

The Moral Project of Childhood: Motherhood, Material Life, and Early Children's Consumer Culture

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Review

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Cook, Daniel Thomas. *The Moral Project of Childhood: Motherhood, Material Life, and Early Children's Consumer Culture*. New York University Press, 2020. PAPERBACK. \$30.00 ISBN 9781479810260

In *The Moral Project of Childhood*, Daniel Thomas Cook further enriches our understanding of the relationship between ideas about childhood and the development of consumer cultures for children in the United States. As a Distinguished Professor of Childhood Studies at Rutgers University-Camden and the author and editor of several books on these subjects, Cook has emerged as one of the leading thinkers on what he describes on his faculty webpage as “the tensions between ‘the child’ and ‘the market.’” In this book he develops a “moral architecture” for these relationships by focusing on the practices and debates among nineteenth- and early twentieth-century White Anglo-American mothers of the Global North, whom he defines as “those most often held personally responsible for navigating the dense undergrowth of competing and confusing expectations” of childhood. In doing so, he sets out to historicize this architecture and make the case that the figure of the child consumer is a problem through which we can understand the shifting cultural ideas of “value and personhood” among these elite communities (3).

Perhaps Cook's most important accomplishment in this book is discarding the perception of a “pre-capitalist” childhood overtaken by rampant commercialism during the nineteenth century. As he notes, the idea of commerce and consumerism acting as a toxic force in childhood is far more common in the literature of the 1980s than it ever was in writings of the 1800s. Such a dichotomy made little sense to nineteenth-century White and prosperous mothers who were focused on teaching their offspring how to engage with goods and money in a manner that would reflect a genteel level of “taste.” Thus, he argues that instead of thinking of children as “born into a consumer culture,” we should think of modern childhood as continuing to be “born of it” (9).

He argues that the idea of the child consumer facilitated acceptance among White middle-class Americans of many features of an idealized modern American childhood long

before young people were immersed in a flood of material goods. He identifies the emerging maternal emphasis on children's pleasures and desires, and their pursuit of subjectivity and choice, as beliefs associated with consumerism. Through readings of women's and parenting magazines, he traces this shift through growing advocacy of the concept of rewarding children for abiding by parental wishes rather than punishing them for disobedience.

As these parents shifted away from the perception of children as innately depraved and toward a view of them as incomplete and undeveloped, maternal (and in the case of money, paternal) responsibilities moved from providing moral suasion for their offspring to serving as a kind of commercial guide. Children had to learn what the "right" goods and activities were for them to consume, and what place material goods should hold in their current and future lives. Calls for simplicity in holiday celebrations, along with lessons in managing money and navigating ownership rights in playthings, were examples of the ways that children's consumer practices helped to build rather than corrupt young Americans' character at the turn of the twentieth century.

Indeed, by the early 1900s, being a child consumer was an inherent part of White middle-class American childhood. What remained under debate in mothers' magazines was no longer a question of whether these children should have a role as consumer, but what role they should have. In his final chapter, Cook evaluates what he describes as the "dance" over how the ideas of the child and the child consumer were to be "put into cultural conversation with each other" between 1900 and 1930 (133). By 1926, the ideas of the commercial marketplace were beginning to prevail. *Parents* magazine was promoting "Salesmanship for Parents," a concept that involved adapting the practices of business psychology to home problems. By this point, Cook argues, recognizing the child as a commercial actor in the world and even in the home had become "the culmination of a historical process and a pivot point of new trajectories" (151-154).

Cook's arguments are often groundbreaking, particularly in their reorientation of the triangular relationship between children, mothers, and markets. My primary critique of the book is the extreme technicality of its language. He conveys his important ideas in a manner that makes the book accessible mostly for advanced graduate students and PhDs. Perhaps part of the problem is the disciplinary divide—his training is in sociology, mine is in history—but the need to regularly decode his sentences detracted from my reading experience. With this caveat, most

scholars of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American history, and certainly historians of childhood and family, will find ideas of significant value in *The Moral Project of Childhood*.

Paul Ringel is an associate professor of history at High Point University. He is the author of Commercializing Childhood: Children's Magazines, Urban Gentility, and the Ideal of the Child Consumer in the United States, 1823–1918 (2015) and numerous articles about children's literature and American children's consumer cultures. His current book project focuses on how Americans have taught history to children through consumer cultures.