The last decades have witnessed an almost obsessive preoccupation with quality in Sweden, not least in relation to culture on the one hand, and consumer goods on the other. The word has become topical in public discussions about the cultural field, especially concerning state-subsidised culture versus commercial mass culture. Interestingly, we can also observe that mass retail companies, like IKEA and H&M, are extremely keen on claiming – e.g. in their slogans – that they stand for quality. What are the historical roots of this obsession with quality, and what makes the word so controversial and yet central in mass consumer culture?

Talking about quality in a society witnessing an enormous quantitative increase in goods has become a way to express norms not only in terms of exact measures and standards for the production and durability of commodities, but also in a moral sense. This article aims to shed light on how – in connection with mass culture and mass consumerism – the concept of quality has been used, defined and redefined between the seemingly opposite poles of feelings / subjectivity and reason / objectivity.

I argue that quality should be seen as a key concept in the attempts at shaping and reinterpreting mass consumerism in order to make it compatible with the model of the «people's home» (folkhemmet) and the emerging Swedish welfare state. I show how quality appeared as a conceptual counterpoint to mass culture in influential writings around 1900. I then examine two mass medial debates on material mass culture and quality. The first debate is the famous controversy between «functionalists» and «traditionalists» triggered by the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930. Although research about the exhibition – often seen as a symbolic manifestation of Sweden as a quintessentially modern society – abounds,¹ the importance of

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the concept of quality in the debates has not received scholarly attention. The second debate occurred 30 years later, in 1960–1961, and was entitled köp, slit och släng’ (buy, wear and tear and throw away). Despite the fact that it widely engaged the public at the time, it has not yet been studied by historians. This debate also accentuated the notion of quality. The period between the two controversies is discussed in an excursion on the politics of quality and rational consumption.

1. Tracing the Concept of Quality

There is now a newly awakened theoretical interest in the social sciences and humanities in Sweden regarding the concept of quality. In an edited volume, Lars Strannegård, a professor of business studies, concludes that quality should be defined as the experience of authenticity. The problem with Strannegård’s definition is that it lacks a wider historical perspective. Quality defined as authentic and genuine is something historically specific, according to the American historian Miles Orvell, who dated a shift in Western society to the late nineteenth century, when authenticity and originality instead of imitation came into focus in many cultural fields.

We could probably go back even further in time when tracing the shifting meanings of quality. It was in the late eighteenth century that the view of quality as something fixed and naturally given, as something to imitate, became blurred in the industrialised parts of the world. Examples of this transition from «imitation to invention» (Maxine Berg) in the textile manufactures of Europe show that the changing view corresponded with an adjustment to a broader market and the outset of mass production. There is historical evidence, e.g. newspaper advertisements, confirming that the word quality – which formerly simply referred to different kinds of goods – started to be used in a clearly normative meaning in the late nineteenth century in Sweden. Changing perceptions of quality obviously correlate with the rise of consumer society.

Swedish historian Jenny Lee confirms this in her study of Stockholm’s market halls during the last century, showing how the perception of quality has indeed


3 Strannegård, *Den omätbara*, 203.


6 M. Ulväng, forthcoming doctoral thesis, Economic History Department, Uppsala University.
shifted from rationality (hygiene, effective distribution, etc.) to authenticity (organic food products, atmosphere, scent, etc.).

The task that I take on is not to produce a definition of quality, as Strannegård sets out to do, but rather (as Lee does) to track down the concept in historical texts and analyse its meaning for different historical agents and contexts. As I mentioned above, quality originally referred to differentiation and singularisation, that is the categorisation of artefacts in different qualities. While this first meaning is still in use today, the normative meaning of the word became naturalised and dominant during the twentieth century. Sociologist Richard Sennett writes that striving for quality is one of the main characteristics of craftsmanship in both traditional and modern societies. He uses the word in its normative sense, and his account of craftsmanship attributes an intrinsic value to quality. By situating quality in the product itself (be it a house or a computer program) and deriving its origin solely from production, or more precisely from the creative work of craftsmanship, he misses the struggles and negotiations, which often occur in different cultural settings (e.g. among consumers or in public debates) about what should be perceived as quality. Sennett’s main interest is, however, analysing craftsmanship, not quality. The strong connection he makes between the two is nevertheless interesting, as it echoes some of the ideas figuring in the historical debates about mass consumer goods versus handicrafts.

Quality is often best understood in relation to quantity. Sven-Eric Liedman, a historian of ideas, claims that the modern world is witnessing an accelerating quantification of qualities. He offers some enlightening historical examples of quality expressed by quantitative measures. Liedman interprets this as a modern phenomenon – although he admits that modernity is a floating category here – starting with Newton’s theory of colours, through the eighteenth-century requirements to label (hallmark) products from the first manufactures (in Sweden called Hallrätten) and the marking of students’ accomplishments in school to the development of an expert field in business and industry since the 1920s. Following Liedman, I will trace the relationship between quantity and quality in the texts that I will analyse below.

2. The Idea of Mass Culture as Culture without Quality

In 1910, the Swedish conservative philosopher Vitalis Norström published a book entitled Masskultur. This was the first explicit discussion of the phenomenon in Sweden and indeed the notion of mass culture appears to have been introduced in
the Swedish language around 1900 mainly by Norström.\textsuperscript{10} The word «massa» in the sense of a crowd or large population has been used in Swedish since the early nineteenth century, and, as in several other languages, it is associated with «modern» times. It also has negative connotations in contrast to the positive word «folk».

Norström was a professor of philosophy, a member of the Swedish Academy and an influential participant in the cultural debates of his time.\textsuperscript{12} In his book he describes contemporary culture as mass culture personified by the quintessential contemporary man, the factory worker. Norström, like the famous French analyst of mass mentality, Gustave Le Bon, states that the masses always intellectually stand below the individuals forming the mass. Quantity cannot overshadow quality, he claims. He delivers a strong criticism of collectivism but also characterises mass culture by two main features: an excessive use of the products of «material civilisation» and a shift toward «the quantitative side of life». Norström explicitly states that «our age» as opposed to earlier times is a mass culture «without quality» that is built on «the naked principle of quantum».\textsuperscript{13} For Norström, this principle of quantity seems to have become dominant everywhere in society – in production, in consumption, even in scientific writing. The mass production of goods and the materialistic character of modern civilisation are not problems in themselves. They are necessary to «survive» modern life and they are in many ways beneficiary for people. However, the people of modern times tend to forget that all these commodities – elevators, vacuum cleaners and automobiles – are nothing but means that cannot compensate for genuine values, for quality: «Having a range of delightful soaps for washing off the soot of the factory air is no better than living in air that does not make you dirty». Mass consumerism, for Norström as for many other writers, thus stands out as a «surrogate for spiritual life».\textsuperscript{14} Quantity and quality thus become dichotomous notions in Norström’s essay.

One cannot easily reject the thoughts of Norström as narrow-minded conservative cultural criticism. His essay shows similarities to the classic works of social theory. Norström himself refers extensively to Werner Sombart regarding how work and therefore workers’ personal lives are objectified, and how sensual pleasures and consumption – measured in quantities – are used to compensate for the lack of quality.\textsuperscript{15} The most prominent exponent of the idea that quality is replaced by quan-

\textsuperscript{10} The Dictionary of The Swedish Academy (SAOB) gives the title of Norström’s book (which includes an essay with the same title) as the first example of the word masskultur in Swedish.

\textsuperscript{11} This meaning of the word «mass» was not listed in the nineteenth-century edition of the Swedish standard encyclopaedia, Nordisk Familjebok, whereas it was introduced in the 1912 edition, thereby replacing the older term pöbel. See vol. 10 (1886), vol. 13 (1889) and the updated edition (Uggleupplagan) vol. 17 (1912).


\textsuperscript{13} V. Norström, Masskultur, Stockholm 1910, 31, 35, 40, 32. Emphasis and English translation by author.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., (quotations in this order): 21, 13, 16, 36.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 22–24.
tity in modern society is of course Georg Simmel, who is not referred to in but is most certainly influential for Norström’s writings. For Simmel, money was the symbol of modern life, and the main characteristic of money, he believed, was precisely its capacity to turn qualities of any kind into quantity.16

Parts of this classic criticism of mass culture introduced by Norström in Sweden has remained vital throughout the twentieth century. It united authors and activists with different political and ideological agendas. Both radical and conservative Swedish writers were inspired, for example by the work of Ortega y Gasset in the 1930s.17 This also applies for many of the actual campaigns against mass cultural phenomena that occurred during this period. One example is the moral panic about «the cinema misery» in 1905–1911, which ended in the introduction of censorship in 1911. Also the attack against «dirty literature for youths» represented by Nick Carter booklets in 1908–1909 engaged both young socialists and conservatives alike.18 In the mid-1930s a campaign was launched against the new chain stores, which were accused of selling bad quality merchandise mainly by means of a mass psychosis: crowded interiors, cheap prices, alluring displays and music from the loudspeakers made costumers lose control. Here the lack of quality and the manipulation of the masses came explicitly into focus again. Indeed, the name of the first Swedish bargain store company, EPA, became synonymous with bad quality in the Swedish language.19

After the Second World War, Swedish as well as Western criticism often took the form of left-wing attacks on commercialism and on capitalism as a system. The exact words used by critics changed during the twentieth century, as did the larger ideological or political message. Nonetheless, despite huge differences in context and in the sophistication of critical ideas, the image of mass consumerism as representing the shallowness, soullessness, falseness, lack of authenticity and, most of all, lack of quality in mass culture remained rather constant.20

3. The Pragmatic Use of Quality in Sweden

The concept of quality was perhaps more important in social democratic Sweden than in other countries. In Sweden, as opposed to Germany or France, intellectuals could not easily and openly take a stand in favour of high culture and against mass
culture. Among left-wing intellectuals in Sweden, the kind of intellectual elitism that Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno or Jean Paul Sartre represented was not entirely accepted.\textsuperscript{21} Drawing boundaries between democratic popular culture and mass culture proved to be a difficult task, however. Here the concept of quality became instrumental for dampening the polarisation between high culture and mass culture. An example from Swedish cinema and cultural politics in the early 1960s illustrate this. The term «quality film» was introduced and incorporated in official cultural policy in order to «rescue» films from being automatically categorised as mass cultural products. Cinema, meaning only «quality films», began to receive state support instead of being subject to amusement tax.\textsuperscript{22} The new notion «quality film» made it possible, at least rhetorically, to reconcile high cultural ambitions and (seemingly) democratic cultural politics.

Quality (in the normative sense) was in fact widely used during the 1960s and 1970s in polemical books, political programmes and governmental committee reports as a crucial concept for the cultural politics of the Swedish welfare state. The word enabled intellectuals to make a statement against commercial mass culture without being explicitly elitist. Discussions continued, however, about how quality in culture should be defined and secured. Accusations of a new kind of elitism through the word «quality» occurred as well. As late as 2009, quality came into focus when protests were raised against a proposal from a governmental inquiry to dispose of the word in the new official guidelines for Swedish cultural policy.\textsuperscript{23}

The struggles and negotiations regarding mass culture and quality in the cultural field are of course not entirely translatable to the issue of mass commodities, where commercialisation as well as some form of quality control have been more obvious preconditions. I think, however, that consumer culture (with its perceived quantitative fixation on the material side of life) has been an important, in many ways symbolic, target for the criticism of mass culture at large from early on.

A conclusion so far would therefore be that, first, in this criticism quality was repeatedly opposed to quantity, although these notions appear to have simply complemented each other in earlier times. Second, the attempts of cultural politics in the 1960s to use the concept of quality for dampening the polarisation between high culture and mass culture indicate that this state of opposition did not remain unchallenged.


\textsuperscript{22} Snickars, «Vad är kvalitet?», 162–177; H. Schein, Har vi råd med kultur?, Stockholm 1962.

In the following I will show that, prior to the cultural policy debates of the 1960s, several influential attempts were made in Sweden to reconcile the concepts of quality and quantity within the discourse of material culture. Instead of simply using quality as a counterpoint to mass culture, as the cultural critics of the early twentieth century did, the protagonists of the controversies in 1930 and 1961 were reinterpreting the concept in order to practically handle and meaningfully appropriate the challenges of a mass consumer society.

4. Reconciling Quality and Quantity: The Case of Swedish Modernism

The individual and the mass...
The personal or the universal?
Quality or quantity?
– Insoluble questions, for the collective is a fact
we cannot disregard any more than we can disregard
the needs of individuals for lives of their own.
The problem in our times can be stated as:
Quantity and quality, the mass and the individual.
It is necessary to solve this problem in building-art and industrial art.

These are the opening words of the «functionalist manifesto», acceptera, from 1931. They were printed below a suggestive picture of a dense crowd with one individual, a young man (dressed as a worker), standing in the forefront. The ambition of the authors, six of Sweden’s most prominent architects and art theorists, was to formulate an energetic and coherent response to massive criticism against the functionalistic statement of the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930. They proclaimed the issue of quality in relation to mass culture as one of the central problems that modern society must solve.

Quality is mentioned – although in a very instrumental way – in the earliest pronouncements of the Stockholm Exhibition’s programme, which aimed to display industrially produced everyday housing and furnishings as well as other mass commodities of «good quality» intended for the greater population. The Stockholm Exhibition was initiated and organised by Svenska Slöjdföreningen, the Swedish

24 G. Asplund et al., acceptera, Stockholm 1980 [1931]. Published in English as acceptera [accept] transl. D. Jones, in: Creagh et al., Modern Swedish Design (MSD), 143. This English translation, referred to as MSD, will be used for all quotations from acceptera.
Arts & Crafts Society (known today as Svensk Form [Swedish Form], the main organ of Swedish design), a large and influential organisation of artists, craftsmen, intellectuals and representatives from production and retail. Symptomatically, the Society, founded in 1845, started to use a slightly different English translation of its name in the 1930s: Swedish Society for Industrial Arts & Crafts.27

Quality has been a catchword for the Society from the start. Just like the British Arts & Crafts movement, founded on John Ruskin’s and William Morris’s ideas, the Swedish Society was led by the ambition to promote Swedish handicrafts as opposed to industrially produced mass commodities. In the early twentieth century the main focus shifted towards introducing and securing quality in industrial production through cooperation between artists and industries. The initiator of this new way of thinking was the art historian Gregor Paulsson in his seminal pamphlet Vackrare vardagsvara (Beautiful things for everyday life) 1919. Inspired by the thoughts of Ellen Key and the programme of the Deutscher Werkbund, he argued for the importance of beauty and good form for everyday commodities.28

For Paulsson, introducing beauty in industrial production was, however, not an emotional matter, but mostly a rational issue.29 In a chapter called «Beauty and Quality» he argues for the value of good form as a means of competition for producers. The key issue here is not imitating handcrafted products but creating new, beautiful and «genuinely» industrial forms – new types for mass production. Originality is thus not only possible but crucial, also for mass produced goods. In contrast to the criticism of mass culture (exemplified above by Norström), for Paulsson quality is perfectly compatible with mass production and therefore the material culture of the masses. He notes that there are still many obstacles left on the way to the realisation of this vision of mass produced quality: Producers have only started to understand the value of beauty for the process of standardisation, and only a few educated retailers have been able to manage to stop profiting from bad taste by selling «pure rubbish» and «fairground baubles».30

The greatest problem, Paulsson continues, is that, despite the signs of improvement in commerce, the public still has a special liking for «cheap frippery». This desire, once awakened, is difficult to dispel. Paulsson calls this taste for cheap «gaudy merchandise» a «cultural disease», an illness that will hopefully be cured in time.31 Society should therefore promote this development, for example, through public consumption and education. What is interesting for the purpose of this

27 See newspaper cuttings and letter headings, etc. in the Archives of Svensk Form, Centrum för Näringslivshistoria, vol. 1: 26–28.
31 Paulsson, Vackrare, 47, 50.
paper is that the word quality is used recurrently in the pamphlet and the fact that Paulsson – although critical of both the producers and consumers of mass culture – outlines a programme combining quality and mass culture.

The Stockholm Exhibition of 1930
A few years after the publication of Vackrare vardagsvara (Beautiful Things for Everyday Life) Paulsson became the director of the Svenska Slöjdforeningen (Swedish Arts & Crafts Society) and in this position he was appointed commissioner general of the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930, which was initiated and organised by the Society. Paulsson’s programme had turned more radical by then. He no longer regarded the involvement of artistic competence in the production process as necessary for the quality of the everyday mass commodity. He gave a speech in 1928 presenting the programme of the coming exhibition and declared that its main objective was to reflect the times: «Its [the exhibition’s] modernity will consist negatively of the insight that the time has passed when an artist was expected to design every latch, every mounting, every curtain, every chair and to turn the homes of the people into room-art. [...] it is as meaningless to talk about artistic interior decoration with 99 per cent of the population as it is to advise the same percentage to take a recreational trip to the Riviera.» This may sound cynical, but he continues: «Positively it will consist of standards of good quality and of appropriate form for the large mass of goods for everyday use, regardless of whether they are designed by professional artists or not.»

The explicit purpose of the exhibition was thus to focus on solving «the most urgent social problems», that is to produce good basic commodities and housing for the larger public.

In this context, quality became a sociological tool, an ingredient in a social reform programme.

The Stockholm Exhibition, built in Djurgårdsbrunnsviken, a waterfront area along a channel just outside central Stockholm, became a major event in Sweden attended by over four million visitors during four spring and summer months in 1930. Both contemporaries and posterity described it as a milestone in architectural history and a radical demonstration of functionalist ideas. In reality, architectural historians claim the exhibition was more of a summary of 1920s architecture, design, arts and crafts, including both modernist and traditional works.

Its focus was directed at the everyday commodity, the cheap mass product. Simplicity was both the means and the goal.

The architect Gunnar Asplund was assigned the chief responsibility for the overall architectural design of the exhibition and, together with his staff, he drew all the major buildings, exhibition halls and

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32 Svenska Slöjdforeningens Tidskrift (1928), 113. See also Råberg, Stockholmsutställningen, 41–42.
33 Svenska Slöjdforeningens Tidskrift (1928), 113
34 Råberg, Funktionalistiskt, 176; Rudberg, «Rakkniven», 134.
35 Råberg, Stockholmsutställningen, 45.
restaurants in a homogenous functionalist style.\(^{36}\) Despite its declared emphasis on utility wares, the exhibition’s architecture also gained considerable attention among the public and the media. Simple and straight lines, flat roofing, large horizontal windows, new materials, visible construction and the lack of ornaments were debated in the media, as were the technological novelties and the new furniture. One of the biggest sensations was, for example, the steel tubular chair. The exhibition thus stood out as a significant «high cultural» event with an ambition of social reform. At the same time it was also a «mass cultural» and commercial happening with commercial firms as exhibitors and a range of restaurants, cafés, souvenir shops and an amusement park, all promoted by a massive modern advertising campaign. As such, the 1930 exhibition stimulated discussions – including both passionate declarations of sympathy and severe criticism – about mass culture versus art, and modernity versus tradition.\(^{37}\)

**Reception and criticism**

A gentleman: We ask for values and you answer in kilowatt!

We: We also ask for values and are answered with ornaments, decorations, side-issues.\(^{38}\)

The renowned furniture designer, Carl Malmsten, stands out as the main critic of the exhibition, although criticism had wide support both within and outside the Slöjdföreningen. Malmsten had attacked the ambitions of the exhibition from the beginning. He and his sympathisers feared that industrial production would dominate almost totally, and not leave space for artistic craftsmanship. Malmsten and his allies within the Arts & Crafts Society demanded that Paulsson resign. In addition to the struggles within the Society, the debate also dominated the press. Moreover, Malmsten was reported to be working on a longer critical pamphlet that in the end was never published. In July 1930, however, the major daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* conducted an interview with Malmsten and also printed parts of his pamphlet.

The concepts of quality and mass culture were at the core of Malmsten’s argument as well. The exhibition represented for him «the masses standing against the value, the quality. The contemporary man has won the whole world. And lost his soul.»\(^{39}\) Malmsten’s criticism is not as much about architecture, art or design as it is about mass culture, commercialism and consumerism. In fact he depicts the exhibition as a striking example of «cheap mass culture» and «decadence». He agrees\(^{36}\) Asplund was the architect of, among other things, the Stockholm City Library and the Stockholm Woodland Cemetery, Skogskyrkogården (together with Sigurd Lewerentz). The latter is listed as a World Heritage site by UNESCO.\(^{37}\) Rudberg, «Rakkniven», 122–139; and Rudberg, *Stockholmsutställningen 1930*, 197–201.\(^{38}\) acceptera, in: MSD, 307.\(^{39}\) «The opposition against ‘Funkis’», in: DN, 19 June 1930.
that it indeed – and unfortunately – reflects the spirit of the time, a time when real value has been abolished. It is therefore a shame for real, genuine culture; it is nothing but «a marketplace where quality is sacrificed for the rush work done under pressure from advertising». A «vulgar lack of spirit» and «the meaningless run on the mass culture of our time» permeate the exhibition, the architecture of which is reminiscent of mass bazaars and bargain sales. It therefore forms, he argues, a sharp contrast to personality, individuality and Swedishness.  

Malmsten’s criticism was backed by a large faction in the Arts & Crafts Society and by prominent representatives from the cultural and political elite, such as the architect Ragnar Östberg, artist Carl Milles and the mayor of Stockholm Carl Lindhagen. The criticism reverberated loudly in some parts of the media as well. Functionalism was described in the same negative terms as jazz («frozen negro music»), and as advertising («not architecture but American advertisements»). Also these critics feared the loss of spirituality, personality and national culture.  

The functionalists also had many sympathisers, both among colleagues and politicians as well as in the media. The Swedish proletarian author Ivar-Lo Johansson described the exhibition as an eye-opener. Walking around the grounds he realised that the new things, these everyday objects designed in a matter of fact manner, would influence the families living with them, making their minds and thoughts more open, more transparent and clearer. The new things would soon create a new feeling of life and a new man. Another prominent writer, Elin Wägner, called the exhibition nothing less than a «revolution». These reviews thus paint a double-faced picture: a shallow mass culture deprived of «quality», «real» values and feelings, and, on the contrary, a new, «real» culture based on openness and truth helped by the new, objectively designed commodities for the benefit of the masses.

acceptera – accept

The book entitled acceptera must be one of the most analysed texts of Swedish architecture and art history. The layout, the setting of the headlines and paragraphs and the use of suggestive illustrations are all reminiscent of both avant-garde publishing and the methods of commercial advertising. The writing style is characterised by a striking and sometimes humorous playfulness. This is of course in accordance with its pronounced aim of spreading optimism and in a way smoothing over the sharpest conflicts and criticism. One can, however, also sense an overtone of elitism and aesthetic moralising along with not entirely new, but still radical ideas of social

40 Ibid.
reforms. Nevertheless, everyone seems to agree that this is a remarkable book that summarises the programme and ideas behind the exhibition as well as the response to the criticism against it. Arguments about architecture and housing constitute only a part of the book comprising altogether 200 pages of texts and illustrations. *acceptera* is mainly about modern society, modern men and women and last but not least about the importance of things, commodities in modern life. It is the collective product of six architects and art historians, including Gregor Paulsson and Gunnar Asplund. All of the authors contributed actively to the exhibition.

The architectural historian Eva Eriksson pointed out that the real protagonist of *acceptera* is in fact «the times». The authors of *acceptera* urged the public to «accept» the times, accept the modernisation process, «accept the reality that exists – only in that way have we any prospect of mastering it, taking it in hand, and altering it to create culture that offers an adaptable tool for life. We have no need for outworn forms from earlier cultures.» Tradition and history thus appear to be nearly irrelevant to the authors. The architectural historian Helena Mattsson argued that *acceptera* was part of a project to design the future consumer, a new consuming subject, not by advertising, as American and British marketing professionals later intended, but by the products themselves. Among the many layers of the book, I will focus here on the arguments that reconcile quality with quantity.

The authors make it repeatedly clear that they are fighting on two fronts: against cultural traditionalists (those claiming the importance of quality, individuality and the true and real values of life) and against «bad» mass culture (based on quantity). They accuse both of these of sentimentality. Cultural traditionalists («guardians of culture») show a «romantic» enthusiasm for the formal expressions and production methods of times past. Regarding consumption this attitude is manifested in a «craze» for antiquities and crafts. Crafts are of course worth appreciation if one is able to pay the price, but the majority cannot. The uncritical consumers of cheap mass merchandise, in their turn, are often lured by the same romantic quest for the genuine and buy industrially produced goods decorated with false and cheap ornaments in order to make them look handcrafted. Influenced by cynical salesmen, popular magazines and their wish «to outdo the neighbours», consumers confuse the «classless welfare» of modern times with the living habits of the propertied classes. This deplorable sentimentality is of course understandable as a human

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44 Eriksson, *Den moderna*, 464.
45 The other four authors were Wolter Gahn, Sven Markelius, Eskil Sundahl and Uno Åhrén.
47 *acceptera*, in: MSD, 318.
48 Creagh, «Introduction», 133, about the influence of Sprengler on the perception of history in *acceptera*.
50 *acceptera*, 102; MSD, 242.
reaction to the effects of industrialisation – a kind of compensation – but it must be unmasked and rejected.

While the traditionalists emphasise genuine (authentic) culture instead of «machine-made» culture, the same romanticism in mass society leads to the exact opposite: false and simulated products. Instead of the artistic and the artificial, the authors propose a «matter of fact» principle for design, for consumption and for people’s overall relationship to commodities. They thus argue for reason in place of emotions. A genuine culture must follow the requirement of the times; it must be machine-made. But mass production in itself is not enough, they claim: «Consumer products are the Cinderellas of industry. No intellectual brilliance is devoted to them. Bad quality and bad taste is what characterises them the world over. This is one of the strongest dissonances. Many blame this on industry, but they are wrong.» The actual problem is the failure to adapt to a new society, a new life, a new type of men and women. The authors of acceptera thus define quality through rational, matter-of-fact thinking, something that is «objective», not sentimental. Quality is generated by an adequateness to the times: an era of technological progress, the emancipation of women and levelling incomes.  

Quality and quantity in the current day, they propose, do not stand in opposition, as the traditionalists would have it, but are interconnected and interdependent in many intricate ways. One can discern at least four different aspects through which the functionalists link quality with quantity. First, the simple fact of being able to offer «adequate» housing and consumer products to a large number of people is mentioned as a quality in itself, a quality interpreted at a collective level. Second, quantity is in fact a prerequisite for quality in modern times because industrial technology can make some (but not all) everyday goods not only cheaper but also better than craft products: «[T]he greater the distribution of a product, the greater the chance of raising its quality.»  

Mass production requires standardisation and this in turn can be of benefit for developing new, more practical «types» of products. This is also a question of aesthetic quality. These types should not only fit modern life through their functionality but also reflect it in their form. This is the only way to create authentic mass products, and not cheap imitations of handicrafts. The form of the commodities produced in quantity should not seek to be «beautiful» in the way past times perceived beauty, but must instead be given a «self-evident form».  

Therefore, the third aspect is that the new concept of quality – based on the acceptance of the quantitative rise in industry and a new interpretation of beauty – is regarded as «classless» and socially responsible. Quality products do not need to have a stamp of class, the authors declare. The purpose of commodities should be mainly to «serve» people. In order to achieve this they do not need to be artistic

51 acceptera, 25.
52 Ibid., 81, 128–129; MSD, 268.
53 acceptera, 44, 118; MSD, 278.
54 acceptera, 125.
(nor artificial either). Beauty has been overrated during the last decades, the functionalists suggest. Beauty is seen as the hallmark of culture, and it is most often used «as stamp of quality for a social upper class».\footnote{accepter a, 118, 141; MSD, 281.} The quality requirements proposed by Paulsson and his colleagues are said to be «more modest but at the same time more responsible».

The fourth is that consumer products do not even have to last; they can be disposed of without regret. The only important thing is that while we are using them they should «fulfil their role and serve us perfectly, so perfectly that we can also derive aesthetic enjoyment from observing them in use».\footnote{accepter a, in: MSD, 281.} It is interesting to observe that the authors actually include (or at least allow) transience in their definition of quality. This collides with our common understanding of quality as durability fostered by a long tradition of consumer education. The idea is, however, consistent with the functionalist view on history and tradition and the objective relationship between people and things. In an article about standardised furniture, one of the authors of acceptera, Uno Åhrén, develops this idea by stating that the advantage of cheap standardised furniture is that a piece can easily be thrown away and replaced with a new one that is just as inexpensive. Furniture serves real needs more appropriately if it does not have to be repaired and kept for sentimental reasons or as an antiquity.\footnote{accepter a, 146; and U. Åhrén, «Om standardmöbler», in: Svenska Slöjdöreningens Tidskrift (1930), I.} Here again, quantity is transformed into quality.

Quality is thus, in this new interpretation, still about genuine values, authenticity and the truth of expression, but as such, it is no longer opposed to quantity. The reconciliation of quality with quantity builds on the principle of «objective» design and «objective» form, which is seen as the authentic expression of the times. Quantity is thus understood as a condition for quality in modern material culture, since the focus has moved from the individual to the collective. Instead of spirituality and sentiment, the functionalists emphasise reason and logic. In place of longlasting objects as exponents of eternal artistic values, they propagate replaceable but purposeful things.

This is why the question of quality and quantity was crucial for the authors of acceptera. One could object that it is rather necessary to discuss quality issues in the case of consumer products, but that does not mean that quality is given special attention in the interpretation of modern culture in general. However, as the above quotations also demonstrate, the quality of commodities was never distinctly separated from the quality of culture and the «quality of life». Rather they stood in a dialectical relationship to each other. Paulsson and his colleagues believed that quality should in fact also be understood on a more abstract level. In acceptera they emphasised that the quality of products must derive from contemporary society. In his memoirs, Paulsson expressed the social ambitions of the functionalistic movement

\footnote{accepter a, 118, 141; MSD, 281.} \footnote{accepter a, in: MSD, 281.} \footnote{accepter a, 141–142; MSD, 262.} \footnote{See also accepter a, 146; and U. Åhrén, «Om standardmöbler», in: Svenska Slöjdöreningens Tidskrift (1930), I.}
in the following: «The commodity also has a social political task, namely to be a part of a consumption style that gives quality to one’s life.»\(^{59}\) This idea of the interconnectedness between the quality of commodities and the quality of life is actually true for the critics of the Stockholm Exhibition as well, although they had a different idea of the nature of quality. The debate about modernism therefore illustrates not only a reconciliation of quality and quantity but also the observation that the views and moralities toward things reflect (and create) views and values about culture and society at large.

5. Rational Consumption, Consumer Education and the Politics of Quality

The programme presented in acceptera, with its ambition to shape the human environment in a form adequate to a new collective ideal, fitted together well with the idea of «social engineering» that was embraced at the time by representatives of the Swedish social democracy. Paulsson later asserted that the Stockholm Exhibition was indeed influenced by the same thinking that made up the political metaphor of the «people’s home» (re-)launched by the social democratic prime minister Per Albin Hansson a few years before acceptera was published.\(^{60}\) Paulsson’s quality programme, just like the concept of the «people’s home», had its historical roots in a more romantic ideal about a real home for every Swede – both in a concrete and abstract sense – around the turn of century.\(^{61}\) The interconnections became more pronounced and more practical in the 1930s. Several of the authors of acceptera worked together with the social democratic elite. It is worth noting the collaboration between the architect Sven Markelius and the social reformer and politician Alva Myrdal in the creation of Stockholm’s first collective apartment building (1935) with a central kitchen, a common dining room, playroom and day-care for the children.

The authors of acceptera were of course not alone in their call for the objective knowledge of merchandise, the development of good standards for production, or their ambition to reduce the variety of goods to a few types that are most appropriate for modern needs. Previous research has shown that the ideal of «rational consumption» was particularly strong in Sweden during the twentieth century, and the historian Peder Aléx claims that, although this ideal weakened during the last decades, it still has traces in everyday thinking and habits.\(^{62}\)

The Consumer Co-operative movement promoted collectivism and worked to educate consumers in rational consumption since the turn of the century (1899).

\(^{59}\) Paulsson, Upplevt, 74, 75.

\(^{60}\) Creagh, «Introduction», 133.

\(^{61}\) Especially E. Key’s work inspired both visions. See B. Carlsson, Ouvertyr till folkhemmet, Lund 2002, 22.

\(^{62}\) P. Aléx, Den rationella konsumenten. KF som folks-
By this they meant that the rational consumer should be able to tame his or her desire for useless commodities. The consumer-owned stores offered a range of simple but «high quality» goods in limited variations. The Co-op (KF, short for Kooperativa förbundet, Consumer Co-operative Union) expanded rapidly in Sweden. In the 1930s they also started their own production, e.g. in the newly acquired Gustavsberg porcelain factories. By 1950 the number of Co-op members exceeded one million (of a population of seven million) and there were more than 6 000 co-operative shops in the country. KF opened its own architects’ office in the 1920s – practicing functionalist design – under the direction of Eskil Sundahl, another author of acceptera.63

The main goal was, however, not only to produce goods categorised as «quality products» with simple but «objective» designs following the principles sketched in acceptera and elsewhere, but also to get the public to actually choose these among other merchandise. Consumer guidance became an important part of the co-operative movement’s activities. During the Second World War the Swedish government also started to engage itself in consumer issues. Initially official consumer guidance aimed at helping people through periods when there was a shortage of goods, but eventually the focus – quite understandably – changed to assisting consumers with how to handle the overly rich choice of goods. The principles were the same as those embraced by the Co-op: making quality purchases through planning and rationality as opposed to impulses and emotions. Institutions like the partly state-owned Home Research Institute (Hemmens Forskningsinstitut, HFI, est. in 1944) worked to turn Swedish housewives not only into professional homemakers but also into expert consumers. The institute tested a wide range of products (e.g. kitchen knives and children’s socks) and the best ways to use certain commodities (e.g. time studies for doing the washing) in order to recommend rational standards for both consumers and producers as well as a rational (also standardised) behaviour for women.64 «Quality» was a significant catchword for this activity. It basically referred to function (as in 1930s modernism) and durability (as a new-old feature contested by the functionalists in 1930).

Although a technical-scientific apparatus was successively created for defining and controlling quality, the concept also had a strong political dimension. The influential Postwar Programme of the Worker’s Movement (1944) declared its ambition to reform mass production, retail and the consumption of mass consumer goods through subventions and quality control by the state. In accordance with this programme and her vision of «consumer socialism», Alva Myrdal pleaded for the idea

63 Aléx, Den rationella. See also Husz, «Spara, slösa».
of developing a range of so-called folkvaror (people’s goods) to be sold nationwide at affordable and fixed prices. The idea was modelled after the wartime schemes of utility goods in European countries, especially England, but Myrdal and her colleagues wanted to transform measures from a time of shortage and war into a social programme for peace. The production of these quality-controlled articles would be subsidised by the state, and retailers would have an obligation to keep these in stock. The Postwar Programme, other official publications and Alva Myrdal stated that quality must be defined officially, because many consumers were simply not able to recognise quality goods by themselves.⁶⁵ Although Myrdal and her colleagues argued convincingly against accusations that this system of standardised goods would lead to uniformity and the loss of individuality by emphasising that a variety would still exist, they nevertheless treated the individual consumer as the object and not the subject of consumer politics.⁶⁶

After discussions took place with representatives of industry and business and with organisations involved in consumer issues, all that remained of the «consumer socialism» programme was an agreement on the importance of consumer guidance and on state involvement in quality control. It is interesting, however, how Myrdal and part of the social democratic elite insisted on using the word folk (people) here along with the concept of quality in an attempt to redesign mass consumerism. In a round table discussion organised by the Co-op in 1945, a representative of retail trade raised objections against the word folkvaror (people’s goods) and proposed the term «ideal goods» instead. He was backed up by Gregor Paulsson, among others. Although Myrdal admitted that the expression folkvaror evoked unpleasant associations for example to the German Volkswagen (initiated by Hitler’s regime as an affordable quality car), she maintained its benefits. The word did in fact remain in use for some time as a trademark for a government quality programme for mass consumer goods.⁶⁷ These disputes over the word folk give us explicit hints about the dilemmas involved in shaping mass consumption so it fits comfortably in the «people’s home» (folkhem).

The Arts & Crafts Society, the Co-op and the Home Research Institute shared the ambition of taming mass consumerism in the name of quality. Personal connections and institutional co-operations were closely interlaced in their efforts. The two leading figures of the next debate about quality and material mass culture were indeed deeply rooted in this field of quality work, consumer education and social

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reform, imbued with the spirit of rationality, objectivity and collective solutions. For this reason it is interesting to take a closer look at how they redefined quality from the perspective of emotions and individuality in the 1960s.


Thirty years after the arts & crafts war was triggered by the Stockholm Exhibition, the time had come for the next big debate on quality and mass consumption. Sweden had reached a golden age of economic prosperity under social democratic regime. Both private and public consumption were increasing as a result of growing wages and rapidly rising general social welfare. Department stores, chain stores and shopping malls had begun to mushroom all over the country. Mass consumption was a fact.

In January 1961 a debate on the throwaway mentality as a mass phenomenon was arranged on a television show. The protagonists were the interior architect Lena Larsson, working at the time as one of the editors of the popular magazine Allt i Hemmet (All about the Home), and the journalist and consumer advisor Willy Maria Lundberg. Both women were well known media personalities. Two other experts were invited to the television programme: the economist Jan Wallander and the design historian Arthur Hald, the chairman of the board of Svenska Slöjdföreningen, the old Arts & Crafts Society (although the English name of the Society had – rather symptomatically – changed again, this time to Swedish Society of Industrial Design). In the studio, the issue of quality was vehemently debated, and the controversy – called «slit-och-släng debatten» (the wear and tear and throwaway debate) – later continued in other media and engaging the larger public. The throwaway mentality and growing mass consumerism were the targets of critical voices all around the Western world around that time. Despite the fact that works of American social criticism were influential in Sweden, such as John Kenneth Galbraith’s The Affluent Society or Vance Packard’s trilogy against materialistic mentality and mass consumer society (especially The Waste Makers from 1960 which focuses on the topic of the throwaway spirit), the Swedish discourse was somewhat different, as I will demonstrate here.

Larsson started the debate the year before with a provocative article on quality consciousness in consumption that was published in Form, the prestigious journal of the Slöjdföreningen.88 She glorified a modern consumerist lifestyle: consumer

goods did not need to be durable and did not necessarily need to be mended when broken; it was much easier to buy something new. Occasionally people choose products that will not last but have other advantages: they can give the user a feeling of luxury, or they can save labour and be easy to handle. New, non-durable consumer products, such as plastics, are often not only practical but also aesthetically innovative and therefore appealing. Quality, Larsson claimed, means also variation, not merely durability.\textsuperscript{69}

Larsson’s article was in fact a response to the book \textit{Ting och tycken (Things and Thinkings)}, published by Willy Maria Lundberg earlier in the same year (1960). In the book, Lundberg attacked the culture of mass consumerism and praised hard-wearing and durable things that have been produced carefully and are thereafter used but not used up. An old chair put together without glue or spike – using knowledge of traditional handicraft – was for Lundberg worth more than any modern chair – even if it was rather uncomfortable to sit on. Variety does not necessarily mean a high standard, she wrote, rather the opposite. Handcrafted things – along with well-made, carefully developed and selected industry products – are not only durable, they are also «comforting» and have a «soul». They are simply able to give a different and more genuine feeling to the user.

Larsson, on the contrary, maintained that in contemporary society a purchase as such was to be seen as «a new right, a new dignity», since the majority of people were traditionally more accustomed to scarcity than to abundance. She pleaded for a «new notion of quality» that consisted in the ability to buy and dispose of goods.\textsuperscript{70} She thereby underlined the democratic as well as the individual aspects of mass consumerism.

Larsson tells us about her visit to a large fashion shop swarming with young «shopping-confident» female customers. She asks the saleswoman: «Do they care about quality?» – «It depends on what you mean,» was the answer. «They do not want, for instance, warped seams, or a jersey that distorts the figure. They know exactly what is flattering for them and which colours they should choose.» – «Do they ask if it is colour-fast?» [...] The salesclerk smiled gently, «Not likely.»\textsuperscript{71}

In contrast to Larsson, Lundberg used the words fashion and shopping as terms of insult and as antonyms of quality. She wrote with deep indignation about the masses of consumers who moved around in the oversized department stores as «excavators» among the large quantity of merchandise: «[...] it is called a «shopping

\textsuperscript{69} Larsson, «Köp, slit, släng. Några funderingar kring ett slitstarkt ämne», in: \textit{Form} 7–8 (1960), 448–452. Other publications from the debate will be referred to successively.

\textsuperscript{70} Larsson, «Köp, slit, släng», 452; and L. Larsson, «Vara eller icke vara?», in: \textit{Allt i hemmet} 6 (1961), 48–49.

\textsuperscript{71} Larsson, «Köp, slit, släng», 452.
trip, when the excavator is digging. [...] Does the shopping expedition result in something? Something that will last?» Her answer was a doubtless «no». Novelties and fashion articles, so typical for commercial mass culture, are purchased without consideration and disposed as quickly as they are bought – rather understandably – as they are not worth anything. Real value lies not in quantity and novelty, but in everyday habits and familiarity with things. Lundberg wrote: «The cutting board is stable with a pure wooden beauty and freshness. A reliable companion that has served in our kitchen for more than a quarter of a century. Buy, wear and tear, throw away! Madness! It is indeed familiarity that is an ingredient in this feeling of well-being that things can give us. Cutting the bread – well balanced movements of habit. My hand knows exactly the weight of the board when I lift it from the hook on the wall. [...] Why should I chase novelties just for the sake of variety?»

Lundberg obviously did not shy away from strong words, not even when describing mass consumerism in critical terms: «Inferior things are pouring out like diarrhoea from the machines of the factories, and are selling themselves.» In the television studio, Lundberg held up a modern stainless spoon from her bag and demonstrated its poor quality by bending it with only a light touch.

Larsson admitted that all mass produced goods were not (yet) of acceptable quality, but she stated that the consumer should contribute – by purchasing and testing new products – to the screening and improvement of the goods offered on the market. She thereby also meant that modern consumerism in fact leaves space for individual creativity. People learn about quality precisely through the process of buying, wearing and tearing and throwing away, not by recommendations imposed from above.

Moreover, Larsson wrote, old things often lasted, but they were not «people friendly». A washing machine destroys the bed linen faster than washing by hand, but spares the human body: «These are values that we became aware of in today’s society, as opposed to yesterday’s, when it was much more common to wear oneself out quickly while the things lasted long.» In order to illustrate her point, Larsson demonstrated in front of the camera the modern disposable paper nappies and compared them to «yesterday’s unwieldy nappies».

The debate was met with a strong reaction. The notion of slit-och-släng became established as signifying mass consumer culture. The design journal Form published an issue entitled «Quality» with a collection of contributions to and commentaries on the debate. The controversy continued on the radio, in the daily press,
in popular magazines as well as in Vi (the weekly periodical of the Consumer Co-op), which was a publication with very high circulation numbers. The question engaged many people and opinions were divided. A social democratic women’s organisation sent out a questionnaire to its members after the television debate. They received about 500 answers: 130 agreed with Lundberg, 133 backed Larsson and 219 meant that both were right in part. But the majority wrote that the issue was important and many characterised the debate as an eye-opener.76

Again, there are several possible analytical layers to uncover in this debate. First and most obviously there is the opposition between the modern and the traditional, just like in the debate of 1931. Second, one can note the moralising about consumption and mass culture, which was also present in the former debate. And third, which I think is the most important feature, a new emotionality and individualism towards commodities was made legitimate in the normative discourse on mass consumer society. The issue of quality cuts through all these layers.

**Challenged modernity?**

«It was about two different lifestyles opposing each other», wrote Jan Wallander many years later about the debate.77 Lena Larsson described it afterwards as a split between generations. It is obvious that the controversy can be understood as a symptom of the transition from traditional to modern patterns of consumption. To buy, wear and tear and throwaway was not a real possibility for many Swedes in the early twentieth century. The average buying power and actual consumption increased considerably during the decades preceding the 1960s. Private consumption rose in Sweden by 60 per cent per person between the years 1931 and 1955.78 At the same time many «old» attitudes towards commodities were still common. For example in the 1950s the work of repairing and mending was still impossible to avoid in households and was thus an everyday reality for most women. According to a study published in 1961, married women (including those gainfully employed) devoted on average more than five hours per week to needlework (e.g. mending socks).79 These statistics illustrate why the idea of throwawayism presented by Larsson still challenged an ingrained way of life.

It is, however, important to keep in mind that the debate on slit-och-släng was happening in 1960–1961, a few years before the environment was first raised as an issue in western consumer societies, starting with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962).80 Neither had the anti-commercialism within the political youth movement...
of the 1960s had also not gained ground yet. The most obvious way to characterise this debate on the throwaway spirit is therefore to depict it as an encounter between the modern and the traditional. Still, in retrospect, we may wonder which side of the debate stood for the new in the end. On the one hand, some of the ideas belonging to Willy Maria Lundberg anticipated environmentalism, and her work, especially later in the 1960s, had an ecological focus. For example, she created an environmentally friendly «quality house», called Träslottet (The Wooden Castle), a museum of modern jury-selected industrial quality products exhibited in a natural environment side by side with old handicrafts.81 Larsson, on the other hand, felt obliged to explain her former attitude ten years later in an issue of the consumer’s magazine Vi in 1972, entitled Re-usage (Återbruk), about consumption and the environment. It was Larsson herself who came up with this new word.82

At first glance it also seems evident that in a comparison between the debates of 1930–1931 and 1960–1961 Lundberg’s line of argument about quality continues the cultural traditionalists’ critical stance against mass consumption while Larsson in many ways follows the modernists. Things with a soul versus things that should serve us. Durability (of both things and values) versus transience and change. Although there is a noticeable continuity, at a closer look the parallel does not work perfectly. Indeed both protagonists were challenging the dominant discourse on modernity based on rationality and collectivism, cemented by the functionalist programme, social engineering and the instances of consumer education mentioned above. They did this despite the fact that both of them were strongly rooted in the very same field of rational consumer education.

Putting the feelings back in

The ideas of Willy Maria Lundberg and Lena Larsson were not entirely different from each other. Despite the fact that both sympathised with consumer research, both protested against consumers’ being content with «the measurable», that is with quality-tested and labelled goods according to quantitative scientific norms.83 Both Larsson and Lundberg argued for an emotional relationship to things, although from separate perspectives.

There are of course differences regarding the kind of emotionality they both represented. Lundberg considered it impossible to establish an emotional (and «genuine» and «comforting») connection with a mass produced commodity. Such a thing was neither produced by hard work, nor would it last. This view inevitably brings to mind not only the Swedish criticism of mass consumerism discussed above, but also the classic theories of Marx and Simmel on alienation in modern

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81 W. M. Lundberg, Träslottet, Stockholm 1966. See also http://www.traslottet.se.
82 See the editorial and Larsson, «Därfor blev».
83 See, for example, Larsson, Varje människa, 110; Lundberg, Ting och tycken, 42.
society as well as the ideas of the Frankfurt School on mass culture. Lundberg’s point of view also demonstrates a similarity to anti–consumerism in the United States, for example as seen in the work of Galbraith and especially that of the journalist and social critic Vance Packard. Her openly emotional attitude toward goods, however, distinguishes her sharply from these (male) authors.  

Larsson underlined among the aspects of quality that many new products were more «people friendly» than the old ones. The encounters with mass produced commodities could also, as she claimed, be experienced in very personal and very different ways. People are attracted to goods through curiosity or aesthetics. They can be enticed by new colours and materials. They seek pleasure, variation and comfort or new ways of expressing themselves and experiencing the opportunities of a democratic society. By adding identity and a sense of belonging to Larsson’s list (notions that she did not use but would probably agree with), we land very close to the theories of the cultural studies emerging in the 1980s. 

Despite their differences, both women thus took a stand against a purely materialist, overly rational and collectively defined relationship to things. Emotions as well as individualism were now included in the perception of quality on both sides. At the same time the idea of rationality still remained important for both parties, albeit in somewhat different shapes. Both parties also attributed great importance to aesthetics in the relationship between people and things, mass-produced or not. 

Most interesting is that both protagonists openly declared, for their own part, a deeply emotional involvement with things. Lundberg had a «romantic devotion to old-fashioned hard-wearing things», according to her counterpart, Larsson, who added: «She can write about a copper kettle in a manner that makes it boil over.» Larsson’s description is quite pertinent for Lundberg’s book and her writing in general. Her language is emotionally loaded, both with negative and positive expressions. She may have hated cheap mass commodities, but at the same time she deeply loved other artefacts. She could become «soft-hearted» merely by thinking of certain things, while other objects «dampen the anxiety of present times». Emotionality was also emphasised by journalist Eva von Zweigbergk, one of those who took a stand for Lundberg’s side in the debate. In the special issue of Form in 1961 she defended her colleague’s criticism against consumerism, and one of her main arguments was that «emotional values» and individual differences would be lost in a mass consumer society that transforms consumers into «standardised people».  

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84 Lundberg could not have read Packard’s The Waste Makers (published in 1960 in USA) before finishing her own book (which came out rather early in 1960), but she may very well have been familiar with Packard’s earlier work.

85 See Horowitz, Morality, 254–256, about post-moralistic approaches to consumerism.

86 Larsson, «Köp, slit, släng», 452.

87 Lundberg, Ting och tycken, 58–59.

Larsson was also by no means against involving feelings in her perception of the quality of commodities. The principle of rationality should not be driven too far, she claimed. Consumers choose articles because they simply love them, or rather fall in love with them, and others because they find them practical and useful. She explicitly took sides against the discourse of rationality that had been so dominant in consumer issues during the former decades. As early as in 1953 she wrote, that luckily «[t]he buyer is often sensible enough to want something in excess of the object itself he is about to purchase: namely the irrational value». Such an opinion, she commented later on, «drove the consumer educators [of the 1950s] crazy».

Larsson thus pleaded for «the irrational» as an important ingredient of quality and consumption, in other words she promoted emotions, playfulness, subjectivity, aesthetic curiosity, etc. She also recommended that the consumer should feel his or her way and proceed by trial and error when purchasing something. Ideas like this would not have fit with acceptera’s version of quality for consumers, although Larsson shared the functionalist architects’ optimism for mass society and the possibilities of consumerism.

Like Lundberg, Larsson also had support. The writer Marianne Fredriksson, for example, at that time the editor of the magazine Allt i hemmet (All about the Home), entered the debate by publishing an editorial about a desperate love for useless things. She told the story of her sorrow about not buying a beautiful parasol that she had «fallen in love with» in a large department store: «A piece of paper with magic in it. Golden-green and pink. With this paper as a shield between oneself and the real world, some days would never turn out the way they do. [...] A parasol is just vanity. [...] It really cannot be justified. [...] But that is stupid, I actually needed that parasol, after all, as we all need beauty. And beauty is always useful, always necessary and always in a tight corner. It does not happen too often in life that one can buy a glimpse of it for only 35 crowns. Oh, you sententious price-measure-quality-function-educators! Here sits a consumer grieving over a parasol.»

Fredriksson, like Larsson, emphasises aesthetics as well as fascination, enticement and passion in relation to consumption. (Observe that the parasol is valued here as a shield against reality – a large step from the modernist’s appeal to «accept» reality.) Affection for things is now described in a positive way. The commodity is not perceived as a fetish, as Marx wanted to have it, but rather as something that can give rise to and carry genuine feelings and meanings, which are produced in the encounter between consumer and object.

89 Larsson, Varje människa, 110. Larsson quotes her own article from 1953 (in Form) in her memoirs.
Larsson and Fredriksson protested against how the tradition of consumer education and quality testing had developed after the Second World War. Scientifically oriented consumer research dominated in the 1940s and 1950s and it focused on laboratory-like experiments and statistical studies. A state committee for testing and labelling consumer goods (Varudeklarationsnämnden) was established 1951. The Home Research Institute was transformed into two separate governmental agencies in 1957: the State Institute of Consumer Affairs (Statens institut för konsumentfrågor, responsible for consumer education and information) and the State Council of Consumers (Statens Konsumentråd, responsible for research, investigations and consumer policy).92 The new institute launched the periodical Råd & Rön (Advice & Findings) in the year 1958, a publication that, just like its British counterpart Which?, contained matter-of-fact consumer information and reported the results of quality and safety tests.93

Although Larsson actually promoted quality control, her protest against overzealous measuring and testing was manifest. And although Lundberg was on the whole very favourable toward consumer research, one can clearly sense in her writing a depreciation of the eagerness to measure in the name of rationality.94 However, both of them were deeply involved in the same field. Lundberg, born in 1909, was a pioneer in consumer education since the 1930s, a regular writer in the press and a popular voice on the radio, famous for her fighting spirit against bad consumer products. Larsson (born in 1919), who was somewhat younger than Lundberg, had also by that time established herself as an expert of consumer issues in general and home decoration in particular. She was also a radical and a colourful media personality. A former student of Carl Malmsten, she later worked together with functionalist architects. She propagated simple, easy to use furniture, «child friendly living rooms» and wanted to ban unnecessary ornaments, such as crystal chandeliers, from the home.

The standpoints of these two women are interesting precisely because they were such prominent experts of consumer issues and well-known media personalities. In the debate they seemingly represented diametrically opposed positions, and yet they were both demonstrating and talking in favour of an emotional approach to things. Was this the kind of emotionality that figured in the credo of cultural traditionalists thirty years earlier? Not entirely. Malmsten and the critics of functionalism referred to emotions on a «higher level», such as inspiration and spirituality, but they were also talking about comfort and cosiness in the home as a way to ensure the development of subjectivity and personality in a mechanised and impersonal world. Nonetheless, they did not talk about loving a kettle; this was rather part of the malicious

92 Husz, «Spara, slösa»; Lövgren, Hemarbete; Ber -
ner, Sakernas tillstånd.
93 M. Hilton, Consumerism in 20th-Century Britain,
94 Lundberg, Ting och tycken, 41–42.
portrait painted by the functionalist debaters. And not even Lundberg claimed in
1960 that artefacts needed to be created by artists in order to engender genuine af-
fection. Introducing genuine affection directed towards commodities as a value in
modern society was in fact something new.

The Swedish debate in 1960–1961, in contrast to the American criticism of
consumer society, did not put emphasis so much on the wrongdoings of consum-
ers, producers and advertisers but on material objects and people’s relationship to
these objects. The American historian Daniel Horowitz describes the same period
in the United States as dominated by the social criticism of materialistic mentality
and acquisitiveness. Vance Packard was clearly and demonstratively anti-materialis-
tic in his critique of a mass society of waste-makers. In Sweden, even Lundberg,
despite her similar attack on mass consumerism, demonstrated an affectionately
materialistic attitude.

The debate on the throwaway spirit introduced – earlier than one would expect
– a new emotionality in the normative discourse on material mass culture. It chal-
lenged the programme of Swedish modernism from within, but despite the large
public resonance, it cannot be categorised as a general shift. This emphasis on emo-
tions and individualism precisely on the basis of modernism and rationally «quality
conscious» consumption should rather be seen as a symptom of the ambiguous
character of Swedish modernity. Recent historical interpretations have depicted
Swedish modernity as the product of two seemingly conflicting tendencies: Ratio-
nalism and collectivism on the one hand, and a «deep and enduring culturally con-
ditioned individual orientation», often combined with a kind of romanticism, on the
other. The key to understanding the history of Swedish modernity is, it is therefore
claimed, to reveal the tensions between these contrasting orientations as well as the
ways they could be overcome in practice.⁹⁵ I believe that considering the two debates
in unison illustrates these tensions in relation to material culture.

Lundberg and Larsson shared many of the ideas embraced by the functionalists.
Both had functional commodities with a sensible design for the larger public very
much at heart. But both women defined quality as an issue involving emotions, and
in this they differed sharply from the modernists and from the rational consumer
education of the 1940s and 1950s. Both focused on the individual’s use of things,
and for both of them quality resided in the relationship between people and artefacts.
For the functionalists of the 1930s quality was created on a collective level by the
adaptation of things to society. And cultural traditionalists defined quality as a prop-
erty of the product itself.

⁹⁵ B. Stråth / Ø. Sørensen, «Introduction», in: B. Stråth / Ø. Sørensen (eds.), The cultural
M. Hilson / J. Andersson, «Images of Sweden and the Nordic Countries», in: Scandinavian
Journal of History 3 (2009), 219–228; H. Berggren / L. Trägårdh, År svenska människa, Stock-
The insight that emotions permeate the practices of consumption in many different ways is obvious, as is the fact that producers and advertisers make use of this as a result. Emotions were also included in the discourse on mass consumption but with negative overtones. Social critics and consumer educators were talking about dangerous impulses that the commercial forces took advantage of, and even about a «shopping psychosis» that could be created if consumers did not control their emotions. The aim of consumer education was – and probably still is – to teach consumers how to tame and suppress their feelings and to rely on reason instead in order to recognise quality goods. In the debate on throwawayism the (moral) value of emotional attachment to mass produced things was acknowledged for the first time in the normative discourse.

7. Quality of Life, Mass Consumerism and Swedish Modernity – Concluding Remarks

The historian Martin Wiklund has proposed the concept of «quality of life» as one of the key terms for the late 1970s' alternative movement's critique against the dominant version of Swedish modernity. The word signalled a protest both against what was perceived as overly rationalist tendencies of social planning and against materialism and mass consumerism: «Rationalism was thus associated with materialism and a one-sided focus on quantity as opposed to values and quality.» The alternative movement propagated feelings, fantasy and «real values in life» instead of things.

This paper has shown, however, firstly, that the modernists of 1930 also explicitly emphasised the quality of life and secondly, that a criticism in the name of emotional values against the collectivist and rationalist character of the modernist vision was presented already in 1960 or even earlier, but not in contrast to materialism. In the 1970s, the alternative movement's idea of the quality of life illustrates the persistence of the dichotomous perception of quality and quantity, which was introduced in Sweden by the mass culture criticism of the early twentieth century. I have pointed out that the concept of quality, in accordance with the classics of social theory (e.g. Simmel and Sombart), was also used in Sweden to express what was missing from mass culture.

The concept of quality appears, however, to have been instrumental for the attempts at dampening the polarisation between high culture and mass culture in the emerging Swedish welfare society. The challenge for those aiming to deliver a constructive critique of mass culture consisted of reconciling quality and quantity. The two controversies analysed in this paper reveal such attempts at reconciliation. The functionalists offered a solution on the basis of collectivism and rationality, while in the debate in 1960–1961 emotions and the individual’s relationship to commodities...
were proposed as a ground for quality in a mass consumer society. The fact that both protagonists of the later controversy were deeply rooted in the modernist tradition and challenged it from within not only fits well with general theories about the contradictory character of modernity but also with the claims about the specific Swedish propensity for reconciliation and compromise.97

Quality is of course a word with a high level of abstraction and it can, as we have seen, be applied both to the quality of life and the quality of a table lamp. Another observation was that both in general views on mass culture and in writings discussing mass consumerism, preoccupations with the quality of things and the quality of culture or life were converging and even melted together. The issue of quality was turned into a way of moralising about, or taming and reforming mass (consumer) culture.

In the early 1960s, the affirmative acceptance of individual emotions directed towards commodities as a way of assimilating the expanding material culture may have had a resonance among the public, but it did not last as a durable quality programme. Quality had to be reinvented as the world was changing. Not long after the debate, the left-wing movements and the increasing environmental consciousness had an effect on the tone of the discussions about mass consumerism. In 1978 the Slöjdföreningen, now renamed Svensk Form in Swedish, in fact introduced, once again, a «new notion of quality». Instead of rationality or individual emotions they now proposed that the quality of products should be based on a sense of solidarity and individual responsibility. Consumerism was placed in a global and political context. The individual’s choice of a product should be a statement about what kind of society he or she wanted to promote. «The world is in the living room» it was claimed in order to illustrate the new idea of quality.98 This last example underlines my point about how the changing definitions of quality function as a key to understanding the views on material mass culture. The concept of quality was used throughout the twentieth century as a means to assimilate mass culture and to cope with cultural modernity.

97 See Berggren/Trägårdh, Är svensken; and Hilson/Andersson, «Images of Sweden».
The Morality of Quality.
Assimilating Material Mass Culture in Twentieth-Century Sweden

This article discusses perceptions of material mass culture in twentieth-century Sweden through the lens of the concept of «quality». It aims to shed light on how the concept of quality emerged in connection with mass culture and mass consumerism in Swedish public debates and writings, and how it was used, defined and redefined between the seemingly opposite poles of feelings / subjectivity and reason / objectivity. By analysing the ways in which quality was positioned historically within the complex web of relations woven between the individual, society and the commodity, I will show how and why it should be seen as a key term in the attempts at shaping mass consumerism within the framework of the emerging Swedish welfare state. During this process, the concepts of quality and quantity were repeatedly reconciled in different ways. This is exemplified by two mass-media debates on material mass culture in the 1930s and in the 1960s.

Die Moral der Qualität.
Durchsetzung und Adaption materieller Massenkultur in Schweden während des 20. Jahrhunderts


La Moralité de la Qualité.
L’assimilation de la culture matérielle de masse au XXe siècle en Suède

Cet article analyse les perceptions de la culture matérielle de masse au XXe siècle en Suède sous l’angle du concept de «qualité». Son objectif est de faire la lumière sur la question de savoir comment le concept de qualité – dans le cadre de la culture et de la consommation de masse – a émergé des écrits et des débats publics en Suède et comment il a été utilisé, défini et redéfini entre les pôles vraisemblablement opposés de sentiments / subjectivité et de raison / objectivité. En analysant les manières dont la qualité a été historiquement positionnée à l’intérieur du réseau complexe des relations tissées entre l’individu, la société et la marchandise,
l'article s'efforce de montrer comment et pourquoi la qualité est un concept clé permettant de façonner et de réinterpréter la consommation de masse dans le cadre de l'État-providence suédois en gestation. Pendant ce processus, les concepts de qualité et de quantité ont été maintes fois réconciliés de manières différentes. Ce développement est exemplifié par deux débats sur la culture matérielle de masse dans les médias de masse ayant eu lieu pendant les années 1930 et les années 1960.

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