



**Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel. Consommateurs engagés à la Belle Époque. La ligue sociale d'acheteurs. Paris, Les presses de Sciences Po, 2012 344 p. ISBN 978-2724612561, €28.00 (paper).**

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The early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed a proliferation of public concerns and scholarly works on the so-called field of “political consumption”. This notion designates the promotion of public goals and values through individual shopping behavior (e.g. boycotts, “buycotts”, fair trade and organic consumption...) rather than through the classic means of governmental policies and legal frameworks (Micheletti, 2003; Halkier, 2010; Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013). Several of these works pay of course a tribute to similar endeavors from earlier periods, but due to a lack of knowledge, most of these pioneering developments are attributed to the United States (see for instance Glickman, 2012). Chessel’s welcome book fills the gap, by disclosing the contribution of a French social league of buyers — the Ligue sociale d’acheteurs (LSA) — to the early rise of political consumerism, at the time of the Belle Époque in France, a period of technological and social changes analogous in many respects to the US Progressive Era.

The first part of the book describes the LSA and its founders. If in her introduction Chessel concedes that this association is a very little movement among several (and often bigger) ones, she convincingly shows that given its specific character and distinct modes of action, the LSA played an important role in shaping new ideas and policies about work and consumption. The founders of the LSA were French, but open to the world. In particular, they were inspired by the US Consumer league, its women-driven character, its openness to varied religious influences, its tool of “white lists” of acceptable shops and factories, and so on. The LSA was animated by French bourgeois women but also often by their husbands — see the central couple of Henriette and Jean Brunhes. The LSA members were rooted in Catholicism but open to other religious orientations as well as to the progressive republican ideas of the time. Chessel shows that these balanced and plural orientations were precisely what helped the LSA finding a way to give women a political role while also embarking men in their effort, tracing multiple connections with several influential actors, and “circulating” progressive ideas and initiatives both at the national and the worldwide levels.

The second part of the book documents the LSA’s modes of action. Among the latter, she particularly insists on the reliance of the method of the “social survey” (Enquête sociale) based on the Leplaysian tradition. But Chessel shows that with LSA the survey was converted into a distinct feminine tool: instead of targeting the building of academic knowledge, the use of the survey by LSA’s women was taken as a step towards the identification of proper action. Such action was particularly focused on disclosing the discrepancy between the fancy character of novelties and the ugliness of the misery behind it. This effort expressed the reflexive concern of bourgeois catholic women when facing their own shopping practices, and their willingness to care about protecting dressmakers against exploitation through socially aware consumption. This goal was achieved by establishing white lists of acceptable providers, by organizing exhibitions where objects appeared with explanations on the way they were produced, and other similar actions.

The third and last part of the book covers the action of the LSA related to some larger social issues, especially in terms of duration of labor. Given their catholic background, LSA members showed a major concern for banning work during the weekend and urging consumers to avoid shopping during this period; they also engaged in favor of bakers through the banishment of night work for this occupation. Chessel shows that male LSA members played a greater role on these two particular issues, in connection with their involvement in the public sphere, especially in Universities, politics and law (whereas LSA’s feminine members were more focused on

home, female workers and market issues). One of the author's main contributions is to show that the LSA did never oppose private responsible consumer behavior to the enforcement of public policy (contrarily to some versions of contemporary political consumerism), but rather took their efforts as a way to call for social awareness and prepare better laws. The end of the book questions the disappearance of the LSA after the First World War. Chessel subtly notes that if LSA vanished, its spirit spread elsewhere, in several other consumer movements, but also, perhaps, in contemporary consumer regulations and public policies.

This book is remarkably written, in a clear, sober and elegant style; it moreover evidences an impressive aptitude to combine a sharp analytical view with the most meticulous empirical precision. Instead of being lost in the details of her main archive, the author explores the full web of possible other sources to which the LSA is connected, and even gives greater deepness and perspective to her case by replacing it within a broad context documented through an incredible historical and sociological culture. Among several other merits, this book is a welcome contribution on the relationship between gender, markets and politics. In opposition with so many gender studies, gender does not intervene here as a pre-chosen framework but it comes as an obvious expression of the field. The symmetrical treatment of the contribution of male and female LSA members evidences the very meaningful and intriguing articulation between both genders, along a kind of division of labor, which helped women finding a way to engage in public life, often thanks to men's support, even if this was obtained at the expense of a reinforcement of women's supposed "natural" dedication to home and family matters.

Despite the author's amazing coverage of her topic, three major mysteries remain after reading the book. The Belle Époque was marked in France by the vote of two major laws in the same year of 1905: the law on the separation between the Church and the State on the politics side, the law on fraud repression on the consumption side. It is somewhat surprising that Chessel does not really pay attention to any of these laws, while the LSA obviously navigates between the two: the league tried to promote Christian values while taking care not restricting them to the Church; it focused on the social quality of goods but seemed to totally ignore their material quality, except when goods were connected to work, for instance when the sweat of bakers rose a risk of tuberculosis. Chessel late and quick focus on "la vie chère" (i.e. expensive life) conveys another puzzle. The problem of living costs cannot be restricted to the riots of 2010, since these riots rather highlighted the long-standing suffering of popular classes who for decades met daily difficulties to survive. This problem raises a contradiction inherent to the LSA: this movement fought for better work and for better consumption, but, ironically, given its social reliance on rich catholic housewives, it proved incapable to see workers as consumers. A last mystery is about the full (rather than real) impact of LSA. Chessel's account discloses a fascinating array of innovating or astute means of activism, from classic pamphlets and conferences to exhibitions, stamps, and so on, but we learn nothing about the possible contribution of journalists and journals, at a time when the general press was yet by far the main outlet to get public attention. If these three mysteries obviously call for further research on LSA's contribution to early political consumption, the urgent need is for an English translation that will help this major contribution to contemporary history gaining the international recognition it deserves.

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