

The Politics of Consumption/ The Consumption of Politics

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As consumer culture pervades the social life of citizens in America and Europe, it becomes increasingly important to clarify the relationship between consumption and citizenship. With this in mind, faculty and students at the University of Wisconsin organized a conference titled “The Politics of Consumption/The Consumption of Politics.” Held in October 2006, the meeting provided a forum for leading scholars to discuss the interplay of markets, media, politics, and the citizen-consumer. Revised and expanded versions of the papers they presented are collected in this volume with the goal of advancing this emerging area of inquiry. It is our hope that the essays and research papers we have collected here help define the next wave of theory building and research inquiry on the intersections of consumer culture, civic culture, and mass culture.

Keywords: citizen-consumers; competitive consumption; civic engagement; lifestyle politics; materialism; political branding; socially conscious consumption; taste cultures

Nearly a half century before Thorstein Veblen published *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899/1994), his now-classic refutation of neoclassical notions of consumption as utility maximization, another writer was critiquing American society’s materialistic values. Henry David Thoreau’s call to “simplify, simplify” in *Walden* (1854/1995), his chronicle of more than two years of austere living on the shores of Walden Pond, still resonates with contemporary readers struggling to find ways to exist in ecological and social harmony. Thoreau’s prescient question—“What is the use of a house if you haven’t got a tolerable planet to put it on?”—demands concerted attention in the political and environmental climate of the early twenty-first century.

Likewise, Veblen’s (1899/1994) assertions, echoed and expanded by Bourdieu (1979/1984), that consumers’ preferences are determined socially, a consequence not of need but of individuals’ positions in social hierarchies, continue

to serve as a touchstone for academics troubled by the advancement of consumer society. Part of this apprehension lies in the belief that consumers no longer just imitate the consumption patterns of those situated a rung or two above them in status but also imitate those at the top of the social ladder (Schor 1998). People work too hard and spend too much in the pursuit of products and lifestyles that always remain beyond reach.

Although this perspective has been criticized for underestimating how often consumption patterns emanate from lower levels of social hierarchies and overestimating the importance of class in determining the social positioning of taste, such critiques seem to miss the broader argument being advanced by critics of contemporary consumption, who assert that people are misled by an overly materialistic mass culture, mainly in the form of commercialized mass media, to focus on the superficial and synthetic. The resulting consumer culture emphasizes acquisitiveness and individualism at the expense of civic-mindedness. The result, they argue, is the decline of civil society in favor of consumer society.

This position is not without controversy. Others scholars argue that civic culture and consumer culture are not antithetical; instead, they may be inherently inseparable. As Schudson (1981) contended, “Not only are people’s individual needs defined socially, but their individual needs include a need for social connection which is sometimes expressed materially.” This is most obvious in the political consumerism associated with “lifestyle politics” that has come to function as a form of civic participation for many people (Bennett 1998; Schudson 1999). This view asserts that a sizable amount of consumption has become so steeped in the concerns of citizenship that “it is no longer possible to cut the deck neatly between citizenship and civic duty, on one side, and consumption and self interest, on the other” (Scammell 2000).

This is illustrated by the rise of socially conscious consumers—environmentalists, antiglobalists, fair trade and sweatshop activists, freecyclers, and downshiffters—who purchase (or “buycott”) products in ways that demonstrate public-spiritedness and global expansiveness (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005). Resounding some of Thoreau’s appeals, these forms of political consumerism weave together various threads of personal consciousness and political advocacy: the fear of ecological degradation, the rejection of materialism and the market, the protection of children and the disadvantaged, and the inherent integrity of human beings.

Such socially conscious consumption has become as much a badge of belonging as the status conscious consumption critiqued by Veblen and others. Indeed, the same cultural capital that structures status consumption also may shape patterns of political consumerism and civic engagement, with the social identity reflected in particular forms of consumption also creating access to networks of opportunity and participation (Keum et al. 2004). Accordingly, collective identity may be fashioned and maintained through brand subcultures (e.g., iPod, Jeep, Patagonia), lifestyle consumption (e.g., wine tastings, biker bars, fair trade cafes), and gift giving (Belk 1988; Thompson 2000). It remains to be seen whether these consumer alignments are beneficial for civil society in the long

term, as traditional forms of participation require concerted revitalization in response to their apparent decline.

Of course, consumption and politics intersect in other ways as well. The state and corporations jointly shape the course of consumer regulation and protection efforts and often make decisions that advance commercial interests over public concerns. Political campaigns are now grounded in marketing principles, with branding of political candidates and issues, targeted political advertising, staged media events, and market segmentation strategies all commonplace. Even social movements and corporations have politicized consumption by structuring action and initiatives around products and services through boycotts, cause-related marketing, logo politics, and online consumer activism (Cohen 2003; Hilton 2003; Scammell 2000).

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It is with these issues in mind that faculty and students at the University of Wisconsin organized an international conference titled “The Politics of Consumption/The Consumption of Politics.”¹ Held October 19-21, 2006, the meeting provided a forum for the participants, leading scholars from Europe and North America, to discuss the intersection of consumption, citizenship, media, and marketing. We shared the papers collected in this volume, exchanging perspectives on research and theory that substantially advance this emerging area of inquiry. It is our hope that the essays and research papers we have collected here help define the next wave of research on the intersections of consumer culture, civic culture, and mass culture.

Themes and Structure

The conference drew together a number of central themes that were used to structure this volume. These themes revolve around the shifting conception of the consumer and consumption and its alignment with the changing nature and

meaning of citizenship; the relations between consumers, citizens, and the state; consumer and citizen responses to the market; the branding of politicians and social movements; and political consumerism as a form of activism. Taken together, these essays not only point out the main issues, but also the tensions that will mark the next wave of research on the politics of consumption.

The core theme, which runs from the opening to the concluding article, concerns consumerism and its discontents. Schor opens this volume (after having closed the conference) by resurrecting the valuable contributions of major consumer critics—Veblen, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Galbraith, and Baudrillard—which in recent years have been supplanted by micro-level approaches to the problems of consumerism. She argues that the emergence of problems associated with globalization, environmental degradation, and excessive consumption necessitate a reconsideration of critical macro-level approaches to understanding modern consumer society. Schor reviews and critiques each of these classic contributions and then isolates their contemporary relevance for a rebirth of macro-level social inquiry. Yet Schor also calls for a “revalorizing” of consumption, a shift toward recognition of its potential value to community life instead of its unthinking denigration as a scourge on social relations.

This theme is further advanced by Friedland, Shah, Lee, Rademacher, Atkinson, and Hove, who analyze the field of cultural consumption in the contemporary United States, drawing on the methods of correspondence analysis employed by Bourdieu (1979/1984). We observe many parallels between 1960s French society and millennial U.S. society in terms of the determinants of taste within the field structure observed by Bourdieu yet also find that the composition of cultural capital in America differs in some important respects. Most notably, we discover that more refined and nurturing consumer practices align with news consumption and civic engagement, with this communal orientation at odds with, and potentially losing ground to, patterns of cultural consumption stressing coarseness, excess, and an individual orientation. The domination of individual over communal concerns in the United States reveals a more gendered and ideological positioning of taste cultures than in 1960s France, with this macro-social perspective providing insights about some of the shifts Schor highlights.

Other scholars point to the increasing penetration of consumption into the heart of the state and political process, emphasizing the centrality of government in the politics of consumption and the tensions between conceptions of the public as citizen-consumers. Livingstone and Lunt examine how the United Kingdom’s Office of Communications has affected media regulation. Central to this analysis is an implicit shift in the conception of the regulatory beneficiary from citizen to consumer. By analyzing the political discourse of the Office of Communications, as well as information gathered from interviews with key players and focus groups with members of the public, the authors reveal the impact of changing conceptions of citizens/consumers and the potential to privilege the interests of powerful stakeholders.

Hilton further explores the shape of civil society, regulatory systems, and citizen/consumer rights. Operating in a different register, he considers how consumption

itself, particularly consumer protection regimes, became a political project that was central to the post–World War II state. Hilton engages in a comparative historical analysis of consumer protection initiatives that emerged in the East and the West during the latter half of the twentieth century. His survey covers the unique constellations of protection activities that developed to maintain consumer confidence and economic vitality, which included government policy, citizen initiatives, and consumer media. In the process, Hilton illuminates a broader landscape of consumer protection that has transcended national boundaries to provide numerous consumer benefits; however, this optimism is tempered by a corresponding shift in the conceptions of consumer protection as focused on consumer choice, which disadvantages less affluent citizens.

Cohen demonstrates how consumption regimes reshape urban space itself, with large-scale planning projects linked to urban renewal systematically organized around the process of suburbanization and the attempt to preserve the viability of the downtown. Cohen's historical analysis reminds us that the investigation of consumption and civic engagement occurs within local contexts. She compares the power granted to department stores in the retail and urban development of New Haven and Boston in the post-WWII era. She shows how the interplay of politicians, policy makers, and national retailers, with little consideration of diverse audiences and local business offerings, led to the downfall of department stores and revitalization efforts. In doing this, she calls into question the public subsidy of private corporations without consideration of the consequences for civic spaces and corporate civic responsibility.

This question of the place of consumption in shaping everyday meaning is at the heart of the articles presented by Arnould, Thompson, and Belk. Arnould argues that given that market-mediated consumer culture is a dominant social fact of our age, moral denunciations of consumption have played themselves out in ritualized forms. New practices of citizenship will have to navigate the market, not operate in opposition to it. After considering the meaning and potential for consumer agency as well as the assumptions behind anticonsumerist ideologies, Arnould forcefully argues that consumer escape is not possible—or even desirable. He invokes market cases involving microbreweries and the Fair Trade movement to argue that political action is possible within consumption practices and existing market structures.

Thompson takes a different view, understanding the economy of consumption as “carnavalesque,” following Bakhtin, and arguing for muckraking scholarship that criticizes the actual functioning of the market system. He contends that most political critiques of consumption are moralistic, a thematic point he shares with Schudson, below. Unlike Schudson, however, he traces this moralistic turn to the nineteenth-century fusion of Calvinism and patriarchy. In its place, he calls on scholars to critically analyze the constitutive networks and material consequences of market systems with the goal of mobilizing citizen-consumers. These activist-consumers could then combat the problems plaguing specific facets of consumer culture.

Belk approaches problematic aspects of contemporary consumer culture from another angle. He points to the emergence of a sharing economy within

consumption as an alternative to both the market and the gift economy. The potential of sharing as an alternative form of distributing resources has a long and personal history. He notes that while sharing is routinely practiced within the family unit, its potential is largely unrecognized as a community resource, citing the recent emergence of car sharing as an example of the potential of sharing. The Internet has reinvigorated public interest in the concept of sharing by introducing file sharing, open-source code, bulletin boards, shareware, Web logs, online gaming, Wikipedia, and other distributed practices. However, he argues that the intellectual property rights movement threatens to erode the altruistic spirit of this public space with one that promotes self-interest.

Nelson, Rademacher, and Paek explore the underpinnings of sharing and civic identity through a case study of consumers in a second-order, online consumption community: Freecycle.org. Results show that these individuals hold downshifting attitudes (favor less work and less consumption). Yet the downshifting does not necessarily mean increased civic engagement in a traditional sense. Rather, political and civic engagement for this group included political consumption and digital forms of political participation. We contend that the time displacement theory—that less time working and shopping means more civic engagement—is too simplified to account for the interplay between contemporary consumption and participation.

Social movements and issue publics have rediscovered consumption as a focal agenda setter. Micheletti and Stolle explore the antisweatshop movement as an agent of social change. The authors trace the history of sweatshops and the movement that has evolved to oppose them. They identify four types of movement actors (i.e., unions, antisweatshop activist groups, international humanitarian organizations, and Internet spin doctors) and review the nature of their persuasive strategies and tactics. This is followed by an explication of the roles that consumers play in this dynamics of sweatshop issues. The article culminates in an assessment of the effectiveness of the movement. Micheletti and Stolle demonstrate how the antisweatshop movement has become a global advocacy network, growing in scope, density, and sophistication, and using the Internet as its primary organizational mode, another emergent theme.

At the same time, politics itself is increasingly subject to the practices of branding, as demonstrated by Scammell. She begins by providing an overview of the branding concept, and then demonstrates how the branding orientation has been integrated into the political arena by tracing the re-branding of Tony Blair prior to the 2005 U.K. general election. That is, insights from market research were used to create message strategies that reframed the images of Blair and the Labour Party. She argues that the Blair case exemplifies a fundamental shift in the marketing of candidates away from a mass media model (i.e., using mass media and advertising to set the political agenda) to a consumer model (i.e., conceptualizing citizens as consumers, using market research to understand them, and a broader array of brand communication, including personal and interactive channels, to persuade them).

Bennett and Lagos extend this argument, as well as issues raised by Micheletti and Stolle, to demonstrate how younger activists are increasingly moving away

from governance altogether in the attempt to create nongovernmental regulatory regimes via the Web, and how, in particular, the focus on branding and “logo logic” gives both form and structure to these efforts. They examine the use of “logo campaigns” by political activist groups, a practice that attaches critical political messages to popular consumer brands (i.e., Nike or Starbucks) to draw attention to larger political, economic, or environmental issues (i.e., sweatshop labor or environmental degradation). They identify the role of logo campaigns in building consumer awareness, holding the brand hostage, sustaining long-term campaigns, fostering political relationships, and contributing to nongovernmental regulation. However, potential impediments to logo campaigns include the proliferation of uncoordinated messages and activist groups, and the limits of applying such campaigns beyond certain high-profile brands.

Expanding on the centrality of online communications for the politics of consumption and the consumption of politics, DeVreese charts how the shift to the Net itself has become a primary source of political information for younger cohorts and in the process demonstrates that the very forms of consuming politics are changing. His study of the Internet habits of young people in the Netherlands shows that time spent online is not antithetical to political participation. In fact, most of the online activities, including those unrelated to media or politics, were positively related to political participation. Furthermore, by examining a wide range of possible indicators of participation, DeVreese suggests that traditional notions of civic and political engagement should be expanded to include active and passive forms of engagement. More refined views of civic engagement and online activities offer a hopeful presentation of youth civic engagement.

This shifting nature of civic and political participation is again taken up by Shah, McLeod, Kim, Lee, Gotlieb, Ho, and Brevik. We theorize a communication mediation model of political consumerism (i.e., consumer behaviors that are shaped by a desire to express and support political and ethical perspectives), which we then test using original panel survey data. These panel data allow us to test cross-section and panel models of individual difference and aggregate change based on demographics, dispositional factors, communication variables, and consumption orientations. Our analyses reveal a generally consistent pattern across the static and change models: conventional and online news consumption encourages political talk and certain consumption orientations, which in turn lead to political consumption. The relative consistency of the results across models indicates that both conventional and online news use contribute to political consumerism indirectly through their influence on mediating factors.

The final article by Schudson advances themes that he has developed over many years and that he synthesized for the opening address of the conference. It provides a strong counterpoint to the civic republicanism at the core of U.S. political discourse that has long viewed consumption as opposed to citizenship. Schudson argues against the moralistic view of participation in the marketplace as an inferior form of activity to participation in politics. Challenging the perspective that consumption lacks virtue in its own right, or that it displaces civic

life, Schudson concludes that critics who make invidious distinctions between the roles of citizens and consumers are misguided. He notes that both political and consumer behavior can be motivated by either enhancing the public good or satisfying egocentric needs. Consumption can be altruistic (e.g., gift giving), political (e.g., boycotts and buycotts) and democratic (e.g., the “egalitarian ambience” of McDonald’s). Conversely, civic and political activity may serve to advance personal desires or to enhance the egotistical joy of victory. Through this argument, Schudson attempts to restore perspective to conceptions of citizenship and consumption, adding this unique perspective to the other contentions and conclusions that populate this volume.

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Controversies and Opportunities

From these articles we can synthesize a numbers of noteworthy controversies and opportunities toward which future theory, research, and interpretation on the politics of consumption should be directed. We purposefully sketch these sites of contestation in very broad terms, for each domain holds considerable space to determine the specific parameters of the scope of study. Nonetheless, this delineation is a call for concerted attention around these issues and the continued development of this interdisciplinary terrain:

1. *The consumer critique: Didactic and moralistic.* What do we still have to learn from consumer critiques as scholars concerned with the politics of consumption and the consumption of politics? How do these critiques inform and suggest avenues for action regarding the challenges of the current political and environmental climate? Are elements of this critique moralistic and do they demand rethinking? What is the value of complicating the consumer/citizen contrast?
2. *The power to create change: The citizen and the state.* What is the role of the state and corporate interests in the politics of consumption? Should we focus our scholarly attention and activist agendas on the state-corporation over the citizen-consumer given the centrality and power of the former? How can citizen-consumers and social movements influence nation-states and corporations?
3. *A hyphenated public: Consumers, citizens, or citizen-consumers.* What are the promise and perils of a hyphenated conception of the public as a group of citizen-consumers? Do politicians and the state increasingly view citizens as consumers and approach them in this manner? Can citizens ever escape the market and would this even be a desirable

- end? Is there hope for a commons, where sharing is the norm rather than the exception? How can citizens exercise their power through consumption?
4. *The marketing of politics: Candidates and social movements.* How has branding come to dominate the public face of political candidates and political parties, as well as the formation of issue publics? How have other marketing principles been applied to political campaigning? Is political branding a tool for legitimate democratic change or simply another way to dupe the consumer?
 5. *The nature of civic participation: Thick versus thin engagement.* Do political consumerism and logo politics represent new forms of civic participation? Are these forms of participation displacing conventional modes of participation? Are they comparatively thin forms of political participation, or equally robust for sustained democratic engagement? How is the Internet changing the notion of the coordinated civic action? Is this sort of action individual and erratic or collective and coordinated?

As consumer culture pervades the social life of citizens in America and Europe, it becomes increasingly important to clarify the relationship between consumption and citizenship. This means looking beyond lifestyle politics and socially conscious consumption to consider other ways in which consumption has become politicized. This may involve deeper exploration of the connections between taste cultures and certain political ideologies, with particular attention to how social networks formed around brand communities and civic life overlap and mutually constrain one another. At the same time, the relationship between media consumption and competitive consumption deserves greater attention, especially whether the overspent consumer and the strains posed by contemporary consumerism can be linked to patterns of media use. It may be that digital media provide a way to counter these effects. These new modes of Internet youth may be central to the formation of youth culture and foster new modes of belonging, particularly in terms of how cultures of music and style shape identity. Clearly, these types of explorations must attend to the power of state and corporate institutions and consider differences across cultural contexts in an era of globalism. There is much to do to understand the deeper connections among communication, consumption, and citizenship.

Note

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