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The Internet and Civic Engagement: The Age of the Citizen-Consumer

MARGARET SCAMMELL

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Keywords Internet, civic engagement, citizen-consumer, citizenship, consumer, corporate responsibility, globalization, political involvement

> Dr. Railly, you are giving alarmists a bad name . . . the planet cannot survive the excesses of the human race . . . proliferation of nuclear weapons, pollution of land, sea and air, the rape of the environment. In this context, isn't it obvious that [the alarmist] represents the sane vision and the [optimist's] model, "let's go shopping," is the cry of the true lunatic? (*Twelve Monkeys*, starring Bruce Willis)

> Business has overtaken politics as the primary shaping force in society, which means consumers are voting every time they flex their spending muscle, and that in turn makes the vigilante consumer into a powerful consumer, capable, as we have seen, of humbling even the likes of Shell and Monsanto. (Anita Roddick, owner of The Body Shop)

The proposition to be argued is this: The act of consumption is becoming increasingly suffused with citizenship characteristics and considerations. Citizenship is not dead, or dying, but found in new places, in life-politics, as Anthony Giddens (1991) calls it, and in consumption. The site of citizens' political involvement is moving from the production side of the economy to the consumption side. As workers, most of us have less power now for all the familiar reasons: technological revolution and economic globalization, abetted by the deregulating governments of the 1980s and 1990s that systematically dismantled many of the legal rights of labor unions. As consumers, though, we, at least in the developed North, have more power than ever. We have more money and more choice among a wider variety of options of how to spend our hard-earned cash and precious leisure time. We are better-informed shoppers than ever before. Consumer rights and interest groups and their advice are now daily in our mainstream mass media. Environmental lobbyists and activists are no longer left-field, but have a clear

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and central place in public debate and have demonstrated their ability to score direct hits against the multi-nationals: Shell and dumping of waste in the oceans, Monsanto and genetically modified foods, Nike and the pay and working conditions in its Third World suppliers' factories. Just as globalization squeezes orthodox avenues for politics, through the state and organized labor, so new ones are being prized open, in consumer power.

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. They are not at opposite ends of the spectrum: The citizen is politically interested, informed, and outward-looking, while the consumer is self-interested, isolated, and inward-looking. Typically, the citizen is the hero figure of democracy, active, public-spirited, and rational. But what of the consumer?

Probably few of us now would accept Adorno's biting critique of the culture industry, with its power to create false needs and dull the brains of vulnerable citizens: The culture industry, essentially, reduces citizens to consumers. Yet, equally the nerve he hit still nags away. Consumption, if not anti-citizenship, seems at best a hollow consolation for the absence of real political autonomy. "Consumer-style critique," says Zygmunt Bauman (2000), is all that is left to us in a society that no longer recognizes any alternative to itself, "and thereby feels absolved from the duty to examine, demonstrate, justify . . . the validity of its unspoken and tacit assumptions" (p. 23). It is still hard to see how consumption, except at the activist margins, can quite be authentic politics.

That, however, is precisely my case: that we, as consumers, are increasingly aware of our political power and increasingly willing to use it. The modern citizen-consumer is not quite the maximum-utility calculator of Anthony Downs's economic model of citizenship. Downs lays a consumer model over citizenship and argues that this best captures voter behavior. My point takes an almost opposite trajectory: A model of citizenship, with some of the classical republican dimensions of civic duty, public-spiritedness, and self-education, is an increasingly apt description of consumer behavior. This is most obvious in the upsurge of politically conscious environmental, consumer watchdogs and action groups. It is clear, too, in the deliberate harnessing of consumer power to political projects, of which the lesbian and gay movement, and the pink dollar, is a strong example. However, such examples are really more symptom than cause of the age of the citizen-consumer. We are not talking here simply about groups of activists and progressive entrepreneurs at the margins, but the day-to-day activity of increasing millions of ordinary folk whose regular conduct of leisure and consumption has an ever-stronger political edge.

Politics and Consumption

Could the answer to our contemporary complex of political crises really be, let's go shopping? Of course, the marketing utopia of a virtuous cycle of citizen-consumers, ethical business, and profits is just that, a utopia.

Those "realist" democratic theorists, the pluralists, Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom, first gave the clues some 30 years ago to our present age of citizen-consumers. Democracy and markets need each other, Dahl argued, but it is a tempestuous marriage of continual conflict. Democracy has not survived anywhere without markets; equally, capitalism flourishes best in democratic states. Yet the short-term logic of profit threatens the rights and welfare of citizens. Without restraints from government, markets inevitably will inflict harm. In fact, the market gives economic actors "powerful incentives for ignoring the good of others if by doing so they themselves stand to gain. Conscience is

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easily quieted by that seductive justification for inflicting harm on others: 'If I don't do it, others will'" (Dahl, 1998, pp. 174–175). The pluralists warned that the greatest threats to contemporary democracy came not from the state, as liberals might have it, but from large corporations. They had used their power both to secure special privileges under the law and, through their control of advertising and media, to skew the public agenda such that the question of corporate power was a "nonissue," causing scarcely a ripple of public concern or media inquiry (Lindblom, 1977).

The warning foreshadows contemporary debates about globalization. From left and right we see similar analyses of the power of global corporations to "escape" from politics, as Beck puts it (2000, p. 1), to undermine the restraining influence of the nation-state, cutting across its pillars of sovereignty, policing, and tax-raising. "The transition to . . . globalization has crept in on velvet paws, under the guise of normality, rewriting societal rules of the game—with the legitimacy of a modernization that will happen come what may" (Beck, 2000, p. 4). National sovereignty, and what is left of it in the era of globalization, is at the heart of modern European politics both in practice and in theory.

Less remarked, though, are the highly politicizing effects of globalization. Lindblom was right in 1977 to describe corporate power as a nonissue, outside the political left. That is not the case now. Globalization makes corporate power explicit. In part, the corporations themselves and their political supporters are responsible for this, through the rhetoric of market triumph. By drawing attention to their capacity to escape state regulation, they inadvertently highlight their own responsibility for good or ill. They are no longer disguised as an almost nonpolitical fact of life, as they were in the welfare democracies, where the state is the focus of all politics. In the process, they politicize consumption. The first signs of this came from the phenomenal success and popular appeal of the environmental activists such as Greenpeace. They held to public account individual companies, naming and shaming them for acts of environmental destruction and reckless cruelty. It is a very different politics from the class analysis of the traditional left, which sees capitalism as the undifferentiated pursuit of profit, or traditional political analyses, which in the pocketbook models of voting behavior see consumption as the undifferentiated pursuit of individual self-interest. They opened possibilities for the citizen-consumer, differentiating between ethical trade and crass exploitation.

Questions of corporate responsibility are now spreading from the activist fringes to the shopping centers and the talk shows. Witness the example of Monsanto: European governments were unable or unwilling to stop the import of genetically modified (GM) foods, but consumers were reluctant to buy goods whose effects upon health and environment were unsure. Monsanto's refusal to label genetically modified foods sparked a wave of activist protest. Supermarkets and restaurants advertised widely their non-GM credentials, and eventually Monsanto bowed to pressure, announced its commercial abandonment of the infamous "terminator" gene, and committed itself to public dialogue over the risks and benefits of bio-technology.

Smart entrepreneurs have helped along the process of politicization of consumption. The Body Shop, Ben and Jerry, and Richard Branson's Virgin, to name but three, have made fortunes out of a combination of aesthetically pleasing products and marketing strategies contrasting their social responsibility to big corporate greed and immorality. They appealed to us directly as cool citizens, people who were not green purists, who enjoyed the choice and pleasures of consumer society but did not want to support the bully over the little guy, trample over human rights, pollute the planet, and treat animals to wanton cruelty. The success of companies that incorporate social responsibility into

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the brand identity, the boom in socially screened investment funds, the growth of organic food and Fair Trade sales—all these have signaled a fundamental change in marketing attitudes. "For the first time human rights, concerns could become a major marketing issue and tool for manufacturers," wrote clothing industry consultant David Burnham in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial (April 9, 1996). Ethical considerations about the environment, health, human rights and workers' conditions "are moving inexorably from the campaigners' den to the boardroom," according to *The Economist* business editor, Edward Carr (1999, p. 130). Mere compliance with the law or even corporate charitable giving may no longer be enough to maintain reputation, corporate consultants now warn (McIntosh, Leipziger, Jones, & Coleman, 1998). Whether through enlightened self-interest, pure opportunism, or fear of public shaming by consumer and environmental activists, commercial success in affluent markets is increasingly linked to the treatment of the consumer as a concerned citizen.

The consumer-style critique, then, is indeed characteristic of our times. But it is not, as Bauman and other pessimists imply, simply a symptom of an apolitical age, of hedonism and "me-first" materialism, and the waning appetite for social reform. On the contrary, consumer critique is fundamental to citizenship in the age of globalization. It brings into the daylight the dangerously hidden issue of the political power of corporations. In this sense, today's activism goes significantly beyond the consumer boycotts or the identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s. Consumer activism is a response to "the corporate hijacking of political power" and to the "brands' cultural looting of public and mental space," in the words of Naomi Klein (1999, p. 340). It cuts to the heart of global structures of power in a way that identity politics did not, with the latter's focus on representation and inclusion within generally accepted national institutions. Above all, it exposes the potential power of consumers as citizens and provides incentives to business, which regulation increasingly does not, to mind corporate responsibility to and dependence on democracy. This prospect relies on neither extreme of optimism nor pessimism but is rooted in the relationship of mutual interdependence and tension that exists between markets and democratic rights.

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Citizen-Consumers and the Internet

The Internet, we hear constantly, will change everything. Thus far, however, the evidence for politics is rather small. We see vastly expanded information sources for citizens, new delivery systems for political institutions, greater opportunities for politics at the margins. But mostly we see the same old electoral and institutional politics with no evidence of huge new communities of participating citizens.

Perhaps we are looking in the wrong places. The Internet is opening up new worlds for the citizen-consumer. This message came through loud and clear at the spring 2000 World Economic Forum in Davos. The two dominant themes of the meeting were the Internet and the Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organization. The themes are linked. The real lesson of Seattle was not that some 20,000 people gathered to offer motley protests at the commodification of the planet, but how severely it shocked the corporate and political leaders of globalization. In the history of protest, after all, this was not a particularly big event. Yet, corporate business is simply not used to such spectacular (bad) publicity in the world's media. It served as a wake-up call that big business is now in the spotlight and that corporate reputations, carefully nurtured by years of public relations, may be easily undermined.

> In the communication age, it is increasingly difficult for companies to hide dubious actions just because they occur in far away places. NGOs often have grassroots supporters on the ground capable of posting information on the Internet at the first sign of questionable corporate behavior. (Piggott, 2000)

The Internet is the "tool of choice" for information and organization of consumer, anti-corporate, and environmental activism, according to Naomi Klein's investigation (1999, p. 393). Some of the most celebrated, and arguably successful, consumer actions were led on the Net: the Nike campaign, for example, and the actions against Shell Brent Spar ocean dumping. The lesson for many company directors, according to Piggott (2000), was that "good corporate behaviour has become a paramount concern."

E-commerce, management guru Peter Drucker predicts, will eventually kill the multinationals. Who can say? For certain, though, the Internet will greatly expand consumer choice and information and create opportunities for global exchange for communities of interest, leisure, and consumption. Perhaps greater consumer choice will appear at times, as it already has in the U.S., as harassment from clamorous competitors. As this happens, so choice will be simplified according to trust in the corporate brand: Reputations will count as never before. So possibilities for power shift to the citizen-consumer.

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