

I was born in February 1952, and after what was then a standard five-day stay at the hospital, I moved into my first home in Paramus, New Jersey, a brand-new ranch-style house in one of the many subdivisions being carved out of Paramus's woods and farms. My parents had recently bought this 960-square-foot house for \$11,990, thanks to \$2000 in savings crucially supplemented by a 4.5 percent GI mortgage for which my father qualified as a World War II vet. The GI Bill had already subsidized his business school education. Dorothy Rodbell and Paul Cohen had married two years earlier, when they were twenty-two and twenty-nine, respectively. For a long four months they had lived with my mother's parents in Manhattan as they navigated what was still a severe housing shortage following the war. In April 1950 they moved into a newly built garden apartment right across the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee, New Jersey. Less than two years later, they became new suburban homeowners

My family's suburban voyage did not end in Paramus. Four years later, my sister now in tow, we moved three miles away to a larger, more expensive house in a more established, solidly middle-class town. Whereas our neighborhood of young families in Paramus had been socially and economically diverse—Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, professionals living next door to factory foremen, people employed locally as well as Manhattan commuters—our new town was more of a conventional bedroom community. Four years later, when I was eight, we were on the move again, this time to an upper-

middle-class suburb in New York's Westchester County. Beyond my parents' upward mobility, measured through their serial acquisition of more expensive homes in communities of ever higher socioeconomic profiles, New Jersey's inadequate and overly property tax-dependent system of school funding had driven them away. Our new town had nationally touted public schools and a population willing and able to pay for them with steep property taxes, necessary despite New York's greater state support for its local schools.

During those first eight years of my life in New Jersey, I watched post-war mass suburbia develop, what in this book I call "the landscape of mass consumption." New limited-access highways bypassed slower, established commercial routes. Along their path, suburban settlements sprouted on what had been fields of corn, celery, spinach, and cabbage. Shopping centers—in my case, Paramus's Bergen Mall and Garden State Plaza—became the new centers of community life, providing a place to spend a Saturday, to attend an evening concert, to take the children to visit Santa Claus, to see candidates campaign. Like many in my baby boomer generation, I grew up in a world of kids—on the block, in overflowing schools, and on television, where so many programs and advertisements seemed to have been made just for us, from *Captain Kangaroo*, *Romper Room*, and the *Howdy Doody Show* when we were young to *Rin Tin Tin*, *Lassie*, and *American Bandstand* as we grew older.

But my world was not only defined by class and age; race mattered as well. In both of these New Jersey towns, I remember few people who were not white: a handful of highly educated immigrants from Taiwan, no African Americans. The most prominent social division we lived with was between public and parochial school kids. In the more privileged community in Westchester, our recently built subdivision was very near to the substantial homes of two African-American families, one that of a doctor, the other of a dentist. Significantly, these families had built their beautiful custom houses on large plots of land on the edge of town. When new homes went up and expanded the town to its geographical borders in the early 1960s, these two black families found themselves suddenly surrounded by neighbors, but still on the social margins of the community.

As my world grew beyond my town, and I grew into adulthood, I became increasingly active in electoral politics, working on Eugene McCarthy's and then Robert Kennedy's presidential campaigns in 1968, for John Lindsay's reelection as mayor of New York in 1969, and as one of only a handful of paid staff on Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm's presidential campaign in 1972. Looking back on those campaigns, I now can identify political trends analyzed in this book—more reliance on television, more orientation toward professional expertise in polling and advertising, more targeted campaigning to seg-

ments of the electorate. In the Chisholm campaign in particular, one of our toughest challenges was balancing the conflicting agendas of our two main voter segments: white feminists and African Americans. Although civil rights and anti-Vietnam War activism preoccupied me, as it did many in my generation, I was nonetheless quite aware of the rising consumer movement of the 1960s and 1970s chronicled toward the end of this book. I admired Ralph Nader, for years considered grapes food for boycotting not eating, and welcomed increased government regulation of manufactured goods and the environment. I was vaguely aware that my father's cousin Arnold Elkind was appointed chairman of the National Commission on Product Safety by President Lyndon Johnson, taking some pride in my family's own small contribution to making modern America a safer place to live. Was I ever conscious during these years from 1952 to the mid-1970s of living in what this book calls a *Consumers' Republic*, an economy, culture, and politics built around the promises of mass consumption, both in terms of material life and the more idealistic goals of greater freedom, democracy, and equality? Probably not, but I did grow up cognizant of the privilege of living in such a prosperous United States, whose bounty I expected to be available to all Americans. Where it was not—in the trouble spots we called the Deep South, Appalachia, and Harlem—action needed to be taken. It is doubtful that I undertook any deeper analysis of the more complex underpinnings of the affluent society in which I grew up.

I tell my own story at length here not because it is unusual, but, quite the opposite, because it is not. The outlines of my life will prove to be common patterns lived by many Americans in the decades following World War II. I, along with many others, was a child of the Consumers' Republic, even if unaware of it at the time. Though that is my birthright, it is only through writing this book that I have come to terms with the benefits and costs of having grown up during the prosperous decades following World War II, in a society where the pursuit of that prosperity defined many more dimensions of life than most of us recognized at the time.

Although there are many ways that historians might conceptualize the second half of the twentieth century, which in our lifetimes has moved from the front pages of daily newspapers to the annals of history, I have put Americans' encounter with mass consumption at the center of my analysis. I am convinced that Americans after World War II saw their nation as the model for the world of a society committed to mass consumption and what were assumed to be its far-reaching benefits. Mass consumption did not only deliver wonderful things for purchase—the televisions, air conditioners, and computers that have transformed American life over the last half century. It also dictated the

most central dimensions of postwar society, including the political economy (the way public policy and the mass consumption economy mutually reinforced each other), as well as the political culture (how political practice and American values, attitudes, and behaviors tied to mass consumption became intertwined). I am arguing that in the aftermath of World War II a fundamental shift in America's economy, politics, and culture took place, with major consequences for how Americans made a living, where they dwelled, how they interacted with others, what and how they consumed, what they expected of government, and much else. Other historians have stressed the Cold War as the fundamental shaper of postwar America. The Consumers' Republic had close ties to the Cold War, not least of which was its powerful symbolism as the prosperous American alternative to the material deprivations of communism. But I want to suggest as well that much of importance in America's postwar history happened outside of the Cold War frame, and applying it too exclusively can obscure other crucial developments.

Americans' identities as citizens and consumers are often presented as opposites. Citizens, individuals in a political relationship with government, are assumed to embrace a larger public interest, as they must fulfill duties and obligations in the larger society to earn basic rights and privileges. Consumers, concerned with satisfying private material desires, are often denigrated for their personal indulgence, perhaps stemming from the word's original meaning: "to devour, waste, and spend."¹ But it quickly became apparent to me that no simple distinction between these roles held true over the course of the twentieth century, particularly by the 1930s. Rather than isolated ideal types, citizen and consumer were ever-shifting categories that sometimes overlapped, often were in tension, but always reflected the permeability of the political and economic spheres. Hence, this book will describe several different citizen-consumer ideal types that prevailed at particular moments in time. *Citizen consumers* of the New Deal and World War II eras put the market power of the consumer to work politically, not only to save a capitalist America in the midst of the Great Depression, but also to safeguard the rights of individual consumers and the larger "general good." In this effort, they often sought the government as ally. The competing ideal of the *purchaser consumer* during the late 1930s and World War II championed pursuit of self-interest in the marketplace out of confidence in the ameliorative effects of aggregate purchasing power; in wartime, however, such behavior would undermine home-front needs. In the postwar Consumers' Republic, a new ideal emerged—the *purchaser as citizen*—as an alluring compromise. Now the consumer satisfying personal material wants actually served the national interest, since economic recovery after a decade and a half of depression and war depended on a

dynamic mass consumption economy. Most recently, during the last two decades, a new combined *consumer/citizen/taxpayer/voter* has gained influence in a *Consumerized Republic*, where self-interested citizens increasingly view government policies like other market transactions, judging them by how well served they feel personally.

Analyzing the Consumers' Republic's integration of citizenship and consumership has engaged me in many other aspects of postwar American life: its class structure, race relations, and gender dynamics; the evolution of residential communities and commercial centers; the reshaping of mass markets; the changing role of government; and the many political efforts to promote new kinds of corporate and governmental policies toward consumers. This book explores all these issues.

One set of questions in particular, about the shifting boundaries of class in the postwar era, grew directly out of my previous work. When I finished an earlier book, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939*, over a decade ago, I found myself eager to probe what the industrial workers of the interwar era had experienced after World War II. Surely, at last, they had secured a foothold in the mass consumer society whose inclusiveness in the 1920s was limited and whose reach in the 1930s was foreshortened by the Great Depression. As I began to follow their story through World War II into the postwar era, I also investigated the experiences of more middle-class Americans to learn to what extent the lives of blue- and white-collar Americans converged in an era known as the heyday of "mass" consumption. How much, I wanted to know, did the supposedly cohesive (some contemporary critics went so far as to claim conformist) "mass" culture of the Eisenhower and Kennedy years erase the class as well as racial and ethnic distinctions that clearly had shaped the prewar era? If workers in the 1930s had effectively used their toehold in mass culture and mass consumption to transcend ethnic and racial divisions and mobilize as a working class, how might working- and middle-class Americans in the postwar period have exploited mass culture's integrative potential to eliminate their class differences?

I make no claims to be the first to recognize the centrality of mass consumption to twentieth-century American society. In fact, the increased attention paid it after the Second World War only supports my argument for its ubiquitousness in the postwar era. Awareness of the far-reaching impact of mass consumption began much earlier. At the turn of the century, economist Thorstein Veblen developed the concept of "conspicuous consumption" in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) to argue that social emulation expressed through extravagant personal display—not the purely rational economic motive to enrich oneself—motivated all social classes within the capitalist

society of the Gilded Age to aspire to the standards set by the elite. Over the next decade, economist Simon Patten further extended the explanatory importance of mass consumption, though he found more to praise than Veblen did. Patten argued that as the American economy advanced from scarcity to abundance, the realm of consumption and leisure offered workers, many of them new immigrants, more satisfaction and pleasure than degrading industrial work and provided the nation with the chance to build a more cohesive society free of class and ethnic divisions.

It was in the post-World War II period, however, when mass consumption was extensively reshaping the nation, that theorists and critics most consistently identified it as a key influence in defining American society. Historian David Potter, in *People of Plenty* (1954), claimed that all of American history and Americans' "national character" derived from an economy of inexhaustible abundance. In the twentieth century that abundance took the form of a "consumer's culture," and advertising "joined the charmed circle of institutions which fix the values and standards of society." In 1957, in a controversial exposé of the new black middle class that he claimed had emerged over the previous two decades, *Black Bourgeoisie*, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier argued that this self-appointed African-American elite depended on "conspicuous consumption" in their own black world, social and material emulation of whites, and an overconfidence in the health of "Negro business" to compensate for deep-seated inferiority rooted in America's destructive history of racial segregation. A year later, in his best-seller *The Affluent Society* (1958), economist John Kenneth Galbraith blamed the voracious American pursuit of private consumption and the engines of corporate advertising that fed it for neglecting "social consumption"—the roads, schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure needed for a humane society. "Private opulence amid public squalor" was how Galbraith condemned what he saw around him.

David Riesman, in two collections of essays—*The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950) and *Abundance for What?* (1964, but including many essays written during the 1950s)—probed the numerous ways that affluence was changing American society. He focused particularly on the new "social character" of "other-directedness," marked by a greater orientation to peer groups which, he argued, had come, with the new frontier of consumption, to replace the "inner-directedness" connected to an earlier economy and culture of production. With the publication of *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Herbert Marcuse brought the cultural criticism of the Frankfurt School of Hegelian Marxism to an emerging New Left in America, deploring the extent to which mass consumption and mass culture bought complacency from the masses, dulling their capacity for intellectual, spiritual,

and political resistance. And Daniel Bell, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), despaired that late capitalist consumerism fueled personal gratification over the needs of what he called the "public household," dangerously undermining social solidarity and shared, previously religion-based moral values.² Each of these trenchant observers of society and many others I have not mentioned, though advancing diverse and in many cases conflicting views of modern capitalism, recognized that mass consumption had become a central defining engine, not simply of the American economy but of its politics and culture as well.

The critique of mass consumption, of course, went far beyond the biting commentary and far-ranging analyses of intellectuals. The Beats in the 1950s, the hippies in the 1960s, the "Small Is Beautiful" and environmentally sensitive Greens of the 1970s, and some strands of the religious right of the 1980s all developed identities based on a rejection of a mainstream culture built around mass consumption. Cultural rebels shared intellectuals' obsession with mass consumption, even as they defined themselves as counter-cultural by denouncing its values and practices, confirming just how much mass consumption stood at the core of how Americans regarded their society in the second half of the twentieth century.

At the heart of my analysis of postwar America is the concept of the Consumers' Republic. This was not a term that Americans used at the time to refer to the world in which they were living. It is my shorthand for what I document in Chapter 3 was a strategy that emerged after the Second World War for reconstructing the nation's economy and reaffirming its democratic values through promoting the expansion of mass consumption. Inevitably, the Consumers' Republic becomes an abstraction in this book that may at times seem to obscure from view the agency of individual actors and social groups. That is never my intention, but I realize that this ambiguity may be the cost of putting a name to what was in reality a complex shared commitment on the part of policymakers, business and labor leaders, and civic groups to put mass consumption at the center of their plans for a prosperous postwar America. To discuss the repeated articulation and implementation of this consensus view every time I make reference to its common priorities would be tiresome indeed. Where and when these shapers of postwar society disagreed, I have made every effort to reveal their differences.

As for my use of "republic," I employ it because it invokes the language that was used so often after the Second World War to describe America's national mission in the Cold War world. In the hands of the "consensus historians" of the 1950s, the American Revolution and the subsequent United States Constitution became moments of careful republic building, not the more

democratic struggle of "the people" against "the interests" that the preceding generation of "Progressive historians" like Charles Beard and Carl Becker had emphasized. Clinton Rossiter's *Seedtime of the Republic* (1953) and Edmund Morgan's *The Birth of the Republic* (1956) were only two of many volumes to appear that stressed the more conservative commitments of the nation's founders to political stability, economic development, and international security—not so unlike the goals of the United States in the Cold War era, it might be noted. Likewise, the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag "and to the republic for which it stands," originally written in 1892 but not officially given congressional sanction until 1942, took on new popularity in the 1950s, prompting Congress to add the phrase "under God" in 1954 to make it more censorious of a "godless" communist enemy.³ Although the label the Consumers' Republic never crossed the lips or flowed from the pens of those writing in the 1950s, its insights and language would have felt familiar to many of them.

I turn to New Jersey at a number of crucial moments in this book, such as when I seek to probe closely the World War II home front, civil rights activism after the war, booming postwar suburbs and shopping centers in the shadow of declining cities, and battlegrounds for the consumer movement of the 1960s and 1970s. After spending the first eight years of my life in New Jersey, I returned there to live with my own family from 1994 to 1997 in the midst of researching the book (ironically to find myself thrown into the same school funding wars that had discouraged my parents more than thirty years earlier). This book moves back and forth between exploring national trends and rooting them in the localities of New Jersey. Both views, a bird's-eye capturing Washington, D.C., and the fifty states and a closer-up picture where more subtle patterns and interactions can be gleaned, are crucial to my analysis.

To some extent, I could have situated this local investigation anywhere; the trends I explore occurred nationally. But in some critical ways, New Jersey proved the ideal setting. It was the quintessential postwar suburban state. Despite a population growth of almost two million between 1940 and 1960—a 50 percent increase in two decades—every major city except Paterson lost population, and Paterson barely offset the out-migration of higher-income residents to the suburbs with a large in-migration of low-income people with a high birthrate. As the postwar era progressed, as much as 70 percent of the state would qualify as suburban.⁴ And perhaps even more significant, New Jersey had an activist state supreme court over the postwar period that made decisions, often historic ones, arising out of the critical social, economic, and cultural changes under way in the era. The suburbanization of residences and commerce and the new inequalities that resulted from them—through restrictive zoning, increasingly unaffordable privatized housing, growing differen-

tials in school spending, and disputes over free speech and assembly in privately owned shopping centers, the new "town centers" of the suburbs—all engaged the New Jersey Supreme Court's attention. Historians, like journalists, policymakers, and citizens more generally, tend to pay most attention to the decisions of the United States Supreme Court, but in the second half of the twentieth century crucial debates around rights deemed to be protected by state constitutions were reserved for state courts to adjudicate. To look only at the federal courts is to lose sight of pivotal battles that took place over the consequences of creating a landscape of mass consumption during the era of the Consumers' Republic.

Part I of this book, "The Origins of the Postwar Consumers' Republic," begins by rooting the new postwar order in a longer history of the place of consumption in the American economy and politics, including what I call the "first-wave consumer movement" of the Progressive Era at the beginning of the twentieth century. I then focus on the 1930s, when, I argue, the critical foundations of the postwar Consumers' Republic were laid. Statemakers at the top and women and African Americans at the grass roots, many denied access to traditional avenues of power, seized upon the citizen consumer role as a new way of upholding the public interest. They thereby built a "second-wave consumer movement." How and why did attention to mass consumption and the influence of mass consumers grow in an era of horrifying depression, I ask, and what kinds of expectations did politically engaged citizen consumers harbor for their society? Chapter 2 moves into the era of World War II, when the link between consumption and citizenship was reinforced by government agencies like the Office of Price Administration, by women who essentially managed the home front through their domestic and civic activities, and by African Americans who experienced their denial of full citizenship regularly through their exclusion from sites of consumption, such as at theaters, restaurants, hotels, and commissaries on military bases. I probe how different groups imagined postwar America as a result of their wartime experiences, promoting competing visions for what "the return to normalcy" would mean.

Part II, "The Birth of the Consumers' Republic," introduces the vision that won out, the notion of a Consumers' Republic that entrusted the private mass consumption marketplace, supported by government resources, with delivering not only economic prosperity but also loftier social and political ambitions for a more equal, free, and democratic nation. In Chapter 3, I investigate how key postwar policies, such as the GI Bill, revisions in the wartime income tax, and the restructuring of collective bargaining, were designed to promote the goals of the Consumers' Republic, and I assess their actual impact, particularly on the fate of women and the working class. Chapter 4

undertakes the same kind of analysis of how the infrastructure supporting the Consumers' Republic played out for a third social group, African Americans. I explore the benefits and costs to black Americans of a postwar society built around the promises of a mass consumer market.

Part III, "The Landscape of Mass Consumption," consists of a pair of chapters: Chapter 5, devoted to the transformation in residential patterns resulting from the suburbanization of metropolitan areas; and Chapter 6, concerned with the new commercial marketplace structures that accompanied the decentralization of urban living. The expansion of mass suburbia—a plan to solve the horrendous postwar housing shortage through the extensive construction of privately owned, single-family homes—promised to create a more egalitarian and democratic society as more Americans than ever before would own a stake in their communities. But the outcome—measured by how many enjoyed a fair share of property and prime public services—fell far short of these aspirations. Likewise, regional shopping centers promoted themselves as the new civic centers of booming suburban towns. But their dominance over commercial life crippled existing market centers, and their legal status as privately owned property raised new challenges to free speech and assembly. Through the restructuring of both residential communities and commercial centers, the Consumers' Republic introduced new kinds of divisions in postwar society while it aimed, with its democratic ambitions, to overcome old ones.

Part IV, "The Political Culture of Mass Consumption," consists of another pair of chapters, the first on culture, the second on politics. In Chapter 7, I investigate the shifting strategies employed by marketers and advertisers to promote the mass consumption at the base of the Consumers' Republic. As the initial assumption that mass consumption was best supported through mass marketing retreated in the face of saturated markets and declining profits, a new approach—market segmentation—gained ground by the late 1950s, bringing with it implications that transcended who sold what to whom. I particularly look at how political campaigners and politicians applied the formulas of market segmentation to the political arena and assess their impact on the practice of campaigning, on the way candidates and voters related to each other, and on the viability of our political system itself. Finally, Chapter 8 examines the political movement that challenged many of the directions the Consumers' Republic had taken by the mid-1960s. I argue that the "third-wave consumer movement" of the 1960s and 1970s grew out of unfulfilled promises of the Consumers' Republic. Mobilized purchasers as citizens were both propelled by their expectations as participants in the Consumers' Republic and constrained by the limitations of that vision. When the nation went into severe

economic crisis in the mid-1970s, the critical underpinnings of the Consumers' Republic and its associated consumer movement collapsed, though the assumption that consumer well-being was central to the well-being of America persisted. My story closes by following how presidents from Ford through Clinton transformed the Consumers' Republic into what I call the *Consumerization of the Republic*, justifying the new order by claiming it served the interests of consumers. In a concluding Epilogue, I briefly bring this history into the present day and suggest some of the implications to be drawn from this analysis of postwar America.

I hope that readers, aware of how my life has conformed to the larger patterns set out in this book, will begin to contemplate how their own lives may also have been shaped by these economic, political, social, and cultural structures that reigned over the second half of the twentieth century and still are with us in many ways today. But in urging that consideration, I mean in no way to imply that individuals do not still make critically important choices about where they live and shop, what they consume, and how they relate to government as citizens, nor that societies like ours should not monitor and redress the unacceptable outcomes, such as discrimination and inequality, that may result from their seemingly inflexible infrastructures. Recognizing the societal pressures toward certain kinds of thinking and behaving ultimately makes independent action not less significant but more so. If we all are citizens and we all are consumers, how we choose to mix the two reveals a great deal about who we are as individual Americans as well as about the virtue of the America we live in at any particular moment in time.