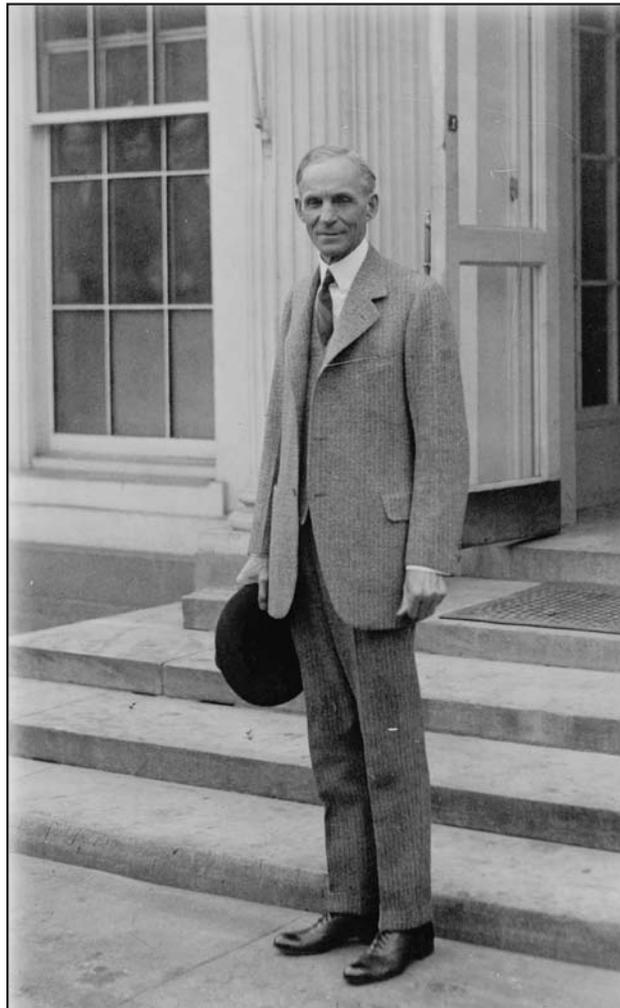


Rethinking Politics: Consumers and the Public Good during the “Jazz Age”

The 1920s are often understood as a time of economic abundance and political quiescence. Frequently the decade’s supposed political lethargy and conservatism is seen as a consequence of its supposed affluence. With progressive energies exhausted—weakened by World War I and the domestic repression that accompanied and followed it—and with the economy booming, Americans, in this stereotypical vision, turned inward. Enjoying the private pleasures afforded by the new affluence of the “jazz age,” they displayed either indifference or cynicism to the well-being of the public sphere.

Commentators often speak of the rise of “consumer society” in the 1920s as a way to encapsulate these political and economic transformations. They frequently use the term to explain the economic vibrancy and political passivity that they take to characterize the decade, and to link the two. In this view, privatized consumption undermined the public-spirited citizenship that had characterized the producerist nineteenth century and Progressive era. Rather than attacking political and corporate corruption, Americans bought Model-T’s; rather than cleaning up slums, they purchased a vast array of new, brand-name consumables; rather than throwing themselves into political struggles—such as the campaigns for suffrage, socialism, and prohibition which had absorbed so much energy in the previous decade—they visited chain stores and ordered goods from catalogs.



Henry Ford—whose Model-T was a popular consumer product—leaving the White House after meeting with President Coolidge, 1927. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-111360.)

Whatever critical spirit remained from the previous decade transmogrified itself from progressive activism to the cynicism characteristic of the “lost generation.” Thus Paul Carter entitles the introductory chapter of his survey text on the decade, “Of Bohemians and Consumers.” This title characterizes the two sides of declining political engagement: the cynical artiste and the solipsistic shopper (1).

Indeed, the 1920s did represent a takeoff period for consumer society. During the decade, pundits, scholars, and many ordinary Americans claimed to be observing an epochal and multifaceted transformation whose key feature was a shift from production to consumption. While a robust consumer economy had been developing since at least the market revolution of the early nineteenth-century, several elements converged in the 1920s to create a fully mature consumer society. Those elements included a much-expanded advertising industry, the advent of installment buying and consumer credit industries, the mass production on Henry Ford’s assembly lines, and the mass consumption at Woolworth’s chain stores. Increasingly,

American life, not just economically but culturally, centered on mass consumption. The decade witnessed an increase in leisure time, as well as the rise of a full-fledged culture of celebrity (notably Babe Ruth) and a self-conscious youth culture (2).

In this industrializing and urbanizing society (the census of 1920 showed that, for the first time, more Americans lived in towns and

cities than in the country), consumption was acknowledged as the prime mover of economic life, dislodging the traditional American faith in “producerism,” the belief that the makers and growers of goods lay at the heart of the nation. Similarly, Americans knocked thrift, another guiding concept of the nineteenth century, off its pedestal. Recognizing that consumption is what drove the economy, many Americans—including an influential group of businessmen and politicians that the historian Meg Jacobs labels the “purchasing power progressives”—redefined thrift not as saving (which was redefined by some as ‘hoarding’) but as what a business group called “wise spending.” In this sense, thrift meant purchasing quality merchandise, since as the *New York Times* editorialized, “Poor Stuff Never is Cheap.” In this new understanding of thrift, not spending or underspending was an unaffordable “extravagance.” Henry Ford gave his imprimatur to this view when he noted that “No successful boy every saved any money.” On the contrary, the wizard of Detroit claimed, they “spent it as fast they could for things to improve themselves.” When, in the early 1920s, his advertising department came up with the slogan, “Buy a Ford and Save the Difference,” Ford replaced the word “save” with “spend.” Spending, he insisted, “is the wiser thing to do.” If spending was the lever of the economy, and prosperity was a social good, then it followed that, if Americans were to practice thrift at all, they should do so in this redefined manner. Thrift in effect became redefined as mass consumption (3).

The advent of consumer society, however, was not only an economic and cultural process. Historians are beginning to show that the decade of the 1920s was also a crucial decade in the development of consumer politics (4). For, rather than a diminution of political energy, the decade witnessed new kinds of political engagements, many of them centered on the politicization of consumers and consumption. In the milieu of the consumer economy of the 1920s, many Americans, far from losing interest in politics, developed new political engagements based in large measure on their identities as consumers. For many Americans—aware that they were living in a distended, urbanizing society with national markets—consumer politics provided a way for the private to reconnect to the public, an avenue for individuals to overcome urban anomie and anonymity to assert their will and to unite in common cause.

Older forms of consumer politics were re-energized too. A keyword search of the *New York Times* for the word “boycott,” during the decade of the 1920s, produces more than 2,000 hits. Alongside such traditional forms of consumer politics, new ones were invented, such as the “Spend Your Money Where You Can Work” campaigns, in which, starting in 1929, members of Chicago’s African American community demanded that businesses, which depended on their patronage, hire black workers. During the Great Depression, these would change into the well-known “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” demands in Harlem, Baltimore and elsewhere (5). In addition, for the first time, consumers began to organize as consumers—forming what became known as the “consumer movement”—and both business and government began to conceive of the “consumer interest” as an important, perhaps the defining, political and social force in modern America. One indication of this reorientation was the coinage in 1921 of the term “consumerism” by the economist Sidney A. Reeve. Just as nineteenth-century advocates of producerism held that those who



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working conditions required by the
JOINT BOARD OF SANITARY CONTROL,
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and the Public in the Cloak, Suit,
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**Insist on women's garments
guaranteed by
the PROSANIS LABEL to be
health garments.**



The “Prosanis” label was a public health effort in New York City. The Joint Board of Sanitary Control and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union encouraged consumers to buy clothing only with this label, ca. 1925. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, American Memory, amrlm mgo1.)

provided useful goods and services to the nation deserved to be the political leaders, advocates of this new concept of consumerism—who ranged from labor leaders, to economists, to eminences in the world of business—held that the economic centrality of consumers necessitated that they be accorded a central political role.

To say that consumption and politics were linked in intriguing new ways in the 1920s is not to claim that consumer politics had a

single meaning. Indeed, at least five understandings of the relationship between consumption and politics emerged in this decade. A variety of pundits, politicians, and purchasing-power proponents described consumers (and sometimes simultaneously) as: economically central, potentially powerful, befuddled and victimized, in need of organization, and universal citizens. While some of these understandings overlapped, they also diverged in crucial respects. Taken as a whole, they reveal that in the 1920s, as in other periods, it is difficult—as well as inaccurate—to pigeonhole consumer politics as either liberal or conservative. While a growing number of Americans agreed that consumers and consumption had reached a new level of importance, they disagreed about the implications and the plan of action to follow from this insight. Business leaders understood consumer politics, as the implementation of policies that would yield maximum mass consumption (hence profits); self-appointed experts understood consumer politics as the creation of a lobby on behalf of ordinary consumers; finally many ordinary consumers understood that the wallet and the cash register provided a site for the expression of collective interests.

Perhaps the most commonly expressed—and widely accepted—view of the 1920s was that consumers were essential to the American economy. From the 1930s through the end of the twentieth century, this insight—labeled Keynesianism in the postwar years—drove federal monetary policy. But in the 1920s, this was a relatively new idea, put forward by businessmen as diverse as the conservative Henry Ford and the progressive Edward Filene, as well as a wide variety of economists and politicians, who came to accept that consumers were the prime movers of economic activity; as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce put it in 1924, “Production cannot be possible unless it produces, first of all, consumers.” Rather than understanding people as primarily producers, they came to be seen as most important in their consuming capacities. For different reasons, labor groups and many politicians supported the increase of working-class purchasing power as both good economic policy, and smart as well as ethical politics. Roy Dickinson, an economist for the American Federation of Labor, writing in the advertising trade journal *Printer's Ink* in 1921, warned that “lower wages reduce purchasing power; men on starvation wages do not buy phonographs, clothes, shoes, etc.” In a 1927 article summarizing what he called, “The New Economic Gospel of Consumption,” journalist Edward S. Cowdrick, noted that “the worker has come to be more important as a consumer than he is as a producer.” This was also a trend that Robert and Helen Lynd discovered in their famous study of Muncie, Indiana (6).

Recognizing their dependence on mass consumption meant that businessmen were acutely concerned with promoting purchasing power. For the most part, however, they did not see the need for independent political action on the part of consumers. Indeed, they sometimes disclaimed a link between consumption and citizenship. The Muncie Chamber of Commerce, for example, declared that since consumption was a “new necessity,” the “American citizen's first importance to his country is no longer that of citizen but that of consumer.” The consumer's job, in this vision, was to buy and it was their job, as businessmen, to entice consumers to do so. This was the essence of what became known as “Fordism,” the model of mass consumption, not as empowerment for ordinary individuals—although that may have been a by-product—but as necessary fuel for the engines of corporate capitalism (7).

Because the mass production economy of the 1920s depended on mass consumption, many commentators came to see consumers as a potentially powerful group, perhaps even a new political and social force.

Others, however, pushed to make consumers an independent political force. Because the mass production economy of the 1920s depended on mass consumption, many commentators came to see consumers as a potentially powerful group, perhaps even a new political and social force. Many businessmen took the so-called “buyers' strikes” of the early 1920s, in which shoppers refused to buy what they deemed to be overpriced goods, as a warning about the need to cultivate consumers through low prices and high quality goods and about the potential power of consumers to either help or weaken their businesses. The buyers' strike, the economic theorist Ralph Borsodi warned businessmen in 1927, “was a dramatic demonstration of the supreme importance” of mass consumption. In what he called “The Distribution Age,” consumers, not producers, held the cards. Similarly, in an editorial on “embattled consumers,” the *New York Times*, also made reference to the buyers' strikes and observed that “the docile and long-suffering consumer” was finally beginning to recognize her “latent power.” The home economist Christine Frederick made this claim as well in her 1929 book, *Selling Mrs. Consumer*. The renewed popularity of boycotts over a range of issues, from the high cost of meat, to racist practices at stores, to unhappiness with foreign governments' policies, and even to dissatisfaction with theatrical performances and prices, demonstrated that Americans used their pocketbooks to achieve their social and political goals. Ultimately, some Americans began to push for a political party to promote the interests of consumers (8).

Yet even as they recognized the fundamental importance of consumers to the economy, many commentators described the average consumer as an embattled figure. In this view, the powerful forces arrayed against consumers made the consumer a weak, easily duped, even pathetic, presence in American life. As early as 1917, the pundit Walter Lippmann compared American consumers to “a bewildered child in a toy shop.” He concluded, “the simple act of buying has become a vast, impersonal thing which the ordinary man is quite incapable of performing without all sorts of organized aid.” Similarly, the pioneering consumer activists, Stuart Chase and F. J. Schlink, famously compared consumers to Lewis Carroll's fairy-tale character Alice, helplessly facing “conflicting claims, bright promises, fancy packages, soaring words,” with an “almost impenetrable ignorance.” (9) The economist Hazel Kyrk described the consumer as “the helpless victim of powerful interests.” (10) The Lynds determined that the citizens of Muncie were not knowledgeable enough to pursue their interests as consumers. Lynd called this problem of ignorance in the ways of consumption, “the new illiteracy” (11).

Furthermore, in this view, consumers were not only duped but inefficient and, as a result, wasteful. Through a combination of commercial complexity, which made face-to-face observations an insufficient mode of policing economic transactions and through what the experts believed was the ordinary consumers' appalling ignorance, consumers were not exercising the potential power that so many commentators claimed that they had. Asserting that few “consumers feel any of that sense of power which economists say is theirs,” Lippmann argued that this made sense because shoppers could not be expected to understand the complexity of the modern economy (12). If any group was in need of scientific assistance and an organized lobby, it was consumers. In the absence of comparative information about goods, efficient and intelligent consumption would be impossible to



Selling Mrs. Consumer

by Mrs. Christine Frederick

Founder and Director Applecroft Home Experiment Station, Greenlawn, Long Island; counsellor to manufacturers on marketing home goods; author of "The New Housekeeping" (now translated into six foreign languages); "Efficient Housekeeping" (text book used in hundreds of home economics study courses); ex-consulting household editor Ladies' Home Journal and ex-household editor of various large women's magazines; newspaper syndicate writer on home economics to millions of newspaper readers each week. Lecturer in America and abroad on Chautauqua circuits, at advertising conventions, and clubs, Chambers of Commerce, retail institutes and sales conventions on home economics; founder of first advertising women's organization; first to apply the principles of scientific management to home; first woman consumer to address Congressional hearings on distribution and home buying problems.



First published in 1929, *Selling Mrs. Consumer* analyzes the relationship between women and the consumer economy. The book's first section explores the need for studies of consumers, women consumers' purchasing power, and the impact of life changes on women's buying habits. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, American Memory, amrlg lgo1.)

achieve. Similarly, many consumer advocates argued, in a pluralist society, in which pretty much every group in society from workers, to businessmen, to doctors, to lawyers was represented by an organized lobby, consumers could not be expected to gain ground without such representation. These advocates of consumer politics did not call on consumers to take action in their own hands, but to delegate these responsibilities to experts who were capable of rising to the challenge. If anything the tone toward consumers taken by Chase and Schlink, and others was one of scolding. "Why do you buy the toothpaste you are using," reads a typical passage, on the first page of *Your Money's Worth*, "do you know if it has, beyond a pleasant taste, any merit at

all? . . . Have you any evidence, except blind hope, that the package of insecticide under your arm will actually rid a house of flies?" Despite this hectoring tone, the book became a manifesto of a new kind of expert-led consumer politics.

The first organization on behalf of consumers that arose, came in the wake of the publication of Chase and Schlink's 1927 bestseller, *Your Money's Worth*—a book Robert Lynd called the "Uncle Tom's Cabin" of the consumer movement. With accounting and engineering backgrounds, the authors claimed that they had the numeracy and technological skills that most consumers lacked. They carried forward the progressive concern with efficiency into the consumer programs they developed. The organization, Chase argued, would substitute "science for magic and persuasion" on the part of advertisers and "eliminate the waste of brands" resulting from the proliferation of inferior products hyped through "mysticism." Based on the demands of enthusiastic readers, who, apparently were not put off by the harsh diagnosis of their condition put forward in the book, Chase and Schlink organized a club in New York City to help consumers get accurate information about goods. The two men also offered advice on a local radio station. As interest in this group blossomed, the informal buyers' club transformed itself in 1929 into the world's first consumer products testing service, Consumers Research (CR). By the end of the decade, CR had 5,000 members and by the mid-1930s, it had about 50,000 members (13).

CR was in many ways very different from earlier consumer groups. Previously, consumer organizations called on citizens to organize their collective consumption on behalf of a group needing assistance or a cause. For example, the National Consumers League, founded in 1899, called on middle-class consumers to use their purchasing power on behalf of poor working-class women. The *raison d'être* of CR was that consumers needed to organize on behalf of another maltreated group—themselves. Moreover, the organization needed to be run, not democratically, but from the top down by experts who could combat the problems that drove consumers to join the group in the first place.

If the main draw for CR members was the advice they received about the relative merits of foods and other consumables, the group also maintained a strong political element. In its newsletter, CR leaders regularly lobbied for increased government intervention on behalf

of the consumer. CR pushed the government to develop standards that would aid the consumer. And it was one of the first organizations to call for a cabinet level, federal Department of the Consumer. Although CR later disavowed its broad-based conception of consumer politics, in the 1920s it was—in spite of its elitism—widely seen as the vanguard of a broad-based consumer politics, which would include the full array of political strategies developed or re-energized during this decade: from boycotts, to lobbying, to political party formation (14).

In the 1920s, then, some Americans began to reverse the nature of consumer politics; rather than consumers acting on behalf of the oppressed, as the NCL urged, they began to argue that it was consumers

themselves who were oppressed and needed assistance. The consumer movement, which blossomed into a powerful social force in the 1930s grew from this insight of the 1920s. Since that time, it has periodically re-emerged as an important social force, notably in the 1960s and 1970s in the figure of Ralph Nader. The 1920s was thus a pivotal decade in shaping, for better or worse, not just a consumerist economy but a consumerist polity. □

Endnotes

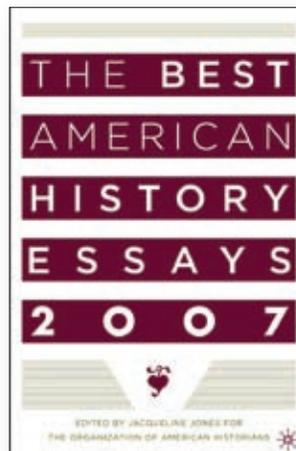
1. Paul Carter, *The Twenties in America*, 2nd ed. (Arlington Heights, IL: AHM Publishing, 1975), 1-34.
2. See Paula S. Fass, *The Beautiful and the Damned: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). Historians have demonstrated that affluence was not as widespread as many of these stereotypes suggest. As the historian Lizabeth Cohen points out, "Not all Americans participated equally in mass consumer markets; many more lacked a car; a washing machine; vacuum cleaner and radio than had one." [Lizabeth Cohen, *Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 22].
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8. Ralph Borsodi, *The Distribution Age: A Study of the Economy of Modern Distribution* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1927), 276. For contemporary analyses of the "buyers' strikes," see: J. H. Collins, "Coming, another buyers' strike?" *Saturday Evening Post*, June 23, 1923, 29; P. D. Vroom, "Is there a buyers' strike?" *Colliers*, July 16, 1921, 5-6; "How to break the buyers' strike," *Literary Digest*, March 26, 1921, 7-9; "Should the buyer cease from striking?," *Literary Digest*, January 22, 1921, 72; "Embattled Consumers," *New York Times*, December 27, 1927. On the call for a "consumers party," see, for example, the letter to the editor from C. E. Nixdorff, *New York Times*, February 15, 1927.
9. Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1917), 65, 67; Stuart Chase and F. J. Schlink, *Your Money's Worth: A Study in the Waste of the Consumer's Dollar* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 2.
10. Kyrk is quoted in Jacobs, *Purchasing Power*, 81.
11. Lynd and Lynd are quoted in Stuart Chase, *The Economy of Abundance* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 272.
12. Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, 64.
13. Lynd quoted in "The Consumer Movement," *Business Week*, April 22, 1939, 40. Chase's first book, *The Tragedy of Waste* (New York: Macmillan, 1925) condemned the fact that consumers produced what he called (following the English critic John Ruskin) "illth" rather than "wealth" through their inaccurate understandings of modern economic processes. Schlink too was extremely

critical of the ability of consumers to shop efficiently. "Memorandum for the Establishment of The Consumers Foundation," Container 2, Subject File: Consumers' Research Folder: Correspondence, memoranda, clippings, and documents, 1928-1931, Stuart Chase Papers, Library of Congress. On the growth of Consumers Research see, "Consumers' Group Grows; To Incorporate Club That Advises Members Through Tests," *New York Times*, Dec. 8, 1929; "Consumers' Group Grows; Membership in Testing Bureau Has Reached 5,700 Since Jan. 1," *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 1930.

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Lawrence B. Glickman is professor of history at the University of South Carolina. He is the author of *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* and the editor of *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (both Cornell University Press). He is currently working on *Buying Power: Consumer Activism in America from the Boston Tea Party to the Twenty-First Century* (University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

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