CONSUMERISM RECONSIDERED:
BUYING AND POWER

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Consumerism has become a powerful and evocative symbol of contemporary capitalism and the modern Western world. Indeed, in the climate of 1991, faced by the crisis of the environment and the radical transformations in Eastern Europe, it is perhaps the most resonant symbol of all. Highly visible, its imagery permeates the physical and cultural territories it occupies. Modern identities and imaginations are knotted inextricably to it. This much is clear. However, intellectually and morally it has not been easy to make sense of, and troubling questions have been raised both for the left and for the right. Within the social sciences and cultural studies it has been a recurring concern, particularly since the consolidation of the consumer society in the aftermath of World War II, and investigations of it have spanned a range of disciplines and theoretical debates. It will not come as a surprise to hear that these accounts offer no consistent explanations or responses. Some authors have condemned consumerism, others have welcomed it. Less predictable, perhaps, is the conclusion that the different arguments are not easily categorized politically. In fact, theories about consumerism (they are of course not unique in this respect) appear to owe as much to the general cultural climate of their formation, to their intellectual genealogy and to personal disposition, as they do to a consistently worked out political critique.

My project in this paper then is to trace the history of these different theorizations in order, first of all, to draw attention to the influence of the political and intellectual contexts from which they emerged, and secondly, to show how they in turn have shaped and placed limits on the way in which consumerism has subsequently been thought. More specifically, I want to show how, during the 1950s and 1960s, both Marxists and conservative critics expressed their condemnation of mass consumption in similarly elitist terms, and how, partly in reaction, this produced during the seventies and eighties a very different body of work in which the consumer and consumption are defended and even celebrated. I shall go on to argue that these very distinct

perspectives have in combination prevented us from recognizing the potential *power* of consumerism - and here I am talking about power in a quite orthodox pre-Foucauldian sense - a power which has been brought into focus latterly by the acceleration of Green activism, by South African boycotts and other instances of consumer sanction and support. Finally, I shall propose that consumer politics is able to mobilize and enfranchise a very broad spectrum of constituents, and moreover that it is productive of a kind of utopian collectivism lacking from other contemporary politics.

In order to arrive at this point in the theoretical narrative it will be necessary to transverse what may be fairly familiar terrain. But this will be more than the routine recitation of what has already been thought and said, because it is only through mapping out the debate and its historical and textual context that it becomes possible to identify the theoretical and political implications of certain routes.

Masses and manipulation

It is worth starting, therefore, in classic vein, with a few lines on Marx, who set the parameters of subsequent debate by centering his analysis on production. Within this framework, consumption and markets were relatively neglected and the twentieth-century integration of the producers of commodities into capitalist society as consumers was not anticipated. For Marxists and socialists since Marx, political consciousness and political organization have been concentrated at the point of production, around labour. The potential of activism at the point of consumption has barely been addressed. Instead it is Marx's less-developed ideas about the relation of commodity fetishism to false consciousness that have proved most influential in this intellectual field and have laid the groundwork for twentieth-century thought not only about consumption, but also about 'mass culture' and 'mass society' more generally.

From the 1930s onwards, some of the most significant contributions to this general area were made by the group of cultural theorists known as the Frankfurt School and one of the best known of these is the essay by Adorno and Horkheimer on the culture industry (1973). Although written in 1944 during the authors' exile to the United States, and containing detailed references to specific American cultural forms, its roots are, in fact, firmly embedded in the inter-war period of Europe, especially, as Swingewood has pointed out, 'in the failure of proletarian revolutions.., during the 1920s and 1930s, the totalitarian nature of Stalinism' and the rise of fascism (1977: vii). Hence their despair and contempt for what they see as the stupidity and

malleability of mass society. They are deeply pessimistic not only about the power of the working class to resist control and indoctrination but also about the nature and quality of the capitalist culture industry itself, and their essay is a relentless invective against this. Products of the culture industry, like cinema, radio and magazines, are distinguished from 'art' and are condemned repeatedly for their uniformity, falseness, vileness, barbaric meaninglessness and much more. Although Adorno and Horkheimer offer more nuanced versions of their thesis elsewhere (Held, 1980) this is probably their most influential piece and is significant not only for its critique of the culture industry as deliberately anti-enlightenment, but also for its expression of the authors' profoundly elitist attitude both to popular culture and to the consumer.

Their elitism was not unusual during this period, nor were they alone in referencing this model of the easily manipulated subject. Their European formation and experiences are likely to have influenced various aspects of their theorization, not just their perception of the working class, and are probably implicated in their anti-Americanism and their intellectual and cultural snobbery. European critiques of American democracy and its impact on culture were of course not new and date back to de Tocqueville who was among the first to publish his trepidation about this question. From the 1930s onwards, a nostalgic defence of high cultural forms and contempt for mass culture and mass consumption becomes a recurring theme in cultural criticism of both the left and right; it appears in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer as well as, for example, in that of the conservative English critic F. R. Leavis, though expressed in very different language. America, as the country where these cultural transformations are most clearly taking place, poses the greatest threat in this respect and becomes itself a kind of metaphor for all that is disturbing about modernity and democracy.

This process is accelerated in the post-war period. Dick Hebdige in his analysis of its specific British manifestation has called it 'the spectre of Americanisation' (1988). He draws attention to the way in which a number of significant authors of the forties and fifties from quite different political perspectives (he singles out Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell and Richard Hoggart in particular) use similar imagery to express their anxiety about the advent of a vulgar and materialistic American-inspired consumer culture. He then goes on to explore aspects of this anti-Americanism among official arbiters of taste within the institutions of design and broadcasting. The pervasiveness of these sentiments during this period are attributed in part to the GI presence in Britain during and immediately after the war, and to the public mythologies this generated about American affluence and style.

The mythologies must also be set in the context of wartime and post-war austerity. As Frank Mort has argued (1988) 'austerity' consisted of more than

just the inevitable wartime constraints; it was part of a socialist ideology, articulated by the Labour Party, in which Fabianism blended with Evangelicalism to form a moral as well as economic rejection of consumerism. In fact, Walvin (1978) has pointed out that the immediate post-war period saw a boom in popular leisure activities despite austerity measures, and that mass consumption for the working class was increasingly seen by them as an entitlement after the deprivation of the war and post-war years. Richard Hoggart, twenty years earlier, was certainly not willing to see the picture in this light (1957). Influenced by the socialist culture described by Mort, he saw the mass consumption which emerged with fifties affluence as a deeply destructive force. It represented an erosion of the authentic elements in working-class life. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, he considered it largely a consequence of American influence (though unlike them he barely touched on capitalism as a force) and he deplored its hedonism, materialism, 'corrupt brightness', 'moral evasiveness' and 'shiny barbarism'. Like Leavis and others to the right of him, he feared a 'levelling down' of cultural standards. His view of the ordinary person and of the effect the reviled new culture would have on him or her is however harder to place; on the one hand he bemoans the passivity and corruptibility of the people; on the other, though less often, he refers to working-class cynicism and what he calls the 'I'm not buying that' stance. Perhaps it is familiarity with his subjects that prevents him from altogether suppressing the notion of working-class agency.

This can be compared with Adorno and Horkheimer's far more sealed off version in which the amorphous acquiescent masses appear to possess no resources that can enable them to escape the repressive and manipulating powers of capitalist consumer culture. They are almost as vulnerable as Orwell's satirized proles in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which was first published about the same time. Herbert Marcuse, also a member of the Frankfurt School in exile but a more significant figure in American intellectual history because of his influential contributions to political thought and the radical student movement during the 1960s, emerges from the same camp. He too has a deeply pessimistic view of the ability of the masses to resist the encroachment of consumer culture.

In *One Dimensional Man* (1964) Marcuse argues that liberal consumer societies control their populations by indoctrinating them with 'false needs' (analogous to false consciousness). People are manipulated through the media and advertising into believing that their identities will be enhanced by useless possessions. In a much quoted passage which encapsulates his position, he writes:

> People recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in
> their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home … social control is anchored in

the new needs which (the consumer society) has produced. (Marcuse, 1964: 24)

Thus the desiring and buying of things creates social conformity and political acquiescence. It militates against radical social change. In similar vein, Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (first published in 1963), a seminal text for the early women's liberation movement, reports on an interview with an executive of an 'institute for motivational manipulation' whom she is outraged by, but clearly believes:

Properly manipulated ('if you are not afraid of that word', he said), American housewives can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack - by the buying of things... I suddenly saw American women as *victims* of... [their] power at the point of purchase. (Friedan, 1965:128; original emphasis).

We see then that Marcuse and Friedan operate with a similar set of assumptions about ordinary men and women whom they see as victims of conspiratorially constructed and deliberately wielded capitalist powers of manipulation.

With hindsight this seems like a rather crude theoretical perspective but, as I have argued elsewhere (Nava, 1987), the position of these two influential authors must be understood in the context of the political and cultural climate in the United States during the previous decade. The fifties saw an unprecedented growth of the consumer society, a term which signifies not just affluence and the expansion of production and markets, but also the increasing penetration of the meanings and images associated with consumption into the culture of everyday life. This was the moment of the consuming housewife - whose 'problem with no name' is the object of Friedan's study - locked into femininity, motherhood, shopping and the suburban idyll. During this conservative period marked by the Cold War, 'consensus' and conformity, the free choice of goods came to symbolize the 'freedom' of the Free World (Ewen, 1976). This period also saw a general shift to the right among US intellectuals, many of whom expressed support for American affluence, the 'end of ideology' and the political status quo (Ross, 1987; Brookeman, 1984). J. K. Galbraith was among the exceptions here; a liberal critic of capitalism, he also distinguished himself from Marxist economists by criticizing their exclusive focus on production, an important point in the context of this argument to which I will return. Along with the Marxists, however, and many to the right of him, he believed that advertising could create demand - in Marcuse's terms 'false needs' - and that desires could be 'shaped by the discreet manipulations of the persuaders' (1958).

We see here the influence of Vance Packard, whose book *The Hidden Persuaders,* first published in 1957, enjoyed both popular and academic success. He argued that advertisers, drawing on the specialized knowledge of 'motivational analysts' and using methods like 'psycho-seduction' and 'subliminal communication', were able to 'manipulate' people into making particular purchasing decisions. Packard's thesis slotted into widely held anxieties about conspiracies, brainwashing and thought control which were boosted by right-wing alarm about communist influence during the Korean War. This reached its cultural apogee in the film *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) in which the Soviet professor in charge of 'conditioning' the American hero declares portentously that his victim's brain 'has not only been washed, as they say, it has been thoroughly dry cleaned'. Despite the fact that there has been no serious substantiating evidence for the existence of 'brainwashing' or even of the 'manipulation' described by Packard and picked up by some of the other theorists I have referred to (indeed, it is estimated that as many as 90 per cent of new products fail despite advertising; Schudson 1981; see also Sinclair 1987), its association with the unknown and unconscious elements of the mind seems to have given it a continuing if uneasy credibility both at popular and more academic levels, on the left as well as on the right.

The pertinent features for my argument which emerge from this picture of the cultural theorists of the fifties and sixties are then first of all a lack of respect for the mentality of ordinary people, exemplified by the view that they are easily duped by advertisers and politically pacified by the buying of useless objects. Their pursuit of commodities and their enjoyment of disdained cultural forms is cited as evidence of their irrationality and gullibility. The idea that certain sectors of the population are particularly vulnerable to the deleterious effects of cultural forms, namely women, children and the less educated, is an assumption running through Packard's book and repeated elsewhere. Stuart Ewen has drawn attention to the way in which one of the recurring comic figures in American television dramas during the 1950s was the wife who grossly overspent on a useless item of personal adornment like a hat (1976). It is interesting in general to compare cultural representations and theorizations of the (female) consumer with those of the (male) producer. The activity of the consumer ('labour' would be considered an inappropriate term here) is likely to be constructed as impulsive and trivial, as lacking agency, whereas the work of the producer, even if 'alienated', tends to be 'hard', 'real', dignified, a source of solidarity and a focus around which to organize politically. This is partly a consequence of the peculiar privileging of production within the economic sphere to which I referred earlier, but in the light of the fact that women control 80 per cent of buying (Scott, 1976), it must also be interpreted as part of a wider misogynistic view of women's reason and capabilities. Indeed, the

ridiculing of women shoppers may be a way of negotiating the anxiety aroused by their economic power in this sphere.

Another characteristic of these texts is the assumption that a distinction can be made between 'true' and 'false' needs. The common position here is not that desires and longings (of the masses in particular) are denied, but that they are considered less authentic and 'real' if they are gratified by material objects and escapist TV rather than, say, political or 'creative' activities. There is a failure to recognize that all desires are constructed and interpreted through culture, that none exist independently of it, and that a hierarchy of authenticity and moral correctness is quite impossible to establish (for a further discussion of this see Kellner, 1983). In addition, almost all the theories I have been discussing are tainted in some measure by a distaste for 'vulgar' display and 'low' culture; there is a lack of perception of the subtle - and not so subtle - meanings that shopping, commodities and popular cultural forms are capable of offering. Finally, many of these analyses also contain an entrenched belief in the monolithic and determining nature of capitalism and hence in the power of state institutions and the culture industries. Combined into a general approach, these elements have created a commonsense way of looking at consumerism, a dominant intellectual paradigm, which has continued to shape thinking in a range of related fields from media studies to feminism, despite the advent of alternative analyses which are critical of all these perspectives.

Thus, more recent work in the area which continues to operate at least in part with similar assumptions includes Haug's *Commodity Aesthetics* (first published 1971, reissued 1986) which 'contains distinct echoes of F. R. Leavis' (Frith 1986); Judith Williamson's *Decoding Advertisements* (1978) which, although innovative in its semiological analysis of ads, hangs on to a notion of production as a much more 'real' aspect of people's identity than consumption; Gillian Dyer's *Advertising as Communication* (1982) which condemns advertising for manipulating attitudes and distorting the quality of life, and, like Galbraith, refers to 'basic' needs (though the particularly virulent critique of Dyer's book by Myers (1986) strikes me as unjustified); and *All Consuming Images* (1988), the latest book by Stuart Ewen, US theorist of consumer culture for whom 'conspiracy' and 'manipulation' remain important concepts. Jeremy Seabrook also fits into this camp. A popular author in the tradition of Hoggart, he has written often and polemically over the last decade about the way in which capitalism and the materialism of the consumer society have corrupted the young and the working class. He describes the process as one of 'mutilation' in which children are 'carried off in the fleshy arms of private consumption.., to be systematically shaped to the products which it will be their duty to want, to compete for and to consume' (1978: 98). Within media studies as well as among politicians and pressure groups like that of Mary Whitehouse, the continuing

debate about 'effects' (of sex and violence in particular) addresses many of the same theoretical questions.

Certain strands within feminism must also be included here. Thus the idea of 'positive images', a widely pursued cultural strategy of feminists, apart from containing rather simple notions of what is positive, also reproduces the belief that images persuade in an unproblematic fashion. More important though in its consequences, is the very topical debate about pornography. Those feminists who argue for censorship and the suppression of certain kinds of images base their demands on the assumption that images work in specific and predictable ways to produce specific forms of behaviour, and that there are no mediating factors, like context, desire and knowledge, that determine our interpretations and affect our actions. In this version of the argument it is men who are perceived as the cultural dopes, as particularly vulnerable victims of indoctrination, because it is presumed (in an odd *non-sequitur* fashion) that if they see pictures of sexualized bodies they will be persuaded to go out and commit violent acts against women.

There are very definite echoes in this particular debate of several of the elements I outlined earlier. Apart from the belief that people (men) can be easily manipulated, there is also an elitist evaluation of the quality of representation in which some sexualized bodies are aesthetically and morally more acceptable than others. One could go on. But this is not the point of the article. What I want to draw attention to are some of the general conventions in the theorization of consumerism, which also extend beyond consumerism.

Pleasure and resistance

Despite its pervasiveness however, the general approach outlined above has not been the only way of understanding these issues. Over the last twelve years or so a growing number of authors have insisted on rereading and reinterpreting the component elements of consumerism and have produced work in which the buying of things has been explored within a quite different framework. Among the forerunners here was Ellen Willis who, in a little-known piece, wrote a succinct defence of consumerism in which she stressed the labour, the rationality and the pleasures involved, and criticized authors such as Marcuse for their elitism and sexism (1970). At about the same time, Enzensberger criticized Marcuse's notion of false needs (1970). However, it was not really until the late seventies that work structured by this new critical perspective began to emerge in quantity, along with the discipline of Cultural Studies of which it forms an integral part.

The pertinent studies here have taken as their subject matter aspects of popular culture like youth styles and fashion, popular TV and cinema, romantic fiction and women's magazines, advertising and shopping (examples include Hall and Jefferson, 1975; Hebdige, 1979; 1988; Morley, 1980; McRobbie, 1989; Wilson, 1985; Steedman, 1986; Mort, 1988; Mercer, 1987; Carter, 1984; Radway, 1987; Winship, 1987; Nava and Nava, 1990). There are, of course, significant differences between these contributions, differences of emphasis and level of analysis, but what this body of work has in common is a reassessment and revalorization of popular cultural forms and popular experience, of the meanings consumption produces. Formed in part out of a reaction against the earlier body of work, it constitutes a kind of intellectual and political break, part of a wider loss of confidence in the primacy of the economic and the correspondence between class and class consciousness. This is despite a general allegiance to the left among these authors. Extremely significant here has been the influence of Stuart Hall who, as director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham and more recently as a member of the *Marxism Today* editorial board, has played a major part in setting the critical agenda. Of particular relevance to this article has been his insistence over the last twelve years that we understand how it is that Thatcherism has managed so effectively to harness popular desires and discontents (Hall, 1988). These questions have found a renewed importance over recent months with the political developments which have taken place in Eastern Europe and the centrality to these of consumer imagery.

Thatcherism is then one feature of the context in which the Cultural Studies approach has developed. Another has been feminism. Over the last decade feminism has been transformed from a narrow movement to an extensive presence- recognizable but not always identified by name - which has permeated cultural production from *EastEnders* and *Cosmopolitan* to the curricula of academe. The feminist concern in the work I have been describing has been to undermine earlier perceptions of women as cultural victims and to examine what is rewarding, rational and indeed sometimes liberating about popular culture. This ties in with the Cultural Studies emphasis on experience, an important component in emerging audience studies. Radical literary theory has also contributed to the general climate in which this approach has developed by asserting that literary value exists not in any absolute sense, but as a construction of the discipline of literary criticism (Eagleton, 1983) and the high culture/low culture divide has been challenged both within this perspective and from a number of other directions (see e.g., Jameson, 1979). Semiotics and psychoanalysis have also been influential: semiotics through its emphasis on the sign and the symbolic nature of commodities; psychoanalysis in its attention to the unconscious processes in psychic life and the contradictory nature of

identity.

More specifically, then, David Morley has done important work on TV and audience in which he stresses the diverse ways in which messages are read; identity, cultural and political background and viewing context all contribute to the range of possible meanings that any particular text can produce (1980; 1986). Feminist work on romantic fiction and TV soaps has explored the progressive elements in these popular forms and has also insisted on acknowledging the complex ways in which the texts are understood, as well as the ambiguous pleasures that they offer (Modleski, 1982; Radway, 1984; Radford, 1986). Erica Carter, in her study of consumer culture in post-war Germany, has explored the symbolic meanings of nylon stockings and how wearing them to work could operate as a form of protest and confrontation in a dreary and routinized existence: 'Consumerism not only offers, but also continually fulfils its promise of everyday solutions… to problems whose origins may lie elsewhere' (Carter, 1984: 213). Thus it can indeed provide women with the 'sense of identity, purpose and creativity' claimed by Friedan's advertising executive, and should not for this reason be condemned. This question is also addressed by Carolyn Steedman (1986) who understands her mother's desire for commodities in post-war Britain as a form of defiance, a refusal to remain marginalized in class terms:

> From a Lancashire mill town and a working-class twenties childhood she came away wanting: fine clothes, glamour, money; to be what she wasn't. However that longing was produced in her distant childhood, what she actually wanted were real…entities, things that she materially lacked, things that a culture and a social system withheld from her. (Steedman, 1986: 6)

My own recent research into the way young people watch TV commercials is another example of this general approach (Nava and Nava, 1990). The argument here is that young people are not easily duped, that they consume advertisements independently of the product which is being marketed, and in the process bring to bear sophisticated critical skills; the advertisers respond to this appreciation by frequently directing their ads at young people - as the most literate sector of their audience - regardless of what is being sold. Frank Mort (1988) and Angela McRobbie (1989) have similarly focused upon the agency of the consumer in their respective studies and the way in which young people, far from simply waiting for the latest fashions to appear, play an active part through the creation of their own street styles in what is manufactured and marketed.

Dick Hebdige's work (1979; 1988) has had a seminal influence on the development of this general perspective in (among other things) its attention to

the symbolic meanings of style and to the way in which the image constitutes not only an integral aspect of contemporary identity but also a form of power and resistance: 'commodities can be symbolically repossessed in everyday life and endowed with implicitly oppositional meanings' (1979: 16). Kobena Mercer has explored similar questions in relation to black hair-styles, which he has argued should be seen as 'aesthetic "solutions" to a range of "problems" created by ideologies of race and racism' (1987: 34). Poststructuralist and postmodernist analyses which stress the overwhelming significance of the sign have of course been very influential here, particularly Baudrillard's work on consumption and the political economy of the sign (1988) in which he argues for a notion of the social 'as nothing other than the play of signs which have no referent in "reality" but only derive their meanings from themselves and each other' (O'Shea; but note also Alan O'Shea's interesting argument about the similarities between Baudrillard and the Frankfurt School in their view of the masses). Much of the work that falls into this second intellectual paradigm, however, has been quite historically and experientially rooted and hence is not postmodernist in the sense referred to above.

Much of it has also drawn quite heavily on psychoanalysis. There have been different influences here, all fairly diffuse, but in a cumulative way all emphasizing the complexity of culture and our interaction with it. Lacan's work has been important, particularly his stress on the subject as fragmented and incoherent. We are simultaneously both rational and irrational; we can both consume and reject what we are consuming; desire permeates everything but is by definition never fulfilled. Melanie Klein's emphasis on the relationship between the child and mother has also been influential; Gillian Skirrow, for example, has drawn on Klein's insights about the child's fascination for the internal working of the mother's body in order to explore the particular appeal of video games to boys (1986). Another application of psychoanalytic theory to consumerism, this time from the object-relations school, is offered by Robert Young (1989) who celebrates the pleasures and comforts of sound systems and computers as transitional objects comparable to the teddy bear.

What all these texts have in common is a legitimizing of the consumer and of the commodities and cultural forms that are *actively* consumed by him or her. Also in common they stress the *materiality* of the symbolic. Explorations of power are confined to this level, to the symbolic and discursive (Nava, 1987). In this intellectual paradigm, the proximity of consumption to production, and hence to the economic, remains unaddressed.

Consumerism and power

It is paradoxical that the orientation of this second paradigm towards fantasy,

identity, meaning and protest, although productive in uncovering the agency of the consumer, has, in its flight from the economic, succeeded in obscuring the radical potential of consumption almost as much as the earlier paradigm in which the consumer was so denigrated. What I want to do now is to retain the insights about the popular and imaginative appeal of consumption and combine them with an exploration of the possibilities of political activism at the point of consumption.

As I have already pointed out, traditional Marxists and socialists have tended to ignore this general area both theoretically and politically. Their concentration has been uniquely centred on *production* as the motor and therefore also the Achilles heel of capitalism. The 'new movements', like feminism and gay and black organizations, have tended, on the one hand, to orient themselves towards changing consciousness through cultural interventions and, on the other, to demanding a greater share of state resources. Although politically all these groups are likely to have been involved in the boycott of South African goods (for example), within the conceptual framework that I am examining, the potential of activism at the point of consumption has been largely neglected. It is ironic therefore that among the first to point the way at the theoretical level to these possibilities have been liberal economists like Galbraith, through their emphasis on the importance of the consumption process within capitalism. The progressive implications of this intellectual avenue are considerable. Galbraith argued in *Economics and the Public Purse* (accessibly summarized by himself for the less knowledgeable in MS magazine, 1974) that women's labour in the management and administration of consumption was as integral to the continuing existence of capitalism as the labour involved in production, but that in neo-classical economics its value was concealed. Here is a point that can yield a considerable amount for feminists (see e.g., Weinbaum and Bridges, 1979) but it is not one to be pursued right now. What is useful for the argument that I am developing in this paper, is the emphasis on the significance of the consumer, and hence by implication, on her potential power.

There is, however, no consideration of this potential in the standard consumer literature. What is referred to as 'consumerism', particularly in the United States, is a movement which had its political heyday there during the sixties (Nader, 1971; Cameron Mitchell, 1986) when it was bracketed with communism and other dangerous 'isms' by some of the giant corporations. It now exists throughout the Western world (see e.g., the Consumers Association and *Which* magazine in Britain) albeit in more moderate form, and continues as before in its task of disseminating information and increasing regulative legislation through the exercise of pressure on government agencies. Its object has consistently been to protect and enlighten the consumer by monitoring the

quality of prices and goods, encoding and publicizing consumer rights, and so forth. In political terms the movement has engaged activists but only in pursuit of the goals identified above. There appears to have been no extrinsic political purpose, no exercise of a more general political power.

Consumer co-operatives from the time of Sydney and Beatrice Webb onwards have also focused predominantly on securing low prices and good quality for their members, although they have done this not only by increasing restrictive legislation and consumer rights, but also by developing their own manufacturing and retailing bases. This has sometimes included the establishment of self-help networks. However, as with the consumer rights movements, objectives have normally been restricted to the protective; there has been no attempt to wield political power over a wider range of issues.

Consumer protection then must be distinguished from consumer boycotts which have specific political goals that do not necessarily operate to the material advantage of the consumer. Boycotts date back to at least the eighteenth century and have historically been employed as a political tactic where other forms of struggle are blocked or seem inappropriate. A notable example has been Cesar Chavez who, inspired by Gandhi and frustrated by corrupt and racist American trade union practices, successfully mobilized (during the 1960s and 1970s) what eventually became an international boycott of Californian grapes and other farm produce in order to improve the working conditions of Mexican-American labourers. As he put it, 'The boycott is not just grapes and lettuce, essentially it's about people's concern for people' (Levy, 1975: *256).* Product boycotts are a more common form of protest in the United States than in Britain and have increased in recent years (Savan, 1989). Economic sanctions against South Africa and boycotts against firms with interests there, like Barclays Bank, have also proved successful. Consumer boycotts have become one of the most effective weapons available to the black population in South Africa. Disenfranchised in terms of the conventional democratic processes, consumer boycotts enable them nevertheless to wield a measure of direct and instantaneous power. A recent example reported in the *Guardian* (Ormond, 1990) involved a white shop-owner who entered the political arena on behalf of the Conservative Party and whose business, as a consequence of the ensuing boycott by blacks, dropped by an extraordinary 90 per cent within two days.

Until recently this form of political activism has involved relatively small numbers of people. However, during the last year or so we have seen an extraordinary growth in a consumer practice which encompasses not only boycotts but also selective buying (i.e., the buying of products which conform to certain criteria). This has undoubtedly been stimulated by the global environmental crisis, and fuelled by government inaction. Concern about these

issues and the conviction that consumer activism can be an effective form of protest has resulted, according to *The Times* (30 June 1989), in an estimated 18 million Green shoppers in Britain. According to the *Daily Telegraph,* 50 per cent of shoppers operate product boycotts of one kind or another *(Ethical Consumer* 3, 1989) and, to date, *The Green Consumer Guide* (Elkington and Hailes, 1989) has been on *The Sunday Times* best-seller list for almost a year and has sold 300,000 copies. Green consumerism has clearly captured the popular imagination to an unprecedented degree. This is because it offers ordinary people access to a new and very immediate democratic process: 'voting' about the environment can take place on a daily basis. People are not only *not* duped, they are able through their shopping to register political support or opposition. Furthermore, they are able to exercise some control over production itself, over what gets produced and the political conditions in which production takes place.

This is facilitated through the type of information researched and disseminated by magazines like *The Ethical Consumer* (first issue published in March 1989, as yet with a small circulation) whose objectives are 'to promote the use of consumer power' and to expand the democratic process. Another example is *New Consumer,* 'the magazine for the creative consumer', which was launched in August 1989. These magazines include both analytical articles and reviews of products and services. Instead of assessing items in terms of value for money (as *Which* does) the criteria used are whether or not manufacturing companies have involvements in South Africa or other 'oppressive regimes'; whether they recognize trade unions, have decent work conditions and responsible marketing practices; whether they are involved in the manufacture of armaments or nuclear power; and finally what their record is on women's issues, animal testing, land rights and the environment. Articles in back issues of *The Ethical Consumer* include an evaluation of the politics of Green consumerism (their position here is that the Green focus on particular items detracts attention from the overall profile of producer companies) and a review of the US magazine *National Boycott News* in which all organized boycotts are reported. At a more general level the argument is that consumer activism occurs where normal democratic processes are inadequate and where there are 'widespread feelings of powerlessness'. It is clear from reading *The Ethical Consumer* and *New Consumer* (as well as the less analytical *Green Consumer Guide)* that the consumerism advocated by bodies of this kind is neither liberal nor individualistic. On the contrary, it is radical, collectivist, internationalist and visionary; implicitly socialist in its analysis of capitalism, it differs in the importance it attributes to the point of consumption.

In addition, one of the great strengths of this new consumer activism is its appeal to groups who historically have been marginalized from both the production process and the politics of the workplace and government, namely

women and the young. They are, however, central to the process of consumption. I have already referred to women's importance in this sphere: it is not only that they have expertise and confidence here, and that they wield 80 per cent of purchasing power; it is also that they are uniquely placed in relation to environmental issues - to food contamination, health care, pollution and, more grandly, the future of the planet - in their continuing capacity as bearers of responsibility for nurturing and for the details of everyday life. This combination has constructed them as a constituency pre-eminently suited to the new consumer activism. And, indeed, women's magazines regularly run articles about these questions. The Body Shop, which comes out clean on every one of *The Ethical Consumer* criteria, has been one of the most successful shops of recent years. There are many examples which confirm women as political *subjects* in this process, as active, knowledgeable and progressive.

The young constitute another group for whom consumer activism is particularly appealing. As large numbers of celebrated individuals from the music and entertainment industry have become involved in popularizing environmental politics, its sandals-and-renunciation image has given way to something much more exciting and fashionable. Ark, the campaigning organization and production company, is an example of this. Environmental consumerism is also urgent and worthwhile. Perhaps part of its success lies in its appeal to a kind of youthful apocalyptic pessimism as well as, simultaneously, to fantasies of omnipotence and reparation. Utopian and collectivist, it offers something to identify with, to belong to. It is also effective. Although the young may not have as large an income as older members of the population, they - like women - have a disproportionate influence on marketing decisions, as is well known among advertisers. Although relatively powerless in orthodox political terms - many of them are not even eighteen - they too are enfranchised in the new democracy of the market-place.

However, the political left appears to have ignored the potential of this kind of politics and has excluded it from its repertoire of popular activism (despite the emphasis in certain sectors on the political importance of consumerism's appeal, Hall and Jacques, 1989). There are various reasons for this. First of all, at a general level, the formative traditions of Marxism, trade unionism and the Labour Party seem to have rendered the left incapable of imagining political struggle outside the workplace, the local state or Parliament. This is ironic, because, of course, in its extreme and 'terrorist' forms, consumer activism is far more effective and much easier than striking and picketing. An example which highlights the vulnerability of the point of consumption (as well as the greater take-up of consumer politics in the United States, perhaps because of their weaker labour history) is the case of the cyanide painted on two Chilean grapes which resulted in the loss of $240m and 20,000 jobs

(Jenkins, 1989). This apart, where the left has looked specifically at consumerism (see e.g., Gyford, 1989) it has tended to be in terms of the collectivity versus the individual; the liberal and defensive consumer rights movement has not been distinguished analytically from the mass exercise of consumer power. Yet another factor which may well have inhibited the serious attention of the left to consumer politics is the degree of crossover between the Green movement and the alternative health movement. Criticisms of individualism, essentialism and mysticism which have been levelled against the health movement (Coward, 1989) are likely to have spilled over on to consumer activism. Then of course there is the continuing saga of moralistic distaste - with resonances of the Hoggart/Marcuse/
Seabrook paradigm - for too much emphasis on acquisition and the buying of things and for what is seen as the licensing of consumer hedonism by, for example, *Marxism Today.* Finally, on the political left as elsewhere, shopping continues to be trivialized through its (unconscious?) association with women's work and the feminine.

Theorists of consumption and the consumer society have also been at fault here. They too have failed to consider these questions (see e.g., Featherstone, 1990). But as I argued earlier in this article, cultural theory cannot be easily disentangled from its wider context, and some of the political points listed in the previous paragraph have also deflected a more academic scrutiny of these issues. Yet current world developments have made this a particularly urgent matter: we are confronted not only by the crisis of the environment, but also by the frailty of socialism in Eastern Europe and the apparent expansion of capitalism into a global system. In this climate it has become all the more imperative to investigate consumerism: to look at how historically it has linked up with other forms of politics; to tease out its contradictions and limits; to examine more closely the proposition that its theoretical marginality owes something to misogyny; to explore its relation to identity and desire; and of course also to develop a sharper understanding of its economic operations and its potential power. It may well be the case that late twentieth-century Western consumerism contains within it far more revolutionary seeds than we have hitherto anticipated. It has already generated new grass-roots constituencies - constituencies of the market-place - and has enfranchised modern citizens in new ways, making possible a new and quite different economic, political, personal and creative participation in society. The full scale of its power has yet to be imagined.

Mica Nava is a Senior Lecturer in Cultural Studies at the Polytechnic of East London, England and a member of the Feminist Review *editorial collective.*

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