

FORUM

Migrants, Metrics, and the Making of the Politics of Consumption in the Progressive Era

Axel R. Schäfer

Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany
Email: a.schaefer@uni-mainz.de

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In February 1920, Los Angeles County Health Officer J. L. Pomeroy commented on the habits and practices of Asian immigrants:

The Japanese claim to be a cleanly race, and yet inspections made throughout the county of the housing conditions scarcely bear this out. The bath-tub as used on a Japanese farm is an imported affair. One tub of water is heated for the entire family group, which consists of eight or ten people.... Facilities for privacy seem to be lacking, and certainly, from a sanitary standpoint, this cannot be too strongly condemned. The care of the food in the Japanese homes is woefully insanitary. Their methods of cooking are primitive. The women seem to have little knowledge of domestic science ... The fact that women work in the fields with their husbands from daylight until dark, undoubtedly accounts for the uncleanly conditions of their homes. Whatever the excuse may be, the average Japanese home in the country is dirty and often filthy.... The background for Americanization therefore seems lacking.¹

Many scholars of immigration read this quotation and many similar texts—ubiquitous on the West Coast in the 1920s—primarily as expressions of vituperative anti-Asian racism and ethnoracial stereotyping. They regard them as part of a continuous line of nativist, racist, and eugenicist thought and legislation in U.S. history, ranging from the 1790 Nationality Act, which limited citizenship to “free white persons,” via the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone, to the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act that shaped restrictive ethnoracial immigration policies until the mid-1960s.² This essay, however, suggests a different interpretation. It maintains that the text quoted above indicates primarily how closely intertwined the highly racialized and ethnicized discourse on immigration was with large-scale changes in the political economy, specifically the transition to consumer capitalism. It maintains that Progressive Era immigration studies are at the core of the emergent knowledge economy of the so-called age of abundance, centered on living standards, hygiene, nutrition, health, and cleanliness. In this reading, categories such as race and ethnicity are part of constructing the figure of the consumer and the politics of consumption. Rather than simply being expressions of traditional

settler-colonial and whiteness discourses, they reflect modern consumerist subjectivities and structures.

Consumer Capitalism and Migration Debates

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mark the epochal transition to a consumption-oriented economy and society. The possibilities of material abundance, the promise of prosperity for all, and the vision of “freedom from want” are among the central experiences of modernity.³ Scholars have explored the role of immigrant labor, imperial acquisitions, and the transnational flow of capital and commodities for the development of U.S. consumer capitalism.⁴ The significance of migration discourses and policies for the subjectivities, social imaginaries, taxonomies, bureaucratic practices, and social politics of consumerist modernity, however, has received far less attention. In the course of the twentieth century, the figure of the consumer and the concept of consumption became central categories of the culture, politics, and economics of the age of abundance. Key protagonists in this process were a wide range of social scientists, civic reformers, bureaucrats, trade unionists, immigrant activists, business lobbyists, and politicians. They embedded consumerist self-understandings, concepts of social welfare, new forms of statistical knowledge, and the politics of consumption on the basis of migration-related discourses and policies.⁵

Consumer capitalism was accompanied by both the rise of new concepts of selfhood and new conceptions of the good society. First, the economic transition to the “age of surplus” ushered in a cultural revolution in which new consumerist subjectivities challenged traditional producerist self-images. Many late nineteenth-century thinkers, such as Simon Nelson Patten, but also John Dewey, William James, and E. R. A. Seligman, maintained that consumer culture amounted to a fundamental break with nineteenth-century morality centered on notions of economic man and Protestant norms of inner-directedness, frugality, and self-discipline.⁶ Cultural historian Warren Susman speaks of the formation of a new psychological type in which the traditional emphasis on “character,” centered on puritanical-republican and productivist norms, was replaced by that of “personality,” centered on the self-realization and performance-oriented self-actualization of the materially secure consumer.⁷ As economist Simon Patten argued in 1907, by freeing up individuals to cultivate and pursue interests beyond the need to survive, the age of surplus would facilitate the emergence of a new “social self” whose social bonds were no longer rooted in utilitarianism, proprietary individualism, rational self-interest, and the social contract, but rather mirrored the interconnectedness and interdependence of industrial modernity.⁸

The new consumerist figuration was closely connected to the immigration debates of the time. As historians Rosanne Currarino and Adam Rome show, for example, trade unionists and workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries developed a new consumerist self-image based on a migrant counter-image. Anti-immigrant sentiments and imagery were part and parcel of a consumerist reconstruction of working-class identities in the age of industrial mass production, business consolidation, mechanization, and dependent wage labor. In particular, the anti-Asian rhetoric of the mainstream labor movement was at the center of redefining the meanings of “producer” and “consumer” in U.S. working-class culture during a time when economic change was undermining the traditional producer-class ideology. Many trade unionists developed their consumerist self-image on the basis of associating Asians with a low standard of living, unhygienic lifestyles, unhealthy nutrition, lack of material needs, “ruthless underconsumption,” and abnormal behavior. Anti-Chinese rhetoric in particular centered on consumerist tropes, such as the alleged lack of material wants and

desires of the Chinese threatening the ability of the working class to achieve higher wages, and cheap labor standing in the way of distributing the productive output.⁹ In essence, anti-immigrant rhetoric signified the shift of the mainstream labor movement from demanding control over the means of production to calling for an “American standard of living”: high wages, affordable goods, more leisure time, and opportunities for material and cultural self-realization within the framework of corporate consumer capitalism.¹⁰

Second, the age of surplus paved the way for new sociopolitical imaginaries. In the eyes of many Progressive Era social scientists, civic activists, public intellectuals, labor leaders, reformers, civil servants, and politicians, mass consumer society held out the promise of social stabilization through prosperity for all, well-paying jobs, the protection of life risks, the rise of a broad middle class, technological progress, and limitless resources. These “bards of abundance” (as Brink Lindsey called them) translated the transition from an economics of scarcity to an economics of abundance into a vision of the social welfare state and a politics of consumption. This politics of consumption included Samuel Gompers’s “politics of more,” what historian Meg Jacobs has called “pocketbook politics,” and Elizabeth Cohen’s concept of the “citizen consumer.” Some even anticipated a “postcapitalist” society (to use Howard Brick’s term) located beyond the class conflicts, inequalities, and ethnoracial discriminations inherent in the societies of the past.¹¹ Crucially, these thinkers linked the process of consumerist self-realization to the emergence of “new wants” and “higher needs and desires” in terms of quality, hygiene, tastes, styles, and aesthetics. They declared material refinement and new consumer “standards of living” the basis for civilizational and cultural development, social participation, and a functioning social order.¹² Many of these ideas became part of a new political economy in the twentieth century, in which generating economic growth, stabilizing the capitalist order, ensuring a productive and healthy workforce, facilitating civic participation, and distributing the fruits of mass production became key policy goals in the form of progressive Fordism, distributive liberalism, or demand-side economics.

Once again, what is striking is how many of the Progressive Era protagonists developed their consumerist and welfarist visions on the basis of a migrant imaginary. They analyzed the “social problem” in conjunction with the “immigration problem,” and used their analysis of migration to formulate the ideas, knowledge base, norms, and practices of the consumer age. Progressives developed conflicting visions, however. On the one hand, many of them, such as sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross, reasserted hierarchies of race, gender, class, and intellect as part of legitimizing and operationalizing consumer politics and the social remit of the state. Indeed, historian Thomas Leonard talks about the “progressive paradox” that many of the Progressive Era social scientists who challenged laissez-faire capitalism and laid the foundations for the modern social welfare state were “illiberal reformers” who simultaneously embraced nativism, racism, and jingoistic excess.¹³ On the other hand, a significant number of social experts hoped to overcome the “racialized democracy” of producerism with the “socialized democracy” of consumerism. For example, the cultural social politics of Randolph Bourne, the radical implications of John Dewey’s pragmatism, the global diasporic consciousness of W. E. B. Du Bois, the democratic social ethics of Jane Addams, and the transnational welfarism of Isaac Rubinow pioneered new ways of reconciling ethnic pluralism, social justice, democratic participation, and cultural modernity. They associated the politics of consumption with positive connotations of immigrants as consumers, citizens, organized workers, or civic participants.¹⁴

Taxonomies

What united these different perspectives, however, was that migration debates and policies were at the center of their socioeconomic, cultural, and political framing of the politics of consumption and the early welfare state. And social scientists, reformers, and administrators from both ends of the spectrum had something else in common. In defining the social politics of consumption in relation to migration, they constructed both the figure of the consumer and consumerist social visions on the basis of an entirely new qualitative and quantitative body of knowledge. Indeed, they were key players in what historian Lutz Raphael has called the “scientization of the social.” Employing new tools and methods of statistical quantification, classification, and standardization, they created a large new body of data that categorized people in terms of ethnicity, race, gender, religion, occupation, function, education, place, or habits of living.¹⁵

Immigrants were among the primary objects of the measuring gaze and sorting agenda of the intellectual “prophets of consumption.” Progressive social scientists, reformers, trade unionists, bureaucrats, and philanthropists—such as John R. Commons, Mary Roberts Coolidge, Wesley Clair Mitchell, Jeremiah Jenks, Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Samuel Gompers, and Elwood Mead—provided the expertise for a massive classification machine that generated data on issues such as health, nutrition, income, education, housing, employment, and consumption, based on the study of immigrants. This data generation occurred primarily in the form of a veritable explosion of reports, surveys, and commission papers authored by state authorities, organized interest groups, professional bodies, and other so-called knowledge entrepreneurs. They included the *Hull House Maps and Papers* (1895) and *The Pittsburgh Survey* (1907–1908), as well as the reports of the U.S. Industrial Commission (1902) and of the Joint Immigration Commission (or Dillingham Commission, 1907–1911).¹⁶

The latter is a key example. Established in 1907 and lavishly funded, the Dillingham Commission investigated the perceived immigration problem for four years. Its findings, presented in forty-one volumes, formed the basis for the restrictive migration policies in the United States between the 1920s and the 1960s. The Commission is best known for producing a vast amount of reports classifying immigrants according to a set of ethnic and racial characteristics. Less recognized, however, is that social scientists on the commission, in particular the economist W. Jett Lauck, used the investigation of immigrants in order to define the concept of living standards as an (objective) cultural norm linked to material prosperity.¹⁷

Lauck’s focus was on criteria such as cleanliness, health, sanitation, eating habits, and home furnishings but also on income levels, cultural interests, housing and household management, and education. The family questionnaire in the Commission surveys contained 152 questions on income, savings, bills, and so forth, often with subcategories, including money sent abroad, plumbing in the home, sanitary facilities, and living room furnishings. Reflecting the shift from producerist to consumerist rationales, Lauck insisted that “[t]he measure of the rational, healthy development of a country is not the extent of its investment in capital, its output of products, or its export and imports, unless there is a corresponding economic opportunity afforded to the citizen dependent upon employment for his material, mental and moral development.”¹⁸ Warren Susman associates the surveys with an intrusive process of “probing personality” as part of what he notes was the cultural transition from a “producerist” focus on character to a “consumerist” emphasis on personality.¹⁹

The Dillingham Commission helped construct the concept of the American standard of living as the intellectual core of the concept of the consumer. Quantitatively, the Commission provided the bureaucratic expertise for a massive classification machine for counting, tabulating, measuring, inspecting, ordering, controlling, and representing populations. Qualitatively, it provided the categories that legitimized and operationalized consumerist subjectivities based on assumptions about appropriate or inappropriate living standards. Similarly, many of the social scientists, trade unionists, politicians, administrators, and civic activists who pioneered the concept of the consumer and the politics of consumption in the early twentieth century sought to define material planes of living in terms of subsistence, comfort, convenience, and luxury. The idea of standard-setting was ubiquitous, encompassing wage levels, habits of leisure and consumption, public services, social organization, and social benefit levels.²⁰

As many critics point out, however, the putatively objective processes of quantification and classification create what they purport to represent. The tools and methods of social science categorization develop into ways of sorting people and ordering social reality. Their mappings circulate, get operationalized, define knowledge, and thus shape self-understandings, public discourses, administrative structures, and policy making. Indeed, this new data corpus, and its taxonomies and sorting techniques, developed into “difference technologies” for the purposes of population management of both corporations and the state. The new body of statistical knowledge thus cannot be separated from the political economy within which it operates.²¹

The taxonomies created during the transition to consumer capitalism frequently pathologized immigrants. In their classifications, many Progressive Era protagonists associated immigrants with a low standard of living that manifested itself in unhygienic lifestyles, unhealthy nutrition, and inappropriate consumption. They associated them with ignorance, abnormal behavior, and dissipation; depicted them as inefficient or defective workers prone to diseases; and denounced them as bad consumers that lacked advanced wants, which are the basis of material prosperity. They contrasted appropriate living standards with the counter-image of inadequate, reprehensible, or self-indulgent consumption of the supposedly unproductive. Others either linked economic prosperity to immigration restrictions or sought to raise immigrants to an American standard of living, whether in regard to hygiene, foodways, home owning, wage levels, or child-rearing. Indeed, much of the discourse around the “inability to assimilate” centered on living standards and sociality. As nativist congressman Albert Johnson noted in the 1920s, Mexican immigration must be curtailed because of “non-productivity, displacement of American labor, low standards of living, multiplication of social problems, and non-contribution to anything desirable to community life.”²²

In summation, a consumerist corpus of knowledge with new human differentiations emerged in the context of migration research. In these social analyses, researchers and reformers defined proper and improper material standards of living, patterns of social or antisocial behavior, insufficient and appropriate economic performance, and normality and deviancy on the basis of categorizing immigrants. Immigration-related imaginaries underlay the cultural and political visions of economic prosperity, social cohesion, and individual well-being of a new politics of consumption that regarded economic growth and consumer spending as the key to civilizational progress, social stability, and democratic governance. Migration research during the Progressive Era became an early domain where consumerist categories of human differentiation were generated, formalized, legitimized, institutionalized, and naturalized. In other words, social scientists, reformers, trade unionists, and bureaucrats, in veritably inventing the immigration problem,

established the figure of the consumer, concepts of social welfare, and the politics of consumption. Categories such as race and ethnicity, rather than simply reinscribing traditional hierarchies, were part of the classifying repertoire of modern consumer capitalism. They affirmed the self-actualizing market subject, a focus on personality, and consumer gratification.²³

Notes

- 1 J. L. Pomeroy, "Japs Imperil Public Health: Their Garden Truck Not Fit for Human Consumption," *The Grizzly Bear: A Monthly Magazine Devoted to All California. Official Organ of Native Sons and Native Daughters Golden West*, 26 (Feb. 1920), 1–2, Ellwood Mead Papers, BANC MSS C-B 1041, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.
- 2 See, for example, Desmond King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- 3 See, for example, Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016); Meg Jacobs, "State of the Field: The Politics of Consumption," *Reviews in American History* 39 (Sept. 2011): 561–573.
- 4 See, for example, Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); Sven Beckert, *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Julie Green, "The Wages of Empire: Capitalism, Expansionism, and Working-Class Formation," in *Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism*, ed. Jana K. Lipman and Daniel E. Bender (New York: New York University Press, 2015).
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- 6 James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 71.
- 7 Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).
- 8 Simon N. Patten, *The New Basis of Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1907). See also Jeffrey Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
- 9 Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 36–59; Adam Rome, "Nature Wars, Culture Wars: Immigration and Environmental Reform in the Progressive Era," *Environmental History* 13 (July 2008): 432.
- 10 Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 78–91; Mark Hendrickson, *American Labor and Economic Citizenship: New Capitalism from World War I to the Great Depression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- 11 Brink Lindsey, *The Age of Abundance: How Prosperity Transformed America's Politics and Culture* (New York: Collins, 2007); Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2004); Howard Brick, *Transcending Capitalism: Visions of a New Society in Modern American Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).
- 12 Marina Moskowitz, *Standard of Living: The Measure of the Middle Class in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).
- 13 Edward A. Ross, *The Old World in the New: The Significance of Past and Present Immigration to the American People* (New York: Century, 1913); Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 129–167.

- 14 Randolph Bourne, "Trans-National America," *Atlantic Monthly* 118 (July 1916): 86–97; John Dewey and James Tufts, *Ethics* (New York: Henry Holt, 1908); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903); Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1902); Isaac M. Rubinow, *Social Insurance: With Special Reference to American Conditions* (New York: Henry Holt, 1913).
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- 16 See, for example, Jeremiah Jenks and W. Jett Lauck, *The Immigration Problem* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1912); John R. Commons, *Races and Immigrants in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1907); Mary Roberts Coolidge, "The Japanese Land Problem in California," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 93 (Jan. 1921): 51–55.
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- 19 Susman, *Culture as History*, 273.
- 20 Moskowitz, *Standard of Living*.
- 21 Kerstin Brückweh, ed. *Engineering Society: The Role of the Human and Social Sciences in Modern Societies, 1880–1980* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Mary O. Furner, "Inquiring Minds Want to Know: Social Investigation in History and Theory," *Modern Intellectual History*, 6 (Apr. 2009): 147–170; Guy Alchon, *The Invisible Hand of Planning: Capitalism, Social Science, and the State in the 1920s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- 22 Quoted in California Joint Immigration Committee, Weekly Report, 8/22/1927, p. 1, James D. Phelan papers, BANC MSS C-B 800, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.
- 23 Jeffrey Sklansky makes the point that the "social self" of progressivism both contained a critique of the new corporate industrial order and provided a new justification for it. See Sklansky, *Soul's Economy*.

Axel R. Schäfer is Professor of U.S. History at the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany. He received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington. In his research and teaching, he focuses on U.S. intellectual and political history, with a particular emphasis on religion and politics, transatlantic social thought, migration, and public policy. In his current research, he explores the relationship between immigration and the politics of consumption in the United States. He is the author of three monographs: *Piety and Public Funding: Evangelicals and the State in Modern America* (2012), *Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelicalism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right* (2011), and *American Progressives and German Social Reform, 1875–1920: Social Ethics, Moral Control, and the Regulatory State in a Transatlantic Context* (2000).