Marc Levinson is an independent historian. His books include The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business in America *(2011) and* The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger *(2nd ed., 2016).*

. . .

Luxurious Citizens: The Politics of Consumption in Nineteenth-Century America. *By Joanna Cohen*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. 296 pp. Figures, notes, index. Cloth, $45.00. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4892-0.
doi:10.1017/S0007680517000873

Reviewed by Lindsay Schakenbach Regele

What did it mean to be a consumer in the nineteenth century? Joanna Cohen answers this question with a "cultural history of economic ideas and how those ideas have shaped citizenship" (p. 9). *Luxurious Citizens* fills a major gap in the scholarly literature; it is the nineteenth-century counterpart to T. H. Breen's and Lizabeth Cohen's works on political consumerism in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively (Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* [2004]; Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* [2003]). Joanna Cohen uses advertisements, political discourse, and the letters, diaries, and account books of retailers and consumers to trace the development of the citizen-consumer from independence through the Civil War. She compellingly showcases the tensions between civic duty and individual rights, free trade and protectionism, inclusion and moral judgment, and volunteerism and coercion that accompany capitalist development.

The first chapter lays out eighteenth-century ideas and behaviors related to luxury. The same goods that had made Americans more British, and thus more resentful of policies that trampled their rights as British subjects, posed new problems after independence. As luxury goods flooded American markets after the Revolution, policymakers linked disruptive events like Shays' Rebellion with overconsumption, while also recognizing that luxury imports could "suffuse the Republic with an energy borne of consumer desire" (p. 16). The task of the new government was to manage this tension between economic freedom and civic responsibility.

This task proved especially daunting before and during the War of 1812, when retaliation against Britain fell not to the voluntary boycotters of the Revolutionary Era, but to law-abiding citizens, who exhibited

decidedly less enthusiasm and patriotism. Although Americans' efforts against Britain were now backed by the power of the state, they ran into significant challenges from luxury-hungry consumers and profiteering Federalists. The war highlighted new dilemmas over the purpose and ramifications of consumption. Women's choices carried civic weight as they had during the Revolution; these choices, however, were judged no longer in terms of "retrenchment and self-sufficiency," but by virtue (p. 78). Ordinary Americans were more accustomed to purchasing luxury goods than they had been several decades earlier, but their economic choices were forgiven more easily than those of their elite counterparts. Merchants knowingly sabotaged economic patriotism, while middling sorts were hoodwinked into purchasing nice imports. Cohen does a wonderful job depicting the sorts of advertisements to which consumers were susceptible, such as those that portrayed the "red-toned hues that were all the rage" (p. 64).

Peace with Britain lessened the need for consumer sacrifice, but as the economic sanctions imposed by the War of 1812 gave way to the free-choice ideology that characterized public auctions, Americans faced more conflicts over the proper roles of the buyer and seller. Cohen charts the rise of a new sort of consumer that existed in the decades between the frugal farmers and elite merchants of the 1790s and the "suspect dandy or contemptible belle" of the antebellum era. This "rural man of middling ranks, susceptible to deception," needed protection from public auctions, which opponents referred to as "dens of inequity" (p. 83). Merchants, too, were victims of auctioneers who offloaded cheap foreign goods on unassuming consumers at prices with which they could not compete. Between 1817 and 1828, merchant committees lobbied hard for higher taxes on auction sales, but to no avail. Policymakers argued that consumers had the right to purchase goods without burdensome taxes, even if they did not always make the best choices. Debates over auction taxes fizzled out in the 1830s, and auctions became associated mostly—although Cohen does not discuss this—with the slave market.

The next chapter shifts from the freedom-of-choice auction system to the concurrent emergence of a strong protectionist movement. Cohen gives us a fresh perspective on the much-maligned tariff. Instead of dwelling on familiar episodes like the debates over the 1828 tariff, Cohen spotlights individuals like Jacob Gregg, a southern cotton manufacturer who sympathized with the challenges facing southern industry, but trumpeted its virtues. Southerners and northerners alike attempted to institute domestic manufacturing in the South—some motivated by national economic betterment, others by the idea of an economically independent South. These efforts failed in large part because southern planters could not shake their addiction to luxury imports.

Chapter 5 centers on the relationship between pleasure and citizenship through the purchase of goods. Cohen analyzes advertisements and depictions of storefront displays to uncover how retailers imagined and created the American consumer. Some of the terrain she covers is familiar, such as the development of a shared material culture around fashion and home furnishings. She also, however, introduces us to characters like New York store clerk Henry Southworth Clay, whose complaints about waiting on a female patron as she took two days to make her purchases vividly illustrate the changing relationships between retailer and consumer, and between gender and luxury. As increasing numbers of Americans spent their incomes on luxury goods, free-trade ideology predominated, only to fracture from the economic pressures of the Civil War. It proved especially difficult to break in the Confederacy, as southerners had long championed easy imports and ostentatious spending among the planter class. Confederate leaders harkened back to the Revolution and War of 1812 to convince southerners that economic sacrifice and self-sufficiency worked and would result in their victory. The South's inability to find a balance between protectionism and free-trade policies led to its failure against a nation-state that successfully used its citizen-consumers to achieve national goals.

A brief epilogue opens with the anecdote of a woman purchasing an English-made crockery during the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Although at first glance this consumer seems unpatriotic, Cohen argues that her purchase embodied the nation's dual tenets of free choice and protectionism. The crockery represented the consumer's freedom to choose, while the tariffs levied on it bolstered the nation's coffers and thus contributed to economic strength. By the late nineteenth century, Americans had decided that luxury could strengthen their nation, so long as it was checked, at least to some extent, by the government. As Cohen closes with a nod to the 2008 financial collapse, she leaves us with some important questions: Who has the right to purchase and to what ends? How do consumer choices contribute to or constrain democracy? Does the American dream of "indulging in a cornucopia of goods" carry with it the equal opportunity to acquire them (p. 218)? The answer to the last question, *Luxurious Citizens* tells us definitively, is no.

Lindsay Schakenbach Regele is assistant professor of history at Miami University, Ohio. She is currently working on a book manuscript, tentatively titled "Manufacturing Advantage: War, the State, and the Origins of American Industry, 1776–1848," under contract with Johns Hopkins University Press.

. . .

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007680517000873 Published online by Cambridge University Press