

Shopping for Human Rights. An Introduction to the Special Issue

Michele Micheletti · Andreas Follesdal

Received: 6 March 2007 / Accepted: 27 March 2007 / Published online: 26 June 2007
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2007

Abstract Globalization, free trade, and individualization have opened up a worldwide marketplace for trading goods. The fair trade movement and other political consumerist endeavours view consumers as important active holders of responsibility for global welfare. Civil society and governments strive to teach consumers how political consumerism can be used as a push factor to change market capitalism. The market itself can also create an interest in political consumerism and, thereby, teach consumers about the political responsibility embedded in their shopping choices. When this happens, the market works as a pull factor for securing human rights. Questions can be raised about the significance of political consumers as a way to solve complex global problems. Political consumerism may be a fair-weather option that loses its attractiveness in times of downward private and corporate economic spirals. Parts of the fair trade movement believe that there are problems with sole reliance on voluntary consumer choice and using personal money and private capital to solve human rights problems by shopping them away. The exponential growth of voluntary codes of corporate conduct and labelling schemes has also created contradictory practices, incoherence in efforts, and superficial changes or what activists call “sweatwash.” Increasingly, many actors call on international law to create new standards that apply direct human rights obligations on corporations.

Keywords Political consumerism · Political responsibility · Obligations of justice · Fair trade movement · Resistance micro-politics · Human rights

M. Micheletti (✉)
Faculty of Social and Life Sciences, Karlstad University, Karlstad 651 88, Sweden
e-mail: michele.micheletti@kau.se

A. Follesdal
Faculty of Law, Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, University of Oslo, Pb 6706 St. Olavs plass,
Oslo 0130, Norway
e-mail: andreas.follesdal@nchr.uio.no

It is nearly impossible in the contemporary world for a person to remove herself from implication through her actions in structures that produce injustice. To the extent that this implication is a ground of political responsibility, then, the responsibility cannot be removed by attempts at withdrawal; it can only be taken up (Young 2004, p. 386).

Scholars in the social sciences and humanities increasingly view some consumption and consumer practices as a form of politics. Political consumerism occurs when consumers consciously use their desire to change objectionable institutional or market environmental, political, or ethical practices as reasons for making choices among producers and products (Micheletti et al. 2006). The political significance that is attributed to the choice of common consumer goods shows how consumption is now becoming part of broad efforts to improve global welfare and well-being.

Scholars tend to agree that the processes of globalization and individualization have brought about this development. Globalization and free trade have opened up a worldwide marketplace for trading goods that are produced and consumed in many different countries. Consumers can now choose among a larger variety of affordable goods that are grown and manufactured outside their own country. This development is both good and bad for global welfare and well-being. On the one hand, free trade increases consumers' freedom of choice, creates employment opportunities in outsourced manufacturing, and gives farmers in developing countries a market for their goods. On the other hand, it has made it more difficult for governments to safeguard production and consumption through legislation and regulatory policy.

Human rights and workers' rights have particularly come into jeopardy in the countries that produce goods for the Northern consumer market. Individualization in the form of consumers' desire for more freedom of choice among affordable goods has also led corporations to find cost-effective ways of marketing an increasing number of affordable consumer goods. This form of individualization convinces a growing number of political groups that consumers may and must also play a role in improving the human rights situation of the farmers and workers who produce goods for them to purchase and enjoy. Shopping has become intertwined with human rights. Consumers are increasingly seen as important active holders of responsibility for global welfare and the human rights of distant others.

For the late Iris Marion Young, the connection between production and consumption growing out of globalization and individualization has profound moral significance. The consequences of the complexities of governing global problems and validating universal human rights locally, nationally, and globally led her to challenge how we conceptualize political responsibility. She dedicated the last years of her life to formulating what she entitled a social connection model of political responsibility that focused on the responsibilities of moral agents for global social processes. The human rights and labour problems in the global garment industry were her empirical example for philosophizing about the responsibility of corporations and consumers for global social justice. The passage that starts this introduction is from an early article entitled "Responsibility and Global Labor Justice" (Young 2004). Later she emphasized the obligations of justice that arise

from the structural social injustices created throughout the long and distant chain of commodity production for the consumer market (Young 2006). Her theoretical argument points to serious limitations in traditional models of political responsibility. The processes of globalization and individualization reveal these limitations and broaden the scope of moral obligations. Moral obligations must transcend the traditional boundary of membership for the political community that has been drawn on the basis of national sovereignty and parliamentary decision-making.

This special issue draws theoretical inspiration from Young's conceptualization of political responsibility for the global and more individualized world. In different ways, the articles included in this issue show how moral obligation, in certain circumstances, complements and overrides the legal obligations that are enacted in state and international law. They explore how production and consumption practices contribute to human rights violations, and, thereby, point to the limitations of current international law that overwhelmingly restricts itself to the human rights violations performed by states. The authors show how citizens as shoppers increasingly attempt to hold corporations accountable for their role in the violation of human rights at home and abroad. Thus, both individuals and collectivities in their role of consumers and producers take on a more central position as actors of significance for global societal development.

The focus is the relationship between shopping and human rights. When seen together, the articles in this special issue study the role of civil society, the market, and government in making "the human rights politics behind products" both a private and a public concern. The authors map how consumer consciousness has been raised about the consequences of consumption for global human rights and the environment worldwide, how civic groups use boycotts to put these issues on the corporate and public agenda, and why labelling schemes have emerged as an important alternative to national and international law to encourage better corporate practice and to offer consumers ways of taking personal responsibility for social and environmental justice. The articles discuss in different ways how shopping has gained a political significance, and they evaluate the capability of shopping to improve the human rights' situation of the people who work for the Northern consumer market.

Detlev Zwick, Janice Denegri-Knott, and Jonathan E. Schroeder show in their article "The Social Pedagogy of Wall Street. Stock Trading as Political Activism?" that the market is not only an *arena* for citizens who use consumer choice to *push* corporations to respect human rights. It can turn consumers into shoppers for human rights. Using the historical literature on the relationship between capitalism and the anti-slavery movement as their theoretical base, they argue that the Internet connectivity which develops from on-line investing gives consumers opportunities to perceive causal relations beyond the economic assessment of the stock market. Capitalism or, in their case, stock trading is, thus, a *pull factor* that can entice conventional consumers to shop for human rights (cf. Micheletti and Stolle forthcoming). Their findings from interviews with on-line investors in the United Kingdom and Germany show how conventional economic investors develop a humanitarian sensibility and become investors for human rights. One investor underscores the sensitizing effect of globalization and individualization on

consumers by saying that he noticed after he began to invest online that “doing investing yourself means you need to change your relation to the world.”

The authors conclude that the stock market includes a “social pedagogy” that can enlighten consumers about the politics of stock investments, show them their moral obligations, and turn them into agents for human rights. Their article explicitly criticizes previous research for focusing primarily on the *push factor* of political consumerism, that is, the consumers and groups who use the market as an *arena* to push their prior cause of socially responsible investment and shopping for human rights on investors and corporations. Their findings acknowledge clearly that the market can also be a *source* that creates an interest in political consumerism. The contribution offers a novel perspective on the inherent role of the market and market actors as a *pull factor* for securing human rights.

“The Fair Trade Idea—Towards an Economics of Social Labels” by *Torsten Steinrücken and Sebastian Jaenichen* reminds us that not all people have the necessary prerequisites for political consumerist enlightenment. Shopping for human rights is a wallet-based and knowledge-intense activity. Consumers need financial and informational resources beyond a threshold if they are to use the market as an arena for politics and to turn themselves into moral shoppers. For them, fair trade labelling schemes are an important mechanism that lowers these knowledge and financial threshold. Labels reduce the costs involved with information searching, create trustworthiness, and help lower the economic cost of fair traded goods by increasing their market share and mainstreaming them into the more conventional consumer marketplace. They give consumers opportunities to shop for common goods and support human rights globally in one economic transaction. Public and private virtue conflates when consumers shop for goods that promote human rights. The article also shows that fair trade label certification comes at a cost. The authors compare the administrative costs of the Max Havelaar Foundation and the German relief organization *Brot für die Welt* Foundation and find that fair trade can be more expensive to operate than more conventional donations for good causes. So in strict economic terms, shopping for human rights can be less cost-efficient than direct donations in the form of foreign aid and fundraising for human rights. Fair traded goods may not even always be economically rational for farmers and producers in the South. They too must consider the investments necessary to certify their goods.

The conclusion is that shopping for human rights can have high redistributive costs for both producers and political consumers. However, political consumerism may also provide additional (non-economic) utility in the form of learning effects on producers as well as higher social reputation of corporations and consumers that are not found in more conventional strategies of using money to promote human rights.

John Wilkinson's “Fair Trade: Dynamic and Dilemmas of a Consumer Oriented Global Social Movement” considers the fair trade movement as part of the “trade not aid” political programme, which is a strategic tool that uses economic transactions to promote development and social inclusion. With the help of other civil groups, the movement has been able to create new consumer awareness in the Western world and to redefine the chain of responsibility in the producer–consumer

relationship. The movement's concentration on certifying goods as fair traded has been successful. Although fair traded goods comprise a small market share, they are one of the fastest growing food segments in Europe and the United States, can be found in large European and North American supermarkets, and are procured by large consumers as McDonalds, Starbucks, and governmental institutions.

The focus on mainstreaming shopping for human rights has however created tensions within the movement, which began some 50 years ago as a mixture of Third World charity and solidarity. For some, mainstreaming certified fair traded goods is the best way to reach the movement's goal of Southern sustainable development. Consumers are given an important role here as mass shoppers or as a critical mass for shopping for human rights (cf. Micheletti and Stolle 2007). But this strategy also means that the movement must consider more conventional consumer demands like convenient shopping locations, price, taste, and material quality. For others concerned about political solidarity and promotion of democratic community-building in the South, these mundane market concerns take the ideological sting out of the fair trade movement. The success of certification threatens to commodify fair trade. Mainstreaming transforms it from the ideological alternative trade movement whose goal is promotion of human rights and poverty alleviation, through local empowerment of Southern farming and producer communities, to a market project based on capitalist market competition. Thus, ideological consciousness-raising loses out to consumer product information and marketing. A third branch of the movement is not as impressed by the capability of shopping for human rights. It puts less faith in political consumers and more in the governmental arena and corporate boardrooms. For this group, the main objective is change in governmental trade rules and corporate codes of conduct.

Wilkinson discusses the three general movement branches and maintains that they should be seen more as movement or goal specialization with important synergy effects than tensions that can tear the movement apart. Of importance for this special issue is his conclusion that shopping for human rights cannot solve the general problems of development and social inclusion. Political advocacy that targets government and corporations is also necessary. Moreover, he finds an important new tension developing along with the emergence of a Southern fair trade agenda. Due to its roots in philanthropy and political solidarity, the fair trade movement has spoken with a Northern voice. It has viewed the South as the beneficiary and object of Northern actions rather than an equal partner in fostering global sustainable development. This viewpoint has led the South to criticize fair trade as a Northern "export-oriented modernization model," which is seen as undermining Southern food sovereignty and entrepreneurship in favour of luxury demand in the North.

That luxury fair trade goods for the Northern consumer market can benefit the South is the topic of *Sarah Lyon's* article "Fair Trade Coffee and Human Rights in Guatemala." She shows how and why coffee links Southern producers and Northern consumers together in economic, social, and political relationships. Lyon calls our attention to the fact that this connection is not a direct producer-consumer one. Rather, it is sometimes channelled through the fair trade certification system, which requires producer groups to be democratic, transparent, and accountable, and

through the relationships between producers and coffee rosters, who act as conduits for consumer actions and intentions.

Lyon's ethnographic study of a group of indigenous fair trade coffee producers in Guatemala tells a rich story of fair trade as a strategy to improve human rights. The case is a rural agricultural cooperative community dependent on coffee for weathering the decades-long civil war and later for its economic survival, dealing with member debt reduction, and democratic development. The article confirms a point made in Wilkinson's article that the main goals of the fair trade movement can be synergizing and not just in tension with each other. In certain circumstances, fair trade can promote certification of superior luxury coffee sold by smallholders and producers and, thereby, promote local community development. Her article discusses how Northern coffee roasters and Southern members of the coffee community reinforce each other. Roasters use information about the local social situation and cultural traditions that they have learned from their monthly visits to market the coffee to consumers wanting both to buy good coffee and to shop for human rights. This Northern quest for information offers Southern producers opportunities to develop transnational networks with potentially important advocates. These advocates can be mobilized in case of future human rights violations and even for relief in the wake of natural disasters. It is also interesting to note that Northern consumer support for fair trade coffee indirectly has fostered the reestablishment of civil society as a political force in Latin America. Fair trade has not, however, fulfilled its goal of gender equality, and Southern producers are still less influential in fair trade institutions than Northern ones.

The two final articles discuss political consumerism as a *push factor* for corporate and consumer awareness and change. In "Consumption, Resistance and Everyday Life: Ruptures and Continuities," *Simon Tormey* maintains that political consumerism should be viewed a form of everyday resistance. His article presents a theoretical-historical contextualization of political consumerism as part of a long tradition on political criticism of representative politics that dates back to the 1700s. The present strategies of political consumerism as articulated by Wilkinson find their roots in the political strategies of such ideologists as Max Stirner, Leo Tolstoy, Agnes Heller, and later Michel Foucault. Tormey's theoretical exposé of their micro-political strategies reveals how they challenge universalist notions of rights and also, interestingly, why such strategies and even political consumerism are perceived as a highly controversial form of politics.

Political consumerism assumes a micro-politics where shopping is part of citizens' individualized way to take responsibility for shaping and creating the social and political environment in both private and public life. Therefore, on this view, shopping is an expression of self-governing judgment that does not necessarily take its point of departure in the programmes of political parties. Political consumerism is less a strategy of taking over existing power and more one of creating power bottom-up. People, individually and/or collectively, use their shopping choices consciously to press for societal change. However, political consumerism may seem to threaten the legitimacy base of parliamentary politics because its participants refuse to place all responsibility for social and environmental justice in the hands of government. Rather as emphasized by Iris

Marion Young's social connection model of political responsibility, shopping implies a practical and personal moral responsibility or commitment to those who create consumer goods for us. In this way, consumer goods are decommodified, politicized, and imbued with morality because consumers' act of choice among them has ramifications for others, regardless of the views of governments.

Politicized decommodification and newer forms of political responsibility-taking help explain the establishment of market-based political and social corporate responsibility. Boris Holzer's 'Framing the Corporation: Royal Dutch/Shell and Human Rights Woes in Nigeria' tells of how civil society associations forced Shell Oil to assume the role of a moral actor. Unlike many of the other articles for this special issue, Holzer does not investigate the mechanisms that encourage consumers to use economic exchanges in the form of boycotts and shopping choices. Instead he focuses on *discursive* political consumerism or the public expression of opinions about corporate policy and practice directed at business, the public at large, family and friends, and various institutions. He utilizes British and German newspapers and has conducted interviews with Shell representatives to investigate the moral framing of Shell Oil in the public discourse in Europe. Framing the problem as a moral issue is crucial for the political consumerist movement to be successful in its endeavours.

This article contributes four general findings of interest for the special issue. First, a bad corporate reputation in one case, as illustrated by the Brent Spar incident, easily spills over to a bad corporate reputation in other cases, as shown by the situation of Shell Oil in Nigeria. Second, corporations must deal with critical activism in a trustworthy and effective way to avoid being framed again in the future. Shell Oil's difficulty with the Brent Oil affair and the attendant lowered levels of trust in that company made it an easy target for its activities in Nigeria. As stated by one of the interviewed Shell representatives, "...we were like herpes, we were on everybody's lips." Third, discursive political consumerist framing may have effects on corporations even when no one explicitly advocates boycotts or moral shopping ("buycotts") for human rights. It may suffice if consumers end up paying close attention to the corporation and its activities. In the case reported in the article, the movement successfully framed the human rights claims against Shell Oil in terms of responsibility for causing environmental pollution, corporate greed and unjust resource distribution in third world settings, and undue involvement in the domestic politics of the country in question. Fourth, bad corporate reputation and denial of responsibility make it exceedingly difficult for corporations to reframe discursive political consumerism's picture of the problem. Shoppers for human rights are led to believe that transnational corporations' wealth, influence, and global presence entail that they also have the capacity to control their surroundings and enhance human rights in situations where local citizens are powerless. Such framing weakens corporations' efforts to convince the public and consumers that they bear little responsibility for human rights violations in specific areas.

Can Human Rights Rely on Shopping?

Political consumerism is an important phenomenon in the current age of globalization and individualization. Surveys not reported in this special issue find increased use of consumer boycotting and shopping for political, environmental, and ethical reasons (Neller and von Deth 2006, p. 33). A growing number of civil society groups, government institutions, and even private actors use political consumerism as a strategy to reach their goals. Labelling schemes have multiplied in number and function as new regulatory tools in several issue areas within the fields of human rights and environmentalism. Several governments applaud their creation and promote their use, which in certain circumstances is interpreted as governmental responsibility avoidance. At the same time, scholars, policy-makers, and others stress the importance of evaluating the democratic accountability and effectiveness of political consumerism as a soft law or voluntary strategy for the promotion of human rights and global environmental protection. Given these developments, it is necessary to conclude this introduction by considering the significance of political consumerism as a way to solve complex global problems. How effective is it, and what are its future prospects?

The special issue articles contribute to answering these questions in several ways. First, the pull of political consumerism for consumers and corporations may be a fair-weather option that loses its attractiveness in times of downward private and corporate economic spirals. If people have less or no money to invest and corporations start to economize, capitalism may once again become focused on the relationship between price and material quality rather than the social connections embedded in economic transactions. This, in turn, leads to a second important observation. There are obvious problems with sole reliance on voluntary consumer choice and using personal money and private capital to solve human rights problems by shopping them away. As indicated in this special issue, certain branches of the encompassing political consumerist movement believe that shopping is not and cannot be a sufficient agent of human rights. Governmental regulatory capacity is necessary—but alas not always sufficient—to shore up the weaknesses and fluctuation of voluntarism. Third, the exponential growth of voluntary codes of corporate conduct and labelling schemes has created contradictory practices, incoherence in efforts, and superficial changes or what activists call “sweatwash.” Increasingly, many actors call on international law to create new standards that apply direct human rights obligations on corporations (ICHRP 2002). It becomes, therefore, very important and interesting to continue research on the intended and unintended effects of political consumerism on individual consumers as well as government, corporations, and civil society. Does it help set new standards with staying power that change corporate and personal values about the significance of consumption globally? Do movement efforts transform shoppers from price minimizers into active and committed supporters of sustainable consumption? Or is this perhaps too much to ask of political consumerism?

If political consumerist shopping is commodified rebellion, as claimed in one article, it may turn out to be both harmless and affirmative of the capitalist system. Now that a broader political consumerist movement comes of age, it must face

important choices about its future strategies. Will it develop as an outsider protest voice that mobilizes and activates a segment of consumers angry over the growing ramifications of corporate globalization but which lacks the necessary skills to build a sustainable consumption governance regime? Or will it evolve into a reform movement without the ideological sting of protest and passion—but with the skills to use market forces, mainstreaming, and compromises in social movement goals, rhetoric, and style to build partnerships with corporations to reform capitalism? For today, political consumerism is probably best understood as a partial solution to human rights problems and as a movement that attempts to fill responsibility vacuums brought on by lack of governmental action. Political consumerism mobilizes and maintains some citizens' sense of justice and integrity, and expresses their need to take responsibility for the injustices generated by their consumption practices both at home and abroad.

Iris Marion Young wrote in what were to become one of her very last contributions that “...all agents who contribute by their actions to the structural processes that produce injustices have responsibility to work to remedy these injustices” (2006, pp. 102–103). She shouldered this obligation in many ways, not least in her own work as a political theorist. If our interpretation of political consumerism is correct, its practitioners use it to fulfill precisely some of these obligations that Iris Marion Young did so much to defend, explore, and live up to.

Acknowledgements A special issue is an example of successful scholarly collective action. We would like to thank all the anonymous reviewers who have graciously given of their time to offer their judgments on articles submitted to the call for papers and constructive criticisms on the articles published in this issue. We would also like to thank *Folke Ölander*, former editor of the *Journal of Consumer Policy*, for proposing that we undertake a special issue on political consumerism and for accepting our suggestion that it concerns “shopping for human rights.” Folke has closely followed our work as guest editors. He has offered advice on suitable reviewers for certain of the submissions and given comments about paper revision, has served as an efficient and excellent copy-editor, and very importantly, has given us professional encouragement that has made the assignment as guest editors an enjoyable and a learning experience.

References

- ICHRP. (2002). *Beyond voluntarism. Human rights and the developing international legal obligations of companies*. Versoix, Switzerland: International Council on Human Rights.
- Micheletti, M., Follesdal, A., & Stolle, D. (Eds.) (2006). *Politics, products, and markets. Exploring political consumerism past and present*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Micheletti, M., & Stolle, D. (2007). Mobilizing consumers for global social justice responsibility-taking. *American Annals of Political and Social Science*, 611, 157–175.
- Micheletti, M., & Stolle, D. (forthcoming). Fashioning social justice through political consumerism, capitalism, and the internet. *Cultural Studies*.
- Neller, K., & van Deth, J. W. (2006). Politisches engagement in Europa. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 30–31, 30–38.
- Young, I. M. (2004). Responsibility and global labor justice. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 12, 265–288.
- Young, I. M. (2006). Responsibility and global justice: A social connection model. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 23, 102–130.