

A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America. By *Lizabeth Cohen*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. 567 pp. Index, notes, photographs, illustrations, tables. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN 0-375-40750-2.

Reviewed by Colin Gordon

In the political culture of World War II, the dominant image was that of the “production soldier”—the home-front worker whose rivet gun was as important as the soldier’s weapon to the success of the war effort, whose paycheck was faithfully socked away in war bonds, and whose car was mothballed in deference to gas and rubber rationing. Sixty years later, the political culture of “Gulf War II” has demanded a very different kind of civic contribution. This war (in part a reflection of its modest scale, in part a reflection of a very different economic context) has had no impact on productive employment. Its costs are to be borne by the supply-side alchemy of tax cuts. And citizens have been urged to contribute to the war effort by shopping—ideally in gas-guzzling “Humvees,” glamorized (and advertised) by the war itself. This contrast in civil expectations is a central theme of *A Consumers' Republic*, Lizabeth Cohen’s magisterial overview of the politics and political culture of mass consumption in postwar American history. How and why did postwar American citizenship—understood here to mean both civic obligations and broader participation in the public sphere—become increasingly defined (and debased) by the politics and economics and culture of mass consumption?

At the core of Cohen’s wide-ranging reassessment of postwar history is a persistent tension between the politics and the economics of mass consumption. The “consumers’ republic” was sustained by public policy (local and federal tax policies, federal housing subsidies, and the larger architecture of “growth politics”) and populated by self-conscious citizen-consumers. In these respects, as Cohen shows, consumption was a political choice and an ongoing political battle (think lunch-counter sit-ins or the tortured history of open housing). At the same time, the “consumers’ republic” was little more than a triumph of the market, a pattern of mass consumption driven by the laws of supply and demand. In these respects, consumerism crowded out politics (think the

privatization of public space or recent deregulatory politics) and even, in the art of the modern political campaign, overwhelmed the political process.

A Consumers' Republic is animated by a nostalgia for the deeply politicized consumerism of the Depression and World War II era, a disdain for the platitudes of postwar marketers and marketing theorists, and an ambivalence about the prospects for consumer citizenship in our own time. This is a largely synthetic work, whose strengths (and at times its genius) rest on its ability to pull together seemingly disparate threads of the postwar experience. The early chapters, drawing on the work of Dana Frank (*Purchasing Power*, 1994), Meg Jacobs (*Pocketbook Politics*, forthcoming), and others, offer a consumers' perspective on depression and war. This is not a terribly original story but, in documenting the high-water mark of modern consumer politics, it establishes an important baseline for the chapters that follow, including an engaging account of the protracted reconversion debate (which, among other things, pitted postwar wage demands against inflationary anxieties), and an awkward recasting of the early civil rights movement within the context of negotiations for public space and issues of consumption.

The middle chapters (to my mind the real strength of the book), which are concerned with the spatial politics of consumption, assess in turn the emergence of suburbia and the modern shopping mall. It is in the suburbs, after all, that the clash between the politics and economics of mass consumption is starkest. Suburban sprawl was (and remains) deeply subsidized by federal highway spending, mortgage insurance offered by the Federal Housing Authority, and federal tax policies. Yet, at the same time, the suburbs gave rise to a fierce neoclassical defense of local and individual autonomy that viewed suburban tract housing and regional shopping centers as the natural consequences of consumer preference. At the intersection of these competing visions, Cohen offers compelling case studies (drawn largely from New Jersey) of the ability and willingness of suburban enclaves to poach the wealth, population, and tax bases of the older urban centers.

The latter chapters turn to the political culture of mass consumption. A solid chapter on marketing strategies captures the dilemmas of segmented appeals in a mass market, particularly the adoption of such strategies by political campaigns. And a closing chapter on the consumer movements of the 1960s and 1970s offers a sage assessment of

both their larger historical context and their limits. Here, as throughout the book, Cohen does a masterful job of weaving certain themes into her account: the tension between grassroots and elite reform movements; the consumer logic and implications of the modern feminist and civil rights movements; and the peril and promise of a political culture increasingly, and irretrievably, organized around the buying and selling of things.

Not surprisingly in a book of such ambition and scope, *A Consumers' Republic* is not without its faults. It purports to carry its story to the present but—at almost every turn—runs out of steam in the 1970s. One wishes Cohen had more to say about consumerism through the inflationary 1970s, the market orthodoxy of the 1980s and beyond, the political economy and political culture of globalization, and the “squirrel’s cage” (as Juliet Schor aptly put it in *The Overworked American*, 1991) of overwork and household debt in the modern economy. The analytical seesaw between the national story and the New Jersey case studies is very uneven. It works well for the treatment of open housing, for example, but offers little help in understanding the broader struggle against Jim Crow. And there is minimal effort to situate the New Jersey material as typical, exceptional, or merely illustrative evidence for the larger narrative.

A number of seemingly important elements of this story are barely addressed, including the place of credit in the consumer economy, the role of redlining and restrictive covenants in housing markets, the emergence of state and local sales taxes in parallel with the rise of the consumer economy, and the political economy of the shopping mall. And what remains—the largely self-contained chapters on various aspects of postwar consumerism—offers snapshots of the “consumers’ republic,” but no clear or convincing account of its importance to the modern American experience. This unevenness reflects, at least in part, the fluctuating quality of the evidence upon which her thesis rests. Arguments and conclusions are drawn, with equal conviction, from archival sources, from the trail of litigation, from contemporary trade publications, and from ephemeral promotional films extolling the social and political virtues of the shopping mall.

Finally, there is a certain wistfulness in this account—part lament for a Depression-era consumerism with strong ties to the state and the labor movement, part faith in the public (and hence political) character of consumption in our own era—which

is at times romantic and naïve. In her hopeful trolling for democratic promise in a consumer society, Cohen overstates both the historical clout and importance of citizen-consumers in the first half of the twentieth century and their political potential in the early years of the twenty-first.

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