

Consumer Culture, Sustainability and a New Vision of Consumer Sovereignty

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Abstract

The article considers sustainable consumption and alternative food networks in the context of global consumer capitalism as a locus where a new form of consumer sovereignty can be developed. It offers a theoretical overview aimed at charting the emergence and consolidation of a relational, responsible vision of consumer sovereignty. Potentially alternative to neo-classical and neoliberal views, such a vision of consumers and their power involves both sustainability, equality and democracy, and private happiness, conceived as a form of responsibility for personal, creative well-being and fulfillment as opposed to acquisition and spending power. Ultimately the article offers a reappraisal of the economic notion of utility of goods, and proposes a way forward for alternative ways of consuming and of thinking of consumption which aim at avoiding the mere reproduction of charity and at involving individuals' subjectivity working on their capacities to develop new pleasures in sustainable lifestyles.

Consumption is becoming more and more important both inside and outside academic circles, and we are increasingly aware that our views of its value and power adhere to whatever notion of consumer sovereignty we adopt (Sassatelli 2007): a self-regarding, self-interested notion of sovereignty (largely coinciding with neoliberal and neo-classical views) or a responsible one. This article considers the cultural representation of consumption and the consumer. It focuses on sustainable consumption and alternative food networks, by proposing a theoretical synthesis aimed at charting the emergence and consolidation of a relational, responsible vision of consumer sovereignty. Potentially alternative to neo-classical and neoliberal views, such a vision of consumer sovereignty involves both collective goods (environmental concerns, equality, democracy) and private happiness (in terms of critical, creative fulfillment as opposed to acquisition and spending power) in the re-appraisal of the notion of economic utility.

Against such backdrop, this article firstly concentrates on the critical framing of the consumer that is promoted by different actors in the alternative food network field, and tries to offer a socio-theoretical mapping of its territory. These networks

are not simply anti-consumerist (see Humphrey 2010); they rather articulate different – sustainable, responsible, and in some cases sombre, visions of market relations, networks and practices. Secondly, this article examines what these initiatives, variously labelled critical, ethical, responsible or political consumption (see, for example, Chessel and Cochoy 2004; Sassatelli 2006; Lewis and Potter 2011; Carrier and Luetchford 2012; Goodman and Sage 2013; Stolle and Micheletti 2013) appear to have in common. In particular I suggest that they embrace new visions of the consumer that may represent a challenge to the more established, neoliberal notions of market choice. This signals 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 the community are being destabilised. In the final section, the article aims to problematise the view that alternative or critical actions do 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 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 consumer gratification. A good choice must be good for the community and for the planet as well as bringing happiness to the consumer. Consumers, in such perspective, are truly sovereigns only if they engage responsibly with their own sustainable well-being, that of the community and of the planet. *Utility* is thus redefined 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*. Commodity circuits themselves extend well beyond individualistic consumption, both before and after the moment of purchase, and into the organisation of production, the use of natural resources, the actual practices of consumption and the management of waste.

The power of the consumer

How we understand consumption and how the consumer has been modelled is, of course, of the essence. Standard economic theory has dealt with consumer power under the fundamental rubric of consumer sovereignty. Consumers, as individualised self-regarding beings, have the power to get what they want from producers and ultimately rule the market. If this model of what mainstream neo-classical economic theory has put forward is crude, nonetheless the latter implies quite a simplistic view of power. It leaves very little space for control and conflict, persuasion and protest. To be sure, persuasion and protest are key elements of power as a relationship mediated through, and an effect of, the sum of strategic positions and inequalities in a given society. Both aspects typically concern consumption. The persuasion of consumers using sophisticated promotional techniques, and the subsequent manipulation of their wants and tastes, have been the object of broad structural critiques of consumer society launched by critical theories of a cultural-Marxist variety, at least from the Frankfurt School onwards. Consumers' protest, as mobilisation against specific companies or producers' initiatives, has been addressed in a number of empirical studies. In the stronger sense, they show that consumption concerns power because social

actors may deploy their consumer choices to make their voices heard for a number of ethical and political issues related to the distribution of resources, the value of labour and the exploitation of natural resources and common goods. The support of fair trade goods, local agriculture, and ethical products, is also an emergent phenomenon that stresses the active political role of consumers. Despite the (partly justified) fears of green-washing and the doubts raised by the diffusion of cause-related or 'ethical marketing' (Arnold 2009) among multinational, the fact that practices of consumption can be constituted, by consumers themselves, as a space for political action has been used, with some reason, against traditional critical views that consider that advertising effectively commends consumption as an alternative to political rebellion.

Sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists have recently been interested in the political investments made by consumers, considering how various forms of political consumerism may broaden the repertoire of political mobilisation. They investigate the significance of the use of the market for ethical, political and environmental reasons. As we know, political consumerism is not new – for example, as early as the late eighteenth century, English women used their consumer power to support the abolition of slavery (Micheletti *et al.* 2007; see also Friedman 1999; Glickman 1997; Cohen 2003). Nevertheless, contemporary political consumerism is different: in the

magnitude of the efforts (the numerous issue areas), the size of their constituency (the global community but primarily the rapidly growing middle class), and the more public interest of their mission (its focus on human rights, farm animal treatment and global common pool resources). (Micheletti 2011, p. 23)

Indeed, the scope of contemporary political consumerism is global, or at least supranational, extending along the long interdependency networks that have been developing with large-scale economic disembedding of production chains from specific territories and their communities. The dialectic of globalisation (Robertson 1995) is at the heart of contemporary forms of political consumerism: as we know, global consumer capitalism has tended to raise local hackles, provoking resistance in many different forms, including fundamentalist ones. As globalisation proceeds, it is the large multinationals that have become the targets of growing critical attention by environmentalist organisations and the alter-global movement. In introducing innovations that alter the routines of consumption, in expanding the relevant human community, in disembedding economic from sociocultural processes, globalisation creates a space to address both commodities as vectors of social relations and the re-embedding economic process.

Let us take a brief look at the field of political, critical or ethical consumerism. As it has been suggested, symbolic initiatives against multinational companies and the boycotting of global brands, labelled respectively discursive and negative political consumerism, have been increasingly joined by positive initiatives (Micheletti *et al.* 2004), or buycotting (Friedman 1999) – that is, the purchase of alternative products such as ethical finance, organic food or Fair Trade goods. Critical consumption practices now seem to concern a wide sector of the population in Western countries. However, the fact that they typically thrive on middle-class publics is considered

limiting; ultimately it may disempower consumers on some issues, reinforcing the established social hierarchies which appear, in their turn, to sustain neoliberal strategies antipodal to alternative or critical consumption initiatives. The scope of political or critical consumerism has also been criticised on the grounds that what draws consumers to ethical products may not be a strong political consciousness; that well-meaning initiatives may not be consequential in terms of specific or global welfare or environmental targets; and that much of what can be done in terms of structural change needs to be accompanied by policies and regulation as well as grassroots mobilisation. Certainly, it would be mistaken to simply attribute a deliberately political intention to all responsible consumer choices (Sassatelli 2006). Many of the practices that come under the umbrella of political consumerism may be conducted by consumers who have in mind meanings and objectives other than strictly political ones, and whose varieties have to be explained also in terms of local histories and circumstances. For example, in the UK, alternative distribution networks, including second-hand shops, not only respond to a politically conscious middle-class consumer, but also attract disadvantaged urban groups that may not be able to afford shopping 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 comes from diverse sources, including a large vegetarian movement as well as health-conscious or gourmet carnivores (Lockie and Kristen 2002). In Italy, a large proportion of those who buy Fair Trade goods in supermarkets do so because they like the products or consider them better quality, or just by chance (Sassatelli 2008). Or, as they participate in local alternative purchasing networks, Italian consumers are attracted by the good taste as well as the apparent closeness of their relations with farmers and the farm world (Grasseni 2013).

Awareness of these complex motives and dynamics helps to address the possible conflicts which may indeed emerge from different components of critical consumers' actions: such as between the support for Fair Trade and ecological considerations in terms of food miles, or the support of local, sustainable agriculture. This is particularly relevant as there is now a growing awareness that as Fair Trade has gone mainstream and it has had difficulties in always keeping its promises to help producers in developing countries (Lyon and Moberg 2010). Works on global anti-sweatshop campaigns and on their appropriation established companies through cause-related marketing seem to point to the fact that wide public recognition, and even commercial success may not always correspond to a real improvement in the working life of garment workers. More broadly, it is important to be alert to the localisation of dissent and to the possible particularistic or nationalistic outcomes of the political investment of consumption (Littler 2009; Micheletti *et al.* 2007). Finally, it is crucial to be aware of the political legitimisation function that endorsement of, for example, Fair Trade initiatives may have for local or national political leaders, quite independently of the effectiveness of these initiatives on the needy groups they are deemed to help (Clarke 2006). This points to the role of politics *strictu sensu*, of global and local governance, and of local/global regulation policies (Bevir and Trentmann 2007).

A focus on regulation is especially important in times of economic crisis, when goodwill may become less compelling, and the belief that the consumer now

translates to a global scale the duties and capacities of the citizen (Beck and Gernsheim 2001) may be just wishful thinking. Taking a look at shareholder activism and responsible investment as increasingly relevant options to facilitate consumers' action on issues outside the jurisdiction of local and national politicians, may help us getting sharper on the matter. These options respond to the notion of what Robert Foster calls the corporate citizenship that corporations themselves promote:

no matter how much good corporations can do and have done, doing good will never be their 'core activity' ... The legal mandate and main purpose of corporations is to enhance market value for the owners of the corporation. (Foster 2008, p. 227)

The model for such options is charity, and when economic recession threatens profits, as it has done since the recent global financial crisis, charitable practices may swiftly vanish. This is certainly something to consider, as the basis for critical or sustainable actions may indeed be withering or be relegated to minority, perhaps elitist, sectors of society. Such a depressing ending may be more likely for issues which are not of immediate local relevance, like the well-being of faraway workers and common pool resources whose vulnerability has not yet impinged on the daily life of relatively wealthy consumers.

What's sovereignty of the consumer?

In his recent book *Consumption and its consequences*, Daniel Miller (2012, p. 63) not only argues that 'consumer culture should be regarded as authentic' but also rejects 'the assumption that it is necessarily individualistic, materialistic, competitive or, indeed, capitalist'. Such a statement looks far more persuasive if we focus on the role of both civil society (movements, political and cultural intermediaries) and political bodies (at local, state and supra-national level) and take seriously the issue of power, problematising consumer sovereignty. In line with some of the more promising developments in economic sociology, we may conceive of the market itself as an embedded socioeconomic formation charged with normative dynamics, rather than an abstract mechanism made of individualised individuals and, likewise, individualised corporate entities operating in purely instrumental fashion. Issues of governance (of commodity networks) and representation (of consumers) have indeed started to come to the fore in order to problematise the political investment of the consumer as a consumer-citizen.¹ The emphasis on regulation and governance in the field of critical consumption studies is timely and well justified. Consumers can be active, but much is not really up to them. Surely one way to stabilise consumer practices, and in particular to internalise concerns for fairness and the environment into the economic calculus, is to regulate commodity circuits so that these concerns are literally taken into account (such as in legal requirements) and, indeed promoted, (such as in the setting of targets and budgets and in established procedures). Consumers' grassroots ethical initiatives may otherwise be easily subsumed within 'business as usual', and the externalising, instrumental, profit-driven market logic.

Still, heavy regulation, especially in the form of sanctions and prohibitions, may also lead to reducing the scope of individual choice, something which may appear

unpalatable to liberal susceptibility. Still, we may resort to the full to the creative power of consumers' practices, their importance as involving meaningful worlds for participants and their capacity to *work through pleasure as much as duty* (Soper *et al.* 2009). It is precisely, pleasure, which has to be factored in and drawn upon in moments of crisis when good-will is at a premium. Together with regulation, it is thus important to consider in which way ethical/critical consumption may offer strong intrinsic incentives (i.e. pleasure) to participants by stabilising taste and knowledge, which in turn contribute to fixing alternative social and commodity networks.

In other words, we should consider how consumption can be organised in ways that allow for immediate, self-rewarding creativity as well as sustainable well-being larger than immediate, fast-consumed satiation – the latter only generates a rat-race and an obsolescence-driven thirst for easy-to-digest commodities. Planned obsolescence, working through a number of dynamics which are characteristic, if not exclusive to high modernity, such as fashion and marketing (see Smart 2010), is fostering a particular type of pleasure linked to the thrill of novelty, the bliss of chance, the delight of immediacy. Intrinsic incentives of a pleasurable kind may instead be cultivated through time, often through effort, and based on the renovation of the old, the reiteration of the activity, and the contingent creativity of variation by *making do with what is available* (be it people or things).

We may start by allowing for the mixture of motives (altruistic or otherwise) which impinge on individual consumer practice at large (see, for example, Sassatelli 2001; Zelizer 2009), and which is arguably even more implicated in practices of a responsible variety. We may then consider that the strength of consumption as an ordinary practice lies in the fact that it is framed as *finality in itself*. This entails taking seriously the pleasures of consumption, considering ethical consumption *not just as a means to do something else*, no matter how important this 'something' might be (participation to the polis, changing the world, helping the planet, showing solidarity to marginal producers, and so on). A new focus on pleasure, and on the different possible qualities and definitions of pleasure, becomes fundamental. While we cannot equate genuine critical choices with political vote, we should not disqualify the intrinsic pleasures of ethical shopping as simply the ultimate distinctive fashion of the well-off. Shopping ethically and critically may enable us to make choices that matter to us in everyday life in ways which political voting may not (Schudson 2007). Rather than for their possible larger effects on macro realities (including world justice and global environmental issues), many consumers' choices are relevant in themselves for what they allow us to do and to be and whom they make us relate to and how. Indeed, what is at stake in many grassroots critical consumption initiatives is precisely that people's lives can be re-organised entirely, starting from a number of apparently banal, practical choices and preferences. This will require and induce a different management of time, space and social relations, which will be more fulfilling for the individual and promote collective, sustainable happiness.

I would like to suggest that today the most relevant issue when considering the scope of critical consumption, as well as consumer practices more in general, is not the tempering of instrumentalism with altruistic motivations. Dominant economic theory, epitomised by Gary Becker's (1996) work, indeed includes some altruistic

effects through an extended individual utility function. Yet it is still characterised by an equation between revealed preferences and taste – that is, what people buy is an accurate reflection of their original, true wants. This has the effect of removing persuasion from the picture: consumers are autonomous beings who will continue (or stop) wanting only if they are truly and happily satisfied (or dissatisfied). Satisfaction itself is seen as the elimination of discomfort: a perspective which reifies pleasure as the discrete filling in of a gap in a linear sequence of clear-cut, pre-packaged and well-defined options. There is, thus, little space for a relational and processual perspective on pleasure as itself a practice of learning, an ongoing accomplishment which transforms goods, relations and networks. This, in its turn, amounts to a vision of sustainable consumer pleasure which defines pleasure as an interactive learning process of mutual shaping between social beings, socially mediated objects and market networks.

As I shall show, only such a perspective on sustainable consumer pleasure can help us build a critical standpoint on consumption today. The fact that the growth of material culture does not automatically translate into more happiness had long been noticed by, for example, Tibor Scitovsky (1992, orig. 1970, See also Easterlin 1974; Schwartz 2004). In particular, he asked what the price of economic progress was, suggesting that economic growth in the West led to genuine gains in living standards but that these had not translated into fertile leisure, thereby enhancing human happiness. On the contrary, it is especially the pursuit of fertile leisure and creative activities – at once time intensive and less dependent on standardised commodities – which appears to be severely squeezed by the logic of market expansion (Bianchi 2010; and more broadly, Schor 1999). The problem is not so much commoditisation or consumption *per se*, but how these are organised in the context of commodity chains, commodity characteristics and the work–leisure balance, in terms of both time and skills. Just like we are still very much culturally working out our personal genealogies by drawing lines as group or family members (Zerubavel 2013), so we rely on the relations which are sustained through consumption (and the lines which are drawn through it) for self-recognition. Likewise, in a relational mode, the past, the present and the future are intertwined, and we literally make them, *also* through consumption. The future, Appadurai has recently remade (2013, 287, and 292) is a “routine element of thought and practice in all societies; it is “not just a technical or a neutral space, but is shot through with affect and with sensations”, it is a “collective process” and a “human capacity”. The idea that the future is a cultural fact of this sort goes hand in hand with the recognition that people around the world have different access to future-making practices, that the “capacity to aspire” demands and promotes recognition. I suggest that this capacity to aspire and to imagine a better future is crucial to shift our view of consumption as a powerful sustainable pleasure (see also Sassatelli 2013a). Against a pessimistic view, individual consumption skills which allow for relationships and offer recognition and which are to be gained from actual consumption itself are what really count. Revising the idea of a neat separation between consumption as individual pleasure and mechanic satiation and work as bureaucratic, well-defined and potentially limitless duty, we may make a few steps towards a new organisation of consumption in practice and a new vision of how sustaining pleasure in consumption becomes inevitably larger than individual, punctual satiation. This

entails going beyond basic mainstream economic reasoning, and especially the idea that all satiation (that is, consumption) is equal or equivalent.

Indeed, in late capitalist societies the economy has been organised so as to boost a trade-off between comfort and pleasure (Scitovsky 1992). In standard economic theory, all consumer satisfactions are treated as if they were alike and modelled on a simple, mechanistic notion of satiation, whereby maximum pleasure is reached with the maximum reduction in excitement. On the basis of a mechanistic anthropology whereby the human being features as a hydraulic machine reacting to the need of eliminating (physical) discomfort, pleasure coincides with an (instantaneous) moment of satiation. On the contrary, we should start by acknowledging, with Sen (1977), that utility is plural in nature. There are different utilities, which generate different effects both on individual welfare and on public goods. This is why a politics of utility – or, in other terms, pleasure – is central. Once we overcome the idea of pleasure as passive satiation, the components of the good life are not simply outcome-oriented, self-contained activities aiming at relieving individual pain and stress, but also self-rewarding activities requiring skills and developing through relationships requiring time:² skills that are, to some degree, renewable and self-sustainable in their capacity to sustain medium to long-term projects of well-being beyond individual satiation. However, we shall not set immediate pleasure against long-term well-being: the challenge is precisely to combine immediate pleasure and long-lasting, sustainable well-being. In other terms, this is not a reactionary call for abstaining from or deferring pleasure. It is the recognition that only some immediate pleasure is organised to be sustained and renewed in the long run through the enhancement of social relations, and that only sustainable pleasure is real – that is, truly beneficial across time. Such a position involves a particular view that individual pleasure develops in the process of looking for, finding and learning about things (and people). And indeed, it is as a process, through activity and critical appropriation, that fertile pleasure is produced. This requires some form of self-discipline linked to the active learning of (consumption) skills. Thus, while comfort is linked to goods that save time, effort and skill (and thereby produce instantaneous satiation of a want), pleasure is linked to goods and modalities of consumption that require time, effort and skills (and thereby enrich one's own faculties and produce long-term well-being). This entails a vision of sovereignty which extends the self beyond a self-regarding present and links it to territory and other people, namely, a responsible sovereignty. Such critical vision of sovereignty is coextensive with a notion of utility that refuses to reify single commodities and looks instead at commodity networks, considering wants as related to effects, people as connected through goods, and goods connected among themselves.

Pleasure and skills

Recognising that consumption needs time, and that the spending of time in consumption can produce skills that may be deployed creatively is fundamental and aims at the heart of a further distinction: that between *standardised goods* which provide novelty by obsolescence, and *pleasure goods* which work in a more personalised fashion, providing novelty by learning, creativity and relationality. Now, we should be

clear that pleasure goods are pleasurable not just, or mainly, for their objective, intrinsic qualities, but for the way in which consumption is organised. These goods are, in fact, pleasure circuits, entailing ways of consuming which enhance the critical acquisition of skills through lively interpersonal relations. This can be illustrated by contrasting pleasure circuits with 'sterile ownership', a classical disease of consumer capitalism for Simmel (1990), fuelled by the growth in a commoditised material culture, the standardised diversity of objects and the continual, marginal innovations made to them. Consumers may indeed find themselves with objects that are useless and meaningless or even alienating, and they may be upset by having discarded an object which still provided them with a sense of identity. In such a situation, the consumer legally owns the object but does not possess it emotionally; such an object can certainly provide the extrinsic pleasures of status competition but offers nothing in terms of intrinsic pleasure and personal fulfillment.

Such a paradox is evident when we consider that consumption as creative appropriation requires time, rather than merely filling up time, and that the feelings and skills associated with the time of consumption are themselves a *laboured* part of its value. Thus forms of sterile ownership may be a feature of economies where leisure time is the shortest for the moneyed elite. A study of consumption patterns in contemporary liberal market societies by Sullivan and Gershuny (2004) in fact shows that expensive leisure goods (such as sophisticated cameras, camping equipment and sport accessories) are purchased by time-pressured high-income earners and are often left unused, remaining in storage at home as symbols of a potential future and a wished-for self-identity. These luxuries contribute to expenditure on consumption at the macro-economic level, and of course produce a number of unwanted externalities (external diseconomies or costs on the environment, for example, or on perceived deprivation as induced by status competition) even though they remain unused. As such, they do not directly produce pleasure: being only virtually consumed, they offer some symbolic support in daily life only to be bearers of frustration. They play act consumption skills to make an impression rather than favouring the critical learning of skills which may allow for future, renewable pleasure. For our argument, the importance of this study rests in the fact that the goods mentioned are precisely of the sort that may allow consumers to be critical, active and reflexive about their pleasures. For instance, a camera needs (consumption) skills to be used, and while we may soon be back on the market to buy extra accessories, what matters in terms of sustainable pleasure is learning to use and make the most of it. Likewise, golfing equipment is meaningful in that its real pleasure relates, like much consumption, to the socialisation that develops through play, to the rituals of play and to the added effects of interaction among participants.

Interaction in consumer practices may amount to what, in economic terms, could be defined as 'external economies'. External economies of this sort are

especially important in the area of stimulation and excitement, because many of their sources depend on human interaction, which is often of a type that is enjoyed by all those who interact. (Scitovsky 1992, p. 33)

Goods such as the arts, sport and social games require (consumption) skills and are typically organised via sustained social interaction, and they are thus relational

goods. They point to the fact that the value of consumption lies in its being not only an individual process of discovery but also a way of sharing and communicating knowledge, memories, narratives and emotions. As is apparent, for example, in the commercialisation of leisure activities, fitness and sport (see Sassatelli 2010), commercialism typically instrumentalises social relations in order to promote the fastest appropriation of goods possible via a 'must-have', 'must be' or 'status symbol' logic that can easily be rendered in monetised terms, rather than allowing the time and informality which promotes relationality *per se*.

There is thus a need to prioritise the flourishing of the relational component in consumption, even at the expense of commercialism, and indeed promote the decoupling of the consumption of pleasure goods from monetary logic by recognising the social value of alternative systems of provision. Much of this is happening around the idea of critical consumption and is predicated on a relational logic. Thus, a number of different critical consumption organisations place an emphasis on consumer choice not only as a political action but also as one that may provide pleasure by being decoupled from the commercial logic of fast consumption and by consciously re-embedding pleasure in social relations (Sassatelli 2008). Even the Slow Food emphasis on conviviality responds to this logic, and around this lingers much of its (not always successful) efforts to promote the refinement of taste as an ethical, humanist pursuit of consumers' skills, as opposed to a distinctive class practice (Sassatelli and Davolio 2010).

Conclusion

As sociologists of consumption have come to understand that taste is shaped in the encounter between goods and people, emphasis must be placed not only on the institutional structure of such an encounter (from commercialism to gift relations) but also the skills it requires and promotes. Consumption skills or knowledge are fundamental to a critical appraisal of contemporary consumer culture. Storing up consumption knowledge is a serious affair which may be demanding both on time-pressured elites and on the money-short working classes. There may be an insidious gap between the generalised knowledge which is needed for everyday consumption, and specialised skills, which are required in the work environment. The skills required in the work environment are intensive, often technical in nature, and geared to solving specific, practical tasks, while generalised knowledge is more extensive, less technical and more about the meaning, the value and the connections between elements, and generally responds to aesthetic and ethical sensibility. Resources, both collective and individual, are spent to make us become good workers, while little is devoted to make us become 'good' consumers³.

The debates around consumption and its sustainability, consumers and their power, could be enriched by considering anew our relation to the world of commodities on both the production side and the consumption side. In the introduction to his well-known collection, Appadurai (1986) was right in stating that consumption and production knowledge do not coincide, but we should avoid inferring from this that consumption knowledge and skills are essentially good. With the consolidation of modernity, or, as others like to call it, with late-modernity, people's knowledge as

consumers generally must become ‘infinitely more varied than their knowledge as producers’, yet it might just be as much piecemeal and reactive. ‘Modern consumers are the victims of the velocity of fashion as surely as primitive consumers are the victims of the stability of sumptuary laws’ which prescribe what to consume (Appadurai 1986, p. 32). This entails that, although they are more varied, consumption skills risk never being sufficiently reflexive to allow for the successful, fertile appropriation of goods and sustainable pleasure.

Moreover, the increase in outsourcing services is commoditising consumption itself. As Arlie Russell Hochschild (2013, p. 130) writes in her last book:

it is not only that we cannot grow vegetables, build houses, train dogs, or read to our children, but that we seem to be in the process of ceasing to look for primary meaning in doing so. We are moving our personal symbols from the production side of life to the consumption side of it.

This, I think, not only means that we need to negotiate which meanings we may move from production to consumption, as Hochschild notes, but also we need to define what counts as consumption, what meanings may be attached to it. Ultimately what capacities are we left with as consumers of emotion-thick commodities through which we want love and affection to be demonstrated, performed and recognised. Capacities, skills, or the details of how we go about our consumer practices, as well as the values that we attach to these practices are crucial.

Much of the sociology of consumption has been concerned to show that consumption is in fact a form of production (notably, De Certeau 1984; Miller 1987; 1995). In many ways there has been a theoretically legitimate pressure to think of consumption as production (of meanings, relations, feeling rules and ultimately the elicitation of emotions) and as a way to appropriate, de-commoditise and personalise purchased goods and services. But the point is what skills and capacities are we left with when we become consumers of fast and pre-digested or intimate commodities? A new model of critical consumer sovereignty considering pleasure as well as duty needs to address what skills and capacities consumers may extract from consumption, which points to a renewed alliance with territory and producers.

Notes

¹ In her influential book *Political virtue and shopping* (2003), Michele Micheletti framed the issue through the notion of individualised collective action. This was meant as an analytical tool to capture the essence of a form of citizen engagement that brings together self-interest and the general good. In a more recent paper, Micheletti (2011) proposes a new, different label: individualised responsibility taking. However, even in her recent contribution, she well epitomises the one unchanging feature of much reflection on political, ethical or critical consumption: the emphasis is on duty, commitment, and other-regarding results and posed as alternative to individual pleasure as relational well-being (Sassatelli 2013).

² Central to this is the factoring in of temporality and the critical space that it allows. Indeed, in line with classical Greek philosophy, Scitovsky (1992) considers that critical reflection about what one wants is crucial to the pursuit of happiness: this may allow for exiting the immediacy of substitutable utilities as defined by market options, and consider not just the

punctual satisfaction of a given need but present pleasures that may end up being comparatively more encompassing, long-lasting and sustainable in the future.

- ³ Even in the early 1970s, Scitovsky (1992, p. 64) lamented that the education system 'is increasingly aimed at providing professional training in production skills, rather than the general liberal arts education, which provides training in the consumption skills necessary for getting the most out of life'. Recent debates on education and commercialisation, and on the effect of neoliberal policies on teachers' capacity to teach how to learn and how to extract pleasure from learning point towards similar directions (Connell 2009).

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