis
GHI FELLOW IN THE HISTORY OF CONSUMPTION, 2013-14

German teacher J. Elsenheimer was pessimistic about the future. Like many of his contemporaries around 1900, he meticulously observed the profound changes of recent years, and found little that he liked.1 It seemed highly symptomatic to him that

[O]ur boys today don’t have a clue how even the simplest items around them are produced. In my youth, boys used to build their own kites, bows, and whistles. Today one buys these things and does not take good care of them because they only cost a few pennies. Knives are taken away anxiously even from adult students [for fear, R.K.] they might hurt themselves, and these poor boys see their blood shed by just looking at a knife. Overly anxious, they of course act clumsily and then indeed cut themselves.2

In Elsenheimer’s view, purchasing a kite or a whistle was not simply a convenient way of getting a toy. It was a sign of loss and decline. What “real boys” wanted to have, they would make themselves; they would be neither anxious nor helpless or careless. Against this vision of a society of the helpless, spendthrift, ignorant, and, not least, the unmanly, Elsenheimer invoked nostalgic images of his childhood as the “good old days.”

Despite his idealization of the past, Elsenheimer and many who shared his critical stance towards modern practices of consumption pointed at fundamental changes that had come along with those seemingly simple shifts such as the one from building to buying a toy. Elsenheimer associated goods with practices, skills, knowledge, norms, and values. He feared a loss of skills which would leave boys, and later men, helpless, not to mention the spread of anxiety and carelessness in society. Only the return to the old practices of making things oneself, he suggested, would help guarantee the prevalence of norms and values he thought important.

Elsenheimer’s complaint illustrates why consumption was never regarded as a purely private matter but drew the attention of social commentators, social scientists, manufacturers, marketing experts,

environmentalists, and many others. The great interest in consumption is due to its dual function as a “marker” and a “maker,” as historian Heinz-Gerhard Haupt has put it. As “markers,” forms of obtaining goods indicate gender, generation, class, norms and values. Consumption practices interrelate with concepts of identities and the social order; they allow for social distinction as well as for communicating belonging to a social group. As “makers,” changing modes of consumption involve new professions, markets, and forms of trade. Things mediate social relations; they embody skills, knowledge, and practices; they can evoke new practices and make others disappear.

As markers and makers, forms of consumption both reflect and create structures and ideas that affect large parts of society. The coming of the mass consumer society in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, its breakthrough and further development during the following decades thus involved sometimes heated debates about its impact. In this context, debates about self-made goods in contrast to store bought items, as exemplified in Elsenheimer’s complaint, took place in any modern consumer society in which people could choose from different ways of obtaining goods.

I argue that these debates were fought so heatedly because of the transformative potential ascribed to different forms of obtaining goods in the sense of “make or buy” decisions. Preferences such as those revealed in Elsenheimer’s plea for boys to build their own toys are bound up with broader interpretations of the past and the present, and with expectations about the future. The future, from this perspective, is affected and can be changed by how people acquire goods. The nexus between individual forms of obtaining goods and social developments on a larger scale invested these debates with a great sense of urgency for many contemporaries.

Making things oneself as one particular form of obtaining goods in a consumer society has so far been neglected by most historians of modern consumption. While a few studies examine certain practices such as sewing and home-improvement or conflicts such as the debates about the one-kitchen-house, they do not inquire into the overall meaning of the prevalence of seemingly outdated practices or their impact on the development of mass consumer society. At first glance, it is a seeming paradox: Why did people choose to make things themselves when they could simply buy most goods or services? In this context, the question “Why not buy?” carries two
meanings. Why did people not simply buy things such as a chair or a cake instead of making them themselves? In stressing the “not,” by contrast, it can also emphasize the opposite: why did people choose to make things themselves instead of purchasing particular goods and services?

The focus of my research project is on practices of “making things oneself,” that is, the production or repair of goods, and their meaning in Germany. This approach allows for connecting users, things, tools, competences, and desires, all of which are crucial in shaping modern consumer society.9 What things did people make themselves, and how did they do it? How were practices of making things oneself related to social groups in terms of role expectations, identities, and ideas of the social order? These questions are at the center of my project, which covers the 1890s to the 1980s as a period that saw the emergence and breakthrough of modern consumer society in Germany.10

While a multitude of other case studies is conceivable for the study of do-it-yourself, this project focuses on two particular fields: home improvement and the preparation of food. Home improvement can be defined as work around the house by private persons in their leisure time, even when other options are available. It encompasses maintenance and repair work, but also renovation and improvement. Dwellings indicate — to differing extents — the status, social relations, and personal taste of their inhabitants, and therefore make an excellent object for the study of social and cultural histories. Food, on the other hand, is not only part of the outside world around us, but is incorporated in and becomes a part of the body. Therefore cultures, societies, and individuals have always been particular about food and its preparation. The common perception that people “are what they eat” and the fact that all societies and cultures attach symbolic meanings to the acquisition, preparation, and consumption of food have made nutrition a preferred field of regulation and intervention for politicians, social scientists, social reformers, nutritionists, and others.

In this article, I will first outline how a focus on “making things oneself” can contribute to social history and the history of consumption. In a second step, I will present some thoughts on why contemporaries thought the “make or buy” decision of consumers so important, and will elaborate on the transformative power that was thought to be inherent in such decisions.

I. Did You Make This Yourself? Norms, Values, and Role Expectations

Elsenheimer’s critical outburst calls our attention to four major perspectives on practices of making things oneself: first, the relation between manufactured and handmade or homemade items; second, the norms and values that are attached to such practices; third, the skills and knowledge necessary to perform such practices; and fourth, the interpretations of what making things oneself meant at a given time.

1. Cross-References

In an age of mass production and consumption, the practice of making things by hand that could easily be purchased must always been seen in relation to store-bought items as well as the services provided by professional carpenters, bakers, tailors, or technicians. Conversely, the hand-made or home-made remained an important point of reference for ready-made items. Marketing firms have continued to advertise products as “better than home-made” or “as good as home-made,” to refer to the joys of making things oneself, or to emphasize how nice it is to not be compelled to make a certain thing by hand but to be able to buy it. When making things oneself, the alternative of buying an item or service is always present. This holds even true for items that cannot be bought because they are not (yet) available in stores, and for those who cannot really choose between buying and making because they lack money or skills. Despite such restrictions, alternative ways of obtaining goods remain present as points of reference. This built-in relational perspective helps to identify and to explain changes in practices and meanings of making things oneself.

It would be wrong to assume a linear development in which making things oneself was simply replaced by market relations. Contradictory tendencies and hybrid forms existed simultaneously, and in many cases the consumption of ready-made items and do-it-yourself practices not only co-existed but correlated with one another. Products such as cake mixes, sewing kits, or wallpaper paste soluble in water eased and sometimes only made possible that people made certain things themselves. As hybrids that left only some steps in the process of production to the customer/maker, practices of both making and buying are inherent to them, thus advancing the intellectual nexus between them.
2. Norms and Values

Individuals are judged and classified according to their decisions whether to make certain things themselves or not. The question “Did you make this yourself?” can provoke either embarrassment or pride. Depending on the context, making things oneself can be seen as adequate or non-adequate behavior. It is expected of certain demographic groups but not of others, as demonstrated in particular by Elsnerheimer’s complaint about boys. The consumer and leisure choices associated with practices of making things oneself express norms and values and reveal preferences in the employment of time, money, and material resources. Unlike the boys he criticized, Elsnerheimer clearly preferred spending time on something over spending money.

Consumer and leisure choices of this kind can be seen as “moral judgments,” as Mary Douglas has put it, about what constitutes a man or a woman, how children ought to be raised, or how one ought to behave as a member of a certain profession. By indicating norms and values, discourses on and practices of making things oneself reveal changing role expectations and ideas of social order, which are, in turn, related to the material environment. Who is supposed to do what, how, and for which reasons? Ever-changing consumer and leisure choices put norms, values, and role expectations permanently on the negotiating table. New products and modes of production, changing political or economic circumstances, and also shifts in values and attitudes prompted the renegotiation of what making things oneself meant.

3. Skills and Knowledge

Elsnerheimer’s fear of lost skills suggests a third point. In his youth, Elsnerheimer knew practices that the children of the early twentieth century were never introduced to, or seemed to not care about. Changing circumstances in particular raised questions about which skills one should possess and what one should know, as the example of Erna Barschak, a German emigre to the United States, illustrates. Barschak, a psychologist and vocational training teacher, had fled Nazi Germany in her fifties. Upon her arrival in the United States in 1940, she started looking for a job but had to admit at the employment agency that she was not qualified for taking on a position in a household:

I really did not understand how to do housework. Brought up in the way [in which] upper middle-class German families

in the big cities educate[d] their ‘intellectual’ daughters,’ I had never learned to cook, sew, or (I hesitate to confess this) to clean... Now for the first time I felt how badly prepared we European intellectuals were for living in ‘another world.’ Why had I not learned to keep house, to cook, to sew? I could find a job immediately if only I knew what every woman in the world was supposed to know.13

Americans, on the other hand, were quite handy. Barschak noted carefully that professors, lawyers, and bankers took pride in such tasks and knew how to bake bread, fix the attic, or paint a fence in their leisure time — something unthinkable among German Bildungsburger (educated middle-class) of the time.14 Barschak’s experiences in the United States shook up her ideas about skills she thought certain individuals or groups should possess. Emigrating from Germany to the United States placed her into a new environment where she found herself in a new position: that of a job-seeking immigrant rather than a settled, metropolitan intellectual, and with unfamiliar concepts of appropriate leisure activities. All of a sudden, Barschak felt that skills and the knowledge that had been quite important for her middle-class Berlin life might not be sufficient in America. Nothing in her memoirs says that she finally learned how to keep house or engaged in home improvement, but the quote tells us that she started to re-think what useful skills were.

Changes like a new cultural environment, the invention of new products, the emergence of new ideas (such as environmentalism, socialism, or feminism), generational change, economic upswings and crises, or political change challenge notions of which skills are regarded as useful and which bodies of knowledge one should possess. As with norms and values, individuals had to constantly renegotiate a changing environment. This raises a number of questions, including: How did people acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to make things themselves? What did societies deem important and appropriate for different social groups to know? Who taught such skills and knowledge to whom, and for which reasons? Where and how did Elsenheimer learn how to build a kite or make a whistle, for instance? Did he learn it from his father, other children, a book, or at school? These questions also direct our attention to different learning contexts, including family and friends, formal education, self-education, how-to-books and mass media such as TV shows.

13 Barschak, My American Adventure, 10f.
14 Ibid., 55.
4. Interpretations

The fourth perspective on making things oneself highlights the interpretations of such practices offered by the media, social scientists, marketing experts, pollsters, charities, teachers, representatives of various crafts, and many others. These interpretations must be placed in historical context, not only with regard to their content but also the background of their explanations. Did they follow a social, economic, or political agenda? Which activities and social groups did they focus on? Historicizing the interpretations given over the decades about why people would (not) or should (not) engage in making things themselves adds to our knowledge of norms, values, and concepts of social order that shaped the field of such practices.

Making things oneself, as a practice and as a discourse, stands at the center of three influential categories, all of which have been used to interpret western societies of the twentieth century: consumption, work, and leisure. Andreas Wirsching recently suggested a paradigm shift “from work to consumption,” stating that the prime source of identity no longer is work but consumption. Wirsching raises an issue that gets at the heart of how individuals and social groups make sense of their world and of themselves in a dynamic and complex mixture of practices, possessions, self attributions, and ascriptions by others. By examining practices of making things oneself, I complicate such narratives and seek to show the inconsistencies in the development of modern consumer societies, their complexity, and how the meaning of such practices was constantly renegotiated.

Practices of and discourses on making things oneself do not belong to the realm of wage work; yet in making things oneself, nonprofessionals often perform the work and tasks by which others, such as trained carpenters, tailors, bakers, or computer specialists, make their living. Condemnations of do-it-yourself as illegitimate “black labor” illustrate how hard it is to draw a clear line in this regard. On a more theoretical level, social scientists have long been emphasizing that work and leisure are almost inseparably intertwined. "Bastl meint," in Selbst ist der Mann 4 (Jan. 1960), 3.


16 Wirsching, “Konsum statt Arbeit? Vom Wandel von Individualität in der modernen Massengesellschaft,” Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte (2009), 171–199. The English version of his article is titled “From Work to Consumption” without the question mark, Contemporary European History 20 (2011), 1–26. The same issue contains a critical comment by Frank Trentmann (pp. 27–31) and a reply to his comment by Wirsching (pp. 33–36). Their brief debate emphasizes the importance of how work, consumption, and leisure interrelate and how their interplay impacts individuals as well as societies.

“free time is the unmediated continuation of labor as its shadow,” and more recently authors like Chris Rojek have stressed the fusion of work and labor and the emotional work in leisure activities.

If we are looking at unpaid activities of nonprofessionals, can practices of making things oneself be described as leisure and an outgrowth of modern “leisure societies”? True, many such activities are pastimes, and their upswing was related to decreasing working hours. Yet how about those who sewed, tinkered, or fixed their attics because they could not otherwise obtain clothing, electronic devices, or more living space, and therefore did not have too much of a choice? The problem of defining practices of making things oneself as leisure becomes obvious when looking at household chores such as cooking and baking. On the one hand, cooking and baking can be hobbies. But they have mostly been domestic obligations and therefore not leisure which is supposed to consist of voluntary activities. On the other hand, women and men responsible for the family meals increasingly had the opportunity to resort to restaurants, delivery services, or convenience food such as canned meals, frozen food, packaged cakes, and the like. Over time, being responsible for the family’s meals was less and less limited to preparing them from scratch but could be handled by opening, heating, or buying. Preparing home cooked and home baked meals became optional. Yet while many women and men kept choosing this option (not least because of cultural norms), the example of homemade food shows the ambiguity of concepts of work and labor. “One person’s leisure is another’s torture” write Joy Beatty and William R. Torbert, suggesting that it is a question of one's attitudes towards an activity that makes it work or leisure.

The different ways of obtaining a meal direct our attention to consumption as the third category in which to place practices of and discourses on making things oneself. Whereas for many decades it was more expensive to purchase processed food such as cans or pudding, which were therefore considered luxuries, today convenience food is in many cases cheaper than buying fresh ingredients for preparing the same dish from scratch. Making things oneself is both a way of avoiding purchases (of ready-made items) and a reason for buying, be it ingredients for a fresh meal, or be it semi-finished goods like cake mixes that help to make something (at least partially) oneself. In the field of home improvement, jokes are legion about how home improvers spend way more money on equipment and materials (not to mention time) than a prefabricated item or even a professional...
handyman would have cost. Making things oneself creates a market — as home improvement centers, home canning devices, or, more recently, the overwhelming success or online-platforms such as Etsy or Dawanda show. But it also still is a way of escaping the consumer society. Alternative groups such as the ecological communities of the 1970s tried to strictly observe a sustainable, eco-friendly lifestyle in the countryside not least by baking their own bread, recycling, and building their own furniture.23

Equally rooted in the spheres of leisure, work, and consumption, practices of and discourses on making things oneself are ideally suited for investigating the contradictory history of the coming of a consumer society characterized by the “availability of things.”24 Looking into both practices and the interpretations that accompanied them allows us to ask how individuals and social groups shaped and were shaped by the emergence of the consumer society. Making things oneself blurs the boundaries of production and consumption, work and leisure, and does not necessarily follow an economic rationality in terms of efficiency.

II. The Power Is in Your Hands — Or Is It? Making Things Oneself and Change

Unlike thinking, writing, or speaking, practices of production or repairing have an immediate, obvious, and visible transformative dimension. If one knew how, one could shape one’s environment according to one’s wishes. This quality is often reinforced by adding notions of time and temporality in the sense of social development.25 An example from the German home improvement journal Selbst ist der Mann illustrates this dimension. In 1960, the journal’s editors commented on the British royal family. Reportedly, Princess Margaret’s butler had refused to help with the expansion of the wine cellar. While the magazine depicted the butler as a hopeless case of “yesterday’s man,” it lauded Princess Margaret’s husband for being a “man of today” since he did not shy away from such work.”26 Here, making things oneself is depicted as inherently modern and progressive, since it corresponded to modern consumer standards as expressed in the idea of remodeling and the willingness to engage in manual labor and therefore practices that the Butler seemed to think of as beneath him. Yet the magazine depicted his refusal to help as being outdated and old-fashioned. By helping with the wine cellar, Anthony Armstrong-Jones not only transformed the wine cellar but


25 In this essay, I concentrate on references to the past, present, and future as connected to social development and leave out the related issues of time as a resource, of individual experiences of time while making things oneself, and of individualized time, which are nonetheless of greatest importance to this project.

also himself. In doing so, he became a modern man, a “man of today.”

In this perspective, not making things oneself meant sticking to old rules and traditions that had been rendered superfluous or even a little ridiculous.

Being “up to date” was only one way of connecting practices of making things oneself with time. Others focused on the future, regarding traditional forms of how to make things as an important step towards mastering the future, and sometimes as the only way to do so. Depending on which future they thought desirable, their views on making things oneself differed considerably. First, there were those who, like Elsenheimer, wanted the future to look pretty much like an idealized version of the past. Their nostalgic, often highly gendered notions of temporality and social development evoked ideas of a past in which making things oneself not only helped guarantee high quality standards of production and an aesthetically pleasing environment, but also the prevalence of social order including family and other social relations.

Otto Speck, a well-known education researcher and sociologist, for example, compared present with past circumstances in his influential work Kinder erwerbstätiger Mütter (Children of working mothers) from 1956. According to Speck, “latchkey kids” were a “contemporary problem.” He felt that latchkey kids lacked maternal care, especially as expressed through home-cooked meals. Speck frequently pointed out that children desperately wished to have lunch prepared and served by their mothers and hated heating up prepared food or eating with their care providers. He concluded that “food prepared and served by the mother herself is of great psychological importance for children,” helping to keep families intact and to prevent juvenile delinquency. The traditional housewife and her cooking as imagined and depicted by Speck and many others guaranteed the social order and the persistence of established gender roles, an order Speck wanted to see retained well into the future. Such notions of making things oneself the traditional way often went hand in hand with nostalgic views of the past and the perception of loss and decline. Implicitly evoking idealized and romantic views of the good old days, Speck and Elsenheimer tried to make sure that the future would look like the past rather than the present.

In contrast to such nostalgic views, a second perspective stressed the potential for change towards a different future that was inherent.
in making things oneself. The founding members of the reform colony Monte Verita in Ascona, Switzerland, debated various forms of doing so. They were part of the Lebensreform movement, which tried to improve its members’ physical and mental health by means of a “natural” lifestyle, focusing on topics such as nutrition, clothing, education, and healthcare. Ida Hofmann for example, challenged traditional gender roles by claiming that both women and men could and should saw, smooth boards, cook, and sew. Her fellow founder Karl Gräser even felt that the entire colony should be built by its members without the help of “unnatural” machines.31

Taking up and advancing some of the ideas developed by the Lebensreform movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, environmentalists of the 1970s stressed that only making things themselves would save the future by making sure that “at least some beautiful parts of the world could be saved” from destruction, that it was an important “attempt to overcome the [current] crisis,” and was “an appropriate lifestyle in order to secure survival in the long run.”32 Here, notions of limited global resources and, therefore, of limited time lent extra weight to their efforts. Doing work by hand, avoiding consumption, and “going back” to traditional forms of obtaining goods — for example, baking one’s own bread, canning jam, making furniture, repairing and reusing things — constituted both a form of protest against current lifestyles and economic systems and a way of overcoming them. Thus, Rudolf Doernach, author of the two-volume Handbuch für bessere Zeiten [Handbook for better times], spoke of “Forward to nature!” instead of using the common phrase “Back to nature.”33 This phrase makes clear that the future Doernach and others envisioned was to look different from the past. Unlike Elsenheimer and Speck, the Lebensreformer and the environmentalists of the last third of the twentieth century wanted a different, better future. Traditional practices of making things oneself were used to improve and transform ways of living together, of education, economic activity, and so on towards a new and improved society.

Still others claimed the opposite, stating that making things oneself was old-fashioned and outdated and certainly not a way of mastering the future. Already in 1930, Die kluge Hausfrau [The clever housewife], a journal provided by Edeka, a large German supermarket corporation, wrote about hand-made pasta as if it was an old fairy-tale:

31 Andreas Schwab, Monte Verità — Sanatorium der Sehnsucht (Zurich, 2003), 85, 94. Gräser, however, did not succeed and left Monte Verità soon afterwards.
“In the past, in the old days, women stood in the kitchen and prepared their pasta dough more or less successfully themselves.” This old-fashioned way of making pasta was not necessary any longer, the author claimed. Nowadays one could buy pasta at the Edeka store that was just as good as the home-made version. Doing otherwise would be a waste of time and energy.

Such references to an “outdated” way of doing things often came with a degree of condescension, as a 1969 advertisement for salad sauce from Kraft Foods (Germany) illustrates. “Mother still took cilantro,” the headline read. Nowadays, preparing salad was so much easier, the text explained, since one did not have to worry about complicated seasoning anymore, and it made the housewife independent of seasons and the availability of certain herbs and spices. Around the same time, Kraft Foods started a large, multi-year campaign targeting the younger generation as future customers of their products. In full-page advertisements in the well-known youth magazine Bravo, the fictional character Cherry, a young girl, talked about episodes from her life that always included references to Kraft products, usually by making a little fun of how unnecessarily complicated things had been in the days of her grandmother and by emphasizing how modern and convenient using Kraft products was.

Buying what used to be self-made was a sign of progress and modernity, these examples suggest, and it set the “modern” present or future apart from the past. The same narrative can be found in stories about of people who made things themselves when they either did not (yet) have the money to buy them or the items were not available, thus compensating for their lack of money or the general scarcity with their skills. Sometimes makers of such items tried to hide the items’ being hand made, trying to make them look mass-produced and store-bought. Such attempts could be described as anticipations of the future. Being handy gave people the power to bridge the time until they had more money, or until certain items became available in stores. Here, references to the temporal dimension indicate a past that had been or had to be overcome. To be free to not make something oneself was seen as a liberating or even emancipatory act. It meant independence from time-consuming duties and material shortages.

These few spotlights illustrate the importance of situating forms of making things oneself in time. While my remarks are only cursory
and each of the examples mentioned above deserves further contextualization and interpretation, they show how references to time in connection with questions of making things oneself worked. The consumer and leisure choices inherent in decisions about what to make oneself were credited with transformative power and the potential to overcome the present, to promote an alternative future, or to reclaim the past. “The power is in your hands,” claim Amy Carlton and Cinnamon Cooper, co-founders of the “DIY Trunk Show,” in their “Craftifesto” of 2008: “We’re not just trying to sell stuff. We’re trying to change the world.”

References to temporal categories therefore not only helped individuals position themselves in time but also to indicate their mastery of challenges in the transformation of the material environment and the self. Discourses on what to make oneself and what not to, and on the necessary skills and techniques, are used to communicate technological, cultural, and social — sometimes political — developments in terms of progress or regression: what can/must/should one make oneself now/still/not anymore?

Of course, marketing firms, as well as protest groups, social scientists, and pedagogues, used references to the past, present, and future as arguments to legitimize the choices they advocated and to “sell” them. But whether used deliberately or not, references to time and the positioning of consumer and leisure choices in a temporal framework offer insights into mechanisms of “making sense” of a world of choices in a given economic, cultural, social, and political situation. Temporal references allow for a comparative perspective and therefore for structuring time as well as society, and for positioning oneself or others in them. Taking into account the practices of making things oneself, their technical and training requirements, and the meanings attached to them offers new insights into the periodization of consumer societies in which various options of how to obtain goods existed simultaneously and continuously yet with shifting meanings.

The slogan “The power is in your hands” draws attention to questions of power inherent to practices of making things oneself. Does making things oneself really always indicate power? Depending on the context, making things oneself can open up or close off the reach and flexibility of the individual or social groups. To be sure, it can hold emancipatory power. Being able to make things oneself can reduce dependency. It means that an
individual or a group possess certain skills and knowledge and are capable of applying them. Products play an important role in this. Studies on home improvement have shown that the invention of new products led to a democratization of competence. However, marketers sometimes also purposefully try to undermine people’s confidence in their abilities to prevent them from doing things themselves. Food producers such as manufacturers of baby foods have employed such strategies in their advertisements in order to sell their products, for example stating that “no mother could make it better.”

At times, however, the ability (and monetary means) to buy rather than make something can be liberating. Having to do things oneself can narrow and severely constrain one’s spheres of activity. As an obligation it can be limiting, especially when alternatives are available in principle. States, families, and social scientists such as Otto Speck have sought to discipline and control women by imposing the duty of running the household on them, including the preparation of family meals, not least by connecting cooking to the psychological and physical health of both the family and society.

Are home improvement activities, one can further ask, really (only) an expression of power and the ability to change one’s environment, if it is “expected leisure” for men, as Steven Gelber has put it? Therefore, the opportunity not to make things oneself can also indicate emancipation. In these cases, power is only to a very limited extent “in your hands” since here power derives precisely from not using one’s hands for cooking, sewing, or working around the house but for dining out, opening a can, paying for clothes, or calling a plumber.

Concluding Remarks

Since the mid-2000s, references to past forms of making things oneself are again omnipresent. The “rediscovery” of “forgotten” or “neglected,” alleged or real “traditional” techniques and skills attracts attention not only in the media and among social scientists but also among economic actors. Online-marketplaces for hand-made items such as Etsy or Dawanda are highly successful, as are do-it-yourself-magazines, shows, and fairs. Phenomena like urban gardening, knitting men, repair cafes, or “the new domesticity” of women who leave their well-paid jobs in order to bake and sew in the countryside have led to heated debates about their meaning.


41 See, for example, the advertisements of Alete and Herhana in the German women’s magazine Brigitte (March 1962): 43, 60.

42 Speck, Kinder erwerbstätiger Mütter, 20, 45, 54; Schlegel-Matthies, Im Haus und am Herd.

43 Steve Gelber, Hobbies, Leisure and the Culture of Work in America (New York, 1999), 268 ff.
Are the new crafting, gardening, and cooking movements expressions of a new feminism that reclaims traditional techniques, or are they a new and subtle form of oppression? Do repair cafes, crafting centers, and community gardens help to change the economic system and consumerist lifestyle, and to overcome the throwaway society? Are they just another variety of capitalism?

To this day, making things oneself is not simply a vestige of older times and it is not likely to disappear in the near future. Utopian ideas about a future in which no one would have to do things like build, cook, and sew themselves have not been fulfilled, not least because many people continue to deliberately make things themselves. It seems that many people find it either undesirable to not make things themselves, or (economically) necessary to make things themselves. Researching the reasons behind this and approaching the field of making things oneself as a set of practices and mindsets as well as a market allows for fascinating insights into continual shifts in practices and skills and the renegotiation of their meaning. It challenges notions of the linear development of societies into consumer societies by highlighting the contradictions, continuities, and processes of mastering, initiating, and “making sense” of change.

Reinhild Kreis is Assistant Professor at the University of Mannheim. 2015/16 she is Lise Meitner Fellow at the University of Vienna. Her research focuses on the history of consumption, German-American relations, the history of protest, and the history of emotions. Her publications include Orte für Amerika: Deutsch-Amerikanische Institute und Amerikahäuser in der Bundesrepublik seit den 1960er Jahren (Stuttgart, 2012) and the edited volume Diplomatie mit Gefühl: Vertrauen, Misstrauen und die Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Munich, 2015).

44 A few publications that debate these questions are Wolfgang M. Heckl, Die Kultur der Reparatur (Munich, 2013); Andrea Bauer, Christa Müller, and Karin Werner, Stadt der Commonisten: Neue urbane Räume des Do it yourself (Bielefeld, 2013); Emily Matchat, Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity (New York, 2013); Holm Friebe and Thomas Ramge, Marke Eigenbau: Der Aufstand der Massen gegen die Massenproduktion (Frankfurt a.M., 2008).