



**Jafari, Aliakbar and Hamilton, Kathleen and Hewer, Paul (2015)  
Introduction : politics. In: New Directions in Consumer Research. Sage  
Publications Ltd, London, vii-xvi. ISBN 9781473911536 ,**

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*New Directions in Consumer Research* (Sage, 2015)

Introduction to Volume III – Politics

Aliakbar Jafari, Kathy Hamilton and Paul Hewer

This volume establishes a link between politics and consumption. Understanding the multifaceted relationship between these two is becoming increasingly important in different areas of scholarship such as marketing and consumer research, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, political science, economics, and urban and environmental studies. One of the main reasons for such convergence amongst these disciplines is that in the age of neoliberal political economy, consumption, taken either literally or metaphorically (Askegaard, 2014), is generally seen as a prominent feature of modern society (McCracken, 1988; Gauthier and Martikainen, 2013). Once conceptualised as the ‘using up’ of material goods, and hence subordinated to production as a means of driving the economic engine of society (e.g., in the Marxist tradition), consumption is now broadly viewed as a cultural practice, a mode of being and an active process of creating meanings, self-images, self-identities, symbols, and values (Baudrillard, 1981; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). It is not solely a private act; it is also a social activity in which consumer culture avails individuals with the means to actively articulate and negotiate their identities, values, meanings, and life goals with(in) their social settings (Featherstone, 1991; Murray, 2002; Arnould and Thompson, 2005; 2007).

An important implication of this shift from a passive to an active account of consumption is recognition for consumer agency. This means that, within a network of other actors (e.g., markets, governments, social institutions, other consumers, and media) and in interaction with them, consumers are capable of acting upon a variety of situations to make sense of their lives through purchasing and consumption (Sassatelli, 2007). For example, research on consumer activism (Friedman, 1999; Micheletti, 2003; John and Klein, 2003; Klein et al, 2004; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Hilton, 2009; Kucuk, 2014) confirms that consumers use marketplace resources to not only express their views but also take action (e.g., boycotts and buycotts and forming pressure groups) towards influencing their sociocultural, ideological, economic, and geopolitical environments. Recognition of consumer agency also means celebrating the liberatory power of consumption (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) though which the citizen-consumer is enabled to choose a variety of lifestyles and consumption patterns in order to achieve certain goals in both private and public domains of life (Helleiner, 2000).

These very notions of consumer agency and consumer culture, however, are the subject of heated debates amongst many social theorists who are interested in the macro and micro politics of consumption. The materials presented in this volume are intended to shed light on some of these key debates. Contrary to their counterparts in cognitive psychology and behavioural studies who render consumption a politically-neutral phenomenon within the limited boundaries of microeconomics (Fitchett et al, 2014), scholars in this volume question the very political nature of consumption in the context of neoliberalism. The rationale for such contextualisation is that consumerism – as a key manifestation of neoliberalism – is globally expanding (Gill, 1995; Trentmann, 2004; Gauthier and Martikainen, 2013) and neoliberalism has become a recurrent theoretical object in the analyses of consumption

(Helleiner, 2000; Barnett, 2010) to understand: how and why consumerism inserts change on different aspects of people's private and public lives? What is the role of states in the acceleration or deceleration of consumerism? What are the economic, sociocultural and geopolitical consequences of such policies? What alternative life practices exist for market-based consumerism? What are the roles and responsibilities of other actors (e.g., media, social institutions, markets, brands, NGOs, education) in the expansion or contraction of consumerism? Addressing such questions is particularly important because in the growing literature of consumer culture over-celebration of liberatory consumption may result in overlooking the micro and macro politics that (re)shape consumption and consequently the multiple relationships between a variety of actors (e.g., producers, labour, media, consumers, and owners of capital) who interact with one another through consumption (see Schor, 1999; Hartwick, 2000; Iqani, 2012; Fitchett et al., 2014).

As emphasised in the extensive literature on the nature, history, and variations of neoliberalism (Gill, 1995; Thorsen and Lie, 2002; Harvey, 2005, 2011; Barnett, 2010), consumption discourses should be understood in the light of multiple politics and policies that (re)shape consumption. Neoliberalism, as Fitchett et al. (2014, p. 498) contend, has not only created "new markets and therefore new consumers to an order of magnitude greater than ever before but it also (re)emphasizes the central and pivotal role of the consumer interacting in private, free and competitive markets as the prime agency of social action and well-being". Neoliberalism employs a language that promotes the sovereignty of the consumer in the marketplace; in the sense that the term consumer is used for every aspect of private and social life (e.g., consumer of water, electricity, public health, education, and police services). Yet, in reality, such sovereignty is limited as power relations between different actors and agencies in the market are uneven. For example, not all consumers have

the same level of access to knowledge and expertise on consumption related activities in the market; nor do they have the same level of power to benefit from marketplace resources (Trentmann, 2004, 2006). The neoliberal ideology in Gill's (1995) view is also 'disciplinary' in the Foucauldian sense, meaning that it imposes new structural power imbalance between different strata of society both locally and globally, in both affluent and less developed countries. With its emancipatory promises of privatisation and individualisation, neoliberalism eventually institutionalises socioeconomic hierarchies and inequalities between those who can and those who cannot embrace the offerings of the market. Its pro-market agendas also overlook the negative consequences (e.g., overconsumption, economic debt, and air and land pollution) of consumerism for society.

It is against such a theoretical background that this volume presents some of the major ideas pertinent to the politics of consumption. The book chapters and journal articles are selected from a wide range of sources to demonstrate the depth and breadth of discussions on consumption from a multidisciplinary perspective. It is hoped that these items can collectively encourage new ways of thinking about consumption and its politics. For ease of use, these items are briefly discussed below in four categories based on their thematic interrelatedness.

### **Good and bad consumption**

Pieces in this section resonate with some of the classic debates of Mandeville's (1671/1714) defence of the consumer's self-interest as the driver of nations' prosperity, Marx's (1818/1867) notion of commodity fetishism, and Veblen's (1875/1899) critique of conspicuous consumption. To begin with, Schor (1999) is concerned with the domination of

neoliberal thought in the everyday life situations of Americans to such an extent that people have become unprecedentedly materialistic and market-oriented. The overwhelming presence of advertising and branding, privatisation of public services, and lobbying between governments and businesses have all contributed to a false belief that embracing good life can only be achieved through the market and material possessions. As such, people mistakenly believe that by increasing their income they can have a better life. But this is a vicious cycle that would only add to more consumerism and consequently more work. Moreover, the meaning of life has been narrowed down to status competition amongst different strata of society. Upscale emulation has become a prevailing characteristic of society. Such negative consequences of materialism, Schor argues, can be resolved by adopting new politics of consumption that are based on ecological, democratic, and humane values and measuring good life based not on the quantity of material possessions but on the quality of life.

In the second piece, Luban (1998) compares and contrasts two paths of ‘no growth’ and ‘safe growth’ in response to the negative consequences (e.g., overconsumption and overuse of resources) of neoliberal oriented consumerism. The former, he argues, cannot benefit society at large because it needs a higher level of altruism from all nation-states across the world and this is practically impossible because not all societies have the same types and level of needs; neither do they have the same level of economic development. The latter path, however, can be achieved provided that all actors involved collaborate closely. Safe growth requires all members of society to commit themselves to sustainable production and consumption and in doing so they must be ready to undertake some painful transformations in ways of producing, distributing, and consuming. Even governments should not be afraid of pursuing coercive means of achieving safe growth by imposing new policies that would encourage people and businesses towards reducing consumerism.

Soper's (2007) solution for combating consumerism is 'alternative hedonism'. The author argues that alternative hedonism is a shift from market-based hedonism towards pursuing pleasurable patterns of living outside the market; e.g., where possible, walking and cycling instead of driving cars to work. The main challenge of achieving such an objective is to overcome the discourse of neoliberalism. Neoliberal consumerism has traditionally used a persuasive language to make people believe that pleasure resides only within the market and without it, people miss out on many benefits. To abandon market-oriented pleasures for alternative hedonism, people must have a high level of conscience because by adopting alternative hedonism they are consciously aware of quitting a form of consumerism that is driven by self-interest and harms common good. Implementing alternative hedonism is not problem-free as some needs are difficult to address without market resources; yet, as far as possible, governments should introduce policies that would facilitate alternative hedonism.

In the fourth piece, Varul (2013) provides a consumerist critique of capitalism from a reactionary socialism perspective. The gist of his argument is that anti-consumerism should be differentiated from anti-capitalism. These two, he stresses, have been mistakenly used synonymously. Anti-capitalism or 'reactionary socialism' (in Marx and Engels's view) should be seen as a movement that questions the inability of capitalism in providing universal freedom for mankind. The problem of capitalism is not that it promotes individualisation through consumerism because consumerism can indeed contribute to human society by providing general intellect and facilitating practising individualism and improving life conditions. The problem of capitalism is that it creates inequalities amongst people in terms of access to the marketplace resources. As such, while in a capitalist system, the labour

cannot practise their individualism in their work environment, consumer culture avails them with realising their freedom in any way they want.

Miller's (1997) analysis of shopping spaces in Trinidad provides a fresh critique of the traditional right (pro-consumerism, neoliberalism) and left (anti-consumerism, anti-capitalism) movements. He emphasises that although each camp has their own merits, both streams repeat clichéd accounts of consumerism which are not helpful to our understanding of consumption in people's everyday life situations. Critiquing, for example, Walter Benjamin's Marxist approach to consumption as commodity fetishism, Miller argues for new approaches to the study of consumption that would take into account micro-politics of consumption (e.g., how family members divide purchasing responsibilities; or how people behave in shopping malls). He also calls for studying the macro politics of consumption in terms of the impact it inserts on the increasing inequalities between affluent and less affluent societies in the world. To resolve such inequalities, calls for policies that would encourage ethical and sustainable patterns of consumption and enhance consumer knowledge and protection.

### **Rethinking consumption and the consumer**

The scholarship in this section is mainly concerned with rethinking new ways of studying consumption (Miller, 1997; Trentmann, 2006) and the consumer (Gershon, 2011; Askegaard, 2014) in the age of neoliberalism. Carrier (2006) critiques the dominant culturalist approach of anthropologists towards understanding consumption. In his view, generally speaking, anthropologists focus on the meanings attached to objects and these meanings are studied in order to explain why people consumer certain things and avoid



certain others. Such theorists also commonly use structuralism to analyse consumption. For example, they largely study the needs and desires of people as structurally and psychologically shaped within cultural contexts. The author argues that although these approaches are useful, they do not provide us with innovative ways of understanding consumption, especially in the age of neoliberalism which makes consumption a prevailing aspect of everyday life. He, therefore, suggests that new knowledge on consumption can be gained if researchers look at the phenomenon through non-conventional methods; for example, by investigating consumption through the lens of politics of consumption in people's everyday life situations in understudied contexts. Interdisciplinary and historical analyses of consumption can also open up new paths before researchers.

In the next article, Eckhardt and Mahi (2004) critique an established thought that MNEs are the major drivers of globalisation as they spread products, services and signs across the world. Such a thought in the authors' view overlooks the role of consumer agency in the process of globalisation. As the authors argue, consumers are not the passive users of the MNEs' market offerings; rather, they are active transformers of them. Consumers are capable of analysing brands, products, and services in ways that suit their lives in their sociocultural contexts. For example, based on their adaptability and compatibility with local consumers, brands, products and services can be accepted or rejected by local consumers. As such, consumers are not simply choosers; they are also transformers. Such conceptualisation therefore calls for rethinking the role of consumers in the process of the globalisation of consumer culture and power relations between MNEs and local consumers in emerging markets.

In a rather similar way, Jafari and Goulding (2013) demonstrate that consumers in non-western contexts do not simply emulate western modes of consumer culture. As interpretive agents, and based on their cultural reflexivity, they are capable of examining their own cultural practices and life conditions against those of others living in other parts of the world through the global cultural flow. Their reflexive examination of self motivates them to selectively resist or accept certain cultural practices both locally and globally. In this reflexive process, as they learn new ways of living and being, they challenge some of the most dominant socio-political institutions of their society. The authors draw attention to the important role of consumption in inserting change on societies, especially the ones in which political and institutional dynamics play an important role in governing consumption.

### **Representations and branding**

This part of the volume concentrates on the relationship between politics of identity and sign economy as a dominant denomination of neoliberalism (Baudrillard, 1981; Bauman, 1995, 2000; Klein, 2001; Holt, 2007; Sürdem, 2013). In her critical analysis of the prevailing postmodern account of consumer culture Hartwick (2000) argues that focus on identity play and construction of imaginative selves disconnects consumption from production. The author contends that such identity based consumption overlooks the politics of production in the sense that it disregards how commodities are produced in the first place before becoming means of identity construction for consumers who are concerned with constructing and communicating playful identities for themselves. In Hartwick's account, this kind of consumerism depoliticises the supply chain and overlooks the unethical and difficult conditions (e.g., sweatshops) of production for the labour involved in such conditions. The author concludes by proposing consumer activism (e.g., anti-corporate movements, green

consumption and boycotts) as effective ways of enforcing support for those involved in production.

In the next piece, Sassatelli (2007) embarks on the role of advertising ideology and brand representations in creating consumerism. The author's argument is that in the neoliberal age where consumption and consumer culture are promoted as the locus of embracing good life, branding and advertising are used as powerful means of representations. They use semiotics (e.g., celebrity images) as persuasive ways of creating and promoting certain lifestyles. Unlike the past, brands nowadays are not focused on products and services; rather they are concentrated on lifestyles. Brands create their own myth through employing emotive and metaphoric languages that are intended to evoke certain sentiments and meanings in their audience. Branding and advertising, therefore, should be seen as political ideologies that manipulate consumers' interest in certain lifestyles. For example, even those brands that promote fair trade and sustainable consumption create brand cultures that ironically encourage unsustainable modes of consumption.

Arvidsson's (2006) work echoes a rather similar view. The author critiques the politics of brand management as a political form of governance. Brands promote use value (e.g., symbols, values, status, and meanings) and consumers buy into brands' values. Yet, what consumers pay for buying premium brands does not give them any ownership of the brands; it only gives them access to the communicative realm of brands. They pay to be recognised as members of the brand culture. Brand management, therefore, is a political process of filtering or censoring the negative features of or comments about the brands. This management process is about maintaining the sovereignty of the brands and their governmentality against

existing or potential anti-brand movements. By participating in brand loyalty schemes and brand cultures, consumers, therefore, willingly give up their power to submit themselves and to be manipulated by brands.

### **Consumers as citizens**

Articles in this category address some of the complexities and paradoxes associated with the neoliberal notion of citizen-consumer hybridity (Harvey, 2005, 2011; Barnett, 2010). In his comparative analysis of the citizen and the consumer, Schudson (2006) argues that to some extent these two have similarities. Since individuals can use consumption as a political act (e.g., in the case of consumer activism), the consumer can be regarded as a political citizen. On the other hand, since in their political decision making (e.g., casting their votes), people behave as consumers of political brands and services, they can be regarded as consumers. However, there are differences between two in terms of the general contexts in which they function. The world of politics can be contaminated by fraud and dishonesty as politicians often play roles in order to deceive people and win their votes, but in the realm of consumption, as long as consumers do not step on other people's rights, they can contribute to other people's lives by the sacrifices they make (e.g., mothers saving in order to address their children's needs).

Helleiner's (2000) analysis of the use of local currency in some communities raises similar concerns raised by Johnston (2008). Helleiner argues that although local currency movements can be seen as examples of consumer activism, such activities cannot fundamentally change the order of political economy. Since local currency movements promote local trade and socioeconomic justice, they can, to some extent, challenge the neoliberal notions of global

economy and competition. However, such movements operate based on the rules of the games of neoliberalism. Therefore, local currency movements can only bring about social change; they cannot insert fundamental change on political economy. The author demonstrates the limits of the political power of citizen-consumer.

Finally, Nelson et al. (2007) optimistically argue that the citizen-consumer fulfils their civic responsibilities through their consumption practices. Consumers who are engaged in downshifting are in fact upshifting in their civic lives. They demonstrate more commitment to political participation and are more involved in community based activities (e.g., recycling, gift economy) than their materialist counterparts. They are less brand-aware and materialistic than others. These individuals participate in political consumerism (e.g., boycotts and buycotts) to influence their environments. The authors conclude that these alternative ways of political participation deserve more investigation.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The papers discussed in this volume collectively highlight the importance of understanding the politics of consumption in the age of neoliberalism. A critical reading of these papers suggests that while consumerism contributes to consumers' overall quality of life and better organisation of their lives, it paradoxically exposes them to a series of negative consequences such as overconsumption, materialism, socioeconomic inequalities and exploitation by markets. Similarly, as we demonstrated, while consumption can empower individuals to use marketplace resources to act upon political and ideological dynamics of their society (e.g., political consumerism), their power can be limited to the boundaries of the neoliberal

ideology. Understanding such paradoxes is crucial to research on the intersections between consumption, markets and society. Given the global expansion of neoliberalism and its much acclaimed consumer culture (see Hartwick, 2000; Fitchett et al., 2014) in emerging economies and non-western contexts (Jafari et al., 2012), future research should particularly endeavour to investigate the politics that shape consumer culture in such societies.

Another important area to explore is the increasing socioeconomic inequalities in different parts of world. Consumerism, as we discussed, is increasingly seen as a demarcation criterion between the economically able and less able strata of society. As such, it is worth researching the impact of people's sense of exclusion from consumer culture on their political views and also the politics of their interactions with the state and with their fellow citizens. Last but not least, researchers should embark on analysing the paradoxes embedded in various movements under the banner of consumer activism. Research in this stream should try to understand the extent to which consumers can influence their macro political systems. This would be an important contribution to research on the citizen-consumer duality.

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