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Abstract

To what extent should consumption reflect local and national interests? Joanna Cohen has written an excellent book at the intersection of intellectual, economic, and cultural history about how this question was asked and understood in the period extending from the American War for Independence to the post-bellum era. She demonstrates how citizens in the early republic struggled to understand the consumer's place in the constellation of America's national interest, asking questions such as, "Who [should have] access to foreign goods?' and "Who should shop and how[?]" (52). Although the Constitution roughly framed the relationship between the American government and consumers, it did not codify what it meant to be a consumer, leaving the American citizen-consumer subject to debate and the throes of a changing political economy. So, what did it mean to be a citizen-consumer [*Excerpt*]

Keywords

Book Review, Economic History, American History

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So, what did it mean to be a citizen-consumer in 18th and 19th century America? Answering this question requires an investigation of the early republic's civil society – a probing of identities and privileges that were not often implemented through law. Instead, they were culturally implied and tacitly understood, and unavoidably varied on an individual basis. Cohen traces these changing commercial identities and their impact on communities and individuals.

In the aftermath of the War of 1812, for example, the political and economic elites' contested claims about American consumption were transformed into a consequential discussion about consumers' rights. This development portended more than a shift in the image of the paragon American consumer—the idealized citizen for whom the market was to be a place of patriotism as much as a locus of economic activity. The disputes about consumption in the early republic and the contours of the citizen-consumer had material and metaphysical significance for the elite and everyman alike; politicians and powerful merchants, though perhaps more invested in the debate, were no more subject to its repercussions than traders in the Ohio Country and silversmiths in Philadelphia.

However, citizens were not all equal in their consumption. Cohen demonstrates these inequalities by focusing on social norms and the interaction of consumer attitudes with identities, such as age and gender, and location-based differences between consumers, such as geography and community. Gender, in particular, looms large in *Luxurious Citizens*. Men were often responsible for their family's choices, thereby granting them more freedom as consumers, whereas women were expected to balance their desires with their duties to both family and society. Women were especially subject to idealized portraits of the virtuous consumer. Americans expected women's inherent morality, long recognized as a reason for their relegation to the domestic sphere, to carry into the marketplace and favor American goods over foreign importation. Failures to adhere to the strictures of this trope or to spend in the proper,

proscribed ways exposed women to wicked criticism, a consequence of the “matrix of meaning” through which elites interpreted consumption in the emerging nation (220).

Cohen also argues that citizens’ choices were worth paying attention to and monitoring, for they were a crucial part of the nation’s nascent political economy. When, in 1852, the Franklin Institute’s William D. Kelley lamented America’s “luxurious citizens” and their foreign purchases instead of American-made goods, he was not lamenting the citizens’ choices themselves, but their aggregate effect (221). Cumulatively, citizens’ desires and preferences for imported goods rejected the citizen-consumer ideal that Kelley promoted. In 1871, almost twenty years later, Kelley celebrated an America that, despite invasion and Civil War, strutted the successes of its political economy on the world stage. With manufactories producing both opulent and ordinary goods, the United States’ postbellum citizen-consumer was defined by “the freedom to indulge personal desires,” with American-made goods, which “represented the pleasing success of the American Republic” (221-222). Yet, the consumer could also freely purchase foreign goods, as the freedom to shop became enshrined in a reunified America.

Though the citizen-consumer has remained only loosely defined, American society since the postbellum era has shifted “toward a more liberated form of consumption” in which the “public good” is “measured by the extent to which it enabled the free pursuit of private interest” (223). The middle class became the core of the Republic’s citizenry, their actions the “template of how citizens could

add to America's wealth without draining the nation's resources or threatening its moral and social order" (224). This newfound sense of consumer freedom is ever-prevalent in contemporary American, where it is still enshrined as the cardinal virtue of free enterprise. In this sense, Cohen's history is as relevant for common Americans as it is for historians studying how a country made sense of consumption.