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Introduction

The Rise of Consumer Society

PETER VAN DAM AND JOOST JONKER

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The striking emergence of ‘consumer society’ in the Low Countries during the twentieth century came about in two waves. The first – from around 1920 until the 1960s – saw the discovery of the individual figure of the consumer. During the second, postwar wave, the notion of a society made up of consumers took hold. Commonalities between the Low Countries and other parts of the world facilitated a transnational dialogue about the place of consumers and the shaping of a society which could accommodate them. The crucial role companies, officials and civic organisations played in shaping consumer society calls attention to the limitations of a perspective focused primarily on individual consumers. This special issue highlights how a focus on the rise of consumer society yields a fruitful integration of questions of economy, politics, and citizenship, and forces us to rethink the position the Low Countries in a transnational context.

De opkomst van de consumptiemaatschappij

De opvallende opmars van een ‘consumptiemaatschappij’ in de twintigste-eeuwse Lage Landen voltrok zich in twee golven. Tijdens de eerste – van rond 1920 tot de jaren 1960 – werd de consument als individuele figuur ontdekt. Vervolgens kwam tijdens een tweede, naoorlogse golf het idee van een maatschappij die uit consumenten bestond op. Overeenkomsten tussen de Lage Landen en andere delen van de wereld maakten een transnationale dialoog mogelijk over de plaats van consumenten en een maatschappij die bij hen paste. De cruciale rol die bedrijven, ambtenaren en maatschappelijke organisaties speelden bij het vormgeven van die consumptiemaatschappij vestigt de aandacht op de beperkingen van een perspectief op individuele consumenten. Dit themanummer laat zien dat de geschiedenis van de consumptiemaatschappij een vruchtbare combinatie van vragen omtrent economie, politiek en burgerschap mogelijk maakt en ons dwingt om opnieuw na te denken over de plaats van de Lage Landen in een transnationale context.

Exclusive luxury goods, foodstuff imported on an immense scale, and citizens coloring their lives through conspicuous consumption – as pioneering grounds the Low Countries since early modern times have yielded important contributions to the international history of consumption. Once we turn our attention to the twentieth century, however, Belgium and the Netherlands hardly appear as international forerunners. As a result, the development of consumer societies in the twentieth century has usually featured as a background to other political, social, or cultural developments. Yet the emergence of a consumer society in the Low Countries during the twentieth century constitutes one of the most striking social transformations they witnessed during this era. As this special issue amply illustrates, a focus on this particular transformation yields a fruitful integration of questions of economy, politics, and citizenship. Moreover, it forces us to rethink the position of the Low Countries in an international context.

During recent years, the history of consumption in the twentieth century has drawn considerable attention. The initial focus on the United States has gradually been complemented by scholarship on other parts of the world, especially on Germany and France. Three key questions arise from this recent body of scholarship: To what extent can the postwar consumer society be regarded as a *sui generis* phenomenon, both with regard to earlier times and its own internal cohesion? Did regional differences persist or has a transnational convergence taken place? Finally, should we hail the postwar consumer society as a breakthrough of democracy and welfare or as the advent of greater social inequality, ecological disaster, and tasteless spending?

Above all, the history of consumer society puts into perspective the emergence of a society presumably made up of consumers. Since the First World War, consumption became a contentious societal theme. It was not just discussed among higher classes, but increasingly drew attention from all parts of society. During the war, governments grappled with economic issues and goods distributions. As Tyler Stovall has recently argued, this was an important precondition for the politicization of consumption after the war.¹ The interwar years thus saw the parallel development of two mirroring lines of thought. One saw consumption primarily in relation to luxury, as often as not with suspicion. The other viewed consumption simply as the satisfaction of elementary needs.

These two traditions – consumption as a preoccupation for the wealthy or as a vital part in the life of every citizen – merged in the postwar years. Consumption was recast as a fundamental civic right and tied to conceptions of freedom and democracy: the consumer society as a society of free and prosperous citizens enjoying abundance and democracy. The notion of citizenship changed as policymakers, marketing professionals, and activists

1 Tyler Edward Stovall, *Paris and the Spirit of 1919: Consumer Struggles, Transnationalism, and*

Revolution, New Studies in European History (Cambridge 2012) 13.

came to see all citizens as consumers. Moreover, the members of this emerging consumer society were acutely self-conscious. In a growing number of fields, their individual choice was no longer conceived as a possibility, but as the point of departure.² Because the decisions about what to consume came to be seen as instrumental in steering the evolution of society, persuading citizens to choose responsibly became increasingly important.

The articles collected in this volume particularly further our understanding of how the consumer was discovered and constructed. To make sense of this discovery, Lizabeth Cohen's pioneering work on the evolution of interlinkages of the roles of citizens and consumers during the twentieth century can serve as the point of departure.³ Building on Cohen's work, Sheryl Kroen has contrasted a pre-war notion that justice and democracy demanded a critique of the market with the postwar view of the market as empowering citizens as consumers. Whereas the latter was presumably dominant before the Second World War, the more positive image was developed in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s and exported to Europe along with Marshall Aid. Within the context of the Cold War, free markets were presented as the natural allies of democracy, which contrasted with totalitarian states and their planned economies. A powerful corporate lobby and, above all, a booming economy ensured the support of West-European citizens for this new model of consumer democracy.⁴

Although both the consumer society and the attempts to address consumers as such predated the postwar era, postwar Western European societies reinforced the notion that the free market was a crucial foundation for justice and democracy. According to scholars such as Lizabeth Cohen and Matthew Hilton, the public-minded citizen-consumer was replaced by a citizen who regarded private consumption as the yardstick of public life.⁵ This 'history of loss' has been questioned by critics such as Michael Prinz and Frank Trentmann. They pointed at a less positive prewar nexus between citizenship and consumption, which came to the fore during anti-Semitic boycotts in Germany and in British campaigns promoting 'Empire goods'. They also noted the achievements of postwar consumer activists.⁶ Trentmann

2 Dominik Schrage, 'The Availability of Things – a Short Genealogy of Consumption', *Krisis. Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* 1 (2012) 16.

3 Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York 2003).

4 Sheryl Kroen, 'A Political History of the Consumer', *The Historical Journal* 47:3 (2004) 729-732.

5 Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*; Matthew Hilton, *Prosperity for All: Consumer Activism in an Era of Globalization* (Ithaca 2009).

6 Michael Prinz, "Bürgerrecht Konsum", *Archiv Für Sozialgeschichte* 44 (2004) 678-690; Frank Trentmann, Before "fair Trade": Empire, Free Trade, and the Moral Economies of Food in the Modern World', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, 6 (2007) 1079-1102, DOI:10.1068/d448t.

in particular has rejected the conflation of the rise of consumer society and civic disengagement, welcoming the increased intention to the wide array of relations between citizenship and consumption.⁷

This volume sheds new light on crucial aspects of the postwar construction of the consumer. First of all, it suggests that consumer society emerged in two successive waves. The initial one lasted from around 1920 until the 1960s and saw the discovery of the individual figure of the consumer. It can above all be observed by the practices which Jan Hein Furnée analyzes in his contribution on the marketing practices of the prestigious chain of department stores *De Bijenkorf*. Inspired by the movement for ‘Scientific Management’, the board and the Research Bureau of this chain at first employed and refined methods to chart its customers. During the 1940s and 1950s, they went on to map how these customers navigated stores. Thus, the set-up of these stores could be adjusted according to the ways in which customers were expected to behave. The emergence of consumption as an important issue in the worker movement and social democracy resounds in Giselle Nath’s discussion of the involvement of the Belgian worker movement with consumer representation and in the social democratic debate on consumers which Chris Dols and Maarten van den Bos analyze as part of the history of the politicization of the idea that ‘the customer is king’.

During the second, postwar wave, the notion of a society made up of consumers overtook its less encompassing precursor, which is nonetheless indispensable to an understanding of this evolution. This is aptly visible in Dols’ and Van den Bos’ contribution. Borrowing a phrase popularized by the Ford company in the interwar years to stress its service to citizens of considerable wealth, the television program *Koning Klant* (‘King Customer’) connected the phrase to the postwar notion that consumers held sovereign power by publicizing topics which called on a society of consumers. By conveying the message that every citizen had to seize power in the face of companies threatening their sovereignty, the show contested the idea that companies themselves turned customers into kings (and queens).

In the Low Countries, this new notion of a consumer society emerged gradually in the post war years. Marshall Aid politics seem to have influenced its rise only indirectly. It could only fully establish itself after the predominance of scarcity had slowly been replaced by the assumption of affluence during the 1950s. Thus, the notion of a consumer society was only widely discussed and given practical consequence during the 1960s. Joost Jonker, Michael Milo, and Johan Vannerom in particular point out how the equality of all citizens as consumers became a guiding principle in legislation on consumer credit during these years. At the same time, they add

7 Frank Trentmann, ‘Citizenship and Consumption’, *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7:2 (2007) 148,

DOI:10.1177/1469540507077667; Cf. Kroen, ‘A Political History of the Consumer’.

an important caveat to this transformation, for the notion was immediately accompanied by new distinctions among these fundamentally equal citizen-consumers. The ideal of a classless society of consumers was never fulfilled, as companies, civic organizations, and others continued to distinguish consumers based on traditional classifications such as gender, class or education, as well as new categories like responsible or ethical consumption.

The second insight presented in these articles concerns rival interpretations of the consumer and the roles of different actors in this process. Companies took the lead in defining and framing the consumer. Naturally, they had always promoted consumption, but as Keetie Sluyterman demonstrates, the focus of large companies such as Heineken gradually shifted from intermediaries to individual consumers. This shift followed the move to a different product – bottled beer –, and required new means such as market research to visualize their customers, and new marketing strategies to target them directly. Jan Hein Furnée analyzes how department store *De Bijenkorf* increasingly focused on the consumer through insights from market research and psychology. These insights were then translated into the setup of the store in order to lure people into becoming customers. In the process, management differentiated between different kinds of consumers, hoping not just to understand them, but also to shape a specific type of consumer.

As companies started looking for consumers and learned to address them, civic organizations claimed to speak for them, rendering them the second group of actors to actively construct consumers particularly since the 1950s. Giselle Nath traces the struggles among Belgian organizations for the right to represent consumers. Remarkably, in their quest for recognition by the government *Test-Achats* and the *Union Féminine pour la Défense et l'Information du Consommateur* had to compete with each other and with organizations such as trade unions, which did not claim to represent citizens as consumers exclusively. The organizations' self-interested policies and the conflicts among them reinforced the reluctance of the Belgian government to integrate consumer interest organizations into Belgian corporatist structures. As the contribution by Chris Dols and Maarten van de Bos and Peter van Dam's article on fair trade activism underline, consumer activists also pursued their aims through the media and through direct action, not only competing with other civic organizations, but also challenging companies in the name of consumer interests.

Government actors in the Low Countries were initially more reluctant than companies and civic organizations to present citizens as consumers. The history of consumer credit presented by Jonker, Milo, and Vannerom shows how government intervention during the first half of the twentieth century was largely limited to protecting consumers against hazardous products, including unwarranted forms of credit. As consumer spending was ascribed an essential role in postwar welfare states, the stance towards consumer credit became more ambivalent. On the one hand, protection remained an important

focus. On the other, enabling citizens to consume became an important new priority. The consumer thus appeared as someone who had to be protected and empowered at the same time.

By taking the Low Countries as a vantage point for a transnational history of consumer society, this volume thirdly highlights the spatial dimensions within which the discovery of the consumer took place. The contributions enable us to evaluate whether the historiographical picture painted with an eye to above all the United States, (West) Germany and France has to be adjusted as a result of scholarship on smaller countries such as the Low Countries. At the same time, they attempt to define the place of the Low Countries within this larger framework. The history of consumer society in the Low Countries confirms the image of its gradual rise from long-standing traditions of thinking about consumption. Building on lines of thought which were expressed in the interwar years, political, economic, and civic actors developed the notion of a society of fundamentally equal consumers especially since the 1950s, gaining prevalence during the 1960s. In this sense, the history of the Low Countries fits the broader pattern also observed in surrounding European countries.

Rather than a result of a transfer from the United States to the European continent, these contributions present the slow birth of consumer society as the result of a transnational dialogue on the place of consumers and the shaping of a society which could accommodate them.⁸ This was not a bipolar exchange, but a multipolar dialogue, in which the influence of participants from different parts of the world differed from topic to topic.⁹ Regarding political economy debates, experts from Great Britain conveyed the example of a state-led market economy, whilst West-German and Belgian experts promoted the notion of a more liberal approach.¹⁰ The contributions by Furnée and Sluyterman stress the importance of American experts in the field of marketing, whilst demonstrating how their ideas were adapted to national and local circumstances. Moreover, the management of *De Bijenkorf* also played an active role in the international exchange of ideas on customer profiling and its consequences for retail practices. As Nath points out, the establishment of consumer organizations took its cue from similar initiatives in the United States, whilst also building

8 Cf. Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge 2005).

9 Sheryl Kroen, 'Negotiations with the American Way: The Consumer and the Social Contract in Post-War Europe', in John Brewer and Frank Trentmann (eds.) *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges* (London 2006) 251-277; Lydia Langer,

Revolution im Einzelhandel. Die Einführung der Selbstbedienung in Lebensmittelgeschäften der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (1949-1973) (Cologne 2013).

10 Bram Mellink, 'Politici zonder partij. Sociale zekerheid en de geboorte van het neoliberalisme in Nederland (1945-1952)' (to be published in *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 132:4 (2017)).

on traditions of the labor and women's movement. Fair trade activism merged the politicization of global economic relations by representatives of the global South with local traditions of consumer activism. In legislation, finally, the French *Code civil* provided the vantage point during the nineteenth century. Ensuing debates were primarily dominated by national perspectives until the emergence of European regulation.

In the history of these relatively small countries, then, the impact of transnational relations is perhaps even more obvious than in their larger counterparts. Against that background, the persisting importance of the local, national, and European framework presented in this issue are all the more striking. Rather than presenting the history of consumer society as either an exclusively transnational or national history, it has to account for the interplay between these different levels. The most striking contribution to a general history of consumer society coming from the Low Countries – the dissemination of initiatives for fair trade pioneered in the Netherlands – only serve to confirm this insight. It is precisely because of the commonalities between the Low Countries and other parts of the world that these initiatives could be successfully exported.

The history of fair trade provides a suitable conclusion to this volume, because it presents us with a markedly double-sided answer to the question of how to appraise consumer society. On the one hand, the recent success of the movement underlines the rise of the notion of individual consumer choice and responsibility as a cornerstone of postwar society. On the other, it calls attention to a fourth and final insight into the postwar discovery of the consumer, namely to the limitations of this perspective. The motives of individual consumers for buying goods such as fair trade coffee remain opaque and contested, both by organizations claiming to represent these consumers and by scholars. Similarly, the extent to which the fairness of markets can be left to individual consumers remains highly contested.¹¹ More generally, the history of fair trade activism demonstrates how consumption was bound to larger trading structures and part of a larger array of practices influencing how consumers were regarded. The fundamental importance of the ways in which governments, civic organizations and companies understood and shaped the image of consumers highlights the need for caution when asserting the pivotal role of the consumer in postwar history.¹²

11 Gavin Fridell, *Fair Trade Coffee: The Prospects and Pitfalls of Market-Driven Social Justice* (Toronto 2007); Daniel Jaffee, 'Weak Coffee: Certification and Co-Optation in the Fair Trade Movement', *Social Problems* 59:1 (2012) 94-116, DOI:10.1525/sp.2012.59.1.94; Wouter Mensink, *Kun je een betere wereld kopen? De consument en het fairtrade-complex* (Amsterdam 2015).

12 J. Clarke, 'Unsettled Connections: Citizens, Consumers and the Reform of Public Services', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7:2 (2007) 159-78, DOI:10.1177/1469540507077671; Peter-Paul Bänziger, 'Von der Arbeits- zur Konsumgesellschaft? Kritik eines Leitmotivs der Deutschsprachigen Zeitgeschichtsschreibung', *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 12:1 (2015) 11-38.

These limitations, then, should not cause us to abandon the topic. In pointing out the essential influence of related social actors, practices, and spatial frameworks, this volume provides important touchstones for future research on postwar consumers and consumer society. As the contributions to this volume demonstrate, this relational view of consumption can serve as a point of departure for connecting many venerable areas of scholarship to this vibrant field of research.

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