

From the White Label campaign to the No sweat initiatives. A journey at the roots of political consumerism¹.

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Abstract

In the last years there has been an increasing focus on consumers as political actors. As the attention towards this phenomenon grows, so does the need of a better understanding of this “new political subject”. How new is actually this phenomenon and when being a consumer became a key element for mobilisation, are the main questions discussed in this paper.

In order to answer to these questions, the paper offers a review of how consumers and consumption have been defined through history, with a particular focus on the nineteen and twentieth century in Europe. Middle class women, as described in the paper, play an important role in spreading this culture, as well as in being at the forefront of initiatives critical towards the negative consequences of capitalism. Some of these initiatives are described in this paper, flashing possible links current initiatives of political consumerism.

Forewords

“The responsibility for some of the worst evils from which producers suffer rests with the consumers, who seek the cheapest markets regardless of how cheapness is brought about. It is, therefore, the duty of consumers to find out under what conditions the articles they purchase are produced and distributed and to insist that these conditions shall be wholesome and consistent with a respectable existence on the part of the workers”

These are the words used by Josephine Shaw Lowell, head of the Consumers League of New York), while addressing the participants to a meeting of the League in the ‘30s (quoted in Storrs, 2000: p. 21). The idea of writing this paper developed after having read these words. Researchers on political consumption have consistently to face the question whether political consumption is a new phenomenon and in which sense, who are the actors that mobilise and why. The effort of answering this question inevitably led into a journey at the root of political consumerism and, ultimately, at the core of the debate of when consumers started to be defined –and define themselves- as social actors.

In this journey around the historical debate about the “making of the consumer”, particularly fruitful was to follow the women’s path. Issues related to consumers mobilisations and episodes related to women activism crossed in fact each other, indicating how the process of definition of both consumers and women as political subjects was deeply interwoven.

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1. At the origin of political consumerism: its gendered roots

The past decade has seen increasing research into political consumerism², defined as responsibility expressed through purchase of specific product or avoidance of others. According to Korthals, consumers are increasingly found to demand goods that are produced to certain ethical standards for safety, health, animal welfare, environmental impacts, wages and conditions, and 'fair trade' (Korthals, 2001). Micheletti, observes as well the increasing relevance of actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices (Micheletti, 2003; p.2) Political consumption is often framed as a new phenomenon, seen as the result of post-materialist values of wealthy societies (Inglehart, 1997), of the uncertainty related to live in a risk society (Beck, 1992) as a form for defining collective identities (Sassatelli, 2006) or as part of the development of new forms of political participation (Melucci, 1989, Inglehart and Catterberg, 2002,). But is political consumerism actually a new phenomenon?

A growing interest among historians on consumerism and to the process leading to the formation of consumers as social actors, actually indicates that political consumerism is not actually a new phenomenon and that it developed together with the development of a consumer society. (Trentmann, 2006; Cohen, 2003; Strasser, McGovern and Judt, 1998; D'Aunton and Hilton, 2001; Hilton, 2003; De Grazia, 1996).

The raise of the consumer as a subjects of politics became visible through initiatives ranging from the formation of the consumers leagues (Hilton, 2004) or of the consumers co-operatives (Scott, 1998), or of specific initiatives such as the "white list" (Vincent, 2006) or boycotts (Friedman, 1999).

Furthermore, the formation of the consumer as a social actor was related to the increasing focus of consumers as object of public policies (Trentmann and Taylor, 2006) or as a juridical subject (Everson, 2006) as well as by the development of institutions dealing specifically with consumption issues (Hegnes, 2006), Goldstein, 2006, Melby, 1989)

The analysis of this literature indicates that from its very beginning political consumerism tent to interweave both the dimension of expressing rights (i.e. right to protest, or right to choose among products) as well as a urge for responsibility taking (i.e. duty to think to the consequences of purchase as well as duty to cooperate with public policies).

This way of framing political consumerism pervades the current debate as well. The notion "citizen-consumer" widely used in the literature (Cohen, 2003; Thoresen, 2004; Hilton, 2005) reflects this duality. To be a "citizen-consumer" implies both the opportunity of voicing and organising protest as consumers as well as comply with different forms of "responsibility taking" related to purchasing practices as well as to appropriation and use of products.

A closer analysis of the literature upon the history of consumption indicates that women were particularly significant in the construction of the consumer role as a specific one, partially disembedded from other forms of social affiliations (De Grazia, 1996; Myrvang, Myklebust and Brenna, 2004). Lacking political citizenship – as was the case in most nations at least until the first decades of the 20th century – women found that consumption afforded them

² The term consumerism is here used to express consumers' activism, and not –as referred also in the literature– as an indication of widespread of a materialistic (and individualistic) culture. A description of the two meanings of consumerism can be found in Theien (2004).

with an opportunity to express expertise and identity and to establish relations that were both social and political.

This was particularly true for upper and middle class women. Contrary to working class ones, who could count on participation in trade unionism or socialist movement (Theien, 2005), upper and middle class women (typically non-workers) struggled more in defining autonomous identities and forms of social participation (Myrvang, 2004). For them, consumption represented an entrance into the public sphere as a recognisable collective subject.

The construction of a social identity based both on gender and on the consumer role was the result of several, often interrelated, factors. Particularly relevant in this process was the sharpening of the distinction between the spheres of production and consumption - the widespread of an economic relationship between married couples where women became housewives and their husband wage-earners (Melby, 1989)- but also the increase of physical structures specifically devoted to consumption (i.e. Shopping arcades, Brenna, 2002), and of goods to pick out (Myrvang, 2004).

The genderness of the consumer role was made even more explicitly in the context of public policy making. Policies aimed at protecting or enhancing national wealth or nationalistic values appealed to housewives and sought alliances with them. This tendency –particularly visible in times of crisis- is for instance described by Reagin in her study of interwar Germany (1998), in De Grazia’s analysis of women under fascism in Italy (De Grazia, 1996), in Cohen analysis of women on the “home battle front during the second world war” (Cohen 2003) or Melby’s history of the Norwegian housewives union (Melby, 1989).

All these initiatives constructed the women as the “expert consumers”, and – as we will see- women will utilise this expertise as a form of activism, social involvement and protest.

The development of a consumer society was not however the only cause of women activism. Although it is outside the aim of this paper to go through the topic of women and political involvement it is worth mentioning that widespread of women organisations which characterises the second half of the 19th century and upwards (Kish Sklar & al. 1998). Activism for full citizenship (i.e. right to vote) widespread, women were a visible presence in trade unions and socialist inspired organisations, but also moderate women found motives for an higher involvement in the civil life, as supported by Pope Leon XIII’s encyclical of 1891 (*Rerum Novarum*) asking Catholics to take a more active role in the society (Chessel, 2006 or by other Christian initiatives aimed at civilising capitalism (Storrs, 2000; Vincent, 2006)

Thus, the emerging of a consumer role and the increase of women’s participation to the public life cross somewhere during the last decades of the 19th century, generating a core of what we can define a long lasting tradition of political consumerism. But how initiatives of political consumerism were shaped, and for which causes triggered forms of political consumerism?

Literature investigating forms of consumers activism and protest (Friedman, 1999; Choen, 2003; Micheletti, 2003) tend to indicate the relevance of “boycotts” as a toll widely used in the early stages of consumerism. Labour boycotts as a support to the strikes were for instance not uncommon at the shift of the previous century (Fridman, 1999 p. 34-25), being women often at the forefront in the organisation of such initiatives (Tilly, 1989); economic protest against unmotivated increase of prices, particularly for important food staples, such for

instance meat or milk have also been reported (Friedman, 1999 p.34; Micheletti, 2003 p. 44). Here, as well, women have been at the forefront in promoting and carrying on these initiatives (Cohen, 2003; Theien, 2005)

Consumers (and women) activism did not limit to boycotts, including a wider range of initiatives. Among the ones in which women have played an important role, of particular interest is the “white list campaign” (which took place in different European countries and in USA between the end of 1800 and the first decades of 1900) aimed both at expressing protest about goods produced under questionable working conditions and at promoting products which, instead, were manufactured in accordance with legislation (Kish Sklar, 1988; Vincent, 2007; Chessel, 2006; Storrs, 2000). The next section examines this particular campaign in more detail.

2. A case of women-consumers activism: the white label campaign

The origins of the white list (or white label) campaign can be traced across the Atlantic as a result of cooperation between reformers in Europe and the USA. This experience, which had different impact across countries is generally associated with the activities of the Consumers’ Leagues. The First league was established in London in 1887 by a woman, Clementina Black (Vincent, 2007), followed shortly after by league established in New York in 1890 (a sign, this of the network among women reformers (Kish Sklar & alt. 1998). Besides New York, leagues were established in Philadelphia, Chicago and Boston, leading to a National Consumer League (NCL) in 1900 (Chessel, 2006, p.81). Similarly, leagues widespread in different European countries: in 1902 they were created in France and in the Netherlands, followed by Switzerland, Germany, Spain and Italy (Chessel, ib). The first international congress of the Consumers’ Leagues was held in Geneva in 1908 (Vincent, 2007).

The leagues differed sensibly from country to country and –with the exception of USA (Storrs, 2000) - never became properly mass organisations. Their influence, however, has not to be underestimated as they provided an agenda for political issues and a frame for discussing them. Particularly, the Consumers Leagues, rather moderate and often inspired by Christian values, represented an alternative to the consumers’ cooperatives or other forms of leftist organisations, appealing particularly to middle class women of “good family” (Chessel, 2006).

The Leagues promoted the assumption of responsibility by consumers for the conditions in which production takes place. Kish Sklar, in her study of the white label campaign in the USA, defines this as an *informed morality*, which implies a threefold responsibility on the part of consumers: to recognise the direct relationship with the producer, to learn about producers’ working class conditions and to limit purchases to goods produced under ethical conditions. (Kish Sklar, 1988 p. 27).

Describing the initiatives undertaken by the league in France, Chassel refers that the league “*encouraged its members to inform themselves about the working conditions of dress makers and shop-girls. Members were asked to choose correctly from a white list of good dressmakers, who were thought to treat their workers well and who promised not to make them work at nights or on Sundays*” (Chessel, 2006, p.83). Thus, women were asked to refuse to have deliveries late in the evening, to go shopping late in the afternoon or on Sundays. Furthermore, in order not to load shop girls they were asked to plan their purchase well in advance (i.e. early in December and not in the days immediately before Christmas).

Vincent describes a similar experience in England, promoted in this case by the Christian Social Union. CSU members promoted the use of labels by certain producers to indicate the compliance with manufacturing and safety standard (Vincent, 2007; p.39-40)

It was in the USA, however, that this initiative achieved the greatest relevance, in terms of the number involved as activists as well as of the factories or stores certified. According to Storrs, the first white label was affixed to cigar boxes in 1874 (Storrs, 2000 p. 20). However, the textile industry and department stores were more often the main target of the campaign (Storrs, 2000). In 1891, for instance, a “white list of department stores” was compiled in New York by Josephine Shaw Lowell and other members of the New York City Consumers League. White lists were periodically published on newspapers.

The white label campaign replaced the white list initiative when Florence Kelly was elected general secretary of the National Consumers League in 1899 (Kish Sklar, 1998, p. 19). As one of her first initiatives, she designed the Consumer White Label and launched the campaign on a national scale. The campaign focused mainly on “*women’s and children’s [machine] stitched white cotton underwear*”, including “*corsets and corset substitutes, skirt and stocking supporters, wrappers, petticoats, and flannelette garments*” (quoted in Kish Sklar, 1988, p. 24). Members of the League were granted the status of inspectors by the government. During their visits to factories and department stores, they controlled that federal legislation governing labour conditions and child labour was in place. At the height of its success, in 1904, the League had licensed sixty factories.

Although the White Label Campaign (as well the White Lists in Europe) faded before the Great War, the effort of “civilising capitalism” by consumers direct action was more long lasting. As shown by the quote at the beginning of this paper, the moral pressure encouraging consumers to make the right choice was still persistent in the ‘30s (Storrs, 2000) as well there was no doubt that women still represented the core of consumers’ activism (Storrs, 2000; Choen, 2003).

Evaluating the importance of the white label initiative (in USA), Kish Sklar noted that “*the campaign deserves a place as one of the most extensive expressions of women’s political activism before the passing of the nineteenth amendment in 1920. The campaign drew women into public life in ways that validated what might be called their social citizenship almost twenty years before the passage of the women’s suffrage amendment to the constitution*” (Kish Sklar, 1998, pp. 33-34). Through this initiative women utilised their expertise (of making choices, of evaluating products, of purchasing practice) for staking out their responsibility for social housekeeping, extending woman’s sphere from the family to the community (Storrs, 2000 pg15).

This initiative was as well important in terms of the definition of consumers as social and political actors, as it showed the kind of power that “informed consumers choices” could have. Moreover, this initiative provided consumers with an additional tool to the “black list” of organised boycotts: the referred to as “*buycott*”.

Finally, what makes the white list and white labels particularly interesting is the fact that it exemplify a case of early political consumerism facing issues very similar to the ones currently under discussion, as the working conditions laying back the products available in the shops (Klein, 2000; Micheletti, 2003) and the initiatives that consumers can carry on for

changing objectionable practices (Peretti, 2004). Hence a red thread seems ideally to connect the white list campaign of the beginning of the last century with the current “no-sweat” initiatives.

3. Conclusions: links between past and presents forms of political consumerism

Starting by asking the if political consumerism is actually a new phenomenon and which kind of initiatives could eventually be traced back in time, this article suggested that forms of political consumerism developed together with the development of a consumer society. Forms of protest carried on by citizens as consumers have emerged at least since the last two decades of the 19th century. As shown by the literature that has investigated the origin of the consumption society, women have been often at the forefront of such early initiatives, indicating that consumerism was deeply characterised by a gender dimension. Consumption appealed to women as users of new facilities as well as a main target of public policies. Furthermore, as we have seen, consumption gave women – particularly middle class ones – new opportunities for social and political participation. The “white list” initiative, which developed both in Europe and in the USA in the late 1800s and early 1900s, is an example of this activism. The white list or white label campaign can be regarded as one of the first examples of “political consumerism” as we tent to define it today (Micheletti, 2003), as it asked consumers to make choices of products and producers based on the way these products were manufactured. Violations of work regulations, use of child labour, and unhealthy working conditions were the core concerns of the white label activists, showing a remarkable parallelism with the current “sweatshop” campaigns (e.g., the Clean Clothes Campaign).

The similarities do not end here: now, as then, women tend to be most active in practising political consumerism. The growing literature on contemporary forms of political consumerism underlines in fact that women, more than men, tend to be involved in forms of political consumerism (Stolle & Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti, 2003 & 2004; Tobiasen, 2005), although with variation from country to country³. Women, particularly, tend to be more prone than men in purchasing goods defined as “ethical”, such as for instance fair trade or organic goods (Micheletti, 2003).

As the study of Halkier (1999) however shows, the boundaries between political concerns (of justice or sustainability) and more private ones (i.e. of care or health in relation to family) tend often to be blurred. This indicates that –now as then – it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between the private and public sphere of women as consumers and activists.

This link between the private and public dimension of political consumerism is taken into account as well by Micheletti, when she underlines the fact that “Considerations about family health also play a part in contemporary political consumerism (...)” (Micheletti, 2003; p.43). Similar findings emerged, further more, in the study of Miller (1998), who reflects on the “middle class bias” of political (or ethical) consumption. The relationship between middle class women and political/ethical consumerism – shown among other by the study of Tobias, 2005, 131-132) is discussed also by Dolan (2005, p.369). These considerations seem to suggest additional similarities between past and present forms of political consumerism. In fact, ss pointed out by Chessel, the white label campaign was and remained a middle class phenomenon. At the core, it was fundamentally paternalistic (or materialistic), and the gap

³ In countries such as Norway, for instance, it appears difficult to state that political consumerism is particularly a women phenomenon (Strømsnes, 2007; p.313) –if we consider survey data asking respondents about participation in “boycott” or boycott”.

between consumers (non-workers) and workers was a fundamental dimension of that experience. *The consumers' league did not seek to help workers but to educate men and women of the middle-class in to help workers* (Chessel, 2006, p. 85). The workers were never framed as consumers. A similar divide tends to characterise contemporary campaigns as well as they trace a distinction between consumers in the richer part of the world and producers in the poorest countries. The concept of "informed morality" used by Kish Sklar in describing the white label campaign may, to a large extent, aptly describe the current experience of political consumerism.

These considerations suggest the presence of relevant links between past and present forms of political consumerism. Further investigation on these topics is however needed.

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