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# THE SCHOOL CRATE

MEDIATING CONSUMER INDIVIDUALISM, 1954 - 1985

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## ABSTRACT

After World War II, accessibility of consumer goods to the majority of population broadened unprecedentedly. Acts of purchase became a centrality of political and cultural discourses. The transition to a consumer society in West Germany engendered polemic between consumption critics and advocates due to an incompatibility of different visions towards individuality. Consumption in the market overflowing with goods has been favored as freedom of choice and expression—reflecting a citizen sovereignty which is a decisive principle of democracy. It was the first time that a rigid referential system such as social class, education, and status in the domain of production, which previously defined selfhood, had been eradicated—conceiving a sense of social mobility. It is irreconcilable with the normative selfhood in the European tradition of the lifelong ‘self-cultivation’ or *Bildung*. The concept of *Bildung* acknowledges the domain of ‘high culture’ (*Kultur*) as a site which one could gain genuine individuality. Nobility of *Kultur* was privileged over the products from *Zivilisation* which are accessible, affordable but facile.

The ‘Werkbund group’, the ‘Badische Landesmuseum’ in Karlsruhe, and the ‘Neue Sammlung’ in Munich had circulated school crates containing the assortments of household appliances which were representatives of the ‘good form’ to West German schools from 1954 to 1985. Exercises of ‘grasping’ and verbally reflecting in classrooms were meant to sharpen students’ acumen and challenge them to establish their own principle of judgment. This research of the school crates is situated in the polemic of consumption—occurring in the transitional period before the fertility of West German consumer society at the end of the sixties. The school crate functioned as a negotiant between a consumer’s unprecedented freedom of choices and a nobility of individuality and taste in German tradition.