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# Emily E. LB. Twarog, Politics of the Pantry: Housewives, Food, and Consumer Protest in Twentieth-Century America

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Emily E. LB. Twarog, *Politics of the Pantry: Housewives, Food, and Consumer Protest in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press 2017)

FOR SOME THREE decades, histories of consumer activism and of food have expanded the boundaries of social and working-class history by revealing previously hidden aspects of class and gender conflict, probing such matters as the relationship between wages and consumption and the politics of food price, and interrogating the supposedly conservative beliefs and behaviours of middle- and working-class women who identified themselves as housewives and consumers. In *Politics of the Pantry*, Emily Twarog contributes new insights to this recovery by highlighting sequential upsurges of consumer protest that underscore a five-decades-long trajectory of US women's political activism as consumers. From the 1930s to the 1980s, she argues, consumer movements united women across ethnic, racial, and class differences as they collectively challenged consumer capitalism and the patriarchy. Yet despite the movement's longevity and its ability to adapt to changing circumstances in campaigns that called for not just a fair cost of living, but also (sometimes implicitly) for women's rights, she argues, it has long been overlooked by the women's movement.

In contrast to the sweeping overview of US consumer movements detailed by the field's leading historian, Lawrence Glickman, this book turns its lens on a series of movements that emerged in various US cities over these five decades. Twarog takes a fresh look at 1935 New York City meat boycott, observing that meat had both practical and symbolic significance in working-class culture, as necessary nourishment for men engaged in hard physical labour and as a marker

of masculine virility and strength. In addition to the Jewish and ethnically identified women whose leadership in the boycott has long been recognized, she observes, were African American women who engaged in a form of "economic nationalism" targeting white-owned businesses in predominantly Black neighbourhoods in their boycotts of high-priced meat. Women's auxiliaries of the left-leaning Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions maintained the momentum of the consumer movement during the 1940s, motivated by outrage about "sky rocketing" prices and the CIO principle that "the home belonged at the center of the labor movement." (31) Auxiliaries, Twarog explains, were organizations of workers' wives and described their members as housewives, yet despite their apparent acceptance of subordinate gender status, they framed their mandate as the advancement of women's rights. Auxiliaries thus campaigned for higher wages for women as well as increased purchasing power for families, linking economics to their vision of women's equality. The movement was supported by such high-profile women as Caroline Ware and Genora (Johnson) Dollinger. African American women and organizations also supported the movement, but, Twarog notes, in an era that saw wildcat strikes by white workers to protest employers hiring or promoting Black workers, they organized separately. During wartime, auxiliaries provided volunteer price checkers to the army of women recruited by the Office of Price Administration (OPA) to monitor its federal price-control program. Portrayed by wartime propaganda as an expression of selfless patriotism, price checking nonetheless provoked critical questions among union women, questions that re-emerged at war's end in consumer demands for federal regulation of such

matters as accurate labelling, fat content, and fair pricing.

The onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s sent a chill through working-class activist communities, including those of consumers. Following the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, US unions were required to provide signed non-communist pledges or face serious consequences. Unions that supported political activism risked being targeted as harbouring communists. The United Auto Workers (UAW), one of the biggest CIO unions with an exceptionally activist auxiliary, responded to the threat by, among other measures, putting union officials in charge of its auxiliaries and slashing their funding. Thus, although grassroots consumer protest continued, mostly in Black neighbourhoods where housewives protested high rents and substandard housing, the auxiliaries' membership declined and they lost the capacity for direct action. Unions accepted a narrow definition of their sphere of influence that had little connection to general social welfare and a retrograde understanding of gender relations that drew a sharp distinction between domestic matters such as prices and the manly terrain of the workplace.

In the 1960s, consumers in a number of US cities organized around elusive food labeling practices and deceptive packaging but, despite the existence of federal legislation, made little headway. In the 1970s, supported by state legislators, housewives in a number of states protested high prices with meat boycotts and "baloney rallies," eventually establishing a national organization, the National Consumer Congress, and electing a number of consumer activists to political office. By the middle of the decade, a direct action movement calling itself the Codebreakers organized to oppose bar codes on products that replaced prices on individual items that made it difficult for housewives to check prices.

It also used street theatre and lobbying legislators to make retailers, manufacturers, and government more accountable to consumers.

Twarog's overview of five decades of recurrent upsurges of consumer movements demonstrates a little-acknowledged trajectory of sustained consumer protest. In the process, it celebrates some of its most energetic leaders and activists and provides new evidence of the African American activists who are missing from many earlier accounts. She also profiles a number of consumer activists who were inspired by their involvement in such movements to launch campaigns for political office on platforms that politicized consumer rights and the state's obligation to guarantee affordable, high-quality food and make food's price and safety transparent to consumers. The book pays considerable attention to America's best-known consumer advocate, Esther Peterson, who for years held the federal government's consumer portfolio, but in whom grassroots consumer activist found a somewhat ambiguous ally. Peterson appears to have considered herself something of a radical, although even her quite liberal efforts made little headway. Still, they earned her business's rebuke as "the most pernicious threat to advertising today." (79)

Twarog seeks to do more than recover consumer movement history; she wants to reframe consumer activists as feminists or proto-feminists who claimed a political voice for women by politicizing consumption. She makes the argument in her Introduction and returns to it in her Epilogue, but it is also implicit in the accounts of feisty women who disregard social expectations of gender normative behaviour as they take to the streets in noisy protest even as they insist on their identity as housewives. Yet feminists of the 1970s and onward, she suggests, failed to recognize the consumer movement's

radical potential. Rather, they ignored or dismissed such women because they identified as housewives. To explain this myopia, Twarog points to radical feminist Robin Morgan's opening remarks to the American Home Economics Association in 1972. "As a radical feminist," Morgan began, "I am here addressing the enemy." (9) By demeaning women who mobilized politically around their domestic responsibilities and denying them a place in the progressive women's movements of these decades, Twarog argues, feminists abandoned them to the radical right and conservatives such as Phyllis Schlafly. Food policy advocates today must learn from that strategic and moral error, she suggests. Rather than vilifying domestic politics, food security activists must tap the energy and vision of consumer activists, whose contemporary iteration can be found most notable in Black neighbourhoods and in the global south, where food security is an urgent problem.

JULIE GUARD

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Jim Clifford, *West Ham and the River Lea: A Social and Environmental History of London's Industrialized Marshland, 1839-1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 2017)

IN FALL 1898, a coalition of labour union leaders and socialists gained control of the municipal government of West Ham, an industrial suburb east of the city of London, England. However brief their term – just two years – the coalition represented the first municipal government controlled by what was emerging as Britain's Labour Party. Historian Jim Clifford takes seriously the explanation for the electoral breakthrough offered by one local conservative newspaper – that ratepayers turned to the group that promised to deal with West Ham's water

problems. In doing so, Clifford takes a key political event and grounds it in the material circumstances of everyday life. Political history meets social and environmental history.

The 1898 election appears half way through Clifford's illuminating study. The first half of the book deals with the impact of the urban and industrial transformation of the Lower Lea River Valley. Using historical geographic information system (GIS) mapping, Clifford details the disproportionate growth of heavy industry in this particular industrial suburb of London. The technique also allows him to show the continuing significance of navigable rivers in the area during the long 19th century, which meant that industry frequently located on marshland. Better off residents stayed well away from these increasingly noxious areas, leaving them to the factories, open sewers, and overcrowded and poorly built homes of low-income, socially-marginalized residents. Although Clifford briefly mentions that the suburb offered some natural amenities not available to residents of the inner city, he primarily surveys the damage done to those living in the Lower Lea environment.

The election marks a turning point in the book. In Chapter 4, Clifford documents the inadequate municipal response to water shortages in the 1890s that prompted a coalition of voters to support Labour politicians in 1898. Unusually dry summers played a role, but the environmental historian underlines how human behavior ensured droughts would become crises. Demand grew, as more and more people expected more and more water to be part of their everyday lives. The local private monopoly proved unable, or unwilling, to expand facilities in response to growing demand, or to work with other companies in the surrounding region to ensure a steady supply. When local political leaders failed to intervene