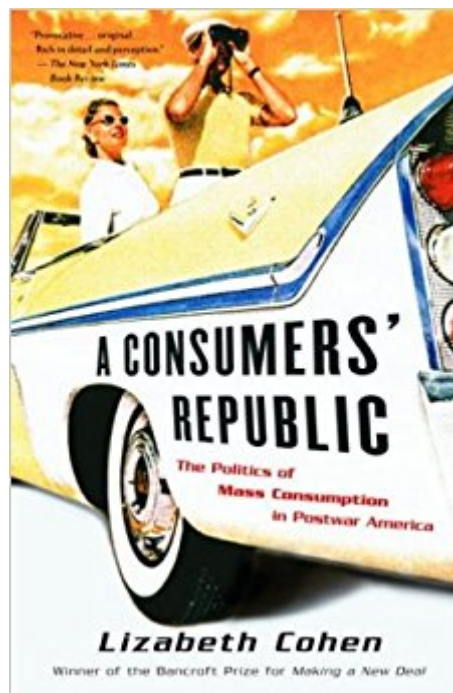




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# A Consumers' Republic: The Politics Of Mass Consumption In Postwar America



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

After WWII, Americans' lives were shaped by economic, political, social and cultural structures premised on the notion that mass consumption would bring widespread prosperity and social equality. In an ideal America, mass consumption would "provide jobs, purchasing power, and investment dollars, while also allowing Americans to live better than ever before, participate in political decision-making on an equal footing with their similarly prospering neighbors, and to exercise their cherished freedoms by making independent choices in markets and politics."

Although the postwar era offered a period of unprecedented affluence and encouraged certain

forms of political activism, Bancroft Prize-winning historian Cohen (*Making a New Deal*) powerfully illustrates the consumer culture's failures in terms of social egalitarianism. The postwar housing shortage spawned suburbs that starkly emphasized class and racial differences; well-intentioned innovations, such as the GI bill, had little impact on women, working-class men and African-Americans; targeted marketing segmented citizens along class, gender, age, race and ethnic lines, accentuating divisions and undermining commonalities; and economic inequality expanded greatly during the past three decades. Cohen's sharp and incisive history particularly highlights the struggles of blacks seeking civil rights and women pursuing greater representation within the republic, illuminating the ways that mass consumption both helped and hindered their progress. Ultimately, Cohen asks whether mass consumption has successfully created a more egalitarian and democratic American society. The answer is balanced, judicious and laced with suggestions for how American citizens can begin to articulate a common vision for the future, even as the nation's population grows ever more diverse. 64 illus., 3 maps. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**\*Starred Review\*** Without question, this is a difficult, demanding, and dense book--but it is also a greatly significant contribution to this season's business literature. Cohen, author of the prizewinning *Making a New Deal* (1990), submits a copiously researched, brilliantly conceived, and ultimately quite instructive study of American economics since the Depression. Stated in its simplest terms, her thesis, which she elaborately, even excitingly develops, is that from the 1930s until the present day, particularly since WW II, the U.S. defines what she calls a consumer republic: "an economy, culture, and politics built around the promises of mass consumption." She posits that within the second half of the twentieth century, good consumerism and good citizenship became twin concepts--ideals that were mutually inclusive. The belief arose and gained veracity that to maintain American might, the good citizen must also be the good consumer. The ramifications of this political notion are explored in various aspects of how and where Americans lived over the past half-century, with considerable attention paid to the effect of the consumer republic on black Americans. Not just for business readers but also for those who are serious about history, political science, and sociology. Brad Hooper Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Lizabeth Cohen writes that the federal government stimulated the economy first and foremost through its commitment to becoming the arsenal of democracy™.

which translated concretely into the expenditure of billions of dollars for armaments. (p. 63) To deal with issues on the home front, President Roosevelt created the Office of Price Administration and Civilian Supply (OPA) that, in 1942, issued the General Maximum Price Regulation what became known as General Max™ requiring merchants to set ceiling prices for goods at the highest price they had charged during March [of 1942] and granting the OPA specific powers of enforcement. (p. 65) The OPA's primary objective was to curb inflation and, in that regard, it was fairly successful. Cohen writes, in contrast to an inflation rate of 62 percent in World War I, prices rose less than 8 percent during the last two years of World War II, and crucial military material found its way to the front. (p. 66) The OPA convinced consumers to follow guidelines by creating new rituals of patriotic citizenship such as obeying OPA price, rent, and rationing regulations and reporting violators; participating in recycling, scrap, and waste fat drives; planting Victory Gardens as putting up the harvest. (p. 67) The OPA instilled this new mindset successfully due to the survival of prosperity amid sacrifice in conditions where, even when observant of salvaging, rationing, and other market regulations, Americans managed to live better during the war than they had during the Great Depression. (p. 69) Women took an active role in consumer activism as well. Cohen writes, loyal female citizens were defined in consumerist ways, as keepers of the homefront fires through their own disciplined, patriotic market behavior as well as through the enforcement of high moral standards in others. (p. 75) Women became more politically active to this respect. While men may still have run major wartime agencies like the OPA, women were much more visible politically than they had been in the heyday of the New Deal. (p. 77) In bureaucracy, women's new authority was most evident on the state and local level, for here they served as key administrators. (p. 78) In this way, women consumers were seen as the legitimate representatives of the public interest to elevate women to a new, official level of civic authority. (p. 79) African Americans, while excluded from the OPA, were able to exert their own influence as well. To this end, African Americans supported price and rent controls and the rationing of scarce goods even more enthusiastically than did the average white American, recognizing in them the potential not just for fair treatment during wartime, but also for redress of the overcharging and other market exploitation that was their common lot in the hands of inner-city storekeepers and landlords. (p. 85) Price controls weren't enforced as well in black neighborhoods to the result that African Americans continued to pay from 3 to 12 percent more for groceries than whites in comparable neighborhoods. (p. 87) Finally, after a

summer of violence in Harlem in 1943, the OPA admitted its responsibility for the mistreatment of blacks under price control. (p. 88) This led first to a series of sanctions and warnings, and eventually the OPA relented and declared New York City a war rental area, finally establishing the rent control for which Harlem tenants were desperate. (p. 88) According to Cohen, what was probably most significant to the shift to market segmentation was the post-war explosion of market researchers' interest in consumer motivation, prevalent enough to attract scathing condemnation for its manipulative dangers from social critic Vance Packard. (p. 298) The shift was one from 'who' and 'what' to 'why' people bought; thus opening the door to the possibility of greater diversity in consumers' behavior and attitudes. (p. 298) Cohen states, 'by the 1970s continued interest in the psychological dimension of consuming would lead to the emergence of psychographics, a term coined to mean the combining of demographic and psychological factors to define market segments.' (p. 299) Following this, links extended to social science disciplines other than psychology, helping further to conceptualize buyers as heterogeneous. (p. 299) In this way, 'the growing influence of social science on marketing prepared the way for market segmentation and, in turn, gave practitioners more precise tools for identifying and catering to segments of consumers.' (p. 301) Among the ways in which marketers segmented the markets was 'by some version of social class,' though, 'with the shift to market segmentation and particularly the rise of psychographics by the 1960s, marketers turned class differentiation from an income to a lifestyle distinction' which led marketers to pay 'particular attention to the working class.' (p. 310-311) To this end, 'manufactures and sellers of goods ranging from furniture to clothing to magazines hired marketing researchers to help them figure out what working people wanted.' (p. 311) In the 1980s, 'income inequality in America grew and working-class people had less money to spend' so 'marketers and manufacturers shifted their prime target to upper-class consumers with more disposable cash.' (p. 312) The differentiation of the sexes was the next shift 'as men gained more influence over consumption, accompanying their wives more frequently on shopping expeditions and exerting new control with the expansion of credit' and so 'men and women increasingly became viewed as separate, profitable market segments with distinctive desires and responsibilities, no longer a single family market.' (p. 313-314) The final segments were teenagers, which 'became defined as a unique consumer experience: buying certain kinds of things' 'records, clothes, makeup, movies, and fast food

“in certain kinds of places” shopping centers, drive-in theaters, and car hop restaurants, and minorities, with the most significant segment consisting of African Americans. (p. 319-323) As to politics, the application of mass marketing techniques to the political arena dates back to the turn of the century, though it reached a new level of intensity in the 1930s. (p. 332) It was Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952 and again in 1956 that brought mass marketing fully into the political arena, sounding the death knell for campaigning by whistle-stop tours, street parades, and grassroots organizations. (p. 333) In the 1960s, the advent of market segmentation later that decade would change the rules of the game for political marketing, as it had for product marketing, pushing campaigns and electioneering away from selling to the Lowest Common Denominator toward crafting special messages for distinctive segments about whom more and more was becoming known through increasingly sophisticated polling. (p. 336) When the Kennedys took control at the Democratic National Convention, Sargent Shriver was promptly dispatched to reach out to as many of these groups as possible, including Germans, Italians, Poles, Spanish, farmers, labor, senior citizens, the youth, and civil rights groups. (p. 337-338) In this way, market segmentation techniques were not only implemented in candidate campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s; they were also called on to help mobilize voters around controversial issues and their impacts were campaign duels between televised advertisements, packaged candidates known more by image than substance, and party conventions that are no more than infomercials. (p. 341) According to Cohen, suburban town centers proved inadequate to support all the consumption desired by the influx of new residents along with suburban consumers increasingly viewing returning to urban downtowns to shop as inconvenient, and retailers coming to realize that suburban residents offered a lucrative frontier ripe for conquest. (p. 257) These factors led to the creation of the regional shopping center as a new form of community marketplace. (p. 257) Following the war, only the most ambitious suburban tracts built had developers incorporated stores into their plans. (p. 258) This changed, however, when by 1957, 940 shopping centers had already been built. (p. 258) Unlike the small, independent stores found in cities, each shopping center had two to three department stores as anchors surrounded by fifty to seventy smaller stores. (p. 259) In building these shopping centers, developers set out to perfect the concept of downtown, not to obliterate it. (p. 261) In their eyes, a centrally owned and managed Garden State Plaza or Bergen Mall offered an alternative model to the inefficiencies, visual chaos, and provinciality

of traditional downtown districts. (p. 263) To achieve this goal, various mall planning boards were encouraging members and their communities to use appropriate zoning and site development controls to encourage this desirable trend of making centers real downtowns for the surrounding area. (p. 264-265) One example of the increase in shoppers that shopping centers generated was found in the anecdote of Jack Shuster. Shuster opened two toy stores in 1962, one in downtown Rochester, the other in the suburban Pittsford Plaza; not only were unit sales four times higher in Pittsford, but charge accounts were opened and used there at twenty-five times the rate of downtown. (p. 281) While a greater population congregated at shopping centers, they were private property and so an unintended consequence of the American shift in orientation from public town center to private shopping center was the narrowing of the ground where constitutionally protected free speech and free assembly can legally take place. (p. 277) Eventually, a series of court rulings would vaguely define what type of free speech was allowed, though it would shift from favoring the storeowners to the customers depending on the prevailing political atmosphere. Discussing the gendered consumer republic, Cohen writes, "The pejorative labels of 'female' and 'weak' also undermined the consumer movement more broadly. Whereas its reputation as female-dominated had once given it prestige as a voice of morality and the public interest, in the new postwar world female identification only tainted the consumer movement as out of step with the times and, accompanied by a decline in ordinary women's consumer activism, contributed to its decline. (pg. 135) That said, norms, whether conveyed through ideals presented on television or via government tax policies, of course, are not the same as social realities. Women could "and did " break with those norms every day. (pg. 150) Cohen writes of the remnants of consumer representation in the 1950s, "What advocacy for consumer persisted through the 1950s, then, was undertaken by maverick (and sometimes opportunistic) lawmakers such as Congressman Roberts, Illinois Senator Paul Douglas " a champion of truth-in-lending " and Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver, who, as chairman of the Senate Antitrust and Monopoly Subcommittee, went on the attack against the prescriptions drug industry, rather than by any bottom-up mobilization of consumers, with the major exception of civil rights activism. (pg. 348) Cohen describes the rising tide of consumer activism in the 1960s, but does not discuss comics. However, she writes, "Women served as the foot soldiers and the leadership of the third-wave consumer movement, much as they had for its predecessors during the Progressive Era and the New Deal. When Esther Peterson served President Johnson as his special assistant for

consumer affairs, she was faced with a groundswell of grassroots agitation from  
housewives for such goals as lower supermarket prices, fewer price-raising  
promotional gimmicks like games and trading stamps, better inspection of consumer scales, and  
more honest advertising of specials. (pg. 367)

A brilliantly composed overview of what happened to America after World War II in terms of how the  
flight to the suburbs was on one level an escape from the blacks occupying the inner city....and how  
shopping/consuming became identified as growing the economy. To shop was to benefit everyone  
else by insuring their jobs would continue. The detail of her research are extremely impressive.

Lizabeth Cohen is my new found hero. Read the book. I am half way through so I cant comment  
fully. So far it make me understand why although I hate landfills. Wal - or any mart, oil driven greed  
and developement. Hypocracy in government and media spin. Why I am powerless over  
consuming. Which is helping me identify how I can be a solution or remain a "victim," to the  
consumer becoming the consumed.

Lizabeth Cohen's "A Consumers' Republic" does much to explain how citizenship has been  
significantly redefined by consumerism in postwar America. The thoroughly readable book is full of  
insights and should interest all readers of 20th century American history. It will also prompt many to  
ponder how America might try to heal its frayed society while there is time available to do so. In the  
Acknowledgements, Ms. Cohen explains that this impressive book was written over the course of  
ten years. Her thesis profited from audience feedback at numerous college lectures and  
presentations she made during this time and with able assistance from a number of talented student  
researchers. With over 400 pages of text and 100 pages of notes, the book represents a remarkable  
achievement and is a testament to Ms. Cohen's intelligent use of the academic research  
process. Ms. Cohen is in top form when she chronicles the struggles of women and  
African-Americans to assert their rights in what she calls the "Consumers' Republic" of 1945 to  
1975. The author provides background material by documenting how a variety of bread-and-butter  
consumer issues mobilized millions into action from the Depression through WWII. Ms. Cohen then  
shows how power gained by women and minorities through their contributions to the war effort later  
found expression in the Civil Rights, women's liberation and other movements of the 1950s and  
1960s. However, Ms. Cohen explains that policy makers in the aftermath of WWII were influenced  
and corrupted by, among other things, unparalleled levels of corporate power and ideological rivalry



with the Soviet Union. Mass consumption was seen as a solution to help keep manufacturing profits high and was propagandized in order to prove to the world that the U.S. was practically a classless society. The reality was different, of course. The author discusses how racial, gender and class biases were reaffirmed and institutionalized by the GI Bill and other legislative acts. As a result of Ms. Cohen's extraordinary research, the reader comes to understand that the increasingly stratified post-WWII American society that resulted was not inevitable but was shaped by powerful interests who privileged private sector solutions at the expense of the public. In my view, the only shortcomings in this ambitious book are Ms. Cohen's failure to discuss the environmental consequences of consumerism and her omission of the student revolt against the military/industrial complex in the 1960s. But overall, these are minor quibbles. "A Consumers' Republic" delivers plenty of thought-provoking material and is a pleasure to read. The book is highly recommended to everyone who might want to gain perspective on contemporary American society and further consider where it might be headed.

This book is a fascinating history of our consumer habits in the US. It makes me think a lot about my own consumer ideas and the consumerism of the society I live in today, based on the foundations described in this book. I have purchased this book also because there are examples of consumer trends all over the US, but there are also some extensive descriptions of protests by African American citizens in response to unfair restrictions in businesses, particularly in NJ, that were of interest to me.

Though this book is somewhat lengthy but it gives a quite comprehensive account of mass consumption in the postwar era.

A good read from a good perspective.

Yeah its good

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