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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

Consumption As a Practice Of/In Self-Formation: the Neoliberal Politics of Consumption (And Consumer Research?)

Detlev Zwick

Politics loom large in much CCT work but it is often conceived of and rendered intelligible through the individual, autonomous and strategic work consumers do to make themselves moral, gendered, economic, social, political, etc. subjects. Largely unexplored in these accounts of democratization are questions of power at play when the participation of consumers in the rationalization of their own consumption is sold as empowerment and valid democratic expression (Andrejevic 2003). Put differently, detecting in collective struggles over brand meanings an important form of democratization in one thing. Querying the implications of a political-economic regime (Neoliberalism) that orients flows of democratic energies toward brands is quite another. The questions I want to ask, then, relate to the kind of politics our work represents when we no longer see a need to make a distinction between forms of market morality and non-market morality.

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"Consumption as a Practice of/in Self-Formation: The Neoliberal Politics of Consumption (and Consumer Research?)"

Detlev Zwick, York University, Canada

As I write this abstract, I am presented, inescapably, on television, the radio, the newspaper, and any number of online sources with what amounts to a minute-by-minute account of the incoming retail numbers for so-called Black Friday (traditionally a big shopping day on the Friday after Thanksgiving, which is on the third Thursday of November) and for "Cyber Monday," a more recent invention that extends the Thanksgiving shopping spree online and into the following week (for many this requires shopping from work). Reeling from arguably the worst economic crisis in the history of the United States, the results of two of the biggest shopping days of the year are becoming the most important news of the week. Retail numbers are to the ailing economy what the thermometer is for the feverish patient: a way to calculate and put a number to the severity of the illness; except that in the case of the economy, the higher the number the happier everyone will be. Enlisting, or to use Althusser's well-known term, interpellating the consumer (however "shopped out"⁴) as an active agent in the historical project of restoring America's dithering economic as well as psychological, social, and cultural health is yet another example of how personal consumption is constructed as an act of social action, moral duty and active political participation (see Sas-satelli 2007). But I think what is more important to understand is that these particular moments of intensification bring to the fore a political subject that considers the market (and the economy more generally) as the organizing and regulative principle of all aspects of the state and society; a neoliberal subject that may not act against his (class) interests, as is often suggested, but whose interests are aligned with that of the market (Brown 2006).

For many theorists in the social sciences and the cultural studies-informed camp of consumer research, consumer culture and the society of consumption have been regarded as the embodiment, long awaited, of an enlightened modernity. From this perspective, the ascendancy of consumption and the democratization of middle-class materialism beginning in the immediate post-war years, "far from being supremely alienating, [...] stands for the expansion of civil society, the first moment in history when central political and commercial organs and agendas became receptive to, and part of,

the broader community" (Miller 2007, p.3). In light of the tight entanglements of the economic and the cultural (Slater 2002; 2005) and consumption and society, considering consumption as intrinsically political seems plausible (see e.g., the recent Hummer studies by Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler, see also Giesler 2008; Holt 2006; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Thompson and Arsel 2004). However, while I do not wish to diminish the importance of consumption in the organization of social, political, and cultural relations, I wish to argue that this focus on consumption misses the corresponding rise of a culture of production, in particular of the production of self-producing subjects, and a culture of *selling*, i.e., of selling something to someone. It misses, thus, that the expansion of consumption goes hand in hand with an expansion of the range and spheres of market exchanges.

In my comments I want to argue that the rise of consumer culture as field for democratic participation needs to be considered (and critiqued, not just reported on, which is the focus of the studies mentioned above) as part of a larger transformation of an extension of the rationality of the market, the schemes of analysis it offers and the decision-making criteria it suggests (Michel Foucault 2008, p.323). Within the project of Neoliberalism, a constructivist enterprise that intends to govern subjectivity through culture (Lemke 2001), the institutionalizing of a consumer culture becomes one element of neoliberal governmentality aimed at exhorting individuals to produce themselves as autonomous, entrepreneurial, and profit-maximizing subjects, including in domains "that are not exclusively or not primarily economic: the family and the birth rate, for example, or delinquency and penal policy" (Michel Foucault 2008). In a consumer culture (or society) the subject is morally responsible for navigating not just the market but the entire social realm using rational choice and cost-benefit calculations grounded on market-based principles to the exclusion of all other ethical values and social interests (Hamann 2009). In this account, the cultural myth of consumption as empowering and consumer choice as political expression of widespread democratization functions as a wedge to break up residual social dependencies and alternative rationalities.

I will use the case of Prahalad's (2005) enormously popular and influential book *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* as illustrative case to make the point that via the mobilization of the consumer (here in an "emergent" consumer culture) neoliberal governmentality targets the conduct of the individual in its entirety in an attempt to shape the individual's orientations in a more entrepreneurial and self-reliant form. My account points to the need to understand consumer culture as a kind of ethical framework that encourages the individual to cultivate himself as an entrepreneur who considers everyone around him as a consumer (and producer) of something. Consumer culture and a society that equates rationalities of the market with civic participation and hails the consumer subject as ethical model for citizenship, has therefore the potential, following Brown (2005, p.43), to be deeply undemocratic:

The model neoliberal citizen is one who strategizes for her- or himself among various social, political, and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options. A fully realized neoliberal citizenry would be the opposite of public-minded; indeed, it would barely exist as a public. The body politic ceases to be a body but is rather a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers . . . which is, of course, exactly how voters are addressed in most American campaign discourse."

Thus, I am arguing for "bringing in" a political economy of consumption if we are to prevent our work from replicating the

⁴A term frequently used by the well-known economist Nouriel Roubini of New York University's Stern School of Business to express a situation where the vast majority of Americans is no longer able to maintain customarily high levels of consumer spending because of massive and mounting personal debt and declining incomes. Roubini maintains, therefore, that unlike less severe economic downturns in the past this recession cannot be fixed by high or even increasing levels of domestic consumption.

hegemonic “consumption as empowerment, liberation, and self-realization” accounts of much of consumer research from the 1990s up until now, characterized by “professors earnestly spying on young people at the mall, or obsessively staring at them in virtual communities” (Miller 2006, p.4). To paraphrase Littler (2009), it would be important to ask how the expansion of consumption (of brands, for example), and market relations more generally, comes to appeal to and activate the subject’s desire for democratic and participatory cultures and investigate critically how this energy is used or oriented? Responding to the neoliberal fantasies of empowerment and freedom through consumption does not mean to deny the possibility of emancipatory consumer politics or individual pleasure of consumption. But it means that we are conscious of the material conditions and institutional practices, and critical of the politics of subjectification, that installs an ideology of consumerism and ‘the market’ at the center of contemporary notions of citizenship, political participation, and practices of freedom.

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“The Neo-Liberal Consumer Subject”

Alan Bradshaw, University of London, UK

The meaning of the term “consumer” is in a constant state of expansion bringing us to a point in which consumption is understood to mediate the political economy, social structures and ideologies. Indeed it is now common for governments to claim legitimacy on the basis of an ability to deliver increased levels of consumer spending. Within this expanded frame, there appears to be significant overlap between the consumer subject and the radical political subject; hence we regularly encounter consumer research literature that analyses the consumer in terms of agency, empowerment, resistance, emancipation. Yet to consider the overlap between the consuming subject and the radical political subject is to acknowledge that, as Butler (2009) reminds, we are engaged in the practice of framing and that any application of a frame is an act of containing and determining and therefore any frame is an editorial embellishment of the object and is politically saturated. This insight creates an epistemological problem for a field which is concerned with expanding the frame of the consumer. This paper contends that the conceptual project of expanding the frame of the consumer converges with the neo-liberal enterprise which is concerned with the application of market rationality to all walks of life. This is *not* to say that scholarly projects concerned with expanding the frame the consumer are somehow inherently neo-liberal but it is to say that we urgently to question the distinctions and convergences between how the enterprises frame the subjectivity and therefore what this paper attempts is to analyse the frame of the consumer from the perspective of the radical political subject. As such the paper is an attempt to reach outside of the canon of literature that exists within consumer research and conduct a literature review comprising of contemporary readings of consumer culture from major philosophical figures.

Neo-liberalism is generally understood to be concerned with a radically free market, maximized competition, free trade achieved through economic deregulation however as Brown (2005) identifies, neo-liberalism is sustained by a political rationality that produces its own normatives and subjectivities and is increasingly manifest as a type of common sense. This common sense concerns a systematic extension of market values to all institutions and social actions and a reconfiguration of all human and institutional activities as rational entrepreneurial actions.

The psychological internalisation of this neo-liberal rationality, according to Bauman (2005), creates a subjectivity best exemplified by immigration policies that promises entry visas for the “brightest and best.” In applying under such circumstances would-be migrants,