

Matt, Susan J. *Keeping Up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890-1930*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003

Anne Clendinning

Volume 34, numéro 2, spring 2006

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016015ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016015ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Clendinning, A. (2006). Compte rendu de [Matt, Susan J. *Keeping Up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890-1930*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 34(2), 58–60. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016015ar>

Jakle, John, and Keith Sculle. *Lots of Parking: Land Use in Car Culture*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004.

In their latest volume on the geography of car culture (a subject that previously took them into the history of gas stations, motels, and fast food), John Jakle and Keith Sculle trace the history of parking from curbside accommodation to permanent fixture on the urban landscape. In the process, they add important dimensions to the study of both car culture and urban space. Indeed, in their hands, parking becomes a central topic in the history of the city, affecting everything from small, mundane uses of particular lots, through ideas and uses of public streets, to grand visions for metropolitan futures.

From the perspective of the history of automobility, scholars have largely neglected parking. This fact is quite surprising, given its importance as a foundation of car culture, as a roadside business, and as one of the car's unique contributions to North American society. But as Jakle and Sculle point out, scholars have been more drawn to the car in motion than at rest. To correct this imbalance, they range widely into parking questions at the curbside, in retailing, in institutional building, in municipal planning, and other subjects, discussing everything from technical questions of stall size to more visionary ones of design and cityscape. Further, they trace the way parking came to sustain a range of activities and even became a modern necessity. Simply put, Jakle and Sculle remind us that cars could hardly move without a place to stop at the end of the journey.

From the perspective of urban history, parking is no less important. In many ways, *Lots of Parking* is a story of how a variety of social groups—entrepreneurs, planners, civic boosters, developers, and (in a much less direct way) drivers themselves—worked to transform urban space in the name of the automobile. The lots were usually meant to be temporary, transitional uses, but often became permanent additions to (or, perhaps, subtractions from) the cityscape. Jakle and Sculle portray this process as both awesome and incremental. In their text, they describe how parking evolved slowly and undramatically, moving forward in tiny increments that, at the time, must have seemed natural. At the same time, using maps of downtown Detroit (sure to shock even the most jaded critic of car culture), they illustrate how, in the aggregate, this incremental process dramatically fragmented city space. “Erosion by parking lot proceeded in a kind of nibbling fashion,” they argue. “No one step in the process was, in itself, critical, but each step tended to accelerate the process overall, the cumulative effect being enormous” (171). According to Jakle and Sculle, this incremental process had a much more important affect on city cores than the more famous blockbusting of 1950s and 1960s mega-projects. Neither Indianapolis nor San Diego, they point out, received federal urban renewal funds, yet the fragmentation of their downtown cores went on unabated, following the same path as in other North American cities.

Jakle and Sculle present the evolution of parking as a social

process, but until the last chapter, this is not a book with many people in it, unless you count entrepreneurs, planners, architects, and others going about their institutional routines. At the end, however, they reflect on the more human elements of the parking question, moving from building and landscape to use. They even draw on a sort of Jane Jacobs framework to stress how parking lots became places of social interaction—amongst raucous youth at drive-in restaurants, for instance, and through more mundane daily interactions like random meetings, short conversations, and so on. “People actually use parking space as creatively as any other place-type,” they argue, “humanizing it in many ways and affirming their agency” (238). There is something beautifully ironic about finding Jane Jacobs in parking lots (she would no doubt shudder), but after so much material on urban fragmentation, the point seems a bit added on at the end, set somewhat apart from the main thrust of their story. Difficult questions, moreover, are cloaked in the phrase “as creatively as any other place-type.” It’s an intriguing thought, but is a random meeting in a parking lot the same as a random meeting on a sidewalk? Is it enough to say that people try to humanize a parking lot when the space itself is (often by design) cut off from the web of institutions and interactions that sustain other kinds of urban places? To answer these questions, Jakle and Sculle would have had to draw the points about use through the whole narrative rather than tacking them on at the end, casting their eyes to the web of activities that transforms a chance encounter into a more fundamental way of experiencing a place. In the end, however, this is a minor complaint, since *Lots of Parking* is a comprehensive and highly readable study of a fundamental and understudied aspect of urban history, sure to be a hit with experts and non-specialists alike.

Steve Penfold
University of Toronto

Matt, Susan J. *Keeping Up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890–1930*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

For consumers in the twenty-first century, what could be more natural than the desire for a faster computer, a new car, a fashionable wardrobe, or the perfect house on a good street? How much of the desire for new things is motivated by genuine need or the perceived necessity of staying abreast of the latest consumer trends? And how is it that, even if consumers know better, they still fail to challenge the accepted capitalist wisdom that conspicuous consumption is an indication of social status and personal success? According to Susan J. Matt’s study, “the envy and desire for material equality that besets modern Americans and causes them to seek more things has roots stretching back to the nineteenth century” (185). It is these roots of modern consumer behaviour, and their connection to the emotion of envy, that Matt seeks to identify and explain.

Given the current scholarly interest in the history of consumption and the world of goods, several social and cultural

historians have already documented the expansion of modern consumerism in America. Matt respectfully acknowledges her debt to the work of Jackson Lears, Susan Porter Benson, and Daniel Horowitz, among others. Her study differs, however, in that it looks closely at the connection between envy and consumer behaviour, positing that "the transformation of envy's meaning and legitimacy was significant because it was part of an emerging emotional and behavioural style that supported the expansion of the consumer economy" (3). While the recognition and satiation of envy as natural and normal behaviour was integral to the development of the mass market in the first two decades of the twentieth century, previous generations of Americans had condemned envy and the desire for material goods as sinful. By documenting the process by which public attitudes towards envy changed, *Keeping Up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890–1930* successfully combines the history of consumerism with the less tangible history of emotion.

The book focuses on the decades between 1890 and 1930, those critical years when the United States developed into a mass consumer society. This economic transformation was facilitated by the convergence of several phenomena, including the growth of the popular press and advertising, the advent of mail-order catalogues, the expansion of department stores, and the increased availability of mass-produced, cheaper consumer goods. As a result of these changes, some Americans were able to imitate and emulate their social betters through the acquisition of material goods. Matt argues that it was also during these decades that a "modern understanding" of envy emerged, particularly among white, middle-class Americans, who are the main subjects of the book (3). The great shift in attitudes towards envy occurred in the 1910s and 1920s. It resulted from the growth of abundance, but also from the secularization of society. The increasing endorsement of Darwinian theory, by sociologists and psychologists, such as G. Stanley Hall, reinforced the view that an individual's social position was not divinely determined, but that competition and the human desire for self-improvement were natural and healthy emotional responses to the new consumer society (5). That well-worn phrase "keeping up with the Joneses" often associated with post-World War II affluence actually came into popular use during the 1910s and 1920s, putting its use much earlier than one might have thought.

In five chapters, Matt considers the shift in attitudes towards envy and its effect on five distinct groups: middle-class urban women, middle-class urban men, rural women, rural men and finally children. Each chapter adheres to a similar framework. A discussion of late nineteenth-century condemnations of envy, as espoused by ministers, moralists, teachers, and magazine editors, is then followed by an alternative and more positive view of envy, as a natural human emotion, that, if properly channelled, was actually beneficial to the consumer economy. For example, in chapter one, late nineteenth-century middle-class women were warned against the dangerous folly of trying to

emulate their social betters by dressing above their station, and therefore appearing ridiculous and even threatening the moral purity of the American home by their dishonesty (20–25). In contrast, the next generation of social commentators assured urban female consumers that "dressing up" was a perfectly legitimate expression of women's "positive social instincts" (40–45).

In order to chart these changing attitudes towards envy, Matt makes extensive use of a variety of printed sources, including women's magazines, prescriptive literature, personal memoirs, and religious publications. In addition, the author analyzes the social surveys of middle-class Americans that were conducted during the 1910s and 1920s by professional researchers, sociologists, psychologists, and advertising experts, who were interested in documenting social attitudes and human behaviour. Of great interest are the chapters on rural men, rural women, and children, since these groups seldom figure prominently in histories of consumption. Rural men and women envied the material goods that city life offered, as seen in the magazines and catalogues or demonstrated by the appearance of urban relatives. Nevertheless, the myth of the moral strength of rural America depended upon country people resisting the corruption of urban society, and ministers, teachers, and rural advisors assured farmers and their families that the purity of country living more than compensated them for the transient pleasures of shops and urban entertainments (115–118). By the 1910s and 1920s, there is a perceptible shift in attitudes, and a new generation of rural outreach workers and exponents of the Country Life movement, which aimed at modernizing farm life, advised rural folk on how to improve productivity, raise farm incomes, and by extension, increase farmers' participation in the mass market. Rural sociologists and the advocates of the Country Life movement hoped that this strategy was a way to satisfy rural envy and hopefully reduce the out-migration of young men and women from the farms to the city (137–147). The specialists were wrong, however, because the rhetoric did not fit the harsh reality of farm life in the 1920s, and the majority of farmers resisted advice from outsiders, but also because "the succeeding years of economic tumult and dislocation," presumably the depression of the 1930s, meant that young people continued to leave the land (145). Yet, despite this continued migration, Matt claims that the rural reformers still succeeded in legitimating rural desire for the same material goods and services that city folk enjoyed.

Nevertheless, while rural desire might have been legitimized, it certainly was not satiated due to the steady decline in farm incomes. In fact, the book makes very little mention of the economic context for changing consumer values. For example, there is no reference to World War I and its impact on consumer spending patterns, when Americans might have been faced with fluctuating supplies and shortages of some goods. Nor does the economic crash of 1929, and its relationship to the mass market, figure in Matt's study. Admittedly, the book concludes in 1930, and it would be churlish to suggest that another

decade of research should be added to an already rich analysis. However, it would be interesting to learn how consumer advocates reconciled the rhetoric of envy and acquisitiveness to the economic deprivations of the 1930s. Hopefully, this question will be taken up in future studies of consumer culture.

By combining the history of emotion with consumerism, Susan J. Matt establishes a unique conceptual framework for understanding modern consumerism, perhaps pointing the way to comparative transnational studies of consumer behaviour. In conclusion, *Keeping Up with the Joneses* is an engaging and fascinating study that asks readers to reflect on the long and complex relationship between spending, personal desire, and the economic benefits of consumer envy. Now, are you sure that you need that new computer?

Anne Clendinning
Nipissing University

Shoup, Donald. *The High Cost of Free Parking*. Chicago: APA Planners Press, 2004.

This massive volume of 733 pages provides the evidence that parking requirements in planning legislation or as advocated in industry standards are very costly, unnecessary, and even counter-productive. First on the firing line is the Institute of Transportation Engineers because of their industry-standard guidelines and surveys of transportation generation from various land uses. Their guidelines fill a planning resource void even though, as Shoup exhaustively demonstrates, they are founded largely on minuscule samples of suburban environments. Central cities are absent from the surveys, as are innovative suburban examples. Next up are municipal planners copying each other's guidelines, ignoring international experience, and pretending there is science behind the requirements. Finally, Shoup points out that American municipalities are actually supporting free parking by insisting on over-supply. He even hints that such over-supply of free parking fuels profligate car use, making it difficult to support public and non-motorized transportation. While evidence might be lacking for that particular claim, however logical it might seem, the author spends many pages investigating the hidden financial costs of parking provision. Parking provisions are routinely rolled into the development budget because they are a fundamental requirement in the earliest stages of the project. As a consequence, their real cost is often underestimated, if it is estimated at all. In any event, rarely do charges cover the costs of provision, so that cost recovery is achieved by hiding the costs in higher prices for everything else. The "everything else" that Shoup looks at includes housing, downtown development, road infrastructure, goods, and services. The demonstration is supported by case studies with real financial data and hypothetical cases worked out in detail, for those who might be skeptical about the strongly stated claims of the author and the very high estimated costs associated with parking provisions.

This volume undoubtedly represents many years of careful

study and documentation. Its primary message that planners should not require parking provisions at all would be a fairly dreary one, if it were not lightened by some interesting, even amusing analogies. The steady doses of required parking in our cities are likened to routine medical administration of lead, or to bloodletting. The unclear methods for arriving at the standards routinely applied by cities and their uneven application across cities are likened to blind faith in myth. If it is largely true that parking requirements are not the fruit of analysis, it might be an exaggeration to suggest all parking demand estimations are equally flawed. Parking demand studies routinely appear in environmental impact assessments, for which clear procedures are available. Because the public environment as a whole is more complex than a project, clear approaches for estimating global parking levels in a city have not emerged, which would have provided a parking standard for an individual project. It is also argued by some urban planners advocating a normative approach that parking standards should be set to harmonize with broad environmental goals, with those goals defined at the scale of the city. Shoup does not explore these angles on planning for parking, perhaps because they do not fit well with his theory that the most successful approach is to micro-manage control and financial benefit at the local level.

This work is a good example of a movement to introduce more market mechanisms in urban development and downplay the governmental role in urban planning. The withdrawal of local government from public housing was an earlier spectacular example, and the involvement of local government as a facilitator in privately initiated commercial development is another. Underlying this move toward self-regulation or private management of urban development is the belief that public goods, managed by public bodies, tend to be mismanaged. Garrett Hardin, in his well-known 1968 article "The Tragedy of the Commons," outlined the problem of a heterogeneous society attempting to define common values in support of public goods. Indifference to the issues and the predominance of personally held values are offered as explanations for the failure of public management at the scale of the city. Shoup proposes that public parking be managed and controlled by local area societies who would decide on allocations of parking and cost, as well as re-allocation to public projects. By implication, the full costing of curb parking would raise its price and then do the same for off-street parking. Higher prices for parking result in shorter duration parking. In this way, he believes that effective costing would tighten the supply. Private developers would elect to build less parking or pay in-lieu fees. If the demand is in fact stronger than was anticipated by the project developers, then that demand would spill over into street parking, raising its price. Although deliberately understated throughout the book, the implication is that market pricing would drive a substantial portion of trips into alternate modes of transportation.

The book, in making a clear and supported statement about the effects of government-required parking provisions, points to an interesting debate about the role of local government. Making