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Journal of Consumer Culture

INTRODUCTION

Citizenship and consumption

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RECENT YEARS HAVE seen a rapprochement between politics and consumer culture, symbolized by the coupling of the 'citizen-consumer'. While even a generation ago, consumption and citizenship tended to be located in opposing spheres of private and public, associated with competing inner- and outer-regarding norms and actions, they are today increasingly recognized as porous, indeed overlapping domains. Originally housed in separate corridors of academia, with rival traditions of research and method, students of consumer culture and citizenship are moving into closer conversation. The political is back. This special issue is an attempt to foster that dialogue. It looks at some current attempts to re-engage with the civic side of consumption, examines the political prospects and limits of consumerism in public policy and social movements, and points to the creative tensions involved in realigning the study of consumer culture with the study of political traditions and agencies.

Politics, of course, has always been present in debates about consumer cultures in the modern period. Yet it tended to play the role of a hidden hand rather than offer a sustained, open engagement with the political norms and practices linked to the desires, needs, and practices that make up consumption. Consumer culture and what in the 1960s became known as 'consumer society' was a subject defined by ideological concerns and anxieties, but it was essentially a domain where, if the politics had not been left out altogether, political rights and reason appeared under threat,

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hollowed out by individuation and privatizing material temptations. Veblen, Horkheimer and Adorno may not have agreed on much in their seminal studies of consumer culture, but they certainly shared a sense of its intrinsic tendency towards public waste and civic disengagement. Consumption and citizenship were instinctively viewed in zero-sum terms. Such a viewpoint had roots in much older, long-standing traditions, most manifest in the civic mentality of republicanism with its active, territorial, and gendered conception of the true citizen (Skinner, 1998). Citizens were rooted, with a stake in the land, independent and arms-bearing men living and breathing an organic communal identity. The temptations of goods brought by the world of commerce, by contrast, came with fluidity and specialization, signalling a division of labour and identities: civic life was in danger of being hollowed out by jostling private interests.

In the last decade, this dominant antagonistic picture has been subject to challenges and revisions from several related directions. While not completely vanquished – viz. the seemingly never-ending stream of media commentators lamenting how citizens are becoming shoppers – it is reasonable to diagnose a shift in perspective and evaluation. While not conflict-free, citizenship and consumption have moved closer together. The focus of attention is now as much on overlap and interaction, even contingent symbiosis, as well as on rivalry. This shift reflects major political, cultural, and academic reorientations at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. Fascination with the civic potential of consumption has, most importantly, received an impetus from neoliberalism and the backlash of new social movements. With older producer-oriented labour politics in crisis, political energy and legitimacy have moved more easily to consumption as a site of action and mobilization. In academia, this transition has been amplified by the rise of gender studies, which reclaimed the historical agency of the female consumer, and by a renaissance of civil society, which brought into view the many different types of citizen-consumers active outside the formal domain of the state. In brief, the reassessment of the civic dynamics of consumption came with the broadening of the political beyond an inherited territorial conception of citizenship and a class-based welfare state.

One explanation would be to see this change of viewpoints in structural terms, the expression of an expanding materialist lifestyle associated with consumer society in the 1960s. Consumerism creates a new, liquid society, which hollows out a shared public domain, transcends territorial identities and erodes more solid identities based in work and locality (Bauman, 2001, 2003). Consumer boycotts put to political use the ideal of

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freedom, choice and the sovereign consumer given circulation by neoliberal discourse and policies. Ironically, we should note, this critical narrative shares a good deal with the more positive narrative used by governments such as New Labour in the UK; public service reforms here merely respond to a historic transition from the era of the welfare state, where, it is argued, people wanted to be treated the same, to a society of active, affluent consumers who want choice (Thompson, 2002).

There is some truth in this, of course. In their consumption practices, most people have become more individualized, and less class-bound. Still, it may be wiser to treat the current rapprochement more as one chapter in a longer cyclical story, than as a sharp break between cultural and economic paradigms. Arguably, commercial societies a century ago – or for that matter three centuries ago – in earlier periods of transnational exchange and proto-globalization, were as far removed from a fixed territorial and industrial social system as contemporary societies. Significantly, civil society and commercial consumption advanced hand-in-hand in the transatlantic world of the 18th century. In other words, we should be careful not to conflate a focus on categories of class, state and production with the political and cultural realities of earlier societies. We may experience a rediscovery of the civic elements of consumption rather than a paradigm shift.

Recent studies have begun to illuminate several principal arenas in the politics of consumption. One emerging field of research has analysed consumption as a new resource of political identification and mobilization around questions of fair trade, sweatshop products, and related issues of social and environmental justice. Research here connects with broader public debates about political apathy and the decline of party-based electoral politics. Anxieties about the corrosive impact of media consumption for civic engagement (Putnam, 2000; Sandel, 1996) have a long history. Several recent studies have issued a note of caution. Watching television or boycotting a particular product has not diminished a more general sense of public engagement (Boström et al., 2005; Couldry et al., 2007; Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti and Stolle, 2005).

This research can be fruitfully read alongside the growing literature on consumer movements and earlier forms of consumer boycotts (Breen, 2004; Chatriot, Chessel and Hilton, 2004; Daunton and Hilton, 2001; Hilton, 2003; Jacobs, 1997; Storrs, 2000; Sussman, 2000; Trentmann, 2006a; Trivedi, 2003). Consumption, these studies show, has for a long time functioned as an alternative sphere of political action and inclusion for groups excluded from the formal body politic, both women in the metropole and men and women in the colonies. In a liberal-radical tradition, indebted to

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the enlightenment vision of the softening touch ('the douceur') of commerce, consumption could even be seen as a peaceful, unifying bond across nations. At the same time, it is important to resist a kind of progressive, morally superior social movement narrative. A focus on consumption disrupts a more linear narrative from liberal to social citizenship. It becomes altogether suspect once we adopt a more global perspective. Consumer politics has been anchored in a variety of traditions, including nationalism and imperialism, as in patriotic product campaigns in China, the 'Buy Empire Goods' campaign in 1920s Britain, or the Japanese housewives' movement after the Second World War (Garon and Maclachlan, 2006; Gerth, 2003; Trentmann, 2007).

The identity of the consumer as a subject and object of politics has been a second, related field of controversy. Neoliberalism, drawing on the influential economistic school of rational choice, gave 'the consumer' pride of place in the 1980s and 1990s in programmes to privatize industries and extend the invisible hand of the market to social services. Some writers have presented the consumer as the novel product of an 'advanced liberal' form of governmentality taking hold in the second half of the 20th century, in which individuals 'are not merely "free to choose", but *obliged to be free*, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice. They must interpret their past and dream their future as outcomes of choices made or choices still to make' (Rose, 1999: 87; emphasis in original). One question, of course, is whether people have begun to dream in terms of choice. Research on the frontlines of public service reform suggests that local people and local providers have been remarkably resistant to this new choosing self (Clarke et al., 2007). Without minimizing the impact and disruption of public sector reform on people's lives, the 'advanced liberal' self may be stronger in government texts than in the practices and identities of everyday life.

In addition, it is useful to widen the frame in which the consumer is discussed, both chronologically and thematically. Most scholars of consumer culture have shared a critical rejection of an economistic 'consumer' and the methodological individualism lying behind it, but have done little to flesh out the alternative personas it has inhabited. The consumer is sometimes a descriptive or analytical category, at other times a normative one, and at yet others all at once, giving little attention to the specificity of the consumer as a subject and object in public life. That this should be so is curious, not only since the category has undergone significant changes in the course of the modern period, but also because who counts and who does not count as a consumer has implications for law and regulatory

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politics to the present day. Recent research highlights several interesting developments. First, the consumer has a longer history than advanced liberalism, with roots initially in rights and equity, not individual choice. It is better to think of the consumer in terms of multiple identities that are only slowly (and unevenly and incompletely) fused into a universal subject. This has been a process of social and political contestation, from below as well as from above. The citizen-consumer has been sponsored by liberals, feminists, social democrats and progressives (Cohen, 2003; Trentmann, 2006b). Second, the contemporary politics of regulation has reinforced (not eased) the ambivalence of the consumer interest, and over who speaks for the consumer. New-style regulators in communication and financial services are obliged to engage with and consult consumers as well as protect and serve them. Inevitably, there are inherent tensions about how to represent consumers with diverse interests and different capacities for organization (Lunt and Livingstone, 2007). Finally, research in the UK suggests the fragmented nature of the consumer as an identity, and the limits of choice as an ethic of self-conduct – social movements use it to position themselves in public discourse; people in their everyday lives much less so (Barnett et al., 2005; Malpass et al., in press).

Consumption has also been an integral aspect of new, more transnational forms of governance. The focus on neoliberalism tends to be on its economic side, but the privatization of the consumer into a market-based citizen-consumer also intersects with law, legal forms of knowledge and politics, and new supra-national institutions that transcend a more territorially based model of citizenship. Law and regulation here become a battle site between competing forms of knowledge and between procedural and social functions (Burgess, 2001; Everson and Joerges, in press). For the development of consumer culture this is an important development, not least since it seeks to break down barriers to trade and exchange, thereby changing the flow and diversity of local tastes and consumption behaviour. Much of this emerging global infrastructure of governance concerns needs rather than desires; that is, goods and services that have tended to be neglected at the expense of more conspicuous forms of consumption. As a new study of conflicts over water suggests, legal systems are sites where the micro and macro dynamics of governance come together, where social movements can change the norms of 'responsible consumerism' and where rules are made about the systems of provision in which everyday practices of consumption take place (Morgan, 2006b, 2006a). Clearly, this is an arena where scholars of consumer culture, especially those interested in 'ordinary' consumption

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and theories of practice (Gronow and Warde, 2001; Warde, 2005) could engage further with legal scholars and political scientists.

The articles in this special issue are an invitation for further dialogue between scholars in consumer culture and their colleagues in neighbouring disciplines. Building on some of the points of contact sketched above, they take the discussion of the relationship between consumption and citizenship in several additional directions, drawing on social policy, feminism, political theory and philosophy.

In public policy and in the public debate about 'consumerism' more generally, the focus is on 'choice', especially in the UK and the USA. The promotion of choice has been a defining mission for British New Labour, leading to reform initiatives across the field of public services, from health and social care to policing. In his article, John Clarke follows the figure of the consumer in the thinking of policy makers to ask more generally about the dynamics of consumerist policies and what this can tell us about the changing relationship between the state and its publics in their local encounters over the provision of services. Part of the government agenda of choice was to boost recognition of the consumer as a demanding, vocal 'expert' user of services. The realities of choice looked very different to local providers and users, Clarke's fieldwork shows. Providers guarded their professional expertise. They understood their role as that of managing demand, under conditions of constraint and rationing. Like providers, users have been uncomfortable with the idea of looking at public services in the same frame as going shopping. The people studied by Clarke and colleagues did not think in polar opposite categories of consumer versus citizen; indeed, both these identities are more marginal than in political and academic discourse. If anything, consumerist initiatives have contributed to scepticism and ambivalence, leaving behind an inherently uncertain relationship between public organizations and their users. The article shows the benefits of giving attention to social processes and relationships, as well as to a more textual study of consumerist discourse and policy initiatives. For observers elsewhere interested in applying consumerist models to social services, the British case is an example of the considerable cultural as well as structural obstacles in the path of neoliberal reforms.

Chile preceded the neoliberal turn in the USA and the UK (Harvey, 2005). There are some shared transnational elements, but, as Veronica Schild argues in her article, the model of a market consumer-citizen was also drawing on a particular national form of political culture. Like Clarke's, Schild's story is concerned with the rising figure of the demanding,

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empowered consumer in social services, specifically in welfare services. Consumerism involves the 'outsourcing' of services. However, neoliberalism, she emphasizes, is ultimately not about a weakening of the state, but about changing the directive powers of the state. Civil society played a critical role in paving the way for the market-citizen. Women's movements and feminist discourse looked to an autonomous, reflective self that was subsequently co-opted by neoliberal policies seeking to promote an empowered consumer of welfare services. Put in more general terms, Schild's article can be read as a reflection on the multiple, internal as well as external political forces that have helped to prepare and sustain neoliberal 'consumerist' policies. Instead of being imposed from the outside, global western power trumping local traditions, neoliberalism found a receptive soil of existing alternative, emancipatory ideals of selfhood and autonomy.

These studies ask about the genealogies of consumerist policy and its influence on public life. There is, however, also a second question that looks at the reverse process: what is consumer lifestyle doing to civic culture? This is an old debate that has cast a long shadow over evaluations of materialism and affluence (Horowitz, 1992). In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau produced an influential, still widely read romantic critique of a materialist pursuit of more and more goods (Thoreau, 1854). Thoreau retreated to the Concord woods to experience the simple life, but he was not a puritan. His ideal was to intensify pleasure, not a cult of self-restraint. A materialist lifestyle, in his view, diminished people's ability to enjoy the pleasures of taste, smell and sound, and of activities such as walking and reading. For Thoreau, the problem was not consumption as such. It was that more, duller forms of consumption were crowding out smaller, but more intensely pleasurable forms of consumption.

Thoreau anticipated many of the current critiques of consumerism and choice as leading to a rat-race of work, 'affluenza', a competitive 'luxury' fever', and a decline in well-being (Frank, 1999; James, 2007; Layard, 2005; Offer, 2006). The merits of this literature can be debated in terms of data, their interpretation in terms of utilitarian approaches and methodological individualism, the limits of subjective well-being measures, and the degree to which the USA and UK can be said to exhibit and represent some more universal problems of 'affluence' and 'consumerism'. But it also touches on ethics, encouraging a debate on personal needs and desires, how our choices affect our own well-being and that of others, and how individuals in a civil society might change the material world from within (Ginsborg, 2005). Kate Soper's essay can be read as a contemporary reflection on 'the good

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life' in a consumer-oriented material world, picking up on some of the concerns raised by Thoreau a century and a half earlier.

Just as historical and sociological work has questioned a straightforward divide between private consumption and public citizenship, Soper's philosophical discussion highlights the dangers of contrasting the self-interest of consumers with the civic-mindedness of citizens. The advance of ethical consumerism and debates about sustainable development, she argues, shows that consumer practices are helping to revise what counts as 'the good life'. Affluent consumers, disaffected with stress and pollution, may contribute to this shift for self-interested reasons. Personal pleasure and the pursuit of sensual experiences become the vessel for a more sustainable environment benefiting the public as a whole. A civic concern with freedom and sustainability, in other words, is not a separate island, as with many political theorists and philosophers, but part and parcel of changing consumer practices.

Kaela Jubas rounds off the discussion about consumption and citizenship from a perspective of feminism and cultural studies. Jubas charts the proliferation of the 'citizen-consumer' in social movements and academic literature across the human societies to reflect on the limits as well as opportunities of this fusion for the political imaginary and political action. Her essay shows the richness and various uses to which the 'citizen-consumer' has been put, but it also highlights the problems of operationalizing it as a way of empowering people in their everyday lives. Research suggests that the appeal to personal responsibility and choice in current appeals to the 'citizen-consumer' can be experienced as overwhelming and numbing by individuals and families when it comes to complex global problems such as climate change (Malpass et al., in press). The problem, then, is less one of interaction than one of scale. Consumption shapes citizenship, but citizenship is larger than consumption. The danger, as Jubas reminds us, lies in conflating the two, losing sight of additional sites and norms of political action.

If these articles show the growing number of points of contact between studies of consumption and citizenship, they also alert us to the number of gaps and silences that remain between research agendas nurtured in different traditions of thoughts, methods, and literatures. Three related areas stand out. First, there is a tendency for a division of labour between research on texts and traditions and research on social processes – this has made it difficult to examine how shifts in ideas about citizenship and consumption play themselves out in social relations, and how changes in material culture in

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everyday life might appropriate, modulate and redirect them. Second, there remains a gulf between the study of behaviour, values and symbols, and the study of institutions broadly defined. Law, regulatory regimes, national and transnational processes of governance – these deserve greater attention in the study of consumer cultures.

Finally, there is a gap between micro and macro levels of understanding consumers as citizens. The long and rich literature on citizenship has been oriented towards the public side of norms and practices. What the study of consumption can bring to this is attention to its private side, in the everyday workings of politics. The recent practice turn in the human sciences points to one way forward, offering one possible methodological channel connecting private and public. Following a practice reveals consumption as a series of evolving processes. Consumption is about doing things, purpose and accomplishment as well as symbols and communication: it is about fulfilling certain tasks. So far, practice theory has been used to illuminate the career of particular practices, about how people, material objects and competencies are integrated in the performance of leisure activities, such as Nordic walking or home improvement, how practices start, evolve and die (Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Warde, 2005). Consumption practices, however, are also processes that tie individuals to larger systems of provision, linking private and public worlds. This has implications for the focus of what is at stake in considering the relationship between consumption and citizenship. It is the practices that shape public life, rather than the goods themselves or their symbolic value. Consumption practices depend on external conditions, including policy and infrastructures, but consumers, through their practices, also help to shape these systems – telecommunications, tourism and mobility, gas and water are obvious examples. In addition to openly political forms of action (such as boycotts or political mobilization), consumers through their everyday practices, consciously or unconsciously, leave an active mark on these larger social systems. How the skills necessary for a practice are performed, acquired, contested and regulated, and how they evolve over time is worth studying and can give insight into how personal, emotional, technical and institutional factors are integrated in consumption. Examining washing, watching television, shopping and so forth as practice could provide a useful additional perspective for our understanding of the dynamics between consumption and citizenship. It would make it possible to follow the processes through which human actors and material objects come together in acts of consumption, transforming the field of material politics in the process.

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