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Political consumer activism and democratic legitimacy

Beckstein, Martin

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Volume 24

Winter 2014

Interview

Nina Power

Author of One-Dimensional Woman

Gillian Rose Prize Dissertation

The role of the common law jury as direct deliberative mechanism for the democratic self-legitimation of law

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studies in social and political thought

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Political Consumer Activism and Democratic Legitimacy

Martin Beckstein

Abstract

This article discusses consumer activism not as an ethical, but as a political phenomenon. A political concept of consumer activism implies, first, that consumers sometimes express support or opposition to products and services or consumer and business practices at least partly in order to advance nonmarket agendas, and, second, that consumer activism in the economic sphere occasionally has palpable impact on the organization of social life. Early contributors to the debate were optimistic that political consumer activism might be able to extend democracy into the economic sphere. In recent years, however, scholars have increasingly voiced misgivings about this, arguing that political consumer activism may suffer from a democratic deficit: it may amount to an impermissible form of vigilantism or facilitate the illegitimate conversion of market power into political power. This article systematizes and reassesses these concerns, focusing in particular on arguments that dispute the compatibility of political consumer activism with liberal democracy as a procedural ideal. I conclude that political consumer activism does not face problems to do with legitimacy in this regard, most importantly because money does not play a more important role in market-based politics than in official democratic processes. Political consumer activism takes many forms, yet it is hardly ever about voting with the pocketbook.

Introduction

In Rob VanAlkemade's 2007 documentary *What Would Jesus Buy?* a young girl is asked about the Messiah's hypothetical shopping preferences. After a moment's reflection, she answers: 'The X-Box 360!' Two things are going on in this scene: first, entertainment, with an unsuspecting interviewee being

lead up the garden path by a rhetorical question. Second, a slightly paternalistic case is made for ethical consumerism by suggesting that mature and reflective individuals must overcome infantile naïveté and understand that our consumption behavior ought to be shaped by moral considerations. While moral philosophers have good reason to address consumer activism and discuss the moral duties (and their limits) that individuals have when entering the marketplace, to political philosophers, the relevance of this activism is not beyond doubt.

Politically speaking, some authors claim, consumer activism matters little, arguing that it is more about feeling good than doing good (Blühdorn, 2006: 36; West, 2004: 1; Žižek, 2010: 236). But what if consumer activists could occasionally make a difference and generate effects that have an impact on social life? Should we, then, welcome consumer activism as a novel kind of political participation—one that carries democracy into the economic sphere? Might consumer activism be a good substitute for conventional forms of political participation, such as elections or party membership, that are in decline? Although early contributors to the debate have answered these questions in the affirmative (Hertz, 2002; Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 2002), recent scholars have raised doubts. For instance, Føllesdal et al. (2006: 295) ask their readers not to forget that ‘political consumerism can go wrong.’ Stolle and Hooghe (2006: 284) remark that political consumer activism has ‘truly worrisome democratic implications.’ For Hussain (2012: 112), finally, political consumer activism may well amount to an ‘impermissible form of vigilantism’ that cannot claim ‘a rightful place in the practices of a liberal democratic society.’ This article reassesses these concerns, focusing in particular on arguments that dispute the compatibility of political consumer activism with liberal democracy as a procedural ideal.

The suspicion of democratic illegitimacy is not self-explanatory. Because consumption choices, even if motivated by normative considerations other than price–quality evaluation, are traditionally understood to be a private affair, the first section of this article accounts for the political relevance of consumer activism. The growing relevance of consumer activism in affluent societies is highlighted and a concept of political consumer activism is established that provides criteria for distinguishing it from non-political practices of ethical consumerism. On this basis, the second section explains why political consumer activism cannot lean on the same justification as other informal kinds of political participation such as demonstrations or even lobbying: political consumer activism is not always geared towards official processes of democratic legislation, but instead often seeks to circumvent or even replace it. It is necessary, then, to question the normative justification of political consumer

activism. The third section systematically reassesses whether political consumer activism infringes on the procedural values of democratic morality. The concluding section summarizes that the suspicion of illegitimacy does not withstand scrutiny, and spells out two implications that follow, one concerning the popular^{3/4}and misleading^{3/4}equation of political consumer activism with shopping for change and one concerning the allegedly antagonistic relationship between political consumer activists and business and state actors. Thus, investigation into the compatibility of political consumer activism and the procedural values of democratic morality proves to be important not only to counterbalance the remarks of recent critics. It also helps us to broaden our understanding of political consumer activism and relativize the impression that it is ultimately about voting with the pocketbook. Finally, this broadening of our perspective on political consumer activism may serve to shift the attention of future inquiry from economic actors to state actors, to the ways by which governments politicize economic life, and thus to foster market-based political activism.

1 – From ethical consumerism to political consumer activism

In debates about political economy, the economic sphere is usually considered a site of activism. The logic of the market, it is often suggested, crowds out normative considerations that go beyond price–quality evaluations. Instead of being embedded in social life, the economy under conditions of modern capitalism is disembedded. What’s worse, the economy enmeshes other spheres of the social world by imposing a market logic and ‘imprisoning’ citizens’ attempts to improve it (Polanyi, 1977: 10; 2001: 57–68; Lindblom, 1982: 327; see also Dahl, 1985: 101; Dunn, 2007: 6; Gilpin, 1987: 77; Habermas, 2004: 500; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 161). The idea that there is a trend towards the commercialization of social life is certainly plausible. At the same time, it is obvious that views that generalize the dominance of the logic of the market in the economic sphere and elsewhere are highly questionable. On the one hand, feminist economists have emphasized that economic relations in today’s affluent societies are not wholly organized in a market capitalist way. Transactions in household economies, neighborhood markets, or file-sharing networks are commonly displaced into the ‘informal’ fringe of economic life precisely because they do not exhibit the characteristics of either market or capitalist relations (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 56; see also Watkins, 1998). On the other hand, neither does the ‘formal’ economy consistently operate according to the self-regulating logic attributed to markets. Wolfgang Streeck’s (2012) recent remarks on commercialization in the late 20th century instructively elucidate

this point.

Streeck is alarmed by the observation that the logic of the market is increasingly colonizing social life. In particular, he fears that the market substantially commercializes our societies by exporting personal taste and temporary idle preferences as the guiding principles of action to all other social spheres. Social identities run the risk of becoming structured 'by weaker and looser ties, allowing individuals to surf from one identity to the next, free from any pressure to explain themselves,' with the result that democratic politics stand to be transformed into politainment, with citizens buying public goods rather than negotiating policies that fit into a collective project (Streeck, 2012: 36, 44–6). Hence, like critical scholars before him, Streeck apprehends that the self-regulating mechanism of the market enmeshes social relations, whereas it should be the other way around. Yet Streeck's analysis does not stop there. In addition to the commercialization tendency in public life, he observes that economic relations have also undergone significant transformations in late modernity, and that these transformations have created new opportunities for sociation ('Vergesellschaftung') within the economic sphere.

The economic stagnation of the early 1970s, Streeck explains, was due to a widespread saturation of society with mass-produced, standardized consumer durables. To overcome this stagnation, production had to adjust to the more exacting demands of consumers while the advertising industry did its bit to develop consumers' sense for more exacting desires. Technological progress made a number of shifts possible: from Fordism to post-Fordism, need-supplying to want-supplying economies, sellers' to buyers' markets, saturated to affluent societies; and the diversification and customization of products created unprecedented possibilities for individuals in the economic sphere to 'link up with others and thereby define their place in the world' (Streeck, 2012: 35). These new opportunities for sociation might be problematic for various reasons, as Streeck is eager to underline, but they nevertheless open up room for aesthetic and normative considerations that go beyond price–quality evaluations. Hence, the economic sphere, in particular under conditions of late modern capitalism, is a potential site for activism.

Empirical data confirm this consideration. At least since The Body Shop founder Anita Roddick made a fortune by selling animal-friendly cosmetics, a significant number of consumers display a willingness to take ethical factors into account when making purchasing decisions. Today, this willingness seems to be more prevalent than ever in affluent societies. Surveys conducted in the United States, Australia, Europe, and elsewhere show that growing numbers of people claim to have brought their

consumption behavior in line with normative commitments (Cowe and Williams, 2000; Littler, 2009: 29, 76; Pattie et al., 2003: 446; Pattie et al., 2004: 78). In addition, statistics indicate that markets for 'ethical' products, services, and funds are booming (Fairtrade International, 2011; Lee and Vihinen, 2005: 4–5; see also Celent, 2007). These empirical trends suggest that the consumer can no longer be adequately characterized either as 'rational egoistic economic man' or a 'dupe of hidden persuaders.' Scholars have therefore urged us to consider conceptions of the consumer as an 'activist' or 'moral agent,' and, most remarkably, as responsibility-taking 'citizen-consumer' (Micheletti et al., 2006: xiv; Scammell, 2000: 354).

The notion of a citizen-consumer gives expression to the idea that consumer practices might be a concern not only for moral philosophers but for democratic theorists too. However, consumption behavior does not become a political phenomenon simply because consumers take normative considerations into account when entering the market place. As such, a conceptual distinction is required to differentiate political consumer activism from ethical consumerism.¹

The term citizen-consumer³4the label denoting the potentially political role of the consumer³4is apparently inspired by the consumer-sovereignty hypothesis in economics: if consumers in the market are like the people of a democratic polity by virtue of their commanding supply, so the underlying consideration seems to state, then consumption on an individual level is similar to going to the polls. Boris Holzer accordingly writes:

[T]here is a remarkable structural homology between democratic elections and consumptions choices [...] the act of shopping allows for the timely expression of highly specialized and individualized preferences—including aesthetic, religious and political ones. For the individual consumer, political consumerism comes close to a 'very immediate democratic process' (Holzer, 2003: 413; quoted in Nava, 1991: 168).²

However, Leo Strauss (1988: 14) made clear that 'buying a shirt, as distinguished from casting a vote, is not in itself a political action.' Strauss is right, because the vote is a share of sovereignty, and therefore a political instrument, whereas buying a shirt is a market transaction without a guaranteed political impact. At the same time, the political value of suffrage resides primarily in its capacity to symbolize citizens' egalitarian entitlement to political participation. In terms of power, a vote matters little in modern mass democracies given that the one-person-one-vote rule simultaneously guarantees a minimal share of power and limits the influence it can

maximally achieve to $1/n$. The political impact of market transactions, in contrast, is determined neither in regard to what they minimally achieve nor what they might maximally achieve. Now, if we are to avoid restating the truism that everything is political, which is analytically worthless after all, the point of political consumer activism cannot be simply to imitate democratic elections. Instead of secretly adding $1/n$ to the collective count of aggregate demand, the goal must be to motivate other agents to modify their consumption behavior, to influence how business actors provide which products and services, to address policymakers, or to impact in other ways upon social life. Thus I suggest that we think of ethical consumerism as consumption behavior that is primarily introverted, as expressed in the advice offered by Gandhi, who said that we should be the change we want to see in the world. Simply buying, individually, a fair trade product falls into this category of 'introverted' ethical consumerism. Political consumer activism, in contrast, aims at advancing some partisan agenda by surpassing the additive arithmetic of an individual action's impact and triggering multiplicative effects on social life, for instance by organizing a boycott.³ That said, an activist's public aspirations must also be realistic, that is, the activist's hope of influencing social life must be based on a reasonable strategy as well as a somewhat plausible theory of causation. The normative question arising from the phenomenon of political consumer activism, in contrast to ethical consumerism, is thus not in the moral desirability of various partisan agendas, but rather in the result of making inroads on the organization of social life.⁴

2 – Why might political consumer activism suffer from a democratic deficit?

The question of whether political consumer activism is democratically problematic plausibly rests upon the assumption that politics in a liberal-democratic society should generally comply with certain procedural values of liberal democratic morality. Even though there is considerable room for discussion about how democratic and liberal principles are best implemented in practice, it is fair to say that the political systems in Western affluent societies by and large meet the requirements of non-ideal democratic theory. Accordingly, 'formal' kinds of political participation such as voting, petitioning, running for office, or parliamentary debate are legitimate in these societies by virtue of taking place in a consolidated liberal-democratic political system. Many 'informal' instruments of political activism, such as demonstrations or moderate forms of lobbying, are also democratically unproblematic as long as they do not infringe upon existing law. Even

though they are not an immediate part of the official political process of democratic lawmaking, they are still geared towards it. Many examples of political consumer activism work by exactly the same logic, for instance, when consumer activists advocate stricter legal regulations of foreign trade. As such, such political consumer activism can claim a rightful place in a liberal-democratic society. Yet what about forms of political consumer activism that are not geared towards official processes of democratic lawmaking?

For a long time political theorists were not aware of the existence of political activism that aimed to influence social life without being related to governmental decision-making. More accurately, such activism was not conceptualized in terms of politics. Sidney Verba and Norman S. Nie's (1962: 2) oft-cited definition of political participation, for instance, says that activities of private citizens acquire a political quality if they are 'more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take.' However, since Carl Schmitt challenged state-centric conceptions of politics by pointing out that politics had been centralized within the official sphere of politics only under absolutism, scholars have increasingly acknowledged the diffusion of the political to actors outside and inside the nation-state.⁵ And it is worth mentioning that Verba and Nie themselves admit (in the paragraph following their definition) that political activism does not always need to take a detour through governments: 'attempts to influence the authoritative allocations of values for a society [...] may or may not take place through governmental decisions.' Ways of influencing the authoritative allocation of values in a society, outside of governmental decisions, may simply circumvent democratic legislation, or additionally aim to replace democratic lawmaking. New modes of governance such as public-private or private-private partnerships set standards that potentially serve as functional substitutes for state-based law. In any case, political activism that does not take a detour through democratic legislation but instead establishes social norms surrounding what may and may not be done, motivate norm compliance by the promise of social recognition, and set negative incentives against non-compliance by the threat of social ostracism or by exerting bargaining power.

Not least because of the additional leverage of financial pressure, major political philosophers consider extra-legislative ways of influencing social life especially problematic if they grow out of the economic sphere. Michael Walzer (1983; 1984: 322), for instance, made a famous case for more effectively 'walling in' the economic sphere. Liberal democratic societies, he argues, ought to make greater efforts to prevent transformational processes^{3/4}'social alchemy'^{3/4}by which economic power is converted into

political power. In cases where the exercise of political power cannot be fully contained within the sphere of politics, democratization is needed. For instance, the managerial structures of companies must be democratized, according to Walzer, because some companies constitute ‘private governments’ due to their sustained ‘control over the destinations and risks of other people.’⁶ Benjamin Barber (2004; 2007: 290, Ch. 7) has concluded that political consumer activists who evade the official political process weaken democracy instead of strengthening it, even if animated by the best intentions. He therefore thinks that we must ‘restor[e] the sovereignty of citizens *over* consumption.’ For Waheed Hussain (2012: 112), finally, the legitimate use of political consumer activism must at least be restricted: consumers must ‘treat their buying choices as [...] a kind of ongoing, informal prologue to formal democratic lawmaking.’ Only by fulfilling this ‘proto-legislative requirement,’ does political consumer activism ‘respect the privileged position of formal democratic politics and [...] can therefore claim a rightful place in the practices of a liberal democratic society.’ Otherwise, it simply amounts to an ‘impermissible form of vigilantism.’⁷ The message from these three thinkers is clear: the economy is a site that allows for the exercise of political power; and to be legitimate such economic exertion of political power must be integrated into the process of public will-formation preceding democratic legislation—at least unless they do not themselves comply with the principles of liberal democracy.⁸ The next section assesses whether extra-legislative forms of political consumer activism are indeed prone to infringing on these principles.

3 – Suspicions of democratic illegitimacy

The literature suggests that (extra-legislative) political consumer activism infringes on three principles of liberal democracy in particular: first, political consumer activism does not provide a setting that facilitates deliberation, so that any political outcomes are not determined by reasonable arguments; second, people do not enjoy equality of opportunity when trying to influence issues of common concern by means of political consumer activism; finally, political consumer activism can indirectly, yet effectively, deprive persons and groups of their basic liberties. In what follows, I consider each concern in turn. If the concerns withhold scrutiny, we shall have reason to oppose an unrestricted use of political consumer activism and will be in a position to specify which forms of political consumer activism are democratically problematic.

3.1 Politics without discussion?

Ideally, in a democracy, political outcomes should be determined by the best argument. Yet political consumer activism that does not aim to inform democratic lawmaking in this way, critics feel, and often does not even initiate debate. Political consumer activism is about shopping, not arguing, for change (See e.g. Hussain, 2012: 120-1; Streeck, 2012: 35; Teorell et al., 2007: 342). Such generalizations, however, are invalid. It is fair to say that regional or fair-trade labels do in fact invite the consumer to enter into a dialogue, arguing (if cryptically) that the labeled products are preferable to others on the grounds of lower pollutant emissions from transport or better labor conditions for workers. To give a second example, culture jammers do not simply destroy or negate a company's advertisement but rather challenge the advertiser's effort at persuasion by parodying the original message and adding a critical thought for consideration (e.g. 'McDonald's³I'm lovin' profit').⁹ Quite generally, political consumers rather frequently employ shaming strategies that aim to rhetorically entrap firms by revealing corporate lip service and highlighting failures to comply with their own philosophy. The deliberative quality in many cases of political consumer activism is certainly disputable, but it cannot plausibly be denied *in toto*.¹⁰

Drawing on Albert O. Hirschman's famous distinction, we have to at least admit that 'voice-based' forms of political consumer activism are far less problematic in this regard than 'exit-based' forms:

Some customers stop buying the firm's products or leave the organization: this is the exit option. As a result, revenues drop, membership declines, and management is impelled to search for ways and means to correct whatever faults have led to exit. The firm's customers or the organization's members express their dissatisfaction directly to management or to some other authority to which management is subordinate or through general protest addressed at anyone who cares to listen: this is the voice option. As a result, management once again engages in a search for the causes and possible cures of customers' and members' dissatisfaction. (Hirschman, 1981: 4)

Accepting this distinction for a moment, we can infer that an absence of deliberation is characteristic of exit-based forms of political consumer activism. In boycotts and buycotts or conscientious everyday shopping behavior, consumers withdraw from a relationship with one provider in favor of a relationship with another, without giving explanations to either

side. They might not even send a clear signal about their changed preferences, but simply stop buying. Later I will suggest that the concept of the 'exit option' misses something important if it is applied to political consumer activism without modification. At this point, it suffices to highlight that Hirschman's distinction implies that political consumer activism, even if it is sometimes essentially non-deliberative, cannot be ruled out simply on the basis of the procedural value of democratic deliberation. Exit is not just an option in the market, but in the political sphere, too. Put in more general terms, the official political process in democracy does not always include deliberation. Neither is it clear that all politics in a democracy are deliberative, and nor why they should be. A functioning democracy requires a decision procedure, and deliberation is ill-suited for that purpose. Because it 'is simply unrealistic to expect any moderately large group to come to complete consensus, however long they talk together' (Goodin 2012, 108; see also Przeworski 1998, 141), deliberation must be supplemented by some non-deliberative procedure such as voting. In their capacity as voters, citizens cast ballots without giving reasons. For other practices of official politics deliberation is inessential. Protesters in a demonstration, for instance, need not weigh arguments; they may simply signal their opposition to a policy in order to raise awareness or energize supporters. Campaign volunteers may simply ask for signatures or money from people who already have sympathy for the campaign. Deliberation plays an important role in official politics, but it cannot hope to exhaust it, not least because arguments by themselves cannot make decisions or take actions—which is to say, rule—but only inform political action and decision-making (Walzer, 1999). Ideally, the decisions of campaign volunteers, protesters, and voters to become politically active are the result of a rational process of discussion among free and equal citizens. The same applies to decisions on the part of political consumer activists to support or oppose a business practice, and there is insufficient reason to assume that boycotters and conscientious shoppers would be less susceptible to dialogical reasoning than voters. Perhaps the more problematic difference between voters and consumers is that the former cast a ballot, whereas the latter vote with the pocketbook.

3.2 What money can buy

Citizens should have the same opportunity to influence political outcomes, yet political consumer activism is biased towards the well off, critics claim (Hussain, 2012: 118; Stolle and Hooghe, 2006: 284). Given that money is unequally distributed among people in a society, the analogy between consumption choices and democratic elections, which underlies the notion

of the citizen-consumer, is indeed as cynical as Ludwig von Mises's (1940: 260; cf. 1998: 271-2) provocation: 'democratic elections are an imperfect attempt to simulate the market order in the sphere of politics. In the economic sphere no vote is cast in vain.' If pennies are the votes of the economic sphere, we must conclude that the market is a plutocratic, not democratic order that entails the government of money, for money, and by money. However, the question is whether the analogy is also flawed in regard to what assumed to be the relevant power resources in the two domains (sphere of politics: votes; economic sphere: money). More generally, we must consider whether opportunities to influence political outcomes through political consumer activism are really substantially less equal than those entailing participation in the political sphere.

The procedural value of political equality delegitimizes a number of ways and means by which privileged actors could (and sometimes do) try to shape political outcomes. At the same time, the procedural value of political equality does not prescribe equal influence. 'Democracy,' as Michael Walzer (1983: 309) puts it, 'requires equal rights, not equal power. Rights here are guaranteed opportunities to exercise minimal power (voting rights) or to try to exercise greater power (speech, assembly, petition rights). Citizens may legitimately try to 'amplify' their voice and 'appropriate' other person's votes by engaging in discussion and demonstration, or by organizing campaigns in the run-up to elections. The disproportionate exertion of political influence is a necessary and desirable result as long as opportunities are to be granted.

While the economic sphere does not offer a guaranteed opportunity to exercise minimal power, it offers plenty of opportunities to exercise greater power, and formally speaking, those opportunities are equally offered to everybody. Due to the grossly uneven shares of wealth in most Western societies, it is certainly true that the well off can more easily seize opportunities to exercise political power, meaning that there is no *fair* equality of opportunity. However, in the official process of democratic politics, citizens are also unevenly endowed with the resources necessary for exerting disproportionate influence, such as rhetorical talent, networking skills, free time, access to officials, education (i.e. the various stocks of individual, human, and social capital), and, mutually reinforcing, wealth. There is every reason to alleviate poverty of all kinds, and more should be done to curb respective oligopolies; yet the difference between forms of participation in the political sphere and political consumer activism is one of degree in regard to the unequal distribution of power resources, not one of kind.

Some readers might insist that wealth in financial and productive

capital is more suitable to distorting democratic processes than individual, human, or social capital, and therefore argue that the preceding discussion does not suffice to rule out the objection against extra-legislative political consumer activism via the norm of political equality. I do not intend to put an end to this debate but simply to warn against falling prey to an anti-materialist prejudice that overrates the influence of money in politics as compared to other resources of power and considers it independent from them. The idea that one can buy an election with money in Western affluent societies is an obvious oversimplification of complex processes, and even accepting the kernel of truth that lies in this proposition, it should still be remembered that it is usually more efficient to raise money for an election campaign than to invest one's own. Analogously, an 'ethical' product is better promoted by organizing a boycott than by privately purchasing it in bulk. Also to be taken into consideration is the fact that, historically, political activism in the economic sphere has primarily been associated with the underprivileged. According to Machiavelli (1998: 15, I.4), one of the most efficient ways for common people to make themselves heard in Ancient Rome and the Renaissance city states consisted in disturbing the ordered life of the market place. In addition, boycotts were first systematically organized by the then (in effect) disenfranchised African Americans (e.g. the boycott of slave-produced goods in 1830, or the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955). In the face of these experiences, one problematic aspect of political consumer activism might be that it offers opportunities for political participation to people who are not in the possession of full citizenship rights, such as adolescents and transnational activists.¹¹

3.3 Withholding money, undermining liberties?

Perhaps the role of money in political consumer activism is problematic in another, namely negative regard. Forms of political consumer activism such as boycotts (or divestment) lend weight to social pressure in that not only is social recognition withheld, but sales revenues too. In contrast to other ways of exerting social pressure such as hate speech, market power is used in a strategy of siege warfare that threatens loss of income, and perhaps bankruptcy. Thus, the use of financial pressure may allow political activists to effectively exact compliance even with social agendas that essentially contradict liberal-democratic principles. To illustrate this problem, scholars have referred to the 1933 Nazi boycott of Jewish shops in Germany. The 'Don't buy Jewish' campaign, Hussain (2012: 117–8) argues, 'deprived members of the Jewish community of their religious freedom by making it exceedingly difficult for them to practice their religion openly and to

associate with their co-religionists. Many eventually had to hide their beliefs and affiliations.¹² Less extreme but still indicative of this problem with political consumer activism are contemporary popular boycotts of companies in the name of liberal cosmopolitan labor standards. Scapegoating a company for non-compliance with non-juridified (i.e. non-legally binding) ethical standards, consumer activists betray the promise that the market is free to all comers who respect local law and thus deprive the company's owners of their economic liberty. In addition, they violate the principle that prosecution must not be selective by imposing a fine on a particularly visible and therefore vulnerable company in isolation. In the face of such examples it seems not unreasonable to demand that liberal democracies find ways to bar political consumer activists from placing their bargaining power and state-guaranteed property rights in the service of partisan causes. 'If the public condition does not allow a group of individuals to enact certain rules through legislation, then it should also prevent them (in some way) from imposing these same rules on society through nonstandard uses of their market powers' (Hussain, 2012: 122).

Contrary to the initial impression, however, the 1933 Nazi boycott of Jewish shops is not a good example for supporting the argument, and the reasons why this is so cast doubt on the validity of the argument the example is meant to illustrate. The boycott, taken in isolation, did not affect members of the Jewish community in the way Hussain suggests. The Nazi press soon admitted that the campaign had not yielded the desired effects. In fact, the sales of Jewish shops were thought to have increased on average (Friedländer, 2007: 34). Moreover, it is very likely that the boycott had been orchestrated from behind the scenes by the Nazi regime, which deliberately attempted to abolish the liberal social order. To this purpose, the regime issued racial laws incrementally, starting a week after the boycott. Hence, it was the regime that effectively (and by means of legislation) deprived members of the Jewish community of their basic liberties, not some political consumer activists (through nonstandard uses of market power).

Leaving the historical case aside, it is difficult to see how political consumer activism could possibly have the problematic effects Hussain warns about. First of all, it should be noted that most liberal democracies today do include means to prevent the promotion of discriminatory social norms. Racist boycotts (as well as non-market-based agitation against religious or ethnic minorities), are illegal under hate crime law (in post-world War Two Germany with §130 StGb 'Volksverhetzung'). Second, the rules enacted through extra-legislative political consumer activism differ in an important respect from the rules enacted through legislation: the costs of violating social norms are substantially lower than the costs of violating legal norms. An influential food critic may refuse to include non-vegetarian

restaurants in her rankings in the name of animal rights, and successfully campaign for fellow food and gourmets critics to do the same. Meat-serving restaurants would be ostracized by a vegetarian hegemony, but the option of non-compliance with the vegetarian norm and counter-activism (i.e. boycotts) would remain unimpaired as long as vegetarianism is not enforced. Moreover, we should be clear, boycotts do not inflict financial harm; boycotts do not show on the liabilities side of the balance sheet of firms but only as unrealized expected revenues. The product of a boycotted firm, for the most part, simply fails to appeal sufficiently to its potential target group.

Finally, we need to take into account that even boycotts—as an extra-legislative form of political consumer activism—are more about sending warning signals (voice) than changing consumption habits (exit). The boycotter's route to success is to 'alert customers,' much in the way Hirschman (1981: 24) describes the exit function from a management perspective: 'The alert customers provide the firm with a feedback mechanism which starts the effort at recuperation while the inert customers provide it with the time and dollar cushion needed for this effort to come to fruition.' However, the difference between alert consumers and political consumer activists lies in the fact that boycotters exploit the insights of economic theory and capitalize on companies' expectation of the existence of 'inert (yet mobilizable) customers.' Activists mean to raise fellow consumers' and providers' awareness in equal measure; the call for boycott, as it were, supports the firm in its search for the precise cause of customer withdrawal that boycotters themselves caused in the first place. Were boycotters to mobilize all customers at once the activism would be bound to fail, because the firm would be ruined before it could identify and amend the contested business practice. In other words, exit-based forms of political consumer activism is essentially a non-verbal form of communication, and the relationship of exit-based political consumer activists and firms is one of strategic cooperation through an interplay of exit and voice options, rather than a unilaterally-imposed monetary penalization.¹³

4 – Diversifying citizens' repertoire of contention

In sum, there is little indication that political consumer activism infringe on the procedural values of democratic morality under the conditions of a liberal order^{3/4}even if it is not limited to informing governmental legislation. Political consumer activism might be problematic from other perspectives that have not been considered in this article. Yet with this proviso in mind, it can be concluded that there is no reason to restrict the legitimate space for

consumer activism to ‘waiting rooms’ for official democratic processes. Rather, we should further inquire how the liberties available in ‘under-regulated’ market economies could complement traditional channels of political articulation. Josiah Ober’s (2008) interpretation of ancient Greek democracy—namely that democracy meant majority rule to its enemies, while its advocates stressed that citizens were endowed with ‘a capacity to do things’—is a useful starting point for this endeavor, given that the diversification of citizens’ repertoire of contention is one of the more promising tools for increasing this capacity today. This is especially so if we believe that even established liberal democracies require further democratization, or acknowledge that political systems, in a changing world, must reinvent themselves in order to remain faithful to their principles. For this purpose, I consider two implications of the previous discussion especially important.

First, we should avoid overrating the role that money plays in political consumer activism and, relatedly, refrain from misunderstanding political consumer activism as a form of voting with the pocketbook or shopping for change. The titles of pertinent books, book chapters, and articles are telling when it comes to this widespread misunderstanding: *Supermarket Activism*, *Political Virtue and Shopping*, *Politics in the Supermarket*, *Politik mit dem Einkaufswagen* (‘Politics with the shopping trolley’), *Radical Consumption: Shopping for Change*, *Shopping for Justice* (Baringhorst et al. 2007; Hertz 2002: 145–58; Hilton 2009: Ch. 8; Littler 2009; Micheletti 2003; Stolle et al. 2005). Nothing is wrong with a sharp focus, but none of these studies limits itself to practices of shopping. Instead, ‘shopping’ is employed as *pars pro toto* for diverse forms of political consumer activism, ranging from supermarket activism over boycotts/buycotts, anti-consumerism (e.g. aggressive recycling, saving, downshifting), anti-commercial iconoclasm, and culture jamming, right up to socially responsible investment, shareholder meeting activism, and certification and labeling schemes. These heterogeneous ways of expressing normative support or opposition to products and services, or consumption and business practices, are poorly described as purchasing decisions. Yet more important than accurate terminology, when we employ a rhetorical device that uses a part to stand for the whole, is making sure that we desist from eventually also thinking the whole through the part. After all, approaching political consumer activism through shopping entails the risk of believing that political consumer activism is about purchasing power and exit rather than organizational talent and voice; that it concerns routine behavior rather than short term events; that it operates within the sector of manufactured goods, rather than the sector of services; that it is a phenomenon of the official economy, rather than grey or black markets and

therefore necessarily reproduces capitalism, and so forth. In short, taking into account the variety of forms of political consumer activism requires a rethinking in terms of both depth *and* breadth.

Second, we should rethink the relationship of consumers to producers on the one hand, and democratic governments on the other hand, in a less antagonistic way. In regard to the consumer–producer relationship, I have already suggested that even boycotts can plausibly be interpreted in terms of a playful, cooperative dialogue. Here, I want to add for consideration that this cooperative spirit also underpins the relationship between consumers (as well as producers) and democratic governments. The fact that political consumer activism often seeks to circumvent state-based legislation must not lead us to overlook the role of governments in providing enabling structures for extra-legislative forms of activism, especially as governments in affluent societies appear to be increasingly proactive in this regard. For about two decades governments have aggressively promoted a re-territorialization of politics into the economic sphere. Recall, for instance, how the British and German governments facilitated New Public Management ideals and privatization policies in the mid-1990s. Arguing that state administrations willingly shrunk the space of politics by transferring the provision of public services to the private sector would be to miss the dialectical nature of the underlying stratagem. Inspired by the Third Way, the administrations employed actors from the private sector with the performance of public tasks—not in order to abandon these tasks, but rather to place them, as it were, at arm’s length from the government’s main remit (Burnham, 2002; Freeden, 2002; Hobson, 2004). There is of course much controversy about whether the stratagem worked out well in practice. Yet while it may be true that governments were downsized as a result, the same cannot be said of the space of politics, as business has increasingly become implicated in policy-making and consumers are entrusted with the tasks of monitoring and implementation. Among other things, the British and German governments have spent millions establishing platforms for consumer–producer dialogue, mobilizing consumer and corporate social responsibility activists, or dragging consumers and business actors into the firing line in yet other ways. Examples include Labour’s 1999 ‘Are you doing your bit?’ campaign, the 2003 ‘Fair Feels Good’ campaign by the Schröder administration, or the 2011 ‘Echt gerecht. Clever kaufen’ initiative under Merkel. Similarly, the contracting-out of policy-making (such as, for instance, the British Department of Health’s 2010 decision to have policy on alcohol and diet-related diseases written by drink manufacturers and fast-food companies such as Diageo, PepsiCo, McDonald’s, and Kentucky Fried Chicken), testifies to a remarkable eagerness among government officials to experiment

with the simultaneous privatization of governmental competencies and responsabilization of economic actors.

These examples show that penetration of the political sphere by the logic of the market is accompanied by an increasing politicization of economic relations. They also cast doubt on accounts that see market-based political activism as the result of economic agents seizing power and attempting to fill governance gaps. While certainly true in parts, the other half of the story might be that the politicization of economic relations is part of an educative therapy prescribed by governments aiming to rehabilitate hyper-acquisitive business people as well as privatistic consumers. If so, political philosophers will have to confront Walzer with Polanyi and reconsider whether the democratic cause is better served by governments isolating the economy from social life or re-embedding the economy in social life, by aligning all politics to governmental legislation or by pluralizing the sites of political contention.

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Endnotes

¹ For similar considerations, see Clarke (2008).

² A similar claim is made by Micheletti (2003: 16).

³ The forms and strategies of political consumer activism are manifold, ranging from customer activism and boycotts related to anti-consumerism and culture jamming to transnational standard-setting bodies and labelling or certification schemes. It is important to keep in mind this heterogeneity when talking about political consumer activism^{3/4}a point that will be enlarged upon in the conclusions section.

⁴ My distinction between ethical consumerism and political consumer activism is based on that given by Hussain; but it diverges from that account in two regards: First, I stress the importance of a somewhat plausible theory of causation, because otherwise we would have to conceptually integrate practices such as praying for change into the repertoire of the contention of citizens. Second, as will be made clear in the concluding section, I refrain from conceptualizing political consumption practices as purchasing decisions. However, Hussain (2012: 111) defines political consumer activism (in his formulation: 'social change ethical consumerism') as purchasing

decisions that are taken in order 'to advance some moral, social, environmental, or other nonmarket agenda' by 'chang[ing] the way that other people behave.'

⁵ For Schmitt's critique of state-centric conceptions of politics see Arditi (2003) and Beckstein (2011: 39).

⁶ Cf. Walzer (1983: 294–301). A more moderate position can also be found in many studies that address the 'democratic deficit' of nongovernmental organizations and the new modes of governance more generally. See, in particular, Swyngedouw (2005).

⁷ It is interesting to note that the same logic feeds Milton Friedman's (1970: 125) famous critique of corporate social responsibility initiatives. Managers who try to advance nonmarket agendas, he argues, are 'seeking to attain by undemocratic procedures what they cannot attain by democratic procedures.'

⁸ Hussain (2012: 122 fn. 16) makes this claim explicit.

⁹ For the logic and strategies of culture jamming see Klein (2010) and Lasn (2000).

¹⁰ A well-documented case illustrating that political consumer activism is not politics without discussion is the Nike Sweatshop email. In 2000 the Nike corporation launched the Nike iD campaign, an online service that provides personalized shoes, claiming to be 'about freedom to choose and freedom to express who you are.' Jonah Peretti challenged the corporation's word and requested a pair of shoes customized with the word 'sweatshop' on the sides. Nike, unsurprisingly, refused his request. Yet because Peretti's product order did not contradict the guidelines of the Nike iD campaign, the corporation was forced to resort to rather tenuous arguments ('material ... we simply do not want to place on our products'), and the email correspondence made its way around the world, reaching more than 11 million email accounts, according to estimations. See Peretti (2006).

¹¹ Given the present discussion's focus on the procedural values of democratic morality, this consideration is not pursued further.

¹² A similar argument is made by Micheletti (2008: 26–7).

¹³ The impurity of exit-based forms of consumer activism has also been noted, however with critical intent, by Patrick West (2004) and Ingolfur Blühdorn (2006). They argue that 'new' forms of political participation such as political consumer activism should be primarily understood in terms of a complacent conversation with fellow citizens, rather than an earnest attempt to actually change something.

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