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rebuild ship of state managed to sail unharmed, if not altogether untroubled, through the storm of the French Revolution and the ensuing quarter century of worldwide war. This period brought down kings and empires on both sides of the Atlantic, and it placed great stress on the Union, not the least of which came during the War of 1812. But the Union endured. The founders’ work did not eliminate the tension that resulted from conflicting sectional interests; to the contrary, the Constitution facilitated the articulation of sectional interests through the representation of the states in the Senate and the guarantee to protect state interests such as the preservation of slavery. Eventually, internal tension came close to dissolving the Union during the Civil War. Yet despite such conflicts, the Constitution provided the institutional basis on which the nation would grow in territory, population, and riches. In the long run, therefore, the framers of the Constitution demonstrated that republics were not forever destined to weakness and instability but could become powerful and achieve world domination.

See also anti-Federalists; Articles of Confederation; Bill of Rights; federalism.

FURTHER READING


MAX M. EDLING

consumers and politics

The history of consumers and American politics dates back to the founding of the country and has three distinct strands. First, since the American Revolution, Americans have used the boycott of consumer goods as a political tool. Second, beginning in the late nineteenth century, Americans have made political demands as consumers for a higher standard of living. Finally, in the twentieth century, especially in the postwar period, an organized movement has pushed for greater regulation of the quality and safety of consumer products.

From the Revolution to the Gilded Age

The American Revolution traced its origins, in part, to a consumer boycott, the famous Boston Tea Party on December 16, 1773, when rebelling colonialists dumped British tea in the harbor to protest the crown’s imperial policies. This was not an isolated event. Before the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, colonists boycotted British goods to demonstrate their displeasure with England’s tax policies. After the Seven Years’ War, the British government sought to raise money to pay war debts by taxing is colonial subjects. At the time, the North American mainland purchased 25 percent of English exports. In that context, the colonialists’ nonimportation strategy was a powerful political tool, one intended to put economic pressure on the British government to repeal the Stamp Act of 1765, the Townshend duties, and
the Tea Act as unconstitutional violations of the principle of no taxation without representation. Colonial merchants organized boycotts, which led to a decline in British exports by two-thirds. This strategy gained support from ordinary colonists, from the Daughters of Liberty who held spinning bees and encouraged the wearing of homespun clothes to crowds who mobilized to intimidate customs officials and importers. This new kind of mass politics based on organized popular resistance and everyday political participation culminated in the Boston Tea Party. At stake were fundamental questions of Britain’s public power over its colonial subjects that led to the American Revolution. Colonialists not only achieved independence but also created a new notion of direct representation premised on popular participation in politics.

In the century that followed independence, Americans based their participation in politics on their producer identity as hardworking, virtuous independent farmers, small merchants, or artisans. As more Americans became wage earners, trade unions emerged to represent their collective interests and preserve a sense of autonomy and freedom at the workplace.

In the late nineteenth century, however, Americans began to embrace a consumer identity as the basis of political action. Between 1870 and 1920, the number of Americans living in cities doubled to over 50 percent. By 1920 more people worked in factories than on farms, and less than one-quarter of the workforce was self-employed. At the same time, people were now purchasing basic necessities, from prepared food to ready-to-wear clothing to store-bought tools and furnishings, rather than producing them at home. Moreover, the emergence of department stores, mass retailers, and mail-order catalogs, along with the rise of brand-name goods, created a new consumer ethos of satisfaction guaranteed. Amusement parks, nickelodeons, and commercial dance halls arose as forms of cheap amusement. In that context, Americans started to make demands as consumers entitled to a higher standard of living.

With a rise in productivity, organized labor insisted on a shortening of the workday and the right to leisure time. “Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will” was the slogan. In 1886 hundreds of thousands of workers staged an unsuccessful general strike to demand the eight-hour day. The eight-hour movement won a victory in 1916 with the passage of the Adamson Act, which limited hours for railroad workers. But only in 1938 did labor succeed in getting Congress to pass the Fair Labor Standards Act to make the eight-hour day the national standard.

In the late nineteenth century, organized labor also demanded higher wages as another crucial aspect of a sense of entitlement to an “American standard of living.” Workers began to abandon their critique of wage labor as an extension of slavery. Becoming less critical of capitalism, instead they argued they had a right to earn a “living wage,” by which advocates like American Federation of Labor (AFL) president Samuel Gompers meant enough money to buy a home of at least six rooms with indoor plumbing, furniture, pictures, carpets, and books. Rather than dulling political activism, the prospect of better living standards propelled labor agitation. As Gompers explained in an 1887 political speech, “Continual improvement, by opening up new vistas, creates new desires and develops legitimate aspirations. It makes men more dissatisfied with unjust conditions and ready to battle for the right.”

From the Progressive Era to the 1920s

As nineteenth-century deflation gave way to twentieth-century inflation, a preoccupation with the cost of living led to an activist consumer politics. Between 1897 and 1916, the cost of living rose 30 percent. New sites of consumption, from streetcars to storefronts, became sites of protest with slight fluctuations in price. The early twentieth century witnessed countless rent strikes, beef boycotts, and other fights over the “high cost of living,” led by housewives who understood their actions in the marketplace as the counterpart to their husbands’ wage campaigns at the union hall and factory. For example, Pauline Newman, who became well known as a leader of the 1909 “uprising of 20,000,” when tens of thousands of teenage New York garment workers went on strike, first cut her teeth by leading rent strikes around the city.

A consumer identity could cross class lines and be a unifying force in the Progressive Era fight against corporations. Contemporary Americans understood rising prices as the product of a conspiracy by big trusts. President Woodrow Wilson captured that antimonopoly sentiment when he said, “The high cost of living is arranged by private understanding.” The fight against rising prices united workers and the growing segment of the white-collar middle class on fixed salaries, who shared the belief that trusts were to blame. Progressive journalist Walter Lippmann identified what he saw as a rising “consumer consciousness.” In his 1914 book Drift and Mastery, he explained, “The real power emerging
today in democratic politics is just the mass of people who are crying out against the ‘high cost of living.’” That consumer sensibility was especially true for women, who were thought to be responsible for the vast majority of purchasing. “The mass of women do not look at the world as workers,” said Lippmann. “In America, at least, their primary interest is as consumers.”

Playing on that sentiment, reformers founded the National Consumers League (NCL) in 1898 as a lobbying group of middle-class women who would push for greater regulation of consumer goods and the conditions under which they were made. Under the leadership of Florence Kelley, the NCL led union-label campaigns to persuade women to purchase garments made only in union factories under safe and fair labor conditions. Kelley argued, based on germ theory, that consumers should be concerned about the health of workers and the potential spread of diseases like tuberculosis. Through boycotts, Kelley sought to transform women’s purchasing power into a political force for labor reform. The NCL also pushed, sometimes successfully, for state-level minimum-wage legislation for women workers. Massachusetts passed the first law for minimum wages for women in 1912. Several other states followed until the U.S. Supreme Court declared such legislation unconstitutional in 1923.

Protests over high prices came to a head in World War I, when the cost of living doubled. The Wilson administration worried that high prices would trigger labor unrest as the cost of living outpaced wages. Indeed, organized labor justified its strikes by claiming the right to a living wage. Wilson appointed Herbert Hoover to head the Food Administration and lead the campaign to restrain inflation—or war profiteering, as it was popularly known. Hoover appealed to Americans for patriotic conservation with requests for “meatless Tuesdays and wheatless Wednesdays”; at the same time, he engaged in a massive propaganda effort that legitimized notions of “fair prices” and the rights of consumers and put pressure on businessmen to moderate price increases. In the absence of price controls, which ultimately doomed his efforts, Hoover mobilized housewives to investigate local prices as a way to keep inflation in check.

The notion that shoppers had rights in the marketplace evolved in the 1920s when America became a modern consumer society. The publication of Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle (1906), with its description of the horrible conditions in packinghouses, had earlier led to the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act, bringing the government into the business of regulating product standards for the safety and health of consumers. But the number of mass-produced products and the advertising of those products vastly expanded in the 1920s and were largely unregulated. In the 1920s, Stuart Chase and F. J. Schlink published scathing critiques of the tactics used by manufacturers to produce and sell their goods in books with titles like Your Money’s Worth and 100,000,000 Guinea Pigs. Without standardization of weights, sizes, and materials, and without sufficient product information, consumers could not judge value. In addition, these reformers worried about adulterated and even harmful products and called for stiffer government regulation of production and advertising. Their books became best sellers and led them to form Consumers’ Research as an agency to test branded goods.

Reformers like Chase worried not only about consumer safety but also about inadequate consumer income. In the 1920s, the gross national product increased by 40 percent as a result of the application of mass production techniques to many industries, from automobiles to appliances. Reformers argued that the new economy required a better distribution of income so that more Americans could actually afford to purchase the new consumer goods. Organized labor claimed that living wages were not only morally and politically necessary but also essential to sustaining a mass consumption economy. Edward Filene, the department store magnate, articulated this vision best at a 1925 meeting of progressive reformers: “Mass production can live only through mass distribution, and mass distribution means a mass of people who have buying power.” As he put it, “Production cannot be profitable unless it produces, first of all, consumers.” In 1926, at an AFL annual convention, AFL president William Green explained, “If America’s prosperity is to be maintained, it must be possible for the masses of workmen to buy and use the things they have produced.” Henry Ford had argued for the importance of working-class consumption when he introduced the five-dollar day and cut the prices of his cars. But the labor movement and their allies believed that only unions and federal regulation of wages would enable sufficient redistribution of income to sustain the economy.

The New Deal and World War II

This argument gained traction in the 1930s, when reformers pointed to the problem of underconsumption to
explain the Great Depression. Though capital spending fell far more than consumption, the idea of underconsumption as the major economic problem had widespread appeal. In his Commonwealth Club speech in September 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "Our task now is . . . meeting the problem of underconsumption, of adjusting production to consumption, of distributing wealth and products more equitably." Once in office as president, Roosevelt used the language of consumers and consumption to justify a range of measures, often even contradictory, that would boost the purchasing power of Americans and thereby restore prosperity.

When Roosevelt introduced the New Deal in 1933, he promised an expansion of governmental authority to increase purchasing power: "The aim of this whole effort is to restore our rich domestic market by raising its vast consuming capacity." But the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) and the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), the two key measures of the early New Deal, were necessarily inflationary, enabling producers to cut production and raise prices as a way of restoring profits. Section 7a of the NIRA was intended to increase wages by legalizing collective bargaining, but industry non-compliance rendered this measure ineffective. Both the NIRA and AAA led to higher prices without substantially increasing national income. Those higher prices threatened to undermine public support for the New Deal. As a result, Congress created new bodies to look out for consumers' interest and to contain protest. In the spring of 1935, housewives across the country formed "high cost of living committees," demanding price cuts on meat, milk, and bread.

The Great Depression led to the creation of new governmental agencies dedicated to protecting consumers. The National Recovery Administration's (NRA) Consumer Advisory Board and the AAA's Consumers' Counsel pushed for three programs. First, they sought to organize county consumer councils to create a grassroots consumer movement. These local groups distributed new government publications like Consumers' Guide that listed average prices of basic goods like meat, milk, and bread and urged consumers not to pay more. Second, consumer advocates pushed for an end to price fixing in NRA codes. Finally, they called for a government system of quality standards to provide consumers with essential product information. Their efforts culminated in the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938.

The key moment of injecting a consumer rationale into New Deal legislation came with the passage of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935. New Dealers looked to organized labor as the way to challenge corporate power and redistribute income. When Roosevelt took office, only 10 percent of the industrial workforce was organized. In introducing his measure to Congress in 1935, Senator Robert Wagner of New York explained that unionization of workers was essential for economic recovery: "When employees are denied the freedom to act in concert . . . they cannot participate in our national endeavor to coordinate production and purchasing power." The solution was to let workers organize and bargain collectively for higher wages.

By the election of 1936, Roosevelt cemented his coalition of farmers, workers, and middle-class voters, often using consumer rhetoric to justify his programs. Farm supports boosted agricultural purchasing power, unionization boosted labor's purchasing power, and Social Security would boost purchasing power for millions of unemployed and retired Americans. When the economy declined in 1937-38, Roosevelt announced a Keynesian deficit spending measure, saying that the government had a responsibility to increase national purchasing power during a recession. In the postwar period, politicians would continue to use Keynesian fiscal tools to stabilize the economy.

World War II ended the Depression, and inflation returned as the key economic problem. To fight it, the government created the Office of Price Administration (OPA). As in World War I, the wartime administration mobilized the nation’s housewives to prevent profiteering. But this time Congress passed mandatory federal price controls and rationing. Influenced by the New Deal, the wartime government was committed to preserving mass purchasing power by an expansion of state power. By setting ceilings on millions of products, the OPA successfully restrained business; simultaneously, it got 20 million women to sign the Home Front pledge not to pay more than ceiling prices. Hundreds of thousands volunteered for "little OPAs" in each county, and millions more reported price violations. The OPA remained in place more than a year after the war ended, with broad popular support, including that of organized labor. Having agreed to no-strike pledges and wage freezes, labor supported price controls to protect its members. The war, with a strong activist state, was the high point of a public policy committed to pro-
ecting mass purchasing power by regulating prices and wages.

The Postwar Years
In 1962 President John F. Kennedy announced his commitment to a "consumers' bill of rights." But unlike during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, consumer issues now had little to do with prices or income. Instead of regulating wages and prices, government relied on taxing and spending to stabilize the economy. In the 1960s and 1970s, the modern consumer movement led by activist Ralph Nader focused on health and safety issues. In 1962 Congress passed the Truth in Lending Act to protect credit borrowers and the Truth in Packaging Act to require better labeling, and created the Consumer Protection Safety Commission. Nader's Unsafe at Any Speed (1965) led to the National Traffic and Vehicle Safety Act of 1966. Nader launched the public interest movement in which lawyers pushed for greater government regulation of safety and health in the environment and at the workplace.

By the 1970s, liberals no longer saw greater consumption as the solution to the nation's ills but pointed to abundance and an ethos of indulgence as the problem. President Jimmy Carter made that point of view clear during the energy crisis. "In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God," said Carter in his famous 1979 "malaise" speech, "too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives, which have no confidence or purpose."

Since the energy crisis of the 1970s, critics have taken sharply different views about consumption. Most liberals have called for restraint and conservation, whereas the business community and conservatives have pushed for relaxing regulations to make it easier to exploit the country's natural resources and productive potential. During the 1980s, while the left condemned displays of conspicuous consumption and ridiculed the "yuppie" lifestyle, the right took up the consumer mantle, using arguments about consumer choice to call for an end of government regulation and a return to free-market policies. President Ronald Reagan signed the largest tax cut in the nation's history in 1981, claiming that a reduction in taxes would unleash the nation's creative genius and result in greater economic growth. While the number of jobs in the high-tech and service industries grew, income inequality also increased. To maintain consumer lifestyles and make ends meet, Americans took on unprecedented amounts of consumer debt made possible by the explosion of the credit card industry.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the largest corporation in the United States is Wal-Mart. The company appeals to American consumers by offering everyday low prices, which it stocks through a global supply chain. Whereas reformers a century earlier sought to regulate sweatshops in American cities, most production of consumer goods is now located in "third world" countries, especially China. There are periodic campaigns to prevent Wal-Mart stores from expanding into neighborhoods, spearheaded either by unions who fear the corporation's low wages and nonunion workforce or by local retailers who fear the retail giant's low prices. The success and proliferation of global corporations like Wal-Mart have largely undercut the century-long effort for government regulation of prices and wages. But as long as America remains a consumer society, political struggles about the means and meaning of consumption will occur.

See also business and politics; economy and politics; labor movement and politics; New Deal Era, 1932-52.

FURTHER READING

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