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Daniel Thomas Cook. *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. 211 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3268-8.

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Enfranchising Children?

On the jacket of *The Commodification of Childhood*, Gary Cross captures well the contribution of this book when he praises Daniel Cook for "blending the sociologist's theoretical rigor with the historian's attention to detail and change." This tightly argued case study of the emergence of a clothing industry for children does a number of things extremely well. It makes a broad theoretically and historiographically informed argument about modern childhood and consumer culture. It connects this argument to a very specific set of developments in the history of the merchandising of children's garments and the construction of department stores as modern social spaces. And it brings these ideas to us in a way that is both accessible to advanced undergraduate readers and adequately rigorous for the professional scholar. These features are not always successfully negotiated in our works, and Cook deserves praise for bringing them together with considerable skill.

The Commodification of Childhood focuses our attention on the period between the world wars and brings, at least for this reviewer, a new significance to light within the creation of the merchandising journals such as George Earnshaw's *Infant's Department* established in 1917. Cook shows persuasively that these journals helped define the current framework for children's clothing. They, and the managers who followed their advice, ushered in new forms of age-segmentation through new sizing standards, terms, and garments, and by reorganizing the space of the department store floor. They contributed to the middle-class construction of mothers as buying-agents for the family, and, even more significantly, Cook shows that the merchandisers recognized that children themselves were consumers several decades earlier than many historians have previously dated the advent of this major development. He also gives us a new term to highlight the central conceptual insight of the book–"pediocularity," for the ability of merchandisers and advertisers to take seriously the buying agency of children and the attempts they made to see "the world through children's eyes," instead of only paying attention to parents or professionals (p. 6). After three central chapters detail the successful construction of the toddler's special merchandising needs and the newly intense appeal directly to children in the interwar period, the final chapter shows how these efforts blossomed in the construction of the teen garment market in the 1940s and 1950s.

The central thesis of the book is that children's consumer culture emerges from and has shifted through the modern dualisms between "sentimental versus exchange value, child versus market, person versus commodity, sacred versus profane" (p. 13). Cook calls these polarities "generative tensions," and argues that it is important for scholars to understand them critically, rather than reiterating the assumption they carry. This has a number of implications for studies of consumerism and childhood. It rejects one of the most important ways modern thinkers have understood capitalism by challenging the distinction between a commodity or a price and the person's self or their labor. Cook boldly claims that it "is no longer useful, after the toddler, to think about a commodity as an 'object outside us,' as Marx" defined it (p. 85). A "toddler" was constructed as a subject with feelings whose special needs could be objectively met by the purchase of certain commodities. Paradoxically, the subjectivity of the toddler was invented by the commodification of childhood. Therefore says Cook, "markets have not invaded childhood … markets are indispensable to the making of social persons in the ongoing consumer culture of childhood and, indeed, in consumer culture at large.… [children] are persons who in turn use markets to remake themselves" (p. 144). From this vantage point, the commodification of childhood (and personhood) is the avenue for liberation of the self.

Cook's willingness to push the interpretation of his evidence into general claims about the nature of commodities or the social construction of childhood is one of the main reasons why *The Commodification of Childhood* deserves a wide reading, but it also opens the work to a number of criticisms. Primary among them is the absence of some concept of power (the ability to do) distinct from the concept of agency (the desire to do). Cook persuades me that merchandisers granted children agency and fashioned a kind of "pediocularity" that would allow the industry to exercise some power over this agency. But, this seems a long way from showing one of Cook's most striking claims, that the "child consumer is part of a larger movement toward the enfranchising of children as full persons in Western culture," endowed with significant legal rights (p. 145). Put simply, merchandisers may have tried to fashion a child "consumer" with the right to buy what they want, but the use of this "agency" always depends on wealth (or "buying power") and other salient cultural categories.

Even if children had unlimited buying power, their agency as consumers was constrained and manipulated by the merchandisers themselves. One suspects Cook understands that "consumer choice" provides a minimal basis for understanding the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, but this cannot come to the fore in the text because it is demonstrated best by the distinction between agency and power. The omission of power leads to a second problem. It is notable that class and racial tension are not part of this story at all. Every project has limits and Cook deals extensively with gender. Yet, for a book that lauds merchandisers for the acknowledgement of children's agency, there is a striking lack of evidence of children's will, diversity, or conflict in the book. Cook tries to finesse this weakness, in both his research method and argument, by claiming that children's "absence and minimal presence regarding consumption serves to reinforce the thesis that their consumer personhood has been emergent and slow to be recognized by academic (non-marketing) researchers until recently" (p. 150). This really will not do; the lack of documentation of children's voices in this book could just as easily be a product of their lack of power (not agency), or Cook's decisions as a researcher. Instead of shifting the blame to academic literature in general, the absence of children and youth voices should ask us to reconsider whether the consumer and the citizen are commensurate ideals, and why children have been so well invited to be the former and effectively excluded from being the latter. Here we might see that escaping modern polarities is more easily promised than fulfilled.

These criticisms and concerns should not be read to discount the assessment of *The Commodification of Childhood* given at the outset of this review. Cook has a rare gift for explaining complex theoretical issues, and for integrating secondary literature and detailed primary sources to support his overarching claims. The book is well organized, well documented, and well written. It is a must-read for those interested in children and consumer culture, and it has general significance for the history of childhood. I have used it successfully with undergraduates, and it would be an excellent choice for discussion of theory and method in graduate seminars.

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