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Marsha E. Ackermann. *Cool Comfort: America's Romance With Air-Conditioning*. Washington, D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002. ix + 214 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58834-040-5.

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Energy shortages and environmental degradation have forced Americans to rethink their avid use of such staple comforts as automobiles, home heaters, and air conditioners. Despite the doubts of prominent detractors, Americans in growing numbers have come to accept as factual concepts like global warming and the greenhouse effect. Habits of consumption, however, remain fairly impervious to change. Today's politicians point to the Carter administration's highly unpopular conservation program as an object lesson. As Marsha Ackerman notes in *Cool Comfort*, the thermostat became an instrument of symbolic dissent from Carter's calls for "sacrifice and voluntary discomfort" (p. 163). While businesses inundated the Department of Energy with complaints, federal judges in the sweltering Sun Belt region defiantly ran their courtroom air conditioners at temperatures far below the mandated 80-degree minimum. Ackerman explains these angry responses with polls and anecdotes that implied a widely shared definition of "comfort" that included indoor climate control.

Faced with such "common sense" about air-conditioning, Marsha Ackerman asks how "the idea of cooling captured the popular imagination" (p. 4) in the twentieth-century United States. Specifically, she explores how air-conditioning became "embedded" in the "perceptions and expectations" of the emerging middle class after World War II. A similar story, framed largely around the engineers who invented and tried to shape the uses of air-conditioning, appears in Gail Cooper's authoritative *Air-Conditioning America: Engineers and the Controlled Environment, 1900-1960* (Johns Hopkins, 1998). Ackerman adds some useful information to this history in chapters on intellectual theories about climate, public health activism for cooler and more ventilated build-

ings, air-conditioned sites of leisure, the installation of air-conditioning in federal government buildings, the utopian portrayals of cooling at the Chicago and New York World's Fairs of the 1930's, and the spread of residential cooling systems in postwar suburbs.

Discourses of climate and civilization predated air-conditioning's earliest applications. The iconoclastic geographer and eugenicist Ellsworth Huntington lent "scientific" weight to older notions that tied "backwardness" to hot and humid climates. In his widely read 1915 tome *Civilization and Climate*, Huntington argued that temperate climates helped explain the geopolitical superiority of Western nations. Subjecting the Protestant work ethic to a kind of environmental determinism, Huntington linked productivity to cool temperatures while invoking worn stereotypes about indolent African, "Mediterranean," and Latin American peoples. In the 1924 edition of his book (interestingly, it went through several editions into the 1970s), he added empirical data culled from studies of over 15,000 workers in several states. Huntington correlated higher mortality and lower productivity with factories lacking adequate ventilation. His well-known colleague at Yale, Charles-Edward Amory Winslow, similarly argued for better ventilation in the New York City public schools as a way to safeguard public health and improve student performance. Here readers may run into some confusion. Ackerman implies, but never clearly explains, that intellectuals like Huntington and Winslow sought to manage both the cleanliness and temperature of the air in interior spaces. Winslow, whom Ackerman calls "America's foremost public health expert" (p. 27), became embroiled in controversy over the installation of ventilation systems in public schools. The reader easily could miss the distinction between ven-

tilation systems, which circulated air without actually cooling it, and cooling systems. Similarly, the discussion of Winslow omits the larger context of urban Progressivism, the inclusion of which might clarify his changing position in the controversy over whether ventilation systems should circulate “fresh” or “artificial” air. Only with the advent of more reliable air-conditioners in the mid-1920s did Winslow overcome his initially staunch resistance to recirculated air.

In seeming opposition to the associations of cooling with efficiency, productivity, and civilization, air conditioners made their first significant impact on popular consciousness at indoor sites of leisure and consumption. Ackerman asserts, with limited but fairly persuasive evidence, that ice-cold air “delivered” working and middle class customers to movie palaces, department stores, hotels, and railroad cars. Part of “the total entertainment experience” (p. 49), air-conditioning helped offer an escape from a drab and hot workaday life. At the same time, it became associated with luxury, comfort, and modernity. The marketing of these newly air-conditioned spaces trumpeted unsurprising notions about gender; hotels and railroads promoted cooler work areas for male business travelers, while movie palaces and department stores appealed to “Mrs. Consumer’s” presumed desire for comfort. Similarly, Congress justified the installation of air-conditioning in Washington, D.C. during the New Deal administration as facilitating useful work in the hot summer months. What are we to make, then, of President Roosevelt, who disliked air-conditioning so much that he refused to cool his office? Roosevelt held a patrician’s disdain for displays of personal discomfort, which people of his class long had viewed as a sign of weakness; for a man unwilling to be seen in a wheelchair, heat and humidity perhaps seemed small challenges. Traditionally, the wealthy rarely suffered summer heat, sitting it out in breezy seaside or country retreats. As Ackerman notes, department store managers honored this unwritten rule for decades, installing air conditioners in the so-called “bargain basement” but not the upper floors where women of means shopped into the 1950s.

Air-conditioning might have remained an exotic luxury were it not for the world’s fairs in Chicago (1933-34) and New York (1939-40). Most of the fantastic exhibits promising a scientifically driven utopia were air-conditioned. At New York’s “World of Tomorrow,” exhibits such as the H. G. Wells-inspired Democracy and the Town of Tomorrow prefigured the postwar suburbs in several ways. The architecture of model single-family homes ranged from European high modernist to

“homely” colonial designs, yet many shared the view expressed in a brochure accompanying a home sponsored by *Good Housekeeping* magazine: “Modernism means air-conditioning” (p. 87). This version of modernism, premised on technological progress, became even more prominent after World War II but not quickly or seamlessly. Ackerman shows that the years 1945-1955 constituted a “crucial decade” for the air-conditioning industry, which eagerly but uncertainly eyed the booming residential housing market. Manufacturers like Carrier had limited experience producing home cooling systems, let alone on the mass scale the new suburbs demanded. Elite shapers of opinion, chiefly at *House Beautiful* magazine, also doubted the virtues of air-conditioning. By 1955, air-conditioning had won over such skeptics. That same year, William Levitt contracted with Carrier for air-conditioning units to be included in new homes. The space traveled by air-conditioning in the decade surfaces most clearly in some of the advertisements reproduced in the book. Two Carrier ads that ran in 1949 and 1950 clumsily rehash the interwar discourses of productivity and civilization, contrasting a dozing man in a Mexican village with a sober white executive in his downtown office. The text below the latter image offers air-conditioning for “hotels, skyscrapers, ships, factories or apartment buildings” (p. 11). By 1955, ads were more likely to portray suburban families communing in comfort by their wall unit, as in the Mueller Climatrol blurb promising “comfort, modern living and ‘pride of ownership’” (p. 129).

That telling phrase neatly encapsulates the mutually reinforcing desires that animated consumers, according to Ackerman. Her attempts to demonstrate the advertisements’ effectiveness, however, meet with mixed results. Citing William Whyte and Roland Marchand, she suggests that a combination of “keeping up with the Joneses” and manipulation by advertisers helped manufacture the “need” for air-conditioners. Despite restrictive covenants, African-Americans were hardly immune from the twin tugs of status and comfort; in *Ebony* magazine, profiles of the homes of black celebrities conspicuously mentioned air-conditioning, while ads hawked cheaper wall units for an assumed low-income readership. The 1960 U.S. Census, the first to inquire about air-conditioning (itself a key marker), revealed that African-Americans were less than one-third as likely as whites to live in cooled housing. Regional differences suggest that comfort sometimes outweighed status anxiety. Ackerman presents other data showing that inhabitants of hotter areas like Texas and Louisiana logically valued

air-conditioning more than in other regions, surely a reflection of Sun Belt suburbanization, initiated earlier than she allows here. Ackerman's discussion of air-conditioned suburbia would have benefited also from the inclusion of shopping malls, commercialized public spaces that probably owed much to air-conditioning.

The final two chapters survey, with uneven quality, dissenting opinions from the growing acceptance of air-conditioning in American homes, cars, and indoor public spaces. Leading critics of consumerism and conformity such as Henry Miller, Lewis Mumford, and Vance Packard punctuate a broadly conceived discussion that sometimes ranges too far from the specific questions

raised by the rise of air-conditioning. Environmental historians may chafe at the brevity of Ackerman's portrayal of "green" critiques of air-conditioning. Ackerman might have enriched her discussion of air-conditioning's place in the environmental debates of recent decades by highlighting the rhetoric of rights, so evident in the reaction to Carter-era regulations of energy usage. Clearly air-conditioning became viewed as less a privilege than a right during the period Ackerman covers here. Nevertheless, the book brings such questions to our attention even if it doesn't always explore them fully, making it both a useful addition to scholarship on technology and culture and a highly readable text for the undergraduate and graduate classroom.

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