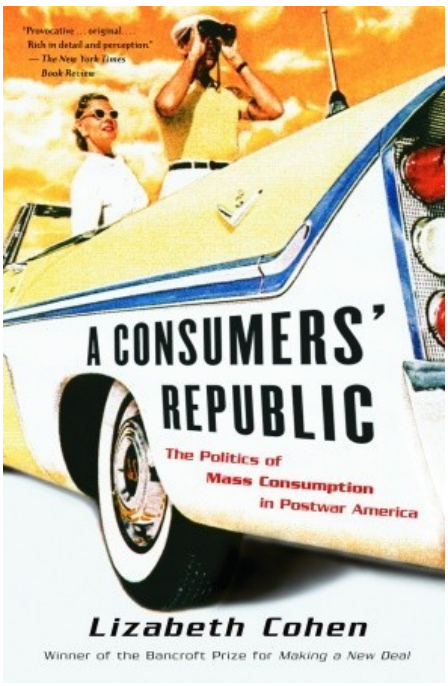

A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America

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In this signal work of history, Bancroft Prize winner and Pulitzer Prize finalist Lizabeth Cohen shows how the pursuit of prosperity after World War II fueled our pervasive consumer mentality and transformed American life.

Trumpeted as a means to promote the general welfare, mass consumption quickly outgrew its economic objectives and became synonymous with patriotism, social equality, and the American Dream. Material goods came to embody the promise of America, and the power of consumers to purchase everything from vacuum cleaners to convertibles gave rise to the power of citizens to purchase political influence and effect social change. Yet despite undeniable successes and unprecedented affluence, mass consumption also fostered economic inequality and the fracturing of society along gender, class, and racial lines. In charting the complex legacy of our “Consumers’ Republic” Lizabeth Cohen has written a bold, encompassing, and profoundly influential book.

A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America Details

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From Reader Review A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America for online ebook

Cynthia says

Interesting but very dense, strategically organized in kind of an odd way, and damn is that conclusion depressing.

Rebecca Radnor says

Interesting take on American history from the 1930's forward that focuses on the role (or you could say rule) of the consumer (rather than the voter or worker), arguing that they became the controlling influence, and sometimes even the controlling power in American society.

As I read this I realized that I had already read some of the chapters for various classes on American history (namely the ones on suburbia and shopping malls). In fact this book is more a collection of journal articles written by an author with central area of interest than a unified book, and as such is very easy to separate into chunks applicable to various class topics. As evidence, the last 32% of the book is notes, bibliography, etc.

Cohen has a markedly Marxist/feminist/liberal bent to her work, and much of the book is focused on how consumers' economic interests have often functioned in direct opposition to their political ones, with the exceptions of when they mobilized to use their collective economic power to enforce change -- a period which she herself admits was fleeting and was dependent on a strong economy (job security). Her chapter on consumer cultures and the shifts from mass market to segmented markets, and how producers grab a segment and begin to mold it via producing for it is fascinating.

The book starts off talking a little bit about the rise of consumer protection laws in the progressive era, but then argues that consumer power became political in the language of the new deal area culminating in the political mobilization of women's social groups in the 30's to utilize their power as consumers to protect their families via laws designed to control unfair pricing, etc and then by union workers to boycott stores that didn't have union workers. The next section is on how African Americans utilized their power as consumers to force the stores that served them to also hire them (as more than janitors, etc). The next section considers the creation of the suburbs, and the home as the largest consumer purchase, and how individual's owners concern with maintaining property values (rightly or wrongly) resulted in segregated neighborhoods. This segregation in turn resulted in imbalances in education as local real-estate taxes funded local schools. She then moves on to the rise of shopping centers (this was one of the chapters I had already read for a class). She then talks about the rise of consumer markets and how marketing changed over time as it became more and more about reaching individuals segments, with the marketers getting more scientific in their approaches by utilizing sociology, anthropology, etc. She then goes on to talk about how politics became influenced by this segmentation, transforming it so that only those already rich enough to undertake a targeted add campaign (or backed by people rich enough) could afford to run. And then she talks about the push back by corporations to undo all the political gains of the consumers/workers, starting in the 70's.

Joseph Stieb says

This is a well-researched, clearly written, and fascinating book that I will come back to over and over again. It's one of those "this is the why the world is the way it is" books that are just incredibly valuable to scholars and the general reader alike. It wasn't always the quickest read, but it is highly illuminating.

Cohen's focus is on consumption, citizenship, and suburbanization. She argues that consumption in the 1930's and 40's became a patriotic act designed to boost the economy under Keynesian auspices. After the war, many people envisioned a "consumer's republic" in which high levels of income and consumption would raise the standard of living of all Americans and unite them in an age oIn the 50's and 60's, it became more of a way of life that mixed into race, where people lived, gender, and politics. Consumerism and citizenship became tightly entwined concepts because consuming was seen as so crucial to keeping the postwar boom going. Over time, this conflation changed people's perception of themselves as citizens and the nation as a whole.

Suburbanization is a huge part of Cohen's argument. Cohen contends that the suburbs allowed people to live out a dream of prosperity, easy consumption, and independence, but at a cost. There was always a nicer suburb to move into, so suburbs started to reflect class hierarchies. They also drained money out of cities, which had hugely negative consequences for urban education and business. For example, new shopping centers popped up to serve the motorized suburbanites' consumption needs, draining the cities of much revenue. Suburbanites, for a mix of racial and economic reasons, wanted to ensure a homogenous population and therefore tried a number of tricks to keep out minorities, including up zoning, redlining, protective covenants, and straight up intimidation or ostracization. Cohen shows that the racist fear of property values dropping when minorities move in (a myth, btw) was pervasive in shaping suburban living patterns and ensuring black cities and white suburbs. The real question Cohen raises is whether suburbanization increased racial inequality and distrust. The answer for the time period of this book (50's to 70's) seems to be yes.

Cohen makes some fascinating points about consumption and race. On one hand, the recognition of the power of the consumer was a major source of empowerment and rights protest. At the end of the day, most businesses wanted their money, which gave them some leverage as long as they acted in a united way. For blacks, the right to consume what they wanted on an equal basis with whites was a key demand that shaped civil rights protests in the 1950's especially. The "don't shop where you can't work" campaign won many concessions regarding black employment in By the 1960's, companies were paying way more attention to the black market, offering specific products and messages. On the other hand, mass consumption and the consumer mentality increased many trends that hurt African Americans, especially those living in the inner cities. Large companies often ran smaller, black owned companies out of business once they turned their attention to the black market. Blacks remained disempowered economically in their communities as stores tended to be owned by outsiders. I have already mentioned the negative outcomes emerging from changing economic patterns relating to suburbanization. Finally, the geographic relocation of shopping centers drained stores and money out of cities, leading to employment problems for African Americans.

The biggest beard stroker of an argument in this book dealt with the connection between consumption and politics. Cohen shows the consumption encouraged a self and small-group centered version of the common good. Market segmentation contributed to this tendency. Markets divided up consumers into men, women, blacks, Latinos, kids, teenagers, the elderly, and then dozens of subsets of those groups, and marketed specifically to each group. Cohen says that politicians increasingly followed this method in campaigns, dividing up the citizenry into a number of groups who all received different campaign messages. Her conclusion is that Americans increasingly view politics from the consumer's perspective, which has eroded

the common good and notions of public service. Our political fragmentation and partisan rancor have only been enhanced by this trend.

Cohen is a bit more pessimistic than I am about this story of consumption and suburbanization. To be fair, she does account for the many programs adopted to lessen the negative effects of these trends. She also notes how successful and positive the consumer advocacy movement has been, especially under Ralph Nader in the 1970's. She clearly dislikes suburbs, but she doesn't let this bias get in the way of her history. This is a landmark book.

The comp stomp continues.

Simon Purdue says

Cohen’s sweeping history of the postwar period paints a vivid picture of a rapidly changing society. The author describes a cultural landscape in which the terms of citizenship had shifted dramatically, placing production and, more importantly, consumption as the primary term of involvement in this new ‘consumer’s republic’. Using her own experiences growing up in New Jersey as a case study- particularly in the third section of the book- Cohen argues that the encouragement of mass consumption had become a concerted project driven by political and economic elites. She notes that consumption, primarily of American-produced goods, quickly became an essential component of citizenship in the new, suburban America, as shopping malls became major social spaces and possession of goods became even more of an indicator of social status. This new culture of consumption marked a gear-shift in the idea of social mobility and the ‘American Dream’, and for the first time it was the spending of money and not the earning of money that paved the way to said dream. Furthermore the postwar years marked a notable shift in American capitalism, and a scaling back of the limitations imposed from the populist era through to the New Deal.
Crucially Cohen dedicates sizeable portions of her analysis of this new consumer’s republic to its failings and- in many cases deliberate- inequalities. She suggests that the consumer’s republic represented a more segregated America than had been seen in the preceding decades, and that the rapid changes that were taking place in American society left African-Americans behind. She, sometimes slightly clumsily, frames much of the Civil Rights Movement in consumerist terms, arguing that the ‘urban rebellions’ of the 1960s were the result of a renewed sense of African-American disenfranchisement and exclusion brought on by this reconfigured and exclusionary white middle class consumerist society. Cohen’s book frames consumption as a key marker of American identity, paving the way for deeper explanations of what it meant to be a citizen in this new social structure.

Craig Werner says

Cohen's thesis--and this is very much a thesis driven book, sometimes to its determent--is that in the years since World War II, the United States is best understood as a "consumers' republic," and that, for the most part, that has operated to the detriment of political citizenship. The consumers' republic refers to the intersection of an economy, culture and politics "built around the promises of mass consumption, both in terms of material life and the more idealistic goals of freedom, democracy, and equality." Cohen does a good job examining the impact of the emphasis on consumerism on housing, the marketplace (particularly the growth of mall culture), and notions of community. Her discussion of how the increasing segmentation of

marketing plays out not just in advertising but also in politics illuminates some of the forces that have led to the horrendous red state-blue state split we're living with today. It's not a perfect book; the alternation between her micro studies of New Jersey (clearly home base for her research) and generalizations about the U.S. as a whole doesn't always flow smoothly. But I'd recommend it over Jackson's Crabgrass Frontier for anyone looking for an introduction to the most important changes in American "lifestyle" from WWII to the 1980s.

Hank Stuever says

Great start for anyone who wants to think or write more intelligently about our shared shopaholic tendencies.

AskHistorians says

A great history of consumerism in the post-WWII US.

Ross says

After World War II, Americans began to change their attitude toward the role of consumption in constructing American identity and values. Actively discouraged by the American government during the war and socially condemned during the Depression, postwar conspicuous consumption subsequently came to represent all that was ideally American in Cohen's "Consumers' Republic": freedom, egalitarianism, and democracy. Cohen argues that the reality of the Consumers' Republic was not so democratic, but was in fact a staging ground for competing notions of American identity and citizenry along racial, gender, and class lines.

Using her home state of New Jersey as a way to analyze mass consumption issues of the postwar era, Cohen details the origins, character, and consequences of this new American consumerist mentality and questions whether the Consumers' Republic actually yielded all of its supposed benefits. She charts the origins of the Republic to the 1930s, when lawmakers, women, and African Americans pursued a "citizen consumer" role—a role that put the safety and political rights of the consumer at a premium. Government agencies reinforced and strengthened the citizen consumer concept through World War II with inflation control and other artificial means of maintaining a stable and productive wartime economy. Cohen places the firm establishment of the Consumers' Republic in the immediate postwar period when government supported an expansion of the private sector, thereby assuming that this would be the sight of an egalitarian free market economy that would embody democratic ideals and freedom for all citizen consumers. Cohen shows that this was not always the case—women, African Americans, and low-income consumers were often marginalized, both formally and informally, by a defensive rising middle class, a painfully slow-moving federal government, and private developers and marketers who wanted to maximize profits, which meant marketing to the rising white middle class reaping the recent benefits of the GI Bill. Cohen also examines the creation and expansion of the suburbs, privately owned shopping centers, and market segmentation, which were all part of the idealist Consumers' Republic based more on a dream of equality rather than a reality.

As a consumer history, *A Consumers' Republic* is well conceived, well articulated, and well executed. Using her childhood home state to illustrate the larger trends taking place throughout the United States is helpful

and convincing, but it neglects the heterogeneity of the country. Regional economic differences were even more pronounced during the establishment of Cohen's Consumers' Republic, leaving a southern or western historian to wonder whether these patterns of widespread suburbanization, multiplying shopping malls, and restructured tax systems were as prevalent in other regions of the United States. From a southern perspective, Cohen situates the role of consumerism among urban African American southerners in the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, but fails to discuss the rural population that made up such a significant portion of the United States generally and the South more specifically. Additionally, the federal government takes a central role in her understanding of the Consumers' Republic, yet southern state governments were notoriously wary of federal intrusion into state policy. It is likely that the economic and social problems of the South put it outside of the mainstream America that Cohen seems to be focused on, but it is a glaring omission in a book concerned with characterizing consumerism in postwar America as a whole.

In addition, Cohen fails to examine the rise of the modern tourist industry occurring almost simultaneously with the development of her Consumers' Republic, especially in states like Florida and California, where theme parks and resorts expanded into multimillion-dollar attractions capitalizing on Americans' postwar purchasing power. Parks like Disney World and Six Flags became synonymous with middle class white America's idea of family vacation and symbols of American consumerism abroad. Cohen's emphasis on the government's role in postwar consumerism implied that housing, malls, and modern appliances were all that consumers were purchasing, but status symbols went beyond a nice car and a nice home. Middle class families might not have been able to afford a trip to Europe or other exotic destinations, but domestic theme parks marketed directly to this rising middle class offered a more exciting and economic alternative to local attractions.

A Consumers' Republic is the product of extensive research and keen insight into the political and social history of modern American consumerism by an author who clearly understands how the pursuit of economic prosperity may have defined postwar America even more than the idealism of the Cold War. Every citizen participated in the Consumers' Republic in some form or another, whether by accepting the government relief of the Depression, reaping the benefits of the GI Bill, or shopping in the local mall. With this book, it is now possible to understand how consumers' personal economic benefit became the catalyst for these extensions of the Consumers' Republic.

Tim says

Excellent history, deeply researched and convincingly argued. Cohen tracks the formation of a Consumer 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") in the aftermath of WW2, from its antecedents in the Depression era citizen consumer, to purchaser as citizen in the aftermath of the war, to the end of the consumer republic, as the roles of consumer and citizen mixed amid economic downturn and attacks on government regulation that begin in the mid-1970s. It is sobering history written clearly and directly. If the New Deal offered a place for the consumer in government and an additional wave of consumer activity in the 60s and 70s offered new consumer protections, the fear of economic downturn after WW2 and its arrival in the 70s limited the consumer's role. The government aided veterans after WW2, but that aid went overwhelmingly to the well educated (GI Bill for education did not help those who had not finished high school before the war) and better capitalized.

Cohen uses her home state of New Jersey as case study to examine property taxes and education, residential home purchases, the rise of malls, and the decline of urban neighborhoods. She notes the roles of women as

citizen consumers and the difficult issues facing African-Americans as they sought places as both citizens and consumers. The entire project of attempting mass consumption comes to an end in the 70s and 80s as different economic ends were pursued.

"Rather than seeking to draw all Americans into an expansive mass consumption web, Reaganites promoted capital investment, concentrated wealth, tax cutting, and personal savings over consumption, with the assumption that prosperity would 'trickle down' from new corporate and private wealth to ordinary American consumers."

"Whereas from the 1930s to as late as the 1970s, to refer to the consumer interest was also to appeal to some larger public good beyond the individual's self-interest, the ubiquitous invocation of the consumer today - as patient, as parent, as social security recipient - often means satisfying the private interest of the paying customer, the combined consumer/citizen/taxpayer/voter whose greatest concern is, 'Am I getting my money's worth?'"

It's a change she describes, and even laments, but which she offers no remedy to undo. Pity that.

William says

Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption*, is a interesting look at the economic and cultural currents which transformed America during the early years of the Cold War. Cohen initially traces this current from the headwaters of the Progressive era, clearly evidenced by Thorsten Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class, in which Veblen argued for the existence of a Gilded Age proto-"keeping up with the Joneses" mentality of social mimicry. As Cohen illustrates, however, the torrent is truly unleashed by the adoption of Keynesian economics during the Great Depression and Second World War, and furthered by the perpetuation of same not only in the initial postwar ear, but throughout the Cold War and beyond.

Cohen develops an interesting taxonomy for participants in this "consumers' republic," a term she uses to describe the distinct rise of mass consumption, with both its economic and cultural implications, following World War II. Cohen describes "citizen consumers," who sought to support the public good through their consumption of goods, and "purchaser consumers," who were oriented toward self-serving acquisitiveness. Eventually, according to Cohen, these two types begin to amalgamate into the "purchaser as citizen," who attempts to satisfy a sense of civic consumerist duty while likewise seeking to benefit by the exercise of personal economic sovereignty. This last piece – a notion of individual sovereignty, or "freedom" in the rhetoric of the Cold War – was tied to an abundance of goods in the marketplace vying for consumer choice and the individual economic means of the consumer to pursue choice. This understanding of freedom was most notably articulated in the Kitchen Debate between then-Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev. However, Cohen illustrates that this ideal of individual economic freedom was hitched to a sensibility, pronounced most provocatively in 1957 by William H. Whyte, editor of Fortune magazine, that "thrift is now un-American." In post-McCarthy America, this truly was a notable statement of the confluence of political and economic ideology. Given this understanding of freedom and patriotism, one wonders if production outside of the system is considered subversive.

While much of Cohen's work was interesting, one area which struck me as uneven was her examination of the G.I. Bill. While Cohen effectively describes how the benefits provided for in the G.I. Bill were inconsistently available or unequally applied even within the population of veterans, with particular regard to

veterans of color, women veterans, and homosexual veterans given “blue discharges,” she continues beyond this criticism of the practical implementation of the G.I. Bill. Stating that the G.I. Bill was “the chief policy instrument favoring men over women” in the re-establishment of postwar social order conveniently overlooks that men were overwhelmingly selected for service in the war to begin with - as Cohen states, of the sixteen million men and women who served during the war, about two percent, or approximately 320,000, were women. While the G.I. Bill undeniably established American males as principle breadwinners within postwar American society, the result was essentially inevitable given the demographic selected for service. To support this analysis, Cohen invokes the Bradley Commission’s report of veterans benefits, which suggested that government resources should be “more equitably distributed to all citizens through more universal social programs.” How the timely reintegration of fifteen million American men into the domestic economy would have been effectively managed without the G.I. Bill, which moderated the flow of veterans back into the labor pool through education and vocational training benefits, is left to the reader to determine.

Jene says

It's been fifteen years since Cohen published A Consumers' Republic, making so much of her thesis seem old hat. Everybody knows about the postwar culture of mass consumption. But what makes this book an important read, even now, is Cohen's further analysis of the effects of this "Consumers' Republic" (CR) on American lives. Americans of all shapes, sizes, and backgrounds accepted the basic premise of the CR: that mass consumption would bring a greater equality to all of America. We didn't need the vast government programs of the New Deal to bring everyone into the middle class, or so the thinking went. Cohen followed up on this mass consumption = mass democracy theory, and found that we (surprise) did not eliminate class distinctions, but instead created new ones while solving some of the old. The postwar era was a lot more complicated than we like to remember.
I think Cohen's best chapter was on suburbanization - the promises it held for middle-class white families, and the legal barriers erected to keep out working-class whites and people of color.

Mariel says

Cohen's argument can be broadly generalized to say that post-war economic policies and consumer spending habits led Americans to conceive of themselves more as consumers than politically-minded citizens. However, the nuance of her work, especially in her attention to the gender and racial inequalities of post-war consumption patterns, illuminates a fundamental shift in what it means to be an American citizen and what constitutes "rights" beyond the framers' intent. Read in March 2017, when the current political climate bears the unbearable stamp of consumption, fraud and market segmentation, the significance of this shift could not have been visible to Cohen in 2003, but her analysis provides an eerily prescient foreshadowing of the consequences of these factors. Unfortunately, her conclusion assumes an acceptance and continuation of the dual identity of consumers and citizens. She believes it would be impossible to sever the social, economic or political connections that have fused over the last half of the 20th century. However, conditions in 2017 suggest that American political identities may have been long-dormant but are waking and may be poised to break free from the segmentation after all.

Cohen's writing is clear and refined. Although this is a work of advanced scholarship, it is well within the reach of able high school students and would be a great example of clear, professional historical writing. I

can see using excerpts to teach content as well as style.

Billy says

Argues that Keynesian-paradigms of thought transcended the New Deal brain-trusters and was adopted by grassroots consumers. In short, consumption became a political act in and of itself during the New Deal, and this dollar activism has remained in the United States ever since. In her examination, she builds upon E.P. Thompson's idea of a "moral economy," a notion that began with the Progressive era but came to actualization during the Great Depression. In particular, women and African American grassroots consumer activism gave these usually disenfranchised groups power. As activists, they forced issues of Civil Rights onto businesses that would discriminate. During the New Deal, administrators focuses on the rights of consumers, not producers, a sharp distinction after decades of adhering to Say's Law. She argues that Keynesians subscribed to the concept of "purchaser-consumers," or politics of purchasing. During the Cold War, consumption was in and of itself an act against communism. Politics pushed the freedom of purchasing, thereby creating a Consumer's Republic." Private consumption became the appropriate form of political public expression. This shift can still be seen in American landscape in the "landscape of mass consumption": suburbia, strip malls, and highways. In short, suburbia is an extension of Keynesian policies. She detests this growth, finding it socially destructive at the expense of economic growth. Suburbs put private consumption ahead of all other considerations—in this way her book can be compared with Rome and Galbraith. Sprawl created a racial and economic exclusivity yet to be overcome. She hopes for a return to a landscape characterized by social equality, not clear delineations in the landscape depicting economic disparity.

Cohen's argument is important because it complicates our understanding of American history. She downplays—nay, challenges—the historical assertion that the cold War was the defining influence on post-war America. Her consumer's republic was a post-war strategy "for reconstructing the nation's economy and reaffirming its democratic values through the expansion of mass consumption." (11) This consumers' Republic impacted where and how Americans lived, how and what they consumed, and how they viewed government. The consumer's republic resulted in an economic upswing (Pax Americana), but also added to racial and gender stratification. This occurred through planning (i.e. suburbia, commercial v. residential zoning). Target Marketing by design stratifies by gender and race. Downtowns became decimated in favor of suburbia and malls. Schools were funded unequally based on property taxes. The G.I. bill aided predominantly white males. The 1970s economic crisis collapsed the Consumers' Republic. In response, a growing political aim to aid in privatization and deregulation are justified as aiding the consumer and therefore the entire economy. Consumers view gov't policies as another consumer good to be judged based on individual utility. (review)

At the end of WWII, New Deal era labor and consumers' movements lost the battle to retain price controls. This defeat combined with postwar reconversion legislation and shifted power away from New Deal models of consumer citizenship towards white, male, middle-class consumers. The women now became not an active member of political action, but a Keynesian pawn held to her home to consume. There were notable exceptions: boycotts and sit-ins of civil rights activists come to mind. Her book attempts to answer Michael Denning's argument about the "laboring of American culture" during the New Deal.

Stephen says

What is the meaning of citizenship? To the Romans, and to the early Americans, citizenship was an exclusive state of being that depended on owning land, and so a stake in society. In the early twentieth century, however, as suffrage waxed more universal and markets were flooded with goods made for the masses, citizenship took on a different meaning. To be a citizen of a modern, capitalist democracy was to be a Consumer; voices rang out most strongly at the marketplace, not the ballot box. In A Consumer's Republic, author Lizbeth Cohen examines the way the burgeoning consumer market effected political activism. Beginning with consumer activist groups who protested high prices amid the Depression, her history examines the Civil Rights and feminist movements through the lens of consumption. Consumer equality, not income distribution, would create a classless society. Women fought for the right to have their own bank accounts and lines of credit in addition to equal wages; blacks labored for just prices in stores as well as unhindered access to the vote. This is an account of social, political, marketing history, intertwined together. Consumption didn't just serve individual desires; as Keynsianism became the dominant economic philosophy, intellectuals and citizen-consumers alike saw their compulsive buying as not only fun, but patriotic: their every new gadget grew the economy. The consumers' republic began to die in the 1970s and 1980s amid economic turbulence; even though people continued to buy more and more, the political aspect of their purchasing, the meaning they had given it, fell away, both because the economy no longer responded as Keynes promised and their motives became more purely self-focused and only tangently connected to the thought of improving the nation's fortunes.

Although occasionally touching on the negative aspects of the rapidly expanding consumer culture -- the growth of suburbia, for instance -- A Consumers' Republic is not a polemic raging against consumerism, and effects open to interpretation, like the consequences of consumerism on citizens' peace of mind, are not touched on. It has a scholarly feel, though a 'popular' look; the art is well-done, including plenty of large black and white photographs that demonstrate the point at hand, and stylized headings that bring to mind advertisements from the 1950s. One particularly effective illustration shows the evolution of advertising in Ebony magazine from the 1950s to the 1970s, as white-owned haircare manufactures realized that (1) blacks were a market and (2) that black people were a different market. They gradually transition from a white model demonstrating hair treatment lotion to a black model advertising products related to 'natural' hair. Republic is a fascinating look at another side of the rise of consumption, impressively thorough in that respect, and free of scathing criticism if not critical substance.

Mike Hankins says

In "A Consumer's Republic," Lizabeth Cohen tracks how America shifted during the mass production of World War 2 into a nation based largely on consumerism as a road to prosperity. Her analysis is solid, and the book is well written for the most part. It's a great source, except that most readers will probably not learn much that they didn't already know. Most of this information seems commonly known, and the book is quite longer than it needs to be.

Electrified by the shock of World War 2 and the mass production, high employment, and massive amounts of earnings it generated for workers, the United States soon found itself in a booming economy where mass

consumption and marketing became defining characteristics of everyday life. Cohen distinguishes between "citizen consumers," who equated consumption with civic duty and used buy power as a weapon to achieve political and social change -- and "purchaser consumers," who simply mass consumed a variety of goods and services. Lifestyles drastically changed as cars became common. Suburbs grew outside the city, generating their own shopping complexes and encouraging commuter lifestyles.

Not all of this expansion was good, as the suburbs, and their local shops and school systems, fostered more division both between races and between ethnic classes. Cohen examines how African Americans were often discriminated against in housing developments and shops, and how many of them were able to leverage their buying power to achieve significant headway in the civil rights arena. Women also found increases in their status as purchasers. Consumption became a way to demonstrate power, as businesses clamored for customers. Consumers could leverage their buying power into gaining regulations to protect their safety (such as FDA standards) or by organizing boycotts and sit-ins to achieve equal access for minorities.

Cohen also emphasizes the strength of mass marketing techniques to tap into the growing buying power of post-war America. Advertising became a science as companies learned to target particular demographic groups for their products. This carried over into politics as well. The Eisenhower campaign specifically made use of marketing techniques, a process which grew to the situation we have today, where many people feel that political candidates are just clamoring for votes through marketing techniques.

The book is a solid source, its filled with great information, its well written and well organized. Cohen does spend far too much time detailing local conditions of her home state of New Jersey, focusing on the town she grew up in. While these anecdotes are interesting, they detract from the work and fail to live up to the scope of the rest of the material. Thus the book could easily lose a hundred pages without losing any real content. Also, most of the information here doesn't seem new. Sure there are nuggets of interesting information here and there, but her points -- while valid and likely correct -- don't tread new ground. This is a great resource to use for the topic of mass consumption in post-war America (perhaps the best source for this topic) but very little of this will be surprising to students of American history. Nonetheless, its a solid read, well worth a look.
