

Virtue, Responsibility and Consumer Choice

Framing Critical Consumerism

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A growing variety of discourses, both within the marketplace and outside it, in politics and civil society, is calling into being the ‘consumer’ not only as an active subject but also, and above all, as a moral and political subject. Institutional actors at the national and supranational level are particularly vocal in addressing consumers as a constituency and as a partner in checking the otherwise allegedly unhampered workings of international business. Examples abound, from the European Union Green Paper on business social responsibility which places the consumer alongside the citizen and identifies both as the main constituency for ethical business, to Amnesty International’s *Human Rights Guidelines for Companies* which calls on consumers as well as business and citizens to consider the social responsibilities associated with economic activities, to a wide spectrum of local, national and supranational movements which are also increasingly concerned with mobilizing social actors as consumers, from traditional environmental movements and fair-trade campaigns to anti-sweatshop boycotts.

Efforts to explicitly link consumption with the pursuit of moral and political aims have a long history. At the turn of the nineteenth century in the United States, for example, the National Consumer League promoted the so-called ‘white lists’, a sort of labelling scheme which aimed at listing national companies that treated their employees fairly.¹ More generally, a host of mobilizations and boycotts called forth the consumer as a political actor, especially from the nineteenth century and more clearly in the twentieth century.² However, especially after the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, which have worked as a catalyst and umbrella for a number of social and political movements concerned with ‘critical’ consumption, a variety of discourses about the ‘duty’ and ‘responsibilities’ of social actors *qua* ‘consumers’ have consolidated into an appealing and compelling narrative. People are increasingly and explicitly asked to think that to shop is to vote and that ethical daily purchases, product boycotts and consumer

voice may be the only way that men and women around the world have to intervene in the workings of global markets.

In this chapter I will consider ‘critical consumerism’ as a normative frame which proposes a particular vision of the consumer, foreshadowing a shift in the way markets and politics may be conceived within liberal-democratic ideologies. I will use a variety of different sources – mainly documents produced by critical consumption transnational campaigns as well as interviews with activists in Italy and the UK – to bring discourses down to their institutional bases and provide a glimpse of both the transnational and local/national dimensions of the phenomenon. The movements which marshal the language of critical consumption have posed themselves as agencies for the representation of the consumer as a fundamental subject-category within public discourse, together with other more visible cultural agencies such as advertising, marketing and conventional consumer defence organizations. This chapter will only touch upon issues such as the competitive dynamics within the consolidating field of alternative and critical consumption mobilizations or the relations between activists and their constituencies. The primary focus is on the role that critical consumption movements ascribe to consumers. The particular model of the consumer they propose has to be problematized precisely because, like advertising and marketing, it works as a ‘claim to truth’ about consumers and codifies a series of practices which are tied to a particular vision of what they should do.³ The moral and political discourses which surround critical and alternative consumer practices appear to draw on themes and tropes which cut across the different symbolic boundaries which have consolidated in the course of modernity.

Consumption and Politics

Within liberal and neoliberal discourse, consumption is conventionally aligned with the market, commerce and the family and pushed into the private sphere, opposed to the public and political spheres of the state and citizenship. The social sciences have shown, however, that the *de gustibus non disputandum est* which seems to make of consumption a space where subjects can and must freely express themselves is more a wish than a social reality. In reality, tastes are anything but indisputable. Judgements are made on the basis of taste, and people are preferred and rewarded because of their own tastes and those of others. This intrinsic political value is complemented by other more structural relations of power, which have to do mostly with the ‘normality’, ‘legitimacy’, ‘fairness’ or otherwise of certain goods and

practices and with the identity ascribed to the consumer. The growth of 'alternative' or 'ethical', 'critical' or 'political' modes of consumer action – as manifested, for example, in the successful boycotting of global brands and chains, in the rising demand for organic food and Fair Trade goods, or in the flourishing of symbolic initiatives against multinational companies or in favour of simpler lifestyles – is often taken as an example of what is widely portrayed as a bottom-up cultural revolution touching upon both everyday lifestyles and the nature of political participation. 'Negative' and 'positive' forms of 'political consumerism', as Michele Micheletti has branded them, now seem to concern a wide sector of the population in developed countries.⁴ Recent comparative survey data on Europe, for example, show that well over 30 per cent of the population of Denmark, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Norway and Portugal are engaging in some form of consumer activism: boycotting products for political reasons, choosing specific items with a view on their ethical or environmental qualities, or participating in the activities of consumer-oriented associations.⁵

While boycotts draw on consumers' ability to refuse certain goods, alternative consumption practices critically address contemporary consumer culture from within. For all their diversity, alternative products are commodities which embody a critical dialogue with many aspects of commoditization as we know it (from rationalization to standardization, from lengthy commodity chains to the externalization of environmental and human costs). As such, they are presented by environmental organizations as occasions for 'political awareness', capable of 'stimulating democracy', bringing consumers 'closer' to 'products and producers' as well as to 'nature', 'humanity' and 'health'.⁶ In terms of market share they are still to be considered niche products, taking up small fractions of pro-capita expenses among mainly middle-class people in Western countries; however, their market is soaring at the dawn of the new millennium, scoring annual rates of growth oscillating between 10 per cent and 20 per cent in most European countries.⁷ What is more, their symbolic impact should not be underestimated, as the greening of even a tiny fraction of our daily consumption routines may enable the cultivation of utopias that are unrealizable in daily life.⁸ Thus alternative products may come to represent bridges suspended not so much towards others as towards ideals that usually escape us, and which we do not want to renounce: even if a style of consumption that is entirely green might presently be difficult, through buying and using some organic, ethical or Fair Trade products consumers can gain proof of the importance of their aspirations, feel as if they have the capacity to contribute to change and claim a new kind of identity for themselves.

In recent years there have also been a host of *ad hoc* consumer boycotts which have helped consolidate the perception that consumers may be important as ‘political’ actors. Boycotts have a long history, notably in the Anglo-American world⁹ – in the American Revolution sympathizers of the American cause would refuse to buy English goods.¹⁰ Such anti-colonialist roots reverberate in today’s global campaigns, which tend to stress global collective goods and the responsibility of the rich consumers of the north. Some campaigns have placed an emphasis on safety and the environment, such as the campaign against McDonald’s; others have instead concentrated on the conditions of labour, for example campaigns against Nike; others still have stressed environmental and humanitarian issues, as in campaigns against Nestlé’s distribution of artificial baby milk in Africa or the wider movement against GM foods.¹¹ These initiatives show that, besides entailing a sombre shift in everyday purchases, critical consumption is crucially sponsored on special occasions that take the shape of contestation and public denunciation. Bringing together a variety of critical discourses and making more visible the hegemonic criteria ordinarily marshalled for justifying choices, similar occasions may help to consolidate agreement on new and distinctive principles for the classification and appraisal of goods as well as for the definition of the role of consumers in the economy, culture and politics.¹²

Discursive strategies, in the form of symbolic protest campaigns and educational initiatives both at the cross-national level and at the local/national level, which use new communication technologies are also crucial forms of politically charged consumer activism. The target of similar symbolic campaigns may be the product itself (coming clean on its process of production or stressing its various externalities from environmental effects to costs in terms of human or animal rights), the advertising imaginary which surrounds it or, more widely, consumer culture as a way of life. Particularly relevant here is Adbusters, a global network of artists, activists, writers, educators and entrepreneurs which sponsors alternative information circuits and promotes various culture jamming activities as forms of social mobilization against multinational companies, commercial culture and consumerism.¹³ Taking advantage of the public sphere created by the Internet, a variety of associations are promoting a host of activities of naming and blaming and an imagery of brand subversion which is the counterpart of the phenomenal development of branding and which deploys irony, pastiche and the carnivalesque¹⁴ to contest the lifestyles associated with global brands that often encode sexism, racism, homophobia, disrespect for the environment and so on.

Political sociologists and political scientists working on new social movements have addressed these recent developments as essentially new forms of political participation. What Albert Hirschman¹⁵ wished for in a well-known essay on market regulation mechanisms, they propose, is now finally coming true: the classical ‘political’ instrument of ‘voice’ appears to be working side by side with a politically inspired market ‘exit’, and ‘choice’ itself is being coloured with political shades. A number of voices have celebrated the political persona of the consumer. Beck and Gernsheim, for example, argue that today ‘citizens discover the act of shopping as one in which they can always cast their ballot – on a world scale, no less’.¹⁶ This development is related to two main abstract sociopolitical trends: the process of ‘individualization’, on the one hand, whereby social actors are increasingly reflexive about their everyday identities, values and actions, and, on the other, the process of ‘sub-politicization’, whereby politics is emerging in places other than the formal political arena (sub-politics) because citizens no longer think that traditional forms of political participation are adequate.¹⁷ Thus Beck has famously argued that if modernity is a democracy oriented to producers, late modernity is a democracy oriented to consumers: a pragmatic and cosmopolitan democracy where the sleepy giant of the ‘sovereign citizen-consumer’ is becoming a counterweight to big transnational corporations.¹⁸

The enthusiastic tone of such ideas notwithstanding, it would be mistaken to *always* attribute a deliberately political finality to consumer choices. Equally, it is debatable whether all practices of consumption are indeed conducted by social actors who self-reflexively constitute themselves as consumers. Many of the practices which come under the umbrella of alternative and critical consumerism might be conducted by consumers who have in mind meanings and objectives other than strictly political ones. What they are doing, both in form and content, cannot be easily equated with the expression of a ‘vote’ on collective goods such as justice, equality, nature, etc. It may be true, as Mary Douglas has observed in a much-quoted essay on shopping as protest, that ‘the consumer wandering round the shops is actualizing a philosophy of life’,¹⁹ but much of this happens *despite* his or her intentions. Each purchase decision is not perceived, nor practically organized, as a consequential and eventful action like a political vote. More generally, Douglas’s approach tends to confine social actors to a rational and cognitive dimension instead of a more practical one which would situate them in time and space, considering consumption practices as situated learning practices which are co-productive of consumers’ desires and objectives and thus escape that neat separation between means and end which underlies liberal democratic models of choice as well as Douglas’s view.²⁰

When social and political scientists embrace and reproduce slogans which are common currency back into the reality they are studying, they run the risk of missing both the social limits of similar slogans and the particular configuration of power–knowledge–subjectivity on which they are built and which they call into being.²¹ For example, the work of political scientists has often focused on the fact that different institutional settings are more or less conducive to consumer collective action, rather than exploring how and why the consumer has become a viable and helpful category for mobilization in different national contexts.²² If we concentrate mainly on such aspects as the socioeconomic determinants of political consumer action, the way it may or may not correspond to different political orientations, degrees of participation, levels of societal or interpersonal trusts, we prepare the ground for a normative rather than a critical analysis. Even if we study the discourses promoted by the variety of associations promoting critical consumption without a critical awareness of the particular view(s) of the consumer encoded, we are bound to transform their visions of the consumer into that which Eco defines as a ‘fetish concept’: an instrument which has ‘a particular ability to obstruct argument, strait-jacketing discussion in emotional reaction’,²³ rather than a shifting historical code for defining and promoting a particular social identity, either being a total rejection or an unconditional apology.

There are a number of other reasons why it is important to problematize the equation between alternative and critical consumerism and political action. An obvious problem has to do with the fact that the different practices which are usually collected under this banner are fragmented and potentially conflicting, thus rendering rather difficult the formation of viable collective identities and initiatives. For example, if we consider only alternative products, it is clear that they mobilize different meanings and promote different world-views. The growing body of work on vegetarianism, green consumption, alternative green consumption, organic food and Fair Trade indicates that different themes and issues typically contribute to each specific form of alternative consumption and that they all are far from being internally coherent.²⁴ For example, alternative distribution networks (from second-hand shops to farmers’ markets to box schemes) not only respond to a politically conscious middle-class consumer, but also attract urban disadvantaged groups which might not be able to afford to shop via formal channels.²⁵ Likewise, the demand for organically grown vegetables typically mixes private health concerns with some degree of environmental consciousness and is coming from diverse sources, from a large vegetarian movement as well as health-conscious or gourmet carnivores.²⁶ Indeed, different practices

and issues may converge or not – just like green consumers may or may not sympathize with the redistributive concerns which inspire Fair Trade. Contradictions of this kind might be acknowledged, and yet they are not easy for activists themselves to tackle. For example, *Enough!*, a magazine published by the Centre for a New American Dream which campaigns for a more healthy and sustainable lifestyle, celebrates the rise of organic food consumption and the fact that major multinationals are getting into organic business, while recognizing that organic food is still too expensive for many consumers.²⁷

This clearly shows the extent to which alternative consumer practices, with all the ordinariness which accompanies daily consumption, cannot be easily translated as ‘means’ of political participation.²⁸ They can be easily absorbed by the market precisely because they are often routine and polysemic practices situated within the market. Ethical and political dimensions are perhaps now entering the market more explicitly than at previous times, but this does not mean that purchase decisions become a form of political practice *tout court*, a practice which subjectively and institutionally targets the functioning principles of the entire economic and political system. For one thing, ‘the market’ is composed of many different institutions with different interest and powers; the marketing and advertising industries are well aware of the interests in ecological, ethical and political themes among a certain strata of Western populations and long ago started to promote their own versions of the ‘greening of demand’.²⁹ Indeed, if we consider the whole cycle of production-distribution-consumption of one particular ethical or green commodity, we will see that it is punctuated by market and political institutions which all contribute to define and entrench the ethics and politics of it. Codes for ethical business and for socially responsible management are becoming widespread and are typically self-administered by industries themselves. While cause-related marketing is responding to boycotting, a variety of labelling schemes, often set up by *ad hoc* organizations variously linked with either business or political institutions, play a crucial role. This does not mean that ethical claims can be easily used in a pure instrumental fashion, as ethically oriented consumers may demand proof of standards and may pressure companies much further than expected. But it does suggest that it is unrealistic to imagine that there is a simple demand/supply relation between consumers and producers.³⁰

Finally, considering consumption as politics, as a new but powerful means of political participation, we may both underestimate the role that the ‘political’ has to play in translating ordinary practices into politically consequential ones and lose sight of the politics of consumption, ranging

from social distinction to the realization of intimate aesthetic experiences. Today's political mobilization of consumers is probably related to how national markets are organized and reorganized while globalization proceeds. International commerce grew by nearly 50 per cent in the 1990s, while economic inequality grew more than ever before during the 1970s and 1990s.³¹ Indeed, as is now widely acknowledged, globalization and standardization have in turn stimulated localization and heterogeneity, contestation and resistance, helping to make ecological implications more visible and more clearly linked to issues of global equality.³²

However, it would be mistaken to simply suppose that the 'consumer' now realizes a new 'global citizenship', working on pure universalistic, cosmopolitan and humanitarian grounds.³³ Certainly in post-colonial times such as ours, overt nationalistic uses of goods may come under attack, but this does not mean that our consumer identities are truly cosmopolitan. Politically charged consumer actions often have a national orientation (as Michele Micheletti has demonstrated in her recent survey of 'political consumerism'),³⁴ being entangled in national public debates, rather than representing a real form of transnational citizenship embedded in a global public discourse. Today's politically charged consumer activism often articulates and embodies the local/global contradiction. For example, humanitarian justice and respect for local traditions may run into conflict in Fair Trade protocols. Fair Trade protocols may themselves work as instruments of cultural hegemony and economic domination, especially where societies such as China, which have productive systems often irreconcilable with workers' rights as defined in the West, are becoming more competitive than Western countries might like. A global humanitarian consumer-citizenship may also require further economic disembedding, as it commands growth rates and volumes for green and ethical products which are at odds with small-scale local production. It may therefore run against the re-embedding of economic action in local environments, which is also one of the aspirations of alternative and critical consumer practices.³⁵

While alternative consumer practices cannot be equated with political participation as such, they do signal that consumption and the consumer are being problematized and drawing on political repertoires. Taken together, the discourses surrounding and promoting alternative and critical consumer practices amount to a particular discourse or frame which not only politicizes consumption and promotes new principles of commodity qualification and visions of 'quality',³⁶ but also does so by mobilizing social actors as 'consumers' and by bestowing on them particular qualities.

Framing Critical Consumerism

Instead of considering ethical, critical and political forms of consumer action as a panacea which responds to the failure of other political means typical of participatory democracy in a global world, we may consider them as a normative frame. This frame is sustained through discourse and practice by a host of different actors – from labelling institutions to alternative producers and distributors to critical consumption associations to individual social actors themselves – which call into being a particular type of consumer.³⁷ Critical and alternative consumption associations and movements are political entrepreneurs and legitimate themselves by constructing a particular consumer identity. Consumer choice is not taken for granted as necessarily good or as a private question. Rather, it is framed as a consequential and momentous practice, capable of expressing consumer sovereignty only if consumers do not lull themselves with the sirens of the Smithian tune, but take full responsibility for the environmental, social and political effects of their choices.

Despite their diversity, many forms of alternative and critical consumption articulate the notion of ‘nature’ and share some kind of interest in environmental values.³⁸ As stated by the magazine *Enough!*, it appears ‘absolutely vital’ that ‘products and commodities be produced and harvested differently – with a long-term focus on resource conservation, labour and community impacts, and limiting waste production’.³⁹ For this reason Mary Douglas has branded green and environmentally-friendly consumer attitudes as instances of a ‘movement of renunciation’ or ‘non-consumption’, akin to that of Ghandi or early Christianity, which puts public or collective goods before one’s own individual desires, or, in other terms, ‘a rejection of the world as we know it’.⁴⁰ Still, as narratives aimed at bringing forward the political potentialities of the consumer, the discourses thematizing critical consumption go far beyond an ethic of renunciation.

Let us look at the minimum common denominator of the many voices which come together in a major event that specifically aims to critically address Western consumer culture – the so-called ‘Buy Nothing Day’ (BND). This is a day of boycotts, events and abstention from purchase which is now celebrated in over fifty countries around the world – the day after Thanksgiving Day in the United States and Canada and the last Saturday of November in Europe. It was initiated in 1992 by Adbusters. Activists themselves may consider the actual shift in everyday purchasing patterns ‘far more important’ and regard BND as a ‘fairly low profile event which

presents an opportunity to focus on anti-consumerist issues', as one organizer of BND in York, England, put it, or as a 'media event which can be used to diffuse a mentality, a concern, a type of consumer', as the Italian editor of *Altraeconomia*, the main alternative economy magazine and sponsor of BND in Italy, states.⁴¹ Yet, for the social analyst BND is important on at least two counts. First, there is the form of protest. With its reliance on Internet connections as well as a host of local environmental, consumer and development associations, BND exemplifies the mixture of globalization and localization and the preference for protest techniques which try to get the message across through surrealistic actions, an important feature of new social movements.⁴² Second, there are the themes which are articulated in the protest. BND campaigners ask each individual to be 'a consumer-hero' rather than a 'consumer-zero', by 'standing up against the pressure to buy'. This is presented as a 'simple idea': 'challenging' consumer culture by 'switch(ing) off from shopping for one day' with the hope that it will provide a 'lasting experience' and a moment for redressing our lifestyles: 'you'll feel detoxed from consumerism and realize shopping is less important'.⁴³ The organizers of BND in the Italian city of Bologna, for example, stress that this is not 'against shopkeepers nor against the government', as these would be 'limited targets'; the real target is 'people themselves, their own way of life as consumers'.⁴⁴ Reversing the well-known rhetoric which links private vices to public virtue and which has had so much success in the Western world, the organizers of the BND protest in Birmingham, England, declare that 'overspending on credit cards may indeed improve the economy in the short term, and therefore seem to be patriotic. But over-consumption is the root of global disaster that has already started to crop up: climate change is only one of the many problems it causes. And we all know it doesn't really make us happy.'⁴⁵ What seems, at first glance, an invitation to give up consumption and its excesses is indeed a melting pot for the amalgam of many forms of alternative consumption. Environmental, humanitarian, ethical and political motives are all present in the discourses that accompany the Canadian web resources: 'the rich Western countries, only twenty per cent of the world population, are consuming eighty per cent of the earth's natural resources, causing a disproportionate level of environmental damage and unfair distribution of wealth. As consumers we need to question the products we buy and challenge the companies which produce them.'⁴⁶

Most of the themes deployed in the initiative are only superficially close to an ascetic rhetoric of renunciation. While there are attempts to expose 'shopaholicism' as a condition that is reaching epidemic proportions, it is very clear that it is not shopping in itself that is harmful, but rather the fact

that people typically shop without considering issues such as the environment and poverty in developing countries. There is a wide variety of themes articulated by the campaigners in this 'anti-consumerist' syndicate – from negotiation of the notion of necessity with respect to the north/south divide, to the environment and sustainable agriculture, to new patterns of consumption relying on self-production. In particular, the separation between consumption and production is exposed and various ways of re-embedding consumer practices in the local natural environment, in communal social relationships and in the production process are recommended. This is mirrored by the idea that product labelling, as advocated by traditional consumerist campaigns, is not enough. 'Ethical consumers' ought to know the 'sustainability cost' of their choices, i.e. how much pollution has been created and how many non-renewable resources have been spent in the manufacture and distribution of any chosen product. Here consumer sovereignty is something other than consumer choice as predicated on the variables singled out by neoclassical economics and free-market ideologies alike (i.e. price and quantity). The value-for-money logic does not hold when the target is not only individual satisfaction but also a set of public goods. Consumer sovereignty itself is predicated not on hedonistic premises but on responsibility. In many forms of alternative consumption there is, to different degrees, an attempt to re-establish a direct relation to goods. Such attempts may be aimed at countering 'risk' and the perception that one is no longer controlling one's material world, as an expanding material culture has led to a separation between the spheres of production and consumption.⁴⁷ However, they also signal that the symbolic boundaries that have come to define the 'consumer' as a specific economic identity who lives in a private world removed from production are being destabilized.

Ethical shopping guides offer a fascinating insight into the moral and political problematization of the consumer. On the surface, ethical shopping guides look like catalogues or inventories of where to find information about ethical producers and products. As such they can be considered intrinsic to a larger trend within modern culture which foregrounds the relevance of expert discourse on commodities as articulated by cultural intermediaries for the promotion and legitimization of (certain) visions of consumption.⁴⁸ However, they also turn upside down conventional and well-established discourses of use and recommendation, subverting hegemonic lifestyles and dominant views of consumption. For example, *Ethical Consumer* – a major association for ethical and responsible purchases in the UK – offers its constituency a magazine which professes to be a guide to 'progressive products', helping to avoid unethical products and providing a list of 'ethical

Best Buy' options.⁴⁹ Best buys are indeed defined through a variety of ethical criteria, i.e. criteria exceeding short-term, self-oriented hedonistic consumer action and embracing long-term effects on a variety of third parties. They include the impact on the environment (pollution, nuclear power, etc.), on animals (animal testing, factory farming, etc.), on humans (oppressive regimes, workers' rights, irresponsible marketing, etc.) and 'extras', which involve more than one party, such as the use of GM. In the case of food, ethical shopping guides entail a shift in the way food is classified as 'good to eat': issues most conventionally related to food quality, such as safety and health, taste and aesthetic pleasure, are very marginal while the environment, human rights or workers' labour conditions become primary concerns.⁵⁰ Ethical shopping guides provide a set of specific criteria of choice drawing on political and ethical codes and principles. As explained by the Editor of *I CARE*, an alternative consumption magazine based in Pisa, Italy, which has also published a best-selling critical consumption guide, 'the first pages of our guide are extremely important, there we explain which criteria we base our choice of products on ... distinguishing features are essentially referred to the social question in a broad sense, peace, environment and democracy: these are, as it were, the four cardinal coordinates for all products'.⁵¹

Similar guides are typically concerned with more than offering a set of ethical criteria for the evaluation of products and producers. The discourses surrounding ethical shopping have to do with 'orders of justifications' which have been pushed outside the dominant mode of legitimatizing markets in Western culture, i.e. the redistribution of resources and the role of demand. They promote a particular image of the consumer as correct, i.e. truthful and right. Reference to the conditions of labour in general and child labour in particular, as well as to the north/south divide, are the main codes marshalled for reframing the role of the consumer. Considering that consumers are 'raising consciousness' and 'becoming aware' of what 'consumption really is', a recent guide to ethical shopping, for example, constructs its readership as one made up of 'consumers concerned about the working conditions under which the products they buy are produced in developing countries'. Once consumers realize that what the Western world consumes is 'subsidized by the poor' in the form of unsafe and underpaid labour and the exploitation of natural resources, it assumes, they will 'pressurize' retailers, producers and governments to change their practices and bring about an 'equitable world trading system'.⁵² Free trade and globalization are said to have removed the protecting influence of the nation-states and the local communities; it is consumers themselves who are presented as uniquely having the power and duty to safeguard both fair economic distribution and the natural environment.

The ‘Consumer’ as a Subject of Power and Duty

The moral and political discourses which define the frame of critical consumerism play with different orders of justification. They can be conceptualized as drawing on repertoires of evaluation or ‘orders of worth’ and ‘justification’ which exist prior to the individual and are available across situations, even if they are realized, made salient and transformed by individuals in particular settings and circumstances.⁵³ Critical consumerism is intrinsically oppositional. Organized through practices and episodes of contestation, it reveals how these repertoires work and attain wider relevance. Whether successful or not, these discourses make explicit what in normal circumstances is implicit and taken for granted. Critical consumerism may thus be seen as a multi-level phenomenon which involves different classification processes – some of which are identified as practical, others as discursive. Considered as a normative frame, critical consumerism engages directly with the hegemonic legitimatizing rhetoric which emerged in the eighteenth century to justify market societies and modern cultures of consumption. Such rhetoric entailed a particular political morality, epitomized not so much by the supposed de-moralization of luxury, but by the entrenchment of a new sphere of action and order of justification for commodity consumption. Consumption became a private matter, constructed in opposition to production and envisaged as the pursuit of private happiness linked to virtuous mechanisms in the public sphere – as in Mandeville’s famous motto ‘private vices, public virtues’.⁵⁴ As a frame, critical consumerism takes issue with the idea that consumers are and should be private economic hedonists, preoccupied with individual pleasures, and proposes, both for the good of the consumer and society, that the former be virtuous so as to offset the vices of both the market and politics.

The identity which is thus bestowed on consumers draws on themes which cut across the different symbolic boundaries and orders of justification which have consolidated in the course of modernity. Themes prevalently associated with the promotion of consumption as a legitimated sphere of action *per se* – ‘taste’, ‘good taste’, ‘pleasure’, ‘fantasy’, ‘comfort’, ‘distinction’, ‘happiness’, ‘refinement’, and so on – are substituted by themes prevalently associated with the definition of a democratic public sphere and production. The political and moral discourses informing critical consumerism in Italy, the UK and the United States portray the consumer as essentially *active*. They often resort to a vocabulary which draws either on social and political activism (to purchase is to ‘vote’, ‘protest’, ‘make oneself heard’, ‘change the world’, ‘help the community’, ‘mobilize for a better future’, and so on) or

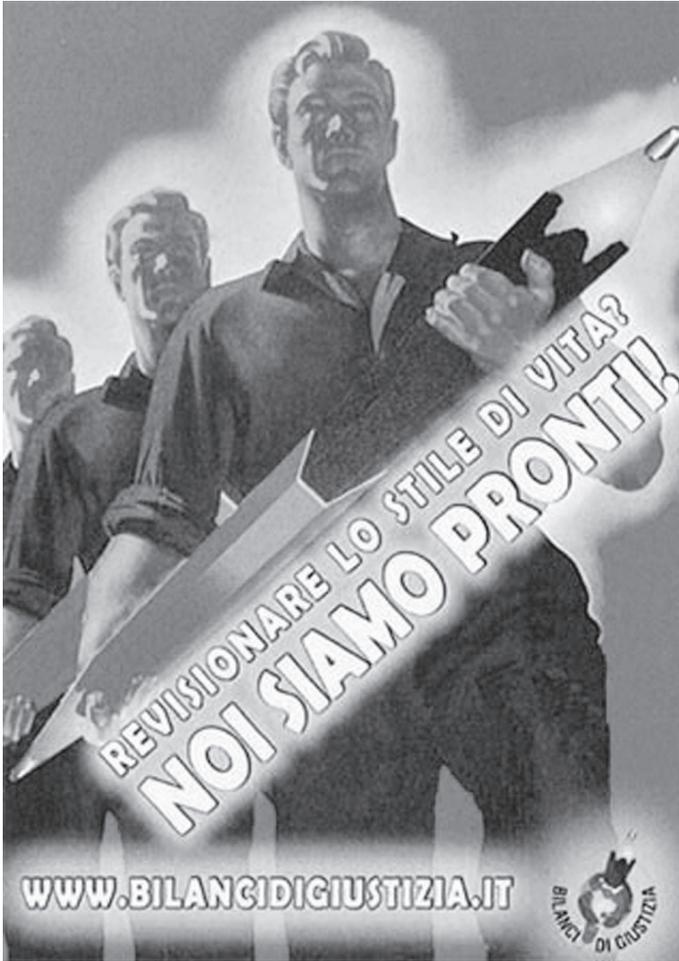


Figure 12 Bilanci di Giustizia, 2004, 'Reform your lifestyle' (www.bilancidigiustizia.it), elaboration on US War Poster, US Army, 1942, Minneapolis Public Library

Source: Bilanci di Giustizia.

on production (to purchase here becomes 'work you do for the community', 'effort done for yourself and the other', 'creative', 'productive', and so on).

These metaphors of political activism and production also emerge in visual representations, as in a recent image produced by Bilanci di Giustizia, a radical association for the promotion of frugal lifestyles and critical consumption in Italy. Drawing on an American Second World War poster

that itself had been influenced by socialist iconography, the image portrays consumers as well-organized worker-soldiers who, armed with pencils, march together to change the world.⁵⁵ More generally, the discourses addressing critical and ethical consumption all tend to stress various strategies which consumers can adopt either to shorten the commodity chain and get closer to producers – relying on various alternative, more direct and informal, forms of distribution – or to reappropriate the process of production itself – baking at home, freezing at home, growing vegetables, collecting wild berries, DIY, and so on, thus implicitly contesting the neat separation between production and consumption which is normatively and institutionally sustained in the global economy. The focus on the consumer as a producer and a political actor on the global scene often passes through a reappraisal of that separation between production and consumption which is associated with the entrenchment of the public/private divide.⁵⁶ The production–consumption distinction is denaturalized and exposed as a complex political and ethical relation rather than a neutral mechanism which each consumer can exploit to his or her (supposed) benefit. The Worldwatch Institute report *Vital Signs* is widely quoted in the various web resources of critical consumption associations in Italy, the UK and the United States. Consumers are invited to ‘take action’ by considering ‘alternative combinations of production and consumption’. Contrary to the classical free-market rhetoric, only more integrated forms of economic life – localized and community based – are considered capable of giving consumers more control over their choices. The lengthening of the commodity chain is criticized for limiting consumer sovereignty instead of enhancing it: consumers’ ‘range of choices becomes controlled’ by supermarkets and many other intermediary actors, which amount to an often ‘transnational’ and characteristically ‘unelected elite’. Thus consumers must widen the scope of their purchases, asking for more: ‘[e]ven when a product label is frank, it is not complete. Ethical consumers ought to know how much waste (i.e. pollution) has been created, and how many un-renewable resources have been consumed, in the manufacture of a product, and also in its distribution. A lettuce that has been transported to New York from California costs a lot of “food miles”. To be ethical consumers, we need to know the sustainability-cost (the real cost) of what we consume’.⁵⁷

The consumer is posited as active, productive and political. As a political actor, he or she is seen as directly responsible not only for him or herself but also for the world. Blame, far from being just externalized and placed on companies and authorities,⁵⁸ is internalized and placed on the self as a consumer. As a consequence, the dominant attitude is that of a re-evaluation of how to consume and what place consumption should take up in daily

life. For the Ethical Consumer group, individual consumers become all powerful if only they ‘decide’ to be so: with their consumption they will thus encourage ‘sustainable businesses that don’t exploit or pollute’.⁵⁹ Consumer choice becomes a concentrated and influential act: we can ‘make a difference with every cup’ of coffee, as a well-known book on Fair Trade coffee puts it.⁶⁰ As one organizer of the main Fair Trade cooperative in Bologna has noted, ‘we may say that, starting from consumption, each of us may come to think, to interrogate many other choices which are connected to it. Thus Fair Trade is a powerful lever, which starts from a small, banal thing, something which we all have to do – like buying coffee – and from there a whole world of decisions is put into question.’⁶¹ It is precisely as such a powerful practice that consumer action is symbolically assimilated to the vote, political action par excellence in parliamentary democracies. While, as Ethical Consumer insists, consumer choices are sometimes said to offer a ‘powerful additional tool’ to traditional political action which is ‘both practical and accessible’, more often dominant political tropes are directly evoked to stress the power of the consumer. In the United States, even organizations such as Oneworld, which promotes what it describes as ‘an elegant sufficiency’, place emphasis on consumer choice as political action. We are invited to consider that ‘to buy is to vote’: ‘we vote “yes” with every purchase we make – a pound of bananas, a tank of diesel fuel – and we vote “No” with every purchase we turn down, forcing the companies to diversify into products we prefer’.⁶²

While versions of such a slogan are also present in Italian moral and political discourses promoting critical consumption, the emphasis here is more clearly placed on the possibility of working from within the market in search of locally based alternative economic forms that offer new ways of expressing human creativity. The editor of *ConsumiEtici*, an ethical consumption magazine which cuts across different political groups, for example, offers ‘methodological tools rather than ideological ones’. He proposes a ‘model of the consumer who reflects on what he or she does but who also knows that one must not always reflect, otherwise reflexive behaviour becomes just depressing. We must be capable of enjoying things ... and for this surely we refer to all those movements which are looking for new forms of expression.’ He emphasizes the importance of acting ‘through the market’: ‘I want to say I am in favour not against, we must win not protest, even if it is more difficult.’⁶³

Such a proactive and pragmatic attitude, which celebrates micro-subversions possible and enjoyable at the interstices of everyday life, often goes hand in hand with a picture of the ‘enemy’ constructed in discourses about critical consumption. This enemy includes not only transnational trade

institutions, global brands or conventional advertising companies; the enemy is also a certain ‘mentality’ or ‘cultural attitude’: a ‘culture’ of ‘waste’ and ‘profit’ in fact which generates ‘indifference’ and ‘lack of awareness’ among consumers and which is responsible for their disempowerment. ‘It is not just a matter of practically demonstrating how things may work differently’, one of the organizers of Rete di Lilliput, an Italian Catholic network of associations working in the alternative economy stresses, ‘but also of hitting that collective imagery which prevents each of us from being bothered,’⁶⁴ Working on themselves as ‘consumers’, social actors can thus act ‘from within the system’, modifying the terms of economic exchange rather than simply ameliorating its functioning.

Many of the themes that have become marginal in traditional consumer movements are thus once again moving to the fore in ‘critical consumerism’. The particularistic, self-interested and instrumental logic of conventional comparative tests – witness the ‘value for money’ approach of successful magazines such as *Which?* in the UK or *Altroconsumo* in Italy – is exposed as missing the point: consumers are brought into life very much like ‘citizens’, emphasis is placed on choice as a public, community-oriented and therefore moral and political action, rather than as a self-interested, private and therefore apolitical affair.

Whatever their scope or particular configurations, the model of the consumer endorsed by conventional consumer associations translates the instrumental and numerical mentality typical of private capitalist enterprises for the domestic sphere. Product-testing organizations and conventional consumer-protection movements not only provide rules of choice, establishing themselves as channels for identifying issues and handling complaints, but also entail a particular view of the consumer.⁶⁵ They tend to embrace a hegemonic notion of the consumer as guided by instrumental rationality. This notion implies the idea that everything can be compared and leads to the ‘exclusion of those dimensions which are not measurable’; value is consequently reduced to a unique unit of measurement. What emerges is the ‘possibility of formalizing an ultimate principle of choice’ based on quality–price analysis.⁶⁶ *Which?*, the influential comparative testing magazine in Britain, provides an example of how it constructs its audience as made up of rational self-interested consumers – forward-looking, risk-averse, time-consistent and ascetic. Claiming to supply consumers with ‘objective’ information on whose basis readers can make their own choices, *Which?* ‘both attributes and cultivates in its readers a set of virtuous character traits that constitute the rational consumer. For *Which?*, the value of design is purely functional. It is axiomatic that no rational person would buy a pair of trainers because of the prestige of the manufacturer’s label,

or a car because of its sleek appearance.’⁶⁷ Like other expert risk-reducing discourses, product-testing magazines assume that quality may be translated into objective quantities and that the rational consumer will seek expert advice. ‘Objective’ information is information that concentrates on use-value as defined by price and quantity, responding to puritanical self-interested consumers.⁶⁸

The discourses which surround alternative and critical consumption indicate a shift in the definition and evaluation of consumer choice as related to its specific location within wider cultural boundaries. As individual consumer choice is charged with power, it appears to be defined less in terms of rights and more in terms of duties. Consumption is seen less as the sphere of negative freedom *par excellence* and more as a sphere for the exercise of positive freedom, less as a private sphere where the consumer can think only of him/herself and be freed from the constraints, worries and burdens of political and productive imperatives, and more as a public domain defined by consumers’ freedom to voice their own moral commitments in order to change politics and the economy. Furthermore, when the consumer is defined as a public and political character, his or her happiness may not be directly correlated to increases in private commodity consumption. Indeed, consumption is often weighted *against* happiness. ‘Almost any consumption’, Oneworld emphasizes, ‘uses up resources. But since one can’t live without some consumption . . . how could I live just as satisfying with less? People are increasingly experimenting with living simply but more fulfillingly.’ Underlying such themes is the idea that the ‘growth of material culture does not translate into more happiness’ and that people’s well-being could be ‘reformulated on other grounds’, as a concern with ‘quality of life’ gradually replaces the negative vision of individual choice with community-oriented contents.⁶⁹ Far from being seen through the lens of a modernist project, happiness is conceived to involve a re-embedding of people in locality and social relations of direct reciprocity. The framing of the consumer within political consumerism thus comes full circle: it codifies a series of practices which are bound up with a particular vision of what consumers should do for the common good as well as their own happiness.

Concluding Remarks

The literature on consumer practices is full of examples of how social actors use commodities to place moral and political weight on to the world.⁷⁰ As consumers people can be deemed normal or deviant, fair or unjust, innocent or corrupting, articulating hegemonic views of consumption, choice and

identity.⁷¹ All in all, consumption is a contested moral and political field and, indeed, it is discursively problematized as such; it raises issues of fairness both within and beyond the human community. It is imbued with a set of crucial binaries such as immediate versus delayed gratification, private versus public, nature versus culture, necessity versus luxury, body versus mind, etc. These moral and political issues do not arise after the fact as justifications; they are part of the way we consume, but they also draw on specific repertoires which are sustained by a number of social institutions, from the family to the state, from marketing to consumer associations, from international business to supranational organizations and global social movements. There is a growing historical awareness that consumers ‘did not arise as an automatic response to the growth of material culture or commercial society, they had to be made . . . through mobilization in civil society and state as well as the commercial domain’.⁷² Our analysis of the current framing of the consumer as a political actor suggests that consumers today, perhaps more than ever, are continuously turned into key social figures via symbolic processes which can cut across some of our firmest cultural boundaries.

The discursive problematization of the consumer should thus become an important object of critical analysis; in order to document and to understand contemporary consumer practices and cultures we also have to understand – to paraphrase Max Weber⁷³ – the ‘good reasons’ that actors give for their own and others’ practices of consumption and the ‘type of person’ they want themselves to be if and when they do indeed posit themselves as consumers. Of course, this does not mean that we, as social scientists, have to proclaim this or that moralist or political view of consumption or of the consumer. Daniel Miller has recently exposed the temptation to criticize consumption long prevalent among social scientists, showing the poverty of a moral critique which typically holds a deeply ethnocentric view, an ascetic and conservative vision of consumer culture and a pessimistic, elitist theory of consumer identity whereby the ‘superficial persona who has become the mere mannequin to commodity culture is always someone other than ourselves’.⁷⁴ These comments epitomize what is now a widespread tendency within consumer studies, namely to consider consumers as active and creative subjects that de-commodify goods, de-coding the meanings conveyed by commercial culture. While the emphasis on consumption as resistance and transgression is important, we risk losing its full cultural and historical meaning if we transform it into an ontology of the consumer. In other terms, we should not take what Miller himself considers today’s task for consumption studies at face value, i.e. ‘to rescue the humanity of the consumer from being reduced to a rhetorical trope in the critique of

capitalism'.⁷⁵ We rather should consider that such a task is co-terminus with a set of political and ethical discourses which are articulated in the world of consumption in specific practices and institutions. By looking at the discourses accompanying new forms of consumption such as ethical and critical consumption, the adoption of a frugal lifestyle or the preference for Fair Trade goods, we can start asking when and how, under which conditions and to what effect consumption might be the means people use to create the identity they feel they have lost as labourers or use mass goods to counter the homogenization of capitalist production, rather than suppose that this is precisely what consumption is *per se*.

If we should leave moral criticism to the philosophers, we can and indeed should as social and cultural analysts consider very closely the ways in which consumer goods and practices are moralized and the consumer posited as a particular social actor. Moral and political discourses about consumption and the consumer offer a perspective on the processes of classification which are coextensive with consumer practices and otherwise remain taken for granted. In this view, discourses about consumption are best taken as a set of diverse situated practices, which are assembled in specific contexts and which reflect more or less directly the consumer practices they describe and/or the moral and political order they take for granted, promote or otherwise qualify. While considering consumers' experience as ordered and patterned, and material culture as a means to fix the categories of culture or objectify people's values,⁷⁶ the sociology and anthropology of consumption have not been very keen to pursue the study of the discourse in this way. To proceed in this direction and strike the right balance between due consideration of the discursive and parody of the semiotic fallacy, we need further examination of discourse as a reflexive and normative practice. Actions and accounts are mutually constitutive; accounts construe and support the reality of those situations which they comment upon, while they are reflexively linked to the socially organized occasions of their use.⁷⁷ As they address consumption and consumers, accounts offer a normative vision, drawing on discursive repertoires and working as a frame orienting action and constituting subjectivity. Just as the notion of consumer sovereignty has worked as a normative claim which helped construct a specialized sphere of action, so the political framing of the consumer, which builds on and promotes his or her capacity to resist market disentanglement, constructs an ideal image of consumers.⁷⁸ In both cases, the consolidation of a normative frame draws on practices and has an effect on them; and in both cases practices also engage with other framings and repertoires in such ways as to reproduce or tease wider cultural boundaries. In this chapter, looking at 'critical consumerism'

as a particular framing of both consumption and the consumer, I have tried to show how consumer culture is constituted as a culture both *for* consumers and *of* consumers, both a set of commodities for people to consume and a set of representations of people as consumers, with the latter working as an intrinsically normative way of encoding the varieties of meanings associated with consumption practices.

Notes

1. K. Kish Sklar 'The Consumer White Label Campaign of the National Consumers' League 1898–1919', in S. Strasser, C. McGovern and M. Judd (eds), *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the 20th Century* (Cambridge, 1998). At the time consumer concerns were not as separate from labour interests as they became later on during the Naderist phase in the 1960s; on the contrary, the ideal was that of 'citizen consumers' rather than of the 'consumer customer', see E.A. Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003); L.B. Glickman, 'The Strike in the Temple of Consumption: Consumer Activism and Twentieth Century American Political Culture', *Journal of American History*, 88(1) (2001), pp. 99–128; C. McGovern, 'Consumption and Citizenship in the United States, 1900–1940', in Strasser *et al.* (eds), *Getting and Spending*, pp. 37–58. An excellent discussion of the development of the consumerist movement in Britain, which shows the shifts of consumer protection initiatives from working-class preoccupations with necessity to middle-class management of affluence, can be found in M. Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth Century Britain: The Search for an Historical Movement* (Cambridge, 2003). For the changing interface between the social identities of the citizen and the consumer, see M. Daunton and M. Hilton (eds), *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford and New York, 2001), and F. Trentmann and P.L. Maclachlan, 'Civilising Markets: Traditions of Consumer Politics in Twentieth-century Britain, Japan and the United States', in M. Bevir and F. Trentmann (eds), *Markets in Historical Contexts* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 170–201.
2. On boycotts see in particular N. Craig Smith, *Morality and the Market: Consumer Pressure for Corporate Accountability* (New York, 1995);

- M. Friedman, *Consumer Boycotts: Effecting Change through the Marketplace and the Media* (New York, 1999). Generally on the history of consumer mobilization and the framing of the consumer as a political actor, see F. Trentmann (ed.), *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford and New York, 2005). See also M. Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism and Collective Action* (London, 2003); M. Micheletti, A. Follesdal and D. Stolle (eds), *Politics, Products and Markets: Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present* (New Brunswick, 2004); Y. Gabriel and T. Lang, *The Unmanageable Consumer: Contemporary Consumption and Its Fragmentation* (London, 1995).
3. M. Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in H.L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (eds), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, 1983).
 4. According to Michele Micheletti, political consumerism includes 'actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices ... Political consumers are the people who engage in such choice situations. They may act individually or collectively. Their market choices reflect an understanding of material products as embedded in a complex society and normative context.' While acknowledging historical precedents, Micheletti conceives political consumerism essentially as a 'new' form of 'political participation', which indicates that 'citizens are looking outside traditional politics and civil society for guidelines to help them formulate their more individualized philosophy of life and live as good citizens' (Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping*, pp. 2ff.). The emphasis in her work, as in most political scientists' work, is not on consumption but on political participation. Thus critical and alternative consumer practices are equated with political actions and considered against the background of other forms of participation rather than in the context of consumer cultures, identities and lifestyles. To open up this equation and prioritize consumption as the focus of analysis I prefer to use the term 'critical' consumerism.
 5. The survey was conducted during October–November 2002 as part of the EU research project 'Trust in food'. See C. Poppe and U. Kjaernes, *Trust in Food in Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Oslo, 2003). See also www.trustinfood.org.
 6. Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World 2004: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress toward Sustainable Society* (Washington, 2004, chapter 1).

7. For data on Fair Trade see EFTA, *Fair Trade in Europe* (EFTA, 2002), and www.efta.org; on organic produce see M. Youssefi and H. Willer, *The World of Organic Agriculture 2003, Statistics and Future Prospects* (IFOAM, 2003), and www.ifoam.org.
8. This view is borrowed from G. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington, 1988), which applies it to luxury objects. Consumption in this guise is profoundly ambivalent because it enables people to carry on living in an imperfect world, believing that perfection can eventually be reached through the accumulation of objects.
9. Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping*, especially chap. 2; M. Friedman, *Consumer Boycotts*.
10. L.B. Glickman, 'Born to Shop? Consumer History and American History', in L.B. Glickman (ed.), *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca, 1999), pp. 1–16. Glickman indeed considers that consumption and its political aspects are crucial for the formation of American identities and ideologies. See also Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, and D. Vogel, 'Tracing the American Roots of the Political Consumerism Movement', in Micheletti *et al.* (eds), *Politics, Products and Markets*, pp. 83–100.
11. See Y. Bar and N. Bromberg, 'The Nestlé Boycott', *Mothering* (Winter, 1995), pp. 56–63; W.L. Bennett, 'Branded Political Communication', in Micheletti *et al.* (eds), *Politics, Products and Market*, pp. 101–25; J. Peretti (with M. Micheletti), 'The Nike Sweatshop Email: Political Consumerism, Internet, and Culture Jamming', in Micheletti *et al.* (eds), *Politics, Products and Market*, pp. 127–44; A. Ross (ed.), *No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade, and the Rights of Garment Workers* (New York, 1999); J. Vidal, *Mclibel: Burger Culture on Trial* (New York, 1997).
12. For a similar perspective see what Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot suggested in more general terms about the market and the consolidation of different 'orders of worth' in modern society, in L. Boltanski and L. Thévenot, *De la justification* (Paris, 1991).
13. Adbuster is a non-profit organization based in Vancouver that publishes an 85,000 circulation magazine (60 per cent in the US) concerned with the 'erosion of cultural and natural environment by commercial forces' and adopts a 'fun approach' to protest. An example of how Adbusters culture jammers work is to try to disclose 'who is behind some of the world's most popular brands', inviting people to put up in offices, coffee shops or local supermarkets a poster illustrating a set of familiar food items which are in fact produced by tobacco companies. See www.adbuster.org.

14. These subversive strategies may be described as a 'semiotic guerrilla warfare' (U. Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (New York, 1986)) and are considered increasingly typical of contemporary social movements; see K. Nash, *Contemporary Political Sociology: Globalization, Politics and Power* (Oxford, 2000). They can be traced back to the Dada and the Surrealist movements and their aesthetic practices of collage which articulated the anarchic idea that a new 'surreality' would emerge through the subversion of common sense, the collapse of dominant categories and dichotomies and the celebration of the forbidden and the abnormal.
15. A.O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (Harvard, 1970).
16. U. Beck and E. Gernsheim, *Individualisation* (London, 2001), p. 44.
17. See in particular U. Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order* (London, 1997), and A. Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalisation is Reshaping Our Lives* (London, 1999). These observations build also on recent political science scholarship on citizenship. The increase in individual skills, as a consequence of the improvement in educational levels and in the information available to the public, is seen as creating citizens who are more aware of the possible causes of social malfunctioning and have greater capacities and means to articulate their dissatisfaction; see R.J. Dalton, *Citizen Politics* (Chatham, 1996). The rise of new forms of political participation is often associated with a growing distrust among citizens of traditional political institutions, particularly regarding the ability of political institutions to control new uncertainties; see P. Norris, *Critical Citizens* (Oxford, 1999).
18. U. Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order* (London, 1997).
19. M. Douglas, *Thought Styles* (London, 1996), p. 86.
20. For further discussion see R. Sassatelli, 'Trust, Choice and Routine: Putting the Consumer on Trial', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 4(4) (2001), pp. 84–105, and R. Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics* (London, 2006).
21. This develops Foucauldian themes that I considered in R. Sassatelli, *Fragments for a Genealogy of the Consumer Society: History in Perspective* (Norwich, Discussion Papers in Public Choice and Social Theory, Discussion Paper 25, University of East Anglia, April 1996).
22. See Trentmann and Maclachlan, 'Civilising Markets'.
23. U. Eco, *Apocalypse Postponed* (Bloomington, 1994 [1964]), pp. 17 and 20.

24. On vegetarianism see A. Beadsworth and T. Keil, 'The Vegetarian Option: Varieties, Conversions, Motives and Careers', *The Sociological Review*, 40(2) (1992), pp. 253–93; K. Tester, 'The Moral Malaise of McDonaldization: The Values of Vegetarianism', in B. Smart (ed.), *Resisting McDonaldization* (Sage, 1999), pp. 207–21; on green consumption and environmentally friendly products see W. Belasco, *Appetite for Change* (Ithaca, 1993); A. James, 'Eating Green(s): Discourses of Organic Food', in K. Milton (ed.), *Environmentalism* (London, 1993), pp. 205–18; on organic and 'natural' products see M. Miele and D. Pinducciu, 'A Market for Nature', *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, 3 (2001), pp. 149–62; J. Murdoch and M. Miele "Back to Nature": Changing "Worlds of Production" in the Food Sector', *Sociologia Ruralis*, 39(4) (1999), pp. 465–83; on the promotion of local traditions and especially as related to the Slow Food movement see A. Leich, 'Slow Food and the Politics of Fat', *Ethnos*, 68(4) (2003), pp. 437–62; J. Murdoch and M. Miele, 'The Practical Aesthetics of Traditional Cousins, Slowfood in Tuscany', *Sociologia Ruralis*, 42(4) (2002), pp. 312–28; on Fair Trade see I. Hudson and M. Hudson, 'Removing the Veil?', *Organization & Environment*, 16(4) (2003), pp. 423–30; M. Levi and A. Linton, 'Fair Trade: A Cup at a Time?', *Politics & Society*, 31(3) (2003), pp. 407–32; M.C. Renard, 'Fair Trade: Quality, Market and Conventions', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 19 (2003), pp. 87–96.
25. C.C. Williams and C. Paddock, 'The Meaning of Alternative Consumption Practices', *Cities*, 20(5) (2003), pp. 311–19.
26. S. Lockie and L. Kristen, 'Eating Green', *Sociologia Ruralis*, 42(1) (2002), pp. 23–40.
27. See www.newdream.org.
28. For an attempt to consider both the ordinariness and the ethical dimension of alternative consumption see C. Barnett and P. Cloke, 'Consuming Ethics: Articulating the Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption', *Antipode*, 37(1) (2005), pp. 23–45.
29. M.G. Zinkhan and L. Carlson, 'Green Advertising and the Reluctant Consumer', *Journal of Advertising*, 24(2) (1995), pp. 1–16. For a more critical approach see P. Kennedy, 'Selling Virtue', in Micheletti *et al.* (eds), *Politics, Products and Market*, pp. 21–44.
30. For the crucial and contradictory role of labelling schemes, see A. Kolk and R. van Tulder, 'Child Labour and Multinational Conduct: A Comparison of International Business and Stakeholder Codes', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 36 (2002), pp. 291–301; A. Jordan, R.K.W. Wurzel

- and A.R. Zito, 'Consumer Responsibility-taking and Eco-labelling Schemes in Europe', in Micheletti *et al.* (eds), *Politics, Products and Market*, pp. 161–80.
31. IMF, *World Economic Outlook* (Washington, 2003); UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003* (Oxford, 2003).
 32. See A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, 1996), and R. Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London, 1990). An example of this is the development of Slowfood, an Italian-born eco-gastronomic organization which has rapidly become an international actor in the global promotion of the local (www.slowfood.org). Movements for the safeguarding of local produce and territories have also developed elsewhere in the world. A well-known example is Navdanya ('nine seeds'), founded in India in 1987 by Vandana Shiva (www.navdanya.org); see Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture*, chap. 8.
 33. See L.W. Bennett, 'Branded Political Communication: Lifestyle Politics, Logo Campaigns and the Rise of Global Citizenship', in Micheletti *et al.* (eds), *Politics, Products and Market*, pp. 101–26.
 34. Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping*, esp. chaps 2 and 3. See also F. Trentmann and P.L. Maclachlan, 'Civilising Markets', and especially F. Trentmann (ed.), *The Making of the Consumer*, which contains many contributions that detail the translation of the consumer into a political subject within various national traditions and socioeconomic spheres.
 35. The reaching of global markets may imply an emphasis on efficiency and promotion which can transform green and Fair Trade (FT) products into fetishes. This shows the antinomy between commercial aims and ethical aims. Such antinomy is also the fundamental mechanism of value creation within the FT field, at least as it emerged in the interviews conducted in Italy: activists have stressed the importance of keeping these values synergic to make FT viable and meaningful; they have used this antinomy as the basis for distinguishing between 'real' critical consumers ('activists' and 'committed') and 'lifestyle' or 'fashion-oriented' consumers ready to jump on the bandwagon of FT. The different actors occupying different positions in the field of alternative and critical consumption in Italy display different attitudes with respect to this dichotomy. Activists that work on the commercial end of FT (shops, import organizations) place an emphasis on the positive role of commercialization as 'cultural vector'; those concerned with labelling schemes stress the role of 'good principles'; and the cultural and political entrepreneurs emphasize the risks of commercialization and the role of 'education and awareness'.

36. See M. Harvey, A. McMeekin and A. Warde (eds), *Qualities of Food* (Manchester, 2004).
37. The notion of frame adopted here develops from Goffman's concept which was used to indicate the 'principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them', E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York, 1974), pp. 10–11. A frame is a set of 'organizational premises – sustained both in mind and in activity' (p. 247), a 'context of understanding' and a 'membrane' which orientates our perceptions within it (p. 3, and E. Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (London, 1961), p. 71). See D. Tannen (ed.), *Framing in Discourse* (Oxford, 1993). Political scientists in particular have often treated it as a way to analyse ideology (see D.A. Snow and R.D. Benford, 'Ideology, Frame Resonance and Participant Mobilizations', *International Social Movements Research*, 1 (1988), pp. 197–217), thus forgetting the interactional and institutional anchoring of the original Goffmanian concept.
38. See D. Goodman, 'Agro-food Studies in the "Age of Ecology": Nature, Corporeality, Bio-politics', *Sociologia Ruralis*, 39(1) (1999), pp. 17–38, and J. Murdoch and M. Miele, 'A New Aesthetic of Food? Relational Reflexivity in the Alternative Food Movement', in Harvey *et al.* (eds), *Qualities of Food*, pp. 1656–75.
39. B. Taylor, 'Buy Different: Building Consumer Demand for Sustainable Goods', *Enough!*, 12, available at www.newdream.org/newletter/buydifferent.pdf.
40. Douglas, *Thought Styles*, p. 11.
41. Respectively, email interview held in November 2001, telephone interview held in January 2004. For more information see www.adbusters.org; www.buyingnothingday.co.uk; [www. GiornatadelNonaquisto](http://www.GiornatadelNonaquisto).
42. Adbuster runs a website which celebrates pluralism and the positive side of globalization with links and material from several countries which have taken up the initiative. The variety of local traditions which are accommodated in this 'global' network is evident, for example, in the fact that the emphasis on self-control which is an important theme in the US is not found in the same way in the corresponding UK or Italian context. Comparing US and Italian materials, we find different pictures; in Italy there is a stronger emphasis on no-profit activity and cooperatives and the political and associational landscape is more fragmented. This has obvious effects. On the same day of the BND 2001 there were two competing initiatives: the Organic Breakfast Day and the Food Bank Day

- (with activists in front of supermarkets collecting food items to donate to the poor).
43. BND-UK, press release, 23 Nov. 2001.
 44. Email interview, November 2001.
 45. Email interview, November 2001.
 46. BND-UK, press release, 23 Nov. 2001.
 47. R. Sassatelli and A. Scott, 'Trust Regimes, Wider Markets, Novel Foods', *European Societies*, 3(2) (2001), pp. 211–42.
 48. On the role of knowledge flows in the consolidation of a modern culture of consumption see A. Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value', in A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1986). On cultural intermediaries and consumer culture see P. Bourdieu, *Distinction* (London, 1984); M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London, 1991).
 49. www.ethicalconsumer.org; see also Gabriel and Lang, *The Unmanageable Consumer*.
 50. In the paradigmatic case of food, conventional issues of health and safety are still relevant in so far as they offer alternative themes the opportunity to reverberate in larger social circles. The most important competing narratives are indeed themselves often related to episodes of breach of trust in the market brought about by health risks associated with industrial food production and globalization. The BSE crisis, in particular, has been incorporated into the wider movement against McDonald's. In Italy, for example, a 'boycott day' against McDonald's arrived after a case of BSE was discovered in cattle raised for use by McDonald's itself. To broaden their reach and penetrate new sections of the public, the organizers of the campaign can therefore count on a very sensational theme. This is then articulated through the usual environmentalist arguments, such as that meat production entails an inefficient use of resources, as well as criticism of aggressive advertising and fears of globalization and homogenization; see R. Sassatelli, 'The Political Morality of Food: Discourses, Contestation and Alternative Consumption', in Harvey *et al.* (eds), *Qualities of Food*, pp. 176–91.
 51. Telephone interview, March 2004.
 52. W. Young and R. Welford, *Ethical Shopping* (London, 2002), p. ix.
 53. See Boltanski and Thévenot, *De la justification*; see also M. Lamont and L. Thévenot, *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology* (Cambridge, 2000).

54. See further R. Sassatelli, 'Consuming Ambivalence: Eighteenth Century Public Discourse on Consumption and Mandeville's Legacy', *Journal of Material Culture*, 2(3) (1997), pp. 339–60, and Sassatelli, *Consumer Culture*.
55. Bilanci di Giustizia (Balances of Justice) is a missionary-style organization, which operates mainly in the centre and north of Italy. Families keep a constant diary of their expenses and publish every year an overview of the social and environmental cost of their lifestyles. See www.bilancidigiustizia.org.
56. Historically, this separation has been coded by gender, with women being mostly confined to the private sphere as the perfect consumer; see V. de Grazia with E. Furlough (eds), *The Sex of Things* (Berkeley, 1996). However, as shown by Matthew Hilton's work on the gendering of consumer politics in twentieth-century Britain, an increasingly gender-neutral category has emerged following the 1950s image of the consumer-housewife. This has been promoted by business groups and an affluent consumer movement which has inscribed consumerism with the values of a male professional class; see M. Hilton, 'The Female Consumer and the Politics of Consumption in Twentieth-century Britain', *The Historical Journal*, 25(1) (2002), pp. 103–28. For a discussion of the continuing relevance of gender in contemporary political consumerism see M. Micheletti, 'Issues of Gender and Political Consumerism', in Micheletti *et al.* (eds), *Politics, Products and Markets*, pp. 245–65.
57. WorldWatch Institute, *Vital Signs 2001* (Washington, 2001), p. 11.
58. Douglas, *Thought Styles*, p. 161.
59. www.ethicalconsumer.org.
60. L. Waridel, *Coffee with Pleasure: Just Java and World Trade* (London, 2002).
61. In-depth interview, June 2004.
62. www.oneworld.net.
63. In-depth interview, October 2004. Historically, Anglo-American and southern European views of how market and personal relations intertwine have differed. In both cases, from the Enlightenment onwards, the market is conceived as making possible a society of horizontal relationships. However, if we consider friendship or genuine reciprocity, Smith believed that the market was the place of instrumental relationships which allowed for the conditions for experiencing true friendship *outside the market*, while Genovesi and the Neapolitan School saw market relationships themselves as relations of reciprocity, see L. Bruni and R. Sugden, 'Moral Canals: Trust and Social Capital in

- the Work of Hume, Smith and Genovesi', *Economics and Philosophy*, 16 (2000), pp. 19–46.
64. Telephone interview, September 2004.
 65. For a review of the issues and organizations which are part of conventional consumerism with particular reference to the US, see D.A. Aaker and G.S. Day, 'A Guide to Consumerism', *Marketing Management*, 4(1), 1997, pp. 44–8. For a more comparative outlook see R. Sassatelli, *Power Balances in the Consumption Sphere* (Florence, European University Institute, Working Paper 5, September 1995, pp. 1–74). For a perspective on the development of the British consumer movement see Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth Century Britain*.
 66. L. Pinto, 'Le Consommateur: agent économique et acteur politique', *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 31 (1990), pp. 179–98.
 67. A. Aldridge, 'The Construction of Rational Consumption in Which? Magazine: The More Blobs the Better?', *Sociology*, 28 (1994), pp. 899–912, 901. This is in striking contrast with specialized magazines dedicated to particular product categories such as fashion, wine and cars. In opposition to depersonalized authority, scientific analysis and asceticism typical of product-testing magazines, they promote charismatic authority, connoisseurship and a hedonistic outlook; see M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*.
 68. It may be possible to suggest some continuity between the 'form of life' of some sectors of the middle class, and in particular the traditional middle class living on a fixed income, and the development of the 'rational consumer'. The traditional middle class on a fixed income is different from the lower classes who are pushed by their precarious status towards a pattern of negative choices with desultory wasting-off expenditure and far from rational calculation (see Pinto, 'Le Consommateur'). They are well distinguished from the entrepreneurial middle class, for whom it is capital which can be stretched and which requires rational calculation. They are also distinct from the new middle class in the media and fashion professions for whom the promotion of self-indulgence in consumption is clearly a means of self-expression (see Bourdieu, *Distinction*, and Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*).
 69. Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World 2004*, pp. 53–4. There is a wide academic literature on this, from *The Joyless Economy* by T. Scitovsky (New York, 1976) to the more recent *An All-consuming Century* by G. Gross (New York, 2000), as well as articulated interdisciplinary discussions on the notion of 'quality of life' and 'welfare' such as M. Nussbaum and A. Sen (eds), *The Quality of Life* (Oxford, 1993).

70. See Douglas, *Thought Styles*, Bourdieu, *Distinction*, and, for an emphasis on the subversive strategies of consumers, M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1984).
71. See R. Sassatelli, 'Tamed Hedonism: Choice, Desires and Deviant Pleasures', in A. Warde and J. Gronow (eds), *Ordinary Consumption* (London, 2001), pp. 93–106.
72. F. Trentmann, 'Knowing Consumers: Histories, Identities, Practices', in Trentmann (ed.), *The Making of the Consumer*, p. 8.
73. M. Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen, 1922); Eng. trans. *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1949), *passim*.
74. D. Miller, 'The Poverty of Morality', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1(2) (2001), pp. 225–44.
75. Miller, 'The Poverty of Morality', p. 234.
76. M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York, 1979); D. Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford, 1987).
77. Rather than considering consumers as reflexive actors, this perspective develops the ethnomethodological notion of reflexivity as applied to accounts, H. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Cambridge, 1984 [1967]), and brings it closer to Foucauldian concerns, i.e. considering that accounts are embodied practices which sustain the reality of a situation but emphasizing conflict, history and power and discourses as repertoires for mutual understanding and justification which cannot be reduced to situated accounting practices. This allows the consideration of how people from different institutional positions may act differently and, especially, how certain themes and evaluation criteria get entrenched and become hegemonic throughout history: that is, how power and history shape the conditions for mutual understanding. See also R. Sassatelli, 'The Political Morality of Food'; for a discussion of Garfinkel and Foucault see also A. McHoul, 'The Getting of Sexuality: Foucault, Garfinkel and the Analysis of Sexual Discourse', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 3(2) (1986), pp. 65–79.
78. Here I take a position different from both Callon and Miller on the role of mainstream economics wisdom and its various ramifications for public discourse. Callon considers that markets are indeed disentangled realities, disciplined, as it were, by economic expert discourse; Miller considers that neoclassical wisdom offers only a virtual picture of consumption, its ideological function being resisted in practice. Certainly, there is ample evidence that no matter how much market exchanges try to

shut themselves off from other spheres of life, they are, as Polanyi said, 'embedded' in social networks; likewise, we witness daily to what extent the instrumental picture of the consumer is institutionally reinforced and frankly hegemonic in a number of key institutional contexts. Much more research is needed on how these competing views of the consumer and consumption are promoted by a number of institutional actors and indeed mixed and mingled in daily practices. See M. Callon (ed.), *The Laws of the Market* (Oxford, 1998), esp. Callon's 'Introduction', pp. 1–57, and D. Miller, 'Turning Callon the Right Way up', *Economy and Society*, 31(2) (2002), pp. 218–33. See also A. Barry and D. Slater, 'Introduction', *Economy and Society*, 2 (2002), pp. 175–93, and B. Fine, 'Callonistics: A Disentanglement', *Economy and Society*, 32(3) (2003), pp. 478–84.