

## Essay Reviews

### Learning in a Consumers' Republic

Kathleen G. Donohue. *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. 326pp. Cloth \$45.95, paper \$25.00.

Daniel Horowitz. *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939–1979*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004. 339pp. Cloth \$29.95.

Jessamyn Neuhaus. *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. 336pp. Cloth \$37.25.

Sylvie Murray. *The Progressive Housewife: Community Activism in Suburban Queens, 1945–1965*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. 252pp. Cloth \$35.00.

Lizabeth Cohen. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. 567pp. Cloth \$35.00; paper \$11.87.

### Kim Tolley

In 1955, when the economist Milton Friedman first suggested vouchers as a means of improving public education, he emphasized the potential of consumers in a free market, rather than professional educators, to stimulate and drive effective reform.<sup>1</sup> For many American educators today, few contemporary topics remain as polarizing as *school choice*, a term that serves as proxy for a range of market-based models of school organization and

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Kim Tolley is Associate Professor in the School of Education and Leadership at Notre Dame de Namur University, California. She is the author of *The Science Education of American Girls: A Historical Perspective* (New York, 2002); co-editor (with Nancy Beadie) of *Chartered Schools: Two Hundred Years of Independent Academies in the United States, 1727–1925* (New York, 2003) and editor of the forthcoming book, *Transformations in Schooling: Comparative and Historical Perspectives*. Readers can contact her at: ktolley@ndnu.edu.

<sup>1</sup>Milton Friedman, "The Role of Government in Education," in R. A. Solo (Ed.), *Economics and the Public Interest* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 123–144.

funding, from the outright privatization of public school facilities and services to school voucher systems, charter schools, and magnet schools. Supporters argue that public school systems will respond to free market incentives with increased innovation and improved academic performance; opponents claim that the effects will either be marginal or that choice will lead to greater social inequities. Underlying the debate are hopes and anxieties about the extent to which—if unbridled—American consumer culture might impact formal systems of schooling.

Despite a growing academic literature on the role of the marketplace in current school choice initiatives, much of the secondary literature in education history has focused on the individuals and organizations that have produced formal systems of schooling rather than on education markets and the social contexts that have shaped them. The appearance of new scholarship on the history of American consumer culture is, therefore, both timely and relevant to the field of education history, particularly for students and scholars seeking to trace the historical roots of modern-day consumerist thinking in education.

The five books examined in this essay analyze changing American attitudes about consumption, consumer activism, and affluence. Each suggests a number of avenues for historical research on the relation between the development of formal systems of schooling, education markets, and American beliefs about the relative roles of producers and consumers. Taken together, they depict a broad paradigm shift in American views about consumers and the potential of the marketplace to generate and sustain “the good life” in a democratic society.

### **The Shift from a Producerist to a Consumerist Worldview**

In *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer*, Kathleen G. Donohue presents a delightfully complex exploration of a sea change among American intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She considers two related questions: First, how did American thinkers come to embrace Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “freedom from want” as an essential human freedom? Second, why did most twentieth-century American thinkers, unlike intellectuals in other countries, ultimately pin their hopes on liberalism rather than socialism? This fascinating and beautifully written book traces the transformation of American nineteenth-century classical liberalism into its twentieth-century counterpart.

By the late eighteenth century, American political thinkers embraced freedom from fear, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion as the defining principles of liberalism. As Donohue points out, Roosevelt’s fourth freedom—freedom from want—had never been a fundamental principle of classical liberalism. Classical liberals had long argued that the only way to guarantee

freedom from want would be through an illiberal redistribution of wealth. Doing so would violate a central economic tenet of classical liberalism, the belief that producers should be free to enjoy the full product of their labor. According to Yale sociologist William Graham Sumner, a man strongly committed to what Donohue terms “the producerist worldview,” the poor remained poor because they did not produce. “Whatever capital you divert to the support of a shiftless and good-for-nothing person is so much diverted from some other employment and that means from somebody else,” he cautioned. In Sumner’s view, when the government used tax money to establish pensions, museums, libraries, and parks, it functioned as a sort of “misguided Robin Hood, robbing from the productive and giving to the nonproductive” (p.15).

Although many classical economists acknowledged the role of consumption in the economic process, they generally valued production far more than consumption. Donohue argues that intellectuals facilitated the transformation from classical liberalism to its twentieth-century counterpart by emphasizing consumers over producers and consumption over production. She analyzes the writings of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social critics—including Simon Patten, Edward Bellamy, Richard T. Ely, and Thorstein Veblen—who reconsidered the connection between one’s right to consume and one’s role in the production process.

The intellectuals who challenged the prevailing producerist wisdom were a disparate lot, hailing from a variety of professions, ascribing to diverse worldviews, and representing both ends of the political spectrum. Simon Patten, professor of the Wharton School of Business, argued that alterations in society’s consumption choices could alleviate poverty. He defined inappropriate consumption as “the consumption of goods that nature could produce only with difficulty” (p. 44). Because Patten viewed the appropriate consumer, not as a parasite, but as a contributor in determining the amount of wealth society had at its disposal, his theories laid the foundation for a consumer-oriented political economy. The social commentator Edward Bellamy also questioned the producerist approach to wealth distribution by suggesting that consumers, as citizens, were the owners of inherited intellectual capital, and as such, they had as legitimate a claim to the nation’s wealth as did any other owners of capital. The economist Richard T. Ely further buttressed the role of the consumer in the political economy by gradually moving from a discussion of “harmful consumption” toward the concept of a “right of consumption” (p. 70). For Ely, shifting the focus from producer to consumer offered a way to minimize the class-struggle implications of a socialist order. Donohue points out that for Ely, and many other twentieth-century American intellectuals, Marxism represented the ascendancy of a producerist form of socialism, a worldview difficult to reconcile with the consumer-oriented socialism emerging in the United States.

Despite the emergence of a more positive view toward consumption among nineteenth-century intellectuals, Donohue demonstrates that the pejorative connotations surrounding the term *consumer* survived beyond the 1880s. For example, in *Women and Economics* (1898), Charlotte Perkins Gilman evidenced a producerist worldview when she argued that women's second-class status in society resulted, in part, because "men were allowed to be producers while women were forced into the ranks of consumers" (p. 32). Gilman viewed this as problematic, because in her view, humans did not produce to consume; they produced because it was human nature to do so. Only by granting women the power to produce could the corrupting influence of the consumer identity be eliminated.

According to Donohue, ideas about the consumer and the producer reached a crossroads in the Progressive Era. During this period academics and reformers made positive definitions of the consumer part of the mainstream political-economic discourse. Progressive Era thinkers were primarily interested in the economic implications of placing the consumer at the center of the political economy. In contrast, the next generation of thinkers called for a political system that revolved around the consumer-citizen. They constructed a consumerist alternative to the producerist paradigm that their predecessors had effectively challenged. She also considers the politicization of these ideas, beginning with the establishment of a more consumer-oriented liberalism by Walter Lippman and Walter Weyl and culminating in the New Deal Era, during which these ideas evolved into public policy embodied in the National Recovery Administration and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration.

Although her book is an intellectual history, Donohue pays attention to the social and economic context in which academics and reformers developed their ideas. She notes that the very forces that made the producer such a positive identity in the American political economy eventually eroded support for the producerist perspective. Donohue argues that the producerist worldview was largely a response to industrialism. As industrialization expanded, American intellectuals grappled with basic economic questions. Who should benefit from the increase in productivity made possible by technology—the workers who built and operated the machines or the capitalists who owned them? "Socialists offered one set of answers, classical liberals another, and agrarian populists yet another" (p. 5).

Unlike intellectuals in other countries, American consumerist thinkers ultimately pinned their hopes on liberalism rather than socialism. Donohue explains this choice as the result of the privation of the Depression, the phenomenal productivity of the post-World War II economy, and the growing tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. As she notes in her conclusion, mid-twentieth century consumerist ideas did not displace producerist ideas; rather, they coexisted in many New Deal programs.

For example, unemployment and social security benefit programs favored “producing” over “nonproducing” citizens. Along the same lines, farm subsidies and minimum-wage legislation ultimately benefited producers. Donohue concludes that the New Deal embodied not so much the ascendancy of consumerist ideas as a “blending of both producerist and consumerist ideas into a new understanding of the relationship between government and citizens” (p. 277).

Donohue’s rich and compelling analysis of the rise and fall of classical liberalism among American thinkers is relevant to education historiography of the early national period. Although a few northeastern states provided state funds to support schooling prior to 1850, the elimination of partial tuition payments and full provision of public schooling did not become widespread in the United States until near the end of the nineteenth century. The ideas expressed by producerist thinkers like Sumner can be found in the statements expressed by many nineteenth-century state legislators—North and South—who argued against the expenditure of public funds to support education. Donohue provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the paradigm that allowed these views to dominate education for the first hundred years of the nation’s existence.

### Twentieth-Century Critiques of Affluence and Consumer Culture

Whereas Donohue touches on the ideas of twentieth-century critics of American-style consumption in the final chapters of her book, Daniel Horowitz places critiques of American consumerism squarely at the center. In *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939–1979*, Horowitz explores the intellectual debates of the twentieth century over America’s growing affluence and consumer culture.

As Americans embraced consumption in the twentieth century, social critics worried about the negative effects of increased affluence on the national character, the environment, and the poor. Horowitz investigates the reactions of intellectuals and social activists to the growing prosperity of the American middle class after the Second World War. Analyzing the works of such figures as social commentators Ernest Dichter and George Katona, historians David M. Potter and Christopher Lasch, economist John Kenneth Galbraith, journalist Vance Packard, feminist Betty Friedan, anthropologist Oscar Lewis, scientists Rachel Carson and Paul Ehrlich, writers Lewis Mumford, Paul Goodman, and Michael Harrington, sociologists Daniel Bell and Robert Bellah, and Martin Luther King, Jr., he documents a persistent distrust of consumption’s merits. His findings suggest that the anxieties of Americans about the value and morality of consumption, far from having been resolved during the New Deal Era, persisted throughout the twentieth century.

Taking the postwar period as his starting point, Horowitz deftly interweaves five themes throughout the book: 1) the persistence of moralistic attitudes toward consumer culture; 2) the role of intellectuals in shaping social movements; 3) the relation of books and cultural trends during the period from 1939 to 1979; 4) a transformation of the 1950s Cold-War consensus, by the 1970s, as a result of widespread discontent over politics and inflation, and 5) the rise of a “post-moralist” era and consumer activism in the final decades of the twentieth century.

Like Donohue, Horowitz identifies the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War as important factors in legitimizing consumption in mainstream American culture. These three events “established the connection between the defense of democratic capitalism and the promise of the postwar expansion of affluence” (p. 12). As a counter to Soviet communism, the so-called Cold War consensus emphasized the role of democratic capitalism in creating an increasingly affluent and expanding middle class. Intellectuals like Ernest Dichter and George Katona believed that a consumption economy would prevent the United States from experiencing the totalitarianism, inflation, and social disruption that had plagued Europe during the interwar era. Horowitz traces the story of the rise and fall of the Cold War consensus, charting “the shift from the celebration of democratic affluence as a basis for American superiority to less confident understandings of the impact of global markets on national life” (p. 7).

Horowitz documents a persistent anxiety about the quest for more and more affluence, even in the midst of the most enthusiastic postwar endorsements of American consumption. In the 1950s and 1960s, several prominent thinkers criticized Dichter’s and Katona’s argument that consumption, capitalism, and democracy were interrelated. For example, John Kenneth Galbraith argued that Americans had become obsessed with the pursuit of private wealth at the expense of the public good. He called on the federal government to address a growing imbalance between an increasingly prosperous middle class and the financially strapped public sector. Vance Packard argued that Americans’ drive for higher social status and material goods had damaged society, leaving millions of citizens frightened by “anxieties, inferiority feelings, and straining generated by this unending process of rating and status striving” (p. 112). Betty Friedan argued that women had been trapped by affluence. She exhorted women to resist the lure of consumer culture and develop authentic identities. Other social critics voiced concern over the impact of unmitigated consumption on the natural environment. For instance, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* detailed the environmental costs of affluence and launched a long-standing social movement. Horowitz also traces the rise of consumer activism in the causes of racial justice, population control, and consumer protection. He identifies

Martin Luther King, Jr., Paul Ehrlich, and Ralph Nader as leading consumer activists who often exhorted their readers both to moderate their consumption and to use their power as consumers to effect social change.

By the 1970s, Americans' confidence seemed spent regarding democratic capitalism's ability to create boundless affluence. The country faced a looming energy crisis and rising inflation. Many social commentators agreed with Paul and Anne Ehrlich's assessment that "the end of affluence" had arrived (p. 203), and along with President Jimmy Carter, they called for national and personal restraints on consumption. Horowitz's final chapter documents how intellectuals like Daniel Bell, Robert N. Bellah, and Christopher Lasch influenced national policy during that era and also analyzes President Carter's response to the energy crisis and social malaise of the 1970s. Drawing on the ideas of Bell, Bellah, and Lasch, Carter called on citizens to "repent of their self-indulgent, materialistic ways and restore to the nation a commitment to public order and delimited affluence" (p. 256).

In his epilogue, Horowitz dates the emergence of what he terms a "post-moralist" vision of consumer culture with the start of the Reagan presidency. He argues that President Ronald Reagan effectively countered Jimmy Carter's pessimistic vision by depicting "an America triumphant—its economy strengthened by limiting government and by unleashing free enterprise, its international standing restored by a resurgence of military power that would defeat the Soviet Union" (p. 245). By rejecting the notion that Americans would have to restrict their consumption and inevitably accept a lower standard of living, Reagan conveyed a renewed confidence in the ability of American consumers to jump-start a sluggish economy. Horowitz reveals how a disparate range of thinkers, including conservative economists, feminists, anthropologists, and cultural critics bolstered this post-moralist vision by emphasizing the liberatory and democratic possibilities of consumer culture. In conclusion, Horowitz points out a modern-day irony. In the wake of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, "the new moralists with regard to consumer culture were the Islamic fundamentalists whose reaction to American affluence and consumer culture was as troubled as their actions were reprehensible" (p. 256).

Both Donohue and Horowitz are gifted writers who have created compelling stories of paradigm shifts in the way Americans have viewed producers, consumers, and the pursuit of affluence. However, one of the drawbacks of any intellectual history is that the reader can never be sure how representative of larger social concerns are the ideas of individual intellectuals; nor does one obtain a sense of how local communities may have interpreted and acted on such ideas. The next three books considered in this essay provide useful counterparts to the more synthetic treatments discussed above, because each presents a historical case study of American consumer culture in a specific context.

## Gender, Consumer Culture, and Suburbia

Jessamyn Neuhaus examines the interaction of cookbooks, gender, and consumer culture in *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America*. Her study raises questions about the means by which historians have timed the rise of a consumer culture in the United States. Traditional historiography centers on the period after the Second World War, placing the Cold War in the foreground. Using quite different sources, Neuhaus's engaging book provides compelling documentary evidence of an earlier shift to a consumer culture in the field of domestic science. By examining the work of cookery authors, rather than the experiences of the women and men who consumed their products, she places producers at the center of this story. Her work reminds us that producers have always played a key role in increasing American appetites for their products, regardless of the disdain nineteenth-century intellectuals may have expressed for the role of consumption in the political economy, long before twentieth-century politicians and policymakers began to urge citizens to consume for the good of the country.

Neuhaus explains that cookbooks and cookery writing expanded during the nineteenth century when white, middle-class domestic science advocates sought to address two related social issues: the shortage of servants in middle-class American kitchens and growing population of immigrant women untrained in cooking American dishes. She argues that after World War I, the focus of domestic scientists—later known as home economists—shifted from training working-class, immigrant women to raising middle-class women's consciousness as consumers of home products. Although Neuhaus does not examine cooking in schoolrooms, her focus on cookbooks and cookery writing reminds us that these sources are significant educational texts in their own right, appearing not only in home kitchens but also in home economics classrooms.

Students and scholars interested in the home economics movement will appreciate the compelling picture Neuhaus paints of the close relationship among producers, advertisers, and home economists. Home economists employed by utility companies churned out recipe pamphlets, while the volume and sophistication of advertising copy in magazines and newspapers increased enormously. "By the 1920s, food-processing companies such as Kraft-Henix and Kellogg employed hundreds of home economists to develop recipes and give product testimonials. Other companies—Sears, Roebuck for example—followed suit and hired home economists in their product development, sales, and publicity departments" (p. 30).

Cookbooks reflected the nation's changing political, economic, and social concerns. During the interwar years, some cookbook authors linked patriotism, democracy, and home cooking. The post-World War I "Red



Scare” led many Americans to reject social practices described as “communal.” This fear spilled over into popular portrayals of cooking. According to one 1933 text, without democratic home cooking, “You and your husband will sally out three times a day with your food tickets and sit down in the communal dining hall of your district and be fed...I should correct that and say, you and your comrade of the moment; for you will not be married in any sense worth considering; since the family as a social unit will be long since abandoned” (p. 62).

Cookbooks published during World War II addressed such issues as cooking with food shortages, using victory-garden vegetables, and keeping the home front strong. These texts appear to have reflected contemporary rhetoric extolling the virtues of the “good citizen” consumer. With the end of food rationing at the war’s end, cookbook sales soared. Promotional and privately authored cookbooks highlighted new household appliances and advertised new frozen, canned, and packaged foods and backyard grills, and cookbooks aimed specifically at men during the fifties emphasized “creative male cooking” (p. 269).

Neuhaus argues that a “discourse of discontent” began to appear in late 1950s cookbooks, presaging the women’s movement. Such books increasingly acknowledged that not all women found cooking terribly rewarding. When Peg Bracken’s *The I Hate to Cook Book* hit bookshelves in 1960, it became a runaway bestseller. Neuhaus concludes that cookbooks published in the late 1950s and early 1960s evidenced the “beginnings of widespread resistance to the cult of domesticity—and, as always, the desire of cookbook publishers to tap into a changing market” (p. 269).

Based on the myriad examples and illustrations that appear in her text, readers will conclude that cookbook writers and their publishers continually targeted a white, middle-class market. Who participated in twentieth-century consumer culture, and who remained on the sidelines? Neuhaus never addresses the issue of possible segmentation in the cookbook market—one weakness in an otherwise well-researched and entertaining study.

While Jessamyn Neuhaus’s depiction of modern American cookbooks is largely congruent with contemporary historiography of postwar suburbia, gender, and consumer culture, Sylvie Murray presents a contrasting picture. Murray seeks to revise current historiography of the impact of American consumer culture on middle-class women after the Second World War. In *The Progressive Housewife: Community Activism in Suburban Queens, 1945–1965*, she rejects the notion that female progressive activism vanished at the end of the war. Middle-class women exchanged participation in the labor market for a domestic life devoted to the production of babies and the consumption of cookbook recipes, appliances, and dress patterns. Murray focuses on the efforts of suburbanites in Queens, New York, to secure public goods, including better housing and improved schools.

Murray argues that, in contrast to the contemporary views expressed by Betty Friedan and reproduced by historians, female political activism existed in suburban Queens. Friedan's analysis depicted women as "victims, devoid of agency and incapable of resisting the forces at work in postwar America" (p. 166), and she was dismissive of female volunteerism. Drawing on manuscript, newspaper, and public record sources, Murray counters Friedan's portrayal, arguing that "the experience of women in the 1950s was critically and, I believe, positively shaped by their participation in such activities" (p. 152).

Murray depicts Queens suburbanites as political actors and citizens active in Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), homeowners' and tenants' associations, and religious, fraternal, political, and veterans' organizations. Queens developed as a suburb for an ethnically diverse population moving out of inner-city neighborhoods after the war. Emigrants to the new neighborhoods embraced the legacy of New Deal liberalism, seeking to improve public services through community activism. In Murray's story, Queens residents became politically active because they were "all faced with a similar lack of public services...." In reaction, they organized "collectively as neighbors, building coalitions among different groups ... to secure what they all considered essential needs" (p. 171). She documents the efforts of women in the United Parents Association to improve the overcrowded, underfunded schools that resulted from New York's wartime building moratorium. In these struggles, community activism took the form of written correspondence with city officials and "mass demonstrations in neighborhood streets and mass attendance at public hearings" (p. 126).

Researchers have often linked racist and antiliberal politics with northern, white middle-class culture, and although she does not successfully overturn this paradigm, Murray does complicate it by providing a more nuanced interpretation of suburbia. She argues that Queens evidenced ideological diversity rather than homogeneity. Although the majority of Queens residents opposed school integration, she claims that some neighborhoods supported it, "particularly those where a large Jewish population resided" (p. 155). For example, she cites the support for school integration expressed by Glen Oaks parents in 1957.

However, Murray also demonstrates that even in racially integrated neighborhoods like Flushing Suburban, when residents viewed a potential threat to their property values, they mobilized forces to preserve the status quo. In such middle-class neighborhoods, "freedom from want" appears to have evolved into a quest for middle-class affluence, including the "freedom" to own a home, maintain property values, accumulate capital, and eventually transfer wealth to the next generation. To the extent that established residents viewed the entry of additional minority groups as threatening that freedom, some readers may conclude that suburban resistance to integration still

appears to have been motivated by racism. At the very least, Flushing residents, like middle-class suburbanites in other areas of the country, appear to have placed their presumed right to affluence above the right of the inner-city poor to have access to decent housing and good schools in suburban communities.

Overall, Murray's book succeeds in identifying Queens suburbanites as political actors and citizens who "took part in the collective life of their communities" (p. 167). She falls short of fully supporting her argument that "these suburban citizens were to the left of the postwar consensus" (p. 174), but she does effectively document the efforts of ideologically diverse Queens residents to improve their neighborhoods through community activism. She traces a story of growing disillusionment with the political process in the 1960s as suburbanites came to feel that policymakers and politicians no longer cared about their concerns.

### The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post-War New Jersey

Whereas fine-grained studies of cookbooks and suburbanites yield information about the evolution of consumer culture in very specific contexts, Lizabeth Cohen's sweeping and magisterial study presents a much broader picture. In *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, Cohen explores the impact of national discourse, economics, and policy on American society in general and New Jersey in particular. Because her book provides a rich, multilayered historical context for exploring the impact of mass consumption on education, it deserves a place on the bookshelf of every scholar interested in educational history.

Cohen argues that as Americans expanded their consumption and engaged in the pursuit of affluence after World War II, they fundamentally altered their conception of citizenship. She traces Americans' evolving identities as citizens and consumers, beginning with *citizen consumers* and *purchaser consumers* in the New Deal era, charting the rise of purchaser citizens after World War II, and concluding with a discussion of the predominance of the *consumer/citizen/taxpayer/voter* in the late twentieth century. Throughout the book, Cohen's own concerns about the expansion of consumer culture in the United States are evident.

Like Donohue, Cohen identifies the Progressive Era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as when Americans began to recognize and articulate the importance of consumers to the political economy. Cohen demonstrates how, by the Great Depression, two distinct and somewhat contradictory views of the consumer emerged in public discourse. On the one hand, policymakers portrayed citizen consumers as "responsible for safe-guarding 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" (p. 18). For example,

in an attempt to pressure producers to lower prices, citizen consumers organized protests and boycotts of specific goods. On the other hand, economists, corporate executives, and government officials also emphasized the role of purchaser consumers in stimulating the economy and driving job growth. In contrast to the citizen consumer, who often threatened to withhold spending, purchaser consumers created new jobs by shelling out more and more money on faster cars, shinier toasters, and the latest brand of golf clubs.

One of this book's strengths is its breadth of focus on literature from both the Civil Rights and Women's Movements. During the 1930s and 1940s, the notion of a citizen consumer gained prominence due to the grassroots activism of women and African Americans, who used their purchasing power as consumers to promote a more equitable market. Cohen argues that women made up much of the leadership of the rank-and-file of the consumer movement during the 1930s. They expanded consumer education programs in schools and communities, orchestrated boycotts and buyers' strikes to protest high prices, and demanded better quality controls and truth in advertising. According to one early chronicler of the movement, "Not since the demand for suffrage have women been drawn so closely together on a common issue" (p. 33). African Americans in the urban North also mobilized politically as consumers during the 1930s, organizing boycotts and creating cooperatives. African-American grassroots consumer activism differed from that of the predominantly white consumer movement in several ways. For example, rather than trying to secure lower prices or protect themselves from hazardous goods, African Americans engaged in consumer activism to secure their rights as producers and to improve economic conditions in their communities. Armed with such slogans as "Don't Shop Where You Can't Work," African-American consumer activists favored black businesses wherever possible (p. 53).

Cohen claims that the New Deal also legitimized consumption by encouraging consumer behavior as the key to economic recovery. When New Dealers argued for a Keynesian policy of boosting demand in the late 1930s, they claimed it would bolster American democracy and equality.<sup>2</sup> Business organizations threw their support behind the notion of purchaser consumers and actively opposed what they viewed as the antibusiness activities of citizen consumers. Through propaganda of their own and in collaboration with the anticommunist witchhunts of Congressman Martin Dies's House Un-American Activities Committee, they sought to link the consumer movement to communism. For example, a January 1938 issue of *Nation's Business* claimed to have exposed the allegedly left-wing politics of the League

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<sup>2</sup>See, John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (New York: Harcourt, 1965).

of Women Shoppers, declaring, "The pinks have really crashed the parlor at last!" (p. 59)

Cohen dates the birth of a "Consumers' Republic" from the postwar period, when the "purchaser as citizen" rose to prominence. During World War II, the American consumer embodied the self-sacrificing, loyal citizen on the home front. In wartime, the government-sponsored Office of Price Administration, the major vehicle for consumer citizenship, oversaw the successful mobilization of the American consumer in support of rationing and reduced consumption. As the government withdrew its hand from market regulation in 1946, however, policymakers, corporations, and social commentators stressed the importance of the consumer as purchaser. Central to the Consumers' Republic was the rhetorical claim that by embracing mass consumption Americans would achieve economic equality. Cohen shows how, despite this rhetoric, such policies as the GI Bill and the tax code benefited some white, middle-class males at the expense of other groups, particularly African Americans.<sup>3</sup>

Cohen argues that in the "Consumers' Republic," suburban Americans became stratified along racial and income lines, paying particular attention to New Jersey as a case study. She demonstrates how advertisers, politicians, and real estate agents targeted narrowly defined social groups in an effort to segment the marketplace for their own gain. Facilitated by the discriminatory practices of private lenders and federal mortgage guarantee agencies, residential areas became more segregated by race and class in a practice called "redlining," with the eventual result that the suburbs evidenced less racial mixing than urban neighborhoods. Because localities funded so many basic services, including schools, one inevitable outcome of residential segregation was schooling inequality.

Citizen consumers did not disappear during this era, but increasing prosperity in the postwar period made it difficult for them to transcend mainstream ideology that celebrated consumer purchasing power. Additionally, Cohen theorizes that the consumer movement's historic association with women contributed to its decline, as contemporaries depicted its efforts as "female" and "weak." Although a consumer-rights movement gained ground in the 1960s, gaining impetus from Ralph Nader's crusade against General Motors and with support from Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Carter, Cohen claims that the profound social changes enacted during the advent of the Consumers' Republic altered its overall significance. Increasingly, Americans brought "market expectations to their appraisals of the government itself, judging it and its policies by the personal benefits they, and segmented purchasers as citizens, derived from them" (p. 344).

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<sup>3</sup>The Servicemen's Readjustment act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights, provided for college or vocational education for veterans of World War II.

Whereas Horowitz describes the late twentieth century period as a “post-moralist” one, Cohen paints a grimmer picture. As the Consumers’ Republic evolved into the “Consumerization of the Republic,” and as “economic inequality proliferated in American society at the turn of the twenty-first century, the benefits long ago promised to all in the salad days of the Consumers’ Republic increasingly became reserved for those who paid for them.” Today, the ultimate message of the Consumerized Republic is “What’s best for me is what’s best for America” (p. 397).

### Learning in a Consumers’ Republic

Historians interested in the recent emphasis on market-based reforms in education will be fascinated by the ideological and policy transformations depicted in this set of books. Three of them could easily form the nucleus of a graduate course on consumerism in education.

Kathleen Donohue’s study is valuable on two counts. First, her book provides a useful theoretical framework for a comparative analysis of the rhetoric of nineteenth-century private-school supporters and public-school advocates. Second, students and researchers interested in linking the late twentieth-century intellectual debates of political economists to market-based educational reform initiatives will find a constructive precedent in Donohue’s research. Although social commentators often portray market-based approaches to schooling as late twentieth-century phenomena, they have a longer history in the United States. While there exists a small body of secondary literature on various kinds of private schools in the United States, historians to date have not given serious consideration to the evolving ideologies that supported them, particularly in light of contemporary discourse about the proper roles of consumers and producers in the nation’s political economy.

Students and scholars interested in education historiography after the Cold War will find that Daniel Horowitz’s book provides an important context for a nuanced analysis of the writings of education critics. During the twentieth century, anxieties about affluence and consumer culture spilled into the writings of many commentators on schooling, reflecting the ideological views of writers like Christopher Lasch and Daniel Bell. To date, education historiography largely focuses on the pre-Cold War period and ignores later scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, an exploration of the rise of marketplace reform initiatives in the context of the consumerist paradigm shift outlined by Lizabeth Cohen could provide a foundation for understanding the ideological, economic,

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<sup>4</sup>For example, the most recent study only briefly discusses the years after the 1950s. See Milton Gaither, *American Educational History Revisited: A Critique of Progress* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).

and socio-political forces driving current school choice debates. Almost fifteen years ago, when Jonathan Kozol asked middle-class white students whether they thought their wealthy school district should share its resources with minority students in the financially strapped districts nearby, he expressed dismay and surprise when one young woman matter-of-factly replied, "How would that benefit me?" As Kozol noted at the time, such a response would have been almost unthinkable a generation earlier. Today, Lizabeth Cohen provides a perspective from which to interpret the young woman's comment, and from this standpoint, Kozol's book *Savage Inequalities* metamorphoses into a historical primary source. The young teenager's words seem to support Cohen's case that by century's end, many middle-class Americans justified their roles as self-interested consumers in a "Consumerized Republic."<sup>5</sup>

When considered within the context of the books discussed here, the recent rise of marketplace reform initiatives in the United States raises a fundamental question. Can the self-interest of an individual, or a community, serve the greater good? Although Lizabeth Cohen appears to take some small comfort in the hope that "there is some evidence of a reversal of the drives for privatization and deregulation that have reduced government's legitimacy" (p. 410), it is not clear that such a reversal is indeed underway, nor are the long-range results of such deregulation on society's social inequalities yet understood. As the gulf between the very rich and the very poor continues to widen, many Americans may continue to express anxieties about consumer culture, even in what Horowitz terms a "post-moralist" age.

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<sup>5</sup>Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (N.Y.: Harper Perennial, 1992).