

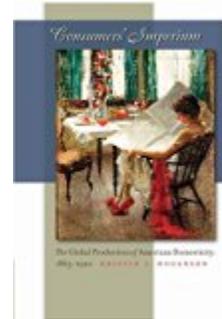
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kristin L. Hoganson. *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. xiv + 402 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5793-9; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3089-5.

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## Imagined Communities: The Intersection between American Domesticity and Imperialism

It is evident that *Consumers' Imperium* was a labor of love. The author, Kristin L. Hoganson, conceived the idea for the book around the time that she had her first child and neared completion of the text while awaiting the birth of what she expected to be her last child. In this book, Hoganson adds additional threads to the traditional narrative of American expansionism in the years following the Civil War through World War I. By viewing the world through the eyes of women, she explores how consumption brought the world into American households and communities through accessories, clothing, food, travel clubs, and events celebrating “immigrant gifts,” such as music, dance, drama, and handicrafts. Each of these five areas of consumption is the focus of a specific chapter with an introduction and a conclusion serving as bookends to frame the central body of text.

In the introduction, Hoganson explains her choice of subject—native-born, white, middle-class to wealthy women. As symbols of U.S. domesticity, turn-of-the-twentieth-century women’s and family magazines intrigued Hoganson. She initially had thought that readers of these publications were parochial and narrow minded, but found that numerous articles had an international focus even while stressing traditional women’s spheres of influence, such as shopping, cooking, and decorating. In the chapters that follow, Hoganson explores “the pleasures of boundless consumption [that] deflected attention from inequalities encountered on the home front”

(p. 12). On a global scale, consumption was a symbol of privilege and hence a source of empowerment for the women examined in the book.

The first chapter explores how American women living on national soil were bringing the world into their homes, while American missionaries to China were shipping household goods halfway around the world to “model their version of home life to potential converts” (p. 21). At one extreme were wealthy women, like Bertha Palmer with a French drawing room, Spanish music room, Flemish library, and an English dining room in her mansion near Lake Michigan in Chicago. At the other end were middle-class women with their Oriental cosey corners that were constructed with gaudy fabric and overstuffed pillows costing less than ten dollars. Through extensive examples, Hoganson explores the tension within American society as the consumption of imported wares and multinational decorating styles challenged the idea that the home was a protective sanctuary from the outside world.

Hoganson opens the second chapter with a lament that wealthy American women were marrying titled European aristocrats, then proceeds to examine the clothes these women wore to project a cosmopolitan image to potential suitors. She also explores the dominant impact of Parisian designers on American women’s wardrobes. Hoganson points out that affluent white Western women desired garments with multinational influences, such as

a “Daring Indian Gown” and the “New Spanish Dress,” when they entered the marketplace through Paris, which branded them as cosmopolitan (pp. 66, 69). The author also builds a case that consumers, except in rare instances, were unaware of the plight of the workers producing the fabrics, laces, and other sewing notions required to construct their garments. Like their affluent sisters, middle-class women were not immune from the sway of Paris and wanted to be included in the imagined community of cosmopolitan fashion. Hoganson explores the democratizing impact of Ebenezer Butterick’s paper patterns that made Parisian fashions accessible to American women from coast-to-coast, including the heartland.

The consumption of food in the United States with a particular focus on international influences is the topic of the third chapter. Cookbook recipes in colonial America were heavily influenced by European, particularly British, traditions. However, Hoaganson demonstrates how imports, industrialization, imperialism, and immigrants created a web of food that influenced American eating habits. She also discusses a new form of explorer who was female rather than male—the food writer. Underpinning herself with scientific expertise, the food writer used ethnographic research to explore international culinary customs and kitchens.

The fourth chapter builds a case that armchair travel clubs laid the foundation for global consciousness among white middle-class American women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Complementing this chapter is an appendix that lists 322 travel clubs for women organized by state, including their known dates of existence through 1920, the number of club members, tourist destinations studied, and documented sources for their existence. In addition, Hoganson mentions the Bay View clubs with their twenty-five thousand collective national members in 1914.

In the fifth chapter, Hoganson explores Progressive Era Americanization campaigns. Some campaigns were undertaken by women’s organizations while others emerged from an individual’s self-perceived role within society as a reformer, business leader, union leader, nativist, English-only advocate, patriot, social worker, or immigrant. Often the purpose of Americanization was homogenization—represented by the melting pot metaphor. Hoganson also explores a cross-current that coexisted at the same time—the immigrant gifts movement. It celebrated and even appropriated the national music, dance, drama, and handicrafts of recent immigrants through festivals and pageants. The

irony of this phenomenon is that native-born Americans needed to understand foreigners to be better Americans, and Hoganson argues that this understanding frequently came through the consumption of immigrant gifts.

The conclusion serves as a bookend to support the various arguments that Hoganson makes regarding the importance of the consumers’ imperium in each of the five previous chapters—primarily that “the richer and more powerful the United States became, the more it could afford to import” (pp. 251-252). She goes even further and argues that it took the world to produce American domesticity and that the United States is a consumer nation on a global scale. In the conclusion, Hoganson identifies the strength of her book—its topical organization with separate chapters focusing respectively on accessories, clothing, food, travel clubs, and immigrant gifts.

The book’s strength however, is also its weakness. The topical approach lends itself to breadth but not especially depth. For instance, the primary focus of this book is secular women’s organizations with occasional references to missionaries and missionary societies. Additional exploration into church-related women’s organizations would have revealed that by 1915 missionary societies had become the largest woman’s movement with more than three million dues-paying members in the United States.[1] Thousands of missionary societies were formed in the United States in the period after the Civil War.[2] These organizations not only sent their money overseas to support missionary work but women on the home front also purchased handicrafts produced overseas by converts. Women in these organizations were armchair travelers of sorts who learned the geography and customs of the countries where missionaries were stationed and, thus, became part of the imagined communities that Hoganson describes. Hoganson briefly introduces women’s missionary societies but does not fully explore them in the text.

In addition to 255 pages in the main body of text, the book includes 62 pages of notes and an impressive bibliography that spans 48 pages. The bibliography alone is worth the price of the book to scholars interested in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, American studies, imperial history, and women’s studies. Although not the primary focus of the study, media historians will find items of interest throughout the book, since the primary sources that Hoganson used include newspapers and popular magazines of the era. In addition, scholars from other disciplines will find one or two chapters of particu-

lar interest. For instance, costume and set designers will be interested in the sections on clothing and decorative accessories, while home economists will be interested in clothing, decorative accessories, and food. Hoganson has given birth to a text that thoughtfully examines the role of consumption of imported wares in shaping the self-identity and global consciousness of native-born, white, middle-class to wealthy women at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

## Notes

[1]. Patricia R. Hill, *The World Their Household: The American Woman's Foreign Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation, 1870-1920* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 8.

[2]. Wayne Flynt and Gerald W. Berkley, *Taking Christianity to China: Alabama Missionaries in the Middle Kingdom, 1850-1950* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 192.

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