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Shopping For Civic Values: Exploring the Emergence of Civic Consumer Culture in Contemporary Western Society.

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In this paper we critique how consumerism is considered an antithesis of citizenship, how acting as a consumer and acting in a civic manner are often viewed as detached parts of our lives. We seek to do this by exploring the blurring of consumerism and citizenship, which is culminating in an emerging area of politicised consumption based on citizenly rights, obligations and social inclusion together with competition and autonomous choice. We illustrate this emergence with specific reference to 'green' citizen-consumers to demonstrate the changing face of civic society in the west, where shopping can act as a vector for civic values and hence facilitates the emergence of civic consumer culture in contemporary western society.

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TABLE TWO
Adaptation of Dahlgren's Civic Culture model-Consumer Dominant *over* Citizen

Values	Individuality dominates in our constant quest for self-expression, understanding and high self-esteem. Immediacy is privileged over transcendence. Personal values are promoted at the expense of others and those identified as civic i.e. equality, justice and reciprocity are superseded. (Bauman 1998, 2001; Giddens 1991, 1998).
Identity	As self-enterprising individuals our sense of agency is realised most readily through consumer choice where personal taste and preference becomes the arbiter of truth and where our high self-efficacy is encouraged. (Rose 1996; Campbell 2001).
Affinity	Weak relationships are formed with brands and retailers based on an extended form of exchange e.g. loyalty schemes. Rights are seen to be actualised through individual not common actions-through notions of consumer sovereignty-thus located in the marketplace. (Gabriel and Lang 1995).
Knowledge	Little sociological imagination is required to operate successfully in the consumer sphere where knowing your own desires is considered to be most important. The linguistic capability/dominant discourse of marketing is, if not alien to civic speak, not supportive of it. (Belk et al 2003; Couldry 2004)
Experience	Experiences as a consumer dominate establishing our sense of expertise and everyday routines and practices. These tend to be framed in a way that eschews collective or public considerations. Our memory bank is characterised as fragmented rather than collective and is dominated by our experiences as consumers. (Warde 2005, Scullion 2006).
Discussion	Efforts are made to avoid talking politics with shopping and its associated interests acting as a key deflector. Little direct connection is made between our daily consumer lives and political action. Acceptable forms of public discourse are limited and increasingly personalised and local. Marketing tends to offer a single non critical type of discourse/form of discussion (about best deals not questioning the very ethics of deals). Closed loop so anti-pluralist. (Couldry 2005; Eliasoph 1998).

Kymlickc 2002; Dahlgren 2006; Edwards 2004; Soper and Trentmann 2008), particularly with the acknowledgement that consumption is now a key political site (Miller 1997; Michellette et al 2004; Nava 1991; Schudson 2007; Stevenson 2002). Thus, an alternative view to this idea that consumer culture *has replaced* civic culture is one that suggests they coalesce and this has brought about a change in the character of citizenship. Consequently the boundaries between private market and political spheres have broken down. This blurring of public and private, of what it signifies to be a consumer and a citizen, means actions once considered part of civic life are increasingly part of what we do as contemporary consumers. For example, in Britain in the last few years we have witnessed a consumer revolt over 'excessive' bank charges, a campaign against the practices of 'ticket touts' making huge profit margins on resold concert tickets and collective pressure being exerted on business and government alike over fuel prices. Of course original motives for involvement may have been about self-interest, but all have also resulted in a greater sensitivity to fairness and reasonableness. This is reflected in our second reiteration of Dahlgren's model of civic culture, where we illustrate how this synthesis reinvents interactions in a fusing of a civic and consumerist society—table three.

Accordingly we argue that this *changes* rather than simply *challenges* the nature of civic culture. Dahlgren (2003, 161) acknowledges that placing any notion of civic culture into a contemporary setting "*we find consumerism as an ideological vector in political discourse.*" And this is particularly apparent within more ethically-orientated consumption, for example increasing consumption of fair-trade brands, and among consumers who 'force' commercial organisations to adopt more responsible business practices, for example the pressures placed on the British food industry and retailers, by parents, to make children's food more healthy.

Furthermore, while civic-consumers tend to take a lead on creating a 'better society', they are also more likely to revise their own already civic-consumption choices to strengthen their 'civic cause', for example cycling rather than using public transport or getting involved in car share schemes to help save fuel and the environment. It is also interesting to observe that, similar to the persona typically portrayed of citizens (Collins and Butler 2003), the citizen-consumer takes an enduring rather than episodic approach to their market engagements; for example willingly entering into relationships with ethical investment organisations who emphasise a long term and more holistic perspective (Zwick et al 2008). We have developed a clearer sense of links between the various life-spheres we occupy, "*the notion of public has been sequestered by 'electorate' consequently increasing the areas of life open to general scrutiny*" (Giddens 1991, 152). This has led to a heightened awareness and salience that our personal lives are wrapped up with global perils.

However, Bauman (2008) and Stevenson (2002) make important caveats to this merging of citizen and consumer. Bauman (2008) argues that consumer activism, including politicised consumption, is dangerous because it undermines the traditions of democracy; since it is the unelected select few acting for what *they* perceive as the good of others. While we acknowledge an undemocratic element within politicised consumption, this does not mean that it is inherently bad, particularly when considered within the context of climate change, discussed later in our paper. Furthermore, it must also be recognised that traditional avenues for democratic expression in western society are weakened by declining voter turnout and a low sense of efficacy, caused in part by public cynicism towards the tarnished reputation of politicians and parties (Dermody et al 2010), reinforcing doubt in the traditions of democracy to further causes that augment human, social and

TABLE THREE

Adaptation of Dahlgren's Civic Culture model—The Merging Citizen-Consumer

Values	Personal versions of humanist values are held where self-reliance and self-responsibility are fused with understanding the need for reciprocity and a desire for fairness. (Bauman 1998, Beck and Beck – Gurnsheim 2002).
Identity	This involves an increased reference to global and cosmopolitan identity with community and tribal alliances formed through shared consumer practices (Rose 1996, Warde 2005).
Affinity	Growth of single issue personalised political participation results in episodic collective action often through the marketplace. Through environmental concerns, there is a growing sense, in the west, of sharing responsibility for the fate of worlds future. (Stevenson 2002, Micheletti et al 2006, Zwick et al 2008).
Knowledge	A growing awareness emerges of the links between consumer actions and their impact on the broader world. There is a greater desire for transparency from both commercial and governmental organisations. (Klein 2001, Couldry 2004).
Experience	The ability to influence commercial and political organisations—often through marketplace actions— has increased. The mass media give widespread coverage of consumerist political campaigns. (Stevenson 2002, Scullion 2006).
Discussion	There is almost universal access to marketplace discussions that take on a political quality (for example the origins and fairness of food production). A choice agenda discourse emerges related to increased expectations of both private and public service delivery. (Collins and Butler 2003; Marquand 2004).

environmental capital. Stevenson (2002, 310) warns “*while consumption may raise ‘ethical questions’, it does so only by being connected to more formal citizenship criteria of rights, obligations and social exclusion.*” Thus, not all consumers will act in a civic way—the distinction between the personal values orientations of materialists vs. citizen-consumers discussed above; and in addition, the cognitive capability and sense of personal efficacy to believe that their behaviour can make a difference. As Castells (1997, 359) remarks, the “*sites of this power are people’s minds.*” Hence the notion of a citizen-consumer appears to be reflective of consumers who, as interpretative agents, are immersed within the capitalist cultural production system, but who can choose to become politicised through their consumption, which they use collectively and individually to interact with their lived world, and in so doing aim to enhance civic society. A vital outcome of this blurring of consumer and citizen, as illustrated in table 3, is a greater sense of transparency and reflexivity. Hence we increasingly see and experience the connections—the politics of being a consumer—and so they shape what it means to live in contemporary society. Accordingly, we now illustrate and explore this within the context of sustainable consumption, which offers a pertinent illustration of this blurring of consumer and citizen.

THE GREEN CITIZEN-CONSUMER

Ecological destruction, for example current predictions of climate change and finite resources, means that we are “*currently living in the shadow of our own annihilation*”, (Stevenson 2002, 312). The latest United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that evidence of global warming is incontrovertible, with catastrophic consequences, (IPCC 2007). Set within this shadow, environmentally responsible-‘green’ citizen-consumers—will be pursuing issues surrounding rights, obligations and social exclusion—as part of their economic power of consumption choices. Typically this will involve boycotts and buycotts (Friedman 1999, 2006; Micheletti et al 2006; Shaw et al 2006); where consumers pursue sustainability issues pertinent to human, social

and environmental capital, for example goods that are fairly traded, organic, cruelty-free, resource-efficient, recyclable, and/or local. As Friedman (1999) observes, boycotts—as expressions of “*economic democracy*” (198) that fuel media interest—are a highly attractive tactic that enable ordinary people to fight for a more sustainable future. Indeed, the involvement of more civic-orientated consumers in the development of more sustainable consumption patterns has been advocated for some time, (see for example Rio, 1992). Accordingly, political consumerism is becoming a core part of civic life as consumption becomes increasingly “*suffused with citizenship characteristics*” (Scammell 2000, 351). Consequently it is reflective of the start of a shift in political power in the UK that allows politicised consumers, albeit still a minority with limited influence (Kennedy 2006), to take immediate action to preserve our planet; and as Follesdal (2006, 8) observes, “*political consumerism can...be a stopgap measure until global structures are in place with sufficient enforcement power.*” Clearly given the latest findings from the IPCC, political consumerism constitutes an important interim and ongoing response to help combat climate change.

Evidence has shown that the intensity of consumers’ commitment towards environmentally responsible -‘green’-consumption can vary (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd 1999 Kilbourne 1995). In turn this reflects the different roles that political consumerism can have per se. The work of Follesdal (2006) is pertinent here. He proposes five different notions of the role of political consumerism, which are not mutually exclusive. We have located these within the realms of sustainability and added indicators of the status (strength) of each role—table four.

As can be seen the more activist green political consumers adopt a role of ‘reforming business practices’—which includes reforming government policy, while the more passive role is one of ‘mutual respect’ where repugnance is expressed but no action is taken.

It is also important to reflect on these roles in relation to engendering a more green civic society. Hence we will now

TABLE FOUR
Roles of Green Civic-Consumers

Role	Summary	Status
1. Agency	Green civic-consumers use their own agency to distance themselves from ‘evil acts’, for example environmental pollution and corporate exploitation of child labour. Through boycotting these offending brands and companies they avoid complicity in evil behaviour that they believe is damaging to human, social and environmental capital. Thus they are attempting to break the causal chain between their own acts and immoral, non-sustainable outcomes.	Active
2. Expression of Self (Identity)	Green civic-consumers, through their ‘green’ consumption choices are actively expressing their post-materialist values. Their consumption choices fall within the realms of ethical and responsible, for example actively choosing organic fair-trade brands to strengthen human, social and environmental capital.	Active
3. Expression of Mutual Respect (Identity)	Behaviour is based on the belief that certain companies are violating fundamental normative constraints, e.g. a coffee company abusing the rights of coffee growers (human capital). These green civic-consumers, as individuals, will express repulsion at these violations by refusing to buy the offending brands, but they will not attempt to change the behaviour of others. Protecting economic capital will be important.	Moderately active
4. Instruments for Reforming Wrong-doers	Green civic-consumers will pressurise individuals to change their ‘wrong’ behaviour, e.g. driving SUVs in cities, non-recycling, by attempting to re-socialise them using, for example, the principles of punishment (shunning, rejection, etc). There is an orientation towards strengthening social capital– to reform the values of society for communal benefit.	Active
5. Instruments for Reforming Business Practices	Green civic-consumers– mainly through protests and boycotts– will drive/punish companies and governments to change their values and thus their behaviour/policies to secure better human rights and human security and so build human, social and environmental capital.	Very active

Source: adapted from the ideas of Follesdal, (2006), Political Consumerism as Chance and Challenge, pp 8-10.

elaborate on the merging citizen-consumer we presented in table three, contrasting this with the original ideas of Dahlgren (2003) in table one. Potentially the most distinctive difference occurs within *values*, where Dahlgren maintains that a positive disposition towards democracy must exist as the best way of organising political life. Yet for the citizen-consumer, they possess a sense of self-reliance and self-responsibility, which go beyond the traditional vessels of democracy to include the ‘power’ of the marketplace. Accordingly these individuals will possess the self-belief that they can make a contribution to democracy through their values-orientation of benevolence and universalism that directs their behaviour. This combination will be very potent in achieving the behaviour and policy changes needed to engender a more sustainability-orientated, civic-consumer culture. All of the roles identified by Follesdal (2006) will be influential here, but mutual respect may be the weakest. Consequently a picture begins to emerge of individuals actively pursuing the cause of human, social and environmental capital through the actions they take on behalf of others within the marketplace as ‘agent’ and as ‘reformer’. In so doing, they express the fundamentals of their self-identity as green civic-consumers. Illustrations of these behaviours can be found in table four. Secondly, with respect to *identity*, people seeing themselves as a green citizen-consumer will regard themselves as politicised consumers with a global and cosmopolitan identity who, with reference to their community and tribal alliances, operate politically within the marketplace to further the cause of sustainability as a whole. With reference to Follesdal’s roles, we can envisage strong connections

with ‘self identity’–principally post-materialist values that engender the pursuit of ethical and responsible consumption–namely fairly-traded, organic, local, energy-efficient, etc. There is also likely to be a strong relationship with ‘agency’. Thirdly, with Dahlgren’s notion of *affinity*, where a growing sense of commonality is needed based on recognition of mutual needs, ‘mutual respect’ could be influential here and certainly the pursuit of social and environmental capital would be pertinent in working towards a civic culture that embraces sustainability. Fourthly, regarding *knowledge*, while individuals will need to understand democracy and possess the literacy skills to participate, equally important will be their cognisance of the market and how they can influence corporate, government and consumer behaviour to further the cause of sustainability by enhancing human, social, environmental and economic capital. ‘Agency’ and ‘reform’ will be important in achieving this. Dahlgren maintains in his fifth element of civic culture, namely *experience*, that there must be some recurring practices that concretise democracy from an abstract to an actual occasion and/or event for people. Consequently while elections will be important events, the positive outcomes of environmental and societal boycotts and protests will also concretise a broader sense of civicness through democracy-using the marketplace to further the cause of sustainability. ‘Agency’ and ‘business/government reform’ will be integral here. Finally, with respect to *discussion*, civic interaction and discussion must include integration of marketplace issues, both in terms of a critique of materialism as well as activism through political consumption that enables change to be achieved

and thus furthers the sustainability agenda. The diversity of communication resources this engenders must be accessible to all. 'Agency' and 'business/government reform' will be important in facilitating this. Accordingly some interesting relationships begin to emerge between the persona of the green citizen-consumer and the roles they can play in enhancing the health of civic society. Clearly, though, further research is needed to empirically explore these relationships.

Becoming a 'green' citizen-consumer, however, is not easy since sustainability is, in itself, a complex issue (Giddens 1994; Goodland 2002). The pursuit of sustainability requires us to evolve to a higher plane of consciousness, for our orientation to become one of self-transcendence (Schwartz 1992), as we become more civic in our orientation (Berglund and Matti 2006; Doherty and de Geus 1996), which enables us to make more responsible and equitable choices as we interact within our capitalist system. It requires us to envision the world differently to enable us to re-engage with it. In many ways, it reflects Dahlgren's (2003) vision of civic society embedded with rights, obligations and social inclusion, but coupled with consumer power within the market system. This, in turn, mirrors the words of Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General, (2000) when he stated: "*We have to choose between a global market driven only by calculations of short-term profit, and one which has a human face....Between a selfish free-for-all in which we ignore the fate of the losers, and a future in which the strong and the successful accept their responsibilities, showing global vision and leadership. Let us choose to unite the powers of the markets with the authority of universal ideals.*"

CONCLUSION: THE EMERGENCE OF CIVIC CONSUMER CULTURE

In conclusion, our preceding discussion demonstrates that consumerism and citizenship can reside together, and in so doing, they can change each other. Hence contemporary citizenship is alive and active through politicised consumption—where shopping acts as a vector for nurturing civic values. Consequently this expression of citizenship operates through a 'cultures of consumption' paradigm—where individuals have a voice through their consumption choices, which they use to pursue social, human and environmental capital, which, in turn reflects a self-transcendence orientation, in accordance with the tenets of civic culture. Consumerism, then, can be empowering, and it has triggered a new expression of personal politics—through shopping—for increasingly powerful, compassionate, reflexive and self-consciously politicised consumer groups. Accordingly we are witnessing the emergence of a civic consumer culture, rooted in consumerism merged with citizenship, which has the potential to enhance the future health of our planet and civic society in the west.

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