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*The Deeper Meaning of Tupperware:  
Consumer Culture and the American Home*

Kristin L. Hoganson. *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865–1920*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. xiv + 402 pps.; ill.; ISBN-13: 978-0-8078-5793-9 (pb).

Charles F. McGovern. *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890–1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. xv + 536 pps.; ill.; ISBN 13: 978-0-8078-5676-5 (pb).

Bob Kealing. *Tupperware Unsealed: Brownie Wise, Earl Tupper, and the Home Party Pioneers*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. x + 250 pps.; ill.; ISBN 13: 978-0-8130-3227-6 (hb).

**Liette Gidlow**

There's no place like home. In our imagination if not in our experience, home is a place of warmth, security, and comfort. It is the place to which we return, and it is where we are supposed to belong. But it takes more than love to make a home. Apparently, it also takes a lot of stuff.

Three recent contributions to the history of consumption in the United States after the Civil War explore how Americans used stuff—the amazing array of goods produced by the new consumer economy—to communicate belonging, affiliation, and other meanings of “home.” That consumer economy grew out of an interlocking series of social and economic changes that made inexpensive manufactures more widely available, aggregated potential buyers into markets, and afforded workers more time for leisure. Between the 1870s and 1920s, migrants and immigrants congregated in cities, concentrating laborers and consumers into accessible workforces and markets. Businesses created new corporate structures and built mass production factories, turning out boxcars full of inexpensive goods. Railroads developed an increasingly complex national network, delivering products from greater distances and more cheaply than ever before. New techniques in photography and printing lowered publishing costs and spurred advertising. These developments and others created an expanded national marketplace in which mass-produced consumer goods, including automobiles, appliances, ready-made clothing, processed foods, leisure magazines, movies, recorded music, and more, became plentiful and increasingly affordable.<sup>1</sup> Consumer goods mattered, then and now, and not

only because their production and use impacts the environment, changes standards of living, and stimulates the senses. According to the historian Gary Cross, they also perform important cultural work, for consumer goods "give meaning to individuals and their roles in society."<sup>2</sup>

The books under review document a range of ways in which Americans between the end of the Civil War and the early cold war used consumer culture to define their place in the world, construct cultural boundaries that distinguished their national home from others, and negotiate new roles for homemakers in public life. Kristin Hoganson's *Consumers' Imperium* uncovers how American homemakers' passion for imports made them important players in the politics of empire. Charles McGovern's *Sold American* explores how early twentieth-century advertisers and consumer advocates connected national feeling with consumer culture, helping to make consumption a key element of American identity and belonging. Bob Kealing's *Tupperware Unsealed* recounts the life of Brownie Wise, the marketing genius who made Tupperware a household name. Together, these works add complexity to scholarship on the interrelationship of consumer culture, gender, and home, a literature with roots in Elaine Tyler May's classic 1988 text on cold war domesticity, *Homeward Bound*.<sup>3</sup>

In *Consumers' Imperium*, Hoganson demonstrates the increasing maturity of historical approaches that situate the United States "in the world." She shatters what is left of the boundary between the foreign and the domestic, a boundary that once isolated the history of foreign relations from the histories of just about everything else, by locating American encounters with the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century world in women's everyday activities of homemaking, shopping, and socializing. These ordinary pursuits regularly brought American women, especially those who were middle-class or elite and white, into contact with the "foreign," and many of these activities—interior decorating in the popular "Oriental" style of the period, cooking exotic dishes, entertaining guests with slide shows of travel abroad—took place in the most domestic of spaces, the home. No longer the Victorian haven from the outside world, home in the Age of Empire functioned as a "contact zone" (8). Even if contact took place in a domestic space, Hoganson writes, "consumption constituted a form of interaction with the wider world" (11).

American consumers between the end of the Civil War and the aftermath of World War I demanded consumer goods from abroad. Homemakers adorned their houses with Oriental rugs, Chinese lanterns, Japanese screens, Turkish towels, Moroccan leather, Venetian glass, English porcelain, Scottish linen, Mexican fans, and more. While European immigrants to the United States often signaled their incorporation into American culture by adopting ready-made clothing upon arrival, many American women embraced a

“cult of French fashion” to signify their sophistication and taste (65). Sears, Roebuck made imported foodstuffs such as coffee, cheeses, olives, and candy readily available to rural mail-order customers who lived far from a cosmopolitan marketplace. Middle-class housewives entertained friends with “national dinners,” while wealthy women hosted lavish balls with exotic themes. Fictive travel proved popular in this period as clubwomen took up mail-order geography courses and armchair travel clubs “sailed” for distant ports. By decorating, furnishing, accessorizing, eating, hostessing, and socializing with a foreign flair, Americans participated in a global consumers’ imperium.

These observations invite us to rethink current understandings of the Gilded Age and Progressive era. In the same years that the United States began to project its economic and military power abroad, Hoganson argues, a cosmopolitan array of goods penetrated American homes. While the United States pursued empire, both formal and informal, in the search for export markets abroad, a surge in imports from all corners of the globe helped to sate consumers’ demands at home. But this story is complicated, because even as Americans welcomed foreign goods and styles into their homes, in this intensely nativist period they also used consumption to maintain and manage the boundaries between native whites on the one hand, and newcomers and nonwhites (whether at home or abroad) on the other. By consuming foreign imports, Americans commanded the labor of colonized others and transformed exotic products “into the harmless stuff of pleasure” (135). Thus consuming the foreign, especially at home, domesticated exotic others.

Women star in Hoganson’s analysis. Women were “charged with producing U.S. domesticity” and shopping was an important way they fulfilled their obligations to run their households and care for their families (8). But Hoganson claims their responsibilities extended to a broad “cultural guardianship” in which women supervised societal morals and manners through their involvement in schools, clubs, community groups, and churches and synagogues (212). True, advertisers and ladies’ magazines tried to guide their choices as homemakers and community members. But by exercising their authority to make decisions inside and outside the home, women—and especially native-born, white, and middle-class and elite women, women with resources, leisure time, and standing—influenced how others interacted with the foreign and what those interactions meant.

What those interactions meant is key, for this book is very much about meaning-making. Certainly many American women in this period followed French fashion, traveled abroad via stereopticon shows, and put up (putatively) Oriental “cosey corners” in their parlors, but what exactly did these actions mean? Did they mean that consuming women gained a

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cosmopolitan awareness of the rest of the world? Respected foreign cultures? Literally "[bought] into empire" (252)?

It is hard to say, but Hoganson expertly teases answers out of her sources. Some seventy newspapers and magazines, from big-city dailies to decorators' trade publications to *National Geographic*, help her identify the trends of the day and the meanings that advertisers and taste-makers tried to attach to goods while clubwomen's papers, with their records of meeting minutes, club projects, and social events, give her insight into what female consumers actually thought and did. She finds that many shopping women likely remained oblivious to the foreign origins of, say, their morning coffee, not to mention the workers, economic forces, and trade policies that made it possible, in which case their embrace of imports could hardly be credited with expanding their awareness of the world. But Hoganson also makes the case that many middle-class and elite women sought out foreign goods precisely because exotic imports could be used to signal their cosmopolitan sophistication and taste. Thus a Santa Monica hostess threw a party that made the pages of the *Los Angeles Times* before the first drink was poured; she invited her guests to a lavish affair in which a hotel ballroom was to be "gorgeously" transformed "with the trappings of the Far East," leaving "beach society . . . agog with anticipation" (138). In other instances, consumption of the foreign seemed to promote acceptance of cultural difference, as when settlement house workers organized ethnic festivals that "made pluralism palatable to native-born Americans" (233).

Often, Hoganson argues, consumers sought out the foreign as an act of imperialism in order to construct difference between themselves and "foreigners" as well as less cosmopolitan, lower-status consumers at home. This sort of consumption conferred insider status on consumers and produced for them a knowledge of the other that was superficial, inauthentic, or, at worst, self-serving. Their preferences transformed them into self-appointed arbiters of the relative worth of world civilizations; artifacts from Africa, for example, rarely decorated the homes of status-conscious women, and ethnic festivals rarely celebrated the contributions of African Americans to the American pageant. In the consumers' imperium, consumption of the foreign served as a way to enact and display global hierarchies of race, ethnicity, and class.

If consumption helped to construct a privileged status for consuming women, the question becomes, how did that privilege reverberate in American society and beyond? Here readers may want to know more. Hoganson offers tantalizing suggestions, arguing that by consuming imports, American women exercised power in a society that still assigned them second-class status, reminding them that despite discrimination and disfranchisement, "on a global scale of things, they occupied a position of privilege" (12). Here,

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extended engagement with the scholarship on consumer citizenship could push the analysis forward. Consumer citizenship was under construction in the period covered by Hoganson's study, and woman suffragists, for example, used their expertise as consumers to stake their claim to fuller citizenship rights.<sup>4</sup> By the 1920s, middle-class and elite ways of consuming helped to constitute and signify a privileged status in the *civic* order as well as in society at large, and surely consumption of the "foreign" played an important role in that.<sup>5</sup> So, how did women's participation in the consumers' imperium construct and define the meaning of their consumer citizenship, and, indeed, women's status as global citizens?

In *Sold American*, Charles McGovern also finds that, in the early twentieth-century United States, the source of national belonging laid close to home. McGovern explores the competing social visions of professional advertisers and "consumerists," that is, the ideological contest between the salesmen of a modern consumer society and the "social scientists, engineers, and bureaucrats" who scientifically evaluated consumer goods to determine their "real" worth (4). If advertisers generally advocated a liberal approach to consumption that emphasized individual choice in the marketplace, consumerists favored a "republican-inspired vision that distrusted the marketplace and viewed material goods as only one element of the pursuit of happiness" (7). In this bitter contest of ideas, McGovern finds the key to understanding the "complex embrace of consumption in the twentieth century" (5). Though they disagreed sharply over how consumers should make choices and which of them best served the public interest, "advertisers and consumerists alike built up common associations of consumption and citizenship between the late nineteenth century and World War II" (369). Together they established the "common sense" that "being an American meant being a consumer" (3–4).

The strength of this book lies in its examination of the work of physicist F.J. Schlink, one of the founders of Consumers' Research, the first consumer product testing organization. Influenced by economists Thorstein Veblen, Wesley C. Mitchell, and Hazel Kyrk, Schlink partnered with Stuart Chase, an accountant and journalist, to author the 1927 best-seller, *Your Money's Worth*. There they articulated the case against "Babbitry," arguing that mindless consumption exploited individuals and harmed society: "We are deluged with things which we do not wear, which we lose, which go out of style, which make unwelcome presents for our friends, which disappear anyhow—fountain pens, cigar lighters, cheap jewelry, . . . mouth washes, key rings, mah jong sets, automobile accessories."<sup>6</sup> These "endless jiggers and doodads and contrivances," together with the dishonest and invasive marketing that made them seem valuable, not only diverted economic

resources to inefficient uses but also eroded ethics and impinged upon personal privacy (176).

Through Consumers' Research, they fought back. By arming consumers with scientific information about the functionality, durability, and cost of goods, Consumers' Research promoted an approach toward consumption in which consumer goods served as tools rather than totems, "private experiences . . . properly stood beyond" the reach of commerce, and personal bonds were based on more substantial values (200). Even so, McGovern argues, consumerists and advertisers linked consumption to citizenship, an association that survived both the depression and the war and solidified, well before the post-war consumer boom, the "common sense" "associations of nationality and consumption" (369).

Scholars of women's and gender history, as well as scholars of politics, may find some of the book's arguments overly general or insufficiently contextualized. If consumption was critical to national identity and women were, as all agreed, the primary consumers, how was national identity gendered? How did ideas about consumer citizenship fit alongside competing sources of ideas about citizenship and national identity, such as ethnic and partisan models that were so powerful in cities dominated by urban machines, or producers' claims to citizenship that still resonated in rural and industrial areas? What about whiteness?<sup>7</sup>

The insufficient attention to gender, race, and class in this work creates further problems. In his analysis of advertisers' approach to consumption, McGovern focuses on print ads that employed an "electoral metaphor," such as a magazine advertisement declaring that Sapolio, a household cleaner, had been "Elected—The People decide for Clean Government," with accompanying illustrations of an old party-style torchlight parade and a public celebration of "return night" (71). These ads portrayed buying as a "political process of consent" and reinforced advertisers' claims that "consumers, not corporations, exercised the true power of the great market democracy" (62, 68). Such ads supported corporations' claims that "'the people' caused and justified the major economic centralization and consolidations of the trust era," claims that in effect ratified corporate capitalism and rebutted the progressive critique that big business had grown too powerful because democratic institutions could not control them (89).

But the voting/buying metaphor meant this and more, and a sustained focus on class, race, ethnicity, and gender brings its broader implications to the fore. The voting/buying metaphor, it turns out, was one of many indications that a broader "commodification of political culture" was underway, one that changed the structures and cultures of political participation and profoundly transformed the place of workers, ethnics, and women in the civic order.<sup>8</sup> In the "party period" of the mid-nineteenth century, when

political life was largely organized around political parties, working class, immigrant, and ethnic white men participated fully and legitimately in civic life. By the 1920s, however, in a new civic order centered around the institutions and practices of a middle- and upper-class culture of consumption, civic legitimacy became largely the province of middle-class and elite, ethnically unmarked white men and women. In this transition, consumer citizenship was critical, for it supplied some of the key ideas through which one regime of gendered, raced, and classed civic hierarchies gave way to another. These issues aside, McGovern's book performs an important service by laying out some of the key ideas about consumption in the first half of the twentieth century—ideas that helped connect national identity with home.

Few products in the 1950s seemed as modern, as ingenious, as *American* as Tupperware, and Kealing's biography of Brownie Wise recounts the remarkable story of the woman responsible for the brand's success.<sup>9</sup> Divorced at twenty eight with a child to support, Wise made a living as a secretary in wartime Detroit while publishing fictional stories on the side about the drama of domestic life and yearning to be "a successful human being" (12). After the war, she supplemented her income by selling home products—mops, cleaners, floor waxes—for the Stanley Corporation. Superb salesmanship was her strength and Wise quickly rose through the managerial ranks; she was so good at turning her sales force into "go-getters" that by 1948 she had become a district manager for the company (19). When she hit the glass ceiling at Stanley—company founder Frank Stanley Beveridge bluntly told her that the company's executive corps was "no place for a woman"—she started selling Tupperware instead (27).

Tupperware at this time had no national sales strategy. Inventor and manufacturer Earl Tupper persuaded department stores to carry his product line, but in retail outlets, items just sat on the shelf. It was not until the product was demonstrated—the bowl tossed to the floor without breaking, the seal put on with the trademark "burp"—that it began to sell. Wise began to demonstrate "Wonder Bowls" at gatherings in women's homes and soon was calling Tupper's offices to place bigger and bigger orders. Tupper noticed the surge in sales and put Wise in charge of developing a national distribution network of home-party sellers.

Tupperware was a juggernaut, and Wise was the reason. Named vice president and general manager of sales in 1951, Wise's Tupperware Home Parties division grossed over \$2 million in sales in its first year (82). In 1953 she put on the most glamorous Tupperware party ever—a press event at the swanky St. Regis hotel on Fifth Avenue, showing off the product to bigwigs from *Newsweek*, *House Beautiful*, and United Press International. In 1954, she made the cover of *Business Week* (109).



But sales dropped sharply the following year, and Wise's relationships with distributors and her boss quickly soured. She and Tupper disagreed over the direction the company should take and soon their disagreements became personal. Tupper accused Wise of lacking "respect for [his] authority"; Wise countered that he did not appreciate how much she had sacrificed for the company (186–87). In January 1958, Tupper fired her.

Historians will appreciate the way the narrative relates the contributions of an exceptional woman and will want to know more about the intersection of her life with the times. For example, what did Brownie learn from her mother, a union recruiter, whom she accompanied as a girl in the 1930s on organizing campaigns through the South? At the peak of her power in the 1950s, Wise organized company-wide pep rallies for dealers, many of whom were housewives who prided themselves on being able to earn income without "shirk[ing] their 'most important job'" or becoming "the dreaded 'career-woman type'" (86). Wise even hired the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale for one of these events as a motivational speaker. How, then, did gender play out in the "gospel of success" of 1950s self-help movements? Though a study of Tupperware's sales force was beyond the scope of this biography, the book reveals the need for a closer investigation of how home-party selling created new work opportunities for women, turning their skill at hostessing and homemaking into a paycheck. The book's poor editing creates frequent distractions for the reader, but scholars with an interest in women and the corporate world will find the book worthwhile.

To be sure, these books leave ample room for other investigations into how consumer culture has helped to make domestic meaning in personal, national, and global contexts. They make clear, however, that the significance of home extends well beyond the doorstep, past national borders and into the world beyond.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Key works on the development of cultures of consumption at the turn of the century include Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983); Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875–1940* (Lanham, MD: Ivan R. Dee, 1992); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000); and Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2004).

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<sup>2</sup>Gary S. Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

<sup>4</sup>Margaret Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes for Women* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup>Liette Gidlow, *The Big Vote: Gender, Consumer Culture, and the Politics of Exclusion, 1890s–1920s* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup>Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (New York: Signet Classics, 2007). Since the novel was published in 1922, the name of the title character has served as shorthand for shallow, unthinking, conformist materialism.

<sup>7</sup>Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Steven P. Erie, *Rainbow's End: Irish Americans and the Dilemmas of Urban Machine Politics, 1840–1985* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), esp. 121–97.

<sup>8</sup>For a discussion of voting/buying metaphors and the commodification of political culture, see Gidlow, *The Big Vote*, 161–93.

<sup>9</sup>For a more historically contextualized look at Wise, see Laurie Kahn-Leavitt's 2003 film, "Tupperware!," produced for PBS in the American Experience series.

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