

Luxurious Citizens. The Politics of Consumption in Nineteenth-Century America by Joanna Cohen, Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, 284pp, 16 illus, [£39.00] (hardback) ISBN 978-0-8122-4892-0

As the subtitle of Joanna Cohen's carefully researched and eminently readable book suggests, the author's attention is firmly on the ways in which the American consumer was constructed by politicians, political economists, lobbyists, newspaper editors, retailers and the like in the century after Independence. We are encouraged to look at how others saw consumers and how they wanted them to behave, rather than how consumers saw themselves or how and what they consumer – although we gather some useful insights into both of these along the way. The brief introduction sets the scene and tone for the rest of the book, but lacks sustained engagement with the historiography of consumption or of the concept of the consumer citizen.

The six substantive chapters that follow break the period into shorter episodes, but they also frame the overall narrative as a series of different constructions of the American citizen as consumer. We start with post-Independence dilemma over the consumption of British goods. The notion of the patriotic consumer – so powerful during the Revolutionary period and paralleling a similar construction in France (a comparison not explored by Cohen) – proved impossible to sustain and generated an economic crisis. The resolution of this was found in accepting that luxury consumption by some (i.e. wealthy) citizens could be of national benefit, with the federal government garnering much-needed income via import taxes. In the second episode, focusing on the 1810s, economic conflict with Britain turned to military hostilities. Neither in the trade war or the actual war that followed could Americans be persuaded to boycott British goods: American manufactures were insufficient in quality

and quantity to meet demand, and citizens rejected the models being placed upon them.

The third chapter turns to conflict between merchants and auctioneers over control of the growing market for consumer goods in the 1810s and 1820s. Initially ignoring consumers as agents in this process, they later constructed them as helpless victims in need of protection and then, more realistically, as knowledgeable and self-interested. Linking this to the bigger picture, Cohen argues persuasively that this was a crucial moment in the development of American political economy as the power of the consumer and the primacy of free choice were enshrined. Import taxes had long been the key mechanism by which the Federal government raised revenue; in 1824 they followed the example of numerous European countries by introducing a whole raft of tariffs aimed at protecting domestic production of consumer goods. These impacted on consumers in terms of higher prices, but also through related campaigns – orchestrated by organisations such as the Franklin and American Institutes – that aimed to encourage American householders to buy American goods, an act that was framed as part of the civic duty and linked to the idealisation of the thrifty consumer and the plain yet comfortable American home. As Cohen demonstrates, consumers once again resisted, forcing politicians and campaigners to recognise the legitimacy of consumers' desire for luxury and for the freedom to choose goods regardless of their provenance. This closer alignment of construction and reality was more apparent in the retailing and advertising boom which forms the focus of chapter 5. During the 1840s and 1850s, the number and range of retail outlets grew, as did retailers' attempts to persuade consumers to buy from their stores. Again, looking across to Europe and (earlier) deployment of window displays, newspaper advertisements and trade cards would have formed a useful context for the analysis. This would have provided context for Cohen's arguments about the growing recognition of women's agency as consumers and about the

anxieties that shopkeepers expressed about distinguishing their idealisation of a refined, respectable and responsible consumer from those who could defraud the unwary retailer by adopting this persona. The same could be argued for the way in which the possession of material goods and domestic comfort was seen by contemporaries as a mark of the North's superior political economy. The contrast drawn between the virtues of a Northern republic of free labour and the slave-owning Southern states have powerful echoes of the distinctions drawn at the turn of the nineteenth century between the comforts enjoyed in an economically prosperous and politically stable Britain and the feckless luxury and autocratic rule seen elsewhere in Europe. In both cases, material prosperity was a sign of political as well as economic "success". Instead, Cohen's analysis of the war years focuses on the attempts of both sides to make consumption a patriotic activity – something which was markedly more successful in the North than the South, where calls for restraint often seem to fallen on deaf ears.

In the short epilogue, Cohen starts, as she does each of the chapters, with a revealing case study. Here, we meet Anna K. Baker, who has recently visited the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition and has decided to purchase a willow pattern dinner service from the English trade stand, along with a couple of German pitchers. Cohen's treatment of this story illustrates her ability to connect mundane events with broader developments in the broader political economy – a key strength of the book and one that makes what could be a rather abstract discussion alive with people and places. Yet it also demonstrates a problem. Anna Baker's purchase is analysed purely as a political act: choosing to buy a British product is seen as odd, given that the event was intended to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of Independence. What seems to be forgotten here – and often elsewhere in the book – is that consumers were not only political but also social,

economic and human; so too were retailers, auctioneers, manufacturers and merchants.

Anna's purchase can be seen in all manner of political lights, but we should not forget the numerous other motivations that drove her and others involved in buying and selling.

Perhaps she just liked willow pattern.

Jon Stobart

Manchester Metropolitan University

J.stobart@mmu.ac.uk