

*Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890–1945.* By Charles McGovern. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. xv + 536 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations. ISBN: Cloth, \$65.00; paper, \$24.95. cloth, 0-807-83033-X; paper, 0-807-85676-2.

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Over the past decade, the study of consumption has become an increasingly important subfield of business history—and, indeed, of American cultural history more generally. Scholars in recent years have looked at consumption in the early American republic, at the ways that people bought and consumed goods in the late nineteenth century, at the explosion of mass consumption in the 1920s and to a still greater extent in the postwar United States. Nor are these studies restricted to analyses of marketing strategies and purchasing patterns. Studies like Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumers' Republic*, Meg Jacobs's *Pocketbook Politics*, and Dana Frank's *Buy American* consider the ways that the rise of mass consumption in the twentieth century transformed political and cultural identities, paying special attention to the paradoxical way that consumption—the ultimate act of immediate gratification—can sometimes become freighted with political meaning.

Charles F. McGovern's *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890–1945*, marks an important contribution to this developing literature. This complex and sophisticated book is at once a study of the ways that advertisers and market researchers conceived of the consumer—their elusive target—and an analysis of the critique of advertising and consumption advanced by early consumer advocates. McGovern's book is unique in its philosophical sweep, for *Sold American* is as much intellectual as business history. The book carefully dissects the political ideologies and the far-reaching visions of America beneath seemingly casual attitudes toward the marketing of consumer products. In a sense, for McGovern, advertisers and marketers, as well as consumer advocates, are all engaged in a debate over the very nature of political life in the United States, even when they are discussing something as trivial as the right way to sell a pair of shoes.

*Sold American* opens with a discussion of the birth of the advertising industry in the early twentieth century. Advertisers needed to justify their existence, both to the

broad public and to the companies that they hoped would purchase their services. Using an impressive variety of sources, including trade publications and the advertisements themselves, McGovern argues that the advertising industry articulated “a vision of social life in the United States that highlighted consumption as the key not only to individual happiness but also to the health of American society” (p. 24). Advertisements, he suggests, were “political documents,” which sought to make the case that consumption was the quintessential democratic act (p. 24). As one 1928 advertisement put it, “Every day is election day for the product of industry” (p. 69). A line of chocolate advertised its popularity as having come about “By Direct Vote of the People,” while Kellogg’s Corn Flakes ran ads in 1924 showing little girls carrying cereal boxes and a caption reading “Votes for Women” (p. 70). Ads claimed that intimate knowledge of consumer products was central to what it meant to be American. “Where is the American who doesn’t know about Campbell’s Soups? They belong to America like the Washington Monument belongs—or the White House or the Lincoln Highway,” read one World War I ad (p. 109).

McGovern shows that just as the advertising industry sought to promulgate a political vision, so too did the consumer movement that developed in the 1920s. Borrowing from Thorstein Veblen, the first consumer advocates were skeptical toward commercialism and materialism. They argued for an essentially utilitarian attitude toward goods, and they insisted that moral and political meaning needed to be found outside the realm of consumption. Physicist and engineer Frederick Schlink and accountant-economist Stuart Chase, both intellectual descendants of Veblen, inspired the movement with their 1927 best-seller *Your Money’s Worth*, which sought to expose the manipulation and waste in advertising: “Man does not live by bread alone. Mystery and wonder are implicit in his psychological make-up. But do we want it in soup, plaster, wall-board, soap, fertilizers and bug-killers?” (p. 174). The two advocates founded Consumers’ Research in 1929, an organization that produced reports on various consumer products debunking the mystical claims of advertisers, and also provided “a philosophy consciously opposed to the commercial system’s unbounded promotion of material modernity” (p. 187).

The conflict between these two visions reached its height during the Great Depression. Advertisers desperately sought to find ways to revive consumer spending, frantically attempting to promulgate their vision of consumer-centered capitalism. Meanwhile, the Consumers' Research critique of advertising as economically wasteful and manipulative became more politicized—Schlink (with another writer) published a second mass-market hit in 1933, *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs*, which argued that corporations intentionally sought to confuse and mislead the public in order to encourage them to purchase faulty, or even dangerous, products and accused advertisers of treating consumers as no more than “guinea pigs.” But Consumers' Research had great difficulty making alliances with the other social movements of the decade, especially the labor movement. A 1935 union campaign divided the group, and the original organization became fiercely anticommunist in the late 1930s, which divided it from the labor movement (the breakaway group more carefully cultivated ties with unions). During World War II, advertisers explicitly sought to depict consumption as the keystone of patriotism, both as the definition of freedom and as a promise for postwar life. One 1944 *Life* magazine advertisement for Revere Copper and Brass Incorporated read, “After total war . . . total living” (p. 358). The advertisers, McGovern suggests, had triumphed in the philosophical struggle over the role of consumption in American society that had raged throughout the Depression years.

As an interesting ancillary theme, McGovern might have looked into the impact on the glorification of consumerism of the rise of Keynesian thought, with its new emphasis on the centrality of purchasing power. Readers might also have liked to hear his thoughts on the postwar labor movement's uncritical embrace of mass consumption. And perhaps in a future study he will look at the conflict between American business and the consumer movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, he has written an elegant, thoroughly researched book about advertising and its discontents, which, in its intellectual reach, also demonstrates the connections between business history and the broader study of the American experience.

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