

*Standard of Living: The Measure of the Middle Class in Modern America.* By Marina Moskowitz. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. xii + 300 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-801-87947-7.

Reviewed by Tracey Deutsch

At first glance, a study that offers in-depth case studies of such items as flatware and zoning plans might not sound like an energizing page-turner. However, Marina Moskowitz's book is both of these things and more. Moskowitz uses the stories of everyday items to craft a persuasive case for the emergence of a new, national standard of living in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America. Of particular interest to business historians is the careful attention she pays to the systems that made these commodities central to middle-class aspirations. Unlike the "cost of living"—the household budgets for goods considered to be necessary to working-class survival—the "standard of living" captured a more qualitative notion of what middle-class homes and neighborhoods ought to contain. One of the text's central points is that business firms' careful attention to distribution made this common understanding possible: in Moskowitz's phrasing, "Commerce was a key mechanism through which the standard of living was defined, disseminated, and perceived" (p. 8).

The centrality of business is clear even from Moskowitz's organization. The bulk of her evidence is contained in four chapters, each of which traces a firm's production and distribution of a different good or service: Reed & Barton's silverplate flatware, the Kohler Company's bathroom fixtures, Aladdin Company's single-family "kit" houses, and Harland Bartholemew and Associates' zoning plans. For each topic, Moskowitz's briefly discusses firms' production techniques, continues into longer investigations of their distribution systems, and then surveys consumers' use of the firms' products and the prescriptions of home economists, cultural critics, and progressive reformers.

In each case, her conclusions rest on a stunning breadth of sources and methodology. The book includes close analyses of straightforward financial data from firms, careful reconstructions of exchanges among firm employees, thoughtful examples of prescriptive literature, and innovative readings of the images used in advertisements.

Although one might wish for more systematic discussions of the emergence of home economics and other fields that promoted “modern” housekeeping, and for more attention to consumers themselves, Moskowitz does make the case that these goods, services, and spaces gained broad acceptance.

In addition to their contributions to the overall argument, each chapter stands on its own as an insightful history of a particularly important good. The chapter on flatware is a case in point. Moskowitz documents the ways in which the manufacturer Reed & Barton oversaw the design and production of new flatware patterns via a modified form of “batch” production. She then details the struggles of salesmen and executives to effectively market and distribute these goods—a problem that required bids on hotel commissions, elaborate catalogs of goods and national advertising, and careful coordination with the jewelry stores in which the firm strove to sell most of its goods. It is a mark of the clarity and verve of Moskowitz’s prose that her account of a salesman’s efforts to get the commission for the flatware for the Grand Hotel in San Francisco makes this section of the chapter something of a nail-biter. Woven throughout, Moskowitz offers evidence of the increased significance of matching flatware patterns to a set of widely accepted prescriptions about dining, class, and propriety itself.

The central theme in the text is simply that these goods and the spaces they occupied did, in fact, help to define the emerging “standard” for many Americans (one Aladdin home was conveniently called “The Standard”). For that reason, if for no other, Moskowitz offers a useful addition to the work in American social history. But because she covers so many topics within each chapter, readers from a variety of fields will find small gems that bear on ongoing discussions of particular concern. For instance, many of her examples reinforce the importance of flexible, or batch, production while also complicating the story by acknowledging the ambivalence with which American firms and consumers greeted standardization. The hybrid production techniques of Reed & Barton and the pains taken by Aladdin Company to develop a personalized touch to their pre-made homes are both cases in point. Those interested in social history will also be intrigued by the ways that sexual normativity is important to the book’s argument. The goods and spaces depicted here were meant to serve the everyday needs of nuclear families—not multigenerational households and certainly neither the single adults nor the

“bohemians” who increasingly claimed spaces in urban commercial areas and apartment districts. The “standard of living” Moskowitz describes may have been salient to the lives of these people, but even if that was the case, then very important gender and sexual norms had also become “standards” for the middle class—a provocative and useful linking of class and sexuality. Finally, her chapter on zoning makes a vital contribution to an understudied but critically important topic in urban history.

There are some weaknesses and begged questions in Moskowitz’ book. Although her claim that a national standard of living emerged in this time period will resonate with most social historians, the meaning of that standard is murky. Voices of users would have helped measure the extent to which such aspirations mattered in everyday life, perhaps even upsetting older norms. Moskowitz comes close to achieving this in her discussions of homes and zoning, but here her sources are users of Aladdin homes who received commissions for their positive referrals—hardly a broad sampling of would-be homeowners.

More to my point, however (and more indicative of the suggestiveness of the book) are the questions *Standard of Living* raises. For example, Moskowitz would certainly acknowledge that the standard was also a boundary, if a permeable one. However, given that it arose at the same moment as Jim Crow laws and renewed efforts to define racial systems, was the ideal of a “standard of living” itself bound up in struggles for whiteness? What are the implications for post–World War II social and consumer histories? Also, if, as Moskowitz says, distribution was so important to the standard of living, then it would be useful to know more about what happened in the spaces where distribution happened. This includes not only studies of the architecture of stores, but also the generational and gender relations that might shape spending in homes. These are all ways of asking another question: how did social dynamics mediate the purchases would-be consumers made and the messages that manufacturers received about consumer demand?

Other readers will no doubt find additional enticing questions. The point here is simply that the text is useful and informative on its own terms and in its implications for studies of consumer society. Moskowitz has produced a book that takes important steps

in connecting business and cultural history and that opens up new avenues for research in both fields.

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