

Example of
consumption and
citizenship as it
existed in the u.s.
between 1930s an...

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Consumption and Citizenship as it existed in the U. S. between 1930s and 1970s - Lizabeth Cohen

Introduction

Lizabeth Cohen's monumental book clears any lingering doubt on the legitimacy of the consumer history. According to Cohen, Consumers' Republic refers to an economy, politics and culture built on a strong belief that through mass consumption of goods, prosperity and a greater degree of democracy and equality will be achieved. Through her book, Cohen gives an account of the developments in the consumer and the marketplace since the 1930s. She describes the intersection between commercial lives and other various domains in surprising ways. By so doing, she can write an exhilarating history of the politics of the postwar American. The postwar American pays much emphasis on the role of day-to-day economic activities in influencing the fate of African Americans, senior citizens, women's and suburbanites, among others. Despite the twentieth century seeing the United States depicted as a consumer nation, there remains a dilemma on the impact of the increased consumption of goods and services on the natural environment. Also, it increased consumption of goods and services in traditions of the democratic politics and the global future. The judgment should go deeper beyond the mere utility garnered from consumerism to address this issue. Rather, an ideological framework and a complex psychology need to be analyzed (Cohen 8). Cohen's association of consumption with citizenship is important in understanding the course of the consumer politics in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Cohen's approach to the account of the twentieth century achieves two

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commendable goals. First, Cohen goes against the grain by considering the consumption domain instead of using other approaches that are greatly standardized. As such, she can gainsay the underlying whim of a private and public split. According to her, private consumption is linked to public citizenship in several manners during the late twentieth century. She goes on to offer scores of combinations with the most stable forms being the diametric opposites: “ purchaser-consumer” and “ citizen consumer.” Citizen consumer configuration represents a paragon of protecting consumers, in their individual capacity, with the intent of having quality goods. In history, this lead to the formation of welfare states, among other socialist organizations. Through the paragon of citizen consumer, Cohen asserts that the marketplace polishes off the distinction between private and public, albeit simultaneous. It is a way by which social justice is worked for, particularly for the marginalized groups such as women and blacks. On the other hand, the configuration of purchaser-consumer stands for the paragon of the interests of businesses and mass consumption without regulation, which translates to the benefits of the wealth eventually benefiting the poor as well (Cohen 9). Cohen’s idea is that the collision between these two configurations gives rise to the Consumer’s republic.

Additionally, Cohen’s approach pays focus on the marginalized groups and substitute forums and political strategies. Using the perspective of the consumer enables Cohen to analyze the mundane behavior of Americans, such as grassroots consumer activism, going for loans plus shopping instead of those activities typically specified as politics (Cohen 36). As such, she can present diversified perspectives in her book.

1. Great Depression

During the Great Depression period, the ability to consume was palliating whereas the conception and language of citizens to identify as consumers heightened. The discovery of consumerism as a source of power, in the form of social force, was accompanied by the problem of under-consumption inherent in the period of the Great Depression. Given this situation, it was necessary to have agencies to address this issue and hence the establishment of New Deal actors and agencies. The role of the new Deal agencies and actors was to gestate the function that the consumer played in the civil society and among the policymakers in the state (Cohen 24). It is during this period that both purchaser-consumer and citizen consumer ideals were simultaneously considered in regards to the public policy of the New Deal. For instance, the Consumer Advisory Board (CAB) had the role of making codes and many other regulatory acts, which had a significant impact in facilitating the ideal of citizen consumer. Later, the emphasis was directed to the Keynesian concept of purchasing power and promoting demand, and this worked in favor of the purchaser-consumer ideal (Cohen 28).

Additionally, Cohen's analysis starts from amidst the era of the Great Depression. Given the mass consumption of goods, the period of Depression necessitated the formation of mass consumer campaigns, which were closely linked to the New Deal plans. These movements presented a forum in which unrepresented groups, such as African-Americans and women, identified themselves as consumers. Hence, could stake claims on the people exerting power in both private and public domains in the United States (Cohen 32).

African Americans specifically used the market platform to exercise new power in their capacity, citizen consumers. As the businesses of the white supremacists were ostracized, the businesses owned by blacks gained great support. On the other hand, consumer movements were led by women, who held high ranks, during the 1930s, with the exception of product-testing wings and consumer cooperative of the movement (Cohen 33). These practices blended well with the prevailing economic policy, which was acquired from Keynes. It stipulated that the government's intervention was imperative so as to resuscitate the entire economy, besides motivating mass demand (Cohen 55). The emphasis put on the formation of a wider consumer base, encouraging mass consumption, and a willingness to have the government intervene in the market meant that. The consumers were empowered in a unique manner during the Great Depression period to a greater degree.

2. World War II,

After the Great Depression, the Americans were subjected to conditions that were unlike the ones they encountered during the boom of the 1920s and the Great Depression in 1930s. However, the consumer movements experienced during the Great Depression had a great impact in laying the framework for the aftermath of war's Consumers' Republic, together with the encounters of World War II. Cohen asserts that Americans found out that the only way to be supportive of the war, albeit on the home front, was through consuming responsibly. The necessity to mobilize domestic support throughout the period of World War II energized the ideal of the consumer. Cohen points out that during the period of war, America was nearly achieving

the right model of consumer conduct, closer than it has ever happened. The patriotic “ Consumer pledge Song” proclaimed that

“ I will be a wise consumer, gladly do so with humor, that’s the way to win, the sooner, to peace and Victory” (Cohen 46).

The Office of price Administration (OPA) was administered by educating policy makers who paid heed to consumer advocates, who were mainly women. Through the use of price controls, Cohen affirms that the equality was coined and therefore the requisite fairness for effective solidarity while the wartime was achieved. Moreover, the sudden patriotism from citizens, which saw them obey the OPA price, rationing regulations, planting Victory Gardens, reprocessing scrap and reporting violators, led to granting of novel political importance of tasks that were previously considered to be domestic and private (Cohen 67).

Furthermore, the social status of women in society was untouched. Women gained prominence as wartime workers and public good defenders by virtue of their traditional purpose as consumers. Some women even joined the federal government, during Roosevelt’s terms, to serve as guardians of the public good. Moreover, the war substantially altered the class structure in the Unites states in the sense that the middle class was replicated once the income of the low class increased in a rapid manner as compared to that of the high class (Cohen 69). Cohen also substantiates that the regulations of redistribution of wealth and consumption experienced during the wartime received broad acceptance by Americans. It was on the mere ground that it was an impermanent condition and the promised returns after the ceasing of the war were abundant. However, Cohen asserts that the extension of the

rent and price controls beyond the postwar period was successful. This process was a way of preventing the gyrating consequences of inflation that had proved detrimental after World War I (Cohen 79). In this manner, economic equality was upheld even in the periods of peace. Also, the purchaser-consumer idea was unheard during the wartime since consumers accumulated rationed goods, and others bought them back via the black market (Cohen 83). As such, consumerism as self-interest was not attractive during the period of war.

3. The Early Postwar Era

With the culmination of the World War II, the postwar era of conversion sets in. Consumption took place with intent of general good. In order to preserve equity and protect consumers, price controls and other regulations in the markets were observed. However, these initiatives were defeated by the purchaser consumers, who consumed to get private gain (Cohen 108). In fact, the OPA ceased in 1946 despite protests from consumer activists and this translated to the elimination of a key policy that facilitated the movement of citizen consumer. Besides, there existed a broad scope of economic interest, including liberal capitalists and prominent businessmen, who were all against the New Deal, and embraced mass consumption's grandness. Hence, it achieved a reconversion from the period of wartime to postwar periods, peacetime (Cohen 114). The purchaser-consumer ideal that had disappeared during the wartime was now resurfacing.

At this time, the conflict among the purchaser-consumer and citizen-consumer ideals was hitting up. It is what Cohen dubbed the Consumer's Republic. The conflict took the form of a take and gave nature between the

two ideals; citizen-consumer and purchaser-consumer. The failures and success of this epoch of richness are demonstrated by Cohen, and she describes how the movement dampened. Women, who had gained political power, were now “refeminized” as their positions were taken away from them and were instead turned into housewives. Instruments of prejudice, such as a new income tax codes and Bill of rights were applied to create cultural and economic dominance by white males (Cohen 141). Moreover, the lack of credit for women and the lessons from television aided in changing the rules of the game in regards to gender roles (Cohen 152). Instead of ensuring that the principle of fair distribution was upheld, the emphasis was put on the growth of the economic pie. As a result, this paved the way for the dominance of the purchaser-consumer. Cohen asserts that the culmination of economic equity was reached even without requiring political progressiveness of redistributing the existing wealth (Cohen 126). The purchaser-consumer ideal was fortified by the prosperity encountered after the war, and mass consumption was practiced. Further, the oncoming Cold war, which encouraged the free consumption of goods as facilitated by political leaders, strengthened the mass consumption ideal (129). Contrary to the prior promises of equality that had been made, consumer concerns, such as just prices, grading, labeling and product safety lost importance to the self-interests of the purchaser-consumer ideal (Cohen 133). Moreover, the realities of mass consumption saw the African Americans segregated in public places. Discrimination was practiced in the access of commercial avenues and public accommodation. Nonetheless, the strong link between citizenship and consumption gave the blacks an opportunity to

fight against discrimination in public venues, such as through the use of boycotts (Cohen 166). Even though, the civil rights movements successfully stopped the discrimination in public places; this triumph gave rise to a new kind of discrimination. It is in the sense that the landscape of mass consumption moved into suburbia from urban centers where African Americans were congested (Cohen 191). The movement into suburbia improved the lives of many Americans, but the establishment of new hierarchies increased the inequality gap (Cohen 200). Also, the privatization of shopping malls in the 1950s heightened the segregation of the public space (Cohen 259). Finally, in the 1950s, promotion and publicizing shifted from lot marketing to segmental marketing. The result was a novel commercial culture with hyperbolized social differences in pursuance of profits (Cohen 309). Despite the economic growth encountered, economic equality was adversely affected.

4. The 1960s and 1970s.

Nevertheless, in the 1960s and 1970s, the accomplishments of the Consumers' Republic lose validity. Cohen maintains that a situation of deindustrialization and stagflation are encountered since they deemed resistant to the fixes of proposed by Keynes (Cohen 388). According to Cohen, this period of the neoliberal period is referred to as the Republic's Consumeralization. It is where the relationship between the consumers and the government is likened to that of shoppers in the marketplace (Cohen 396). In essence, Cohen considers this to be a terrible social failure in relation to the capability of the Consumer's Republic (Cohen 397).

In conclusion, Cohen's analysis of the history of the consumer helps in

addressing the issues of marginalized groups, such as women and African Americans. During the mid of the Great Depression, the discovery of consumerism heightened and was followed by the New Deal agencies and actors whose role was to redefine the role of the consumer in a civil society. During World War II, various controls were placed on consumption and worked in favor of the ideal of citizen consumer. Meanwhile, the purchaser-consumer ideal disappeared. However, the end of the war saw the end of the promises of equality as the purchaser-consumer ideal had a comeback. Up to the 1950s, the inequalities in consumption highlighted by the economic growth experienced. In the 1960s and 1970s, the benefits of the Consumers' Republic expired, and stagflation and deindustrialization took over. Having experienced the Consumer's republic effect in the early postwar era, the encounters in the 1960s and 1970s were considered a complete failure.

Work Cited

Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004. Internet resource.