Consuming a Political Figure: a Post-Structuralist Reading of Four "Political Products"

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Although the political aspects of consumption represent a vibrant topic of consumer research, the existing literature seldom delves into the consumption of politics itself. The presented working paper acknowledges both the increasing politicization of consumption and the burgeoning commercialization of politics by accentuating the importance of studying the ways in which individuals consume politics. An interpretative textual analysis of four interconnected political products centering on US President G. W. Bush is presented to shed light on the symbolic facets of consuming politics in an ex-socialist European setting.

[to cite]:

Domen Bajde (2007), "Consuming a Political Figure: a Post-Structuralist Reading of Four "Political Products"", in E - European Advances in Consumer Research Volume 8, eds. Stefania Borghini, Mary Ann McGrath, and Cele Otnes, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 277-278.

[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13977/eacr/vol8/E-08

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The extent to which contemporary politics are determined by market considerations (Bourdieu 1998) and the level of politically inspired consumption are unprecedented (Baudrillard 1988, Micheletti 2003). Some observers describe this state of affairs as a capitulation of the state sphere brought on by the omnipotence of the market sphere (Godbout and Caille 1998). On the other hand, the situation can also be perceived as a gradual erosion of the division between the modern categorization of the state and the market. Nowadays, we are faced with hybrid citizen-consumers whose actions no longer conform to the strict division between public and private, political and commercial. The described transformations invite various novel lines of consumer research. This working paper centers on a specific, yet widespread consumption practice by investigating political consumption (i.e., consuming a political figure) in an ex-socialist European commercial. The described transformations invite various novel lines of consumer research. This working paper centers on a specific, yet...
bureaucratic individualized actions such as consumption activities. Along similar lines, Micheletti (2003) introduces the notion of “individualized collective action” as a form of contemporary political activism. Ironically, the existing research building upon these premises by and large explores the politically inspired consumption of products such as food or fashion items (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004; Murray 2002; Shaw and Newholm 2002), while the consumption of politics itself has attracted less interest.

Considering the burgeoning commercialization of politics, the limited interest in the consumption of politics is peculiar to say the least. The influx of novel ways in which the market appropriates politics commands attention. For instance, recently we have faced a proliferation of politically inspired entertainment (e.g., movie-documentaries such as Fahrenheit 9/11) coupled with the explosion of politically charged web products ranging from computer games, video clips, and music to an assortment of political merchandise (e.g., T-shirts, stickers, coasters). These “political products” are generally related to prominent political events and/or revolve around infamous political figures. Among the latter type the craze surrounding US President G. W. Bush is quite exceptional in terms of both its global scope and diversity. For example, consumers can consume this political figure through various computer games, documentaries, books, and merchandise.

My research delves into political consumption in an ex-socialist European setting by exploring a set of G.W. Bush-related products: a collection of four books written by Marcel Stefancic, a Slovenian pop-philosopher, film critic, legendary infotainment host, and journalist obsessed with American politics. In addition to revolving around a global political figure, these four products of popular culture touch upon a number of global socio-political issues. As a result, they offer fertile grounds for an exploration of the symbolic aspects of political consumption. The four texts were analyzed by drawing upon the literary criticism tradition (Stern 1989). Specifically, a post-structuralist reading was adopted to generate and examine the central binary oppositions that underpin the text and which are relevant to our discussion (Brown 1996). In line with Currie (1989, 5), these binary oppositions represent an “unstable basis for meaning, a place where the values and hidden ideologies of the text are inscribed.”

The four analyzed texts include Bush’s America (published in 2001), The Bush Code, Bush’s Legion (both 2004) and Bush’s Resurrection (2005). At first glance, the collection offers a neat chronological review of the President’s incumbency, beginning with the 2000 US elections and the events surrounding 9/11, continuing with the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and concluding with the 2004 elections and the ensuing events. On the other hand, the texts position G. W. Bush in a very wide socio-historical framework, employing this political figure as an emblem of contemporary politics. As such, the hero represents a powerful catalyst for heated discussions regarding the crisis of democracy, hegemonic international relations, and the place of religion and business in politics.

Whereas several elementary binary oppositions underpin the texts (e.g., capitalism vs. socialism, business vs. politics), the opposition between truth and falseness is of particular interest to our discussion. This fundamental opposition underpins the complex socio-political discussions surrounding G. W. Bush, who throughout the four texts serves as a symbol of deceitfulness and corruption. The author meticulously maps the historical “lies of American politics” (e.g., Vietnam, McCarthyism, Iraq) to construct the overarching narrative of “Bushist” hegemony. The delineated hegemony is twofold as it subsumes the (internal) deceitful subordination of the American public and the (external) aggressive extortion of the international community which together offer a unique reference point for a collective identification of “anti-Bushists” across the globe.

What is more, the falseness of contemporary (American) democracy is further illustrated by the hold that religion and business have on politics. The author outlines “a typical Bushist” as being a “polished combination of an ideologist, a consultant, a businessman and a hardcore hawk”. This illustration eloquently stresses the deceitful, self-interested aggression of Bushist politics as perceived through the lens of an ex-socialist European pop-philosopher. In essence, what we are faced with is Stefancic’s truth which, notwithstanding its criticism of the market and religious ideology, is itself set to be consumed by an array of faithful followers. It is a truth assembled from numerous political products (e.g., anti-Bushist web sites, documentaries) which are offered as signs leading towards “the truth”. As such, political products generate cultural spaces in which specific truths and realities can be constructed and consumed. The playful nature of these cultural spaces enables their “producers” to criticize fictitious politics through fiction (i.e., in this case a fictional literary work). Such paradoxes and the underlying production and consumption of playful realities represent an interesting topic for consumer research of both playful consumption and political consumption.

References