Reflections on "Political Virtue and Shopping"

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Political Virtue and Shopping was first published in 2003 and again with an epilogue in second edition 2010. That year an Italian translation also appeared. My Palgrave Macmillan editor later said that it was his most cited book – even across geographical space and disciplinary focus. The book focused on an accelerating societal development, political consumerism or the use of the marketplace as an arena for politics. My general curiosity about the topic goes back to the 1960s and the United Farm Workers' grape boycott (Garcia 2007; pp. 53.54 in Political Virtue and Shopping 2010) that met me when going to the supermarket at that time. This was civic education in practice – just as it can be now. Outside stores boycott supporters passed out fliers about the unacceptable labour conditions of migrant farm workers in California; inside stores signs pointed to union member-picked grapes and lettuce and asked consumers to 'buycott' them. The boycott movement was supported by U.S. Senator Robert Kennedy, and its leader Cesar Chavez evoked Ghanaian non-violent tactics when he went on a hunger strike. All this made news. I wrote a paper on the boycott movement for my high school social studies class. Much later when doing research for two books, one on the Swedish farmers' movement (Micheletti 1990) and the other on civil society and state relations in Sweden (Micheletti 1995), I learned that people in other countries also were turning to political consumerism. In the mid-1980s some dissatisfied Swedish farmers decided to promote more forcefully organic agriculture because they were dissatisfied by how pesticide and animal welfare was regulated in Swedish agricultural once it became clear that organically-labelled food was a money making venture. Also in these years, environmental groups decided to mobilize consumer power in their quest for stronger environmental regulations. They asked consumer advocate Ralph Nader for advice on cooperating with businesses to promote green production and succeeded in mobilizing consumers into some boycotts and into using their new green shopping guide (SNF 1998; see Political Virtue and Shopping 2010, 127), which sold out almost immediately after publication. Environmental activists openly admitted that they were surprised about the effectiveness that mobilized consumer choice could have in Sweden. These experiences led to other market-based efforts – and importantly a few green labelling schemes. Interestingly and different from today, what did not work well were efforts in changing consumer

lifestyles. Attempts to reuse and reduce consumption – that is, downsize it – by encouraging second-hand shopping, repairing goods, buying fewer goods and eating less meat did not prove successful.

Another inspiration for understanding the importance of political consumerism as a societal phenomenon was a national survey from 1997 on how Swedes participate in politics. The study was for a democratic audit report (Petersson et al 1998). Of all measured forms of participation, boycotting was the one that had increased the most between 1987 (ca 15 %), when it was first measured, and 1997 (ca 29%); 'buycotting' was not yet part of the standard survey questionnaire. (Later studies showed also higher levels particularly for buycotting in Sweden, a result partially explained by the prevalence of green labeling schemes in the country). At the time no big boycotts were ongoing, and we did not have a good understanding of what explained this enormous increase in ten years. For *Political Virtue and Shopping* I revisited these research materials, conducted new interview and document studies, did country and historical comparisons, and read much more theory. This research helped me construe political consumerism's societal dynamics. As discussed in Chapter 1, among the important reasons are concerns about government dragging its feet on regulating industry's use of chemicals and its inability to deal effectively with globalized challenges in the field of environmental risks and human rights. Today scholars consider labelling schemes (that is, 'buycotting' mechanisms) to be new regulatory tools highly fitting for our more globalized networked governance-oriented world. In short, concerned citizens were trying to use their shopping choices to fill a political responsibility vacuum left by government. Chapter 4 discusses the Swedish case and gives some revealing examples on this matter.

To theorize citizen engagement I formulated two ideal types – 'collectivist' collective action (the political action repertoire traditionally used by social movements) and 'individualized' collective action. The latter term has both inspired scholars and been an important source of their criticism of the book and the phenomenon itself. The term 'individualized' was misunderstood as meaning 'individualistic'. My critics mixed up the term 'individualized collective action' with Ulrich Beck's discussion of cocooning or fleeing from politics, and unfortunately did not associate it with his discussion on subpolitics, which concerns individuals and groups stepping up to take more responsibility for societal developments (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). And they argued that calling the phenomenon political 'consumerism' instead of political 'consumption' was a normative stance on my part for neo-liberalism and shopping as defining our role as societal beings. Some of these misunderstandings might just have been an attempt to create a strawman

argument to push a different thesis; but in other cases they say a lot about the scholarly critic's local setting where enhancing consumer choice was an intimate part of ideologically-driven rolling back the state. In the epilogue for the second edition I address these criticisms and emphasize that the term 'individualized' refers to individuals and collectivities complementing, challenging, and/or replacing "old school" political action (e.g., party and union membership) with newer or different societal participatory methods and problem-solving tools. If asked to write a third edition, I would put more stress on multi-level governmental use of consumer choice (for instance, through the boycotting and buycotting function embedded in trade and procurement policy) as part of their steering repertoire and how states across the world call on their citizens to think and act as conscious, ethical and climate-smart shoppers. Governmental lack of sufficient steering control – for whatever reason – over societal and environmental risks and general difficulty in mobilizing support for 'old school' regulatory policy illustrates why they do so. I would also relate this development to the discourse on responsibilization (that is, the state's turning of societal responsibility for solving common problems over to individuals and other 'non-state' actors) and how responsibilization might be understood as part of individualized collective action. Thus, rather than being a normative claim about how society ought to function, the concept of individualized collective action offers a theoretical understanding of the role of consumption in real-life developments at the individual, local, national, supranational and international level. For me, this concept dovetails with Iris Marion Young's philosophical contribution, the social connection model of responsibility for global justice (Young 2006), which theorizes about why older government-oriented models of political responsibility often fail us. In her writings, Young put responsibility for the global harms associated with the production and consumption of goods in the hands of each and every one of us, and importantly, assigned some actors, like corporations, more responsibility than others.

Another criticism of the book, other publications which I have authored and co-authored as well as other scholars' research on political consumerism is the field's 'northern bias' in its theorizing and empirical focus. This is a very important criticism that I agree with fully. With few exceptions my book and other research has focused on established democracies in the northern hemisphere. Empirically this research has generally only included the southern hemisphere as an object of political consumer action – as a geographic area producing goods that northern consumers boycott and/or buycott for, among other matters, to 'help' the people (workers, farmers, citizens) living in the Global South. I acknowledge this criticism in Chapter 5 but at that time there was not much research to draw on to discuss it much further. Fortunately this has

changed; scholars in different parts of the world are now conducting studies about the workings of political consumerism globally, and they are critiquing my and other theoretical understandings of it. Personally I am looking forward to reading new studies on the practice of political consumerism in Africa, Asia, Latin and Southern America, and Eastern Europe. Hopefully this research will offer further explanations for the varying levels of its practice in different geographical areas and perhaps even identify further forms not revealed in the studies of the northern world. Such investigations can enrich the study of the phenomenon theoretically and methodologically and address the claim that surveys are missing important social practices in the field.

Some critical readers of my book have identified me as a 'true believer' in the force of consumer power to help save the world. Some of them maintain that I have become adamant about the importance of political shopping in the second edition, perhaps because in its epilogue I identify two additional forms of political consumerism (discursive actions and lifestyle change) and discuss particularly how buycotting has become more mainstreamed and institutionalized globally. In the book *Political Consumerism: Global Responsibility in Action* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), Dietlind Stolle and I study how political consumerism as a form of social movement action is challenged by the mainstreaming of buycott choice, for instance when transnational corporations certify their goods as organic and fairtrade or when consumers are nudged by guilt-inducing mobilizing marketing to buy fairtrade chocolate for loved ones in holiday season. The tension between the marketing goals of making political consumerism (e.g., fairtrade coffee) a popular consumer commodity, on the one hand, and the ideological commitment that is rooted in civil society's solidarity with workers globally, on the other, as well as the tension between self-regarding (self-interests) and other-oriented interests in political consumerism deserves much more research in the field of ethics and philosophy.

New research should also concentrate more on the presence of political consumerism in certain consumer-oriented industry sectors over others. It should not just cover the sectors where it is prevalent (such as food and wood products) but also where it is less successful – like electronics, toys and affordable clothing. What significance do industry-specific and consumer-specific characteristics have here, or even self-regarding versus other-oriented interests? Scholars should additionally delve more into investigating political consumerism's effectiveness as a problem-solving venture both in terms of its actual outcome "on the ground" so to speak but also by developing theory and methodology for studying its effectiveness. In short: new scholarship should answer the question if there really is political virtue in shopping.

Another part of political consumerism should never be forgotten. It does not necessarily promote democratic ideals and development. Boycotting and buycotting has had and still has undemocratic roots. In Chapter 2 I discuss how it historically was used to promote discrimination. The best-researched case at the time was the 'Don't Buy Jewish' consumer campaign of the 1930s in Europe and elsewhere (Encyclopædia Judaica Jerusalem 1971). I also write about how political consumer messages can confuse corporations when civic groups with diametrically opposing ideologies target the same goods or corporation in the same time period, as happened with The Walt Disney Company in the 1990s (see Best and Lowney 2009; Political Virtue and Shopping, 150). The company had to deal with calls for boycotts of the same Disney entertainment, clothing and toys from ideologically diametrically opposed standpoints – from fairtrade groups concerned about 'sweatshop' working conditions in the factories in the Global South that manufactured Disney products, from U.S. anti-ethnic and racial discrimination groups critical of Disney's portrayal of ethnicity and race in its products and movies, and from Christian fundamentalist groups alarmed about Disney's loose relationship with traditional family values and particularly when it comes to sexual orientation. Here the important point for political consumer research is boycott effectiveness: how is a corporation to respond to such diversified and contradictory demands forthcoming in political consumer action without provoking more irritation in consumer society?

There are also instances where an acknowledged good cause attracts bad, undemocratic or unwanted elements when using the market as its arena for politics. Here we might speak of politically dilemma-ridden and highly politically sensitive political consumerism. A case in point is the boycott and divestment calls against the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, which many governments find difficult to handle. As noted earlier concerned citizens often turn to the market as an arena for politics when they consider government solutions inadequate. Here the Palestine-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanction (BDS) Movement wants to mobilize all kinds of consumers into market-based actions to compel Israel to comply with international law declaring the Israeli occupation settlements illegal. It wants Israel to leave these territories. The BDS movement creates perplexities for all kinds of consumers – both individual and institutional (e.g., procurement officers for public and private bodies) – due to the legacy of anti-Jewish boycotts and the Anti-Semitic campaigns in the 1930s and also because people with anti-Semitic sentiments can support it. While the U.S. Congress has condemned the movement as anti-Israel in orientation, the U.K. Royal Courts of Justice ruled that local councils can boycott Israeli settlement goods and divest in companies associated with the Occupied Territories if they have good ethical reasons for

doing so. The European Union has taken a different route. After long debates it decided to issue a formal interpretative notice declaring that products coming from Israeli settlements cannot be labelled as 'Made in Israel', and gives its member states primarily responsibility for enforcing Israeli compliance on how goods are labelled. 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 political consumerism's ability to handle and solve sensitive and long-lasting political problems. They also offer a more nuanced understanding of the scope and effectiveness of political consumerism's political virtue.

Researching political consumerism has been fun. The magnitude of the book's global response took me and my editor by surprise. The book gave scholars working in the field a 'research identity' and sounding board to contextualize their research, and me the opportunity to meet and learn from so many interesting scholars from different generations, countries, and disciplines – even if some of them have been highly critical. Currently I am following my critics and furthering the study of political consumerism in an Oxford Handbook on Political Consumerism, edited by Magnus Boström, myself and Peter Oosterveer. The handbook, commissioned by my book editor who is now at Oxford University Press and rooted in the overwhelming response to *Political Virtue and Shopping*, will include over forty chapters written by scholars from different geographic areas and disciplines. An entire section is devoted to theoretical and research design perspectives; other sections discuss political consumerism's strong and weak industrial sectors, geographical spread and practice, and importantly, its democratic paradoxes and challenges. Hopefully this volume, scheduled for publication in 2018, will receive the same enthusiastic response as my book, and find it ways into classrooms across the world. It is also my hope that the Journal of Consumer Ethics will contribute with interesting insights and viewpoints to the academic and public debate on the suitability of the market as an arena for local to global politics.

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