

Political consumerism

Part of slaktivism and adhocracy?

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This session's title asks if the political consumer is an activist or a slaktivist and if the phenomenon of political consumerism is part of societal advocacy or adhococracy. Posed in binary terms, these questions raise some of the criticisms that scholars have had about the use of the market as an arena for politics. Critics worry that political consumerism will 'crowd out' more conventional or traditional ways for people to engage in politics. Will it simply give citizens an easy way out of caring about and acting on societal developments and turn them into slackers who just boycott or buycott something to give them a feeling of sufficient societal involvement? They also worry about the role of political consumerism in global governance. Is it only a 'fair weather' venture relying solely on voluntary actions based on extra money in consumers' pockets? What happens when this money dwindles in bad economic times or when consumers decide to use it for other purposes? Another broad claim is that democratic problem-solving to meet the challenges of sustainability cannot rely on consumer goodwill and adhococratic voluntary soft law institutions (such as organic, fair trade and green labelling schemes) that rely on corporations taking social responsibility. Here, critics maintain that these mechanisms sideline the need for legally binding 'hard law' governmental regulatory policy that is implemented by the public bureaucracy. In other words, they argue that more voluntary efforts let governments off the hook in terms of taking political responsibility seriously and investing in it both politically and financially.

My talk for this session addressed this theme and these broad questions in four ways—by first offering a personal account of my interest in the topic and then continuing with theorising political consumerism, providing some recent research results and ending with a few ongoing studies. My interest in the topic began in the 1960s and the United Farm Workers' grape boycott. Going to the supermarket in Los Angeles as a child brought me into direct contact with the politics of the marketplace, including this movement's efforts to improve the unacceptable labour conditions of migrant farm workers and the environmental problems associated with food production. There was boycott activism both outside and inside the stores. This meeting with politics in the supermarket was civil education in practice. It soon became the inspiration for a paper for my high-school social studies class. Much later, while doing research on Swedish civil society, I learned that even in a strong European state (such as Sweden) with a dominant labour and environmental movement and a good track record in working environments and green performance, the market was

emerging as an important arena for politics. Why? Environmental activists told me that they believed the state would not do more (that is, not take more political responsibility) to regulate the supply and demand side of production and consumption; therefore, they mobilised consumers to push industry to green its production. Green farmers had the same understanding of the situation; they started a labelling scheme for organic food to boost greener food. Even labour activists believed that more needed to be done in the new field of electromagnetic radiation from computers, an important issue in the 1990s, and constructed a labelling scheme for environmentally friendly electronic products for work that became a global standard (Micheletti 1995). Mobilising citizens to boycott was duly noted in a 1997 national survey on democracy and citizenship in Sweden. Of all measured forms of societal participation for this democratic audit study, we found that boycotting was the one that had increased the most between 1987 (approximately 15%, when first measured, and 1997 (approximately 29%), although it was not among the most used forms of political or societal action (Petersson et al. 1998). Later studies also showed higher levels, particularly for boycotting (deliberately choosing products or brands for environmental, ethical and political reasons) in Sweden, a result partially explained by the prevalence of green labelling schemes in the country (Stolle and Micheletti 2013; Micheletti 2010). In short, political consumerism in these studied cases finds its roots in a desire on the part of frustrated activists and concerned citizens to step in and play a part in greening Swedish society. For them it was not an easy way out of political engagement. Their motivations for political shopping are, therefore, not the characteristics of slaktivism. However, many labelling schemes that emerged in this period used the flexibility of adhococracy to create soft laws promoting the environmental and social pillars of sustainable development.

Over the years I have revisited these research materials and conducted new research in order to improve my empirical and theoretical base for understanding the political consumer phenomenon. This phenomenon can now be defined as the use of the market as a political arena through four forms of action focusing on political, ethical and environmental concerns and motivations for personal and collective actions. They are: engaging in 1) boycotting (saying no to certain products and brands); 2) buycotting (deliberately purchasing certain products and brands); 3) discursive endeavours (discussing the role of production and consumption in society and societal development); and 4) lifestyle change

(altering one's living practices and standards for political, ethical and/or environmental reasons). The social dynamics behind the increased importance of the phenomenon are also clearer. The more forceful emergence of the market as an arena for politics in the 1990s and 2000s is explained by major changes that have created political responsibility gaps and/or challenges in handling complex problems of great global political magnitude. Importantly, globalisation has led to 'governance' situations that shift the focus in problem-solving responsibility from nation-state government to other regulatory institutions and mechanisms, many of which involve voluntary 'soft law' partnerships with stakeholders such as corporations, NGOs and consumers. Moreover, economic globalisation has promoted multinational and transnational corporations and given them more importance politically, and free trade doctrines have made it more difficult for individual states to regulate them sufficiently. Neo-liberalisation, a second important major societal change, has, among other matters, implied that market logic has become a key mechanism for organising society and solving societal problems; it gives choice an enhanced role and consumers a more central role in responsibility-taking at all levels of society.

For a political scientist specialising in studying how people engage in politics, the societal change towards individualisation is of crucial significance. This process involves many developments, including 'looser politics' with more spheres and targets, that is, a kind of adhococracy with more ways for citizens to engage politically. Ulrich Beck was an early observer of this development and theorised it well in his publications on sub-politics, sub-politicians and risk society. Others, including myself, focus on sustainable citizenship, creative political action, ecological modernisation and post-material values (McFarland and Micheletti 2010; Micheletti and Stolle 2012) to understand and study how and why many people decided not only to focus on the obvious material concerns about consumption (quality and price) but also to consider the less apparent environmental and human rights' concerns lurking behind labels and to use their shopping choices to take more societal responsibility. The terms individualised collective action (Micheletti 2010) and individualised responsibility-taking (Stolle and Micheletti 2013) are ways of theorising how and why individuals and looser groups step up to take more responsibility for societal developments. While the terms imply a more personal and less 'one-size-fits-all' orientation in political action, they do not signify 'individualism', purely self-interest driven activities or what Beck called cocooning and flight from

politics. Noteworthy is that empirical studies find that political consumers do not flee ‘old school’ political action (e.g. voting, joining organisations), and political consumer actions do not ‘crowd out’ or replace conventional politics (Stolle and Hooghe 2003). On the contrary, studies find that most political consumers are highly engaged in many forms of political action, including the ‘old school’ ones.

However, this does not imply that political consumerism is not at all related to processes of responsabilisation or the state’s turning over of societal responsibility for solving common problems to individuals and other ‘non-state’ actors (Shamir 2008). In this sense, political consumerism is part of the neo-liberal discourse and more adhococratic forms of governance or governmentality. My sense is that increased interest in organic food reflects responsabilisation because consumers take action in safeguarding their health by wanting to ensure that they get the best food possible for themselves and their families. This impression is confirmed in empirical studies showing that self-interest is an important motivation for buying organically labelled food products; of course, the economic means for doing so are also important (Stolle and Micheletti 2013). In fact, the reframing of the 1960s grape boycott into a family health issue—buying and bringing home grapes treated with pesticides—was what mobilised greater numbers of consumers to support it (Micheletti 2010, 53–54).

This example illustrates well the role of virtues and interests in political consumerism. In my talk I discussed two traditions of theoretical public virtues. They focus on other-oriented interests, that is, how people should be acting to help the public good and commons. The first is consequentialism, which implies deciding to act on the basis of outcomes for, say, the environment, animal treatment and human rights. This approach requires the ability to rationally calculate the consequences of one’s actions on these matters, the intention being to do good by them. The second is deontology and implies acting on the basis of universal rules, norms and guidelines that advocate, for instance, scaling back energy consumption, meat eating and driving to work against climate change. Both public virtue traditions have been criticised for demanding far too much of consumers. For instance, they require considerable information-seeking on the part of consumers, the ability to calculate the consequences of their own choices, and the time and ability to assess the different choice options available if they want to shop for a better world.

Moreover, scholars claim that the public virtue traditions do not recognise the complexities and dilemmas involved in other-oriented actions and demand too much self-sacrifice on the part of individual consumers (Burt 1993). My talk discussed a third approach, virtue ethics, which takes into account these criticisms. Its focus is on how personal concerns and worries (that is, self-interest) can in fact generate a side-effect including the caring of others. This is shown in the grape boycott example discussed above (Barnett, Cafaro, and Newholm 2005). Yet what appears to be crucial here is how the issue is framed and communicated publicly, as well as the kinds of alternative consumption that are suggested instead. This is necessary in order to convince people to change their consumer choices and possible practices and lifestyles in a way that benefits the global common good.

Self-interest in the form of, say, concerns about personal and family health also appears to be increasingly important among the motivations for deciding not to eat meat and to become vegetarian. However, can there be spillover effects from self- to other-oriented interests in consumer areas other than food and agriculture? How could they develop, say, in the field of affordable clothing and textiles (Boström and Micheletti 2016)? Here the relationship between self- and other-interest is less direct and transparent. Perhaps, as suggested by Iris Marion Young's work on the social connection model of political responsibility, institutions like transnational corporations must take more responsibility for framing and communicating the relationship here (Young 2016). For instance, they (and even governments and non-governmental organisations) should be able to provide consumers with 'sensitising information' explaining the connection between private consumption desires and public sustainability challenges so that they can become motivated to make 'better' consumer choices. Corporations can also see to it that consumers are offered 'better' choices by producing goods that can be labelled organic, environmentally friendly and fair trade, or which integrate sustainability values into their production chains in other ways. Importantly, consumers must be able to make such choices and see how their choices are better for themselves and for others. What, then, is needed is available consumer information that explains the link between private consuming desire and public matters, on the one hand, and affordable 'better' goods, on the other, so that consumers can make these choices and do so without sacrificing too much privately.

The problem is that this kind of information and choice is not always available, and corporate transparency platforms do not always encourage consumers to seek this kind of information (Micheletti and Stolle forthcoming). Other studies indicate that this kind of information must be ‘tailor-made’ for different country and societal contexts; there is, in other words, no one-size-fits-all way of engaging consumers with more sustainable consumption practices (Austgulen 2016). Some corporations claim that they will take more responsibility if consumers ask them to; in other words, once they register a consumer demand for more sustainable products. Yet, as many studies show, corporations can and do affect consumer demand. This can be accomplished if they decide to alter their marketing strategies so that they do not play upon private desires and the social status drivers of consumption. It is, therefore, in their power to play down and play less upon, for instance, the need for new toys and clothing and routine presents for particular holidays and the importance of consumption for constructing social identities (Joyner Armstrong et al. 2010).

Another important research finding from political consumer scholarship is that it is quite possible that market actors (corporations, consumers and others) might decide that their engagement for, say, sustainability in one market sector lets them off the hook in another. Such behaviour is called ‘moral licensing’ (Stolle Micheletti 2013) and can perhaps be viewed as a form of slaktivism. Some scholars discuss ways of getting around moral licensing behaviour. One suggested alternative is to encourage consumers to develop a new reflective lifestyle—a kind of life politics or lifestyle politics—that recognises that consumption is embedded in all kinds of social practice and that consumers can learn a reflective way to use their freedom of choice systematically, in a societally responsible and sustainable way across several societal fields. Some scholars argue that veganism is an example of a new comprehensive and reflexive consumer and citizen lifestyle, as discussed by Estela Diaz in this session. Another reflective personal project would be, for instance, to consider how everyday life choices such as buying milk, deciding on what to wear to work and how to get there (mode of transportation) play a role in the responsibility for climate change and our stewardship of the planet.

However, to evaluate the feasibility of this kind of virtue ethical practice, it is important to continue studying what makes it difficult to achieve. Therefore, scholars focus on the effects of the present barriers to consuming more sus-

tainability in their studies. Three kinds of barrier have been identified in the political consumer literature. First, collective action-oriented barriers focus on why individuals might experience a sense of helplessness and a lack of empowerment about what they can do in their role as consumers, and whether their actions really matter. This might even include thoughts about the significance of the realisation that only some consumers change their lifestyles while others do not. Second, economic and market barriers—particularly product availability, price and quality—often play an important role in consuming practices. Among other matters, they can encourage overconsumption by luring citizens into purchasing goods that are on sale and convincing them that large product packages and ‘three for two’ market offers are good buys, even if they really do not need that much of the market item. Third, there are lifestyle barriers. In addition to the important social status ones mentioned briefly above, unreflective consumer lifestyle practices, based on habits and routines, create pathways to certain kinds of consumption that are often less unsustainable than others. This happens because consumers do not have, or take, the time to reflect on their choices, thereby missing out on figuring in the more hidden aspects embedded in market goods, as illustrated by environmental and human rights’ concerns (Isenhour 2010).

Any talk of how shopping can promote a good society must also address the darker side of the political consumer phenomenon, which should never be forgotten. Using the market as an arena for politics does not necessarily, and not always, promote democratic ideals and developments. Boycotting and buy-cotting can be, and have been, used against democracy. They have played an important role historically in persecuting religious, ethnic and racial groups. The best-researched case is the ‘Don’t Buy Jewish’ consumer campaign in Germany, other parts of Europe (such as Sweden) and elsewhere in the 1930s. The Klu Klux Klan in the US also uses political consumerism to promote its cause of white supremacy, anti-Semitism and anti-immigration. Another problem with political consumerism is that it can be confusing for the corporations that come under attack. There are notable examples of how the same business or product can be the target of political consumer boycotts run by social movement networks with diametrically opposing ideologies. A good illustration is The Walt Disney Company, which has had to deal with fair trade, US anti-ethnic and racial discrimination, and Christian fundamentalist groups, all of which call upon their supporters to boycott the same Disney entertainment and toy

industry. How is a corporation to respond to this kind of political consumer action? What specifically should it do, if anything, to end the boycott? Appeasing one network might just irritate another.

Furthermore, political consumerism can be triggered by dilemma-ridden and highly sensitive political developments. This is the case with the mobilisation against Israel's occupation of Palestine territory and boycott calls targeting Israeli 'settlement' goods and non-Palestine market activities in these territories. As noted earlier, concerned citizens often turn to the market as an arena for politics, particularly boycotts (including divestments), when they consider government solutions to be inadequate. Here the Palestine-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanction (BDS) Movement is calling on citizens and consumers globally to use market forces to compel Israel to comply with international law declaring the Israeli occupation settlements illegal. It attempts to mobilise individual consumers and even public procurement officers to take market-based action. The BDS movement creates perplexities for all kinds of consumer—both individual and institutional (e.g. procurement officers)—as a result of the legacy of the aforementioned anti-Jewish boycotts, and also because the boycott can mobilise anti-Semitic sentiment. Several American states and even the US Congress have condemned the BDS Movement as being anti-Israel in orientation. The European Union has taken a different route. It decided to issue a formal interpretative notice declaring that products from Israeli settlements cannot be labelled 'Made in Israel' and that it does not support the BDS boycott. It gives its member states the primary responsibility for enforcing Israeli compliance on how goods are labelled, and even retailers and supermarkets within the member states are called upon to help verify correct adherence to this policy. Such instances raise the question of the ability of political consumerism to handle and solve sensitive and long-lasting political problems. Perhaps they raise awareness of the issue of the occupied territories and give consumers with strong sentiments a way of expressing their views. Should this be viewed as a form of slaktivism?

Hopefully this summary both illustrates and explains the increasing academic and public interest in the phenomenon of political consumerism. It is truly a fascinating, rich and multifaceted area of study. And there is much more to research here. In a year or so the *Oxford Handbook on Political Consumerism*, edited by Magnus Boström, Michele Micheletti and Peter Oosterveer, will be

published. It will include over forty chapters written by scholars from different geographic areas and disciplines. An entire section is devoted to theoretical and research design approaches. While this section of the handbook might appeal most to students and academics, practitioners might find of interest other sections that discuss political consumerism's strong and weak industrial sectors and explore why it is more prevalent in certain commodity markets than others. The handbook will also cover its geographical spread and practice globally. Importantly, it focuses on its democratic paradoxes and challenges, as well as its problem-solving potential and successes. Our ambition is for this volume to answer questions about political consumerism and to raise new ones, including those posed in this conference section on the relationship between it and matters of slaktivism and adhocracy.

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