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Abstract

This paper develops a theoretically and empirically founded critique of the concept of political consumerism. In the course of the last decade, political consumerism was "discovered" as a new form of political participation, revealing the politics behind products. Surveys show that individuals more and more often use their consumption to voice political concerns, boycotting products or explicitly buying products for a political reason (boycott). I first discuss this concept and its different dimensions. I then offer an encompassing critique thereof, focusing on four main aspects: the conceptualization of consumers and consumption, the question of whether political consumption is new, the universality of the notion, and the articulation between individual and collective forms of political consumption.

Keywords

Political consumerism, consumers, consumption, boycott.

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Max Weber Fellow, 2012-2013

Introduction

By the mid-2000s, ethical shopping had become such a widespread and much talked about phenomenon in the Western world that *The Economist* ran a title story under the headline "Good food? Why ethical shopping harms the world." (December 9th-15th 2006). This special report, of course, responded to a great many other media articles that presented ethical shopping as the new solution to make a better planet. The spectre of the political consumer haunted the mediasphere. In supermarkets, products appealing to political consumers became more and more common and seemed to respond to a growing demand. Entire supermarket chains converted themselves to being "ethical". Studies from the UK (Harrison et al. 2005, Varul and Wilson-Kovacs 2008, Zaccai 2007), Germany (Baringhorst et al. 2007; Lamla and Neckel 2006), Italy (Forno 2006, Tosi 2006, Sassatelli 2010), France (Chessel and Cochoy 2004, Dubuisson-Queller 2009), North America (Johnston et al. 2011, Johnston and Bauman 2009, Johnston 2008) and Scandinavia (Micheletti et al. 2004) detected the rise of ethical or political consumerism and argued that consumption is becoming increasingly politicized; more and more consumers, they say, boycott and buycott products for ethical, environmental, political and ethical reasons.

How can we understand the phenomenon of 'political consumerism' (Micheletti 2003), as one political scientist has called it? How do citizens come to use their consumer power to voice political concerns? Scholars interested in forms of civic action have studied – and often praised – it as a novel form of individual political participation. In this paper, I offer a theoretical and conceptual critique of this scholarship. After presenting the main arguments of the 'political consumerism' perspective, I raise four main critical points, drawing on scholarship from the sociology and history of consumption as well as social movement studies: the perspective's conceptualization of consumers and consumption, the question of whether political consumption is new, the universality of the notion, and the articulation between individual and collective forms of political consumption. I conclude with a call for a social movement perspective on political consumerism.

The "political consumerism" perspective

The transformation of political participation

Although the various studies of consumers' use of boycotts and buycotts (Baringhorst et al. 2007, Forno 2006, Harrison et al. 2005, Micheletti et al. 2004, Tosi 2006, Varul and Wilson-Kovacs 2008, Zaccai 2007) are based on different research traditions and use different terms, they all agree on the basic assumption and finding that consumers taking into account the "politics behind products" are a growing force. Politics is no longer restrained to the political sphere, the argument goes: it has expanded to the supermarket, where consumers now vote with their shopping carts. Micheletti, sometimes in collaboration with other political scientists, has gone the furthest in theoretically conceptualizing political consumers. She coins the term "political consumerism" to sum up this phenomenon:

> [Political consumerism] represents actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices. Their choices are based on attitudes and values regarding issues of justice, fairness, or noneconomic issues that concern personal and family well-being and ethical or political assessment of favorable and unfavorable business and government practice. (Micheletti 2003, p. 2)

Consumers have the possibility to refrain from buying certain products or brands on the basis of their values – a practice that is called boycott. Or they can make buycotts – somehow the opposite of the boycott, where consumers buy a specific product, brand, label, etc., specifically for environmental, social, political, or ethical reasons. An example of a buycott would be a consumer who buys fair trade orange juice rather than conventional juice, with the goal of supporting small farmers in a South American country.

For Micheletti and other collaborating scholars, consumers increasingly act politically in their private lives, because the private and public arenas are interconnected.

> People who view consumer choices in this fashion see no border between the political and economic spheres. For them, the market is an arena for politics. They also believe that their private choices have political consequences. […] In short, every person is part of global responsibility-taking. Or in the postmodern language of scholars of global risk society "… individuals can feel themselves to be authors of global political acts"(ibid.)

The proximity of this approach with postmodern perspectives of sociological analysis is apparent and made explicit in the above quote[1]. Micheletti builds on what scholars like Anthony Giddens or Ulrich Beck diagnose as late modern societies, global risk society, or reflexive modernity. These scholars see a shift in the way Western societies are structured, which brings about new forms of politics and political participation. From societies built on class distinctions, nation-states, and social differentiation – the key concepts of classic sociological analysis from Marx, Durkheim, Weber etc. – postmodern theorists say we have now entered a different stage, where these categories are no longer central. For Ulrich Beck, in particular, the processes of globalization, individualization, gender equality, and the rise of global risks undermined the basic components of modern societies (Beck 1996; Beck et al. 1994). At the same time, these processes also destabilize traditional forms of political representation, which have become inadequate to deal with the challenges of late modernity. The political can no longer be limited to the specialized political sphere. Beck both diagnoses and calls for the rise of sub-politics, a new frame of reference for politics both beyond and underneath the political institutions of nation-states, involving individual participation that bypasses traditional channels of representation and the borders of states (Beck 1996). The paradigmatic example is the boycott of Shell in the mid-1990s. Gidden's equivalent to Beck's sub-politics is the idea of life politics (Beck et al. 1994; Giddens 1991), and other authors have suggested similar concepts reflecting how the political penetrates individual lifestyles (Beck et al. 1994; Bennett 2004). In many respects, theories of late modernity recall the new social movement (NSM) approach in social movement theory. NSM explained the development of new forms of political participation based on identity politics through an analysis of the transformation of social structures – the rise of the middle class and of postmaterialist values (Inglehart 1997; Melucci 1985, 1989; Touraine 1980). Such transformations are also said to have affected the forms of political participation in Western Europe and North America, where studies observed the decline of collective forms of participation and a parallel rise of more individualized forms. This trend is either deplored or celebrated. In the former category, detrimental consequences for democracy are feared from people's tendency to "bowl alone" and their lack of social ties (Putnam 2000). For authors from the latter category, people have become critical citizens and prefer modes of participation that are individual and bypass traditional forms of representation (Norris 1999).

Whatever the term used, and admitting that there are theoretical differences between the different concepts, they reflect a common understanding of broad social transformations and their consequences for political participation. Political participation becomes more individualized and shifts to spheres beyond the specialized political sphere – in particular, the personal, private sphere of individual lifestyles. Boundaries between public and private life, between political, economic, and personal spheres, are thus blurred. However, while many studies elaborate very consequent theories on broad social transformations, they largely fail to assess them empirically. To stay with U. Beck, his concept of sub-politics, based only on anecdotal empirical analysis, is in fact much more a prophecy, a normative call for how politics should work in a global risk society, than an empirical observation. What should be the object of empirical study – namely the assertions of transformations and the rise of new forms of politics – is taken as given and already established; and what politics looks like in this context is postulated without much empirical proof.

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[1] This affinity is certainly not shared by all of the references cited in the first paragraph, some of them developing a similarly critical view of political consumerism as the one developed here (for instance, Dubuisson-Quellier's (2009) work on the collective aspects of political consumerism or Johnston's (and colleagues') critique based on a class perspective (Johnston 2008, Johnston and Baumann 2009).

Micheletti starts from a similar performative premise. She postulates that consumers today take into account the politics behind products, and that this is a result of social transformations like globalization, the ever-increasing role the market has, and individualization. Empirical data on the rise of political consumerism, let alone on its causal explanations and its supposedly individualized character, are quite scarce and shaky, however. They are of two sorts: on the one hand, the rise of environmental and social standards and labels and the increase in the sales figures for them (Boström and Klintman 2008; Micheletti 2003, 2004b), which shows a process of institutionalization of political consumerism; but the institutional history of such programmes can hardly be attributed to the actions of individual consumers. On the other hand, empirical evidence is based on survey data on participation in boycotts and buycotts. It is on this latter front that the political consumerist research agenda has mostly worked, without explicitly linking it to the former phenomenon of the rise of standards and labels.

There is indeed some evidence that patterns of individual political consumerism have increased recently. In a longitudinal perspective participation in boycotts, as measured by surveys on political participation, steadily increased from the 1970s to the late 1990s, along with other types of political participation (figure 1.1).

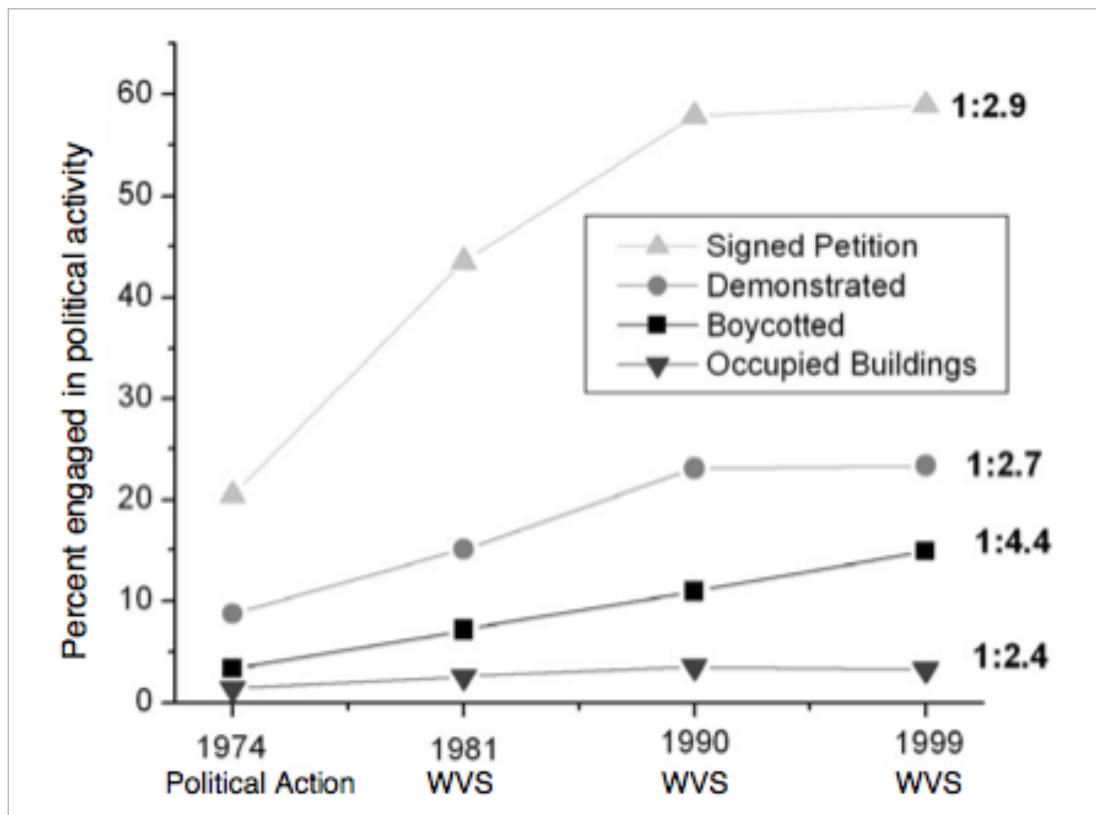

Figure 1.1 Rise of new forms of political participation, from Stolle et al. (2005: p.247), based on Political Action Survey (Barnes and Kaase 1979) and World Value surveys.

As Stolle et al. point out (Stolle et al. 2005), among the forms of participation shown the boycott is the action form that proportionally rises the most, multiplying by a factor of 4.4. It starts, however, from a very low level. Other evidence for a rise in political concerns by consumers when purchasing everyday goods comes from consumer studies. For example, the studies of the French *Centre de recherche pour l'étude et l'observation des conditions de vie* (CREDOC) show that since the mid 1990s (when such questions were first asked), more and more respondents assert that the ethical qualities of goods are important in their purchase decisions.

However, this last example shows why studies based on surveys need to be interpreted carefully, as they tend to produce artefacts to some extent. The discovery of political consumerism at

the end of the 1990s goes along with the conduct of surveys on the issue; but since very few such questions were asked in surveys in previous years (with the notable exception of boycotts[2]), it automatically appears that this is a new phenomenon. This impression, however, is mostly due to the method itself: it is at the moment of the first survey on this topic that its rise is observed. This seems to be especially true for an invisible practice such as political consumerism, which takes place individually in shopping centres and does not necessary leave any public traces.

In addition, and extending on this point, it must also be noted that there is an important gap between declarations and actual practices by consumers. Declaring, when responding to a survey, that one has bought something for environmental, social, or ethical reasons in the last 12 months or that one cares about the ethical characteristics of a product, and actually changing one's consumption patterns, are very different things. An ethnographic study of shopping, for example, shows that consumers constantly affirm the importance of buying green or fair trade products, recycling, and so on, but when it comes to actual purchases, forget about all these convictions (Miller 2001). This misalignment between declarations and practices is also well known in marketing studies on this subject. Interestingly, but not coming as a surprise, marketing studies are much more sceptical about the rise of political consumerism than political science scholars. Carrigan and Attalla (2001) entitled an article on the subject *The Myth of the Ethical Consumer*, and Auger and Devinney (2007) inquire into the mismatch by arguing that surveys demanding what kind of criteria consumers take into account when purchasing goods actually get responses of social desirability.[3] It is tempting to see behind these different appreciations the different finalities of the research. In political science, it is about discovering a new form of political participation, and there is thus, at least in a first step, little interest in qualifying and critically questioning the figures. In marketing, on the other hand, the goal is to empirically assess the (monetary) potential of this new market of green or ethical consumers; therefore, there is an interest in a more accurate picture, finding out how many consumers really do buy products for political reasons.

Is political consumerism political?

Empirical studies in the political consumerism stream do not explicitly address the question of the increase of this action mode, nor do they try to distinguish between practices and declarations; rather, they take this assumption for granted and try to assess the spread of political consumerism and the social profiles of political consumers. The studies by Goul Andersen and Tobiasen on Denmark (2004), Ferrer-Fons on several European countries (based on the European Social Survey (ESS), which included a question on the buycott in 2002) (Ferrer-Fons 2004, 2006), Forno (using a survey) (Forno 2006; Forno and Ceccarini 2006) and Andretta (2006) on Italy (using the ESS), or Stolle and colleagues, exploiting an experimental survey among students in Canada, Belgium, and Sweden (Stolle et al. 2005), all address the same questions. The goal of these studies is to test a number of hypotheses, drawn from the theoretical framework explaining the rise of political consumerism discussed above, to characterize political consumers. All in all, the studies show that political consumers tend to be better educated than the average, and that more women are political consumers than men (Micheletti 2004a); that political consumers are also politically engaged using other forms like petitions, demonstrating and voting and that political consumerism hence does not crowd out other more established forms of participation; and that political consumers express a critical attitude towards the institutions of political representation. Thus, the empirical findings tend to support hypotheses on transformations in political participation by showing that political consumerism is a form of participation used by critical citizens with high levels of education. But they also point out that being a political consumer is not an isolated form of participation; on the contrary. It is the most participating citizens that also declare political consumerist behaviours.

The second and perhaps even more important goal of this research is to show that political consumerism is actually a form of *political* participation. Indeed, in this literature there is an important

[2] Indeed, the boycott already figured in the first classic study on political participation by Barnes and Kaase (1979).

[3] Meaning that the "movement of political consumerism" led to the creation of a new social norm much more than to an actual change in consumer practices, a point Dubuisson-Quellier makes (Dubuisson-Quellier 2009).

concern to legitimize both the object of study and its practice as genuinely politically motivated behaviour. This is for obvious reasons within the field of political science, where consumption is not an object commonly studied, and the association of consumption with political behaviour and, even more so, voting, encounters some resistance. Consuming as a banal everyday practice is not a legitimate object of study in this field[4]. In many ways, parallels can be drawn with the study of other "illegitimate" political practices that first had to be established as legitimate and genuinely political against resistance within the scientific community. Along the way, they pass from unconventional forms of participation to conventional ones. It was a novelty for 1970s studies of political action to include questions on such practices as demonstrating, petition signing or boycotting in an analysis of political behaviour. The study of "unconventional" tactics like demonstrations (Fillieule 1997), occupations (Péchu 2006), or even petitions (Contamin 2001) alongside voting as the legitimate form of political participation in representative political systems was met with scepticism and only established itself recently and slowly within political science departments. The difference is perhaps that consumption is not a practice specifically designed to voice political claims, like the petition or the demonstration or even the occupation of buildings, but an everyday practice that sometimes gets loaded with political meaning, but most of the time is associated with the pursuit of self-interest. To put it differently, while it seems quite clear-cut that someone who participates in a demonstration or signs a petition is doing so specifically to voice some sort of political claim[5], this is not the case with consumption. Hence the attempt of scholars of political consumerism to clearly establish political consumers' *political* motivations.

One way to do this is by insisting on the high degree of politicization of political consumers who also participate through other channels and show a high interest in politics (according to the results of the studies mentioned above). Stolle et *al*. (2005) go one step further to tackle this problem. They propose measuring political consumerism by taking into account three conditions: behaviour, motivation, and frequency. First, respondents must attest to consumption *behaviour*: people who never buy anything by themselves (for example children or husbands whose wives do all the shopping) cannot be political consumers, neither boycotters nor buycotters. But second, in order to be a political consumer, one's purchasing behaviour must also be *motivated* by political reasons:

> It is entirely possible that people buy fair-trade products simply because they prefer the taste or because they are on sale. Other people never go to US hamburger outlets, not as a protest against US cultural hegemony, but simply because they do not eat hamburgers. It can be argued that the label of political consumerism only applies if people are motivated by ethical or political considerations, or at least by the wish to change social conditions, either with or without relying on the political system. (p. 255).

And finally, they argue that it is important to distinguish between people who are regular political consumers, and those who only behave as political consumers occasionally.

[4] In *Political Virtue and Shopping*, Micheletti recounts some of the difficulties and verbal attacks she faced in political science congresses when presenting her work on political consumerism (Micheletti 2003). She experienced criticism on the basis of political appreciations rather than scientific ones on the legitimacy of the object. She tells how some scholars criticized her by saying that political consumerism equals the promotion of a neo-liberal agenda and diverts attention from the role governments must play in wealth distribution. A second group defended the opposite position, assuming that political considerations when consuming attacked free trade and disfigured the act of consumption, which should be free of political reflections. In other words, both tried to defend a clear distinction between the political and the economic sphere, albeit for different reasons. These political arguments against political consumerism, however, also hide more epistemological concerns about the legitimacy of a practice as a form of political participation. Against objections, Micheletti asserts that political consumerism "is an interesting phenomenon well-worth studying because it challenges our traditional thinking about politics as centreed in the political system of the nation-state and what we mean by political participation" (p.3).

[5] However, this "common sense" interpretation is a contemporary one and as such relatively new. In earlier theories of collective behaviour, demonstrators were pictured as an irrational mob, and only a paradigm shift in the study of social movements in favour of resource mobilization theory conceptualized participants in demonstrations as rational actors pursuing political goals.

While the conditions of frequency and behaviour may indeed help to attain a better empirical picture of political consumers, it is the motivation criterion that is most telling. The fact that this cannot be taken for granted says something about the very peculiarity of consumption-as-political-behaviour. If few would suggest a similar condition of political motivation for voting or demonstrating to be considered political behaviour, this is because it is simply taken for granted – rightly or wrongly[6] – that this is the case. But because consuming is a practice that is usually not done with political motives – and is even a behaviour associated with motivations as apolitical as pleasure, fun, and self-interest[7] – the specific political motivation must be attested for. Only if you are genuinely motivated by political goals can you count as a political consumer! The researchers, in an interesting twist, share here the concerns of some *entrepreneurs* of political consumption, like fair trade shops in the 1970s, who wanted their customers first and foremost to buy fair trade products *because they shared the movement's political goals*, and not for other reasons like charity or, perhaps even worse, taste. If consumption is to be political, such mundane concerns as taste should not count at all. However, other fair trade approaches today such as labelling schemes take an opposite view. This is a position that could be termed utilitarian: the more people buy fair trade, the better it is for the goals of the movement, since more farmers can thus benefit from the fair trade minimum price. the motivations of consumers are not important in this model: someone buying fair trade coffee because she likes its taste contributes just as much to the organization's goals as someone buying it because she is a genuine political consumer (according to Stolle et *al.*'s (2005) criteria). In sum, if one starts to look at the more global picture, involving not only individual consumers but also political entrepreneurs, organizations, movements, and so on, the phenomenon of political consumerism becomes more complex.

2. Towards an embedded approach to political consumers

In addition to the points raised so far, a number of specific critiques can be raised against the political consumerist perspective. They refer to the perspective's implicit concept of consumers (a), the idea that political consumerism is a new (b) and universal (c) phenomenon, and its focus on individual consumer behaviour instead of collective endeavours to mobilize consumers (d).

Empowerment vs. manipulation

The political consumerist perspective attributes all kinds of benefits to the rise of the political consumer. In particular, political consumerism is celebrated as a way through which otherwise excluded actors can become politically involved. It opens up a "venue for political action" in the marketplace, which gives everybody the possibility of participating: "People excluded from such policymaking communities as corporate board rooms, diplomatic circles, and legislative arenas can use their market choices as a means for political expression and as political action" (Micheletti 2003, p. 12); and it is especially empowering for minorities like women or African Americans:

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[6] Rather wrongly so, actually. The political sociology of voting, demonstrating or collective behaviour in general shows that people do this for all sorts of motivations, not necessarily political or in accordance with the official message of parties or demonstrations. The political meaning is the result of the work of collective political entrepreneurs, which homogenize individual motivations behind a unique motive and purpose (Bourdieu 1985, 1989; Mariot 2011; Fillieule and Tartakowsky, 2008).

[7] This is of course meant to be ironic, but might deserve to be stated more explicitly: indeed, self-interest is supposed to be the driving force behind consumption; the idea that people pursue their private interests in private life, thinking of themselves and their families, and the general interest in public life, is central to the distinction between the private and public realm (Hirschman 1982). But the theoretical distinction giving opposite motivations to private and public life is highly questionable (Schudson 2007). Political careers and political claims are not necessarily motivated by a drive to pursue the public good, but must be presented as such in order to be legitimate; this is the basic rule of representation (Bourdieu 1991). And conversely, one of the main arguments of the political consumerism approach is to say that political consumers are not self-interested, but motivated by the general good; private consumption can pursue a public goal. It is an attitude that mirrors precisely the legitimate motivations of political participation and political careers: not self-interest, but the general welfare. In order to become political, consumption must undergo the exact same symbolic transformation.

> Political consumerism can be characterized as a pluralist activity because it has looseness and an indeterminacy that appeals to citizens who tend to find themselves marginalized and alienated from formal political settings. It has, thus, been and continues to be an important instrument of reinventing citizenship (ibid., p. 17)

Ulrich Beck goes as far as seeing consumers as playing the role of political entrepreneurs of our future (Beck 1996, p. 129, cited by Micheletti 2003, p. 16); pushing the argument to its limits, the political consumer becomes an almost messianic figure capable of resolving the crisis of traditional representative politics by going beyond representation and allowing for a more equal access to participation and political power. As discussed above, the political consumerist perspective is not only – and maybe not even mainly – an empirical approach, but also a normative project concerned with nothing less than the future of democracy.

The idea that political consumers might represent that future, of course, rests on the idea that all consumers are equal and autonomous in their consumer behaviour. It translates a vision of individualized consumers making rational purchase decisions free of any sort of constraints – which is why political-participation-as-consumers can become a means of political action promising a more equal access to politics. But voting through consumer behaviour can hardly be characterized as more equal or more democratic than voting in elections. Consumer power, after all, is expressed through purchases, and thus through money, and the distribution of wealth is highly unequal, whereas the democratic principle stands on the one-man-one-vote rule. Not everybody can afford to be a political consumer. Not everybody can boycott cheap fast-food places and buy only organic food, for example; one has to have the wallet for it. In other words, the question of economic justice and equality interferes with the ideal of political consumerism as a more equal form of participation. Surveys show, not surprisingly, that there is a correlation between boycotting or buycotting and income. It is mostly middle class and cultural and economic elites who are political consumers. If political consumerism indeed aims at establishing new norms about "good consumption" (Dubuisson-Quellier 2009) it becomes part of a well-known mechanism through which dominant social groups set norms of consumption imposing themselves on subordinate groups. Studying the "citizen-consumer hybrid" at Whole Foods Market (a big "ethical" food outlet in the US), Josée Johnston claims that political consumerism actually "validates elite consumption as ethical, natural, and part of good "taste"" (Johnston 2008, p. 257), as opposed to cheap food of bad quality[8].

This reveals a more fundamental point. The economic inequality is but one aspect of a larger picture. It leads to a mostly political critique of political consumerism – opposition of a normative kind. Political consumerism is bad, the argument goes, because it does precisely the opposite to what the political consumerist perspective promises: it creates more inequality because not everybody can be a political consumer. But behind this, there is a deeper-lying issue, which is the social embeddedness of consumption, or consumption's social determinants, which include economic inequalities, but also cultural and institutional factors.

What makes consumers prefer one product over another? What determines consumption? It is possible to place theories of consumption on a continuum according to the degree of agency they accord to consumers. At one extreme, one finds theories where consumers dispose of maximum agency. The political consumerist perspective is based on such a model, taken from economic and postmodernist approaches to consumer behaviour. The prevalent conception of consumers in classic economics is that of an individual and rational actor seeking to maximize his utility (Fine 2002). He or she has fixed preferences and makes consumer decisions on the basis of a costs/benefits analysis, having available all the information needed. Amended theories admit that the rationality may be limited because of asymmetrical information, but the consumer remains an independent and autonomous subject, and sociological theories on the social shaping of consumption have never led to a reformulation of the classic economics concept of consumers (Ruffieux 2004).

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[8] The mechanism is the same as Gusfield's observations on the temperance movement's fight for prohibition interpreted as a struggle over social status through the establishment of moral superiority (Gusfield 1984 [1963]).

Postmodernist theories of consumption come up with a fairly similar conceptualization of consumers. In this paradigm, which is a reaction to critical theories denying consumers autonomy and agency, consumption is not so much a material exchange than a process through which meaning is created. More than goods with material characteristics, consumers "buy" meaning, which they co-construct with the purchased object. Consumption thus becomes a privileged means of expressing identities, and in this game of appropriation and construction of meaning, it becomes itself a form of cultural production (De Certeau 1990). Postmodern approaches to consumption not only represent the consumer as a powerful and empowered actor. It is precisely through consumption that he uses this force in order to construct an identity. Consumers appropriate objects and give them new meanings, and through this processes of *bricolage* and do-it-yourself identities, come to construct themselves as individuals. Insistence on the consumer's autonomy and capacity to appropriate any meanings from objects goes along with a celebration of the individual, his identity and subjectivity, detached from social ties (see for example Featherstone 1991). Eventually, this leads to an image of the consumer as far from reality as the rational consumer of classic economics theory (Hilton 2003, p. 15).

Political consumerist conceptions of the consumer draw on these theoretical sources. Consumption is always imagined as an individual act, carried out by autonomous subjects, who act for their idiosyncratic political convictions; never is it put into a larger social and institutional context. This latter focus would make consumers not autonomous subjects, but actors caught in a web of constraining factors limiting their consumer "choices". It interprets these actions not as individual choices, but as an expression of a series of social constraints. Some marketing studies on ethical consumers suggest more psycho-social interpretations of this behaviour. Shaw and Newholm show the importance of the availability of information and of the norms of the subject's environment and social sphere. Their study explains that consuming ethical products in a systematic manner is not a strictly personal issue, but depends on one's social environment (Shaw and Newholm 2002; see also the studies in Harrison et al. 2005). A piece of research on veganism comes to a similar conclusion, revealing the point at which maintaining this food culture is facilitated by belonging to subcultural groups (Cherry 2006). Explanation of political consumerist behaviour and its maintenance, such studies suggest, should turn to the level of social groups and (activist) sub-cultures rather than isolated individuals.

The sociology of consumption goes a long way to explaining the social determinants of consumer behaviour. From Veblen through Halbwachs to Bourdieu, consumption has been explained as a social system of classification (Bourdieu 1984; Halbwachs 1912; Veblen 1899). Consumption habits differentiate social classes and groups; consumption is socially determined by social stratification. In Bourdieu's study of the social origin of taste (1984), different tastes for cultural productions like music, films, or games are explained by the relative weight of economic and cultural capital. Cultural consumption is not a function of individual and idiosyncratic preferences, but reflects social stratifications and shows regularities according to one's position in society. While the exact transposition of Bourdieu's model of social distinction, based primarily on the crucial importance of education and qualifications, to other national contexts may be problematic and need national adjustment (Savage et al. 2001), the basic idea that consumption patterns follow social logics is a well-accepted finding in the sociology of consumption. It is also reflected in many marketing studies, which typically build up typologies of consumers, based on factor analysis, with different types reflecting specific social characteristics – young professional women vs. housewives vs. female students, for example[9].

Consumption is not only socially embedded through the position of consumers in social stratification. It is also constrained by technological, geographical, cultural and institutional contexts.

[9] Such typologies, very common in marketing studies, are of course often carried out without much scientific rigor. They nevertheless acknowledge, within marketing studies – which can be seen as an applied version of economic theory – the fact that the socially disembedded consumer of classic economic theory is a fiction. Producers of goods know this and try to cater to specific social categories – by segmenting the market, for example (Cohen 2003) – and not to a fictional generic consumer. However, the fact that this process not only reflects existing groups, but also creates groups – that it is actually less about market segments than the segment*ing* of markets – points to the various actors involved in the construction of consumers, a point discussed in the next few pages.

Consumers are not free to buy whatever they want; rather, their options are shaped by the infrastructure of their environment[10]. Consumer patterns are constrained and do not all depend on the free will of individual consumers, and they cannot be reduced to the isolated moment of shopping: instead, shopping and consumption are inserted into everyday routines, and goods are not only bought, they are also used in different ways. This theoretical strand thus also draws strongly on anthropological approaches to consumption.

Consumption is shaped by technology: for example, the spread of heating in winter and air conditioning in summer has affected the clothes we wear, which have become less differentiated from one season to the other (Shove 2003). It is geographically and culturally shaped, and many individual consumption practices are actually made collectively or constrained by one's objective living conditions. For example, in the US, the development of large suburbs outside of big cities brought along a whole series of consumption behaviours which in turn constrain and shape future behaviours: a preference for individual houses, a dependence on cars, the development of big malls of mass consumption, etc. (Cohen 2003). These objective conditions shape the consumption habits of inhabitants of suburbs, and are an obstacle to certain innovations like sustainable consumption practices. And consumption is institutionally shaped: Bartiaux (2007), for instance, discusses how shifting to new routines for household waste sorting was favoured in Belgium by the perceived pressure and the facilities provided, showing the importance of institutional contexts to set up new behavioural patterns. In another example, Kjaernes and colleagues, in different studies (Kjaernes et al. 2007; Kjaernes et al. 2005; Terragni and Kjaernes 2004; Torjusen et al. 2004), show how different national patterns of food consumption – shaped culturally, but also in the interplay involving the nationally distinctive organization of agriculture and retailing – are an important explanation of the success of organic food in different countries.

One specific way to conceptualize the institutional shaping of consumption practices are approaches in terms of governmentality. Foucault coined this term to signify the links between the conduct of governments and the governance of individual behaviour (Foucault 2004). In this perspective, consumption, like other individual practices, is always an object of diverse rational interventions from governments and other institutions like the church, developing a range of technologies to orient behaviour. Governing takes place beyond the state, and the loci of power are not limited to the central state authority, in conformity with Foucault's decentralized concept of power (Rose and Miller 1992). In this respect, social movement organizations themselves are agents of power, promoting specific visions of good conduct and the right way to consume; hence, enterprises of social movements govern "by problematizing and attempting to shape the conduct of those they mobilize, such as disciplining the purchasing power of consumers" (Wiedenhoft 2008, p. 290). Rumpala detects a novel stage in the governmentality of consumption in the figure of the sustainable consumer (Rumpala 2009)[11]. Consumption is taken as an object of (governmental) intervention with the goal of changing it toward more sustainable modes of consuming. Government initiatives like public campaigns or the promotion of labelling schemes aim at the general population, considered as a mass of individual consumers. They are expected to adapt their consumption habits by integrating objectives for the general good. This perspective is central for a number of activist mobilizations; and government programmes, which sometimes fund and/or build on activist organizations, have supplanted it (Rumpala 2009, p. 968-69). Governmentality perspectives thus point to a further sort of embededdness of consumer practices: they are the object of intervention by a variety of actors, who promote, through different instruments, specific images of the consumer and of good consumption practices. They point to the crucial role of organized groups, actions, and instruments in the conduct of individual consumption; in such a perspective, political consumption is less the expression of individual concerns by consumers than a result of processes of mobilization of the figure of the political consumer (Miller and Rose 1997). Thus, they invite us to turn our view away from individual

[10] For such an approach to the "infrastructure of consumption", see in particular the volumes authored or co-edited by Shove (Shove 2003; Shove et al. 2009; Van Vliet et al. 2005).

[11] If he speaks of a *novel* stage, this is to say that in the past other views of the consumer were put forward by instances of governmentality (such as the rational consumer by consumer organizations from the 1950s onward (Pinto 1992)

consumers towards organized actions and public interventions which take as their object consumers and consumer behaviour.

In some applications, however, governmentality perspectives lead to a homogenizing vision that loses sight of the diversity of discourses on consumption. If the goal is to identify very broad historical trends like the historic succession of different views of the consumer – the rational consumer being supplanted by the responsible consumer – conflicts between opposing visions and nuances are lost in the picture. Rumpala, for example, explicitly calls for a methodological approach that distances itself from analytic separations too easily available, like between the political and economic spheres (ibid., p.970). The analysis thus becomes rather superficial, which is, by the way, explicitly advocated by some proponents of the perspective (Rose 1999). While this may be a legitimate method for discovering historic tendencies, it is of little help if one wants to understand more thoroughly the differences and subtleties that exist between diachronically and synchronically diverse mobilizations of the consumer. It risks seeing sameness where there is actually conflict and nuances of meaning; it risks reducing consumer behaviour and consumer mobilizations to instruments of political power and, ultimately, to government intervention, a finding at quite some distance from Foucault's decentralized conception of power.

If pushed too far, governmentality approaches might thus end up creating a final category for the conceptualization of consumers, picturing consumers as a manipulated mass, at the mercy of the advertising industry (or whatever other actor is perceived as the most powerful). This is the vision of the "one-dimensional man" (Marcuse 1968) developed in the Frankfurt school of sociology. In this perspective, consumers are submerged by commercial messages from the capitalist system; "the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry… bind[s] the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers" (Marcuse 1968, p. 6). This leads to a uniformization and standardization of consumption that leaves no space for practices of distinction. Or rather, such practices are actually the very fruit of advertising strategies, and as such but spurious and vain. Consumers cannot escape what Guy Debord famously named the *Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1994 [1967]) and are alienated from any kind of authentic life. Obviously, in such a model there is no agency left whatsoever. What is interesting, however, is that while critical theorists accused marketing and the advertising industry of manipulating consumers that they (the critical theorists) saw as a dumb and flexible mass, advertising professionals and their allies from scientific institutions actually built their models on much more nuanced and diverse representations of consumers (Miller and Rose 1997).

In sum, the sociology of consumers strongly suggests that individual consumer behaviour is constrained and enabled by social factors: consumers' position in the social field and membership of social groups; technological, institutional, cultural, and geographical mechanisms that shape consumption; and public discourses and the mobilization of different views of consumers. This means that a focus on individual consumers and their acts of political consumerism grasps only a small part of the global picture of political consumerism, and if one is to understand the phenomenon more thoroughly, one needs to take into account the social shaping of consumption.

The idea of novelty

Political consumerism is presented as a novel form of political participation, whose rise is explained by social transformations such as globalization, commodification, individualization and the rise of postmaterialist values, all processes that initiated in the second half of the 20th century. However, as argued above, since political consumerism is almost exclusively measured through surveys, the observation of its rise is mostly an artefact created by the instrument of measurement. And indeed, the world did not wait until the 1990s to give political meaning to consumption. This is widely known for boycotts (and, it must be said, acknowledged by the authors writing in the political consumerist perspective[12]). From the Boston Tea Party and the subsequent boycott of English goods to Gandhi's

[12] Micheletti explicitly states that political consumerism is not a new phenomenon, but has historic precedents. However, she sustains that it is different from forms in the past inasmuch as it is more global in orientation, focuses on postmaterialist or postmodern concerns, possibly represents the public virtue more than the private virtue, and takes more institutionalized forms (Micheletti 2003, p. 108). I agree with the argument that political consumerism today has certain

boycott of English products, passing through boycotts of Jewish shops in Nazi Germany, there are many historic examples of famous and infamous boycott campaigns. What is less well known is that the buycott is not an invention of recent times either. Glickman's work, for example, shows how the anti-slavery movement in the mid 19th century developed a sort of label for slave-free products, or how a boycott of Japanese silk in the 1920s at the same time promoted a buycott of substitute products (Glickman 2004a, 2005). Similarly, Wiedenhoft (2008) studies the National Consumers' Leagues in the early 1900s and their use of "white lists", listing shops where women workers are treated "correctly", and later their use of a label in competition with a union-made label issued by labour unions. And Chessel's historic inquiry into the Social Leagues of consumers in France and Switzerland reveals that they tried to bring together the concerns of consumers and workers by taking into account workers' concerns in purchasing decisions (Chessel 2004).

With a historical perspective, the phenomenon of political consumerism as one observes it today thus appears to be but a variant – albeit taking specific forms and rising under particular historic circumstances – of a long history of different mobilizations and conceptualizations of consumers (Barraud de Lagerie 2012, Dubuisson-Quellier 2009). Putting today's mobilization of consumers into this historic picture, then, reveals that the idea that consumption is merely about the self-interest of individual consumers and questions of quality and price is actually a relatively recent construction, and that besides this figure, there have always been other conceptualizations and mobilizations of consumers. In the 19th century and well into the beginning of the 20th century, association of the interests of consumers with those of workers was a common concern for different mobilizations (Bevir and Trentmann 2007; Chatriot et al. 2005; Trentmann 2006). The co-operative movement explicitly brought together consumers and workers in an effort to serve their interests concomitantly, and in many places it is vibrant until today. In the cooperative movement, producers, workers and consumers are seen as pursuing common goals, not antagonist interests. The past few years have seen a revival of co-operatives or similar forms, such as local exchange markets (Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine et al. 2011). The first consumer organizations, emerging at the beginning of the 20th century, also pursued the goal of shared interests between consumers and workers. Indeed, the clear division into specific roles of consumers and workers, respectively, first had to be established (Trentmann 2006). Only slowly does a social differentiation emerge and do consumers come to be seen as a specific social category. The category of the consumer itself, thus, is a historical construction (Pinto 1989 [1985]; Trentmann 2006).

The political consumerist perspective argues that overlapping between citizens and consumers, illustrated by the rise of the citizen-consumer, is a new phenomenon, witnessed by the emergence of terms like citizen-consumer (Scammell 2000), ethical consumer, or, in French, *consomm'acteur*. But instead, a historian's look at consumer and citizen roles teaches us not to treat these two roles as separate, but as always interweaving, though in differing ways throughout history. According to Cohen, who studied the evolution of the American "Consumers' Republic",

> [N]o simple distinction between these roles [of consumer and citizen] held true over the course of the twentieth century, particularly by the mid 1930s. Rather than isolated ideal types, citizen and consumer were ever-shifting categories that sometimes overlapped, often were in tension, but always reflected the permeability of the political and economic spheres. (p.8).

She goes on to distinguish stages in the evolution of the relation between those roles: from the citizen-consumer of the New Deal, where consumer organizations mobilized consumers and their consumer decisions to serve the interests of the working class, to the *purchaser-as-citizen* of the postwar period, where consumption as a self-interested consumer actually serves the interests of the nation by driving the economy, to the consumer/citizen/taxpayer/voter in the "consumerized republic", where government policies and elections are increasingly seen like other market transactions (ibid.). Cohen's

(Contd.)

characteristics that distinguish it from previous forms – especially its institutionalization – but as the examples mobilized below will show, public-mindedness, in addition to being difficult to distinguish from private concerns, is hardly a distinguishing feature of it. More recently, Micheletti has taken note of historic studies and now treats the 19th century abolitionist movement essentially as a precursor of today's political consumerism (Micheletti 2007).

approach thus invites us to look at how consumption is embedded in a complex web of meaning, where even self-interested consumption can signify the pursuit of a public goal.[13] In a similar perspective, Matthew Hilton retraces the history of the consumer movement in Great Britain and shows different ways that consumers mobilized (Hilton 2003). Throughout the 20th century, different types of goods were at the centre of consumer concerns, leading to different conceptualizations of the consumer. The early century was characterized by struggles over goods of necessity, which led to political and ethical considerations within consumer mobilization. The postwar period was characterized by struggles over goods of affluence, and the prior considerations shifted to questions of quality, price, and security. Today, struggles over goods of abundance have led to a return of political and ethical considerations, mirroring the struggles of the first period.

Looking at the evolution of consumer associations over the century, one can follow these changes in the conception of the consumer and the relative public interventions. The first consumer associations – the social leagues of consumers in Europe and the US – were characterized by a vision allying consumer and workers' interests. They adopted a discourse of consumers' rights *and* of consumers' responsibilities, since consumers should show solidarity with the workers producing the goods they purchase. After the Second World War[14], a reorientation took place, and consumer associations espoused a consumerist ideology, driven by the idea of protecting the interests of consumers, and fighting for product quality. Defence of consumers' interests is based on a vision of rational consumers, but insists that consumers lack the necessary information to make rational decisions. The expertise they need to guide their choices is provided by the consumer associations' product tests, published in magazines such as "Which" in Britain, "Que Choisir" in France (Aldridge 1994), in the magazines of the Swiss consumer associations, or later on TV shows. Consumer associations succeeded in establishing the consumer as a powerful actor in the regulation of markets, and contributed to shaping the offer of products (Mallard 2000). This "consumerist turn" (Pinto 1990, 1992) signals a change in the goals and ideologies of consumer organizations and can be observed in all Western countries, but the structuration of the field of consumer organizations follows very different logics depending on the country one studies (Trumbull 2002, 2006). In France, for example, consumer groups were thriving in the 1960s and 1970s, as unions, family and leisure associations, Catholic organizations, etc., formed groups concerned with consumer issues, mobilizing consumers and offering services to their members (Trumbull 2006; Pinto 1990). The consumer movement became part of the broader wave of protest of the 1970s (Pinto 1989 [1985]). In Germany, meanwhile, consumer organizations were put in place by the state, inserted into the corporative structures of negotiations between different groups of "stakeholders", and had very few individual members (Trumbull 2006). Finally, Hilton's studies of the international consumer movement shows how Consumer International, an organization composed of national consumer organizations, more and more incorporated questions of international solidarity, development, and environmental issues into its concerns, as it welcomed consumer associations from countries of the third world (Hilton 2005). In parallel, ecological and development issues also started to become concerns for Western consumer organizations (Pinto 1990), contributing to promoting new conceptions of responsible and political consumers.

However, it seems that these tendencies remained somewhat marginal, and the major consumer organizations continued to prefer a classic strategy of defence of consumers' interests in a narrow conception. Much more than consumer organizations, it was other types of groups – belonging to what has been called the new social movements – that developed new views and discourses on the respective roles of consumers and citizens. New social movements discovered individual and everyday practices as forms of intervention for social change, and pursued social change not solely through

[13] This public-mindedness of self-interested consumption was, for example, mobilized by the Bush administration in the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks, where citizens were called on to consume in order to demonstrate their attachment to the nation. More generally, it is the basis of market liberalism, where, according to Mandeville's dictum, private vices make public virtue.

[14] But the process was already under way before the war (Glickman 2004b; Rao 1998).

claims-making toward the political system, but equally by advocating individual change (Donati 1989; Melucci 1985, 1989, 1996).

In sum, if one puts political consumerism into a historical perspective, it appears that the roles of consumer and citizen have always been entangled, although with different results depending on historical contexts. The concept of a self-interested consumer and the instruments deployed in order to allow him/her to be rational (notably, comparative tests by consumer organizations) are but one historically situated view of the consumer; attaching political meaning to acts of consumption by putting forward the conception of a responsible consumer is not new or specific to the late 20th century, but characterized long periods of consumer action during this period. However, rejection of the novelty of the figure of the citizen-consumer does not rule out that there have indeed been different historical moments in which consumers were mobilized under different premises. But the explanation given by the political consumerist perspective, invoking broad social transformations, must appear insufficient, or at least too general, in the light of these historical precedents. Indeed, forms of political consumption existed long before the rise of postmaterialism or globalization. What is needed are more precise accounts of why the overlapping of citizens and consumers has changed in recent years, by searching for the agents of this change and the conditions that enabled it.

Political consumers everywhere?

Political consumerism is often presented as a global phenomenon or, at least, a trend concerning the entire Western world. It is presumed to be caused by global processes of social transformation: globalization, individualization, or the rise of postmaterialism are said to favour participation through the consumer tactics of boycotting and buycotting. However, an empirical puzzle challenges such a global explanation: comparing the numbers of boycotters and buycotters, important differences from one country to another appear. Such differences can hardly be accounted for with the theoretical equipment of the political consumerist perspective. National configurations seem to shape political consumerist behaviour to a considerable degree (see figure on the next page).

This suggests that the national context is a very strong determinant of participation through boyotts or buycotts. A respondent from Sweden is much more likely to boycott than one from Italy. Few attempts to explain these differences can be found in the literature on political consumerism; most studies concentrate on a single country, and do not really explore the comparative issues at stake. The table suggests certain geographical differences may explain differences in political consumerism. Political consumerism is most developed in Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway), and western European countries (Switzerland, Germany, UK, Austria, Luxembourg, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland). It is least common in countries in southern and eastern Europe. Two types of explanations have been suggested: political consumerism could be associated with well-being – there seems to be an obvious correlation between a country's economic wealth and political consumerism (Bozonnet 2010; Ferrer-Fons 2004). Or it could be linked to the broader concept of different civic or political cultures (Almond and Verba 1963). Bozonnet (2010) excludes the former explanation because the national context has an effect on propensity to be a political consumer independently of the income level. Thus, there is something more than economic well-being which explains country differences.

The civic culture argument suggests that each country is characterized by a specific political culture. Each country, it is argued, has its set of institutions and privileged forms of participation, and these reflect its specific civic culture. This culturalist perspective has been widely criticized for being essentialist and, in its last resort, tautological. It tends to present cultural patterns as inalienable and homogeneous, leading to explanations of the type "the French often strike and demonstrate because theirs is a contentious political culture", or "the Swiss launch petitions and have a grand coalition government because theirs is a consensual political culture". But while the observation of nationally different patterns of participation is accurate (not only for boycotts and buycotts, but for other forms of participation too), such explanations do not lead any further than conventional common-sense wisdom, as they fail to address the historic processes of social construction of such apparently essential cultural patterns. Nevertheless, cultural differences are still invoked to explain differences in political behaviour from one country to another.

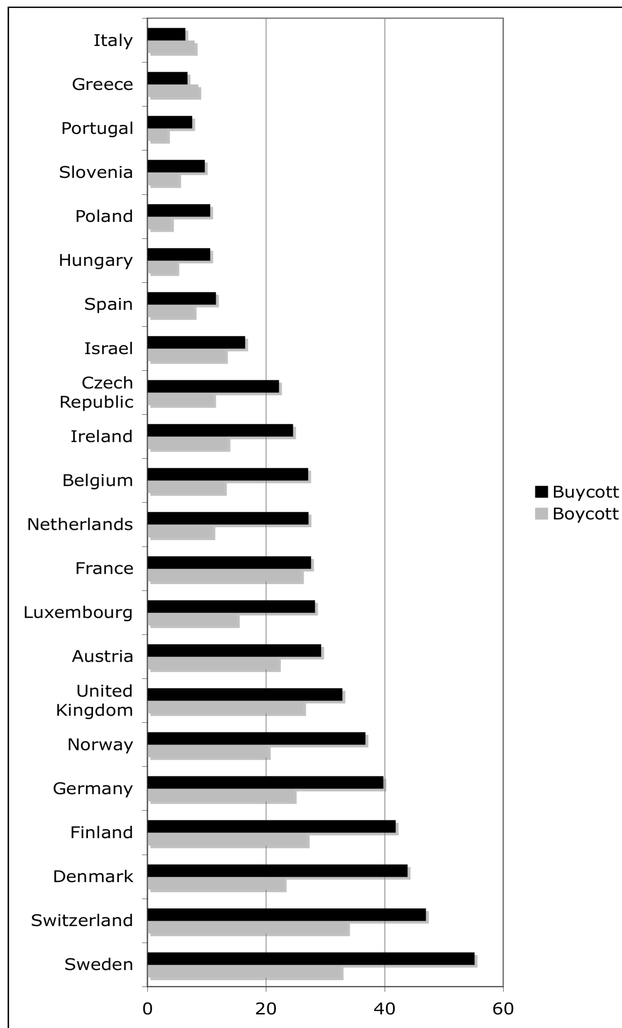

Figure 1.2 Boycotts and Buycotts in Europe, ESS 2002.

Bozonnet arguably makes a more sophisticated point when he states that boycott and buycott found a favourable soil in political cultures based on individual action (Bozonnet 2010). It is in countries with a Protestant heritage and high levels of social capital and cultural liberalism that political consumerism is the most frequent. His explanation in terms of political cultures is thus consistent with the more general theory of late modernity and global risk society: the countries where political consumerism is most developed are those where individualism and postmaterialism are the most present. It takes up a more encompassing argument about the difference between Catholic and Protestant cultures: in Catholic cultures, the private and public spheres are separated, whereas this separation is less stringent in Protestant cultures, where private conducts have public meaning (Hermet 1991, p. 150). Thus, political consumption seems to correspond more to Protestant cultures, as the public good is pursued by changes in private behaviour (Faucher 1999).

However, the argument remains extremely general; it may help identify a broad trend between Catholic and Protestant countries, but it rests on a static and reifying picture, which cannot account for changing patterns over time. National civic cultures are said to exist independently of actors, and shape the ways through which the population of a country expresses itself politically. In addition, such a framework is incapable of explaining more specific differences, for example among countries belonging to similar geographical areas. In fact, these differences suggest that specific national configurations play an important role for the success of the political consumerist repertoire. This is to say that while cultural differences may ultimately be an explaining factor, one has to treat them as

historically constructed and amendable, and specify the conditions and the concrete modalities through which they shape political consumerism.

What configurations are likely to shape the success and structuration of the political consumerist repertoire? The exploratory study by Stolle et *al.* based on a sample of students in Belgium, Canada, and Sweden reveals that not only the overall levels of political consumerist behaviour are different, but that, depending on the country, respondents shop as political consumers for different products (Stolle et al. 2005). Whereas in Sweden detergents are bought for ethical reasons, in Canada it is more often clothes that are the object of political consumerist actions. The authors attribute this to the different presence of labels and campaigns on specific product categories. In Sweden there exists a very well established and well-known environmental label for detergents. In Canada, the anti-sweatshop campaign was very active, especially on university campuses, in denouncing the use of sweatshop workers in the clothing industry. This seems to be reflected in the answers the survey collects. The authors of the study take notice of this fact but do not develop on it. But does this not point to a crucial aspect of political consumerism; that is, its shaping by a) the activity of political consumerist *campaigns* and thus collective forms of action (I will develop on this further in the next section) and b) the availability of ethical products – an ethical offer – in a given country? Figures for the overall level of buycott practices, in particular, may mostly reflect the extent to which ethically labelled products like fair trade or eco-labels are available to the broad public. The figures would then show in which countries ethical products have become largely available and visible in supermarkets, against countries where they remain limited to niche markets mainly reaching a community of activists. Terragni and Kjaernes (2004) make this point when they compare the level of political consumerism in Norway to the other Scandinavian countries and ask, "why is it so low?" They argue that the availability of ethical products and the institutionalized roles of consumers are crucial in explaining the success of political consumerism. At the time of their study, ethical products were not widely available in Norwegian supermarkets[15].

Together, these studies thus point to conditions and actions that enable the expression of political consumerism: collective campaigns mobilizing consumers, the creation of labels or other indicators of the ethical quality of goods, and their availability. Campaigns, labels, and their availability in turn depend on specific national configurations. In different countries, political consumerist campaigns are more or less recent and successful; states have or have not supported the development of ethical labels; and retailers and other market actors have, sometimes as a reaction to social movement campaigns, adopted new policies and sell products specifically designated as ethical. In other words, the success of ethical consumption as an individual form of political participation depends on national patterns of interaction between consumers, social movement organizations and their campaigns, corporations, and the state. This suggests that an exploration of political consumerism should look at these nationally-shaped patterns of interaction.

Individual, collective, or individualized collective action?

The political consumerism perspective measures political consumerism as a form of *individual* participation. As discussed above, consumption is seen as an individual act by autonomous consumers. But at the same time, acts of political consumption are not just individual; they have a collective side to them and have collective meaning, as when they take place within boycott campaigns or within a larger movement of conscious consumption. Political consumerism not only consists of silent, individual, spontaneous, uncoordinated or even isolated acts of individual consumption. It takes place within a web of coordinated campaigns targeting specific corporate practices, and is sustained by organizations promoting alternative forms of consumption. The question then becomes how to conceive of the relation between collective and individual aspects. How are individual acts of boycott and buycott linked to collective initiatives and campaigns? Here lies a crucial issue, which is akin to a chicken and egg question: what comes first, individual concern and change of consumer behaviour by

[15] For the second point (the institutionalized roles of consumers) the authors observe a mismatch problem: market actors say that consumers do not demand ethical products; consumers seldom raise their concerns and instead trust the public authorities, who in turn have not yet taken actions to promote the ethical dimension in food.

critical consumers, or coordinated campaigns and organizations targeting corporate policies raising consciousness among consumers?

In accordance with the theoretical premise of the global risk society's growing individualization, Micheletti paints a picture of individual consumers who grow aware of risks and externalities linked to products, and adapt their consumer behaviour in consequence. These actions are not limited to changing consumer behaviour, but involve a variety of different methods for practising responsibility-taking, *"including traditional and non-conventional political tools"* (Micheletti 2003, p.26). She speaks of *individualized collective action*, where political consumerism is not limited to silent acts of buycott and boycott (in which the collective is somehow virtual, the aggregation of individual and uncoordinated acts of individual consumers), but includes discursive forms of protest (called "discursive political consumerism"). But in any case, consumer action is seen as erupting quite spontaneously, a result of individual moments of *prise de conscience* or public scandals; it is "*citizen prompted, citizen-created action involving people taking charge of matters that they themselves deem important in a variety of arenas"* (p.25). Individualized collective action, she says, is non-hierarchical and loosely structured; it is bottom-up grassroots engagement rather than mobilization within rigid organizational structures.

Internet as a non-hierarchical form of communication is said to favour such mobilizations. The paradigmatic example is the so-called Nike email exchange, where J. Peretti, a communications professional, responded to a Nike advertisement offering to customize an individual pair of sneakers. He asked Nike to write "sweatshop" on his shoes, which the company refused, resulting in a rather comical email exchange between Peretti and Nike. Peretti then forwarded this exchange to some friends, who quickly forwarded it to their own friends, and the exchange spread more and more widely, with Peretti receiving up to 500 email responses a day. Eventually, the mainstream media took up the affair and reported on it (Peretti and Micheletti 2004). However, as Peretti suggests in an article with the magazine *the Nation*[16], the spread was not as spontaneous and uncoordinated as it seems. In fact, it was only when it reached an activist community engaged in the anti-sweatshop movement that it really kicked off. Accounts of this episode focusing on the revolutionary technology that allows information to spread without coordination and individual people to almost accidentally launch a mass movement ignore the crucial role played by the already constituted activist community and the broad network of anti-sweatshop groups on North American campuses, very present in 2001. They were organized as fairly "traditional" social movement groups, involving student groups, church groups, unions, etc.; these groups were responsible for the massive spread of the message. In addition, it is also very likely that if J. Peretti was aware of the issue of sweatshops and Nike, this was due to the various campaigns targeting this company and taking on the issue of sweatshops in general that had taken place in the US (Brooks 2009) and especially on its campuses (Einwohner and Spencer 2005; Featherstone and United Students Against Sweatshops 2002) where Peretti was a student in the late 1990s).

The link between individual and collective action is both undertheorized and lacks empirical evidence in the political consumerist perspective (Dubuisson-Quellier and Barrier 2007; Dubuisson-Quellier 2009). Boycotts, for example, take the form of boycott campaigns, often launched by established and "old" organizations like unions or environmental associations (Trautmann 2004). The actual participation of consumers may even be unnecessary in so-called media boycotts (Friedman 1997). How is "discursive political consumerism" linked to boycott and buycott practices? How do institutionalized forms like third world shops and labels enable political consumerism? What is the role of social movement organizations in raising consumer awareness of the politics behind products, and in creating tools to guide purchase behaviour? These questions remain unasked in most of the literature on political consumerism, leaving us in darkness as to the origins of boycotts and buycotts. They are presented as individual decisions by individual consumers. But is there not a more complex process of collective mobilizing of consumers, collective claims-making and collective injunctions to change individual behaviour? Empirical analysis of the functioning of political consumerism shows

[16] My Nike Media Adventure, The Nation, March 22, 2001, http://www.thenation.com/article/my-nike-media-adventure (accessed on June 8 2010).

that both before and in parallel to the silent expression of political consumers through their purchases, much consciousness-raising and mobilization work takes place (Barnett et al. 2005; Clarke et al. 2007a, 2007b, Malpass et al. 2007). Organizations are at the origin of the political consumerist tactical repertoire and promote such action modes (Dubuisson-Quellier and Barrier 2007). While individual consumers may express political opinions through purchase behaviour, they do so in a context made of organizations, mobilization processes, media discourses etc. which frame consumption as a political issue (Sassatelli 2006).

Conclusion

The fundamental hypotheses of political consumerism are that *consumption can be a form of individual political participation* and that *consumers more and more take into consideration the "politics behind products" when they make purchase decisions.* A critical appraisal of this perspective, however, reveals that it rests on an all too individualistic conceptualization of consumers and consumption, and underplays the extent to which individual consumption is socially embedded and nationally shaped. In addition, individual patterns of political consumption are incited, if not determined, by collective actors mobilizing consumers. The importance of the social shaping of consumption practices calls for a social movement perspective on political consumerism (Balsiger 2010). Such a perspective does not see boycotts and buycotts as individual and isolated practices through which new forms of universalistic and cosmopolitan citizenship arise, but as enabled by the action of *political entrepreneurs*, or *entrepreneurs of political consumption*. Through their action, such entrepreneurs call into being a particular type of consumer (Sassatelli 2006), target corporations and change markets. It is by examining the actions of such collective enterprises that one can better grasp the phenomenon of political consumption and the specific forms it takes at national levels.

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