

INTRODUCTION

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We are a people and culture shaped by the ideology of abundance, or as historian David Potter noted, a people of plenty. Cultural observers from Alexis de Tocqueville to Daniel J. Boorstin have conjectured about the role that material abundance and the ethos of the marketplace played in the formation of a distinctive American national character and contributed to a fluid class structure and democratic institutions. The American consumer culture has also produced a disposable society, mass producing and mass consuming for the moment, characterized by suburban sprawl, shopping malls, and ubiquitous corporate logos and advertising slogans. Traditional benchmarks of group and personal identity—occupational status, ethnicity, religious affiliation—have receded as Americans increasingly define themselves in terms of their purchasing power and consumer choices.

During the past decade a new wave of interdisciplinary studies on consumerism and the evolution of the postwar American consumer culture has emerged. Researchers in diverse academic fields have explored the social, political, and economic changes in postwar American society wrought by mass production, mass marketing, and mass consumption. Social and labor historians have debated the degree to which workers, minorities, and marginal segments of the American population have shared in the material abundance of the affluent society. Central to this scholarship has been an attempt to reconcile the resiliency of the ideology of abundance with the harsh economic realities of post-industrial America—corporate downsizing, plant closures, technological displacement, declining wages associated with service-sector employment, and the creation of a permanent class of the unemployed and underemployed.

Recent studies note that more Americans have fallen below the poverty line than at any time since the Great Depression. Unbroken prosperity based upon mass production and middle class consumption (a consensus once championed by such diverse figures as Henry Ford and Samuel Gompers) no longer seems attainable within the context of a dysfunctional economic system. In many respects the consumer culture has contributed to an environment of rising economic and political expectations that have not been fulfilled. The United States exhibits many characteristics of a

stratified social system as the middle class shrinks and the gulf between rich and poor widens.

The broad field of consumer studies and history of consumerism has produced published monographs and articles on such topics as: the origins of the consumers' movement and grass roots consumer activism; the history of consumer testing organizations; critical legal studies on consumer health and safety issues; consumer regulatory legislation; consumerism and environmentalism; and the politics of consumption. Increasingly, major research libraries have initiated collection development strategies to acquire important holdings relating to consumerism and consumer studies, material culture, product design and engineering, and the history of advertising. Moreover, the multipurpose research dimension of more traditional business and labor archives have been reexamined in light of their applicability to the study of consumer issues.

This issue of the *Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries* revolves around the central themes of consumerism, labor, and the ancillary subject of labor education at Rutgers University. Deposited within the Rutgers University Libraries (RUL) are rich bibliographical and primary sources pertaining to the history of the consumer testing movement, institutional labor history, Rutgers' contribution to modern labor education, and documentation of collective bargaining in New Jersey. Significant scholarship within the field of consumerism and consumer studies will be featured, with a focus upon RUL's archival holdings which have stimulated research on these subject areas. Also highlighted are the units and programs within the RUL and School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR) whose educational mission, collection development policy, and reference service facilitate research and public understanding of complex labor-management and collective bargaining issues and further labor education.

In a departure from previous issues of the *Journal*, this special issue features a transcribed interview with Dr. Lizabeth Cohen, Professor of History, New York University. Professor Cohen, a social historian, has received critical praise for her scholarship on the subject of the consumer culture, class formation and politics in historical perspective. In the interview conducted by graduate students Lisa Kannenberg and Lisa Phillips (Department of History, Rutgers University–New Brunswick), Dr. Cohen discusses the emerging themes, research methodologies, and sources used in her current work. Following her first book, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers In Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), she has expanded the scope of her interdisciplinary research to an analysis of how the mass consumer economy and culture shaped workers' political perceptions in the postwar era and redefined citizenship and participatory democracy. Northern New Jersey's diverse population, its strong identification with industry and labor, and variegated pattern of urban, suburban, and working class communities provide the ideal setting

for her regional case study. Dr. Cohen has incorporated primary source material from several consumer-related RUL archival collections into the body of her research.

Two significant collections that fit within this framework are the records of Consumers' Research Inc. (CR), and the archives of the International Union of Electronic, Electrical, Salaried, Machine and Furniture Workers, AFL-CIO (IUE), housed in RUL's Special Collections and University Archives. Initiated as federally funded archival processing projects, the CR and IUE Archives have developed into important interdisciplinary research collections that enhance the stature of the Rutgers University Libraries as a major documentation center for the study of consumerism and labor issues. Despite the differing institutional nature of their contents, these collections have some important similarities. First, they both have historic ties to New Jersey. Consumers' Research Incorporated, the pioneering consumer products testing organization, was headquartered in rural Washington, New Jersey. James B. Carey, the IUE's first president, spent his formative years in Glassboro, New Jersey and inclusive IUE records pertaining to Districts One and Three chronicle labor activism in New Jersey's major industrial centers. Secondly, both archives collectively document the domestic anti-communist movement from the 1930s through the McCarthy era.

Gregory L. Williams, Consumers' Research Project Archivist, contributes a significant article on the recently completed CR Archives Project, providing an historical sketch of the first consumer products testing organization in the United States. The CR Archives is a premier collection for the study of consumerism and American culture. Williams' piece highlights the mercurial economic, political, and labor views of CR founder, Frederick J. Schlink, and his role in shaping the modern consumers' movement. In addition to describing the major record groups and series of the CR Archives, Williams assesses the potential research value of the collection in terms of its material culture content, advertising ephemera, and documentation of the evolution of product design and engineering standards in American industry.

James P. Quigel's article examines the unique relationship existing between the IUE and RUL, which serves as the official depository for the union's extensive archives. In addition to analyzing the IUE in historical perspective and describing the departmental record groups that form the core of the IUE Archives, this paper alerts the reader to current research trends in the field of social history which have recast the traditional uses of institutional labor history collections. Once the exclusive preserve of union functionaries, labor historians, and industrial relations specialists, labor archives have become multidimensional in application, serving as important documentary sources for researching labor's larger social, economic, and political context in the formation of the modern American state.

The *Journal* is especially pleased to spotlight the Library of the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR Library) in this issue. Among the archival holdings of the SMLR Library are collections and documents which trace Rutgers University's pioneering contribution to modern labor education. Eugene McElroy draws upon this primary source material to write an informative institutional history of the Institute of Management and Labor Relations (forerunner of the SMLR) and its affiliated labor education programs. His article highlights the leading proponents and organizations active in the creation of the early Rutgers Summer Labor Institutes and the movement to establish a firmly-rooted labor education curriculum at Rutgers. The working relationship forged among IMLR administrators, faculty, and New Jersey's labor community was augmented by professional library and archival groups active in the preservation of labor union archives. Collectively, they were instrumental in establishing a labor library and archives to support the educational mission of the Institute. Bernard Downey, former IMLR Librarian, offers his personal recollection of the collective effort towards developing a Rutgers Labor Union archives. He traces the origins of IMLR collection development policy and acquisition initiatives which enabled the library to acquire the IUE Archives and the historical records of New Jersey labor unions, the New Jersey State Industrial Union Council, and affiliated central labor bodies.

Finally, Jeffrey P. Katz, a librarian at SMLR, surveys the library's extensive bibliographic, reference, and archival holdings which support the academic and continuing education programs of the SMLR. By virtue of its specialized collection development policy and reference and instructional services in the labor and management fields, the SMLR has evolved into an important state-affiliated research and documentation center for the study of industrial relations and human resource management. Katz describes the library's unique status as the official depository for New Jersey's public sector collective bargaining contracts and its role in compiling, organizing and disseminating essential data on New Jersey's labor unions and collective bargaining trends in the public sphere.

The post-industrial era has ushered in a period of momentous social and economic changes for workers and consumers, the consequences of which will be debated well into the next century. Clearly, the institutions which serve to further their objectives and are reflections of their aspirations stand at a critical juncture in this period of transition. Critics question the relevancy of labor unions in today's global workplace and service-based economy, characterized by the drive for greater efficiency and ever cheaper labor markets. Scholars and social commentators debate the merits of forming a broadly-based consumer-labor movement as a balance to the excesses of post-modern capitalism typified by downsizing and global economic decentralization to maximize profits for the shareholders and

executives at the expense of the environment and the economic and physical well-being of workers. As the articles of this issue illustrate, the Rutgers University Libraries is poised to serve as an important research, reference and documentation center for the exploration of these important issues.