Creating Consumers: Home Economics in Twentieth-Century America by Carolyn M. Goldstein (review)

Rima D. Apple

Technology and Culture, Volume 55, Number 1, January 2014, pp. 259-261
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/tech.2014.0030

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Accessed 11 Oct 2016 03:02 GMT
tailed efforts to gain access and control over railroads in the Trans-Mississippi West and the post–Civil War South.

Running the railroad proved perhaps even more difficult than construction. The author clearly discusses the complex problems of administering the system, especially with the rising power of organized labor, increasing government regulation, technological advances, and competition from other railroads such as the New York Central and the Reading. Churella chronicles technology such as air brakes, steel freight and passenger cars, and signal systems, discussing them not simply as anonymous tools, but as complex, interconnected, human-shaped developments that cannot be divorced from the broader context. While the early chapters on system building are important and an interesting read, the later chapters on running and adapting the system to changing circumstances are where the book really shines.

Churella used a wealth of sources to construct this monumental work. The state archives of Pennsylvania and the Hagley Museum and archives possess many of the PRR’s papers; however, the author went beyond the standard sources and examined newspapers and historical and contemporary printed works. Ample and extensive endnotes expand the work, but unfortunately the book provides no bibliography. While the author pays much attention to the presidents of the PRR and other corporate leaders, this is not a hagiography of empire builders, nor is it an indictment of robber barons. He provides a balanced and evenhanded portrayal of the many individual and collective entities involved in an enormous corporate enterprise. Historians of railroad and business history will find this work invaluable, as will serious amateur historians. Even more, anyone with interest in the rise of industrial America and the regulatory, technological, and labor ramifications thereof will find much to engage them. At nearly one thousand pages, the history of the PRR matches the grandeur of the book.

JEFF SCHRAMM


Carolyn Goldstein’s thoughtful study of the early development of home economics reassesses the significance of this often maligned discipline. In uncovering the pivotal role of home economists in the creation of our consumer economy, the author adroitly draws out the philosophies that shaped the field and the goals of the leaders who envisioned a new role for women
in the twentieth century. Goldstein addresses two critical aspects of home economics. First: in previous eras, the home was considered a site of production, but by the end of the nineteenth century, the emergence of new products, technologies, and markets transformed the domestic sphere into a site of consumption. Women inhabited and controlled this arena and reformers, many of whom were home economists, believed that women needed instruction in their new role as consumer—education in rational consumption. Second, and frequently overlooked: home economics opened new, acceptable careers for the increasing numbers of women graduating from college. Building on the work of Margaret Rossiter, historians have been teasing out the ways in which home economics enabled women to pursue scientific research. Goldstein’s study enlarges our appreciation of home economics as an employment path for women in other areas of science and technology. Creating Consumers investigates these two complementary elements of home economics: education and professionalism.

The majority of home economics graduates became homemakers, educators, and extension workers. Yet a significant number also entered governmental agencies, such as the federal Bureau of Home Economics, or found opportunities in business as consumer representatives, product testers, and the like. It is this critical “mediating role” of home economists of the first half of the twentieth century that Goldstein has studied. The book opens with a chapter on college educators in the century’s first two decades and Herbert Hoover’s employment of home economists during World War I to teach housewives about efficiency in the household, especially the efficient use of foodstuffs in aid of the war effort.

The wartime experience demonstrated the necessity and utility of the scientific and technological expertise of home economics. These positive experiences led to the establishment of the Bureau of Home Economics in 1923, the focus of two well-developed chapters that illustrate the expanding scope and influence of home economics. During its first two decades, the bureau employed the largest number of women scientists in the federal government, opening up authoritative positions for them in science and technology on a wide array of household issues, including “cooking methods, sewing techniques, fiber and fabric properties, consumption habits, nutrition guidelines, measuring cup tolerances, meat palatability, child-rearing practices, and family accounting systems” (p. 79). The staff of the bureau, in Goldstein’s analysis, helped define “rational consumption” as a “civic duty” (p. 102).

Home economics graduates also found employment in the corporate world, including utility companies; manufacturers of food, other household products, and electrical appliances; women’s magazines; and retail companies. Three central chapters detail the conflicts they faced as professionals in the commercial market. Probably the best-known activities of home
economists in business were the development of recipes to popularize a manufacturer’s products and the creating and testing of new products. Yet, beyond these functions, they too envisioned themselves as advocates of rational consumption, though this goal could, and did, clash with companies’ imperatives to sell products and services. For many years, home economists in the commercial arena fought for recognition as professionals within the discipline of home economics, arguing that because of their academic training, they were different from their profit-minded employers.

By the last half of the twentieth century, as Goldstein’s astute analysis demonstrates, home economists were less visible in both the government and the commercial spheres, as social forces such as second-wave feminism attacked the field, as the values home economists sought to instill became normalized, and, most significantly, as consumerism was increasingly challenged in United States society. But the issues that led the first generation of home economists to apply contemporary science and technology to the problems of family and home continue to concern today’s society. Goldstein’s telling of their story helps us reclaim women’s critical position in the history of science and technology.

RIMA D. APPLE

Dr. Rima D. Apple, professor emerita, University of Wisconsin–Madison, is author of Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America (2006). Most recently, she was visiting professor at Glasgow Caledonian University.

The Color Revolution.


Historians of technology are not especially known for their great sense of style. Regina Blaszczyk’s The Color Revolution may change that, not through fashion advice for the twenty-first-century scholar, but by providing an original and well-researched account of how color came to play a central role in twentieth-century American consumer culture. Contrary to intellectual histories tracing the evolution of scientific and philosophical ideas about color, or more anthropologically inspired studies of color symbolism, Blaszczyk focuses on the everyday business of color, more specifically, the wide-ranging if underappreciated role of color experts in American manufacturing, retailing, and advertising from the 1890s to the 1960s. The color revolution, she demonstrates, was not the result of chemical innovations alone. Obviously, synthetic dyes and car paints, not to mention awe-inspiring light displays, contributed to making everyday life more colorful than ever before. Yet, according to Blaszczyk, what was most revolutionary was less color per se than the new technologies—color wheels and cards—and