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WILL CONSUMERS SAVE THE WORLD? THE FRAMING OF POLITICAL CONSUMERISM

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ABSTRACT. An active ethically conscious consumer has been acclaimed as the new hero and hope for an ethically improved capitalism. Through consumers' "voting" at the checkout, corporations are supposed to be held accountable for their conduct. In the literature on political consumerism, this has mainly been approached as political participation and governance. In this article, we do a critical review of this literature. We do so by questioning the existence of what we call a "generic active consumer model." At the core of this position, there is a belief that the active consumer is a universal entity, available across nations and time. Instead we call for an approach that takes accord of the ways consumers and consumer roles are framed in interactive processes in markets, governance structures, and everyday life. Consumers in different countries assess their responsibilities and their powers *as consumers* differently due to different institutionalizations within distinctive contexts. We also must take into account how the inertia of ordinary consumption and the moral complexities of everyday life restrict the adoption of an active consumerist role. Hence, the debate on political consumerism should make for a more realistic notion of ethical consumer-sovereignty and its role in improving the workings of capitalism. In our view, these findings have severe implications for understanding both theories of political consumption and the dynamics of political consumption per se.

KEY WORDS: consumer sovereignty, ethical shopping, political consumerism

1. INTRODUCTION

In the North Trans-Atlantic world, ethical and/or political consumption has received increasing attention, both academic (e.g., Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti et al., 2004; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2004; Harrison et al., 2005; Vogel, 2005), political (e.g., EU Green Paper on CSR, 2001; Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, 2006), and commercial (e.g., Unilever, 2005; Exxon, 2005). Consumption, and in particular the act of shopping, have been politicized and made into the subject of individual moral judgment. As a result, the focus of public discourse and consumer studies has shifted from consumer rights to consumer duties (Sassatelli, 2006 p. 236) and from seeing consumers as weak, manipulated marionettes of capitalism, to seeing them as potentially sovereign, morally responsible political actors

(see e.g., Sørensen, 2004; Harrison et al., 2005). This view has been vividly (and optimistically) portrayed by Ulrich Beck (1997) in his statement that "if modernity is a democracy oriented to producers, late modernity is a democracy oriented to consumers: a pragmatic and cosmopolitan democracy where the sleepy giant of the 'sovereign citizen-consumer' is becoming a counterweight to big transnational corporations." Hence, heavy burdens are put on the shoulders of the consumer as s/he is bestowed the responsibility for a morally virtuous handling of technological change and the liberalization of world trade.

In this article, we do a critical assessment of the literature on political consumerism and challenge what Trentmann calls the "new orthodoxy of the 'active consumer' in the social sciences" (Trentmann, 2006a p. 3). We discuss the realism of assigning such powers and responsibilities to him or her. This involves asking whether this generic figure exists, and for an adequate understanding of the rationalities guiding consumers' ethically-politically relevant decisions and practices. Inspired by Erving Goffman's concept of framing (1974), we point towards actors and interests that try to impart such responsibilities on consumers, and towards processes intrinsic to consumption that may hamper a widespread approval of such responsibilities. We end up asking for a more realistic notion of ethical consumer sovereignty and its role in improving the workings of capitalism.

2. CONSUMPTION AS POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND GOVERNANCE

Many different terms have been applied to the phenomenon in focus, such as ethical shopping, ethical purchase behavior, ethical consumption, political consumption, political consumerism, and critical consumerism. In the following, we will refer to all of these as political consumerism. The predominant definitions of political consumerism are tied to market contexts and shopping practices. One prominent representative of this tradition, Michele Micheletti (2003), defines political consumerism as "actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices" (ibid. p. 2). People boycott and (so called) buycott[1] products and services by withholding or utilizing their purchasing power. Hence, market choice is pointed out as the lever by which consumers may exert power "with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices" (ibid. p. 2). In accordance with this, a recent comparative European study reported that between a fourth and a third of adults reported to have engaged in boycotting or actively buying to

[1] Actively choose a product for some ethical-political reason.

support a cause (Kjaernes et al., 2007 p. 107). When aggregated, these individual choices have the potential to transcend the actions of individuals to form political movements that may, in turn, challenge political and economic powers (Merlucci, 1988; Klein, 2000).

The metaphorical link to voting in political democracies is fairly evident in this definition. Deliberate choices are supposed to be made, by individuals (one man, one vote) between distinct alternatives, based on ''attitudes and values regarding issues of justice, fairness, or non-economic issues…'' (Micheletti, 2003 p. 2). According to this perspective, consumption is regarded as an arena for political participation and the relevant ''active'' actor is the individual purchaser, whose personal values are (more or less) reflected in the ''voting'' at the checkout. The motive is to change an unwanted practice of some other actor.

The philosopher Andreas Follesdal (2004) adds other motivations as well. These include the desire to have ''clean hands,'' the constructions of identity (self understanding or respect for the other) and the active attempt to influence other consumers (to effect moral pressure) (ibid. 2004 p. 5–8). According to Follesdal's perspective, political consumerism should be understood as processes whereby consumers participate as collective agents in *governance*—arrangements by which agents regulate some issue area ''by means of extra-institutional authority, involving non-public actors and without secure enforcement'' (ibid. p. 9).

Follesdal's broader approach transcends the voting metaphor to allow for consumption practices outside market contexts.…[2] Such practices may be related to alternative lifestyles, but also to more mainstream activities, like taking part in recycling programs and other measures aimed at realizing a sustainable lifestyle. This broadening of the arena for political consumerism is important for understanding its dynamics and potentials.

3. A GENERIC ACTIVE CONSUMER?

The main problem with the political-science and philosophy oriented literature on political consumerism is their taken for granted the notion of the consumer. The consumer is assumed to exist as a universal recognizable figure across cultural, historical, and institutional settings. Moreover, this is an active, fairly conscious consumer. But, as documented in numerous comparative studies, peoples' opinions, attitudes, values, and sentiments

[2] in so far as they may be said to be involved in ''the governance of markets, supplementing states, intergovernmental bodies as the UN, NGOs, and multinational enterprises'' (Follesdal, 2004: 8).

differ vastly across time and space, also on issues of relevance for our discussion.[3] In addition people's own conceptions of what it means and implies to be a consumer varies, and hence, the relevance of the reported attitudes and values to their subjective experiences as consumers.

Two recent comparative European studies of, respectively, consumers' trust in food and consumers attitudes to farm animal welfare, may exemplify this (Kjaernes et al., 2007a, b). The study on trust in food revealed distinct differences between European countries regarding peoples' identities and understandings of their roles and potential power as consumers. Consumers in, e.g., the UK were much more prone to think their voice as consumers mattered compared to consumers in, e.g., Norway (Kjaernes et al., 2007 p. 109; see also Terragni and Kjaernes, 2005). The study on consumers' attitudes to animal welfare (Kjaernes et al., 2007b) revealed differences regarding the subjective understanding of consumer responsibilities. Countries with relatively similar scores on questions related to concerns for animals, showed considerable differences on questions related to whether people should address such questions *as consumers*. For instance, while the Dutch mobilized for animal welfare, identifying themselves as consumers in markets, their Norwegian counterparts were more likely to think that animal welfare should be take care of by public authorities.

Several studies show the salience of national institutions in processes of consumer role formation and interpretation. Micheletti (2003) (herself) demonstrates how political consumerism has been entangled in national public debates, giving consumer actions a more national than cosmopolitan orientation. Similarly Trentmann's historical analyses (2006a, b) show how the consumer is transformed into political subjects within truly national social and economic contexts and traditions. The importance of the nation state was also demonstrated in Kjaernes et al., (2007a), where the nationality of the respondents was the single most important explanatory factor in relations to respondents' understanding of their roles, rights, and responsibilities as consumers (ibid. p. 185).

Hence, the subjective definitions of the consumer role, its rights, responsibilities, and agency diverge between countries (see e.g., Sassatelli, 2006) and historical periods (e.g., Trentmann and Taylor, 2006). The national consumer character portrayed in these studies is hardly consistent with a notion of a generic active citizen-consumer as put forward in political-science oriented studies. Instead of a generic consumer, what appears from these studies are accounts of distinct figures, relationally bound within specific national contexts, developing within distinct national debates and in accordance with national traditions of governance (see also Trentmann,

[3] See, e.g., http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_238_en.pdf

2006 p. 20; Kjaernes et al., 2007a p. 107–108). The dominant political-science and philosophy approaches to political consumerism fail to account for this.

4. SUPPLY SIDE DRIVERS FOR ETHICS

Even though consumers' protests may feed on bad business practices in itself, the scope and intensity of such activism is often dependant on alliances to other agents capable of stabilizing attention and problem definitions on relevant questions. The most obvious reason for this is the feeble and unstable identity of consumers. The consumer role is plastic and open for business interests, civic society organizations, and governmental agencies to mold. Such institutionalization processes, where role expectations, rights, and responsibilities are negotiated and possibly stabilized, are hard to understand from within the political science and philosophy approaches mentioned above. Focusing on consumers' attitudes and values, one misses out other actors' strategies aimed at, e.g., developing markets and regulating political responsibilities, and how other actors thereby, deliberately or not, serve to frame consumers, their options, attention, expectations, and self-definitions.

According to Goffman, frames are "principles of organization which govern events […] and our subjective involvement in them" (Goffman, 1974 p. 10f). This way frames serve to organize actors, actions, cognition, and attention. Within media studies, there seems to be a tendency towards using the term also for deliberate attempts to "manipulate" audiences, as is evident in Entmans definition: "[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." (Entman, 1993 p. 52; see also D'Angelo, 2002 p. 873). But frames, in Goffman's original version, also have an interactional and institutional aspect often disregarded in political science or media studies where frame analysis[4] has mostly been applied to the study of ideology.[5] As such, institutions tend to lock attention, distributions of tasks, problem definitions and solutions by means of legal rules, conventions, and the channeling of resources.

Institutionalization processes whereby consumer roles have been framed have increasingly been subject to historical studies (e.g., Trentmann, 2006b; Brewer and Trentmann, 2006). But, as Sassatelli (2006) notes, such processes are still going on. The consumer role is constantly contested,

[5] A point also made by Sassatelli (2006:227f).

discursively, legally, and through developments in the socio-technical arrangements in markets and shopping environments. In this "fight," there are obviously influential actors that may draw advantages from a stabilization and dissemination of a more active ethically concerned consumer role model. We will use the following section to point to how some commercial, civic society, and governmental actors deliberately aim at disseminating and stabilizing such a role model.

Business interests are heavily involved in developing markets for ethical products. Modern consumer markets are dominated by highly concentrated manufacturing industries and vertically integrated retailers who base their consumer communication on branding, TV-advertising, and product placement (see, e.g., Dobson, 2003; Dulsrud and Beckstrøm, 2005). The producers of branded goods and the distributors respond to consumers' concerns and protests to avoid blame, they actively appeal to consumers' consciousness to differentiate markets, and they are eager to demonstrate citizenship to avoid regulatory intervention from authorities (e.g., Marsden et al., 2000). They also have a need to "dress up" in order to motivate employees. Economic performance often depends on employees' motivation and belief in the virtues of their company (Vogel, 2005 p. 59). For these and other reasons, a lot of business-branches and corporations put up private quality standards, regulatory schemes, and labeling programs to communicate more or less justified claims of ethical virtues. In the era of brands, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become an indispensable part of any consumer-oriented production and marketing (e.g., Kotler and Lee, 2005; Vogel, 2005). The internet and globalized media push producers of branded goods to be seen as ethically virtuous and consistent and to enforce their claimed virtues throughout the value chain (e.g., Vogel, 2005 p. 9). In this way, ethical consumption is approached and developed just like any other market, where producers hope to build profitable niches where they can get a price above the standard products.

But, CSR also has its limitations. As pointed out by Vogel (2005), CSR is market-driven and therefore only viable as long as it is profitable (ibid. p. 4), a point we will return to later. CSR can, of course, also be pure window-dressing, with or without operative systems of certification. Or, they can be intended to confuse rather than to empower consumers (Klein, 2000). Due to the global reach of trade flows, it can often be hard for consumers and their advocates to validate or falsify CSR-claims. Ethical products are, therefore, often heavily dependant on consumer trust for their credibility.

National authorities are also of relevance for this development. In the post-cold war era, a notion of a slim but strong state has grown in popularity (Majone, 1994; Fukuyama, 2005), in which ambitions outside core functions are increasingly pursued by means of indirect policy instruments.

Soft laws, private standards, codes of conduct, and stakeholder involvement are encouraged (Jordana and Levi-Faur, 2004). Even though the state "may carry a big stick," "the soft voice" is due to the economic and political limitations of modern states and their dependency on commercial actors and civic society to do their parts (Braithwaith, 1997). This is even more the case when the actions and actors in question are outside the jurisdiction of the nation state, e.g., distant exporting countries. In these cases, private standards may supplement and extend "the arm of the law." But also at home, governments may be hampered by international treaties and obligations in politically "unwanted" ways. In such cases, private codes of conduct and labeling schemes may accomplish what governments aren't allowed to (or don't want to or haven't got the courage to) do, and thereby release governments from domestic political pressures and nuisances.[6] Moreover, in many cases such codes of conduct have a trade-protectionist effect, by indirectly coining most imported goods (from third world countries) unethical, e.g., with reference to poor working conditions in sweat shops, unsustainable resource management and so on (e.g., Jha, 2006). In this way ethical labeling may accommodate protection in situations where international trade agreements prevent governments from using fiscal tariffs and import quotas.

NGOs are also important actors in themselves. With the advent of Internet and its mobilizing potential, and with more global media coverage, they have acquired a new momentum. They are often able to set national as well as international media agendas, and to form shifting alliances with governments and businesses to pursue their ambitions. Increasingly, they are involved with corporations in programs to improve on and give credibility to businesses on relevant CSR parameters (Vogel op. cit. p. 24). As pointed out by Sassatelli (2006), the dominant ones are increasingly embracing market capitalism in the sense that they heavily propagate ideas of consumer sovereignty. Looking at written materials from NGOs in USA, UK, and Italy she found that: "The consumer is posited as active, productive and political. As a political actor, he or she is seen as directly responsible not only for him or herself but also for the world. Blame, far from being just externalized and placed on companies and authorities, is internalized and placed on the self as a consumer" (Sassatelli ibid. p. 233).

So, as for the sovereign, active, responsible consumer, there seems to be strong actors within the corporate sector, within governments as well as NGOs that all support the framing of the consumer role and consumption practices in an active direction. An escalation of political consumerism may

[6] This was, for instance, the case with GM-food in Norway, where the supermarket chains agreed not to import such foods.

be congruent with the development of profitable markets, with the de-loading of political and fiscal government responsibilities, and with the power and aims of NGOs. And, of course, these interests are differently represented and organized and hence, their framing projects differently focused in different countries. This should be taken into account when trying to explain differences in consumer role definitions between countries. There are also powerful counter-forces and inertia impeding this development, something we briefly will address in the following sections.

5. THE ETHICAL DYNAMICS OF CONSUMPTION

So far we have discussed the institutional, macro, and supply-side framing of consumers and consumption. But, we are still wanting for an understanding of the concrete situations and ethical dilemmas consumers are confronted with and how they solve them in everyday life situations. This is where consumer agency may take place, sometimes regardless of other institutionalized attempts to frame and orchestrate the outcomes. Political scientists as well as philosophers offer few clues to why people choose differently and end up with different purchases and consumption practices.

Given the mechanisms suggested in the last section, an obvious question is why we are not all political consumerists. The so-called attitude-behavior gap is well documented in the social sciences. In interviews, people say they want to act virtuously, but measurements of behaviors tell us that they don't (Swann, 2002). All too often, explanations of non-virtuous behavior fall back on references to either some kind of information problem (consumers do not know the options open for choice and/or the true consequences of their actions) (Akerlof, 1970), problem of weak will (consumers are unable to discipline themselves) (e.g., Elster, 1989), or simply opportunistic behavior and lack of empathy (I may profit on others suffering, but I can live with that). These may all be relevant as partial explanations, yet insufficient and unsatisfactory as they individualize the phenomenon and not at least the blame for it. From a sociological perspective, it is obvious that more structural and relational aspects have to be taken into consideration.

One such structural aspect is related to the size of the area open for conscious consumption choices. Both Micheletti and Follesdal base their discussions of political consumerism and its potentials on the assumption that consumers make deliberate choices. However, as Gronow and Warde (2001) have pointed out, the greater part of everyday consumption is pressingly mundane, embedded in relatively inconspicuous routines and socio-technical systems of everyday life. It consists of objects and actions

where there are no alternatives (e.g., infrastructure), where there is no social distinction to harvest (e.g., washing powder), where actions are heavily habituated and conventionalized, and where the pure practicality and materiality of practices dominate. Some of these practices may be of significance for ethical or environmental concerns (e.g., related to energy consumption), but tend to stay outside the area of reflective action. Even though it is theoretically possible to make more of these practices the object of deliberate choices, thereby making political consumerism a full-time preoccupation, for practical reasons this is not feasible for most people. Therefore, non-reflective ordinary consumption will probably always comprise the larger bulk of practices we reasonably can call consumption. This severely restricts the area of validity of the active ethically conscious consumer advocated for in the political science and philosophy literature.

Everyday life decisions and practices have been extensively studied in anthropology and sociology. What such studies reveal are fairly complex landscapes of moral relations, and habituated practices. Moral-ideological, practical-physical, relational, and economic frames enable and restrict consumption practices. As such, the motivations reflected in political consumerism, have been described as outcomes of moral negotiations between different everyday considerations (Miller, 1998; Halkier, 2004). Ethical-political virtues often have to be compromised against other obligations and highly legitimate concerns, framing the actual options available for choice. As such, purchasing decisions are often entangled in overlapping and conflicting moral expectations, care and power relations, economic concerns, nutritional concerns, taste, preferences, and various practical considerations, e.g., related to available time and distance to procurement options (e.g., Holm and Kildevang, 1996).

Daniel Miller (2001) brings the analysis of conflicting concerns a bit further. Based on ethnographic material from North London, he observed that his otherwise charitable and altruistic informants, failed to engage in what we call political consumerism. Miller revealed how his housewife informants enacted other virtues such as love and thrift through their shopping practices. They turned ''the discourse of shopping as an antisocial, hedonistic, and materialistic pursuit'' into the ''dutiful attempt to save money on behalf of the household at large'' (ibid. p. 134). He found that this highly moral activity turned out to be incompatible with ethical shopping. As long as ethical products are more expensive than conventional ones, moral, as the term colloquially is used by people when judging their own activities in relation to questions of good and bad, may come in conflict with ethics. ''Ethics'' here implies caring for others, ''and in particular, distant others'' (ibid. 133). He continues, ''In short, I would argue that ethical shopping is experienced as opposed to moral shopping, while moral

shopping constrains any possibility of ethical shopping'' (ibid. p. 134). The previously mentioned attitude-behavior gap may be more understandable in light of this. People aren't necessarily lying when speaking about their virtuous preferences, but caught in more or less unsolvable moral dilemmas.

In short, a large, yet still ethically relevant part of consumption goes on outside the area up for ''voting at the checkout,'' and consumer agency is not necessarily furthering political consumerism. Again, there may be national differences with regard to the significance of these mechanisms, depending on the relative salience of different consumption areas and the ''ethicallity'' of these areas for people in different countries.

6. DISCUSSION—CONSUMER AGENCY?

In this article, we started out with a critical assessment of the generic active consumer role dominating the political science and philosophy literature on political consumerism. Based on comparative studies, we challenged the existence of such a model. Consumers in different countries assess their responsibilities and their powers *as consumers* differently. We may seek to explain these differences in the ways consumption is differently framed in different countries, due to variations in markets, governance structures, and political and cultural histories. On the consumer side, we noticed that there are everyday mechanisms serving to hamper the development of widespread political consumerism. First of all, the bulk of mundane consumption is normally outside the area for reflective choice. Moreover, the complexities of everyday life demand negotiations between conflicting moral and ethical considerations. Ethical concerns for distant causes often loose out against the moral obligation to care for the close ones through sound family budgeting. These mechanisms seriously delimit the market for ethical products.

Given the influence from others in molding out a consumer role, and the impeding mechanisms of consumption practices, one may ask whether ethical consumption is possible at all (Coff, 2006; see also Lang and Heasman, 2004 p. 280). Consumers often lack necessary, reliable information and they do not have the autonomy to make unbiased choices and ethically relevant alternatives to choose from. Hence, the notion of political consumption as a way to exercise ethical power in purchasing situations may be illusory (see also Coff, ibid. pp. 77–85). In this view, the necessary preconditions for most consumers to make ethically guided choices are simply not fulfilled, due to the way production, manufacturing, distribution, and marketing is organized in our societies.

If we are at least partly right on this point, we should shift focus from moralizing over consumers' choices, to start discussing which moral burdens

people as consumers can and should be expected to carry. Perhaps some concerns should mainly be addressed through people's roles as citizens, supporting collective action by means of governmental regulation. For some problems, this may be the only feasible way to proceed. This is what Miller suggests based on his study of shopping in North London. The conflict between moral and ethics could be solved, if the government took care of ethics to leave morals to consumers (Miller, 2001 p. 135). This implies a more "private" consumer role, with more restricted responsibilities. As such, it is also in line with consumer conceptions in the Scandinavian countries, as referred to in Kjaernes et al. (2007a). However, in this neo-liberalistic epoch, to delegate choices to consumers seems to have become more or less the default option for overloaded and decision-shunning politicians. Instead of moralizations over consumers' lacking virtues, what is needed is therefore a renewed ideological debate on private vs. public responsibilities.

Moreover, in sectors where we, through some kind of democratic process, find it reasonable and effective for consumers to take on ethical responsibilities, we should discuss the preconditions for ethically guided consumer choices to be made. How can consumers be given a more defined role as autonomous responsible actors? How can consumers be given relevant and reliable information about production and distribution methods? And, how can consumers be given real and realistic alternatives that, ethically considered, do make a difference? These are fundamental questions at the base of our current political-economic system that have to be discussed if political consumerism is to be more than mere market differentiation and individual ego-trips.

Let us conclude this article with a meta-reflection. What should be obvious from our discussion is to what extent the whole debate on political consumerism, including the academic side of it, is part of a contestation over of what consumers and consumption should be. The "new orthodoxy of the 'active' consumer" come part and parcel with the promotion of a rearrangement of responsibilities between the state and private markets in an evermore liberalistic world economy (Simmonds, 1995; Miller, 2001 p. 137; Trentmann, 2006a p. 3). The proponents of a more distant state are the obvious beneficiaries of the dissemination and stabilizing of the idea of a more responsible consumer role. However, the real potential of political consumerism to transform society is far more limited. For, as Gronow and Warde pointed out, large parts of our daily consumption is non-reflexive and not open for voting. As Miller notes, the market for ethics is effectively delimited by the everyday morality of caring for those closest to us. And, as Vogel notes, on the supply side, CSR is only possible as long as it is profitable. With this in mind, we should, as academics and commentators in

public debates, be careful not to end up promoting a new ideology of ethical consumption, thereby producing a lot of frustration and concealing the true realities of modern capitalism.

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