

The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer. By *Daniel Thomas Cook*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. x + 211 pp. Illustrations, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$74.95; paper, \$21.95. ISBN: cloth 0-822-33279-5; paper 0-822-33268-X.

Reviewed by Michael Zakim

*The Commodification of Childhood* is an account of how infant, toddler, child, and teen emerged as the dominant terms of growing up in the early decades of the twentieth century, embraced in equal measure by clothing entrepreneurs and proponents of good parenting. Daniel Thomas Cook does not just expose this convergence of profits and pedagogy, however. He contends that the former actually begat the latter, that the categories by which children are raised and educated were invented by a clothing industry intent on enhancing sales. This is an extremely ambitious thesis, and an extremely interesting one, purporting as it does to explicate the "hegemonic" dynamics of market society. We really are, Cook argues, products of commodity logic. This does not happen, however, because rampant consumerism corrupts some prior, pristine nature. Rather, since the market defines childhood to begin with, it is simply impossible to grow up without purchasing, or "consuming," the necessities of emotional and intellectual development. Commodities are not, subsequently, just goods being bought and sold. They are an epistemology that informs our very understanding of healthy, well-adjusted children.

So much for the theory. How does Cook test such provocative ideas in their actual historical setting? Here *The Commodification of Childhood* has mixed results. The best chapter of the book, "Merchandising, Motherhood, and Morality," albeit resting on a thin evidential base, offers a powerful account of how retailers consciously turned motherhood into a consumer category. Quoting extensively from George Earnshaw's monthly trade journal, *Infants' Department*, which began publishing in 1917 (and continues to this day), Cook shows how manufacturers encouraged merchandisers to create new sales departments devoted exclusively to infant wear. The aim was to make the store a central arena for fulfilling maternal obligations. In an era characterized by less

domestic help, increased female participation in the labor market, and rising middle-class incomes, “the market place . . . offered the mother a place to be an active, caring agent and to consume on behalf of her children” (pp. 42–4). Retailers were urged to physically separate children’s wear—and especially infants’ clothing—in order to distinguish them morally from other goods. A woman could then come to the store “*as a mother*” (p. 48), and shopping became the means for realizing such altruistic slogans as “Baby’s Health—Civic Wealth” (p. 57). If she is satisfied with that experience, Earnshaw assured the trade, she “acquires the habit of buying everything she wants for the family at your store” (p. 48). But most significant for the historian is the merchant’s success in redefining baby’s health. Earnshaw explained: “The maternal instinct that desires *everything* that will contribute to the comfort and welfare of the baby is enlisted on the side of the merchant who knows how to create desire and inspire confidence. . . . [N]othing yet discovered accomplishes these two things so well . . . as a trained nurse who can answer intimate questions with the voice of authority, and, merely by bringing to the mother’s attention articles she never heard of, arouse in her the desire to possess them for her baby” (p. 58). Such marketing manipulations apparently knew no bounds, driven as they were by the specter of proven success. Cook summarizes: “Motherhood . . . becomes expressed and expressible through consumption—as consumer practice—and thereby commodified, emerging as a value-in-exchange” (p. 65).

It is a compelling argument, although the reader wants to know more about how this commercial logic interacted with parallel discourses in other fields, such as education, psychology, social reform, and good government. Only then can Cook present a definitive account of market society’s redefinition of childhood. On the other hand, it is entirely credible to argue, as Cook does, that, in an age of social and institutional flux when traditional truths rapidly lose their hold, business steps in to fill the void. Ever since Emerson identified the moral order implicit in industrial exchange, the spirit of gain has been an important organizing principle in American life.

In contrast to the discussion of motherhood, Cook’s chapter on “Baby Booms and Market Booms: Teen and Subteen Girls in the Postwar Marketplace” fails to live up to its promise. Here Cook describes the burgeoning demand by “teen girls” to dress up like young women, a market valued by *Life* magazine in 1959 as being worth ten billion

dollars. Looking older, of course, was achieved by means of more sexualized styles, the subject of considerable controversy. Cook quotes an admonishment from *Parents* magazine in 1931: “The lowness and sheerness of present-day frocks shock us because ‘in our day’ only ‘fast’ girls wore such attire” (p. 128).

Cook does not contend that teens’ desire to become objects of the sexual gaze was created by the clothing business. In this instance, the industry at best responded to an existing consumer demand with various merchandising tactics. Sales clerks, for instance, were encouraged to act as liaisons between parents and their adolescent children. Or new teen departments were equipped with a soda fountain and stools and sundry other age-typed paraphernalia. Significantly, however, and in stark contrast to Earnshaw’s success in wedding profit incentive and moral imperative, teen commodification ran counter to public sensibilities. Thus *Life* ran a censorious headline in 1962: “Boys and Girls: Too Old Too Soon: America’s Subteens Rushing Toward Trouble” (p. 142). This growing conflict between the commercial value of sex and society’s insistence on containing the sexuality of young persons would seem to have put clothiers in a most difficult position, one that even belies Cook’s general thesis on the market’s success in shaping childhood. (On the other hand, it might buttress his thesis since, half a century later, it is clear who won the battle over teenage sexuality.) In any event, *The Commodification of Childhood* refrains from exploring such a central issue, one it so effectively raises, which is too bad, since that would have made Cook’s study a more significant contribution to the history and sociology of the family in a commodifying age.

*Michael Zakim teaches history at Tel Aviv University. He is author of Ready-Made Democracy (2003).*