



University
of Glasgow

Clarke, J. (2012) Work, consumption and subjectivity in postwar France: Moulinex and the meanings of domestic appliances, 1950s-1970s. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 47 (4). pp. 838-859. ISSN 0022-0094

Copyright © 2012 The Authors

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

The content must not be changed in any way or reproduced in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holder(s)

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details must be given

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/74837/>

Deposited on: 5 February 2013

**Work, Consumption and Subjectivity in Postwar France: Moulinex and the
Meanings of Domestic Appliances 1950s-1970s.**

Jackie Clarke

(Author's accepted version of article to be published in *Journal of Contemporary
History* 47:4 October 2012)

In a recent debate with Andreas Wirsching, Frank Trentmann, pronounced the death of the consumer society – or at least took out a contract on the concept's life.¹ 'Consumer society – RIP' was a response to Wirsching's stark (but not entirely new) claim that the adoption of an American economic model in Europe since World War Two has led to a steady retreat of work-based identities, as selfhood has come to be defined instead by consumption.² This argument about a historic shift from work-centred to consumption-centred values echoes to some extent the work of postwar social scientists and cultural critics, who heralded the 'post-industrial' age and 'the leisure civilisation', or who saw in Western Europe by the end of the 1960s a new kind of consumerism which relied not just on an unprecedented proliferation of goods but on an equally unprecedented mythologisation of these goods.³ A staple part of popular historical narratives of postwar Europe, the idea that we live in a consumer

¹ Frank Trentmann, 'Consumer Society – RIP. A Comment' *Contemporary European History* 20, 1 (2011), 27-31.

² Andreas Wirsching, 'From Work to Consumption: Transatlantic Visions of Individuality in Modern Mass Society' *Contemporary European History* 20, 1 (2011), 1, 3.

³ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-industrial Society* (New York 1973); Joffre Dumazedier, *Vers une civilisation du loisir* (Paris 1962); Jean Baudrillard, *La Société de consommation* (Paris 1970); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris 1957).

society has become so widely accepted that the term itself has entered common parlance. Yet while it is perfectly plausible to suggest that relationships to work and consumption underwent major changes in the postwar period, one might well be sceptical about the more schematic and dichotomised versions of this narrative. For this reason, Trentmann has called for a history of consumption that is more attentive to geographical unevenness and historical discontinuities. Or as he put it in the pages of this journal a few years ago: ‘instead of oppositional models of analysis (consumption versus production) and of sequential models (consumer society after class society), the challenge of the next generation of work will be one of integration.’⁴

This article takes up that challenge by exploring the interpenetration of cultures of work and consumption at one of France’s best known companies: the domestic appliance manufacturer, Moulinex. Focusing on a single company offers a useful way of keeping in view the culture in which objects are produced as well that in which they are sold and used; hence my attention here will range across the spaces of the home, the media and the factory. My interest in developing such an approach has been motivated in part by the blind spots of some of the recent historiography of consumer culture in twentieth-century France, a field which has been dominated by American scholars. A distinction can be drawn here between the pioneering studies of department stores published in the 1980s and the work which emerged in the 1990s.⁵ While the former explored shops as spaces of consumption *and* work, the

⁴ Frank Trentmann, ‘Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, 3 (2004), 9.

⁵ Michael B Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton 1981) and, looking beyond the French case, Susan Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Management and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Champaign, Illinois, 1987).

latter studies have been more concerned with advertising discourses, public debates over mass consumption and the processes of identity construction that these sources reveal. This trend was a product of the ‘cultural turn’ in methodology and the accompanying growth of gender and identity studies. Addressing topics such as the culture of business elites, the interwar marketing of domestic appliances, the Marshall Plan missions and debates about ‘Americanisation’, the studies I refer to explored ways in which mass consumption was seen as a threat to Frenchness and/or gender order.⁶ Like much of the cultural history that emerged in this period, however, these studies paid little attention to what had long been the privileged objects of social history: labour, the workplace and the working class. As historians of twentieth-

⁶ E.g. Robert L Frost, ‘Machine Liberation: Inventing Housewives and Home Appliances in Interwar France’ *French Historical Studies* 18, 1 (Spring 1993) , 109-130; Ellen Furlough, ‘Selling the American Way in Interwar France: ‘Prix uniques’ and the Salon des Arts Ménagers’, *Journal of Social History*, 26, 3 (1993), 491-519; Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley 1993); Marjorie Beale, *The Modernist Enterprise: French Elites and the Threat of Modernity 1900-1940* (Stanford 1999). Steven L Harp, *Marketing Michelin: Advertising and Cultural Identity in Twentieth-Century France* (Baltimore 2001) can also be seen as part of this trend. Neither the interest in gender and consumption, nor the concern with ‘Americanisation’ was limited to the French case. Among the other significant contributions are Victoria de Grazia (ed) with Ellen Furlough, *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley 1996); Erica Carter, *How German is She? Postwar West German Reconstruction and the Consuming Woman* (Ann Arbor 1997) and more recently Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge MA 2005). A critical perspective on the Americanisation thesis can be found in Sarah Howard, ‘The Advertising Industry and Alcohol in Interwar France’ *Historical Journal* 51, 2 (2008), 421-455.

century France turned their attention towards consumption, they seemed - with a some notable exceptions - to turn their gaze away from the world of work.⁷

Although the postwar period is commonly considered as the era of mass consumption *par excellence*, detailed historical research on the subject is still in its infancy. This is particularly true in France, where, until very recently, postwar consumer culture has been a subject for sociologists and cultural critics, rather than historians. Textbook or survey histories have relied heavily on the plentiful statistical data gathered by French government agencies in the postwar decades. However, a number of studies addressing specific sectors, businesses, products or commercial practices have now begun to appear, covering everything from Club Med to hypermarkets, from the growth of bottled water consumption to the development of consumer credit.⁸ As this indicative list suggests, these studies are currently too

⁷ The exceptions include Helen Chenu, *The Fabric of Gender: Working-Class Culture in Third Republic France* (University Park 2005) and Ellen Furlough, *Consumer Cooperation in France: The Politics of Consumption 1834-1930* (Ithaca and London 1991).

⁸ Ellen Furlough, 'Packaging Pleasures: Club Méditerranée and French Consumer Culture, 1950-1968' *French Historical Studies*, 18, 1 (1993), 65-81; Jean-Claude Daumas, 'Consommation de masse et grande distribution: une révolution permanente (1957-2005)', *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 91 (2006), 57-76; Nicholas Marty, 'La Consommation des eaux embouteillées: entre alimentation, distinction et hygiène' *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 91 (2006), 25-41; Alain Chatriot, 'Consumers' Associations and the State: Protection and Defence of the Consumer in France, 1950-2000' in A. Chatriot, M.-E. Chessel and Matthew Hilton, *The Expert Consumer: Associations and Professionals in Consumer Society* (Aldershot 2006), 123-136 and A. Chatriot, 'Protéger le consommateur contre lui-même: la régulation du crédit à la consommation', *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 91 (2006), 95-109. See also other articles in this special issue of *Vingtième siècle* on the theme 'Consommer en masse'. On the other side of the Atlantic, Furlough is not alone in examining the growth of tourism in the postwar period. See, for example, Christopher Endy, *Cold War Holidays:*

disparate to add up to anything resembling a new school of thinking, though the French work, which has emerged largely from the sub-fields of business and economic history has tended to be more concerned with historicising changing economic practices or with the politics of consumption, than with questions of cultural representation and identity construction.⁹

One area that has received more sustained attention in the historiography is the transformation of the home and the dissemination of domestic appliances in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁰ It was in this period that what the French called ‘le confort moderne’ – hot running water, inside toilets, central heating, electrical appliances - came to be seen not as a luxury but as a standard of living that should be accessible to all. Sales of appliances rocketed as more and more French homes acquired goods that had initially been the preserve of the most affluent: in 1954 only 7.5 per cent of French households had a fridge and 8.5 per cent a washing machine, but by 1968 the

American Tourism in France (Chapel Hill 2004) and Daniel J Sherman, ‘Paradis à vendre : tourisme et imitation en Polynésie française (1958-1971)’ *Terrain* 44 (2005), 39-56.

⁹ One of the pioneers of the history of consumption in twentieth-century France (with focus on the prewar period) has been Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel who worked on the advertising profession and on business education, before turning her attention to questions of consumer activism. See M.-E. Chessel, *La Publicité. Naissance d’une profession 1900-1940* (Paris 1998) and A. Chatriot, M.-E. Chessel and M. Hilton, *Au nom du consommateur. Consommation et politique en Europe et aux Etats-Unis au XXe siècle* (Paris 2004).

¹⁰ Rebecca J Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France* (Cambridge 2011); Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge MA, 1995); Claire Leymonerie, ‘Le Salon des Arts ménagers dans les années 1950: théâtre d’une conversion à la consommation de masse’ *Vingtième siècle. Revue d’histoire*, 91 (2006), 43-56 and Claire Leymonerie, ‘La Vitrine d’appareils ménagers: reflet des structures commerciales de la France des années 1950’ *Réseaux* 135-6 (2006), 93-123.

respective figures were 72.4 per cent and 50.1 per cent.¹¹ Historians have shown that in the early 1950s an American model of domestic life was quite explicitly promoted in France as a means of undermining class-based identities, as appliances were deployed in Marshall Plan propaganda as symbols of the benefits that working-class people could enjoy if they abandoned Communism and bought into consumer capitalism.¹² Similarly, the normative discourses about domestic comfort that proliferated throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s in sources such as advertising and women's magazines have also been seen not just as new models of feminine domesticity, but as part of a process of privatisation of social life which served to break down class solidarities and political socialisation.¹³ A recent study by Rebecca Pulju offers a more optimistic analysis, arguing that the expansion of mass consumption and the forms of consumer politics that developed with it in France, offered women a new role as consumer-citizens who would consume for the national good and make their voices heard in the market community. While this study too privileges consumption as a site of identity construction, Pulju acknowledges the extent to which the promotion of the new domestic ideal was part of a national productivity drive that rationalised housework as well as factory work.¹⁴ If the home

¹¹ Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society*, 16.

¹² Sheryl Kroen, 'Negotiations with the American Way. The Consumer and the Social Contract in Post-war Europe' John Brewer and Frank Trentmann (eds.), *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives. Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges* (Oxford 2006), esp. 254-6. See also Greg Castillo, 'Domesticating the Cold War. Household Consumption as Propaganda in Marshall Plan Germany' *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, 2 (2005), 261-288.

¹³ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, 71-122, esp. 106-108. In this respect Ross's analysis follows that of the contemporary theorists Henri Lefebvre and Cornelius Castoriadis.

¹⁴ Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society*, esp. pp.11-13, 27-94.

is sometimes considered primarily as a space of consumption, we are reminded here that it was also a place of work, especially for women.

It is this dual role of women as worker-consumers, rather than their role as consumer-citizens that will be the object of analysis in this article. Moulinex offers an invaluable vantage point from which to explore this role, as it was not just in the home that women's work was central to the expansion of the domestic appliance industry. It was women – young, unskilled and from a predominantly rural region – who staffed the shop floors of the eleven Moulinex factories that sprang up across Lower Normandy and its neighbouring departments between 1958 and 1975. A 1968 study put the percentage of women on the workforce at over 80% with an average age of around 18 to 19.¹⁵ In fact, the feminisation of the industrial labour force was a structural feature in France in the 1960s and 1970s: as industries producing consumer goods expanded, the number of unskilled factory jobs multiplied and women (particularly in the manufacture of the electrical goods), along with immigrant men (particularly in automobile construction), were the primary recruits for these posts. At the height of these years of expansion, between 1968 and 1975, nearly half of industrial jobs created were for women.¹⁶

Although the postwar expansion of mass consumption has often been measured in fridges and washing machines, Moulinex - which produced smaller items, such as electric mixers - occupies an emblematic place in this story. This is the case, not just because it epitomises the industry's reliance on female labour, both paid and unpaid, but because the company played a crucial role in making appliances

¹⁵ Michel Chesnais, 'La Société Moulinex. Intégration et expansion' *Etudes normandes* 202 (1968), cited in Manuella Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex* (Paris 2011), 78.

¹⁶ Gérard Noiriel, *Les Ouvriers dans la société française XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris 2002) 211-13.

available at prices that most working households could afford. Moulinex was created by Jean Mantelet when its forerunner, Moulin-Légumes, began to develop electrical appliances in the mid 1950s. Moulin-Légumes had been making manual kitchen gadgets (like the eponymous Moulin-Légume purée maker or the Mouli grater) since 1932, but in 1956 an electric coffee-grinder was launched and the new Moulinex brand was formally adopted as a trading name in 1957. It would soon become a household name in France and the coffee-grinder exemplified the strategy that would enable the company to achieve this. A simple design, a standardised motor and an assembly line staffed by a cheap, unskilled and (initially at least) non-unionised female workforce allowed the Moulinex appliance to hit the market at less than half the price previously charged for rival products (though a fierce price battle with Peugeot ensued over the next few years).¹⁷ As the range of Moulinex products grew so did its hold on the market. By 1960, the offering included mixers, mincers, liquidisers, food-processors and hair-dryers; vacuum cleaners, grills, rotisseries and electric carving knives would follow. The success of these appliances was such that in 1967 Moulinex could claim to have 80% of the French small appliance market.¹⁸ Indeed, this was a market that matured later than that for the iconic item of the 1950s -

¹⁷ The coffee-grinder was marketed at 1990 old francs (19.90 new francs), whereas similar products had previously sold for 4000 or 5000. Archives départementales du Calvados (hereafter AD Calvados): 2003 JP 1058 913 'Argumentation à l'usage de nos représentants' attached to 'Note d'informations no.9 aux représentants' 22 September 1958. By August-September 1960, Peugeot (Moulinex's closest rival in the late 1950s and early 1960s, despite being better known as an automobile constructor) was marketing its basic model at 18.90FF, but Moulinex was still managing to undercut this with a price of 17.89FF. Prices cited in advertisements in *Elle* 12 August 1960 and 23 September 1960.

¹⁸ AD Calvados: 2003 JP 1058 913 'Pourquoi meilleur et moins cher...?' (draft advertising document).

the fridge - for which annual sales had stabilised by the mid-1960s.¹⁹ The mass dissemination and accumulation of smaller electrical goods came a little later. Annual sales of food processors had reached 900 000 in 1964, for example, but hit 2.75 million in 1974; electric coffee-makers, still something of a novelty in 1964 with annual sales of only 60 000, were being purchased at the rate of 1.64 million a year ten years later.²⁰ Moulinex's hold on this market was such that no brand was more closely identified with the postwar transformation of the French home.

The Moulinex case also merits attention, in the context of the questions I have raised, because it deliberately fostered the acquisition of appliances by its workers, offering them for purchase at discounted rates. As we will see, this highly successful policy (at least in terms of the uptake by workers) has left its mark among those who worked for the company in its heyday. Moulinex went bust in 2001 and many of those who lost their jobs had started work during the years of expansion in the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. A strong attachment to Moulinex remains among many of these ex-workers and I will argue that it is a relationship mediated in part by appliances as material and symbolic objects, a relationship constructed through both work and consumption.²¹

Indeed, if the values of productivism and consumerism are often linked to sequential social models (work-centred or class-based society versus consumer society), I will suggest in what follows that, if we can use these terms at all, we might do better to pay more attention to the ways in which the two sets of values are

¹⁹ Henri Morsel (ed.), *Histoire de l'électricité en France* vol.3 (Paris 1996), 924.

²⁰ Morsel *Histoire de l'électricité*, 924.

²¹ On the attachment of Moulinex workers to the firm and the issues it raises in the context of mass redundancies see Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*.

interrelated and mutually constitutive - the evidence from Moulinex certainly points in this direction. By productivism, I mean not only the belief that increasing production and productivity are social goods but a set of values that promote work as the primary site for the integration of individuals into a community. By consumerism, I mean not just a regime which favours the expansion of consumption, but one in which consumption is seen as a primary means of constructing identity and expressing one's social value. If such consumer identities are often seen in terms of increasing individualism (and other studies have certainly provided evidence to suggest that this is part of the story of the expansion of mass consumption in Europe since World War Two), I will argue here that the kinds of identifications with consumer goods proposed by the Moulinex company, as well as the available evidence about Moulinex workers' consumption of the products they produced, present a more complex picture.²²

I will first trace some of the meanings ascribed to Moulinex appliances in the company's marketing and promotional discourse from the end of 1950s to the late 1970s and will demonstrate that, during the postwar boom years, the Moulinex consumer was sold not just a product, but an ethos of national productive effort. Shifting the focus to the factory, I will then show how workers' consumption of Moulinex products was promoted by management in an effort to foster corporate loyalty and model a pacified work community. The final section of the article will argue that, while workers embraced the perks that allowed them to acquire appliances at discounted rates, their use of and continuing attachment to these products did not

²² One of the most influential studies of the effects of 'affluence' on postwar working-class identities was John Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer, Jennifer Platt, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge 1969).

entirely conform either to the management vision or to the expectation that such goods operated as a vector for the construction of privatised consumption-based identities.

Early analysts of the consumer culture that developed in France in the 1950s and 1960s were struck by the constant stimulation of consumer desire that operated in the mass media. They saw consumer society as an order dominated by systems of signification and they argued that the mythologisation of commodities served to occlude or distance the forms of production on which the proliferation of consumer goods depended.²³ Barthes, for example, famously argued that the sensual qualities invoked to distinguish brands of soap powder not only masked the abrasive qualities of detergent but created an illusion of competition and consumer choice in a market dominated by ‘trusts’.²⁴ Yet the appeals to whiteness and cleanliness that were the stock in trade of soap powder adverts were also part of a discourse about work, in the sense that they promised to make women’s domestic labour easier. This was all the more true of domestic appliances, which were framed in a discourse about the rationalisation or ‘organisation’ of housework (*organisation ménagère*) - which had taken shape in the interwar years. As engineers sought to improve efficiency in factories through time and motion study, ergonomics, planning techniques and standardisation (methods often collectively referred to in France as *l’organisation scientifique du travail* – the scientific organisation of work), their ideas were taken up

²³ See e.g. Baudrillard, *La Société de consommation*, 26-30; Barthes, *Mythologies*, 69-72.

²⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 36-38.

by household experts who tried to bring a similar drive for efficiency to the home.²⁵ By the 1950s and 1960s, electrical appliances, which had remained inaccessible to most people before the war, were being offered as the primary means of achieving household efficiency, and (as I will illustrate in a moment) industrial discourses about standardisation and productivity permeated the way in which these products were branded.

Selling appliances to the mass market meant positioning them as essential, practical things, rather than luxuries – as part of a normal standard of living that should be available to all classes. As a brand Moulinex was very much identified with the making of this mass market, trading heavily on price and accessibility to all. In 1962, Jean Mantelet boasted that, while it would have cost one of his workers a week's wages to buy an electric coffee grinder in 1956, it now cost her less than one day's pay.²⁶ Claire Leymonerie has noted that at the Salon des arts ménagers (an annual home exhibition) in the 1950s, small equipment manufacturers like Moulin-Légumes piled their wares on the counter so that people could pick them up and used sharp-talking demonstrators to explain the products. In contrast, exhibitors offering larger and more expensive items used photographs and printed information panels to inform their clientele and presented their products on pedestals that invited the customer to contemplate and aestheticise the product rather than handle it.²⁷ As Moulinex moved into electrical goods, it positioned these as analogous in marketing

²⁵ See Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization: Factory, Home and Nation from the 1920s to Vichy* (Oxford and New York, 2011), 70-94.

²⁶ AD Calvados: 2003 JP 1058 912 dossier 12b, Jean Mantelet, 'Activités 1961 des sociétés Moulinex et Moulin-Légumes,' 5 January 1962.

²⁷ Claire Leymonerie, 'Le Salon des arts ménagers dans les années 1950. Théâtre d'une conversion à la consommation de masse', *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 91 (July-September 2006), 53-54

terms to the manual equipment made by its sister company, insisting that an electric coffee-grinder was a functional everyday item just a like cheese grater.²⁸ Simplicity and robustness were the qualities most readily attributed to Moulinex products.²⁹

A clear example of the way in which these products were framed by a discourse about the rationalisation of work can be found in an advertising feature in *Elle* magazine in August 1960, which opened with the rhetorical question and answer: ‘Your number one problem? Domestic organisation’.³⁰ *Elle* was one of the higher end women’s magazines and the Moulinex feature which appeared in this issue presented an aspirational image of the brand, but one that still emphasised functionality rather than aesthetics or luxury. The two page spread related an experiment in which a women had been asked to make a series of dishes for a dinner party, first without using appliances, and then again with the aid of a range of Moulinex products. The accompanying illustrations showed the woman in the first instance in an apron, beating a bowl of ingredients by hand, with half-prepared food all around her, while a second larger image offered the spectacle of the same woman in full cocktail dress, with hair done, make-up applied and an array of finished dishes before her. That this elegant hostess could put the final touches to her meal by whipping cream with her Moulinex mixer while already dressed for dinner emphasised the cleanliness and tidiness associated with the use of appliances as well the principal message about their efficiency. The latter was highlighted by the text which informed readers that it had taken one hour and forty five minutes to make the meal by hand and a mere thirty two

²⁸ AD Calvados: 2003 JP 1058 913 ‘Argumentation à l’usage de nos représentants’ attached to ‘Note d’informations no.9 aux représentants ‘ 22 September 1958.

²⁹ ‘La Vie en rose des cordons bleus et de leurs maris’ *Paris Match* 16 July 1960, 84

³⁰ ‘En utilisant Moulinex, économisez sur votre temps 15 jours de vacances par an’, *Elle* (12 August 1960), 66-67.

minutes and seven seconds with the help of Moulinex. The precision timing in latter case underlined the implicit shift from an old regime of domestic work based on approximation and inherited knowledge to a scientific model based on industrial, Taylorised conceptions of time and efficiency.

Of course the message here was more about serving one's family in a way that was considered 'modern' than about the kinds of work-centred values that tended to be attached to men's work (the idea of self-realisation through work, for example). Efficiency was valued as a means of securing time for leisure, but also as a way of making time for those immaterial forms of feminine labour that involve emotional nurturing of the family: 'Each time you spend ten minutes too long on a domestic chore, those are ten minutes "stolen" from your rest, your children, your husband, your beauty, your reading.'³¹ Thus, the argument was not simply that, as the promoters of another long-established French brand might put it, 'you're worth it'; appliances were also being sold as an investment in domestic productivity, since spending the 300FF it would cost to acquire the featured appliances would not just save time that could be used for a holiday (as the feature also pointed out), but would create time for more work, albeit work of a different kind. Consumer culture in this instance promoted a kind of domestic productivism.

If these products were presented as elements of a standard of living to which all might aspire (despite the relatively high cost of acquiring the full range of products advertised in *Elle*), the link between the discourse of domestic standardisation and the process of industrial standardisation was made very apparent in early Moulinex adverts. In the late 1950s, the company's press adverts were basic half pages in black and white featuring no more than two or three appliances. The slogan (until 1962)

³¹ 'En utilisant Moulinex...', *Elle* (12 August 1960), 66-67.

was ‘Moulinex: price and quality through mass production’ and this text was accompanied by a logo showing a stylised factory with a line of uniform coffee grinders emerging from it as if straight from the production line.³² Rather than being obscured by the product (as in Barthes examples), the factory was foregrounded here in an aestheticised form and the standardisation of production was deployed as an asset. Indeed, while the epithet ‘mass-produced’ is more likely to be seen today as a mark of low quality, in the 1950s and 1960s it connoted ‘modernity’. Images of industrial vats and production lines could be mobilised - in relation to food products for example - as an indicator of hygienic ‘modern’ factory conditions.³³ Similarly, the brand image that was being constructed in the Moulinex adverts rested not just on images of appliances as available for potential consumption, but on their inscription in a representation of productive prowess.

This was in fact one of several ways in which a narrative of industrial success was integrated into the Moulinex brand. From the beginning, this was a company that liked to communicate about its history and it did so notably by endlessly re-telling the story of Jean Mantelet’s genius as an inventor and industrialist. In this heavily gendered narrative, which varies only slightly from one source to another, the path to Moulinex began one day in 1932 when the genial inventor returned from his then modest workshop, only to find that the mashed potato in the dinner his wife served up to him was lumpy. Using his masculine technical know-how to help the ill-equipped housewife, Mantelet invented the Moulin-légume - a gadget that would make lumpy mash a thing of the past. Seeing that he could sell to a wider market if he kept the

³² See for example the adverts in *Marie-Claire* (May 1959), 39 or *Elle* (16 September 1960), 124.

³³ E.g. Claudel Camembert advertisement *Paris March* 632 (20 May 1961), 148-49; Gelati Alemagna advertisement *Paris Match* 683 (12 May 1962).

price low, Mantelet decided to take only a small margin and target the mass market. Genius struck again nearly a quarter of a century later when he realised that France had entered a motorised age and that, just as cars and mopeds were replacing bicycles, so domestic work could be automated with mass-produced motors, and women liberated in the process. This was the narrative presented in an advertising feature in *Paris Match* in 1960 and the same story can be found in a range of subsequent sources including a wave of articles in May 1969 that coincided with the company's Mothers' Day promotion.³⁴ *France-soir* even ran a feature that year with the headline, 'Because Mrs Mantelet's Mash Was Lumpy, Moulinex Has Become Number 1 in Europe'.³⁵ What is significant here is not only the extent to which the Moulinex brand was defined by the figure of Jean Mantelet, but the extent to which Mantelet's image was built not so much on his money-making talents, but on his credentials as a man who made things. He was an industrialist rather than a businessman and this myth of origins linked the Moulinex brand with what could be called an industrial ethic.

From 1962, the slogan 'price and quality through mass production' was replaced with the grand claim that 'Moulinex liberates women'. The factory logo, with its reference to the benefits of mass production, disappeared shortly afterwards, but industrial imagery remained very much part of the company's visual repertoire. This was particularly true in documents aimed at a business audience such as annual reports and brochures for distributors, where photographs of factories proliferated

³⁴ 'La Vie en rose des cordons bleus et de leurs maris' *Paris Match* 16 July 1960, 84-5 and, for example, 'Mais où donc s'arrêtera Monsieur Moulinex' *L'Aurore* (26-27 April 1969).

³⁵ AD Calvados: 2003 JP 1058 2160 'Parce que la pureté de Mme Mantelet avait des grumeaux Moulinex est devenue le No. 1 Européen des petits appareils ménagers' *France-Soir-Paris-Presse-L'Intransigeant* 21 May 1969.

throughout the 1960s, often in preference to images of Moulinex products.³⁶ Photographs of factories also accompanied the press features on the ‘industrial adventure’ of Moulinex which the company promoted notably in the later 1960s. Figure 1 shows an image used in the company’s annual report for 1965, but press features such as those that ran in specialised titles like *Essor industriel. Economies régionales* in 1966, in general dailies such as *France-soir*, *Aurore*, and *Figaro* in May 1969, or in *Paris Match* in 1972, offered a similar feast of factory imagery -- from external aerial photographs of the large Alençon site to shots of production lines and workshops with machinery and workers stretching as far as the eye can see.³⁷ What was promoted in this material, notably in the example below, was a vision of the factory as a harmonious space of technological achievement and contented collective effort, a message reinforced by the gendering of the production line as a feminine space. Indeed, the fact that industrial photography featured prominently in the company’s 1969 press campaign can surely be read an attempt to reconstruct a vision of a pacified workplace that had been profoundly shaken by the social movements of the previous year.

³⁶ E.g. Brochures in AD Calvados: 2003 JP 1058 2160 and annual reports 1962-70 in 2003 JP 894 2.

³⁷ Press clippings in AD Calvados: 2003 JP 1058 2160.



Figure 1. Moulinex publicity image 1965. AD Calvados 2003 JP 1058 2160. © Direction des Archives du Calvados.

These representations can be understood as part of a postwar media landscape in which productivist themes were very much in evidence, as France embarked on a state managed programme of industrial expansion mapped out in a series of economic plans. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, newsreels ran features on industrial innovation and the opening of new factories, and as television replaced newsreel, the factory was also a subject taken up with some enthusiasm by television journalists.³⁸

³⁸ E.g. 'Inauguration de la Foire de Lyon et visite des usines Berliet' *Les Actualités françaises* 8 May 1957 <http://www.ina.fr/economie-et-societe/vie-economique/video/AFE85007387/inauguration-de-la-foire-de-lyon-et-visite-aux-usines-berliet.fr.html>; 'Nouvelle source d'électricité' *Les Actualités françaises* 1 February 1961 <http://www.ina.fr/video/AFE85008978/nouvelle-source-d-electricite-l->

Government publications such as *La Documentation française illustrée* charted the country's resurgence after war and decolonisation, not just in abstract graphs and tables, but in photographs of factories, power stations and construction sites.³⁹ In the context of this visual discourse of national modernisation, it is not surprising that companies like Moulinex should choose to tout their industrial achievements, particularly since Moulinex's role in bringing factory jobs to an area better known for its orchards and dairy produce resonated well with public policy commitments to regional development. Indeed, a feature of this company imagery was its emphasis on locality. Photographs carried captions such as 'Manufacturing of condensers: 600 000 per month at the Falaise factory', which evoked not just abstract qualities of industriousness but a homely Norman contribution to a national project of economic expansion.⁴⁰ As another article put it, 'Alençon, Caen, Falaise, Argentan, Mamers, soon Fresnay, Domfront, Trouville. In these lovely Norman towns, Moulinex factories represent progress.'⁴¹

atome-et-les-marees.fr.html; 'Votre téléviseur' Radiodiffusion television française, 13 December 1960
<http://boutique.ina.fr/video/economie-et-societe/vie-economique/CPF86609277/votre-televiseur.fr.html>; 'R16 Renault: naissance d'une voiture' ORTF 24 May 1965
<http://www.ina.fr/economie-et-societe/vie-economique/video/CAF97069561/r-16-renault-naissance-d-une-voiture.fr.html> accessed 5 May 2011.

³⁹ E.g 'Les Industries mécaniques' *La Documentation française illustrée* 153 (January 1960) and 'Qu'est-ce que le Plan?' *La Documentation française illustrée* 159 (July 1960).

⁴⁰ AD 2003 JP 1058 2160 *Essor Industriel. Economies régionales. Supplément illustré à La Vie française* no.23 (May 1966), 4.

⁴¹ 'Une affaire dont le succès repose sur votre bonheur' *Jours de France* (24 May 1969), 157

If the Moulinex factory was deployed in the media as a symbol of progress, just as the Moulinex product was, appliances also played an important role as a material and symbolic currency *within* the factory. The policy of selling appliances to workers at a discounted rate ensured that Moulinex employees were avid consumers of the company's products. Unfortunately, the archive records on this practice are rather sparse. They date mainly from the 1970s or later, but oral evidence suggests that discounts already existed in the 1960s.⁴² Evidence from 1972 indicates that new appliances were offered to workers at that time with a reduction of 36% on the retail price and a document from 1976 suggests that discounts of up to 50% were available on clearance lines.⁴³ The popularity of appliance sales to staff was such that the management complained in 1976 that the perk was being 'abused' and decided to make the purchase of a second similar appliance in the same year subject to a lesser discount of only 24% (the same as the wholesale price).⁴⁴ Among the 830 former Moulinex workers surveyed by Manuella Roupnel-Fuentes in 2003, as well as among those I have interviewed, it was clearly the norm to acquire a host of Moulinex products for one's home.⁴⁵ Josseline Berthaume, for example, remembers that her

⁴² Of 12 interviewees who started work at Moulinex between 1962 and 1971 only Michèle Houel (interviewed 17 May 2010) had a doubt about whether discounted appliances had been available when she first started work at Falaise in 1962, though she felt sure they had been available when she moved to the Caen factory in Cormelles le Royal in 1964. All my interviewees worked at Cormelles although a few others also spent part of their career on other Moulinex sites.

⁴³ AD Calvados: 2003 JP 910 68 dossier 3. Memos on prices of new appliances for July and December 1972. AD Calvados: 2003 JP 910 253 'Moulinex Mamers. Procès-verbal de la réunion du Comité d'établissement, en date du 13 janvier 1976'.

⁴⁴ AD Calvados: 2003 JP 910 253 'Moulinex Caen. Procès-verbal de la réunion du Comité d'établissement, en date du 30 avril 1976', 5.

⁴⁵ Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, 129.

parents' house had little in the way of appliances (other than a fridge and a washing machine) before she started work at Moulinex as a seventeen year old in 1970, but after that 'it was an invasion!'⁴⁶

Clearly the policy of discounted sales benefited workers materially, but before considering workers' own perspectives on the appliances they produced and consumed in the final section of this article, it is important to understand the place of this policy in the company culture at Moulinex. A clue to the meanings that management attached to appliances, as they promoted their acquisition by staff, can be found in the practice of awarding workers a free manual appliance (like the Moulin-légume) each year on the anniversary of their employment at Moulinex. As a material benefit, this was modest in comparison to the discounts on electrical goods – indeed since many Moulinex workers spent twenty-five years or more with the firm, this annual gift was of less and less use as the years went on.⁴⁷ Arguably, however, this makes all the more apparent the symbolic function of this gesture, for the anniversary gift was clearly a marker of stability, fidelity and corporate loyalty. That the gift should be selected from the older manual appliances which evoked the company's origins invited workers to situate themselves in a narrative of corporate continuity, as part of the oft-repeated Moulinex story of invention and industry. Moreover, gadgets like the Moulin-légume had become inseparable from the figure of Jean Mantelet, making them symbols not just of corporate loyalty, but of loyalty to the person of the *patron*. This suggests that encouraging employees to develop a

⁴⁶ Josseline Berthaume 11 May 2010.

⁴⁷ The average number of years of service among those who lost their jobs when the company went bust in 2001 was twenty six. Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, 24.

relationship with the company as consumers of its goods was a way reinforcing their relationship with the company as producers.

As social relations became more openly conflictual at Moulinex in the wake of 1968 (when unions gained a foothold for the first time), appliances were also used to promote corporate loyalty in other ways. In 1969 a strike broke out in the automatic machine workshop and a memo that survives in the company archives indicates that the workers and team leaders who refused to join the strike were secretly rewarded with a free appliance and in some cases a cash bonus. The award of these appliances also reaffirmed factory hierarchies since the value of the item offered depended not on particular services rendered during the strike but on the individual's grade. Unqualified workers were given a small appliance such as a toaster (worth under 30FF at the staff price), while skilled mechanics and workshop supervisors could choose items up to the value of 100-120FF including vacuum cleaners, food processors and deep fat fryers.⁴⁸

It was in 1975, against a backdrop of further strikes and amidst concerns that the company's rapid growth had resulted in a loss of cohesion, that Moulinex launched another initiative which illuminates the way in which it invited employees to construct a double relationship with the firm as both producers and consumers. This was the launch of an in-house magazine for staff called *Le Point de rencontre*. The title alone suggests a communications strategy whose aim was to build (or rebuild) consensus and the retelling of the company's history through objects in the magazine's pages offered one way of doing this. A regular feature on the back page showed the successive models of a selected appliance that been produced over the years, inviting the reader to construct his or own history through the object and hence

⁴⁸ AD Calvados 2003 JP 910 97/5, memo and list of selected appliances.

through the company (see Fig. 2). That these personal histories were understood in terms of both production *and* consumption of appliances was apparent from other content in magazine, where features on industrial organisation or particular factories were interspersed with items such as consumer advice or recipe pages showing how appliances could be put to good use in employees' own homes.⁴⁹



Figure 2. *Le Point de rencontre* 4 (September 1975). AD Calvados 2003 JP 894 1. © Direction des Archives du Calvados.

⁴⁹ E.g. *Le Point de rencontre* 1 (February 1975), 15 and *Le Point de rencontre* 5 (November 1975) inside back cover.

These practices can be understood as part of a prevailing consumerist paternalism at Moulinex.⁵⁰ According to one former Moulinex manager, Jean Mantelet liked to refer to his whole enterprise of making appliances accessible to the masses as a form of social action.⁵¹ Even today, many former workers still cast Jean Mantelet, who remained at the head of the firm until 1987, as a paternal figure, sometimes referring to him as *le père Mantelet* or *papie* (Grandpa) *Mantelet*.⁵² It may seem odd to link the promotion of individual or household consumption with paternalism, since the latter term is usually used to evoke a regime in which companies controlled significant swathes of workers lives outside work by directly providing facilities such as housing and collective leisure facilities. Such practices had developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in industries such as mining and steel, as exemplified locally by one of Moulinex's neighbouring employers in Caen, the Société métallurgique de Normandie (SMN).⁵³ After the Second World War, however, when a national social security system was created, when employees had a legal right to representation on the committees that managed workplace social provision and when employers were required from 1953 to contribute to a local housing fund managed jointly by representatives of business and the public authorities, the older forms paternalist intervention in domestic life died out. In this context, employers like Moulinex, who did not directly provide workers' housing, did not exercise the same degree of influence over workers' lives outside the

⁵⁰ Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, 41-50

⁵¹ Didier Douriez, *Moulinex: 25 ans au service de Jean Mantelet* (Cabourg 2001), 74.

⁵² See testimonies in Sonia Brault, *Les Moulinex. Alençon 1937-2001* (Verrières 2009), 20-21.

⁵³ Alain Leménoel, *La SMN. Une forteresse ouvrière 1910-1993* (Cabourg 2005), 106-165; Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, 44.

workplace as companies like the SMN had done before the war.⁵⁴ While this made the home more wholeheartedly the preserve of the family rather than the company, fostering the privatised model of family life that is generally associated with consumer society, a new bond between the workers' domestic space and the company was nonetheless being configured through the acquisition of appliances – a bond which continued to promote the values of stability and loyalty to Moulinex and its founder.

Employees may have bought appliances, but one cannot conclude from this that they bought into the meanings that the company attributed to these objects. So how did Moulinex workers construct a relationship to objects and how far did they embrace or contest the management discourse? Returning to one of the questions raised in the introduction to this article, we might also ask to what extent these workers were beginning to construct social identities as consumers rather than producers – and if so, to what extent there was a tension between these identities, given that company discourse both inside and outside the business imbued the brand heavily with productivist values. A potential obstacle here is the fact that, while sources that offer insight into the perspectives of management and marketers are relatively plentiful, it is much more difficult to access the workers' perspective, particularly in relation to the social lives of objects beyond the factory. Life history interviews and published testimonies can only offer a retrospective view but, read carefully and combined with company and trade union archives, these sources do

⁵⁴ Nicolas Hatzfeld, *Les Gens d'usine: 50 ans d'histoire à Peugeot-Sochaux* (Paris 2002), 210-11; Noiriel, *Les Ouvriers dans la société française*, 224-25.

offer some clues as to working-class consumer practices and the multiple meanings of domestic appliances, as well as a glimpse of working-class memories of the so-called *Trente glorieuses*.⁵⁵

One effect of the practice of selling appliances to workers was that, even within the space of the factory, they sometimes addressed their employers in their capacity as consumers. This is apparent in records of meetings between management and workers in the statutory *comités d'établissement* - workplace committees with responsibility for managing certain social benefits for employees, such as subsidised leisure activities and children's holidays - though appliance sales were actually administered directly by the company rather than by these committees. Nonetheless, it was not unusual for workers' representatives to enquire about when appliances would be available and on what terms, or even to complain about aspects of the service, such as the delays that sometimes accumulated between order and delivery.⁵⁶ At one meeting in 1976 a representative went further, by offering some customer feedback about the de-scaling product supplied with each pack of filters for Moulinex coffee machines: apparently some users had found the quantity to be insufficient and wanted to know whether more could be purchased separately.⁵⁷ This request was given short shrift, as employees were told that the amount of product provided had

⁵⁵ The phrase coined by Jean Fourastié for the thirty 'glorious' years of economic expansion that followed the Second World War.

⁵⁶ E.g. AD Calvados: 2003 JP 910 67 'Réunion du Comité d'établissement d'Argentan en date du 8 février 1972' and 'Réunion du Comité d'établissement d'Argentan en date du 14 novembre 1972'; AD Calvados: 2003 JP 910 253 'Réunion du Comité d'établissement de Villaines-la-Juhel en date du 30 mars 1976'.

⁵⁷ AD Calvados: 2003 JP 910 253 'Moulinex Mamers. Procès-verbal de la Réunion du Comité d'établissement, en date du 8 Juin 1976'.

been calculated by the relevant technical team to ensure that appliances were appropriately maintained – the implication being that the company and its (overwhelmingly male) technicians knew better than the product’s (doubtless disproportionately female) end-users. This isolated and ostensibly banal exchange is interesting in that it highlights two conflicting understandings of the role of the worker as consumer: an active role similar to that espoused by consumer associations was being exercised by the workers’ representative, inviting the manufacturer to adapt the product to consumer feedback, but this appeared to come as a surprise to the management representative, who constructed appropriate consumer behaviour, on this occasion at least, in more passive and conformist terms.

In other ways too, Moulinex workers used their access to cheap appliances in ways which did not entirely conform to expectations. One of the most striking practices is the use of the staff discount to facilitate the acquisition of appliances by those who did not actually work for the company. While workers often bought appliances as gifts, especially for weddings, it also appears that they were purchasing items on behalf of family and friends, thereby passing on their discount to other consumers.⁵⁸ This was surely what the management suspected when they complained in 1976 that some members of staff were buying as many as four or five models of the same kind of appliance in one year.⁵⁹ Similarly, there was a free repair and spare parts service for staff which, according to two interviewees, was widely used to repair the

⁵⁸ Mireille Jouvin 25 June 2010; Josette Gosselin 29 June 2010. This is confirmed by an interview with Moulinex trade unionist Thierry Lepaon in 2005 cited in Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, 129-130.

⁵⁹ AD Calvados: 2003 JP 910 253 ‘Procès-verbal de la réunion du Comité d’établissement, en date du 30 avril 1976’, 5.

appliances of any friend or neighbour who might ask.⁶⁰ This would certainly explain why on one occasion more than 450 replacement coffee pots for electric coffee-makers were requested by employees at the Caen factory in a period of two and half months.⁶¹ While this factory employed close to 3000 people at the time, the high level of demand for spare parts clearly indicates that, unless Moulinex workers were exceptionally accident-prone, the workers' benefits were being used to service a much wider community.⁶²

These practices are intriguing because they complicate the idea that to buy consumer goods was necessarily to invest in a privatised form of domestic life, which tended to break down social solidarities, especially class solidarities. Interestingly, while Nicolas Hatzfeld's study of Peugeot workers at Sochaux found that cars bought by these workers in the 1950s were often resold locally within a year, sometimes at a profit, I have found no evidence to date of such a commercial practice among Moulinex workers.⁶³ Allain Magloire remembers that he once got a free haircut from a local hairdresser in return for getting his hairdryer fixed, but this was more a matter of mutual back-scratching than profiteering.⁶⁴ It is not clear how common such informal barter arrangements were, but evidence of familial and neighbourly sharing of perks does indicate that the prevailing model of individual household consumption, and indeed the official Moulinex discourse on democratisation and accessibility, were

⁶⁰ Guillaume Cransac 27 May 2010 and Allain Magloire 1 June 2010.

⁶¹ AD Calvados: 2003 JP 910 253 'Procès-verbal de la réunion du Comité d'établissement, en date du 30 avril 1976', 5.

⁶² AD Calvados: 2003 JP 910 253 'Procès-verbal de la reunion du Comité d'établissement en date du 27 janvier 1976' gives the total number employed on the Caen site in January 1976 as 2930 people.

⁶³ Hatzfeld, *Les Gens d'usine*, 207-08.

⁶⁴ Allain Magloire 1 June 2010.

to some extent being subverted. This suggests that, at least in the period when working-class households were still gaining access to household consumer durables for the first time, one can find a collective ethos of mutual aid in the consumer practices of these communities, as well as a desire to share in the spoils of capitalism. The two impulses in this instance were not in contradiction.

It should also be noted that, while many former Moulinex workers retain a strong sense of loyalty to the firm and a respect for Jean Mantelet in particular, this does not mean they were acquiescent as employees or reluctant to engage in collective action (though obviously individual attitudes varied). The period from 1968 to 1978 was marked by an ongoing struggle to improve pay and conditions, as workers simultaneously defended their standard of living and contested the rhythm of work imposed by relentless production targets.⁶⁵ In workers' memories of social relations in this period, one incident looms large and it is illuminating that it is an incident involving appliances. The events occurred during a bitter strike and occupation at Moulinex in Cormelles le Royal in June 1978, when what is described in contemporary press accounts as a 'commando' group, armed with batons, forced its way into the occupied factory. A report in *Ouest France* suggested that these 'commandos' were not Moulinex employees and that they acted with the complicity

⁶⁵ AD Calvados: CFDT 2002 450 8 contains a range of campaign leaflets illustrating such themes. A flyer headed 'Plateforme revendicative', for example, sets out the campaign platform of the CFDT at Alençon in 1975, listing among the union's demands a return to the 40 hour week, a fifth week of paid holidays, a 'more humane' rhythm of work and measures to alleviate the fatigue associated with sustained repetitive work. Similar demands were made by the CGT in Argentan in its newsletter *Le Presse-purée* ahead of the election of workers' representatives in that factory on 20 November 1974. These examples can be found in dossiers in 1 and 11 respectively.

of the Moulinex management.⁶⁶ Indeed, it was suspected that they came from the neighbouring Citroën factory, as Citroën had a reputation for this kind of hard-line action.⁶⁷ In what seems to be the most memorable aspect of the event, the workers occupying the Moulinex factory – mostly women – defended themselves by using the pressure cookers the factory was then producing as projectiles. Here the appliance was not a commodity to be bought and taken home, but a product of the workers' labour and one which is mobilised in their memories in a way that articulates their subjectivity as producers (fighting to improve their terms and conditions), rather than consumers. This moment when 'the pressure cookers flew' was reported in the press at the time and seems to have entered into Moulinex mythology. Five of my twelve interviewees referred to the incident, while the language of flight or the analogy between pressure-cooker lids and flying saucers recurs across testimonies in the way the event is described.⁶⁸ This suggests that the anecdote is well-rehearsed and has solidified into a form that finds its resonance precisely in the way this appropriation of appliances as a symbol of dissent overturned the consensual social world that was represented in company rhetoric by the-appliance-as-commodity.

Moreover, consumer identities themselves were not necessarily depoliticised. In the ten years of social tensions that followed May 1968, the two main unions at Moulinex, the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) and the Confédération

⁶⁶ AD Calvados: Gauer Papers 1J 57. Clipping from *Ouest France* 27 June 1978.

⁶⁷ AD Calvados: Gauer Papers 1J 57. 'Flics, Fascistes, Hors des Usines!', leaflet by Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, Organisation communiste des travailleurs and Parti communiste révolutionnaire 27 June 1978; clipping from *Liberté* 30 June 1978.

⁶⁸ Interviews with Jocelyne Rouvrais, Jean-Claude Guénégant, Mireille Jouvin, Jean Duranton, Michèle Houel 17 May 2010 – 30 June 2010. The published testimony of Thérèse L'Equilbecq also refers to seeing the pressure cooker lids 'fly' in Douriez, *Moulinex*, 91.

française démocratique du travail (CFDT) rarely entered into explicit critique of the ‘consumer society’. However, neither union missed the opportunity to exploit the ‘Moulinex liberates women’ slogan for its own purposes. One campaign document that appears to date from the mid-1970s carried the title ‘The Tool of Your Liberation: The CFDT’ above an illustration of a woman throwing off her chains, just as the ‘Moulinex liberates women’ adverts showed a woman casting aside her apron.⁶⁹ The accompanying text went further than most trade union materials in exploring the contradictions in the Fordist worker’s position as producer and consumer, particularly for the women who did so much of the unskilled labour at Moulinex. It began by appealing to its audience’s experience as consumers, noting that when they went shopping for a washing machine or a television, ‘the customer is king....the salesperson treats us with the greatest respect at the moment of purchase’; in contrast, it was observed, the same women were entitled to no such respect in the factory, but rather found themselves relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy and constrained by the relentless rhythm of work. Hence, it was argued, the label ‘consumer society’ merely served to mask the fundamentally exploitative social relations of capitalism.⁷⁰ While this line of reasoning began by inviting women workers to think from the subject position of the consumer, it did so in order to radicalise them as producers.

If the above examples suggest that, in the hands of Moulinex workers, appliances did not simply promote consumerist forms of subjectivity, this is even more evident when former workers speak about the appliances they bought, used and

⁶⁹ AD Calvados 2002 450 8 CFDT Argentan, ‘L’Outil de votre liberation. La CFDT’; an example from the CGT can be found in *Le Presse-purée. Journal d’information du syndicat Moulinex d’Argentan* CGT-FSM November 1974.

⁷⁰ AD Calvados 2002 450 8 CFDT Argentan, ‘L’Outil de votre liberation. La CFDT’.

sold to others. Their investment in Moulinex products is clearly bound up with pride in their work. Although the reductions on appliances for workers were substantial, by the 1970s the discounting practices of major retailers meant that one could sometimes buy appliances from a range of brands, including Moulinex, just as cheaply in a department store or hypermarket. So the fact that workers bought Moulinex was not simply a matter of price. When asked why they bought the products, my interviewees often found it difficult to answer, as it was self-evident to them that they would prefer Moulinex products – it was natural (‘ça coulait de source’) as Allain Magloire put it. Pressed as to whether the discounted price was the primary motivation for buying Moulinex, Monsieur Magloire replied ‘No. We worked on these products after all.’⁷¹ This was partly a matter of workers supporting their own company economically rather than giving their business to competitors. Yet it was also an expression of confidence in the products they had produced. Josseline Berthaume explained this confidence both in terms of the global reputation of the company and her familiarity with the appliances from working in the factory.⁷² Male workers who worked in product development highlighted the technical innovations of Moulinex products, evoking not just the achievements of their former firm but in some cases their own contribution to this.⁷³ But it was not only men who affirmed the quality of the products. Revealingly, a female worker interviewed by Fanny Gallot explained the practice of facilitating sales to friends and neighbours as an expression of the pride that workers felt in the appliances: ‘We liked to boast about them’, she laughed.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Allain Magloire 1 June 2010.

⁷² Josseline Berthaume 11 May 2010.

⁷³ Jean Duranton 30 June 2010, Guillaume Cransac 27 May 2010.

⁷⁴ Fanny Gallot, ‘L’Attachement des ouvrières aux produits de leur travail’, *Contretemps. Revue de critique communiste* 10 (June 2011), 85.

Indeed, if a further indication is needed of the extent to which the workers' identification with the appliances was an expression of their identities as producers, it can be found in the rupture with the products experienced by those who were made redundant in 2001. When the company went bust, the Moulinex brand survived as it was sold to SEB. It is therefore still possible to buy Moulinex branded products. Yet most of the workers I have interviewed told me that they refuse to buy these products. For them, these are not 'real' Moulinex appliances produced by Moulinex workers, but rather symbols of the betrayal that the former workers continue to feel a decade on from the company's collapse.

There is a nexus of identifications here between the worker, the product and the company itself, which is surely a legacy of the way in which the consumption of appliances was promoted as a means of binding workers to the firm (though it now operates to denounce the failings of management in the last years of the company's life).⁷⁵ The positive meanings that workers attach to products today reflect the kinds of qualities that were ascribed to the brand from the outset, as the emphasis is very much on functionality and robustness. One of the primary characteristics invoked is durability: Josette Gosselin, who spent nearly thirty three years at Moulinex, told me she still has a working food processor that her husband bought for her as a present when she started work at the company in 1969.⁷⁶ The success of the repair service offered to workers is also an indication that there was no culture of disposability in these consumers' relationship to the objects they bought – items that broke down were only replaced as a last resort if they could not be repaired. Indeed the most recurrent

⁷⁵ This nexus of identifications has also been noted by Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, 129-30.

⁷⁶ Josette Gosselin 29 June 2010

phrase used by former Moulinex workers to talk about appliances is ‘c’était du solide’ – they were made of solid stuff.⁷⁷

This observation about ‘solidity’ has cropped up in informal conversations as well as in interviews even when workers were not prompted by me to discuss their feelings about appliances. Uttered with varying degrees of pride and wistfulness, it is a phrase that expresses the profound sense of loss that many Moulinex workers have experienced since the company went bust. All but one of my interviewees lost their jobs in the factory closures of 2001. Hired as teenagers or in their early twenties at a time when one only had to show up to get a job, and having fought to improve their social rights in the late 1960s and 1970s, these workers experienced the introduction of new ‘flexible’ working practices in the 1980s and 1990s, before being cast out in middle age into a labour market that bore no relation to the one they had known in their youth. When they speak of the solidity of Moulinex products, it is as if these appliances now embody the stability of the social model that was lost with the company’s collapse. As a metaphor for Fordism, the solidity of Moulinex appliances evokes the lost ‘solidity’ of secure jobs, of the camaraderie of the workplace (also frequently invoked in interviews and published testimonies), and of workers’ longstanding relationship with their company.⁷⁸ In this sense, the idea of Moulinex as solidity is at least partly a retrospective construction, formulated from a position of forced worklessness, but it can also be read as a legacy of the company culture and workers’ practices discussed earlier. It was at once a reappropriation of the brand that

⁷⁷ Michèle Houel 17 May 2010; Josette Gosselin 29 June 2010.

⁷⁸ Gatherings of women who worked at Moulinex often trigger reminiscences about the ‘bonne ambiance’ of the early days. I witnessed this on several occasions in the three months I spent in Caen, regularly attending meetings of APIC Mx, an association of former Moulinex workers. The role of the workplace as a social support network is particularly clear in my interviews with Josseline Berthume (11 May 2010) and Jocelyne Rouvrais (18 May 2010). See also the testimony of Chantal in Dominique Gros and Michèle Daniau, *Moulinex. Ils laisseront des traces* (Cherbourg-Octeville 2003), 84.

was constructed from the late 1950s onwards and a survival of the Moulinex workers' symbolic investment in appliances as expressions of solidarity and professional pride.

These memories and the company culture that helped to shape them illustrate how difficult it can be to delineate where the producer's relationship to the object ends and the consumer's relationship begins. Although the expansion of mass consumption (of fashion and popular music as well as domestic appliances) occupies an important place in the popular memory of the *Trente glorieuses*, expressions of consumer pleasure and memories of excitement at the acquisition of appliances are largely absent from the interview narratives. Rather, as the above evidence illustrates, appliances are remembered as objects saturated with work – as expressions of pride in one's work and symbols the social relations of the Fordist factory (whether in terms of the metaphor of solidity or in the more dissensual form of the flying pressure cooker). But this is not the only way in which appliances embody work-based identities. Unlike leisure products, such as the television, these were tools of domestic labour. While Moulinex advertising had suggested that increased leisure time was one of the benefits that women could enjoy by using appliances, there is little sense of such gains in the workers' memories I have gathered. When Josette Gosselin and Maguy Lalizel recall their lives with young children in the late 1960s and 1970s, they describe a carefully timetabled domestic existence, as they rushed to get meals on the table and chores done, while working what were sometimes anti-social hours at the factory – 'everything was programmed'.⁷⁹ Domestic time is

⁷⁹ Josette Gosselin 29 June 2010; Shift work 'throws your whole organisation up in the air' said Maguy (23 June 2010) 'I was running around the whole time'. She could also still recount the carefully timed routine that allowed her to give her children their lunch home – pick up at school at noon, speedy lunch, drop off at 1.15, bus to the factory at 1.30.

remembered by these women as scarcely less constrained than factory time. Social surveys from this period suggest that this experience was far from unusual: in 1974-75, women in employment with at least one child under fourteen did an average of thirty eight hours and twenty minutes of domestic labour per week on top of their paid job.⁸⁰

Clearly there are limits to the kinds of conclusions one can draw from the Moulinex case. The interpenetration of consumer culture and workplace culture that has been highlighted here is related to certain specificities of this type of industry and the products it manufactured, including their link to labour in the home. Moulinex workers stood in a double relationship to appliances (as producers and consumers) that is distinct from that of other consumers of the products. In this sense their experience was not typical of French society as a whole. Indeed, no study of a single company can yield general conclusions. Nonetheless, studies such as this one can contribute to the development of a history of consumption which is not only more sensitive to specificities of sector, place and time, but less cut off from the history of work. What this article reveals are some of the limitations of generalisations about consumer society and its putative tendency to replace collective identities defined by work with more individualised subjectivities defined by consumption. At Moulinex in the 1960s and 1970s, access to consumer goods in the form of appliances seems to have served as much to reinforce work-centred subjectivities as it did to foster self-expression through consumption.

⁸⁰ Data gathered by the Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques cited in Claire Laubier (ed), *The Condition of Women in France: 1945 to the Present. A Documentary Anthology* (London 1990), 160.

I have made this argument largely by tracing the meanings ascribed to appliances and have emphasised throughout that work was not something that only happened in the factory. I will conclude by giving the last word to Josette Gosselin. When asked about the appliances she had bought from Moulinex with her staff discount, Josette almost omitted from the list her electric carving knife but suddenly remembered and said with a smile ‘the electric carving knife was important’.⁸¹ Having never understood the point of an electric knife, I found this response intriguing. Certainly, the electrification of such a simple tool in the 1960s was symptomatic of what might be called the Moulinex moment in the expansion of domestic consumption. In this case, however, it also serves as a reminder that the division between home and factory was not one that is very helpfully understood in terms of a dichotomy between consumption and production. When pressed about what was important for her about the electric carving knife, Josette told me that it cut nice even slices: her pleasure in consumption was, ultimately, the pleasure of a job well done.

⁸¹ Josette Gosselin 29 June 2010.