

Sustainability and New Visions of Consumers Sovereignty and Utility¹

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In his widely known work *La société de consommation*, the French cultural critic Jean Baudrillard thus summed up contemporary society: ‘Just as medieval society was balanced on God and the Devil, so ours is balanced on consumption and its denunciation’. The notion of the consumer, contested as it has always been, has itself become an important cultural category. Especially from the late nineteenth century onwards, a number of economic, cultural and political agencies increasingly claimed for themselves the right and duty to address consumers and to speak for them. Advertising and marketing as well as state welfare agencies, consumer defence organisations, women’s groups, consumer boycotts, and more recently the European Union, environmental groups, and new global movements have all contributed, together with social scientific discourses, to situate the ‘consumer’ as a fundamental subject-category within public discourse.

This paper starts by considering the cultural representation of consumption and the consumer focussing on sustainable consumption and alternative food networks, proposing a theoretical systematization aimed at charting the emergence and consolidation of a relational view of consumer sovereignty. Potentially alternative to neo-classical and neo-liberal views, this view of consumer sovereignty takes up both collective goods (environmental concerns, equality, democracy) and private happiness (in terms of critical, creative fulfilment as opposed to acquisition and spending power) in the re-appraisal of the notion of utility. On the backdrop of such understanding, this paper firstly concentrates on the critical framing of the consumer as promoted by different actors in what it defines the alternative food network field and tries to offer a socio-theoretical mapping of its territory. Secondly, the paper looks at what these initiatives appear to have in common, and in particular it considers that they do embrace new visions of the consumer that may represent a challenge to the more established, neo-liberal notions of market choice, signalling that the symbolic boundaries that have come to define the consumer as a specific economic identity who lives in a private world removed from producers, nature and community are being destabilised. Finally, the paper aims to problematise Baudrillard’s view that ‘counter-discourse’ does not afford ‘any real distance’ from (a single vision of) consumer society. While there may be no escape from market society and consumer choice, choices can be constructed and practiced in quite a variety of ways, some of which seem to internalise values other than money and quantity and consider common goods and gift relations, civic engagement and sustainability as

¹ This paper largely draws on two previous contributions: Sassatelli (2009) and (2011).

irreducible elements of consumers' gratification. A good choice must be good for the community and for the planet as well as bringing happiness to the consumer: a sovereign consumer is such only if he or she engages responsibly with his or her own wellbeing, that of the community and the planet. Utility is thus re-defined not as a property of final goods as expressed in the individualistic relation between object and subject, but as a diffuse, entangled property of commodity circuits that extend well before and well after individualistic consumption, into the organization of production, the use of natural resources and the management of waste.

Swinging Consumers

In contemporary Western societies the 'consumer' has by and large been cast a positive political economic role: defined as he who buys goods for his personal uses, he is often portrayed as the last resort to keep the economy turning whenever demand slackens. That commerce and consumption are the 'wheels of the market' is an idea that extends back to the origins of what we conventionally call 'modernity': attempting to account for and legitimate the new capitalist and bourgeois lifestyles, liberal theories have often taken on a genuine *pro-consumerist* character (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; Hirschman 1977 and 1982; Pocock 1985). Apologists of the free market have typically claimed that it is to be seen as a civilising force which pacifies societies. Consumption was in fact defined by its first apologists, much as it is by dominant contemporary economic theory, as the active search of personal gratification through commodities, and growth in personal consumption is seen as dangerous neither for the nation nor the individual. (Appleby 1993). Since humans are essentially defined as rational animals with infinite and undefined desires who have been able to guide the economy of nations to unimagined levels of prosperity, great care must be taken in assuring that this gratification be authentic. This generates a pressure to stress consumers' autonomy which culminates in the notion of 'consumer sovereignty'. Provided consumers are autonomous self-disciplined beings (something which is typically measured against their capacity to be model employees), their pursuit of happiness through a growth of private consumption is beneficial both to them and to the wider society. This notion consumer sovereignty has found numerous supporters well outside the science of economics, in politics for example as the citizen-consumer has been marshalled to reform the welfare provision in the UK (Clarke 2006, more widely see also Cohen 2003). A pro-consumerist rhetoric is to be found above all in marketing and commercial advertising, which have had an important role in promoting consumption as an arena of legitimate action, rich in meaning and full of untarnished promises: a series of positive

individual aspirations and images of self-realization have been associated with the private acquisition and use of goods and services: happiness, sociability, youthfulness, enjoyment, friendship, eroticism, etc.

Turning these views up-side-down, voices from a range of quarters have rallied to stigmatise consumption, casting it as a source of moral disorder, a soul-corrupting mirage. Indeed, whenever economic growth has opened up the availability of new consumer goods to upward mobile social groups or has threatened the traditional gender order, strong hostile sentiments towards material riches have emerged. These sentiments may well have a disciplining function if it is true, as Veblen (1994, 53) insisted, that “consumption of luxuries in the true sense is a consumption directed to the comfort of the consumer itself and it is therefore a mark of the master” which does elicit social control. It is thereby not surprising that consumption has often been seen as a negative expression of the triumph of the modern market which weakens men, turning them into useless citizens incapable of defending their own country or participating in politics, whilst making women superficial and idle, unfit as wives and mothers (Hirschman 1977 and 1982; Hilton 2002; Horowitz 1985; Sassatelli 1997; Searle 1998). According to an *anti-consumerist* rhetoric, consumption, deprecated in its modern guise as ‘consumerism’ or ‘consumer culture’, gave birth to spiritual impoverishment for which people sought comfort in material goods, a surrogate for traditional forms of satisfaction, self-realisation and identification through work and political participation. The huge growth in material culture is thus criticised as a source of disorientation and a threat to the authenticity of the self, who should be strong and autonomous, able to become himself through his works and relationships and not through his possessions. Within the Marxist tradition this growth has been described as a process of ‘reification’ in which human beings become quantifiable and fungible objects like commodities (Lukács 1971). Consumerism is seen as promoting a ‘narcissist personality type’ (Lasch 1991, orig. 1979). Where the ascetic culture of production favours the development of strong personalities attached to duties and to the family, consumer culture favours the development of weak and isolated personalities, who continually search for gratification in objects and who are fated to be continually deluded: the pleasures which they are desperately seeking out to fill their emptiness is in fact a form of ‘aggression’ which reduces all to a commodity, an object interchangeable with other objects. In a similar scenery, most authors of a critical persuasion give advertising a propulsive role: advertising is the ideological engine of a system in which work has lost its meaning, to which people nevertheless remain attached because they cannot give up the dreams associated with advertised goods.

Both pro- and anti-consumerist views provide a caricature of consumption, its practices and its meanings in everyday life. Apocalyptic views remove consumption from the web of social

relations to criticize its social impact. The characterisation of consumer culture as totally opposed to work, as ruled by a consuming passion from which all inclinations towards moderation and rationality have been excluded reduces people to ads spectators and is blind to the intermingling of goods and people: consumption has often a relational character (even if we may have in mind rather narrow circles) and its pleasures are often related to gift relations or aesthetic elements which activate people's capacity to attribute value to the world (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Miller 1987). On the other side of the fence, apologetic views of consumption are surprisingly blind to the social limits of consumption, including the fact that an increased expenditure does not necessarily lead to well-being and happiness. They divert attention from the fact that, in contrast to liberal and neo-liberal slogans, the common good doesn't automatically spring forth from the pursuit of individual interests. Against such celebratory stance, we know that collective goods can rarely be provided efficiently by the market alone and that the democratisation of luxuries may become an environmentally dangerous and socially pointless game (Castells 1977; Hirsch 1977; Sen 1985).

Broadly speaking, all of the discourses on consumption, even those providing a considered scientific view, run the risk of falling into celebration or censorship, yielding to a series of binary oppositions which trap us in dichotomous thought: public/private, duty/pleasure, rational/irrational, and of course freedom/oppression. Both apocalyptic and apologetic views may be seen as two opposed but complementary ways of consoling consumers, letting them catch a glimpse of worlds where absolute liberty exists and can be delivered through prescriptions as apparently simple as total rejection or total acceptance. The swinging consumer amounts to an evaluative pendulum which is often being exploited by commercial advertising to frame consumption. As cultural analysts, we are called onto consider the productive qualities of such evaluative pendulum while avoiding it, strait-jacketing discussion in extreme emotional reactions. Indeed, both pro-consumerist and anti-consumerist views take seriously the idea that consumer culture produces consumers, but offer a polemic view of consumer subjectivity which does not account for the plurality and contested nature of consumption and for the irreducibility of consumers' practices to commercial representations. There is always a gap between representation (in commercial discourse or public discourse) of consumption and actual consumption practices, which are generated, even unwittingly, through everyday creativity (Willis 1990). Rather than being based on a sovereign consumer or producing a pathological consumer as its norm, consumer culture offers visions of normality, happiness and fairness which people are asked to engage with and it accommodates a variety of cultures of consuming which must enrich goods of values other than mere affluence (Sassatelli 2007). In doing so they draw both on pro- and anti-consumerist themes and contribute to move forward the rhetorical toolkit for the framing of the consumer. The swing of the pendulum

between apology and criticism of consumption appears to have a productive role within contemporary culture, something which may be noticed referring to commercial advertising and marketing (Sassatelli 2008; 2010).

Politics, Consumption and Sustainability

Apocalyptic views tend to deny that the sphere of consumption can also constitute itself as a space for (different) forms of political action. Of course, commercial advertising teaches us that through commodity consumption (often an individualized or private activity) we can solve all problems (even social ones). In this sense, it doesn't favour traditional forms of political mobilisation (linked to the party, the factory, or street protests). Consumption however is by no means just the exercise of private egotism. The political investment of consumption is something that a growing body of research on ethical and political purchases ("boycotts") is documenting (Ceccarini and Forno 2005; Chessel and Cochoy 2004; Micheletti et al. 2004; Sassatelli 2004; 2006a and b; Tosi 2006). According to Efta 2005, the sales volume of Fair Trade products has grown 154% in Europe between 1997 and 2004. FT Coffee is the fastest growing segment in the US market, growing a spectacular 67% per year (Arnould 2007). The European Social Survey has shown that approximately 1/3 of Europeans has boycotted certain goods or/and has bought goods for political and ethical reasons. According to Ifoam, organic production is growing a steady 10% every year and the growing number of studies on alternative food networks (from basket schemes to farmer markets) are showing their vigour in many advanced economies (Dubouisson-Quellier and Lamine 2004; Goodman 2003; Holloway et als. 2004). While historically consumers have organized cooperatives to safeguard their purchasing power (Furlough and Strikwerda 1999) as well as social movements have launched boycotts and have called forth the consumer as a political actor (Friedman 1999; Trentmann 2005; Cohen 2003), it is especially after WTO 1999 that new social movements of an alter-global variety have massively recurred to the whole spectrum of consumer actions (boycotts, buycotts, naming & blaming, ethical merchandising, etc.) to widen the repertoire of political participation, find new ways to mobilize people, and address global issues. A variety of actors (both individual and collective, economic and political, oriented towards profit maximization or to collective goods) are contributing to shape alternative views of the market, and such variety is reflected in the many nuances of the discourses predicated on the 'critical' consumer, their uneven resonance, and the varying degrees of economic and political effectiveness of commodities framed through environmental, ethical and political concerns. Yet, as a start, we can individuate a fundamental cultural theme in that consumer choice is portrayed as not universally

good and as not a private issue. Most forms of critical consumption share some kind of interest in environmental values and address both re-distribution issues and the problems generated by the increased separation and disentanglement of production and consumption. People are typically asked to consume better. As a source of power, consumption is not to be given up altogether, yet consumer choice is framed as a directly consequential and momentous practice, capable of expressing consumer sovereignty only if consumers take full responsibility for the environmental, social and political effects of their choices, and are ready to re-consider their consuming life on such grounds.

As it is apparent from empirical research conducted in Italy among engaged consumers as well as activists from a variety of organizations, different initiatives share a distinct notion of consumer sovereignty which critically elaborate, and sometimes overturns, laissez-faire wisdom (Sassatelli 2006a; Leonini and Sassatelli, 2008). Three themes in particular seem to emerge in varying portions and combinations: redistribution and interdependency, collective goods, and the pleasures of frugality. Most informants put forward a civic vision of the market, contending that market relations thrive among equals, and indeed that the market is good but requires a pacified social space to realise itself, which places value on redistribution and sees the powerful consumer as the prime motor behind this. They also share the view that goods which are beyond individual, exclusive enjoyment (and in particular the environment) are of the essence for consumers' quality of life, but they are all too often neglected by capitalist market relations, and yet again see consumer choice as a way to internalize environmental factors. Finally, the relationship between consumption and happiness postulated by liberalism is considered all too simple. Matching a growing body of literature in philosophy and the social sciences which pinpoints that people's well-being could be reformulated on grounds other than increasing expenditure, starting from notions of "quality of life" which will often thicken up a short-term, individualist and private vision of individual choice with environmental or communitarian contents (Nussbaum and Sen 1993). This may imply some form of "voluntary simplicity", "sobriety" or downshifting" in consumption (see also Etzioni 1998; Nelson et al 2007; Soper, 2008).

The discourses surrounding critical consumer practices provide a set of specific criteria of choice drawing on 'regimes of justifications' (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) which have been pushed outside the dominant mode of legitimating markets in western culture. As I have suggested elsewhere (Sassatelli 2006b), themes prevalently associated with the promotion of consumption as a legitimated spheres 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 vocabulary of critical

consumerism 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 on production (to purchase here becomes 'work you do for the community', 'effort done for yourself and the other', 'creative', 'productive', and so on). Along this, it is also slowly providing a new set of criteria for measuring quality of life and pleasure which draw on spiritual themes, de-rationalization and communitarism.

While "lifestyle politics" has come to function as a form of civic participation for many people (Beck and Gernsheim 2001; Schudson 1999), consumption has become so 'politicized' that it is no longer possible to sharply divide between "citizenship and civic duty" on one side and "consumption and self-interest" on the other (Scammell 2000). A number of voices have thus celebrated the political persona of the consumer. The consumer has been portrayed as the truly global actor who can be a counterweight to big trans-national corporations for a cosmopolitan democracy replacing the vanquishing citizen: today 'citizens discover the act of shopping as one in which they can always cast their ballot – on a world scale, no less' (Beck and Gernsheim 2001: 44). Similar claims rests on a dubious metaphor assimilating consumer choice with voting (and voting with democracy). Let's tease out what is implicit in the metaphor: that consumer choice is like voting, that it is effective, that it is democratic. These assumption can easily obliterate the specificity of both voting and consumer choice, the fruitful synergies which can be produced by considering their mutual transformation, and, last but not least, their ambivalence.

To be sure, it would be mistaken to always attribute just a deliberately political finality to consumer choices of a critical variety. Many of the practices which come under the umbrella of critical consumerism might be conducted by consumers who have in mind meanings and objectives other than strictly political ones. For example, alternative distribution networks, including second-hands shops, not only respond to a politically conscious middle-class consumer, but also attract urban disadvantaged groups which might not afford to shop via formal channels (Williams and Paddock 2003). 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 gourmand carnivores (Lockie and Kristen 2002). In Italy, a large proportion of those who buy FT goods in supermarkets for examples do so because they 'like' the products, consider them 'better quality', or just 'by chance' (Leonini and Sassatelli 2008). Still, alternative ways of consuming are not a syndrome, an ideology like Baudrillard maintained. Nor are they yet another positional option, the consumption of lost simplicity on luxury grounds. However, we should neither disqualify the intrinsic pleasures of ethical shopping nor just equate 'genuine' critical choices with political vote. Shopping ethically

enable us to make choices which matter to ourselves in everyday life in ways which political voting may not, because they matter in themselves, empowering us in every day life, rather than for their expressive potential or possible larger effects on macro realities (Schudson 2007). Indeed, people lives can be re-organized entirely starting from a number of apparently banal choices, which often require and induce a different management of time, of space and of social relations (Leonini and Sassatelli 2008). While certain consumption such as news consumption seems to be crucial for both for civic engagement and truly political consumerism (Friedland et als 2007; Shah et als. 2007), the presence of politically and ethically motivated cultural intermediaries and social movements appears to be crucial to translate the micro-politics of everyday life into political pressure as such.

This brings me to effectiveness, conceived in terms of public resonance, corporate change, and ultimately political-economic change. We know that FT has had its difficulties in always keeping its promises to help producers in developing countries as it goes mainstream. Recent work on global anti-sweatshop campaigns (Micheletti and Stolle 2007) and on its appropriation by US company American Apparel (Littler and Moor 2008) and seems to point to the fact that wide public resonance, and even commercial success, may not correspond in all instances to a real improvement in the working life of garment workers. Alternative consumer practices can be easily absorbed by the market. 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 have long started to promote their own versions of the 'greening of demand' (Zinkhan and Carlson 1995). The institutionalization of a dialog between consumerist and environmental organizations and large multinational commercial companies may also have ambivalent effects (Barnett and Cloke 2005; Doubleday 2004). Codes for ethical business and for socially responsible management are becoming widespread, yet they 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 easily be 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 direct and symmetrical demand/supply relation between consumers and producers. In particular, the reaching of global markets may imply an emphasis on efficiency and promotion which can transform green and FT products into fetishes (Hudson and Hudson 2003; Levi and Linton 2003). Yet, the antinomy between commercial aims and ethical aims may become a dialectic resource to modify capitalist views. To be sure, it is the fundamental dynamic of value creation and progress within the FT field (Leonini and Sassatelli 2008). Italian activists have stressed the importance of keeping these values

synergic for making 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 which are ready to jump on the bandwagon of FT. The different actors which occupy different positions in the field of alternative and critical consumption have variously articulated this dichotomy. Activists which work on the commercial end of FT (shops, import organizations) place emphasis on the positive role of commercialization as ‘cultural vector’; those who are concerned with labelling schemes stress the role of ‘good principles’; and the cultural and political entrepreneurs emphasise the risks of commercialization and the role of ‘education and awareness’. The very plurality and fragmentation of the FT market in Italy seems to favour such a plurality of voices which arguably results in a more democratic space. As it has been documented, markets are indeed institutions that can be organized differently (see Carrier 1997; Callon 1998), and they can thus be put to many different ends. Sure, there is no easy road to alternative ways of organizing economic life, no easy switch from growth and profit to de-growth and sustainability. Yet, we are learning that capitalist, profit-driven markets can be transformed to take into account the redistribute resources, take into account externalities and make people in distant places and the environment into internal consideration, avoid economic polarization, stress a new set of pleasures that provide positive incentives to consuming less and better. Engaged consumers may be one of the lever of the transformation.

New Visions of Consumers Sovereignty and Utility

Now, let’s consider the relationship between critical consumption and democracy. Apocalyptic views of consumerism are largely one-sided in excluding any possible contribution of consumption to civic life. Yet, it is likewise mistaken to suppose that the individual, global consumer increasingly invoked by FT and other critical initiatives now translates on a global scale the duties and capacities of the citizen or transforms the awareness of effects into a politics of justice. To be sure, Eric Arnould (2007, 106) has a point when he maintains that “successful progressive practice of citizenship ‘should’ take place through market mediated forms in our culture because these are the templates for action and understanding available to most people”. Still, while we all consume, we do so in many different ways which are largely a function of our different resources and of the different political infrastructure which upholds different systems of consumption. In very banal terms, if in contemporary democracies to each citizen corresponds a vote, consumers are notably different in terms of purchasing power and may thus have rather different degrees of influence on

the market. Critical consumption does try to make the political infrastructure of our everyday consumer lives visible to us, yet different positions within such infrastructure and different infrastructures (often still determined by national borders) make critical consumption more or less probable and viable. This double-bind construction shows that there is still a space for politics in the traditional sense; indeed, that politics and consumption can be synergic in the transformation of the market. Consumers as citizens of the world are clearly the constituency for sustainability, the challenge is to have them drawing on a different, relational notion of consumer sovereignty as coupled with an idea of political subjectivity that calls into being the necessity of a new, global Leviathan. Concentrating solely on the former, i.e. a relational notion of consumer sovereignty germane to sustainability, I suggest that this requires a focus on the creative, slow appropriation of commodities. This resonates with the growing body of literature in philosophy and the social sciences which pinpoints that people's well-being could be reformulated on grounds other than increasing expenditure, starting from notions of "quality of life" which will often thicken up a short-term, individualistic, competitive and private vision of individual choice with environmental or communitarian contents (Nussbaum and Sen 1993). This clearly does not imply simply nice buys but also rejecting upscale spending and long working hours, to live a simpler, more relaxed life and to enhance personal fulfillment through relationships, socioeconomic equality and environmental awareness. The emphasis on simplicity is in many ways all but regressive: it is an emphasis on slowness and embeddedness which amount to the deepening of consumers' knowledge, where the redundancy that allows for the elaboration of taste as a reflexive, critical practice does not come from sophistication or distinction but from the embracement of the relational nature of commodities. An emphasis on slowness may take place in order to discover new pleasures and enhance personal satisfaction, as well as to further socio-economic equality and environmental awareness. While there may be no escape from market society and consumer choice, choices can be constructed and practiced in quite a variety of ways, some of which seem to internalise values other than money and quantity and consider common goods and gift relations, civic engagement and sustainability as irreducible elements of consumers' gratification. A good choice must be good for the community and for the planet as well as bringing happiness to the consumer: a sovereign consumer is such only if he or she engages responsibly with his or her own wellbeing, that of the community and the planet. Utility is thus re-defined not as a property of final goods as expressed in the individualistic relation between object and subject, but as a diffuse, entangled property of commodity circuits that extend well before and well after individualistic consumption, into the organization of production, the use of natural resources and the management of waste.

Clearly, seen in this light, critical consumption practices do have potential for social change. While such potential needs to be considered case by case, it is evident that critical cultures of consumption of different varieties represent a crucial reservoir for political mobilization, but should not be equated with it, partly because they are broader and much more mundane than political consumerism strictly speaking (Sassatelli 2004; 2006; 2008). Critical or ethical commodities and commodity circuits embody a critical dialogue with many aspects of consumer capitalism, including the notion of consumer sovereignty. But they do not throw this notion away. They rather consider consumer sovereignty a political project larger than the market as narrowly defined. They thus attempt at modifying consumer capitalism from the inside, the starting point of these initiatives being that consumer choice is not universally good and it certainly is not a private issue.

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