As historians continue to pay increasing attention to the origins of the transition to democracy, multi-causal explanations will become the order of the day. In the long run, Radcliff’s book will be read as a crucial piece of the puzzle. At the present time, it represents a well-researched, provocative and carefully nuanced rebuttal of the elite-consensus orthodoxy that is appearing increasingly misguided with the passing of each year.

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Histories of consumption can take a variety of forms. They can propose a broad view of the development of consumption in a specific period or national or regional context. They can focus on one or more sectors such as retail, advertising, foodstuffs or fashion. They can look at a range of material and intangible goods or concentrate on just one. The biggest single problem facing the historian, as Emanuela Scarpellini says in the preface to her informative and endlessly fascinating history of Italian consumption, is that the topic can ‘fan out to include practically everything’ (p. viii). Choices therefore have to made. In this case, the author has not opted to focus on a specific period, as she might have done. The 1890s, inter-war years, the 1950s and 1960s, and the 1980s all present interesting specificities in the Italian context that have been treated before, if not exhaustively, and on which she could have focused. Instead she has taken a long view; her book covers the entire period from unification in the mid-nineteenth century to the present. In terms of goods, she deals mainly with material objects and their uses. Her book works well as a social history of the Italian economy, since she dedicates considerable space to macro-economic developments and to public policy issues such as poverty, regional and class differences, and international trade and protectionism. To this extent it acts as a useful complement to Vera Zamagni’s The Economic History of Italy, 1860–1990 (1993).

But the strength of the book lies elsewhere. What Scarpellini gives us is a genuine and richly informative insight into the many theatres and practices of consumption. She describes domestic interiors, social rituals, shops and showrooms, quite literally taking the reader on tours of typical examples of everything from bedrooms to cafes. She tells us how people in different classes and regions lived, travelled, dressed and ate. Workers’ and peasants’ dwellings are evoked with as much care and attention to detail as bourgeois townhouses and apartments. Leisure is also explored in relation to class, region and gender. Her many vignettes are presented with elegant ease, but behind each one there stands a considerable amount of research into magazines, catalogues, photographs and memoirs. Her sense of the temporalities as well as the locations of consumption is especially impressive. That is to say, she does not capture each moment or context solely in terms of its distinctiveness with respect to what came before, as, for example, magazine features on the new kitchens of the 1920s or the living-rooms of the 1950s might have done. She understands that novelties were added to the existing, that new appliances
had to co-exist with old furniture and the memories of scarcity and hardship conditioned attitudes towards early experiences of prosperity. Particularly telling in this respect is her discussion of the period of the post-war ‘economic boom’ when Italy finally became a predominantly industrial country and consumer goods started to spread widely. She notes that bedrooms hardly changed in this period and that they continued to be dominated by heavy furniture and religious icons often dating back several decades, even as kitchens were being transformed and living- and dining-rooms reorganised to make room for radio and television sets. In this respect, her work can be seen to support the view that in Italy novelties, no matter how striking, tended to be negotiated culturally in ways that downplayed their potential for disruption. The Catholic Church and its many organisations, publications and activities played a crucial role here in providing both real continuity and new rituals (the blessing of motor cars, for example) that reconciled modernity and tradition.

Given the ambition and range of this book, it is appropriate to ask what light it sheds on certain much-debated historiographical issues such as the extent to which consumerism undermined Fascism’s attempt to effect a militaristic ‘anthropological revolution’—to use Emilio Gentile’s term—by instilling the Italians with a militaristic ethos; how far it contributed to an alleged ‘Americanisation’ of Italy in the post-war years, and whether the specific forms Italian consumption took somehow explain the political emergence in the mid-1990s of Silvio Berlusconi.

In How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922–1945 (1993), Victoria De Grazia suggested that consumption practices conflicted with the efforts of Fascism to shape public life and orient private behaviour. Similar views have been advanced by the film historian Gian Piero Brunetta. Scarpellini’s analysis confirms this perspective in some respects. She notes that, while food consumption was compressed in the 1930s, spending increased on home, beauty, hygiene, durable goods and transport. But, at the same time, Italy remained a comparatively poor country with per capita income at the end of the 1930s being not much more than half that in Britain or Germany. Fascism did not favour the development of consumption since its priorities lay elsewhere. However, it did introduce, for the first time, a patriotic dimension to consumption by promoting national products and brands and encouraging the use of flags, references to ancient Rome and so on in advertising. In this regard, the regime, she argues, ‘had the effect of raising consumption to the status of being a full contributor to the nation’s development’ (pp. 87–8). She also stresses that consumer policy (especially in relation to self-sufficiency) was ‘an important aspect of Fascist politics with respect to women’ (p. 88), assisting in the process whereby women were ‘nationalised’ (a process analysed by De Grazia). Thus no simple dichotomy between consumerism and Fascism can be assumed.

Scarpellini suggests that consumption has always had local and transnational aspects. She recognises the importance of the European model for Italy, for example in terms of the nineteenth-century innovations of department stores and advertising, and later welfare. This approach shapes her view of the 1950s, when suddenly the issue of Americanisation appeared on the agenda. She observes how this term, and the generally negative views of change that it entailed, were the product more of intellectual responses to change than of change itself. Being more interested in the latter than the former, she only refers
twice, briefly, to the question of Americanisation (pp. 177 and 222), preferring to concentrate instead on the practical ways in which changes were effected in production, distribution and lifestyles. ‘Cultural encounters are phenomena too complex to be resolved categorically’, she argues, adding that ‘Italy has inevitably interpreted, used, and created its own form of “Americanization”, incorporating contents and techniques from across the ocean, but mindful of its own history and culture’ (p. 222).

This mindfulness was dramatically undermined in the 1980s and 1990s as consumption became less a family matter and more an individual one. This, the author says, tied in with a long-term trend towards the consumption of ‘culturally fulfilling’ products. There was still a patriotic aspect, reflected in pride in the success of Italian fashion and design brands, but, in contrast to the past, the great increases in consumer spaces bypassed the conventional locations of civic life (the city centre, the local quarter) in favour of out-of-town shopping centres and factory outlet villages. The bedrooms of Italian homes from the 1990s were less likely to be filled with old heavy furniture than self-assembly items bought from IKEA. She does not address directly the issue of Berlusconi’s emergence, but it is evident that she sees consumer behaviour and consumer culture as shaping ever wider aspects of life. It is possible therefore to build a reading of the Berlusconi phenomenon onto her careful mapping of individual and collective behaviour.

Overall, this learned, yet accessible, book represents an invaluable contribution to the understanding of Italian modernity.

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In 1811, the diplomat Henry Salt was in Tigray, in what is now Ethiopia. This was the era of the zemene mesafint, the ‘age of the princes’ in which noblemen were independent of any Solomonic central authority. In Tigray, Salt met the Ras, Welde Selassie, who lamented, ‘It is my heartfelt desire to see the King reinstated in all the dignity of his office but how can I give him ability? … When I march into the country [Gondar] they will … for a time agree to all my measures, but no sooner is my back turned than they plunder the King, refuse their proper tribute … I am old now and when I am dead all will come again to confusion’ (p. 46). While Salt may have caught Selassie on a particularly bad day, Richard Reid would argue the quotation is both indicative of a persistent inability of leaders to impose anything more than a fragile control over the peoples of north-east Africa, and a comment made at the start of two centuries of intense, cyclical conflicts that owe more to the longue durée of networks of violence than to discontinuities such as changing international circumstances. Reid also emphasises that centres of power—the most important being Ethiopia’s empire-state—were fundamentally shaped by frontier zones—the most important being Eritrea, notable for its long-standing rejection of Ethiopian centralism. While the nature of conflict has, of course, changed—for instance, Eritrea now involves itself in the affairs of non-contiguous territories, such as in its support for the Union of Islamic Courts.