

Special Issue:
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Environmental Change in Nordic Fiction

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A Green Criticism of the Consumer Society?

Abstract

The novels of the Norwegian Nobel Prize winner Knut Hamsun can be seen as an ongoing discussion with modernity. In some parts his critique is reactionary, in other parts worth listening to. This article deals with his *Segelfoss* novels, Hamsun's satirical representation of the commodity trade within the emerging capitalist market and the role of the consumer. The novels may be read as early and thought-provoking contributions to the large amount of literature on consumers and their nature. Is growth always good? What has been lost?

Zusammenfassung

Die Romane des norwegischen Nobelpreisträgers Knut Hamsun können als eine ständige Auseinandersetzung mit der Moderne betrachtet werden. In einigen Teilen ist seine Kritik reaktionär, in anderen Teilen hörensenswert. In diesem Artikel geht es um seine *Segelfoss*-Romane, Hamsuns satirische Darstellung des Warenhandels im aufkommenden kapitalistischen Markt und der Rolle des Verbrauchers. Die Romane können als frühe und zum Nachdenken anregende Beiträge zu der großen Menge an Literatur über Verbraucher und ihr Wesen gelesen werden. Ist Wachstum immer gut? Was ist verloren gegangen?

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The Hamsun scholar Øystein Rottem characterizes Knut Hamsun's collected works – published in the period 1877–1949 – as an ongoing discussion of and negotiation with modernity.¹ I agree with this viewpoint. Hamsun's critique of modernity has been labelled as reactionary, and in some respects it is, including his fascination for the patriarch – a powerful and usually older man in charge of a small community – and a similar contempt for workers' organization and workers' rights. Hamsun also has no sense of the modern working woman,² and elements of racism and antisemitism in his writing have been pointed to.³ Still, Hamsun's novels keep on reaching ever new groups of readers, and students and scholars write theses and articles on Hamsun in an understanding that his authorship extends beyond the reactionary and anti-democratic, and that his fiction writing holds some important insights about humanity and human life, about society and our relationship to nature.

In today's ecological crisis of pollution and climate change, it is worth reflecting, first, on whether the crisis is largely caused by an ideology based on progress – understood as ever-increasing consumption and material growth – and, second, that we must look for alternatives to this and ask questions about what the good life is. It can then be useful to look back to see what in the old society had value and has been lost. What should our relationship with nature and the environment really be?

The Danish psychologist Svend Brinkmann argues in his book *Gå glipp. Begrensningens kunst i en grenseløs tid* (2018, »The Art of Limitation in a Boundless Time«) for a rediscovery of past virtues such as frugality, moderation and modesty, as a counterweight to the social acceleration associated with modernity and its harmful effects. Earlier, the philosophy behind the consumer ideology was that the more one consumed, the better. The paradox that arises from considering a good citizen as a consuming human being is, however, the following, as Brinkman states: »If you are satisfied, you have no incentive to get more, therefore satisfaction is a burden, not a virtue in a consumer society.«⁴

Hamsun addresses this unreasonable precondition, and it is possible to see a line from Hamsun's emphasis on simple living and responsiveness to nature to Brinkmann's argument for the ethical value of moderation in an ecologically oriented social critique in the year 2022.

Segelfoss Town

Knut Hamsun's criticism of modernity in his *Segelfoss* books – *Barn av tiden* (1913, »Children of the Age«) and *Segelfoss by* (1915, »Segelfoss Town«), set on the coast of northern Norway – is characterized by clearly conservative elements. I would argue, however, that Jørgen Haugan exaggerates these traits in his monograph *Solgudens fall* (2004, »The Fall of the Sun God«), when he refers to the novels as reactionary in their criticism of society or

¹ Cf. Rottem 2016, p. 16.

² Cf. Žagar 2009; Andersen 2011; Dingstad 2021.

³ Cf. Storfjell 2003; Rem 2014; Jernsletten 2003.

⁴ »Er man tilfreds, har man jo ikke noe incitament til å skaffe seg mer, derfor er tilfredshet en last, ikke en dyd i et forbrukersamfunn.« (Brinkmann 2018, p. 25)

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civilization, and nostalgic in their attitude to life. He further claims that »[t]he old, crumbling society is maintained as an ideal and as a model example of the decaying consequences of evolution«.⁵ If this had been an accurate description, these books would have nothing to say to us today except for their entertainment value. But I think they do, and particularly on one point, namely Hamsun's satirical representation of the commodity trade within the emerging capitalist market and the role of the consumer. That is the topic of this article.

In her book *Forbruker og medmenneske* (2006, »Consumer and Fellow Human«), Victoria W. Thoresen demonstrates how purchasing power and consumerism have been the subject of massive, arguably excessive, faith. Increased expenditure has been considered the »[...] source of the Good Life; an instrument to achieve freedom, power, and happiness; the way to ensure social status; the evidence of success; the key to economic growth, and global development«.⁶ According to Thoresen, from the late twentieth century onwards, there has been a strong focus on how increased consumption has resulted in a growing number of people who struggle with social and psychological disorders, as well as material and environment-related difficulties. Increased consumption does not necessarily mean better quality of life.

It is questions related to the consumer and commodity trade – the modern consumer – that Hamsun wanted to address as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, in particular in his book *Segelfoss Town*.

A Novel about Change

Segelfoss Town is a typical Hamsun novel in terms of both characters and setting: a small seaside town in northern Norway in which the local shop, with the shopkeeper Theodor, serves as the setting for most of the plot, albeit with Holmsen's estate standing out in the landscape as a guarantor, securing both moral and aesthetic values. As a contrast to the Holmsen family, Theodor is portrayed as someone with a desire for splendour but lacking the good taste to acquire it. The Holmsen estate does not represent financial security, however, and in the novel *Men livet lever* (1933, »The Roads Leads On«), grocer Theodor has purchased the estate and moved in.

Between the near-noble Holmsen family on the one hand and the grocer Theodor from the local shop on the other, we find both in *Segelfoss Town* and in *Children of the Age* the speculator and adventurer Holmengraa.

Segelfoss Town has no obvious protagonist; Willatz Holmsen the Younger only shows up on page 110, and never becomes a main character in the plot, as his father was in the previous novel *Children of the Age*. None of Hamsun's other novels can be described as a collective novel to the same extent as *Segelfoss Town*. We follow the society of Segelfoss in its entirety, focusing on various characters one after the other and on the dynamics between them which either cause further plot development or bring it to a standstill. In many ways, it is a book about the economy.

⁵ »Det gamle, hendøende samfunnet holdes oppe som et ideal og som en målestokk for det forfallet som utviklingen har medført.« (Haugan 2004, p. 226)

⁶ »[...] kilden til det gode livet; et redskap til å oppnå frihet, makt og lykke; måten å sikre sosial status på; beviset på vellykkethet; nøkkelen til økonomisk vekst og global utvikling« (Thoresen 2006, p. 6).

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Segelfoss has gone from being a barter economy to being a monetary economy within a few decades, and many of the chains of events spin out of this.

Segelfoss Town is also in many ways a book about change. According to Nils Magne Knutsen, we witness the following changes:

1. Change of *land tenure*. The land is passed on from the Holmsen family and estate first to Holmengraa, and thereafter to the smallholders who eventually become freeholders.
2. Change of *economic basis*. The Segelfoss estate, being dependent on agriculture and fishing, becomes Segelfoss town, which is based on trade and industry.
3. Change of *consumer habits, lifestyle and pace*. A transition takes place from a barter economy to a monetary economy, from salt meat and fish to canned food, from goat's cheese to Swiss cheese, from sturdy homemade shoes and clothing to low quality manufactured products, from a peaceful rural community to a busy town with hotel, local newspaper and major developments.
4. Change of *moral attitudes*. The inhabitants move from politeness, respect and decency towards unrest, laziness, dissatisfaction and loss of decency.⁷

Hamsun operates with multiple agendas in the novel. But despite the criticism of modernity, *Segelfoss Town* is entertaining and energetic, with a number of fascinating characters and milieus. This might explain its positive reception with both critics and readers; the book was published in November 1915 and had to be reprinted three times before the end of the year.

In the following, I will address some of the criticism expressed in the novel; not the unreasonable attack on the labour movement, but point three in Nils Magne Knutsen's aforementioned list: consumer habits, lifestyle and pace. I would argue that *Segelfoss Town* may be read as a novel about consumer society, and it is this development that Hamsun wants to address. Moreover, it is on this point that the novel is of particular relevance today.

Consumer Society

At the beginning of *Segelfoss Town*, we are presented with Hamsun's satirical criticism of the emerging consumer society. Grocer Per is replaced by his son Theodor, and with this shift, a new type of trade develops:

That's the way things grew – one thing with another, and the business most of all. Matches and salt? No! canned goods and macaroni and Gruyère! The stubborn cripple up in the attic wanted goat-cheese now as in the old days – the foolish old man; goat-cheese was not to be got now for no one kept goats any longer. The article was out of date. [...] Couldn't he be like other folk and take Roquefort in tin-foil and Camembert in dainty wooden boxes? [...] He had not kept pace with the progress of the place and of mankind; there was no one now who did

⁷ Cf. Knutsen 1975, p. 78.

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not eat all the macaroni he could get [...] and they would have liked to have had a swaying macaroni-forest here too, just as in foreign lands!⁸

Theodor's assortment is partly a response to his customers' demands, but he is also partly responsible for the new course of action with his introduction of new products and his marketing. There is a dialectics here, which is familiar with the modern consumer society. The customers' new preferences are not necessarily due to quality or price; it's *fashion*, and often the fact that the products come from abroad. A comic example of this is the Segelfoss people's image of swaying spaghetti fields.

The mania for shopping is not just an innocent indulgence; it has a fundamental impact on the small coastal society. This is also satirically described when canned food is perceived as fresh as opposed to the local food. This is Hamsun's portrayal of the ignorant consumer.

According to the philosopher Kate Soper, the *consumer* category is a relatively new designation. Trade has always taken place, but the consumer identity appears in the mid-1800s, when it was hotly debated whether consumption was a contribution to public welfare and whether one might talk about the »conscientious consumer« as opposed to the consumer who is driven only by personal greed and irrational appetite.⁹ This is an ongoing debate, and today we have terms like green trade, indicating that the consumer is environmentally aware, and Fair Trade, where the consumer wishes to aid producers in developing countries by making demands of Western capital owners. The politically aware consumer may also be found in various product-boycotting movements. Terms such as »consumer effort« point to this aspect of the consumer role.

Yet many are probably so-called passive consumers. Soper emphasizes that many feel uncomfortable with the fact that improved living standards involve increased consumption, and that something is lost in a »high-speed, work-dominated, materialistic lifestyle«. ¹⁰ According to Soper, aspects of the consumer culture have resulted in a transition from what the ancient Greeks called *pothos* – an appreciation of the already accessible – to *himeros*, a longing for the inaccessible.¹¹

Among the questions that have been raised in the debate concerning global trade are the following: Is the consumer culture compatible with altruism, a moral attitude that values others' well-being before one's own selfishness, or is consumption *per se* connected to self-interest and desire? Can – and should – the consumer be cultivated in order to become a »citizen consumer« and an »active consumer«, or is the consumer destined to be manipulated? These

⁸ Hamsun 1925, p. 27. »Slik vokste allting i været, det ene med det andre og handelen mest. Fyrstikker og salt? Nei hermetikk og makaroni og sveitserost. Den stivsinnete krøpling oppe på loftet ville ha geitost nu som i gamle dager, – den enfoldige mann, geitost var jo ikke lenger til å oppdrive fordi ingen holdt geit mere. Varen var utryddet [...] Kunne han ikke som andre folk ta roquefort i sølvpapir og camembert i delikate treesker? [...] Han hadde ikke fulgt med i stedets og menneskenes oppsving, nu var det ingen som ikke åt makaroni [...] og de måtte bare såsant ha hatt en duvende makaroniskog her også likesom i utlandet!« (Hamsun 2008b, p. 27)

⁹ Soper 2007, p. 206.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 211.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*

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questions are discussed in a number of recent books on the consumer, among others in *The Making of the Consumer* (2006), edited by Frank Trentmann.

Hamsun's *Segelfoss* novels also discuss such questions, although not theoretically, but through scenes and situations. The plot in *Children of the Age* is set in the last decades of the nineteenth century, whereas *Segelfoss Town* takes place in the early 1900s. They are thus from a period in which the concept of the consumer was relatively new.

Does Hamsun wish to return to the time of the barter economy? I don't think there are any grounds for claiming that. Hamsun does not reject retail trade or the monetary economy as such; his fascination with the local shop and with trade – whether it concerns fish or markets – runs through many of his novels from northern Norway. We also notice the narrator's fascination with the investor. Hamsun gives no final answer as to what false and actual needs are. In his novels, he generally has an unerring eye for the fact that some luxury products may provide pleasure, or that some products may provide perhaps necessary social success in a given situation. What he criticizes is the excessive purchasing, often with money one doesn't actually have, in order to acquire things one doesn't need: a type of commerce that doesn't lead to the customer's satisfaction but rather appears as a sort of aggressive social climbing. One may argue that Hamsun investigates what it means to consume differently in the *Segelfoss* novels.

For instance, Hamsun makes an appeal for locally produced food. Moreover, as in a number of other novels by Hamsun we get a discussion of what »the good life« is and whether it is necessarily connected to material wealth.

Within consumer criticism, one may easily end up with an altogether oversimplified distinction between false and actual needs. Actual needs here denote the minimum needs of food, clothing and other equipment. But many would object that such an ascetic approach is too moralistic. In an article on »consumerism«, Kate Soper and Lyn Thomas point out that we need not forget that »to be human is to need (desire) diversity, change, novelty, self-development«. ¹² Thus, one may not easily say that consumption is simply a compensatory activity. However, the constant search for a satisfaction that never occurs is nevertheless problematic from a consumer point of view. There is a limit to excessive consumption. Victoria W. Thorsen says, in *Forbruker og medmenneske*: »The crux of the matter is not the consumption itself, but its patterns and effects.« ¹³ We need to slow down only when we see consumer patterns and trends that are harmful for human development.

In the *Segelfoss* novels, Hamsun challenges the idea of progress and what it involves. That is not the same as wanting to return to a barter economy. The issues that are addressed in the novels are a mix of conservative and progressive thoughts; conservative when it comes to the views on the worker and the employer, and the aristocracy, but progressive in their discussion of the consumer culture. The *Segelfoss* books are not among Hamsun's artistically strongest, but in many ways, they represent the key to his authorship. In his subsequent novels, the social criticism is elaborated and diversified.

¹² Soper & Thomas 2006, p. 24.

¹³ »Det springende punkt er ikke forbruket i seg selv, mens dets mønstre og virkninger.« (Thoresen 2006, p. 7)

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In his news articles and commentaries, Hamsun provides simple answers to the problems that arise in modernity and the new age, as in *Bonde, ta hjem datter din fra byen* (1918, »Farmer, bring your daughter home from the city«). In his novels, he is much more experimental in his criticism of civilization, which constantly presumes new forms. In contrast to the mania for shopping that weighs heavily on the community around the local shop in Segelfoss, Abel in the novel *Ringen sluttet* (1936, »The Ring is Closed«) is someone who chooses to renounce all material needs.

Consumer Protection

Are values and consumption connected? This has been a central point of many discussions concerning trade and consumption. Hamsun's answer to this is a clear and resounding »yes«, and in the *Segelfoss* books he is – among other things – exploring this. To put it briefly, the philosophy behind the consumer ideology used to be that more and more was better and better. Hamsun did not believe this, as few people do today.

There is a difference between consumption in an »affluent economy«, which characterizes Norway today, and a »shortage economy« which is characteristic of Hamsun's Segelfoss society. Nevertheless, his thoughts on local societies and local products – practical knowledge and tradition – are interesting today.

Hamsun is not primarily analysing legal responsibility in relation to the consumer society (although the bank mortgages in Segelfoss fall under the law); what interests him is rather consumer responsibility as a private matter.

Kristin Asdal and Eivind Jacobsen give the following definition of consumer responsibility in their book *Forbrukerens ansvar* (2009, »The Consumer's Responsibility«). »It has to do with our conscience, with the dialogue we have with ourselves about what we should or ought to do in various purchase and consumer situations. Morality, guilt, shame, are, in other words, a central theme.«¹⁴

The fact that the shoemaker at Segelfoss stops making shoes and instead buys poor quality shoes at the local shop, the fact that he uncritically receives the new goods, and the fact that in the novel he is never reinstated to his old profession, says much about Hamsun's lack of faith in the emerging consumer society.

Also relevant to the question of the consumer is a discussion of distributive trade, in this context the shopkeeper. There was no consumer council in Hamsun's time; the Norwegian Consumer Council was established in 1953 in order to aid consumers in their encounters with insistent market operators and deceptive advertising, among other things. Consumers were regarded as weak and easily manipulated victims of strong economic agents. Consequently, they needed protection, and to be enlightened and taught how to become independent and able to make their own critical assessments and choices. In later times, the focus on consumer power and rights, and market structures, has further increased: in 1975, the right to consumer education was adopted in the US, and in 1985, the UN emphasized

¹⁴ »Det handler om vår samvittighet, den samtalen vi har med oss selv om hva vi gjør eller burde gjøre i ulike kjøps- og forbrukersammenhenger. Moral, skyld, skam er med andre ord et vesentlig tema.« (Asdal & Jacobsen 2009, p. 10)

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the importance of consumer education, community training and environmental awareness. The idea of *consumer citizenship* is a term that has emerged from the 1980s onwards in the Western world.¹⁵

At one point in *Segelfoss Town*, there is a real need for consumer protection. This is when Theodor in the local shop takes in illustrated catalogues of grave monuments from foundries and stonemasons down south. The Segelfoss tradition has been painted wooden crosses or just an earth mound, but now:

[...] it developed into a regular business; stone monuments were generally considered the finest, and they ousted the metal ones; they were of marble and granite, polished and unpolished, and of all colours – you could take your choice. There were crosses and pyramids and slabs and pillars and obelisks, monuments of every shape.¹⁶

The motivation behind this purchasing from »illustrated catalogues« is a desire for momentary attention and recognition. It does not arise from tradition or custom; it is triggered by vanity and ostentation in addition to the new access to products. The joy of splendour is short-lived, however; when the goods arrive in Segelfoss by boat from the south, none of the customers have the money to pay for them and they have to buy on tick, hoping to be able to repay their debt after the fishing season is over. In addition, the effect of standing out from the crowd has disappeared, as increasingly more people have constructed resplendent gravesites.

The Road Leads On

We also meet the Segelfoss community in the third volume of Hamsun's *August* trilogy: *Men livet lever* (2009, »The Road Leads On«). Theodor's son, Gordon, returns home from mercantile studies in Germany with, as the narrator phrases it, knowledge about »accountancy, banking and foreign exchange – pompous and superfluous stuff«.¹⁷ As the new owner of the Segelfoss farm he knows nothing about farming and fishing, about herring seining or the smoking of salmon, about eiderdown farming, searching for angelica in the mountains – about hay drying or sheep farming, hunting and collecting wild sea bird eggs, grain harvesting and threshing. He only knows bookkeeping, and he is so aloft over the conditions of the place that he finds it incomprehensible that the Japanese silk kimonos he has brought back for sale are turned down. Why do people want to keep their old canvas shirt and woollen underwear? The villagers lived as they had learned to and only accepted the new slowly, the narrator states, and supports this attitude. About traditional, local knowledge the narrator exclaims:

Ay, the old ways, those are the best! Look there at those boat-sheds of theirs, those little sheds on stilts! Surely they differ in no particular from those which stood here eight centuries ago when Sverre ruled the land, though they still answer every practical purpose. The walls are open strips of birch and aspen, the roofs are of turf and birchbark. And if someone there is who imagines that these boathouse walls ought to be fitted tight against the

¹⁵ Cf. Thoresen 2006, p. 15.

¹⁶ Hamsun 1925, p. 362. »[...] det ble en forretning, stenene var nesten flottest og fortrenge malmen, det var marmor og granitt, polert og upolert, alle farver, folk kunne velge. Det var kors og pyramider og plater og søyler og obelisker, alle former.« (Hamsun 2008b, p. 350)

¹⁷ Hamsun 2013, p. 7. »[...] bokførsel, omsetning, børshandel, veksellære, store og overflødige studier.« (Hamsun 2009a, p.12)

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weather, the reply is obvious that much would be lost thereby, since it is wind blowing in through the cracks which airs out the sails and the fishing gear left hanging there to dry. And observe those massive wooden locks on the doors of the sheds with their prehistoric wooden keys! No iron there, not a single thing which will rust. And when at last, lock and key have become rotten, what a simple matter it will be to fit new ones at not a single penny's cost, with the expenditure of only a little time and some deftness of hand – an interesting evening's work for any ordinary man.¹⁸

The depiction of the boathouse, with its practical arrangement based on local knowledge, comes right after the episode of the failed sale of silk kimonos and can be said figuratively to express Hamsun's preferences for a life where, on the one hand, one was used to being content with little and, on the other hand, people take a practical view of things. The coastal population are in need of solid clothing and not silk kimonos; they have to dress appropriately for the climate and their daily occupation. Hamsun phrases it this way: »kle seg efter klima og håndtering« (to dress for the weather).¹⁹ The word »håndtering« (handling) is used in a special way: it means to deal with or handle something, e.g., a tool or instrument, by using it correctly. This dealing has to do with practice, and with the *hand*, and is associated with tradition. It has to do with a practical approach to things, local knowledge. The merchant's silk kimonos have then come to the wrong place.

The Norwegian philosopher Jakob Meløe, who is concerned with local knowledge – of action theory, or »prakseologi« as he calls it – defines *place* as something that has to do with human activities: the place and the terrain give shape to our activities, he says: »[...] if we are to gain a good grasp of people's different concepts about the world, about the world in which they themselves are active, then we must gain experience from the activities from which their concepts originate and have their roots.«²⁰ Transferred to Hamsun, one can say that Hamsun argues for practical knowledge that springs from a long life in the local community – a shopkeeper has to acknowledge this.

Conclusion

The consumer is the object of extensive and cross-disciplinary research, and can be placed within an international field of research that has increased significantly over the past years. While some consider consumers as hedonistic, utility-maximizing individuals, others consider themselves able to prove that in many regards consumption is a fundamentally moral activity. In the latter case, the consumer is given a role as a morally responsible acting

¹⁸ Hamsun 2013, p. 17. »Se på naustene deres, disse sjøbodene som sikkert ikke var anderledes nu enn på kong Sverres tid, men som svarte til formålet. Veggene var staver av asp og bjerk, taket var av never og torv. Og var det noen som mente at disse naustvegger skulle ha vært tettere, så var det nettopp det de ikke skulle være, det skulle blåse gjennom veggene, så seil og børnskap som hang derinne kunne tørke igjen etter hvert bruk. Og se på disse svære trelåser for naustdøren, med den lange forhistoriske trenøkkel, intet var av jern, intet rustet. Når lås og nøkkel engang morknet var det å gjøre fra nytt, det kostet ikke en øre, det kostet bare litt tid for en netthendt mann, en interessant kveldsstund.« (Hamsun 2009a, p. 22)

¹⁹ Hamsun 2009a, p. 43.

²⁰ »[...] skal vi skaffe oss et godt grep om folks forskjellige begreper om verden, om den verden de selv er virksomme i, så skal vi skaffe oss erfaringer fra de virksomhetene deres begreper stammer fra og har sitt feste i« (Meløe 2011, p. 71).

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individual whose choices in the consumer market can make a difference. Power is attributed to them and liability imposed on them, according to Asdal & Jacobsen. Consumption is an activity that requires competence; it has to do with how needs and desires may be addressed within the framework of what is both appropriate and possible. Markets and consumers are cultural products, shaped by politics and history.

Hamsun's *Segelfoss* novels may be read as thought-provoking contributions to the large amount of existing literature on consumers and their nature. Hamsun uses Theodor (and later Gordon) in the local shop and his customers to discuss current problems in the commodity trade. Even though the mania for shopping at Segelfoss is portrayed wittily, this does not mean that we should not take the novels seriously. To return to Jørgen Haugan's criticism of the *Segelfoss* novels: it is not necessarily »the old crumbling society« Hamsun propagandizes, as Haugan claims,²¹ but rather certain values concerning the production of local food and goods and the ideas behind them, values that may be lost unless the consumer is educated or knows his or her place, and if the trader alone is allowed to set the agenda.

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²¹ Haugan 2004, p. 226.

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