Market and Public Sphere: Unpacking Political Consumerism

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In this paper, we revisit political consumerism (consumer activism and resistance) by bring to the debate the concept of the public sphere. Drawing on the formulations by Habermas (1984; [1959] 1989) and Arendt ([1958] 1998) on the modern public sphere, and by Asen (2000) and Warner (2002) on counter publics, we question the legitimacy of the market as a site for emancipatory political action. We conclude with thoughts on the future of political consumerism in the age of the internet and the specter of a transnational public sphere.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

In the past, consumer researchers have studied various dimensions and practices of consumerist politics including boycotts (Klein et al, 2004; Sen et al, 2001), the critical/reflexive consumer (Murray and Ozanne, 1991; Ozanne and Murray 1995; Firtat and Venkatesh 1995), consumer activism (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), consumer resistance (Kozinets 2002, Kozinets et al 2004), countervailing strategies for commercial mainstreaming (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007) and oppositional meanings of global brandscapes (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). A related yet substantially different stream of research on the politics of consumption has evolved in the field of political science. Discussions of what political theorists call political consumerism (see e.g. Micheletti 2003; Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle 2004) focus on broad issues ranging from the existence and role of the postmodern political agent to the meaning of forest stewardship in the age of privatization. At the center of many of these writings are analyses of the condition and effects of global corporate capitalism, especially when fuelled by new information and communication technologies. The objective of this body of literature is to theorize the political consumerism movement as an individual and collective quest for political virtue in consumption and the market in the age of postmodern consumer culture, unfettered neo-liberalism, and rising neo-conservativism (Saltman 2006). Heeding the call of the conference theme, we would like to advance the budding debate on the politics of consumption in consumer research by ‘building a bridge’ to the theoretical work done in the field of political consumerism and by sketching out new directions for research on the politics of consumption within the canon of consumer culture theory.

Within the scope of this session we would like to achieve two main objectives. First, we revisit and critically interrogate some (often implicit) assumptions that posit the market as a sphere for political action and consumer agency. Second, we present two growing domains of consumption activity that traditionally have not been considered by researchers of the intersection of politics and consumption: first, the interrelationship between consumers’ political orientation and collective consumer decision making and second, tourism. Partly due to a lack of comprehensive theoretical and historical analyses of political consumerism in CCT, our discussions have been limited to explorations of the motivations, the role, and the actions of various anti-global and anti-corporatist consumer movements. In this session, we not only present a number of different contexts in which to investigate political consumer action and move forward theorizations of political consumerism, we also question the theoretical and practical limits of political consumerism by presenting the contradictions that persist (and arguably become more accentuated in the age of neo-liberal globalization) between the market and the public (political) sphere. Hence, our agenda goes beyond the well-known consumer activism/resistance literatures by theorizing the political conditions of possibility of markets, consumption, and consumer subjects.

The first paper by Ozalp and Zwick investigates the implicit assumptions inherent in positing the market as a domain for enacting political action (collective and individual) and performing political consumer agency. From a public sphere perspective inspired by Habermas and others, the authors build a case against seeing the market as a useful site for political action as its logic goes against the main principles of enlightened and emancipated political debate: concern for the common good, concern for complete inclusion, and a desire to resolve inequity and injustice. The paper concludes with thoughts on the future of consumer resistance and the public sphere in the age of the Internet. Ozalp and Zwick argue that as the market becomes a transnational public the already rather limited ability of consumers to constitute and govern markets as a public sphere is diminished further vis-à-vis other political bodies such as firms, supra-national institutions, and governments. Yet, the condition of possibility for emancipated political consumerism is a market functioning as a public sphere. Otherwise, such acts of resistance are merely momentary and cannot be considered political and emancipatory.

The second paper expands on what has been considered part of the politics-market nexus by focusing on a specific type of anti-consumption activity: politically motivated brand rejection (PMBR). Sandikci and Ekici define PMBR as the refusal to purchase and/or use a brand on a permanent basis because of its perceived association with a particular political ideology that the consumer rejects. Based on interview data, the authors present three different types of ideologies that can lead to PMBR: predatory globalization, chauvinistic nationalism, and religious fundamentalism.

The third paper studies the volunteer vacation context in order to understand how political consumers have sought re-enchantment, communitas, and public virtue. Leonard presents results of an ongoing empirical project that investigates how volunteer vacations become a domain for political identity projects by presenting a space for engaging with the Other/Difference. She discusses how the motivations of political consumerism enter one of the more unlikely areas, global tourism, a site conventionally associated with the consumption of leisure and escape. Collectively these papers aim to provide a richer understanding of the intersection of politics and consumption.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Market and Public Sphere: Unpacking Political Consumerism”
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Today, consumers are actors in increasingly politicized market. Even international relations between countries are enacted in part through the market as instances of country-based calls for boycotts demonstrate (for example, many Muslim countries called for a boycott of Danish products after the cartoon incident and many popular right-wing media pundits in the US called for a consumer boycott of French products after the President Chirac-led government around President Chirac refused to support the Iraq war). More typically perhaps, the market has been politicized by the critics of global corporate capitalism who routinely call for consumption boycotts when companies fail to uphold ethical, social, economic, or environmental standards. Although these practices resulted in a growing interest in studying consumer activism, the notion of whether the market can serve as a legitimate site for emancipatory political action and agency has remained largely unquestioned. In this paper, we would like to investigate this take-for-granted assumption. To this end we first introduce two different conceptualizations of the modern public sphere that we find useful for theorizing political consumerism: modern public sphere and
counter publics. We then proceed to discuss under what conditions the market could be considered a public sphere that provides a legitimate area for political action and agency. Finally, we discuss how the Internet and the changing nature of a transnational public sphere may affect political consumerism.

Standard practices of political consumerism involve boycotts, buyouts, culture jamming, stewardship certification schemes, labeling schemes, and socially responsible investments. Micheletti and others (Micheletti et al., 2004) see the global market as a site for ethics and citizen action. They suggest that the dissociation of individual citizens from the political life turned the market into a site for "confronting the transnational corporations directly in the global marketplace, [where consumers] accuse them of violating human rights, and criticize them for their lack of dedication to sustainable development" (Micheletti et al., 2004, p. x). The capacity to resist corporate power qua consumer power has been discussed in the marketing literature as well, including boycotts (Klein et al., 2004; Sen et al., 2001), consumer enlightenment (Murray and Ozanne, 1995; Firat and Venkatesh 1995), consumer activism (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), countervailing strategies for commercial mainstreaming (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007) and oppositional meanings of global brandscapes (Thompson and Arsel, 2004).

Despite such vivid interest in the politics of consumption, the question whether the market in fact constitutes a site for emancipation and deliberation remains unaddressed. In pursuit of an answer, we refer to the works of Habermas (1984; [1959] 1989) and Arendt ([1958] 1998) to develop a concept of the modern public sphere. Even though both authors consider the market as a social 'space', the recent rise of what has widely been called neo-liberalism calls into question whether the market form can uphold the key pillars of a public sphere (presence of rational-critical discourse and common goal), since there is an increasing power imbalance and unequal distribution. As a result, researchers of political consumerism and consumer resistance/activism focus on how the market can enable a free speech situation in Habermas’s sense. Although the ideal speech situation developed by Habermas (1984) is central to the reflexive-defiant consumer of Murray and Ozanne (1991; 1995) and also rather implicitly present in the conceptualizations of the postmodern consumer subject by Firat and Venkatesh (1995), these authors focus on theorizing the consumer subject rather than developing a conceptualization of the market as public sphere for consumer emancipation. Arguments similar to Murray and Ozanne can be found in the political science literature on political consumerism. Specifically, as ideal democracies and public spheres are inclusive rather than exclusive; equating political consumerism with democracy and equating the [political] consumer subject with the democratic individual and citizen (see Micheletti et al., 2004, for different perspectives on this argument) calls for an in depth analysis of the inclusiveness of the political consumerism. As Stoole and Hooghe (2004, p.284) state “political consumerism like many other forms of participation is not all-inclusive”. Given the exclusivity of market and consumer resistance as well as the absence of a cultural and social mechanism that will ensure the pursuit of a common good, serious doubts arise about the market as a modern public sphere (Barber 2007).

Within public sphere literature, the issue of exclusivity has resulted in the development of the concept of counter public. A counter public excludes or self-reflexively sets itself against the wider public (Asen, 2000). A counter public shares an understanding of a common good that is different from the wider public (Warner, 2002). The counter public exists as long as the exclusion is articulated in the discourse (Asen, 2000). The objective is to end the exclusion. Again, while references to a counter public can be found in the CCT literature (see e.g. Kozinets 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004) a theorization of this concept is missing with important implications for the theorization of consumer resistance as a counter public. Theories of counter publics require the articulation of resolution (of exclusion) (Asen, 2000). Such a perspective is yet to be included in the consumer resistance work in the CCT literature.

Hence, our analysis suggests three problem areas to which CCT researchers interested in the field of consumer resistance need to pay more attention: the common good, exclusivity, and the possibility of articulating a resolution to exclusion. Finally, we provide some thoughts on the future of consumer resistance and the public sphere. The meaning of the public has changed with the Internet, which has also affected the idea of the market as public sphere. Similar to Bohman (2004), we argue that even though the market turns into a transnational public as a result of the Internet, the existence of institutional support becomes ever more critical. The role of consumers in constituting the market as a public sphere is diminished vis-à-vis other forms like firms, supra-national institutions, and governments. As a result we argue that the possibility of a deliberate and emancipated consumer is not the result of acts of resistance but of a market functioning as a public sphere. Otherwise, such acts of resistance are merely momentary and cannot be considered political and emancipatory.

"Politically Motivated Brand Rejection"
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Both anecdotal and scholarly accounts indicate that anti-consumption attitudes and behaviors have become more diversified and widespread. The term anti-consumption spans a wide continuum, ranging from relatively harmless beliefs, such as negative perceptions of fast-food, to violent and illegal behaviors, such as the acts of vandalism and arson targeted at companies such as McDonald’s, Nike, and the Gap. This study contributes to the existing literature by introducing and discussing an emergent form of anti-consumption behavior, which we refer to as “politically motivated brand rejection” (PMBR). We define PMBR as the refusal to purchase and/or use a brand on a permanent basis because of its perceived association to a particular political ideology that the consumer is opposed to. By political ideology we refer to a “belief system that explains and justifies a preferred political order for society, either existing or proposed, and offers a strategy for its attainment” (Christenson 1971, p.5). Movements such as anti-branding/anti-globalization, green/ethical consumption, and voluntary simplicity exemplify consumption behaviors that are shaped by various political and ideological commitments. As problems such as environmental destruction, human rights violations, and unfair business practices become issues that states have difficulty controlling and governing, marketplace choice emerges as a new form of political participation through which citizen-consumers can exercise their agency (Micheletti 2003). However, contemporary political-social landscape is also characterized by increasing conservatism, fundamentalism, and nationalism. It is likely that, similar to the environmental and ethical concerns that promote anti-consumption behaviors, concerns over nationalism or fundamentalism can also foster anti-consumption behaviors.

The study draws from data collected through qualitative methods in Ankara, Turkey, between March and December 2005. Data collection process involved two stages. First, semi-structured interviews with consumers of different age, gender, and social groups were conducted. The goal was to find out whether they
deliberately refused any brands and products in their consumption choices, and if they did so, to identify the reasons underlying their behavior. Analysis of the first stage data indicated that consumers may reject brands and products for a variety of product, health, environment, and ethics related reasons. However, there were also some consumers who reported rejecting a brand because of politically-motivated reasons that were not discussed previously. Although a number of local and global brands were mentioned, the brands most frequently cited as subject to such rejection behavior were Coca Cola and Cola Turka, a Turkish cola brand. At the second stage of data collection process, interviews with exclusive Coca Cola or Cola Turka consumers were conducted.

The analysis indicates that informants refrain from drinking Coca Cola or Cola Turka for a number of reasons. These include product related as well as politically oriented reasons. The analysis of the politically oriented reasons mentioned by our informants suggests that these consumers perceive an association between the brand they reject and a particular political ideology that they personally oppose. We identified three distinct sets of political ideologies that underlie rejection behavior. A brand can be rejected by some consumers if it is associated with a hegemonic and imperialistic form of globalization, or what Falk (1999) refers to as “predatory globalization”. Many of the Cola Turka consumers in our sample perceive Coca Cola as a symbol of the hegemony of the United States operating under the guise of globalization. Some of them state that they refuse to drink Coca Cola because they consider it represents American cultural imperialism. However, although these consumers reject Coca Cola due to its perceived association with American cultural imperialism, their rejection behavior is distinct from consumer animosity. They do not feel animosity toward all American products; rather they selectively reject certain brands that they believe are associated with the hegemonic nature of the American culture.

A brand can also be rejected if it is associated with chauvinistic nationalism and is seen as manipulating nationalist feelings for financial gains. Contrary to the expectations of the literature on consumer ethnocentrism, our analysis indicates that a domestic brand can be rejected by local consumers because of its strong identification with nationalism. Almost unanimously, those who reject Cola Turka perceive the consumers of Cola Turka as nationalist people who resent foreign brands and give importance to using domestic products, and disassociate themselves from the type of nationalism that they think Cola Turka represents. Moreover, many of the Coca Cola users believe that the managers of Cola Turka brand take advantage of the political context that fosters anti-American sentiments in Turkey and attempt to convert nationalistic feelings into cash.

Finally, a brand can be rejected if it is associated with religious fundamentalism and perceived as representing a threat to contemporary lifestyles. Almost all of the informants who refuse to consume Cola Turka point at the religious undertones of the brand and/or the parent company and perceive the brand as a symbol of Islamic fundamentalism. They believe that those who consume Cola Turka do so not because of its taste but as an expression of their support for the political ideology that the brand and its parent company advocate. Many consumers who reject Cola Turka believe that the Cola Turka represents radical religious groups whose hidden agenda is to abolish the secular regime in Turkey and throw her back into the dark ages. The findings reported in this paper provide preliminary evidence for politically motivated brand-rejection behavior. We argue that PMBR differs from other related forms of brand rejection. First, unlike political consumption, PMBR appears to be a sporadic activity which is not necessarily accompanied with a heightened and enduring sensitivity toward objectionable business practices in general. Second, unlike political consumers who participate in boycotts with the goal of pressuring the target company to correct its bad business practices, consumers who engage in PMBR do not expect a change in the market and business practices.

“Virtuous Vacations: When the Global Citizen Consumer Hits the Road”

Hillary Leonard, University of Rhode Island

Volunteer vacations offer the opportunity to join a travel program, typically organized by a non-profit or nongovernmental organization, and spend one’s holiday doing volunteer work. The work of the tourists on these “Volunteer vacation,” “alternative tourism,” or “working holiday” programs range from assisting scientists in conservation research to building homes and schools to assisting disabled, orphaned, street children to repairing trails in wilderness parks. Programs take place all over the globe in both the developed and developing world with international casts of characters. The work does not come cheaply. Costs for these holidays can equal those of some of the most high-end luxury vacations with land-only costs for a one or two week program running several thousand dollars. Despite the expense, the amenities rarely approach the hedonic, luxury vacation image so widely distributed by the cultural industries. For many volunteer tourists part of the authenticism of the experience is derived from “roughing it” or denying themselves the indulgence of a sumptuous vacation. The work of the volunteers can be tedious, even grueling, leaving volunteers with little time or energy for activities beyond the program or relaxation. Yet the niche is growing quickly and many mass tourist vacation programs are incorporating elements of volunteer vacations into their mainstream packaged holidays.

This paper draws from interview data to investigate the experiences and motivations of the volunteer vacationer. Particular emphasis is put on the question of how such forms of tourism provide citizen consumers the opportunity to share in the responsibility for a wide-range of environmental, social, and political issues in our complex risk-ridden world. As these working holidays offer diverse groups of individuals the opportunity to engage with fellow tourists and their hosts, fascinating political, social, and cultural dynamics play themselves out often translating in a type of worldly solidarity with the plight of others and a sense of collective identity through, or perhaps despite, difference.

Volunteer vacations resist some common models and typologies of tourism and tourists available in the literature. Tourism is frequently contrasted to the everyday, the ordinary (Graburn, 1989) and work (Cohen, 1984) and is commonly conceived of in parallel to pleasure (Rojek, 1995). Further tourism is often categorized by the amount of exposure or protection it provides from the local environment provided by the “tourist bubble” of the tourist infrastructure (Cohen, 1984). The organized tour is the type of tourism most removed and protected from the local host environment, a categorization with lower social status, deemed the most inauthentic. However, the volunteer vacationer joins the organized tour of a working holiday in an effort to gain otherwise unattainable access to the locals and their culture. For many vacations are a time to indulge oneself, an occasion for well-deserved pleasure (Urry, 1990). Contrary to this view of tourism, the volunteer vacation is defined by its objective of benefiting others. As such, volunteer vacations represent a form of political consumerism where citizens take responsibility, balance self interest with helping others, and an enact virtue through consumption (Micheletti, 2003). On the self-interest side, tourists commonly join volunteer vacations for the
chance to meet and connect with a group of like-minded tourists. Perhaps alienated at work, the volunteer program offers tourists access to community and solidarity. Although the community bonds tend to be formed between co-tourists within the packaged volunteer program, volunteer tourists typically choose these holidays to intimately encounter local hosts.

The desire to encounter and “help” the Other has commonly been derided as patronizing at best and perhaps an attempt to reify colonialist, elitist power. However these views have been challenged with the charge that the self/other dichotomy might be refigured (Wearing and Neil, 2000). Although Western views privilege self in opposition to Other, in different cultures self may be defined through connection to others (Wearing and Neil, 2000). By offering volunteer tourists and local hosts the occasion to cooperate and find unity with each other, volunteer vacations build bridges between these groups and bonds them as common citizens of the world. In this way, the other becomes integral and important rather than minimized and contrasting.

REFERENCES