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**A CONSUMER'S REPUBLIC**

**THE POLITICS OF MASS CONSUMPTION  
IN POSTWAR AMERICA**

**LIZABETH COHEN**

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### A Consumers' Republic

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LIZABETH COHEN

## a Consumers' Republic

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**ALSO BY LIZABETH COHEN**

*Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* *The American Pageant* (with David Kennedy)

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# A Consumers' Republic

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*THE POLITICS OF MASS CONSUMPTION  
IN POSTWAR AMERICA*



*Lizabeth Cohen*



*Vintage Books*

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NEW YORK

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## Prologue



The author (right) and her sister in front of their ranch-style house in suburban Paramus, New Jersey, 1956.  
(Collection of Lizabeth Cohen)

I was born in February 1952, and after what was then a standard five-day stay at the hospital, I moved into my first home in Paramus, New Jersey, a brand-new ranch-style house in one of the many subdivisions being carved out of Paramus's woods and farms. My parents had recently bought this 960-square-foot house for \$11,990, thanks to \$2000 in savings crucially supplemented by a 4.5 percent GI mortgage for which my father qualified as a World War II vet. The GI Bill had already subsidized his business school education. Dorothy Rodbell and Paul Cohen had married two years earlier, when they were twenty-two and twenty-nine, respectively. For a long four months they had lived with my mother's parents in Manhattan as they navigated what was still a severe housing shortage following the war. In April 1950 they moved into a newly built garden apartment right across the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee, New Jersey. Less than two years later, they became new suburban homeowners

My family's suburban voyage did not end in Paramus. Four years later, my sister now in tow, we moved three miles away to a larger, more expensive house in a more established, solidly middle-class town. Whereas our neighborhood of young families in Paramus had been socially and economically diverse—Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, professionals living next door to factory foremen, people employed locally as well as Manhattan commuters—our new town was more of a conventional bedroom community. Four years later, when I was eight, we were on the move again, this time to an upper-middle-class suburb in New York's Westchester County. Beyond my parents' upward mobility, measured through their serial acquisition of more expensive homes in communities of ever higher socioeconomic profiles, New Jersey's inadequate and overly property tax-dependent system of school funding had driven them away. Our new town had nationally touted public schools and a population willing and able to pay for them with steep property taxes, necessary despite New York's greater state support for its local schools.

During those first eight years of my life in New Jersey, I watched postwar mass suburbia develop, what in this book I call “the landscape of mass consumption.” New limited-access highways bypassed slower, established commercial routes. Along their path, suburban settlements sprouted on what had been fields of corn, celery, spinach,

and cabbage. Shopping centers—in my case, Paramus's Bergen Mall and Garden State Plaza—became the new centers of community life, providing a place to spend a Saturday, to attend an evening concert, to take the children to visit Santa Claus, to see candidates campaign. Like many in my baby boomer generation, I grew up in a world of kids—on the block, in overflowing schools, and on television, where so many programs and advertisements seemed to have been made just for us, from *Captain Kangaroo*, *Romper Room*, and the *Howdy Doody Show* when we were young to *Rin Tin Tin*, *Lassie*, and *American Bandstand* as we grew older.

But my world was not only defined by class and age; race mattered as well. In both of these New Jersey towns, I remember few people who were not white: a handful of highly educated immigrants from Taiwan, no African Americans. The most prominent social division we lived with was between public and parochial school kids. In the more privileged community in Westchester, our recently built subdivision was very near to the substantial homes of two African-American families, one that of a doctor, the other of a dentist. Significantly, these families had built their beautiful custom houses on large plots of land on the edge of town. When new homes went up and expanded the town to its geographical borders in the early 1960s, these two black families found themselves suddenly surrounded by neighbors, but still on the social margins of the community.

As my world grew beyond my town, and I grew into adulthood, I became increasingly active in electoral politics, working on Eugene McCarthy's and then Robert Kennedy's presidential campaigns in 1968, for John Lindsay's reelection as mayor of New York in 1969, and as one of only a handful of paid staff on Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm's presidential campaign in 1972. Looking back on those campaigns, I now can identify political trends analyzed in this book—more reliance on television, more orientation toward professional expertise in polling and advertising, more targeted campaigning to segments of the electorate. In the Chisholm campaign in particular, one of our toughest challenges was balancing the conflicting agendas of our two main voter segments: white feminists and African Americans. Although civil rights and anti-Vietnam War activism preoccupied me, as it did many in my generation, I was nonetheless quite aware of the rising consumer movement of the 1960s and 1970s chronicled toward the end of this book. I admired Ralph Nader, for years considered grapes food for boycotting not eating, and welcomed increased government regulation of manufactured goods and the environment. I was vaguely aware that my father's cousin Arnold Elkind was appointed chairman of the National Commission on Product Safety by President Lyndon Johnson, taking some pride in my family's own small contribution to making modern America a safer place to live. Was I ever conscious during these years from 1952 to the mid-1970s of living in what this book calls a *Consumers' Republic*, an economy, culture, and politics built around the promises of mass consumption, both in terms of material life and the more idealistic goals of greater freedom, democracy, and equality? Probably not, but I did grow up cognizant of the privilege of living in such a prosperous United States, whose bounty I expected to be available to all Americans. Where it was not—in the trouble spots we called the Deep South, Appalachia, and Harlem—action needed to be taken. It is doubtful that I undertook any deeper analysis of the more complex underpinnings of the affluent society in which I grew up.

I tell my own story at length here not because it is unusual, but, quite the opposite, because it is not. The outlines of my life will prove to be common patterns lived by many Americans in the decades following World War II. I, along with many others, was a child of the Consumers' Republic, even if unaware of it at the time. Though that is my birthright, it is only through writing this book that I have come to terms with the benefits and costs of having grown up during the prosperous decades following World War II, in a society where the pursuit of that prosperity defined many more dimensions of life than most of us recognized at the time.

Although there are many ways that historians might conceptualize the second half of the twentieth century, which in our lifetimes has moved from the front pages of daily newspapers to the annals of history, I have put Americans' encounter with mass consumption at the center of my analysis. I am convinced that Americans after World War II saw their nation as the model for the world of a society committed to mass consumption and what

were assumed to be its far-reaching benefits. Mass consumption did not only deliver wonderful things for purchase—the televisions, air conditioners, and computers that have transformed American life over the last half century. It also dictated the most central dimensions of postwar society, including the political economy (the way public policy and the mass consumption economy mutually reinforced each other), as well as the political culture (how political practice and American values, attitudes, and behaviors tied to mass consumption became intertwined). I am arguing that in the aftermath of World War II a fundamental shift in America's economy, politics, and culture took place, with major consequences for how Americans made a living, where they dwelled, how they interacted with others, what and how they consumed, what they expected of government, and much else. Other historians have stressed the Cold War as the fundamental shaper of postwar America. The Consumers' Republic had close ties to the Cold War, not least of which was its powerful symbolism as the prosperous American alternative to the material deprivations of communism. But I want to suggest as well that much of importance in America's postwar history happened outside of the Cold War frame, and applying it too exclusively can obscure other crucial developments.

Americans' identities as citizens and consumers are often presented as opposites. Citizens, individuals in a political relationship with government, are assumed to embrace a larger public interest, as they must fulfill duties and obligations in the larger society to earn basic rights and privileges. Consumers, concerned with satisfying private material desires, are often denigrated for their personal indulgence, perhaps stemming from the word's original meaning: “to devour, waste, and spend.”<sup>1</sup> But it quickly became apparent to me that no simple distinction between these roles held true over the course of the twentieth century, particularly by the 1930s. Rather than isolated ideal types, citizen and consumer were ever-shifting categories that sometimes overlapped, often were in tension, but always reflected the permeability of the political and economic spheres. Hence, this book will describe several different citizen-consumer ideal types that prevailed at particular moments in time. *Citizen consumers* of the New Deal and World War II eras put the market power of the consumer to work politically, not only to save a capitalist America in the midst of the Great Depression, but also to safeguard the rights of individual consumers and the larger “general good.” In this effort, they often sought the government as ally. The competing ideal of the *purchaser consumer* during the late 1930s and World War II championed pursuit of self-interest in the marketplace out of confidence in the ameliorative effects of aggregate purchasing power; in wartime, however, such behavior would undermine home-front needs. In the postwar Consumers' Republic, a new ideal emerged—the *purchaser as citizen*—as an alluring compromise. Now the consumer satisfying personal material wants actually served the national interest, since economic recovery after a decade and a half of depression and war depended on a dynamic mass consumption economy. Most recently, during the last two decades, a new combined *consumer/citizen/taxpayer/voter* has gained influence in a *Consumerized Republic*, where self-interested citizens increasingly view government policies like other market transactions, judging them by how well served they feel personally.

Analyzing the Consumers' Republic's integration of citizenship and consumership has engaged me in many other aspects of postwar American life: its class structure, race relations, and gender dynamics; the evolution of residential communities and commercial centers; the reshaping of mass markets; the changing role of government; and the many political efforts to promote new kinds of corporate and governmental policies toward consumers. This book explores all these issues.

One set of questions in particular, about the shifting boundaries of class in the postwar era, grew directly out of my previous work. When I finished an earlier book, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*, over a decade ago, I found myself eager to probe what the industrial workers of the interwar era had experienced after World War II. Surely, at last, they had secured a foothold in the mass consumer society whose inclusiveness in the 1920s was limited and whose reach in the 1930s was foreshortened by the Great Depression. As I began to follow their story through World War II into the postwar era, I also investigated the experiences of more middle-class

Americans to learn to what extent the lives of blue-and white-collar Americans converged in an era known as the heyday of “mass” consumption. How much, I wanted to know, did the supposedly cohesive (some contemporary critics went so far as to claim conformist) “mass” culture of the Eisenhower and Kennedy years erase the class as well as racial and ethnic distinctions that clearly had shaped the prewar era? If workers in the 1930s had effectively used their toehold in mass culture and mass consumption to transcend ethnic and racial divisions and mobilize as a working class, how might working-and middle-class Americans in the postwar period have exploited mass culture's integrative potential to eliminate their class differences?

I make no claims to be the first to recognize the centrality of mass consumption to twentieth-century American society. In fact, the increased attention paid it after the Second World War only supports my argument for its ubiquitousness in the postwar era. Awareness of the far-reaching impact of mass consumption began much earlier. At the turn of the century, economist Thorstein Veblen developed the concept of “conspicuous consumption” in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) to argue that social emulation expressed through extravagant personal display—not the purely rational economic motive to enrich oneself—motivated all social classes within the capitalist society of the Gilded Age to aspire to the standards set by the elite. Over the next decade, economist Simon Patten further extended the explanatory importance of mass consumption, though he found more to praise than Veblen did. Patten argued that as the American economy advanced from scarcity to abundance, the realm of consumption and leisure offered workers, many of them new immigrants, more satisfaction and pleasure than degrading industrial work and provided the nation with the chance to build a more cohesive society free of class and ethnic divisions.

It was in the post-World War II period, however, when mass consumption was extensively reshaping the nation, that theorists and critics most consistently identified it as a key influence in defining American society. Historian David Potter, in *People of Plenty* (1954), claimed that all of American history and Americans' “national character” derived from an economy of inexhaustible abundance. In the twentieth century that abundance took the form of a “consumer's culture,” and advertising “joined the charmed circle of institutions which fix the values and standards of society.” In 1957, in a controversial exposé of the new black middle class that he claimed had emerged over the previous two decades, *Black Bourgeoisie*, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier argued that this self-appointed African-American elite depended on “conspicuous consumption” in their own black world, social and material emulation of whites, and an overconfidence in the health of “Negro business” to compensate for deep-seated inferiority rooted in America's destructive history of racial segregation. A year later, in his best-seller *The Affluent Society* (1958), economist John Kenneth Galbraith blamed the voracious American pursuit of private consumption and the engines of corporate advertising that fed it for neglecting “social consumption”—the roads, schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure needed for a humane society. “Private opulence amid public squalor” was how Galbraith condemned what he saw around him.

David Riesman, in two collections of essays—*The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950) and *Abundance for What?* (1964, but including many essays written during the 1950s)—probed the numerous ways that affluence was changing American society. He focused particularly on the new “social character” of “other-directedness,” marked by a greater orientation to peer groups which, he argued, had come, with the new frontier of consumption, to replace the “inner-directedness” connected to an earlier economy and culture of production. With the publication of *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Herbert Marcuse brought the cultural criticism of the Frankfurt School of Hegelian Marxism to an emerging New Left in America, deploring the extent to which mass consumption and mass culture bought complacency from the masses, dulling their capacity for intellectual, spiritual, and political resistance. And Daniel Bell, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), despaired that late capitalist consumerism fueled personal gratification over the needs of what he called the “public household,” dangerously undermining social solidarity and shared, previously religion-based moral values.<sup>2</sup> Each of these trenchant observers of society and many others I have not mentioned, though advancing diverse and in many cases conflicting views of

modern capitalism, recognized that mass consumption had become a central defining engine, not simply of the American economy but of its politics and culture as well.

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The critique of mass consumption, of course, went far beyond the biting commentary and far-ranging analyses of intellectuals. The Beats in the 1950s, the hippies in the 1960s, the “Small Is Beautiful” and environmentally sensitive Greens of the 1970s, and some strands of the religious right of the 1980s all developed identities based on a rejection of a mainstream culture built around mass consumption. Cultural rebels shared intellectuals' obsession with mass consumption, even as they defined themselves as counter-cultural by denouncing its values and practices, confirming just how much mass consumption stood at the core of how Americans regarded their society in the second half of the twentieth century.

At the heart of my analysis of postwar America is the concept of the Consumers' Republic. This was not a term that Americans used at the time to refer to the world in which they were living. It is my shorthand for what I document in Chapter 3 was a strategy that emerged after the Second World War for reconstructing the nation's economy and reaffirming its democratic values through promoting the expansion of mass consumption. Inevitably, the Consumers' Republic becomes an abstraction in this book that may at times seem to obscure from view the agency of individual actors and social groups. That is never my intention, but I realize that this ambiguity may be the cost of putting a name to what was in reality a complex shared commitment on the part of policymakers, business and labor leaders, and civic groups to put mass consumption at the center of their plans for a prosperous postwar America. To discuss the repeated articulation and implementation of this consensus view every time I make reference to its common priorities would be tiresome indeed. Where and when these shapers of postwar society disagreed, I have made every effort to reveal their differences.

As for my use of “republic,” I employ it because it invokes the language that was used so often after the Second World War to describe America's national mission in the Cold War world. In the hands of the “consensus historians” of the 1950s, the American Revolution and the subsequent United States Constitution became moments of careful republic building, not the more democratic struggle of “the people” against “the interests” that the preceding generation of “Progressive historians” like Charles Beard and Carl Becker had emphasized. Clinton Rossiter's *Seedtime of the Republic* (1953) and Edmund Morgan's *The Birth of the Republic* (1956) were only two of many volumes to appear that stressed the more conservative commitments of the nation's founders to political stability, economic development, and international security—not so unlike the goals of the United States in the Cold War era, it might be noted. Likewise, the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag “and to the republic for which it stands,” originally written in 1892 but not officially given congressional sanction until 1942, took on new popularity in the 1950s, prompting Congress to add the phrase “under God” in 1954 to make it more censorious of a “godless” communist enemy.<sup>3</sup> Although the label the Consumers' Republic never crossed the lips or flowed from the pens of those writing in the 1950s, its insights and language would have felt familiar to many of them.

I turn to New Jersey at a number of crucial moments in this book, such as when I seek to probe closely the World War II home front, civil rights activism after the war, booming postwar suburbs and shopping centers in the shadow of declining cities, and battlegrounds for the consumer movement of the 1960s and 1970s. After spending the first eight years of my life in New Jersey, I returned there to live with my own family from 1994 to 1997 in the midst of researching the book (ironically to find myself thrown into the same school funding wars that had discouraged my parents more than thirty years earlier). This book moves back and forth between exploring national trends and rooting them in the localities of New Jersey. Both views, a bird's-eye capturing Washington, D.C., and the fifty states and a closer-up picture where more subtle patterns and interactions can be gleaned, are crucial to my analysis.

To some extent, I could have situated this local investigation anywhere; the trends I explore occurred nationally. But in some critical ways, New Jersey proved the ideal setting. It was the quintessential postwar suburban state. Despite a population growth of almost two million between 1940 and 1960—a 50 percent increase in two decades—

every major city except Paterson lost population, and Paterson barely offset the out-migration of higher-income residents to the suburbs with a large in-migration of low-income people with a high birthrate. As the postwar era progressed, as much as 70 percent of the state would qualify as suburban.<sup>4</sup> And perhaps even more significant, New Jersey had an activist state supreme court over the postwar period that made decisions, often historic ones, arising out of the critical social, economic, and cultural changes under way in the era. The suburbanization of residences and commerce and the new inequalities that resulted from them—through restrictive zoning, increasingly unaffordable privatized housing, growing differentials in school spending, and disputes over free speech and assembly in privately owned shopping centers, the new “town centers” of the suburbs—all engaged the New Jersey Supreme Court's attention. Historians, like journalists, policymakers, and citizens more generally, tend to pay most attention to the decisions of the United States Supreme Court, but in the second half of the twentieth century crucial debates around rights deemed to be protected by state constitutions were reserved for state courts to adjudicate. To look only at the federal courts is to lose sight of pivotal battles that took place over the consequences of creating a landscape of mass consumption during the era of the Consumers' Republic.

Part I of this book, “The Origins of the Postwar Consumers' Republic,” begins by rooting the new postwar order in a longer history of the place of consumption in the American economy and politics, including what I call the “first-wave consumer movement” of the Progressive Era at the beginning of the twentieth century. I then focus on the 1930s, when, I argue, the critical foundations of the postwar Consumers' Republic were laid. Statemakers at the top and women and African Americans at the grass roots, many denied access to traditional avenues of power, seized upon the citizen consumer role as a new way of upholding the public interest. They thereby built a “second-wave consumer movement.” How and why did attention to mass consumption and the influence of mass consumers grow in an era of horrifying depression, I ask, and what kinds of expectations did politically engaged citizen consumers harbor for their society? Chapter 2 moves into the era of World War II, when the link between consumption and citizenship was reinforced by government agencies like the Office of Price Administration, by women who essentially managed the home front through their domestic and civic activities, and by African Americans who experienced their denial of full citizenship regularly through their exclusion from sites of consumption, such as at theaters, restaurants, hotels, and commissaries on military bases. I probe how different groups imagined postwar America as a result of their wartime experiences, promoting competing visions for what “the return to normalcy” would mean.

Part II, “The Birth of the Consumers' Republic,” introduces the vision that won out, the notion of a Consumers' Republic that entrusted the private mass consumption marketplace, supported by government resources, with delivering not only economic prosperity but also loftier social and political ambitions for a more equal, free, and democratic nation. In Chapter 3, I investigate how key postwar policies, such as the GI Bill, revisions in the wartime income tax, and the restructuring of collective bargaining, were designed to promote the goals of the Consumers' Republic, and I assess their actual impact, particularly on the fate of women and the working class. Chapter 4 undertakes the same kind of analysis of how the infrastructure supporting the Consumers' Republic played out for a third social group, African Americans. I explore the benefits and costs to black Americans of a postwar society built around the promises of a mass consumer market.

Part III, “The Landscape of Mass Consumption,” consists of a pair of chapters: Chapter 5, devoted to the transformation in residential patterns resulting from the suburbanization of metropolitan areas; and Chapter 6, concerned with the new commercial marketplace structures that accompanied the decentralization of urban living. The expansion of mass suburbia—a plan to solve the horrendous postwar housing shortage through the extensive construction of privately owned, single-family homes—promised to create a more egalitarian and democratic society as more Americans than ever before would own a stake in their communities. But the outcome—measured by how many enjoyed a fair share of property and prime public services—fell far short of these aspirations. Likewise,

regional shopping centers promoted themselves as the new civic centers of booming suburban towns. But their dominance over commercial life crippled existing market centers, and their legal status as privately owned property raised new challenges to free speech and assembly. Through the restructuring of both residential communities and commercial centers, the Consumers' Republic introduced new kinds of divisions in postwar society while it aimed, with its democratic ambitions, to overcome old ones.

Part IV, “The Political Culture of Mass Consumption,” consists of another pair of chapters, the first on culture, the second on politics. In Chapter 7, I investigate the shifting strategies employed by marketers and advertisers to promote the mass consumption at the base of the Consumers' Republic. As the initial assumption that mass consumption was best supported through mass marketing retreated in the face of saturated markets and declining profits, a new approach—market segmentation—gained ground by the late 1950s, bringing with it implications that transcended who sold what to whom. I particularly look at how political campaigners and politicians applied the formulas of market segmentation to the political arena and assess their impact on the practice of campaigning, on the way candidates and voters related to each other, and on the viability of our political system itself. Finally, Chapter 8 examines the political movement that challenged many of the directions the Consumers' Republic had taken by the mid-1960s. I argue that the “third-wave consumer movement” of the 1960s and 1970s grew out of unfulfilled promises of the Consumers' Republic. Mobilized purchasers as citizens were both propelled by their expectations as participants in the Consumers' Republic and constrained by the limitations of that vision. When the nation went into severe economic crisis in the mid-1970s, the critical underpinnings of the Consumers' Republic and its associated consumer movement collapsed, though the assumption that consumer well-being was central to the well-being of America persisted. My story closes by following how presidents from Ford through Clinton transformed the Consumers' Republic into what I call the *Consumerization of the Republic*, justifying the new order by claiming it served the interests of consumers. In a concluding Epilogue, I briefly bring this history into the present day and suggest some of the implications to be drawn from this analysis of postwar America.

I hope that readers, aware of how my life has conformed to the larger patterns set out in this book, will begin to contemplate how their own lives may also have been shaped by these economic, political, social, and cultural structures that reigned over the second half of the twentieth century and still are with us in many ways today. But in urging that consideration, I mean in no way to imply that individuals do not still make critically important choices about where they live and shop, what they consume, and how they relate to government as citizens, nor that societies like ours should not monitor and redress the unacceptable outcomes, such as discrimination and inequality, that may result from their seemingly inflexible infrastructures. Recognizing the societal pressures toward certain kinds of thinking and behaving ultimately makes independent action not less significant but more so. If we all are citizens and we all are consumers, how we choose to mix the two reveals a great deal about who we are as individual Americans as well as about the virtue of the America we live in at any particular moment in time.





# Depression: Rise of the Citizen Consumer

A paradox arose in the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Hard times forced many Americans to struggle to find and keep work, to feed their families, and to hold on to their homes or pay their rent. Yet increasingly they were being viewed by policymakers—and by themselves—as consumers, as purchasers of goods in the marketplace. Even as many people were barely making ends meet in the thirties, two images of the consumer came to prevail and, in fact, competed for dominance. On the one hand, what I will call citizen consumers were regarded as responsible for safeguarding the general good of the nation, in particular for prodding government to protect the rights, safety, and fair treatment of individual consumers in the private marketplace. On the other hand, purchaser consumers were viewed as contributing to the larger society more by exercising purchasing power than through asserting themselves politically.

Overleaf: From the Great Depression to the end of the Second World War, the foundations of the Consumers' Republic began to be laid, as consumers figured ever more centrally in efforts to achieve a more prosperous economy and democratic polity. During World War II, for example, the home construction industry organized traveling “Post-War Home” shows to entice Americans with models of the kind of houses they could expect to buy at war's end. Consumers across the economic spectrum were encouraged to imagine “home” as a newly built, single-family detached house for purchase in the suburbs, not a rented residence in a multiple dwelling in the city. (Courtesy of Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture/Eastern Washington State Historical Society, Spokane)

Consider these two contrasting depictions of the consumer from the 1930s. When in 1933 Congress passed the National Industrial Recovery Act, it authorized this keystone program of the first New Deal to include representatives of the “consuming public” alongside business and labor. In practice this meant that the National Recovery Administration (NRA) made consumers members of some code authorities as well as established a Consumer Advisory Board (CAB), which, despite a constant struggle to get equitable recognition from NRA officials, gave consumers a legitimate voice in the federal government's efforts to foster recovery. After angry consumer advocates descended upon Washington to complain about the inadequacy of the CAB, a Consumers' Counsel was added as well.

The comments of one of CAB's members, the prominent Columbia University sociologist Robert S. Lynd, document well the citizen consumer perspective that prevailed among New

Dealers at the time. Again and again Lynd articulated the importance of empowering consumers—whom he labeled “forgotten men”—to a viable democracy. The consumer “stands there alone—a man barehanded, against the accumulated momentum of 43,000,000 horse power and their army of salesmen, advertising men, and other jockeys. He knows he buys wastefully ... that his desires and insecurities are exploited continually, that even his Government withholds from him vitally important information by which both it and industry save millions of dollars annually.” As a remedy, Lynd and other New Dealers repeatedly called for permanent representation of the consumer point of view in government, most fully through the creation of a federal consumer agency to complement those already devoted to commerce, agriculture, and labor. They also sought protections for consumers against exploitation by business or government, such as requiring quality and labeling standards for all products. Nothing less than the viability of American democracy was at stake, Lynd insisted. “The only way that democracy can survive ... is through the quality of living it can help the rank-and-file of its citizens to achieve,” not simply an adequate standard of living.<sup>1</sup>

The competing vision of Americans as purchaser consumers came through powerfully in a twenty-six-minute public relations film that the Chevrolet Motor Company produced in 1935 entitled *From Dawn to Sunset*. Released only months after General Motors, Chevrolet's parent company, signed an historic union contract with the United Auto Workers (UAW), it depicted employees in twelve plant cities serving the corporation and the nation more as purchasers of goods, including but by no means limited to cars, than as workers in factories. The film followed the typical day of an “army of interdependent automotive workers and salaried personnel” in these twelve cities, showing repeated scenes of workers receiving pay packets and then, often accompanied by wives and children, spending them in downtown stores on everything from new living-room furniture to children's bicycles and stylish clothing. To triumphant music, the narrator proclaimed that “tens of thousands of men on one single payroll have money for themselves and their families to spend,” making possible “the pleasure of buying, the spreading of money, and the enjoyment of all the things that paychecks can buy.”

Chevrolet obviously had a vested interest in depicting new UAW members as well-paid and job-secure customers rather than as tenacious rank-and-file unionists. But much more was at stake. That Chevrolet sought to improve its public image by boasting that “the purchasing power of pay packets fuels the local economies of twelve plant cities” revealed the company's confidence in consumers as the savior of the nation's economy. Because “America has a ready purse and gives eager acceptance to what the men of motors have built,” the United States will enjoy “a prosperity greater than history has ever known,” the film proclaimed. It was the buying power of consumers in the aggregate, not the protection of individual consumers in the marketplace, that manufacturers like General Motors, along with a growing number of economists and government officials by the late 1930s, thought would bring the United States out of depression and ensure its survival as a democratic nation.<sup>2</sup>

Why in the thirties did a wide range of Americans, from ordinary citizens to policymakers, begin to recognize that consumer interests and behavior had profound economic and political consequences for the nation? And what did it mean that they endorsed two very different prescriptions—the citizen consumer and the purchaser consumer—for the proper role of

consumers? Answering these questions matters not only for understanding the 1930s, but the decades that followed as well. The new expectations that Americans developed during the Great Depression for how consumers should contribute to a healthy economy and polity would leave a legacy for World War II and the postwar era.

## DISCOVERING THE CONSUMER INTEREST

The 1930s, of course, were not the first time that Americans took note of the importance of consumption and consumers. Almost from its initial European settlement, America participated in an economy of commercial exchange, and gradually over the centuries the market revolution increased the amount of goods that Americans purchased rather than made at home (or did without). Not only did people consume more ready-made products as time passed, but the accumulation of luxury goods—at first, imported china and textiles, later, fineries manufactured domestically—marked distinctions among Americans, such as between urban and rural dwellers and among social classes. Moreover, at crucial moments of political conflict, Americans exercised their clout as consumers, withdrawing their purchasing power to put economic pressure on their opponents. On the eve of the American Revolution of the late eighteenth century, colonists shirked imported British tea and fabrics. Likewise, nineteenth-century workers organized boycotts of their employers' goods as part of the campaigns for shorter hours, higher wages, and better working conditions. But despite the longstanding significance of consumption in their lives, when Americans before the twentieth century contemplated what made for the most robust national economy, the most stable American polity, and the most independent citizenry, they overwhelmingly pointed to the vitality of production and the power of producers.<sup>3</sup>

The Progressive Era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked a significant shift toward recognizing the centrality of consumers to the nation's economy and polity, so much so that I will refer to it as the “first-wave consumer movement.” Aspects of the Progressive program could qualify as proto-citizen consumer, anticipating as they did concerns and responses that would emerge more fully in the “second-wave consumer movement” of the 1930s and 1940s. The Progressives identified consumers as a new category of the American citizenry, an ideal broad-based constituency desirous and deserving of political and social reforms to limit the dangers of an industrializing, urbanizing, and politically corruptible twentieth-century America. Because all men and women were thought to suffer as consumers from unfairly jacked-up prices, defective manufactured goods, and unresponsive if not deceitful politicians, reform was easily pursued in their name. Progressives sought more direct democracy—primaries, initiatives, referenda, recalls, and female suffrage—as well as specific remedies to protect consumers and taxpayers from exploitation, such as municipal and consumer ownership of utilities and fairer tax policies. The Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act (1906), although weak, were passed to set some minimum standards for the safety and quality of goods increasingly being produced for national markets. And Progressives promoted anti-trust legislation, culminating in the Federal Trade Commission Act (FTC, 1914), to protect against monopolies that

violated an idealized America where consumers were best served by local, independent, and competitive businesses.<sup>4</sup>

Consumers at the grass roots complemented Progressive reformers' efforts by asserting their power in the marketplace. Housewives in some local communities successfully boycotted merchants to bring down prices when they climbed too high. Particularly well documented are the protests of New York's immigrant Jewish housewives in kosher meat boycotts in 1902, rent strikes in 1904 and 1907-08, and cost-of-living protests in 1917.<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, organized workers who long had rejected wage labor as slavery depriving workers of their freedom as citizen producers now accepted the reality of industrialized labor and began to agitate for "a living wage" adequate to provide an "American standard of living" for working-class consumers. A fair shake at consumption—achievable through the eight-hour day, government-regulated minimum wages, and union labels—seemed to promise workers both a better quality of life and full rights as citizens. In the tradition of their nineteenth-century antecedents, workers also expanded their use of consumer boycotts to punish uncooperative employers, as during the Seattle labor movement's impressive organizing drive after World War I.<sup>6</sup>

Most visible nationally were the efforts of middle-class women's reform organizations, such as the National Consumers' League (NCL) and its state chapters, to convince female consumers to practice "ethical consumption," selective buying to pressure employers and the state to improve wages and working conditions for employed women and children. Through its symbolic "Consumers' White Label" campaign, for example, the league urged consumers to purchase only white muslin underwear bearing a label testifying to its manufacture under morally acceptable and sanitary conditions, both to protect their own families from injurious goods and to lobby for protective labor legislation, child labor laws, and improvements in retail and factory work environments. The NCL viewed consumer organization instrumentally as a strategy to better the working conditions of producers; only tangentially did it concern itself with the exploitation of the consumer.<sup>7</sup>

During the 1920s mass consumption—the production, distribution, and purchase of standardized, brand-name goods aimed at the broadest possible buying public—grew more prevalent. By the end of the decade, most Americans, regardless of how much money they had to spend, recognized the growing dominance of mass consumption in the national purchasing. Not all Americans participated equally in mass consumer markets; many more lacked a car, washing machine, vacuum cleaner, and radio in 1930 than had one. Yet through the expansion of a middle class with more time and money to spend, the extension of consumer credit and installment buying, and the burgeoning of advertising ensured that more and more Americans would consider themselves mass consumers by the 1930s.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time that mass consumption boomed in the 1920s, however, governments only acted minimally to protect consumers from the growing dangers of substandard and sometimes dangerous products, unfair pricing, and misleading advertising. Manufacturers, distributors, and advertisers essentially enjoyed free rein in the increasingly national marketplace. During this business-dominated decade, consumers' political consciousness was not high. Much of the fervor had gone out of Progressive Era reform movements. But so long

as exciting new products like automobiles, radios, and household appliances kept coming on the market, and affluence seemed to be growing—at least for the middle and upper classes who could afford these consumer durables—few challenged the status quo by calling for stronger regulation.<sup>9</sup> General acceptance of a doctrine of “voluntary compliance” even weakened the authority of the existing regulatory agencies established during the Progressive Era, the FTC and the Federal Drug Administration (FDA). Rather, those in power in Republican-dominated Washington argued that the consumers' and manufacturers' joint interests were best served by allowing business to pursue unfettered technological innovations and economic efficiencies. The free market would do the rest to deliver to consumers the best-quality goods at the cheapest prices.

As most Americans concentrated on getting ever greater access to the fruits of mass consumption, some persistent Consumers' Leaguers and unionists still sought to enlist consumers in the battle to improve the conditions under which these goods were made. But few Americans during these years considered consumers a self-conscious, identifiable interest group on a par with labor and business whose well-being required attention for American capitalism and democracy to prosper. That shift in mind-set would await the economic collapse of the Great Depression and the second-wave consumer movement it inspired.

The depression and the Democratic administration's eclectic efforts to overcome it, collectively known as the New Deal, remade the American political economy. A national welfare state emerged, industrial relations were restructured around state-sanctioned collective bargaining, and the federal government assumed a more active role in the economy. Less often mentioned but equally noteworthy was a growing recognition by those in and out of government of the importance of considering the consumer interest in reconstructing a viable economy and polity. By the end of the depression decade, invoking “the consumer” would become an acceptable way of promoting the public good, of defending the economic rights and needs of ordinary citizens.

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith argued in his *American Capitalism* of 1952, and historian Ellis Hawley elaborated a decade later, that a lasting impact of the New Deal lay in the way it implemented the concept of “countervailing power” or “counterorganization.” By that Galbraith and Hawley meant the New Deal government's efforts to organize economically weak groups to balance more powerful interests. This approach to restoring the economic equilibrium upset by the Great Depression avoided more direct confrontation with existing bastions of power such as big business.<sup>10</sup>

Well known is the New Deal's “counterorganization” of farmers, laborers, and small businessmen. Less appreciated is its growing attentiveness to consumers as a way of institutionalizing, and protecting, the public interest. As the federal government vastly expanded in authority, it became imperative politically that the general good somehow be represented. Making “consumers” a residual category and empowering them to speak for the public became a way of mitigating the excessive power of other political blocs, including the state itself. Attending to the consumer also conformed to another prevailing tendency of the New Deal, the commitment to resuscitate a severely damaged economy without jettisoning the basic tenets of capitalism. Empowering the consumer seemed to many New Dealers a way of enhancing the public's stake in society and the economy while still preserving the free

enterprise system.

The concrete achievements of what I have termed the second-wave consumer movement could be considered meager.<sup>11</sup> But that assessment misses how the Great Depression spawned a larger reconceptualization of the role of the consumer among state policymakers and civil society that World War II and the postwar period would extend. “I believe we are at the threshold of a fundamental change in our popular economic thought,” Franklin Roosevelt forecast in his presidential campaign of 1932, “[and] that in the future we are going to think less about the producer and more about the consumer.”<sup>12</sup> Although FDR's administration would only gradually break with the classical economic thinking that had dominated during the 1920s and early depression, by the end of his presidency in 1945 he had presided over a recalibration of the balance between consumer and producer interests thought necessary to keep a democratic society and capitalist economy viable. Longtime consumer activist Esther Peterson, who served in the administrations of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter, would unequivocally assert years later: “The idea of consumer representation came during the F.D.R. period.”<sup>13</sup>

Roosevelt's perception as early as 1932 that the consumer was becoming more central likely grew out of a rumbling of consumer discontent that had begun in the mid-1920s and intensified as the depression worsened in the early 1930s. In best-selling books such as Stuart Chase's *The Tragedy of Waste* (1925), Chase and Frederick J. Schlink's *Your Money's Worth* (1927), and Schlink and Arthur Kallet's *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs: Dangers in Everyday Foods, Drugs, and Cosmetics* (1933), a small coterie of economists, engineers, and social activists began to call for impartial product testing and enforced commodity standards to protect consumers from the deceptions of merchandisers. Consumers, they argued, were paying too high a price for the success of mass production. Soon after *Your Money's Worth* appeared, Schlink transformed his small, local consumer club and testing lab in White Plains, New York, into a more substantial national organization, Consumers' Research, with its own bimonthly publication and a membership of 40,000 by 1932 that was growing fast. Other independent product-testing organizations, Inter-mountain Consumers' Service and Consumers Union, followed. Although highly critical of the abuse of consumers, particularly by advertisers, these consumer advocates did not call for any major structural changes in the economy or government. Rather, they hoped that scientific research into product quality would allow the free market to work better, by creating more knowledgeable consumers capable of keeping exploitative merchandisers in check. As Americans faced steadily declining incomes with the deterioration of the economy in the 1930s, they increasingly looked to the burgeoning consumer movement's books and publications for help in getting the most from their dollars.<sup>14</sup>

Consumer cooperatives, retail outlets owned and operated by their customers, were another aspect of the consumer movement to which Roosevelt paid increasing attention during his presidency, ultimately establishing a special commission in 1936 to study their success abroad. Although the cooperative movement predated the 1930s and was never as influential in the United States as in Europe—involving only 1.5 percent of all retail sales nationally—a new wave of interest in consumer cooperatives accompanied the Great Depression. Estimates indicate that co-op associations and membership more than doubled

between 1933 and 1936, and again by 1940, enjoying “mushroom growth,” in the words of the New Jersey Federation of Consumer Cooperatives. Before the 1930s, cooperativism was mostly the project of utopians devoted to bringing the Rochdale ideal of worker-owned stores and housing from England to America or of ethnic groups like Finns, with their tradition of cooperatives, and Italians, eager to buy their native foods. During the depression decade, however, cooperative ventures attracted more diverse consumers—middle-class suburbanites, labor union members, African-American community groups, and others.

The depression also saw an expansion of the goods and services offered cooperatively to include electricity, petroleum, telephones, appliances, restaurants, insurance, credit unions, milk, medical care, laundry, and housing. The cooperative system broadened beyond retail sales as well to encompass wholesale distribution and even, in a few cases, production of cooperatively owned factories. While cooperative leaders were ideologically committed to building an alternative social order around the elimination of the profit motive, a vision that most cooperative buyers did not fully embrace, by participating in cooperative ventures, members nonetheless became more aware of their interests as consumers and of possible alternatives to the traditional capitalist marketplace. When the Newark Consumer Cooperative League, for example, decided to launch its operation with a cooperative laundry, it hoped to save its members money not through the “false economy [of striving] for lower prices by beating down the wages of labor,” but by expanding its membership base. The league extended “a special invitation to trade unionists and workers of all kinds to recognize their position as consumers and as such to ally themselves to their fellows.”<sup>15</sup>



The Consumers' Club of Jersey Homesteads in Hightstown, New Jersey (later renamed Roosevelt), organized a cooperative grocery store and kosher butcher shop, thereby participating in the trend toward cooperative buying that flourished during the Great Depression. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

FDR's interest in the consumer was also undoubtedly fed by liberal reformers both within and outside his circle of advisers as they grappled with ways to pull the United States out of

the Great Depression. Rexford Tugwell, Gardiner Means, Raymond Moley, and Adolf Berle Jr., were all Columbia University professors (two economists, a political scientist, and a lawyer, respectively) who became part of Roosevelt's "brains trust," advising him through the 1932 campaign and into office. In advocating a planned economy to balance the narrow self-interest of business, these advisers considered consumers a crucial part of the larger community whose interests needed to be taken better into account.<sup>16</sup> A political challenge to the Democratic Party and Roosevelt from the left, moreover, put the consumer at the center of a critique of the mainstream political parties. In the fall of 1929, democratic and educational theorist John Dewey and progressive economist Paul Douglas founded a new third party, the League for Independent Political Action, around the interests of consumers because "the needs and troubles of the people are connected with problems of consumption with problems of the maintenance of a reasonably decent and secure standard of living." The existing parties, they argued, grew out of "that stage of American life when the American people as a whole felt that society was to advance by means of industrial inventions and their application," and Americans still clung to protecting the interests of producers at the expense of consumers, even when that era had long passed.

Although the league was loosely modeled on the British Labour Party, it saw its primary political base not in the working class but in the middle class—teachers, small merchants, and white-collar workers—which, in Dewey's words, "represents most adequately the interests of the consumer." The league never gained much popular political support, and in targeting the middle classes even managed to alienate otherwise sympathetic Socialists. But Dewey's and Douglas's prominence in progressive circles and their writings, such as Dewey's three-part series "The Need for a New Party" in *The New Republic* (March-April 1931) and Douglas's *The Coming of a New Party* (1932), drew attention to the converging interests of consumers in the economy and voting citizens in a democracy.<sup>17</sup> Even before the New Deal had come into being, then, the consumer was being clothed in the mantle of the public interest. Over the course of the 1930s, New Deal policymakers would experiment with different ways of recognizing consumers, and consumers themselves would increasingly mobilize around their identity to make economic and political demands of those in power.

While many different conceptions of the proper role for consumers circulated in the experimental air of the New Deal era, the two conceptions mentioned earlier—what I have called the citizen consumer and the purchaser consumer—predominated. The citizen consumer ideal was embraced by New Deal policymakers in Washington and consumer activists at the grass roots, both of whom sought consumer representation in government and new legislation and regulation to protect consumers better in the marketplace. In contrast, the purchaser consumer perspective saw consumers as the potential source of expanded demand that could pull the United States out of severe depression. Although advocates of these two viewpoints usually favored one over the other, it was possible for policymakers to embrace both. Given that the citizen consumer ideal emerged alongside the first New Deal during President Roosevelt's first term, and the purchaser consumer more systematically later in the decade with the acceptance of a Keynesian approach to managing the economy, some New Dealers moved from the first concept to the second, and others found it possible to endorse both simultaneously.



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