

Consumer Politics in Postwar Japan: The Institutional Boundaries of Citizen Activism. By Patricia Maclachlan. 270 pp. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Cloth, \$45.00; paper, \$18.50. ISBN: cloth, 0-231-12346-9; paper, 0-231-12347-7.

Reviewed by Franziska Seraphim

At a time when changing patterns of consumption and their implications for meanings of citizenship are hot topics in the discourse on globalization, Patricia Maclachlan reminds us that to understand consumers as political subjects is to take seriously their historical experiences within the framework of national (and local) institutions. In the case of postwar Japan, these institutions have long been recognized as more firmly producer oriented and more resistant to consumer demands than those of other industrialized countries, but this does not simply point to the absence or ineffectiveness of consumer politics. On the contrary, Maclachlan shows the highly diverse goals, strategies, and policy results that have guided Japanese consumer advocates in response to multiple and changing contexts, including institutional politics, socioeconomic development, the nature of consumer issues, and others. As a variety of Japanese legislation empowering consumers goes into effect at the beginning of the new millennium, historians and social scientists need to rethink commonplace assumptions about the relation between represented consumer interests, policy-making, and meanings of democracy in postwar Japan and elsewhere. *Consumer Politics in Postwar Japan* offers historians wonderful new material to further challenge received narratives of “Japan, Inc.” and gives political scientists an exciting perspective on comparative social movement studies. The book begins with a concise introduction, which frames the topic and main thesis with reference to the existing literature. Thereafter, it is organized into two parts. The first lays out the theoretical, comparative, and historical framework of the Japanese consumer movement, and the second presents analyses of three in-depth case studies on the impact of advocacy groups on national policy-making. Social movement scholars will find the first chapter useful, as in it Maclachlan addresses core methodological issues and explains her own “composite” framework of analysis, endorsing the relatively recent approach of historical institutionalism. The survey of the American and British experiences with consumer

advocacy in Chapter Two serves as a useful reference for selective comparisons later in the book. It is also clearly designed to highlight the importance, in Maclachlan's view, of the historical development of political institutions in each respective national context.

Historians will be most interested in the three following chapters, which trace the emergence of the Japanese consumer movement with reference to the most obvious features of Japan's postwar political system: first the restructuring of state institutions under the Allied Occupation in the wake of defeat in World War II, and then the persistent, if qualitatively changing, hegemony of the pro-business Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), with a predictable break in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Here Maclachlan supplements the historical narrative with profiles of the most representative consumer organizations active in these time periods. Significantly, these organizations' political affiliations range from semigovernmental (Japan Consumers Association) to fiercely independent (Japan Consumers Union), but most groups end up working most effectively with and through *local* governmental institutions. The extent of consumer activism on the subnational level is critically important, and the reader is given a flavor of advocates' practical experiences, nicely enhanced by the author's use of uniquely Japanese expressions frequently applied to political processes in this context. For example, a *kakekomidera* (literally a temple where wives could find refuge from their abusive husbands in premodern times) refers to a government agency that would protect consumer interests. The lack of such an institution would be criticized as a case of *monzenbarai* (literally having been turned away at the gate) by the national political system.

The three case studies in Part II provide a rich testing ground for Maclachlan's theories and are well chosen to demonstrate the diversity of consumer issues, organizational strategies, and levels of success or failure in the face of varying degrees of cohesiveness among the governing elites as well as changing economic imperatives. The movement to amend the antimonopoly law in the mid-1970s became exceptionally politicized and resulted in legislation at a time when the LDP faced low public approval rates and weakened political ties with other elites. The movement to oppose the deregulation of food additives in the early 1980s, by contrast, failed despite its extensive and tight organization. Government and business interests were firmly united during this

broader conservative revival under Prime Minister Nakasone, and deregulation practices abroad only legitimized the conservative standpoint. Finally, the movement to enact a strict product liability law, which was passed in 1994, attests to *both* the viability of national and local consumer organs to influence policymakers at a time of political instability *and* the continuing authority of the government and business to protect consumers. For while the clauses of the new law set strict standards in liability, its implementation reflected the continued dependence of consumers on government and business.

The last chapter is particularly instructive in that it connects the book's most important arguments with current wide-reaching changes in consumer politics, illuminated by the author's recent follow-up interviews, to bring the discussion fully into the present. As such, the book offers a wealth of exciting materials not only to academics and students but also to journalists. What is missing, to my mind, is a well-conceived appendix consisting of a short chronological overview of the main developments covered in the book, tables listing important consumer organizations and their political affiliations, perhaps compared with such organizations in Britain and the United States, as well as a few core documents in translation. This would have greatly enhanced the book's usefulness for a host of different readers. While regrettable, this should not distract from the forceful argument presented here and its valuable contribution to the existing literature.

As a historian of Japan interested in the ongoing negotiation of meanings of postwar democracy, I am intrigued by the inherent complexity of the consumer movement and hence its usefulness for understanding the rich texture of political life in Japan. In ways similar to the massive redress efforts of Minamata pollution victims (see Timothy S. George, *Minamata: Pollution and the Struggle for Democracy in Postwar Japan*, 2001), the history of consumer advocacy *is* the history of postwar Japan. It both reflected and actively shaped the socioeconomic conditions and institutional boundaries that characterized Japan over the decades. But unlike other issue-based protest movements "from below," consumer interests could hardly be brushed off as marginal in a country where economic recovery and high growth depended largely on the domestic consumer market (see Simon Partner, *Assembled in Japan: Electrical Goods and the*

Making of the Japanese Consumer, 1999). Precisely because “consumers are the bedrock of modern capitalist systems” (p. 13), the history of the consumer movement forces us to consider producers and consumers *together* as economic as well as political subjects. *Consumer Politics in Postwar Japan* shows how rights-based citizen activism worked within, rather than against, the general preoccupation with economic growth, quite unlike either the established Left with its anticapitalist rhetoric or issue-centered social movements intent to bring the dark side of high growth to public attention.

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