

A Foot in the Past: Consumers, Producers and Footwear in the Long Eighteenth Century. By Giorgio Riello. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. xii + 302 pp. Illustrations, figures, tables, glossary, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$110.00. ISBN: 0-199-29225-6.

Reviewed by Michael Zakim

Giorgio Riello argues that clothing and fashion are subjects whose history, if properly written, encompasses most of social life. His history of footwear thus presents an ambitious account of manufacturing, marketing, shopping, dressing, and desiring. The shoe, he shows us, only seems to be a pedestrian topic of study. In fact, its very ordinariness is leveraged by the market into mass production, popular consumption, and personal expression. The history of footwear consequently becomes no less than an account of the commodity's rise to cultural dominance.

The chapter entitled "Artisans and Guilds" is a good example of how such an ostensibly marginal event brings us face to face with the birth of the modern. Traditional structures of production, Riello explains, because they were inseparable from the organization of society in general, proved singularly incapable of meeting the demands of a commercializing economy. And so, production shifted to the suburbs, where the Cordwainers Company of London had no authority. The Company's subsequent decline, in other words, was not just the result of new business practices. It also signaled the rise of a new way of organizing, let alone conceiving of, economic life. "Guild" and "trade" became mutually exclusive categories for the first time as commerce redrew the map of London and, with it, political geography, detaching the market from any specific time or place. This is when "the economy" was born as an autonomous sphere of social activity, its autonomy generating new forms of authority and privilege. Unfortunately, however, while pointing to these wider implications of the changing conditions of shoemaking, *A Foot in the Past* avoids exploring their meaning.

In fact, such missed opportunities abound. In a section concerning "Footwear and Health" (pp. 82–87), Riello notes the growing cultural importance of hygiene, medical expertise, and gendered bodies, but always only in reference to this or that shoe. The fact

is, these were not sartorial categories. They belonged to an extremely broad discourse that claimed jurisdiction over all of the human condition in seeking to reinvent the self and to make persons of both sexes more governable in a liberal age of personal freedom. This general context must be explained before the reader of *A Foot in the Past* can grasp the deeper significance of debates over the proper height of a heel, or begin to understand how culture became conceived in terms of goods (and thus why it is important to write the history of such goods).

This absence of a wider historical perspective is the result of a failure to assign centrality to the actual goods themselves, and to the lives of those who wore them. Instead, *A Foot in the Past* is driven by such scholarly clichés as “production,” “consumption,” “choice,” and “need” that never transcend their abstract generality. The author does not recognize that he has based his history on a series of concepts that themselves need to be historicized. The result is curatorial, reading more like a series of encyclopedia entries than historical narrative. Fashion, retailing, credit, technology, and the economy, among other important activities by which modern life took shape, remain mutually discrete experiences, as does the redefinition of gender (which barely gets a mention, in fact). The reader is left having to imagine for herself how these spheres interacted and then reconstituted the fabric of a new market society.

This effort is made harder by the book’s frustrating tendency toward the teleological. Riello, for instance, argues that shoe sizes were not invented as an expression of a standardizing ethos, or as a device of mass marketing, but, rather, were necessary for “re-establish[ing] a direct connection between the individual customer and a particular pair of shoes” (p. 212). And yet, how could such a connection be “re-established” if both the individual and his personal identification with goods were a recent development born of the commodity’s unprecedented ubiquity, as the scholarly literature on consumption so copiously cited by Riello has established? “Bespoke” shoes, in other words, did not become a sign of authenticity or even of tradition, and certainly not of an individual self, until after industry had turned society’s relations with the material world upside down.

The treatment of class, unavoidable in any study of economics or of fashion, let alone of both, prompts even deeper reservations. Class is implicated in every aspect of

footwear: in the varying and manifold relations between makers, sellers, purchasers, and wearers of shoes. It follows, then, that an account of the dynamic development of a shoe industry must necessarily record the dynamic changes that overtook the very nature of class. However, *A Foot in the Past* has no interest in such dynamics. Instead, “high” and “low” remain a static taxonomy, which means that we have no way of understanding in what terms Pattison’s “traditional . . . high-class shop” participated in such a mass display of capitalist progress as the 1851 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations (p. 117). Capitalism might very well have turned traditionalists into revolutionaries, but this is a dialectic that requires explanation. Indeed, it is the heart of the story.

Readers of *A Foot in the Past* will learn a lot about shoes but little about modern life. As such, and in spite of his commendable intention to do otherwise, Riello has only reinforced the disciplinary parochialism that continues to separate so much business—let alone dress—history from its social, cultural, and even economic contexts.

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