



Matthew Hilton. *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 382pp. EUR 21.31 (leinen), ISBN 978-0-521-53853-4; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-83129-1.



Matthew Hilton. *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xiii + 382 pp.

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Consuming Britons

The link between Britain and shopkeeping is well established. Napoleon once dismissed Britain as a “nation of shopkeepers” and thus it is unsurprising that British economic and cultural historians have rigorously examined the retail sector.[1] The people frequenting the shops are less-well understood. Scholars have often written of working-class efforts to earn a “living wage” without fully explaining how workers or even the middle class viewed the world of goods. Historians of consumption are attempting to address such concerns, recently by linking consumption to gender and other social identities.[2] And Manchester University Press has begun to publish a series of monographs edited by Jeffrey Richards entitled *Studies in Popular Culture*, which include works focusing on the cultural impact of consumer goods on British popular culture.[3]

Into this growing historiography on consumption and consumer culture comes Matthew Hilton’s *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a*

Historical Movement. This book is not another volume on “consumption,” “consumer goods” or even a study of “the consumer,” but a book about consumerism. Hilton admits that no single definition of consumerism holds true throughout twentieth-century Britain. Overall, Hilton sees consumerism as the expressions of organized groups (whether independent, linked to political parties or to the government) who claim to represent the interest of consumers. He thinks the most important group to be a socio-political movement showing a “desire for self-empowerment expressed by consumer activists” (p. 4).

Hilton’s book is a valuable addition to the field of popular culture and the political culture of consumption because it offers an important chronology for the rise and fall of consumerist organizations in twentieth-century Britain. Hilton is thorough in outlining the twists and turns of consumerist organizations and the political environment in which they existed. As an introduction to organized consumer movements, Hilton’s

book sets the standard for the future. It also is useful for showing the long-term presence of consumer concerns in Labour Party politics. However, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain* is simultaneously too ambitious and too limiting. Hilton's subtitle, "the search for a historical movement," reveals his overly ambitious agenda. Hilton writes that the subtitle "refers to both the efforts of historians to locate the politics of consumption within a specific set of social contexts and the attempts of consumers themselves to establish a third political force" (p. 11). Though Hilton tries very hard to show that various consumerist organizations attempted to form "a third political force," he is not entirely convincing. Moreover, Hilton's book is too limited in its strict focus on consumerist organizations. Lastly, he does not give sufficient attention to new approaches linking gender and consumption.

Hilton has methodically examined the archival records of every major consumerist organization and government department concerned with consumption and has made constructive use of numerous primary source books and articles by members of the organizations he studies as well as by consumer activists. The first section, "Necessity," reaches back into the moral economy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for antecedents to modern consumerism and takes the story up until the end of the Second World War. The second section, "Affluence," continues the story up to the present and devotes considerable time to the rise of consumerist organizations.

The chapters on "Necessity" reveal the traditional attitudes of the British Left towards consumer issues and on the morality of luxury purchases, issues of scarcity and poverty, and questions of adulteration and profiteering. Consumer pressure voiced by workers' organizations (such as the Co-operative movement, the Independent Labour Party and the War Emergency Workers' Committee [WEC]) led to the creation of new government organizations, such as the Consumers Council in 1918 and the Royal Commission on Food Prices in 1924. Hilton is careful not to read too much into these governmental responses. He sees them as part of an effort by the government to prevent consumer unrest from fanning revolutionary impulses, although these responses did also aid the development of a type of "consumer consciousness" (p. 75). After addressing the challenges that consumer groups faced in the Depression when unemployment was the dominant issue, Hilton concludes this section by looking at the dawn of affluence during the final years of Attlee's Labour government. Here the focus

is squarely on the Labour Party's "consumerism of protection, control and guidance" (p. 255) and Hilton compares government policies such as Utility schemes and purchase tax with nascent and ultimately unsuccessful ideas such as government-funded Consumer Advice Centers.

The chapters on "Affluence" complicate the story. In an atmosphere of necessity, consumer interests rarely triumphed over the goals of producers among the supporters of the Left. According to Hilton, during an era of perceived consumer abundance, the center of gravity for consumerist organizations changed entirely; "value-for-money comparative testing consumerism," providing of better information to consumers, and increasing equity in the marketplace and ethical consumerism, all became key issues. Consumer interests began to be taken up by professional independent organizations as well as a plethora of government affiliated committees and councils. The best part of part 2 studies the rise of the Consumers' Association (CA), which was founded in 1956. This organization was a private non-profit company that brought a "professional ethos" to consumerism. CA's chief publication *Which?* used the image of the consumer guided by white-coated scientists who performed rigorous comparative testing on consumer goods. Hilton argues that the CA was influenced by the social democratic desire of its leaders for a more equitable marketplace and could be considered "largely a middle-class social movement" (p. 197). It became a major presence in Britain, expanding from forty-seven thousand members in 1957 to over one million members thirty years later. It is in Hilton's discussion of the CA that he makes his strongest arguments for consumerism as a "third way" between the interests of manufacturers and workers.

The focus on organized consumerist movements is both a strength and a limitation. Hilton's eagerness to include every single organization ever to articulate consumer concerns makes his book buckle under its own weight. Before the book begins there are two pages of abbreviations, including forty-four separate governmental, business, political, and independent organizations through which consumer concerns were expressed. Thoroughness is commendable, but Hilton's book must set a record for abbreviated organizations listed per page. This thoroughness in a sense takes away from the strongest parts of the book which center on a few organizations such as the WEC and CA. It would have been better to center the book on these vibrant expressions of organized consumerism and counterpose them with shorter analyses of their less successful brethren.

By spending almost equal time on the dynamic and merely bureaucratic responses to consumer pressures, the book bogs down and loses its thread. Ironically, despite Hilton's thoroughness, there is one major organization whose views on consumer interests appear infrequently in the book—the Conservative Party. Hilton does not engage at length with the growing historiography tying Conservative fortunes after 1945 to their identification with consumer frustrations over Labour's austerity policies. He makes no use of the Conservative Party archives, nor the papers of related pro-Conservative organizations concerned with consumer issues. It is fine for Hilton to discuss stillborn pro-consumer policies of the Attlee government such as the Consumer Advice Centers, but it is questionable that such discussions be given more space than Conservative discussion of realized policies on consumer issues. Hilton mentions that Margaret Thatcher's government subverted the initial pro-consumer goals of the Office of Fair Trading, but her government is one of the few Conservative governments Hilton discusses in any detail.

Hilton's largest shortcoming may lie in his search for a historical movement among the various consumer organizations he studies. He stresses repeatedly that consumerism and "the politics of consumption" offered a "third way" for the British political party system. He argues that the organized consumers themselves attempted to establish themselves as a third political force, as in the dreams of the CA's founder, Michael Young. One of the most interesting cross linkages Hilton makes is between New Labour and the social democratic goals of consumer activists like Young. Unfortunately, the other material and organizations, like the Co-operative movement, are harder to portray as a "third way." Indeed, Hilton actual shows that the concerns of producers and trade unionists on one side and manufacturers on the other consistently trumped those of consumers.

One final criticism is Hilton's failure to address gender and consumption adequately. One of his most fasci-

nating points is that after 1945, as consumerism became "professionalized," the shopper was re-conceptualized from a female figure to a male. Indeed, when gender makes an appearance the text moves beyond its steady litany of abbreviated consumer organizations. However, such references are limited. Absent too are thematic discussions of the linkages between gender, consumption and popular Conservatism, or of the creation of a sense of expanded public space accorded to female shoppers.

Overall, Hilton's book provides a vital service for future scholars by laying a historical foundation for studying consumerism. As an organizational history, informed by changes in the socio-political environment, it is unparalleled. However, the book disappoints because it promises even more and cannot fulfill this promise. Hilton's book ought to have been more selective in its focus, and his search for a "historical movement" is not completely convincing. Rather than search for such a movement, he might have re-organized his book to consider some of the more rewarding new approaches informing consumption studies.

Notes

[1]. For example, one early but important economic history is W. Hamish Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market 1850-1914* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1981).

[2]. See Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Alan Kidd and David Nicholls, *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism: Middle Class Identity in Britain, 1800-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[3]. See Matthew Hilton, *Smoking in British Popular Culture, 1800-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Sean O'Connell, *The Car in British Society: Class, Gender and Motoring, 1896-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

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