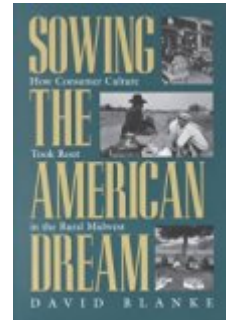




David Blanke. *Sowing the American Dream: How Consumer Culture Took Root in the Rural Midwest.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000. xvi + 282 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8214-1348-7.



Reviewed by Stuart D. Hobbs

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In this work, David Blanke, assistant professor of history at Briar Cliff College, Sioux City, Iowa, looks at the role of Midwestern farmers in the development of modern American consumer capitalism. He believes that historians have given city dwellers too much agency in the creation of the consumer culture. He rightly points out that the rural population of the states he examines included a large number of consumers. What, he asks, did farmers contribute to the development of the consumer culture? Blanke focuses his study on commercial farmers, that is, landowners (not tenants) who were not subsistence farmers but raised and sold a crop on the market. He focuses on four Midwestern states: Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, and Wisconsin. Readers of this list may be disappointed that Ohio is not prominently featured. Blanke largely excluded Ohio (and Michigan) because they developed earlier than the other states and threw the chronology off.

Blanke argues that his commercial farmers "expressed one of the earliest and most forceful modern consumer sensibilities of any population" in the country (p. 7). Commercial farmers, he says,

advocated "collective consumer reform" as a way to participate in the American consumer market and preserve traditional rural community values (p. 7).

Commercial agriculture developed in the Midwest alongside an expanding transportation and communication network. As their crops became more important on the national market, so farmers became aware of the growing supply of consumer goods available to Americans. Farmers felt frustrated, however, by their source of supply: retail merchants and middlemen. Farmers especially blamed middlemen for not bringing to farmers the variety of goods they wanted at a price they were willing to pay. Blanke looked at more than farmer's diatribes, however. He also looked at the business records of merchants and agents and does a good job of describing the difficulties retail middlemen had in getting manufactured goods to isolated farm communities, especially in Wisconsin.

Blanke shows that the complaints of farmers were not always warranted. More than that, he shows that those complaints spurred farmers to

find a solution, which is what makes the farmer's concerns historically significant. In the years after the Civil War, Blanke argues, a rural consumer ethos developed, centered on variety, quality, cost (i.e., cheap), and community. This ethos became manifest in purchasing cooperatives first organized by local and regional farmers clubs and most elaborately promoted by the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry. While many historians of the Grange have adopted the critical and dismissive interpretations of the organization offered by critics at the time, Blanke takes the Grange more seriously.

Blanke emphasizes the importance of the cooperative purchasing program, arguing that this idea appealed to farmers as a way to avoid the middleman, buy direct from manufacturers, and gave rural consumers a voice as to what goods should be purchased. That the Grange largely failed, Blanke says, is not because the cooperatives did not provide a valued service. Rather, he describes an organization in which leaders and followers shared different values. Blanke points out that Grange leaders complained that participants who viewed the organization as solely a group-purchasing plan missed the point: the organization, said the leadership, had a much bigger agenda. In fact, Blanke implies, the access to group purchasing was a major reason people participated in the Grange. Other aspects of the organization, including the secret, Masonic style rituals, did not interest most commercial farmers. Grange leaders promoted the group-purchasing scheme (arguing, for example, that farmers could get out of debt with the money they saved), and thereby attracted members. However, the leadership left the purchasing programs understaffed and underfunded. The resulting disorganization discouraged the farmers initially attracted to the organization, and led to the virtual collapse of the Grange after a few years of wild success.

Ironically, the Montgomery Ward catalog most successfully converted the rural consumer

ethos to success (i.e., profit). Ward provided a simple means for farmers to have a wide selection of goods to choose from and offered them at low prices. Significantly, an uncle of Ward's wife was the Michigan state-purchasing agent for the Grange. Early catalogs had the Grange imprimatur and had great appeal to Grange members and former members. Many remained loyal to the firm of Montgomery Ward long after rivals such as Sears, Roebuck & Co. emerged. Ward cultivated his rural consumers with chatty messages at the front of the catalog saying, for example, that the new edition offered more merchandise and more detailed descriptions of that merchandise because that is what the customers wanted. Ward sided with consumers against middlemen and retailers, furthering his popularity with farmers. Ward assured readers that his catalog would have no gimmicks, such as selling some goods at a loss to get purchases. Ward defended his cash only policy by saying that even though he knew some potential customers would be lost because of it, most would benefit because they would not go into debt. All of these messages, Blanke says, appealed to the rural consumer ethos.

By early 20th century, the Ward catalog had changed. By then the founder had retired from the business, and the management, faced stiff competition from cross-town rival Sears. Blanke compares early Sears catalogs with those of Montgomery Ward. He notes the educational goals inherent in the technical descriptions offered in Ward catalogs and the individualism in the Sears catalog appeals to style and announcements of how popular their goods are "in your neighborhood" (p. 208). Bowing to competitive realities, the managers of Montgomery Ward changed their catalog. Blanke says they adopted the Sears strategy, an urban consumer model in which goods were pitched to individual consumers without reference to the rural consumer ethos. "By the turn of the century," Blanke concludes, "the catalog giants openly pandered to the needs of indi-

vidual consumers without an apparent need to defer to communal sensibilities" (p. 214).

In a work such as this, the farmer's voice is important, but hearing that voice is difficult, because the sources are scarce and scattered. Naturally, organizational voices are prominent: those of the editors of agricultural newspapers and magazines and of Grange leaders. Blanke did find diaries and papers by individual farmers to flesh out his case. In an ingenious attempt to get at his subjects indirectly, Blanke, made a quantitative analysis of newspaper advertisements to determine if advertisers were responding to rural consumers or shaping them. He found a town versus country dispute that pitted the values of commercial farmers who wanted to deal directly to manufactures or big suppliers and avoid merchants and other middlemen, against the values of advertisers, who increasingly were merchants, and who opposed direct marketing. Blanke quotes one Ripon, Wisconsin, editor's attack on rural consumer values as dangerous to the state's economic development. Such sources are not the voice of the farmer, but they do indicate what farmers were perceived to be saying.

Ironically, while rural consumers may have offered a compelling model or alternative consumption communities, in the end the city slickers won. That outcome might indicate that historians have been correct to ignore the countryside. But understanding the response of farmers adds to our understanding of Americans searching for another direction for their community in the early years of the consumer culture.

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