



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### [Review of: T. Skotnicki (2021) The Sympathetic Consumer : Moral Critique in Capitalist Culture]

van Dam, P.

**DOI**

[10.1017/S0020859022000487](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859022000487)

**Publication date**

2022

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

International Review of Social History

**License**

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

van Dam, P. (2022). [Review of: T. Skotnicki (2021) The Sympathetic Consumer : Moral Critique in Capitalist Culture]. *International Review of Social History*, 67(2), 358-361. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859022000487>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

*UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)*

SKOTNICKI, TAD. *The Sympathetic Consumer. Moral Critique in Capitalist Culture.* [Culture and Economic Life.] Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 2021. x, 267 pp. \$90.00. (Paper: \$28.00.)

The recent revival of histories of capitalism has produced numerous insightful analyses, particularly about the history of inequality and a range of commodities. At their best, these accounts employ reflections on Marxist traditions of thought to assess the historical dynamics of specific cases. Following this line of inquiry, however, has induced many scholars to focus on the history of labour and the division of wealth, leaving the history of consumption to colleagues in the field of cultural history. Tad Skotnicki, assistant professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, therefore, provides a timely foray by foregrounding what he terms “the sympathetic consumer”. He conceptualizes the sympathetic consumer as a figure intrinsic to capitalist culture, relating to producers by means of commodities. Skotnicki singles out Karl Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism as the key to understanding consumer activism in Britain and the United States since the late eighteenth century. Abolitionists, co-operative organizations, and the American National Consumers’ League promoted a distinct ideal of consumption. They called on consumers to recognize their essential role in the international economy and spelled out the moral obligations on producers, which result from this position. *The Sympathetic Consumer* thus raises important questions about the utility of commodity fetishism and capitalism as interpretative frameworks for the history of consumer society.

Skotnicki’s emphasis is on the added value of understanding consumer activism through the lens of commodity fetishism. Marx famously remarked on the dual nature of commodity exchange in capitalist societies, which he deemed at once banal and strange. In everyday life, we hardly question the fact that we obtain money for our labour, which we then exchange for products without usually knowing who made them. The consumer activists who promoted sympathetic consumption, however, highlighted the strangeness of this process, admonishing people to take into account who was producing their everyday purchases and under what conditions. The book thus departs from an intriguing observation about how depersonalized goods provoke consumers to ask questions about them. Even as a product like refined sugar could be obtained without any knowledge of its region of origin, production, and distribution, consumers were prompted to question this faceless quality. Abolitionists, for example, questioned whether enslaved people had

contributed to its production. Seen as such, commodification and decommodification tend to go hand in hand.

Responses to depersonalized goods are a crucial part of the history of consumer society. Mass production and long-distance supply chains have expanded to unprecedented levels over past centuries, turning faceless commodities into a constant presence in the daily lives of people around the world. Similarly, the changing perception of the figure of the consumer from a passive recipient to a powerful actor has been fundamental to the ways in which consumer societies have been constructed since the twentieth century. In the light of this dual development, it would have been instructive to historicize the concept of commodity fetishism and the context in which it was developed before applying it to diverse historical episodes. Marx and subsequent authors have used the term “fetish” deliberately to criticize people assigning an independent value to objects. The development of this strand of criticism is in itself an important part of the history of consumer society, expressing the uneasiness of observers about the physical and mental divides between production and consumption and the increasing dependence on markets for our daily livelihood.

The consumer activism Skotnicki foregrounds is part of this process, too, but takes a distinct position. Activists argued these developments could be seized upon to further their causes, thus promoting the idea that consumers had power as well as distinct obligations resulting from their opportunities to choose between different products. These obligations could relate to producers both near and far, the environment, individual or collective health, a social movement, and many other causes. Historian Lawrence Glickman has noted the remarkable continuity in the repertoire of North American consumer activists across three centuries. Even though they did not share a common tradition of activism, they reverted to actions like boycotts and buycotts.<sup>5</sup> Skotnicki’s analysis links this continuity to the logic of capitalist society, but there is little to suggest it is not simply the result of economic relations being part of a broader set of social relations, causing people to shape their buying behaviour accordingly.

Skotnicki elaborates his interpretation of the sympathetic consumer in a series of chapters that proceed first historically, then thematically. After an introductory chapter, the second chapter provides a brisk overview of the consumer activism of British abolitionists. This is followed by a chapter sketching the histories of the National Consumers’ League (NCL) in the United States, the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS), and the Women’s Co-operative Guild (WCG) in Great Britain around 1900. In three subsequent chapters, Skotnicki first discusses how these activists employed “imaginative and sensuous ways of seeing” producers to evoke their sympathy. He then turns his attention to the moral horizons on which these calls for sympathy were based. By focusing on consumption, Skotnicki is able to highlight how the humanitarian imagination and economic relations developed concurrently, reminding us that market relations are in fact social relations, always embedded within moral horizons.

Whereas the other chapters privilege similarities, Chapter 6 fleshes out the differences between the turn-of-the-twentieth-century activists in particular. Noting how

<sup>5</sup>Lawrence Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* (Chicago, IL, 2009).

the NCL, CWS, and WCG made different choices regarding who consumers should be sympathetic towards, Skotnicki concludes that the sympathetic consumer did not dictate the outcome of the activism. Class, gender, and organizational alliances also played a crucial role in the way organizations positioned themselves and variously deployed the repertoire of consumer activism.

The history of these consumer activists has been extensively covered by historians before, with more nuance and a comprehensive analysis of historical sources. Skotnicki builds on some of this earlier work and adds an assessment of the discourses relating to consumption brought forward by these activists in pamphlets and other publications. There is merit to highlighting how economic relations were imagined and presented in moral terms, but the focus on the rhetoric of these activists in relation to activists risks overstating the importance they granted the consumer. As part of a broader activist repertoire, public appeals have readily invoked the power of consumers, even though many activists had their private doubts and often preferred other avenues to accomplish change. Skotnicki neglects this strategic aspect of their communications. To this end, it would have been important to mirror the public rhetoric about consumer power to the organizations' internal strategic discussions and their actual activities.

The final chapter widens the perspective towards present-day consumer activism. Skotnicki reiterates how the sympathetic consumer is but one possible result of commodity fetishism, pointing out other reactions such as a singular focus on financial benefit. The off-hand analysis of fair-trade activism and ethical businesses at the beginning of the twenty-first century ignores the blossoming historical scholarship in this field and does not come to grips with the crucial shift towards achieving change through transforming political institutions and businesses rather than consumer behaviour. The book concludes on a pensive note, listing a host of possible vistas for further research. The most pertinent question in light of the book's main argument is why commodity fetishism is provoking overt reaction only to a limited extent?

Overall, the book is at its best when implementing concepts like commodity fetishism, tapping into the rich tradition of Marxist analysis. Where it attempts to contribute to broader perspectives on capitalist culture, *The Sympathetic Consumer* is much less convincing. The limited ostensible effect of commodity fetishism on wider consumer behaviour renders the concept an unsteady steppingstone towards a broader understanding of an overarching culture of capitalism. The selection of the cases cannot sustain such an overarching perspective either. Abolitionists and consumer activists around 1900 in Britain and the United States were the exception rather than the rule within their own countries, and all the more so from a global perspective. The insights Skotnicki yields by employing the concept of commodity fetishism thus illustrate the continued relevance of Marxist thought to the history of consumer society, if liberated from the straitjacket of traditional grand narratives of the history of capitalism. In that fashion, *The Sympathetic Consumer* demonstrates how the Marxist tradition continues to inspire original questions about the role specific commodities have played in shaping social relations. At the same time, these approaches should be opened up to question artificial distinctions between economic and social life, and include new materialist insights about the agency of non-human

actors and the ways in which humans have accounted for the environmental impact of their economic behaviour.

**Peter van Dam**

Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

E-mail: [p.h.vandam@uva.nl](mailto:p.h.vandam@uva.nl)

doi:10.1017/S0020859022000487