In Christiane Rochefort's 1961 novel, *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*, Josyane, the young heroine, endures a troubled adolescence as the oldest of eleven children in a working class family in one of the *grands ensembles*, the huge new housing complexes on the edges of Paris and other French cities. The story begins with Josyane's parents arriving at the hospital two weeks before her mother's due date, hoping to register her birth early in order to qualify for the *primes de naissance*, a low interest government loan granted to couples who had their first child within a short period after being married. Born for the *allocations*, monthly government allowances granted families for each child, Josyane lives to help her mother with the subsequent children, each of whom arrives with a new subsidy and usually a new home appliance. Josyane fantasizes about the neighbor woman who has borne enough children to form an execution battalion for the nation and imagines them being killed on the battlefield and buried under tombstones reading "Television Mauvin, Car Mauvin, Frigidaire Mauvin, Mixer Mauvin, Washing Machine Mauvin, Carpet Mauvin, Pressure Cooker Mauvin"—and leaving a government pension sizable enough to buy a vacuum
Josyane's satirical meditations on children, government subsidies, and home appliances provide insight into the relationship between the national population drive, the state-led modernization drive, and the desires of individual families—women in particular—to share the benefits of mass consumer society in postwar France. Following the Second World War, the French government identified "modernization" as a means for French recovery from the destruction of the war. In 1946, the government of the Fourth Republic inaugurated the "first overall plan for the modernization and economic equipment of metropolitan and overseas France" or Plan, as it came to be called. The state was a driving force in the changes experienced in France over the course of the trente glorieuses, the period of prosperity spanning 1946-1975. The devastation of the war meant that only the state, aided eventually by the Marshall Plan, could invest the capital needed for renovation.

Though the earliest government plans ignored personal consumption and instead focused on heavy industry and the base sectors of the economy, more personal areas of life became the focus of transformation over the course of the 1950s and 1960s. The importance of the state in the renovations that ushered in a society of mass production

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and consumption is undeniable, but focusing too much attention on the state as an economic force in the postwar recovery slights the real power of the actions and decisions of individuals. Kristin Ross's work on the 1950s, for example, is valuable in revealing some of the psychic effects of the extremely concentrated and swift transformation that French people experienced over this period, but her reliance on the state driven model of change tends to devalue the decisions of individuals.\footnote{Kristin Ross, \textit{Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture}. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).} Ross observes that French people often described the great change in their lives in terms of "the coming of objects–large-scale consumer durables, cars and refrigerators–into their streets and homes."\footnote{Ibid., 5.} A close examination of the postwar French situation and material conditions reveals, however, that appliances and goods did not just "come" into people's lives and homes. Individuals, and women in particular, demanded these goods long before they were available and purchased them once they were.

The roles of state, family, and women in the changes in French life over the period 1945-1960 need to be viewed as more than a simple top-down model of social and economic change. Even when money came to families directly from the state, as in the case of Josyane and the family allocations, it was individual families and women in particular who made the choice to sacrifice in one area in order to buy a washing machine, a refrigerator, a vacuum cleaner, or any one of the new consumer durables that became readily available and popular in the 1950s. In untangling the process of modernization over the course of 1945-1960, one must accept the importance of state programs, but one should also recognize how the
negotiations of individuals and families and their economic constraints and material conditions helped to shape the arrival of mass consumption in France.

The term "modernization" is vague and unwieldy, conjuring up notions of "modernization theory," the standardization of life and work, and a myriad of other concepts associated with the changes that occurred in France over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I frequently echo the voices of my historical subjects in the use of the terms "modern" and "modernization." French families, journalists, organizations, and social commentators in the postwar period often used the term "modern" to refer to the way of life, standards of living, and consumer products associated with the United States. As Richard Kuisel's work shows, debates over American culture in postwar France were passionate in part because they were often based on the assumption that America was the inevitable future. In the immediate postwar period, women journalists referred to the United States as "the woman's paradise" where household toil had been all but eliminated and women held an exalted position in family and society. Over the course of the 1950s, journalists, women's organizations, and social commentators tended to substitute the word "modern" for "American." They labeled as "modern" electrified homes, home appliances, linoleum, and cars, as well as the assumption that all people, regardless of social class, had a right to home comfort. French discussions of American culture often focused on the idea that America was a "classless society" in which home technology and comfort was available to all. It was true that the average French worker had much less

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purchasing power than his or her American counterpart, and French visitors to America marveled at the affluence of Americans across income levels. This reinforced the belief that prosperity was achieved through a society of "mass consumption," that is to say, a society in which a large proportion of the population has access to a wide variety of mass-produced goods and the means to purchase them.

The interchangeability of the adjectives "American" and "modern" raises questions about Americanization and cultural imperialism in the postwar period. Uta Poiger, a historian of Germany, has questioned the use of both "modernization" and "colonization" as terms to describe the American-European encounter in the second half of the twentieth century. Historians often use "modernization" to describe the wholesale transplant of a homogenous, unified American culture to Europe and "colonization" to imply an imposition by the United States that erased cultural difference and standardized European communities along American lines. Both of these usages are simplistic and ignore the specific political, social, and cultural conditions of the receiving countries as well as the negotiations over what aspects of American culture should be accepted or rejected.

In France, the state-led drive for modernization was certainly informed by American methods and supported by

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7 See Richard Kuisel's work on the missionaries of the Marshall Plan. Visitors who traveled to the United States under the auspices of the Marshall Plan continuously commented on the affluence of average Americans and the ability of the American worker to afford the fruits of his or her own labor. Ibid., 70-102.

the Marshall Plan, but one should not ignore the material conditions that made consumer goods attractive, the demands of individual women and families for consumer products, and the actual decisions to purchase products. In addition, the acceptance of certain ideas about the home and comfort did not mean a wholesale acceptance of everything American. Even early on, articles that raved about American homes and kitchens existed alongside those that decried American food and fashion. That French magazines and women's organizations were, by the mid 1950s, referring to consumer durables and the style of living associated with mass consumption as "modern"—and not "American"—indicated their participation in a way of life that was no longer necessarily associated with the United States but with comfort, modernity, and, increasingly, a global, or at least trans-Atlantic, culture.

In considering the arrival of mass consumption in France, it is important to distinguish between the cultural discourse concerning mass consumption and the social reality of life in France between 1945 and 1960. That mass consumption was envisioned as classless did not mean that goods were, at this stage, affordable for the entire population or even a large proportion of it. French society experienced great change over the course of the 1950s, but much of the working population did not have the purchasing power for new consumer goods until at least the 1960s. Despite this, the Second World War and the reconstruction that followed it were watershed periods in twentieth-century French history for ushering in new ideas about class and consumption. While consumption had served to differentiate class even through the interwar

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9 Richard Kuisel discusses traveling exhibits created by the Marshall Plan to circulate throughout France advertising the benefits of the American way of life. Kuisel, 76-79.
period, the coming of mass consumer society introduced the notion of cross-class consuming patterns, even if class divisions remained largely unchanged. Goods were no longer perceived as class specific, advertisers marketed goods as classless, and, in fact, new models of mass distribution, which had formerly been resisted by the class-conscious bourgeoisie, eventually became a success precisely because of the patronage of wealthy families.\textsuperscript{10}

The complex interplay of state goals and family desires reveals that the changes in French society over the period 1945-1960 were neither simple nor unilinear. Modernization was a state goal, but this does not mean that one should overlook the importance of family desires, and women's desires in particular, for clean, modern homes and appliances. The desirability of consumer durables and the attraction of the lifestyle associated with a society of mass consumption were, in part, a product of the material conditions of the immediate postwar period. They were, however, also influenced by the way women and mothers personally experienced these conditions and by their solutions to these problems. Women, carrying the burdens

\textsuperscript{10} See Victoria de Grazia, "Changing Consumer Regimes in Europe, 1930-1970: Comparative Perspectives on the Distribution Problem," in \textit{Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century}, eds. Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 59-83. De Grazia contrasts a Fordist model of distribution, which prevailed in the US and meant low market costs, standardized goods, high turnover, and consumer choice with the bourgeois model, which meant protected markets and small retailers. In the 1950s and 1960s, mass distribution thrived amongst wealthy families who were cognizant of how to make their lives better, knew where to save money, had cars to drive themselves to new shopping centers, and had refrigerators at home to store food. De Grazia sees a "one class market" taking shape by the 1960s.
of family, professional employment, and a national population drive, shaped French culture and society by demanding the household goods and conditions that would make their own lives more bearable. We must turn to these personal problems and solutions to understand fully the arrival of mass consumer society in France.

**Material Conditions and Desire for Change**

In 1957, a journalist from the women's magazine *Marie-France* wrote:

> By the time she has reached seventy years of age, a housewife and mother of two children will have, on average, sewn 20,000 buttons, prepared 18,000 breakfasts and 60,000 meals, and cut and washed more than 15 tons of vegetables. She will have passed the value of an entire year of her life in front of the sink in order to wash 500,000 place settings, 100,000 cups and saucers, and 1,000,000 plates. She will have also washed a monstrous amount of 100,000 square meters of clothing and 120,000 square meters of table linen. Finally, she will have walked 60,000 kilometers, or one and a half times around the earth, in her kitchen and home. These statistics are more eloquent than complaints. Why should we be astonished to see women dream about the domestic appliances destined to liberate them from this slavery?

French women did dream of household appliances in the late 1940s and 1950s, and while many of their wishes were not immediately fulfilled, enough of them were to transform completely French homes and lives over the course of the *trente glorieuses*. In 1949, sixty-three percent of French homes did not have running water, and the most popular electric appliance in the country was the clothes iron. Twenty years later, the home, and the kitchen in

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particular, had been transformed. Three-quarters of French households now had a refrigerator, and half had a washing machine.\textsuperscript{12} Historians of the interwar years have noted that though household appliances were available in France in the 1930s, they remained fairly unpopular, being too expensive for working class families and not within the taste of bourgeois families who avoided mass-produced goods. The popularity of these appliances exploded in the postwar years, changing household labor and the home itself.\textsuperscript{13} It is hard to imagine any other space in which mass consumer culture made such a strong impact and had more of an effect on people's intimate lives.

The 1950s in France was a time to concentrate on the comforts of home and family, often even when comfort was not yet available for many families. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, French women's magazines spoke of the return of prisoners of war and propagated the image of a return to normalcy after the devastation of war and occupation. The governments of the French Fourth Republic continued the pronatalist politics of the previous half century and put in place legislation to encourage childbirth and the traditional family. Charles de Gaulle's call for "twelve million beautiful babies" was answered, and while France had 520,000 births in 1941, this figure rose to 827,000 in 1951, and what had been a population of 40 million in 1946 became 44.4 million, and

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item Alain Beltran, \textit{La Fée et la servante} (Paris: Belin, 1991), 301.
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one of the most dynamic in Europe, by 1958.  

The national focus on the family, which has led some historians to refer to the Fourth Republic as "the Golden Age of Family Politics," occurred in the midst of living conditions reflective of a lack of attention to or investment in working class housing since the beginning of the century and of the further devastation caused by war, occupation, and liberation. During the 1950s, Paul Henri Chombart de Lauwe, head of the Social Ethnology Group at the Museum of Man and a founder of the study of urban sociology in Paris, undertook studies of working class life in suburban Paris that lend insight into women's demands for modernization and home technology. Chombart de Lauwe found that sixty-three percent of the working-class women in his studies did housework for more than twelve hours per day, and nineteen percent for more than fourteen hours. Of women who worked outside of the home—thirty percent of the married women in his study—seventy-nine percent worked more than ten hours a day of combined professional and domestic work. Housework was not only time consuming; it was heavy labor. The women in his study found washing clothes to be the most intensive because the fact that few had hot running water meant continuous running up and down stairs to the tap. Indeed, living conditions in general were very poor. Of the one


15 Paul-Henri Chombart de Lauwe, La Vie quotidienne des familles ouvrières (Paris: Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, 1956), 44.

16 Ibid., 38, 45.
hundred and thirty households interviewed, thirty-two did not have water in the home and forty-two did not have gas. Only fifty had their own bathroom and seventy-nine had only a common toilet on the landing or in the courtyard. Despite the fact that most women who worked outside the home were in low-paid and unpleasant work, Chombart de Lauwe found domestic work, rather than professional work, to be the heaviest burden on working-class women and one for which they found little relief. The families interviewed saw home comfort as extremely desirable and placed a high value on making their lodging a *chez soi*, or home. Women's magazines made the same statement, emphasizing the importance of "*chez soi," "comfort," and "home."

The inadequacy of contemporary housing as well as hopes for the future are apparent in a 1955 inquiry conducted by the French Institute of Public Opinion under the auspices of the Plan that asked families what their desires were and what they would purchase if their income were twenty percent higher than its present level. The researchers interviewed three thousand urban families in an attempt to understand future consumer demand for the benefit of the government and industry. They found that thirty percent of the families they interviewed wished to find new housing, and fully fifty percent of couples under thirty-five years of age wanted to move.

Of the families in this study, seventy-six percent did not have hot water, eighty-four percent did not have a shower or bathtub, eighty-two percent did not have a vacuum cleaner, ninety percent did not have a washing machine,

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17 Ibid., 86.
Among the families in the study, a great many wished for more comfort in the home, especially hot water, bathing facilities, heating, and domestic help. The examiners noted that the market in electric appliances was certain to grow as many people wished for electric cooking equipment and heat.

Unfortunately, desire for domestic appliances and home modernity did not automatically translate into the possession of new homes and appliances. Appliances and furnishings were marketed as classless, but this did not mean that all classes could afford them. In the late 1940s and through the 1950s, commentators decried both the expense of appliances and, in the immediate aftermath of the war, their unavailability. Despite the problems of price and supply that kept working families from gaining access to labor saving appliances, the complaints that authors voiced in 1946 and 1947 began to be resolved, to some extent, over the course of the 1950s. This was still a society in transition—these are the early phases of the French society of mass consumption—but these transitional moments are important for discerning the way that women shaped consumer society in France. One can discern democratization in actual sales of appliances over this period, as well as creative means of acquiring them without great expense. Long before the goods were available to the entire population, it was women who pushed for their arrival, and sometimes the desire for consumer goods led to innovative ways to enjoy the fruits of this technology. One interesting and effective means of gaining access to a washing machine was by starting a washing machine cooperative, a common strategy for the women of the

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19 Ibid., 21.
Mouvement populaire des familles (Working Family Movement, or MPF), a working-class, Catholic organization.

The washing machine cooperatives organized by women of the MPF allowed many working-class women to access one of the most demanded household appliances in France. In "The Memoirs of a Washing Machine, as Told by my Little Finger," a journalist described the beginnings of a washing machine collective and its importance for women of the working class. The machine explained that she "responded to a precise problem (as says . . . my 'manager') that of the buying power and household equipment of the great majority of working mamas." The machine quotes her manager as saying, "We must unite, each person in her own neighborhood should not enclose herself within her own personal problems, the promotion of the mamas of the neighborhood can commence with the washing machine." The machine concluded: "I know that I'm more than 'fill with water to the mark and mix for four minutes,' I am the little washing machine with a spin dryer for a head caught in the current of worker's liberation." The MPF latched on to the washing machine as the household appliance most able to provide immediate relief for women.

The use of washing machine collectives was not limited to urban society. In 1952, an article in the bulletin of the Federal Union of Consumption spoke of collectives organized among rural families in the Maine-et-Loire. Groups of five or ten families would buy a machine together and each would have a day or half-day per week to do laundry. The fact that France was still a society in

transformation and that the washing machine was at the forefront of the transformation was clear in the problems encountered and solutions offered by the collective. The thought of creating a central location for the machines to which each housewife could bring her own laundry had been broached but was very unpopular because the rural members of the cooperative were very independent and only wanted to use the machine in their own homes. Thus the machine was placed in a cart and rolled from farm to farm. Unfortunately, rural roads did not always allow the simple passage of the machine. For these difficulties, an attachment had been added to allow a man to carry it on his back to the next farm.21 Clearly, the desirability of consumer durables was such as to inspire creative means of accessing them before they were easily available.

Cooperatives were a practical way of gaining access to washing machines, but this method could not be applied to all consumer durables. Another means of accessing the benefits of mass consumer society and of driving mass production was the increased use of credit for purchasing appliances.22 Whatever the benefits and risks of credit, it is clear that women shaped mass production through their patronage of these services. In 1957, the women's journal Marie-France printed an article explaining how to buy appliances on credit. The journal advised women on the process and recommended that they find out the difference in price between buying on credit and paying cash and ask about interest rates. The article examined purchases on credit and showed that young families benefited the most.

22 Ibid., 126.
from this method of buying furnishings and appliances.\textsuperscript{23} Despite its risks, the use of credit allowed many more families to buy appliances than otherwise would have and served to push industries toward the production of consumer goods, which had not been the focus of the first Plans for the modernization of France following the war.\textsuperscript{24}

While much of the working class was still prohibited by income from fully enjoying the fruits of mass consumption, we can discern an element of democratization over the course of the 1950s. The growth of spending on the household and the growth in the number of modern conveniences and appliances in France leave no room to doubt the great changes that occurred over the period. Between 1950 and 1957, consumption in France grew by forty percent per person, and the structure of that growth was heavily weighted toward spending on the goods that would provide family comfort.\textsuperscript{25} Calculating the evolution of disposable income and prices led the researchers at CREDOC (Center for Research and Documentation on Consumption) to state that the standard of living in France had increased by four and a half percent per year between 1950 and 1957.\textsuperscript{26} While this increase had led the French to spend more in general, including on basic necessities like food, there had been a disproportionate increase in spending associated with home comfort. Spending on the


\textsuperscript{24} For the history of CETELEM, a credit organization created in 1953 to help families purchase items of home comfort, see Philippe Clément and Maurice Roy, De la 4 CV à la vidéo, 1953-1983, ces trente années qui ont changé notre vie (Paris: Communica International, 1983).


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 25.
"outfitting" of the home had more than doubled.\textsuperscript{27}

The sheer amount of money spent on appliances and furnishings for the home between 1950 and 1960 makes it impossible not to recognize a change in the culture of home and family in France over this period. True, the economy of the French Republic was characterized by high inflation, but the numbers are remarkable nonetheless. In 1950 the French spent 91 billion francs on refrigerators; in 1960, 822 billion. In 1950, 46 billion francs on washing machines; in 1960, 577 billion. In 1950, 32 billion francs on vacuums and floor polishers; in 1960, 119 billion.\textsuperscript{28} The number of appliances sold each year steadily increased over the decade. In 1950, 125,000 refrigerators sold; in 1958, more than four times that many. In 1950, 55,000 washing machines; in 1958, almost eight times that number.\textsuperscript{29}

The most telling statistics for understanding the diffusion of home technology throughout French society are those showing relative growth amongst different social groups. Between 1954 and 1957, the percentage of families owning appliances grew among all sectors of the population. The percentage of working-class families with refrigerators increased four times, and the percentage with washing machines doubled, even in this short period.\textsuperscript{30} More indicative of the diffusion of appliances is the percentage of the total number of appliances owned by each group. For example, while the working-class population owned only twelve percent of the refrigerators

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{29} "Le matériel ménager dans les foyers français (parc et achats)," \textit{Consommation: Annales du CREDOC} 4 (1959): 68.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 7.
in existence in 1955, only two years later it owned twenty percent. For vacuum cleaners the jump was from twelve and a half to twenty-two and a half percent.\textsuperscript{31} For almost every single appliance, the sectors of the population with modest incomes increased the proportion of appliances they owned, and the more wealthy sectors decreased their proportion. Certainly, it was still more common for wealthy families to be able to afford appliances than for working-class families. The overall growth in number of appliances at every income level and the spread of appliances to less wealthy groups make it clear, however, that home technology was an aim for all families regardless of class. Home technology was perceived as egalitarian long before it actually was.

That women were driving the mechanization of the home and mass consumption in France is undeniable. The market research surveys conducted in France in the 1950s repeatedly emphasized that it was the woman of the family who had the most important role in choosing to buy an appliance. Women's organizations and individual women demanded these appliances long before they were even available or advertised in France and called on women as the "consumers of the nation" to make the decisions that would encourage their production. Through their demands and purchases, women shaped modernization in France and made the home a showplace for consumer culture. The state had a role through investing heavily in industry and pushing its plans for modernization. At the same time, we must recognize the importance of individual decisions to devote time and money to family comfort. In the extreme case of Josyane and her neighbors in the grands ensembles, women actually chose to have children in the hopes of

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 8.
acquiring a new appliance. The neighbor who patted her belly and proudly proclaimed, "my frigidaire," was not so much welcoming state-led change as assessing her material conditions and making a decision about improving her own life through the acquisition of a home appliance.\(^{32}\) In demanding and buying the products of mass consumption, French women shaped their society and their own lives.

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\(^{32}\) Rochefort, 84.