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### **Political Consumerism**

Formally defined, political consumerism is the choice of producers and products with the aim of changing ethically or politically objectionable institutional or market practices. Their choices are informed by attitudes and values regarding issues of justice, fairness, non-economic issues that concern personal and family well-being, and ethical or political assessment of favorable and unfavorable business and government practice.

December is the season of giving. Streets and shopping windows are decorated in holiday colors, and Christmas music and spirit fill shopping malls. For retail stores, it is a most lucrative time of year. Newspaper, television, radio, and now even Internet advertisements try to convince people that they truly can show their loved ones how much they really care by giving them special gifts at Christmas time. A particular focus of marketing attention is the younger generation, a group seen as easy prey for marketing strategists because of their concern over personal appearance and the social status accompanying brand name clothing, shoes, and other consumer-oriented material goods. But this characterization does not apply to all young people. Christmas season is also when the political consumerism movement gears up for focused action to question the basis of consumer society. Many young people are involved in this reevaluation of Western consumer-driven society.

A few holiday seasons ago, BehindTheLabel.com, an on-line advocacy network, put out an urgent appeal against The Gap, a large clothing chain with stores in several nations that markets its clothes to young people. It urged consumers not to patronize GAP stores, claiming on its on-line slideshow: "The Gap uses sweatshop labor, if you buy Gap you do too. Make a difference. Be the generation that stops sweatshops. Tell your family and friends: Don't buy me GAP this holiday season." In Canada, advocates wearing Santa outfits appeared in shopping malls to call attention to the effects of our commercial society in other parts of the world. Elsewhere, activists against sweatshops have taken to the streets. In the Netherlands, for example, Dutch protesters dressed themselves as angels to attract consumer attention on a busy public street lined with clothing stores and asked shoppers to send the company of their choice a Christmas card asking about its offshore production practices and codes of conduct.

These examples tell the stories of many young people who are conscientious consumers. They use the marketplace to challenge how we live, work, and do politics in the world today. These young activists urge us to think about consumer society in new ways by confronting what they consider to be an ethically blind and consumption-crazed society. They encourage individual consumers to fight for the rights of workers and animals, and against unbridled free trade, the power of transnational corporations, and the use of pesticides and genetically modified organisms in our food. This type of engagement stands in seeming contrast to the common critique of today's young people as materialistically oriented. Although the numbers indicate that, for example, college freshmen have an increased interest in becoming financially well off, the trend-lines also show that they attach more importance to contributing to society. People who use the market in this fashion are political consumers.

Although the concept is fairly new, political consumerism is an old phenomenon. Historical studies of the United States and Europe have shown how the market has frequently been used as an arena for political activism. Women, marginalized groups, and young people

have, for instance, employed their purchasing power to help put an end to domestic American sweatshop labor in the early 1900s by buying “White Label” goods, to combat various kinds of discrimination through boycotts, and to fight for peace by encouraging their parents to be socially responsible when they invest in the stock market. Citizens both young and old from different nations have even joined together in international boycotts to protest governmental or corporate policy. Well-known examples include those against Nestlé, South Africa, and grape producers. Recently France and the U.S. have been the focus of grassroots international boycotts because of their positions on the Iraq war in the spring of 2003.

Political consumerism comes in different forms. Citizens *boycott* to express political sentiment and they *buycott* or use labeling schemes to support corporations that represent values—environmentalism, fair trade, and sustainable development, for example—that they support. Political consumerism can also have an uglier face, as when boycotts and buycotts are used in struggles against particular ethnic, religious or racial groups and for the advancement of nationalistic goals. The “Don’t Buy Jewish” boycotts that began in Europe at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are the clearest and best-known example of this ugly face of political consumerism. Even current boycott campaigns against corporations seen as “gay-friendly” and “pro-abortion” can be put in this category. Sometimes a political consumerist campaign has both a pretty and ugly face, as shown in the African-American “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign in the earlier 1900s that was used by both citizens struggling to improve the plight of African Americans and also Black Nationalist groups who used boycotts to promote anti-white and anti-Semitic attitudes.

Young people are engaged in all forms of political consumerism. Survey research from different countries shows that they are more interested in grassroots engagements and in using the market than other channels for political participation. When asked in 2002 if they had ever “not bought something because of the conditions under which it was made,” 51.4 percent of young Americans between the ages of 15-25 said “yes” and a majority stated they had done so in the last year. The same survey reports that 43.7 percent of young Americans said they *had* bought a certain product because they liked the values of the company that made it (Orlander, 2004). Political consumerism ranked by far the highest for young people out of a range of political activities including contacting a public official, writing a letter to a newspaper editor, and participating in protests and rallies. About two thirds of the respondents said that they were not involved in any kind of conventional political engagement. Clearly, the high percentage of political consumers among young people is partially caused by the fact that those below eighteen years of age are not yet allowed to vote. However, political consumerism might still be considered a new and important tool for political engagement for young people.

Swedish national surveys confirm the importance of the marketplace as an arena for young people to engage in politics. Nearly 28% percent of all Swedes between the ages of 16 and 29 have boycotted for a political reason within a recent twelve-month period, and over 40% indicate that they have actively chosen a product for similar reasons. Many claim that they act as political consumers more than just once; those youngsters who have extensive education are most involved. Yet political consumerism has the potential to evolve into a widespread phenomenon, which might include also those usually left out of conventional politics. A study conducted by the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs shows that almost everyone in this age group has sometime in their life boycotted or would consider boycotting for a political reason. What is particularly interesting is that this high level of appeal (just under 100 percent)

can be compared with a bit fewer than 70 percent who stated that they were generally interested in politics.

What is particularly interesting is that young citizens' market-based political strategies go beyond boycotting and buycoting, which are commonly targeted in survey research. Young people are also activists in internet campaigns, mobilize their schools, universities or fellow-students to take actions regarding consumer issues, engage in culture jamming, and use the Internet to voice their individual opinions on consumer society and transnational corporations. Most frequently, young people use these means of involvement in their fight for workers' rights in developing and western countries and the treatment of animals. This engagement is channeled through a variety of opportunities for activism that are offered by the "no sweat" and animal rights' movements, two global advocacy movements that developed strongly in the 1990s and 2000s. The "no sweat" movement, represented by North American anti-sweatshop advocacy networks and the European Clean Clothes Campaign, fights for good working conditions in the global garment industry. The crusade for proper animal welfare, including bans on animal testing and fur trading as well as the promotion of vegetarianism and veganism, are the key motivators of the animal rights' movement.

A fairly new tool for these advocacy movements and even individual young citizens who support them is culture jamming/adbusting. Culture jamming is directed against corporate power and involves activities that generally fall under the categories of media hacking, information warfare, terror-art, and guerrilla semiotics. They are individualized types of actions that can be performed alone but that help a common cause. The most famous case of culture jamming was incited by former MIT graduate student Jonah Peretti, who ordered a pair of customizable Nike shoes with the word "sweatshop" on them. This request turned him into a global celebrity. The emails—completely independent of his control or encouragement—reached an estimated 11.4 million people around the globe. This is an example of culture jamming in the classical sense, in that he utilized Nike's own marketing strategy to argue for his request. Peretti's story shows that the Internet is an important tool for global social activist network-building, and it illustrates how individualized life-style choices can dovetail with responsibility-taking for global social justice.

Postcard campaigns are another important form of culture jamming that is used frequently by the anti-sweatshop movement. Typically, activists pass out postcards in front of targeted clothing stores and at music concerts, movement events, and other public happenings that draw crowds of young people. They urge those they encounter to send postcard messages to clothing companies. Postcards depicting sweatshop labor and making fun of corporate advertisements are available on-line from the Clean Clothes Campaign website. Young people find this form of activism enjoyable because they appreciate direct political messages that poke fun at authority and because they can choose the card, write a message in the appropriate textbox, choose the addressee, and then send it off. Examples of culture jamming postcards include: "Income GAP. An American Classic," a play on The GAP's logo; a card portraying Mickey Mouse with fangs and reading "BOM!!! Beware of Mickey. Disney Sweatshops in South China" which provides information on the salary level of the Disney CEO and the wages paid to Disney workers in China; another showing a picture of a man with money stuffed in his mouth and the words "The true colors of Benetton" written across his shirt, and a rewording of the Levis jeans patch "Evil Strauss & Co. \$\$\$".

The animal rights' movement has its own culture jamming campaigns that offer supporters personal items for sale over the Internet so they can wear their values. Students

have come to class with T-shirts depicting the Burger King logotype but with the words “Murder King”. Many young people find these activities appealing because they provide a way of expressing concerns about global justice by offering immediate, counter-cultural involvement with causes that research shows interest youth. These kinds of involvements have also been called life-style politics because the sharing of political messages and the engagements in political acts are embedded in everyday life. For younger generations, politics is enmeshed with their daily life choices about how they dress, what they eat, what they buy, and which music they listen to in their free time.

Political consumerist strategies interest young people because they allow them wiggle room to live, design, and build their own involvements. “Modding” is a term from the computer game world that characterizes this kind of youthful involvement. Political consumerist networks allow people to “mod” (that is, to modify) political activism. Educational meetings organized by the Clean Clothes Campaign can end with participants planning their own public action days to be implemented, without central supervision, in their home towns. Other advocacy campaigns encourage do-it-yourself involvement by providing people with a toolbox or action package to build their own activism. The Canadian anti-sweatshop network, Maquila Solidarity Network, even distributes a Sweatshop Fashion Show toolkit, which has been used by young people across the country to raise awareness about sweatshop abuses in a fun and educational way. These tools help young people plan alternative shows whose purpose is the creation of public spectacles that question the politics of fashion products. Because of their alternative nature, these activities are often picked up by the media in various countries.

Political consumerist activists like the Maquila Solidarity Network also target school environments, particularly high schools. Its “No Sweat Schools” campaigns rally students together to declare their school free of sweatshop products. Their goal is to negotiate an agreement with their school stipulating that it will not purchase uniforms for students, staff, teams, and others that are made under sweatshop conditions. These campaigns are almost always initiated by students themselves, even though they are based on the mobilization and facts provided by the Maquila Solidarity network. The process of a campaign often involves raising student awareness, lobbying principals and teachers, developing a plan for change or a Code of Conduct, and lobbying the Board of Education or a local municipal council. For many pupils, this is the first time that they have engaged with the social and political institutions in their communities. During the campaign, students learn that they are more than just individualized consumers and that their actions are part of a political and economic machine with real power in the corporate and political worlds. The pupils move from the consumer-to-producer relationship to a relationship of institutional purchaser-to-supplier. Young people easily feel that their power has been increased through this shift. University students in the United States have undertaken similar efforts and have even established the organization United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), an effort considered by some to be the new student movement for the 1990s and 2000s.

Youth involvement with the global garment industry has mobilized other people, both young and old, into action and even led to institution-building efforts to follow up agreements made together with student political consumerist activists. The Workers’ Rights Consortium, a non-profit organization, was, for example, created by college students, university administrators and labor rights experts to make sure that university-adopted codes of conduct are effectively enforced. The “Disclosure Campaign” lobbied the Canadian federal government

in 2002 for a change in its labeling regulations governing manufactured goods sold in Canada. It all started when a student in British Columbia, outraged about not being able to find sufficient information about how her clothes had been produced, cut a label out of one of her purchases and sent it to the government along with a demand for more consumer information. The physical defacement of her clothes made a powerful statement that resonated with other concerned young people across the country, who subsequently decided to send in their labels as well. With the help of the Maquila Solidarity Network's website, which advertised the campaign, tens of thousands of clothing labels and petitions signed by over 20,000 Canadians were delivered to the office of the Ministry of Industry, thus demonstrating that support for product transparency had gained broad public support.

Networks and campaigns from the animal rights' movement also understand the importance of youth involvement in their campaigns. They encourage young people to act on their values, do their own thing, and "mod" their involvements by offering toolkits and proposals for how to get involved. An entire website of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, PETA-Kids, is devoted to enticing young people into this kind of activism. It premieres a short animated film "The Meatrix." With music from "The Matrix" in the background, young people are told about problems with agricultural animal welfare and that "[i]t is you the consumer that has the real power ... click here and I will show you how to escape the Meatrix" (. Following the link brings them to the "Get Active" page, which includes tips about grassroots, everyday, social and food, consumer, armchair and web activism.

Most available research tends to show that young people do not dominate the ranks of people who buy organic food and eco-labeled household. Most likely this is because of financial restrictions in choosing products that can at times be more expensive than non-labeled ones and because very young people do not shop for food supplies and household goods as frequently as the older generations. Yet other forms of political consumerism like culture jamming, creation of public spectacles, and attempts to influence the consumer choices made by older generations interest them greatly. Why is this?

The phenomenon of political consumerism is embedded in the ongoing debate about how and why young citizens have been turning their backs on electoral politics in unprecedented numbers. Indeed, much of the decline in voter turnout over the past decade can be explained by the increasing numbers of young citizens not turning up to vote at election time. In the 2000 U.S. presidential election, only 36 percent of young voters between the ages of 18 and 24 actually used their right to vote. Scattered evidence also suggests that the membership base of youth organizations is in decline, even more so than party membership in general.

Large-scale societal transformation explains young peoples' retreat from conventional forms of political involvement. They tend to dislike participation in bureaucratic and time-consuming organizations, and they typically prefer more spontaneous, informal, and egalitarian networks and organizations. This has been called the postmaterialist value shift, entailing heightened interest by younger generations in Western societies for values outside of the material world of physical safety and economic security. The phenomenon of political consumerism fits squarely into this new development. Not only does it offer new ways of political engagement outside of mainstream institutions, it also seeks to spread postmaterial values and ideas of justice, equality and fairness in all parts of the world.

Young citizens have also been found to distrust traditional or mainstream forms of political involvement (political parties, parliaments, Congress, labor unions, and so on), and

they have made conscious choices to avoid them. Instead, they confront societal problems directly, as exemplified by political consumerism. . This desire for new forms of activism helps to explain youth involvement in the Clean Clothes Campaign. Students who join the campaign and who become active are at first very disaffected from the political process. They do not believe that voting or joining a party makes a difference. Yet during a given campaign when pupils or students come into contact with government officials, they get drawn into the conventional political process.

Through political consumerism, young people can directly confront transnational corporations and consumer society. They can work with their concerns about the quality of our environment and animal and human rights. Political consumerism allows them to “mod” their involvement to suit their own needs and consciousnesses. The toolkits and activity packages offer them ideas for individual and collective ways to force a variety of actors to take notice of the problems caused by our consumption patterns and corporate efforts in making us consume at an ever faster rate. Young people can decide for themselves which actors and problems to target. They can use political consumerism to call attention to the need for institutions at the global political level, the growing importance of transnational corporations, or consumer society itself.

With the help of political consumerist toolkits, young people are increasingly demanding more transparency in and control over commodity chains that seem far removed from their everyday lives. Through public performances, jokes, political messages on their clothing, and with the help of the Internet, they demand that corporations reveal the hidden politics and economic, human, ecological, and animal costs of common consumer goods and services. Young people are increasingly crying out to take responsibility for the ecological and ethical “footprints” that we all leave behind after purchasing goods at shopping malls, school cafeterias, and fast food hamburger and chicken chains. They are demanding that corporate actors share in this responsibility-taking with them.

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