

Book Reviews

Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement
By Matthew Hilton

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Reviewed by Professor Joshua Bamfield

This is a comprehensive and committed guide to the development of consumerism in the UK. Although much of it, rightly, concerns the Consumers Association (and many of the press articles about the book have focused on this important aspect) this is only one part of the book. Hilton discusses the origins of consumerism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the campaigns about prices and unethical practices in World War I; the development of a consumerist ethos in the labour movement in the inter-war period; the pro-consumer pressure in World War II and the 1940s; and the growth of consumerism and the increased respect given to consumer matters since the 1950s.

This book will be of interest to people engaged with the co-operative movement because it discusses the Movement clearly and objectively. The co-operative movement is a major part of Hilton's "historical (consumer) movement" and Hilton gives its work due, but not excessive, credit. Hilton argues that the co-operative movement was a part of the consumer movement for most of this period, but co-operative failure to ally with the consumer movement from the 1950s is regarded as a loss to both sides. The distancing of the co-operative movement from the 'official' consumer movement (mainly the Consumers Association) was caused, Hilton suggests, by a combination of co-operative trading weakness, Co-operative disdain for disengaged middle-class consumerists, and the Consumers Association desire to be completely independent of all trading bodies. Hilton suggests, "The CA (Consumers Association) has never made any significant overtures to the Co-op, and for too much of its history an element of snobbery seems to have led the CA to regard the CWS as a scruffy, if well meaning, working-class relative who is now well past their prime and who ought to step aside to allow in the real professionals". (p333). Hilton contrasts this with the French experience, for example, where the French

consumer movement and the co-operative movement have always worked closely together with testing laboratories, publicity, campaigns, and membership organisations.

An important aspect of his book is the sustained discussion of the implications of the historical incidents Hilton portrays, both for protecting the consumer and the development of the consumer movement. It is especially useful to have this set in an historical context, because we see the same issues coming up again and again. He argues that, compared with several other European countries, there were several reasons for the slow growth of consumerism in the UK. At an official level there was a sustaining belief in efficient markets, which made 'interference' in relations between consumer and supplier unnecessary. Amongst many socialists, consumer issues were seen as a matter primarily for housewives and were less important than production issues and the need for increased wages. William Morris's socialist dream (and that of most other thinkers) was about producer co-operation not consumer co-operation. Hilton also shows that what he calls the *hair-shirt culture* of the British Labour Movement frequently made it uninterested in bourgeois concerns about consumer choice, rejected often as mass-market consumerism.

Hilton correctly shows that a large part of the debate about consumerism amongst the left was between producer socialism versus consumer co-operation. The Webbs are lauded as advocating the adoption of policies which recognised the consuming and producing role of each individual or family unit. Many women became politicised **because of** their role as family provisioners. The work of Margaret Llewelyn Davies and the Co-operative Women's Guild in campaigns to help women as consumers and to improve the lot of women is evaluated. The campaigns covered issues such as credit trading, the standards of co-operative trading, a minimum wage for female co-operative employees, as well as maternity benefits in social insurance

legislation and improved hospitals. To these pioneers consumerism was linked to citizenship issues.

Concern about profiteering, food queues and shortages in the First World War led to the Labour Movement setting up the War Emergency Workers' National Committee with Co-operative involvement. This was followed by the creation of a national Consumers' Council as a quango to relay the public's concerns to the Ministry of Food. Although members of the Consumer Council favoured a strong state role, after the war the co-operative members of the Consumer Council opposed subsidies and controls because these conflicted with co-operative trading needs. The co-operative movement was condemned for thinking only of itself. The Consumers' Council was closed down by the Government in 1921. By the 1930s, the Labour Party with strong Co-operative support was calling once more for a Consumers' Council. However, the Consumers' Council Bill of the Second Labour Government was denounced as an orgy of price fixing by farmers. It failed to reach the Statute Book.

Hilton argues that in creating the building blocks of post-war consumerism, much work originated in the organisation Political and Economic Planning (PEP). This was a group of opinion formers, including journalists, civil servants, academics and businessmen rather than politicians and trades unionists. During

the 1930s PEP looked into the feasibility of national economic plans and the need for a consumers' organisation to empower consumers.

By 1938, the co-operative movement's own PEP, the Carr-Saunders Report, argued that co-operative societies needed to regain their leadership role with all ranks of consumer by embarking on consumer education, teaching discrimination, aesthetic consideration and value-for-money criteria. Societies should extend their interest to more affluent goods and engage in the type of testing associated with the Good Housekeeping Institute. The Report urged societies to become more consumer-focused and give consumers what they wanted.

This fascinating book shows that we can identify a historical consumerism - owing much to the moral economy of the eighteenth century - and perceive the co-operative role within it. The renewed enthusiasm of the co-operative movement for ethical values in trading shows us that co-operative trading can meet new needs and by so doing demonstrates something of what has been lost by the indifference of much of the post-war consumer movement to what co-operatives can offer. One does not agree with everything that Hilton puts forward. In developing his thesis of a 'historical (consumer) movement' he provides a clear-sighted agenda for 21st century consumerists and co-operators alike.