Book Review Essays

Seeking the Consumer in American Politics

Joanna Cohen. *Luxurious Citizens: The Politics of Consumption in Nineteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. 284 pp. ISBN 9780812248920, $45.00 (cloth); ISBN 9780812293777, $45.00 (e-book).

Emily Westkaemper. *Selling Women's History: Packaging Feminism in Twentieth-Century American Popular Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017. 257 pp. ISBN 978-0-8135-7633-6, $90.00 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-8135-7632-9, $27.95 (paper); ISBN 978-0-8135-7634-3, $27.95 (e-book).

With their two marvelous new studies, Joanna Cohen and Emily Westkaemper have demonstrated how the consumer has been a key category in American political culture since the late eighteenth century. Unlike many other works that have highlighted how individuals were moved to engage in political action by virtue of their status as consumers, these books revisit familiar political debates—Hamilton's and Jefferson's struggles over the ideal political economy for a new nation, the on-going conflicts between free trade and protectionism that animated many Americans during the nineteenth century, the growing gap between the political economies of the North and South, and twentieth-century feminist efforts to challenge the masculine nature of the public sphere—to illustrate just how meaningful the idea of the consumer and the spaces of consumer culture were to shaping modern politics. Both show the degree to which local, regional, and national politics were very often about participation in the marketplace. Readers also see the ways in which the consumer was often, but not always, identified with particular classes, races, and genders and how these categories were intertwined with notions of citizenship and American identity.

With Cohen tackling the period between the American Revolution and the Civil War, and Westkaemper taking the 1910s to the 1970s, both authors reveal how the growth in the marketplace of goods was frequently seen as a threat to imagined notions of simplicity and thriftiness and to diverse notions of American identity. Despite, or perhaps because of, this anxiety, several key groups managed to

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redefine consumerism as a mode of citizenship; and in so doing, as Cohen explains, "enable[d] middle-class Americans in particular to harness the nation-state to a capitalist marketplace" (2). Westkaemper especially focuses on one legacy of this development by highlighting how middle-class women (white and non-white) employed market ideologies and methods and historical narratives to advance their vision of citizenship and carve out new roles for themselves and other women in the public sphere.

While there have been a number of very important studies of the politics of consumption in American history, these two books use the tools of cultural history to examine how actors and venues not necessarily associated with consumer culture were in fact critical to the invention and reinvention of the consumer in American political culture. Neither author explicitly wrestles with Frank Trentmann's very important argument on the role of liberalism in the construction of modern notions of the consumer, but both substantiate his intervention. Cohen in particular identifies the different visions of the consumer promoted by free traders and protectionists, and charts how these change over time given the developing nature of American politics, the market economy, and the economic knowledge. The twentieth-century feminists that Westkaemper examines embraced the increasingly white, feminine, and middle-class vision of the consumer constructed by figures in Cohen's book to advance their individual careers as producers of consumer culture. Relatively elite African American women often tried to appropriate this strategy to various degrees of success. All of the feminists Westkaemper studies turned to history for inspiring stories of exceptional women and to establish the idea that gender norms are not and never have been timeless and fixed. Whether selling cigarettes or women's equality, the idea of progress was critical to the successes of both feminism and consumer culture.

Joanna Cohen argues more broadly that consumer and political identities were intertwined throughout the nineteenth century. She is particularly attentive to the role of war and postwar settlements in producing new meanings of the nation, the economy, and the consumer. She focuses on the aftermath of Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. About half of the book reevaluates the complex and often contradictory works and speeches of politicians and merchants over issues such as tariffs and free trade. The other half looks more explicitly at the growth and transformations in the development of the U.S. market economy. There is a fascinating chapter on anxieties that erupted around the regulation of public auctions in the 1820s, and another on how urban shopping, advertising, and the growing authority of free trade economists in the 1840s and early 1850s helped displace

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the Jeffersonian vision of a rural, self-sufficient male consumer to create one coded as white, middle class, and (often) female. The book then considers how such ideals were shaped by regional as well as other tensions, and considers how during the Civil War consumers and merchants often failed to uphold the South's autarkic policies that urged them to buy locally, dispense with the pleasures of the market, and lay aside their desire for banned goods. Cohen has a great eye for telling details, and she is very careful not to assume any a priori definition of the consumer. She is equally comfortable explaining the significance of taxation policies as she is reading wartime advertising. What is particularly important about the book, however, is that Cohen insists that any study of American capitalism must examine the cultural, social, and political forces that invented various ideals of the consumer before the massive growth in the industrial economy in the late nineteenth century.

In *Selling Women's History*, Westkaemper similarly is fascinated with the way in which Americans understood the relationship between consumerism and democratic politics; but while Cohen's consumer is often portrayed as a female shopper, Westkaemper examines how educated, middle-class women used the marketplace to advance notions of gender equality during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Like many recent scholars, she insists that feminism did not die between the struggle for the vote and the culture wars of the 1960s, but rather shows how mid-century liberal feminists went to work as journalists, advertisers, and historians to promote female empowerment. Most important, Westkaemper shows how these women, and quite a few men as well, invented many of the tropes and practices of a popular and long-lasting form of women's history.

Any scholar who uses women's magazines as sources likely has noticed the degree to which they often celebrate individual women's achievements in the past. There are countless stories that praise women "worthies" as well as unnamed women who labored to make happy homes in difficult circumstances without modern labor-saving devices. Westkaemper studies these historical articles and advertisements, documenting where they appeared, how they were produced and consumed, and considers why they were so prevalent in the decades between the 1920s and 1960s. She uses the largely untapped records of the associations of adwomen—radio, print, and television advertising; and historical essays and stories; and the papers of important female historians such as Mary Beard. With this wide array of material, Westkaemper shows how women's history emerged long before its institutionalization in the 1970s and 1980s and that historical narratives have frequently been used to validate arguments about

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women's equality and to sell goods. In the last chapter, focusing on the sixties, Westkaemper also considers how the relationship between popular culture and feminism soured. She argues that Betty Friedan and the women who were so inspired by the criticism of corporate capitalism that she offered in *The Feminine Mystique* ironically narrowed our vision of the feminist possibilities of consumer capitalism. As s result, what has been forgotten, or never learned about, is that the women writers and advertisers who when denied authority in the academy found a place to write feminist history in popular venues.

An especially important finding in the book is Westkaemper's argument that both adwomen and feminist historians had a creative approach to historical questions and methods. For example, Lucy Maynard Salmon, who founded Vassar's history department, wrote countless books on a wide variety of topics, and she also creatively came to read material objects as historical sources and posited that engaging in "housework" nurtured American identities and feminist politics. In other words, Salmon showed how women's domestic labor and the so-called private sphere had a recoverable history. In addition to reexamining figures like Salmon, Westkaemper engages in many illuminating discussions of relatively unknown women. For example, she shows how adwomen invented a Quaker maid mascot to validate their role as advertisers and to advance the status of advertising in general. Readers also learn about Rose Arnold Powell, who used the tools of public relations to "elevate Susan B. Anthony in the popular imagination" (94). Similarly, but targeting a younger audience, the early *Wonder Woman* comics included a feature known as "Wonder Woman of History" that introduced readers to women who stretched and even challenged gender norms.

Discovering a new narrative on the origins of women's history personally enthralled me, but the book's argument would have been stronger had Westkaemper more fully addressed the limits as well as possibilities of liberal feminism. To be sure, the author is excellent when addressing the class and racial biases of the women she studies, but Westkaemper could have considered how the liberal feminism she focuses on may have limited the radical possibilities of historical research and cultural studies. While I do not mean to uphold the feminist distaste for mass culture that has existed since at least the 1960s, I think scholars still need to explore in greater detail the midcentury origins of this discomfort. Why did Betty Friedan and her readers feel so powerfully that stereotypical images of women as housewives and sex objects in the mass media were oppressive and fail to see the media's more inspiring portrayals of women?

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Mass culture had grown in significance and its power to shape gender norms was no doubt at a new height, but scholarship could also explore how changes in the media professions might have made it harder for women to advance their vision of female authority and gender equality. The growth of cultural studies in general also no doubt shaped feminists' relationship to popular culture. Indeed, one of the true innovations of feminism in this era was the attention to the media as a problem. Scholars clearly are still indebted to the radical feminists who clarified the power of culture to shape normative gender and sexual ideals. Moreover, both cultural and gender history would not have emerged without the methodological turns that took place in the 1960s. As cultural historians, both Cohen and Westkaemper perhaps owe as much to Betty Friedan as they do to Mary Beard. This is not to detract from Westkaemper's powerful argument, but scholars might continue to delve into the complex and often contradictory history of the feminist politics of consumer culture.

These two highly original and beautifully written and researched books have expanded the vision of the consumer citizen. In addition to donning homespun clothing, engaging in boycotts, or purchasing organic food, the consumer-citizen may have been an auctioneer, smuggler, or feminist. Certainly, this figure was never absent from the "big" questions of American history. Cohen asks readers to consider how debates on war, taxes, and the rural Southern economy were part of the history of consumer society, while Westkaemper pushes public history and feminist studies in new directions. She shows how popular culture has long been critical to constructing and deconstructing the methods, topics, and significance of women's history. This subfield owes a great deal to the growth of mass culture and the gendering of the consumer as female. These books both effectively put to bed tired assumptions about the commercialization of politics and the apolitical nature of consumer culture in modern America.

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