Consumer Citizen:

The Constitution of Consumer

Democracy in Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

This paper approaches the question of whether and how consumers as "consumer citizens" establish consumer democracy. It will do so by drawing on various theoretical building blocks from sociology. The paper will make use of the different dimensions contained in the notion of constitution, starting with the constitution of the social through action, through the politico-legal or institutional conditions constituting the consumer citizen, to the current state of the consumer citizen. Specifically, the consumer citizen will be briefly discussed in five steps: from the angles of general social theory, socialization theory, the theory of modern society, from the view of current social trends, and in the light of considerations from the theory of democracy. The Internet, as a new means of consumer networking, will serve as an empirical research area for exemplifying and specifying the theoretical considerations.

1 Introduction

Currently, we are witnessing a resurgence of academic as well as political interest in the consumer. In view of the obvious problems of governance under conditions of a global market society, the question arises whether there is evidence for an emerging consumer democracy where consumers assume civic responsibility and exert a civilizing influence upon the economic realm. Consumers are traditionally associated with the private sphere whereas citizens are viewed as belonging to the public sphere. The figure of "consumer citizen" challenges such a clear-cut distinction (Negt/Kluge [1972, 7] already questioned it long ago). Yet, at the same time, the hybrid notion of "consumer citizen" perpetuates the distinction of public and private. Rather than rendering the distinction obsolete, it points to shifting boundaries and the lines of demarcation between public and private being redrawn as an outcome of continuous social struggles and negotiations.

Benjamin Barber (2007, 126, also 294 ff.), who sees a threat to democracy in widespread infantilization spurred by consumer industries, fears a dilution of the concept of citizen by lumping it together with the notion of consumer.[1] The political sphere, he claims, is experiencing a loss of autonomy – an autonomy that emanates from public deliberation and the setting of collectively binding norms, the sovereignty of which must be asserted against the economic domain. For this reason, Barber wishes for self-confident citizens of a democratic polity, whose *individual* mastery of life involves the ability of maintaining the differentiation of *societal* domains. Nonetheless, he too must take consumption as a facet of lifeworlds and life practices into account along with the problems it poses for civic involvement. We are at once consumers and citizens and hence have no choice but to somehow reconcile the two sides that

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[1]   On the infantilization of consumers and the consequences for democracy, also see Stiegler (2008).

make up our personality – be it through strict separation or by other means. The conception of consumer citizen serves to shed light on the forms such reconciliation may take – including the range of historical and empirical manifestations – not more and not less.[2]

In this article, I approach the question of whether and how consumers as "consumer citizens" establish consumer democracy by drawing on various theoretical building blocks from sociology. I will make use of the different dimensions contained in the notion of constitution, starting with the constitution of the social through action, through the politico-legal or institutional conditions constituting the consumer citizen, to the current state of the consumer citizen. Specifically, I will briefly discuss the consumer citizen in five steps: from the angles of general social theory, socialization theory, the theory of modern society, from the view of current social trends, and in the light of considerations from the theory of democracy. The Internet, as a new means of consumer networking, will serve as an empirical research area for exemplifying and specifying the theoretical considerations.

2 Social theory: the consumer citizen as a form of constituting the subject in everyday practice

At a first and general level of social theory, the question of how actors constitute the social will be addressed, which, as we all know, has been an object of considerable controversy in sociology. Approaching the issue from a theory of constitution (for instance Giddens 1984) implies that consumer democracy cannot be conceived simply as a self-sustaining institutional order;

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[2] In so doing, other, third sides of this "hybrid subject" (Reckwitz 2006; Haraway 2007) are left in the dark, thus assigning the existence as consumer and citizen greater empirical and also normative significance as compared to other social categories, such as class, race, and gender, or the identity as a worker citizen.

rather actors, in this case consumer citizens, must constantly produce and reproduce the structures of such an order.

This said, we must first of all note that from the perspective of social theory consumption would be gravely misconceived as a passive, heteronomous activity. Rather consumption practices involve elements of active action, just as the domains of work and politics do, which are much more likely to be associated with exerting influence, exercising power, and with change. Marx (1973 [1857], 477) already emphasized the complex entanglement of production and consumption. This line of reasoning can be further elaborated with the help of praxeological social and cultural theories. Accordingly, Michel de Certeau attaches crucial importance to practices of consumption for the constitution of a subject capable of acting autonomously. In "The Practice of Everyday Life" (de Certeau 1984), de Certeau, drawing on the late Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, points out that the *everyday act of putting the given to use*, be it commodities, language, cultural codes, urban spaces, technologies, or whatever else may come to mind, always inheres a potential for creative transgression, which represents an elementary component in anchoring political autonomy in everyday life. Thus, the consumptive practice of reading only appears to be a more passive use of language as compared to writing. For, the process of writing, according to de Certeau, by separating itself from the outside world upon which it acts to create something starting from a blank page subjects itself to a scriptural economy, which reproduces the modern technocratic power structure. De Certeau compares writing to the modern idea of political revolution, which "represents the scriptural project at the level of an entire society seeking to constitute itself as a blank page with respect to the past (…)." (de Certeau 1984, 135, emphasis omitted, J.L.) De Certeau opposes the practice of reading to forms of the political that become enmeshed in the codes from which they derive their

power and effectiveness: reading is free to appropriate a text at will since nothing must be created.[3]

My intention at this point is to draw attention to the theoretical foundations that I suggest as a starting point for conceptualizing the figure of the consumer citizen. De Certeau's use-theoretical approach to everyday practice shows parallels to pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology – thus to a class of theoretical approaches that view any instance of action as containing the seed of potential social innovation and transformation. In emphasizing the contradictions of practice in time and space, he takes a distance to semiotic theories that view consumption and politics in terms of discursive coding. In a praxeological perspective, a conduct of life modeled after patterns dictated by the advertising and brand-name industries is more of a (pathological) borderline case than the normal case. For instance, the "yearning" of the modern individual rooted in romantic ethics would be misinterpreted when viewed as providing concrete guidance in acts of consumption, rather it is more appropriately understood as an element in the persistent set of problems that mark the conduct of modern life. It would be just as misleading to think of "imaginative hedonism", as Colin Campbell (1987) calls our common inclination for day-

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[3] At this point, comparisons with other social and cultural theories could be pursued as well as in a broad sense a phenomenology of political consumer competence. Bourdieu's concept of practice and habitus come to mind in contrast to that of Anthony Giddens, or Walter Benjamin's thoughts on the flâneur, George Bataille's account of luxury consumption, or cultural studies, which locates the remainders of *emancipatory* potential in consumption practices, or Ronald Hitzler and Michala Pfadenhauer's (2006) analyses, which lay open phenomenological elements of existential strategies in everyday consumption, for instance, in dissatisfied customers returning goods, in processes of selection, or in ritual acts of staging one's personality, which remain confined to individual *life politics*, and therefore do not aim at forming a collective countervailing consumer power, but nevertheless embody types of experiences conducive to developing abilities required in public political life.

dreaming, as a stable form of practice that we routinely engage in in everyday consumption.

The constitution of the consumer citizen cannot be derived from discourses alone, as various historical analyses that have identified a formation of the present-day subject centered on consumption (Reckwitz 2006; Prisching 2006) would have us believe. In these approaches, the post-modern, consuming subject largely disappears into the greater cultural structures underlying consumerism and marketing. They treat it as if it were an empty receptacle to be filled and fully reduce its everyday acts to the level of executing *culturally coded, routine consumption practices* that can be read empirically from *historical discourse formations*. There are, however, serious objections to such a view (Lamla 2008e). And precisely because there is no doubt that dispositional shifts toward a consumer culture can indeed be observed - for instance, as exemplified by the "other-directed personality", which I will deal with below - the basic theoretical differences indicated above ought not be rashly passed over. It makes a difference whether we adopt a view of modern consumerism as a coherent and routine form of practice or if we are prepared to expect an intensification of contradictions and suffering, which might originate from the difficulties of narratively assimilating accelerated consumption rituals with the biographical meanings attached to life practices (Lamla 2008a).

The latter is exemplified in Eva Illouz's (1997) study on the relation of consumption and love. In the course of the commercialization of romanticism, consumption practices and love have entered a synthesis, which is not confined to certain social classes: the rendezvous in an exclusive restaurant, the joint trip abroad, or, very important in the USA, the evening spent together at the drive-in theater are all instances testifying to the fact that socio-cultural practices have evolved around consumption that have become pivotal for community, identity, and subject formation. It is indeed correct to describe the present in terms of a radicalization of ten-

dencies of merging the economy and ways of life into hybrid forms. It would be mistaken though to interpret this as a process leading to a socio-culturally *coherent form*, as postmodern diagnoses of consumerism tend to do. As Illouz (1997, 178f.) illustrates in the narrative structure of the accounts given by her research subjects, attempts to work images of romantically charged love affairs and amorous adventures that transcend the normality of everyday life into a biographical storyline that describes the process of establishing and maintaining a true love relationship increasingly fail. At such points, chasms between a virtual world of images and signs, on the one hand, and experienced everyday practice, on the other, become apparent, which actors have to cope with pragmatically and biographically. In looking especially at the new phenomenon of online dating, where grave disappointment at the point of transition from the virtual to the real world is a common fate of a vast number of would-be lovers, Illouz (2007) underscores that staring in the face of such discrepancies involves crises and to an increasing extent painful experiences.

3 Socialization theory: the biographical formation of the consumer citizen

The dispute between praxeological and semiotic paradigms in cultural and social theory has far-reaching consequences for the figure of the consumer citizen, because conceptual choices at this level have implications concerning the potential for "consumer resistance". One is reminded of the past dispute over Parson's role theory, where interactionists countered his model of a passive "role taking" with the concept of an active "role making" in order to establish the conditions for the formation of critical competency and an autonomous ego identity in socialization theory

(Habermas 1973).[4] Socialization and formation refer to those higher-level processes that shape a specific habitus in the course of a life history. Such processes are pivotal in determining the characteristic nature of the political, ethical, and moral map by which people navigate through everyday consumption and life in general. I would like to briefly discuss this referring to Albert O. Hirschman's theoretical considerations spelled out in his book "Shifting Involvements" (1982).

Hirschman addresses shifts in the form of involvement from consumer to citizen and back to consumer again – a recurring cyclical alternation between consumer and citizen in the course of a life history. Although he conceives of this shift as a complete change from one type of action and one action arena to another, private and public thus representing strictly separate spheres, his theory does not reject the notion of a consumer citizen. To the contrary, according to Hirschman, it is the cumulation of disappointment to the point of a life crisis that motivates a reassessment of the previous conduct of life – in the sense of change at the level of second order preferences[5] – and leads to shifting involvement from the market to the political arena, which is again short-lived due to recurring disappointment arising from experiences of over- or underinvolvement in the democratic process. Politicization and civic distanciation from an existence as a private consumer is conceived as an endogenously motivated, biographical learning and formation process – a gradually evolving disposition

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[4] Except that today controversy is less about normative role assignment for individuals as about the cultural coding of subjectivity as such.

[5] Hirschman draws on the work of Harry Frankfurt und Armatya Sen. Disappointments arising from structural features of durable goods and personal services by no means lead in a straight line to the political arena; at first, experiencing disappointment will only motivate changes in consumption behavior (for instance, the acquisition of other goods). For such a shift to take place, a more fundamental biographical transformation must occur. For a more detailed discussion of this formation process, see Lamla 2007.

towards political involvement awaiting the right trigger. Triggering events can be critical occurrences, such as wars or economic crises, or the emergence of critical frames that nourish the projection of private disappointment with consumption upon markets and commercial culture.

It is a theoretical figure that, in the case of the private conduct of consumer life, points out a mode of reorganizing and accommodating orientation patterns of the same type as socialization theories in the Mead-Piaget-Kohlberg-Erikson tradition tend to use in explaining transitions in the stages of development of an ego identity or moral consciousness. However, Hirschman's cyclical model is empirically more open and theoretically more underdetermined. It does not claim invariable stages of development and treats the shift toward the public arena as a historical and not a universal form of resolving biographical crises. Consequently, in this view, other combinations of consumer and citizen are not only conceivable but are also normatively desirable in light of the instability of both a purely private and an active public life.

In contrast to theories that lament the loss of a vivid political public (such as Arendt 1958; Habermas 1998; Sennett 2003; Bauman 2000), Hirschman (1982, 132f.) concludes from his analyses that new ways of reconciling and recombining private and political involvement must be sought. For him the sole factor explaining why the persistent discrepancies in the experience as consumer and citizen have so far failed to give rise to more reconciliatory forms of bridging the gap is to be found in the institutional differentiation of a public-political and a private-economic domain. The institutions in capitalist democracies distribute the available exit and voice options among the separate social domains in such an unfavorable manner that alternative, that is, less volatile or acquiescent forms of reconciling private and public involvement are either systematically impeded or even prevented from emerging to begin with. Irrespective of whether Hirschman's cyclical theory can still

claim to be a fully convincing account of modes of involvement in the 21st century, its value for our analysis lies in the fact that it allows to conceive of paths of development from the perspective of socialization and formation theory leading up to a consumer citizen who is capable of rearranging the domain-specific orientations in a more stable manner and less prone to disappointment so that private-economic and public-political motivations must not necessarily be structurally incompatible. At this point, the ball is passed to the theory of modern society, which must assume the task of identifying the institutional demarcation lines and structural dynamics that obstruct the prospects of such a development and explain how they do so.

4 Theory of modern society: the institutional make-up of the consumer citizen

Hirschman wrote his book in light of the historical situation in 1968 and the economic crisis of the 1970s. This alone raises questions as to the generalizability of his cyclical model of consumer and citizen involvement beyond the specific social situation of the time. In historical and international comparison, there have been other configurations of problems and conditions that have fostered more stable forms of reconciling consumerism and citizenship – I have Cohens' book "Consumers' Republic" (2003) on the post-war US in mind, or the fall of the Berlin Wall (Kroen 2003), or the rise in politically and ethically inspired consumption styles, for instance, in Scandinavian countries (Micheletti/Follesdal/Stolle 2004). Of course, this does not automatically mean that such forms also mark a high standard, in normative terms, from the perspective of socialization, formation, or the theory of democracy. My main intention is to guard against a theoretical perspective that renders the functional differentiation between politics and the economy an absolute and to al-

low for and take into account malleability and discontinuities at the level of modernity's institutional and cultural configurations. Under what kind of societal conditions are political formation processes likely to occur that lay the groundwork for an everyday practice with the potential of bridging the gap between involvement for the public weal and for private benefit without resolving the difference between consumer and citizen one-sidedly? To what extent has social change during the past decades evolved towards or away from such conditions?

For political scientists, the conditions constituting the consumer as a legal economic subject (e.g. information and liability rights), the structure of collective interest representation, and opportunities for taking legal action (class action or representative action; see the contribution by *Struenck* in this volume) play an important role in this respect. Opportunities for cooperating with established political (e.g. parties and unions) as well as civil society actors (NGOs), political opportunity structures, and many other factors are also of great significance for a detailed analysis. As a sociologist, I choose to limit myself to the level of structural dynamics, which only marginally touches upon issues pertaining to the legal make-up of political institutions. Among the institutional factors that we must keep an eye on are the structures of markets and media publics as well as cultural conventions and the allocation of economic resources. Far-reaching changes in the social conditions constituting the consumer citizen could also arise particularly from *technological change sparked by the Internet*. The significance of this factor results from the fact that the structures of the media society and "mass culture" have assumed a leading role in the constitution of the consumer citizen in the 20th century.

Hirschman is not concerned with the structural transformation of media publics. His reasoning refers to the institution of the nuclear family, on the one hand, and the ambivalent opportunities for participation provided by political collectives and bodies, such as political par-

ties or associations, on the other, which – according to his thesis – offer no appropriate alternative middle course to either self-sacrificing vocational devotion or being confined to periodical elections. However, if we direct our attention more toward the structures of the political public and intermediary entities, we gain a somewhat different impression of the social conditions of the consumer citizen's socialization in modern society. It can be argued that the mass media, in spite of all the difficulties in stably reconciling public and private engagement, have encouraged the emergence of habitus formations or character types that counteract such volatile tendencies of oscillating by either fragmenting the dispositions of the consumer and citizen or by transforming one into the other such that engagement in the public interest may survive as an illusion in the guise of consumerism. David Riesman and his associates (1958) provide a very instructive example of an analysis of this type of socialization in their study of the other-directed personality. Riesman et al. describe the disposition toward being a consumer who sensitively attunes his standpoint to the expectations of reference groups and published opinion as the joint product of a socialization process influenced from various quarters, starting with empathetic communication in the nuclear family, through social education in school and, particularly, increasing peer group significance, to the mass media, product marketing, and communication through advertising. With regard to the political sphere, this kind of habitus formation, according to Riesman et al., takes on the form of either a new kind of apathy or appears as an "inside dopester" who readily repeats political positions as portrayed by the mass media while neither being able to make own meaningful connections with everyday experience nor to gain inspiration for civic involvement (Riesman et al. 1961, 239). The main feature, Riesman claims, distinguishing the other-directed from the inner-directed personality characteristic of Protestantism is the former's craving for social recognition.

Now, the interesting point in Riesman's analysis is that this diagnosis does not lead him to dismiss the notion of consumer citizen altogether, rather he asks about the conditions for autonomy to organically develop out of other-direction; he suspects that, in this regard, the consumer personality has some potential in store (Riesman et al. 1961, 260ff.).[6] To identify such conditions, he draws attention to four sets of - partially overlapping - factors that conjoin in determining the consumer citizen: a) Factors involved in establishing and safeguarding the autonomy of the private sphere; b) relations of social recognition; c) types of civic involvement in the community; and d) consultation and exchange of information in market settings (for details, see Lamla 2007, 72-76). In the Internet era, these sets of factors may be undergoing change and, by way of affecting the institutional conditions constituting the consumer citizen, may have a lasting impact upon its habitus formation. Whether this is indeed the case is an empirically open question for contemporary social analysis to address.

Sigrid Baringhorst, in an article entitled *Consumers as Netizens* ("Konsumenten als Netizens", 2007), assembled a few structural parameters indicating transformations that could have an impact on consumer citizen habitus formation in the medium-term. The Internet strengthens consumers' economic leverage by facilitating access to market information, from price comparisons to product testing. It potentially expands not only

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[6] "However, just as there is in my opinion a greater variety of attitudes toward leisure in contemporary America than appears on the surface, so also the sources of utopian political thinking may be hidden and constantly changing, constantly disguising themselves. While political curiosity and interest have been largely driven out of the accepted sphere of the political in recent years by the focus of the press and of the more responsible sectors of public life on crisis, people may, in what is left of their private lives, be nurturing newly critical and creative standards. If these people are not straitjacketed before they get started (…) people may some day learn to buy not only packages of groceries or books but the larger package of a neighborhood, a society, and a way of life." (Riesman 1961, 306-307)

exit but also voice options in the market sphere, even though market suppliers may be slow in providing such opportunities. In addition, it offers civil society organizations a space where mobilizing consumers for political protest is much easier and there are considerably greater opportunities to do so, thus entailing changes in the political opportunity structures for civic involvement. Prospectively, the Internet also holds opportunities for less centralized forms of horizontal consumer networking from which new forms of consumer citizenship may emerge (Bieber/Lamla 2005). Currently, such opportunities for networking are being utilized mainly in so-called "online communities", which at the same time serve to establish and maintain relationships for reciprocal recognition that often (though not always) do not operate on basis of the conventional, economically or culturally dominant criteria for affording social esteem.[7] And, not least, the Internet also increases opportunities for playfully exploring the self in the private sphere, which, for Riesman, plays a key role in enhancing consumer autonomy (also Rössler 2001). Of course, this is not to deny that the virtual world of the Internet also embodies considerable addictive potential.

Whether the Internet provides a platform for the other-directed consumer to develop into a consumer citizen who undergoes a process of political formation in the private sphere is, of course, not decided by the diversity of structural opportunities provided by the Internet, but rather by the way in which this potential is individually

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[7] Riesman sees freeing relations of social recognition from the confines of the myths of achievement and success traditionally underpinning work society as a crucial condition for autonomy to develop out of other-direction. This allows to demonstrate how the sets of factors interact constitutively: Consumption assumes compensation functions in the private sphere (and thus deepens dependencies) as long as desired social esteem and the related self-esteem it affords essentially depend on the position one occupies in the sphere of production. The prevailing institutional conditions of flexible underemployment extend compulsive productivism (Giddens 1994) into the private sphere instead of the private sphere containing it and putting it into perspective (Lamla 2008b).

and collectively put to use. The empirical dynamic of the sphere of digital communication also shows signs of continuity of social structures from the mass media era or even a further deepening of the dependencies that the other-directed consumer is already subject to. A dominant principle of organizing knowledge in modern societies marked by complexity is, for instance, the segmentation of the public in a myriad of co-existing social worlds, which generally engage in negotiating conflict only in cases where rivalry for territories or resources leads them to get in each other's way (Strauss 1993; Schütze 1992).[8] This structural logic of the public sphere, as exemplified by the vast selection of magazines available at any bookstore at a major train station, fits in perfectly well with consumer-oriented markets. Such markets drive the segmentation of social worlds and sub-worlds by constantly expanding the range of products and services offered. The Internet, in spite of its hypertext protocol, proves to be surprisingly conservative in this respect. In the vastness of virtual space, social worlds also each occupy their own respective territories; and, in contrast to the bookstore, here there really is room for them all. There are indeed some

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[8] Social worlds are built around certain practices or core activities for which their members claim authenticity and legitimacy, develop technologies, occupy spaces, and, as the case may be, form organizations without being formally organized as a whole. Rather, their boundaries are determined by the scope of effective communication. Markets, too, can be described as social worlds, or, more specifically, as sub-worlds (Fligstein 1996; Kling/Gerson 1978). To illustrate this symbolic-interactionist concept, I recommend taking a look at the shelves of a contemporary bookstore at a major European train station, where numerous worlds are represented in an impressive selection of magazines for dog, horse, or car owners, anglers, model railroad enthusiasts and computer gamers, others are concerned with the world of fashion and body culture, or the home, nutrition, and dining. The boundaries of social worlds are in constant flux due to segmentation, internal differentiation of sub-worlds, and processes of intersecting with other worlds. In the process, as Strauss (1993) points out, social arenas frequently emerge, where the legitimacy of core activities is contested and demarcation lines are collectively (re)negotiated.

cross-linkages. But, for reasons of precaution, responsibility for the content of other domains is disclaimed. To be sure, the pattern of segmentation is changing with the spread of collaborative applications that have been grouped under the controversial label of "Web 2.0" (O'Reilly 2005), which refers to the platform nature of marketplaces, such as Amazon and eBay, or cultural spaces, such as Wikipedia or MySpace and the dynamic networking they enable. But these technical infrastructures do not necessarily alter relations of dominance embodied in the institutionalized *relations of communication* constituting the consumer citizen either.[9]

5 Current social trends: activating the consumer citizen in cultural capitalism

Analysis of current basic social trends falls within the scope of the social sciences. Such an analysis requires relating structural dynamics, as reflected by the Internet, to other parameters that determine the overall composition of society. In the following, I will attempt to do this with an eye to the co-evolution of cultures and capitalist markets, which is moving toward a constellation that Rifkin (2001) calls "cultural capitalism". In this constellation, the activation of consumers has gained tremendous significance (see for instance Rose 1999). There have been considerable changes compared to the era of other-direction; yet it is still not clearly discernible

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[9] For Manuel Castells, for instance, it is not at all evident that media innovation in the digital space of the Internet will allow to ward off civil society's marginalization in flexible network capitalism. To be sure, there is a diversification of offers, reflecting the fact that media adjust, just as flexible markets do, to manifold consumer needs. Yet, below the surface runs a fundamental cleavage between *a minority of the interacting*, who are capable of making active use of the various communication channels provided, and a *majority of the interacted*, who are content with the predetermined choices handed to them by a multi-media environment geared toward entertainment (see Castells 2003, 394-403 and, in more detail, Lamla 2005).

whether communication with consumers and about con-
sumption, geared toward mobilizing them, enhances
consumer autonomy or rather deepens dependency. To
give an empirical answer to this question one must get a
grasp on the formation of contemporary capitalism as a
totality, which is no easy task by all means. In their
groundbreaking study on the "new spirit of capitalism",
Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (2003) provide a
model for such an analysis. They suggest identifying the
historical formation of contemporary capitalism with
the help of its "political grammar" (in German: *Polis-
Grammatik*), a term used by the authors in referring to
the system of justifications that must fit the respective
institutional configuration of capitalism – its allocation
of social positions and social valuations as well as the
institutionalized forms of placing demands upon its
members as the grounds for such allocation - thus form-
ing a relationship of "elective affinity" (Boltan-
ski/Chiapello 2003, 61ff., 147ff.). The *critique of capi-
talism* plays a crucial role for social change in this con-
text, to the extent that it manages to effectively dele-
gitimize capitalist institutions and forces them to read-
just.

Is there any indication for the emergence of a *con-
sumer-oriented polis*? And if so, does the social form
implied in speaking of polis entail more substance in
terms of consumer democracy and consumer citizenship
than a merely superficial reference to the early forms of
self-administration in the Greek city states. This will be
examined in the following drawing on Boltanski and
Chiapello's methodology. In a first step, I will ask about
the conventions and patterns of criticism that prevail in
the public sphere for legitimizing or delegitimizing cer-
tain consumption practices and forms of involvement.
This will be complemented by an analysis of how the
principles forming capitalist society react to those cul-
tural and normative lines of conflict in order to channel
anticonsumerist criticism and the concomitant "morali-
zation of markets" (Stehr 2007). Ongoing discursive
politicization of consumption can be interpreted as an

expression of a revived quest for attaining a new balance between existence as a private consumer and a public citizen. But what societal transformations and shifts does it indicate? And are such tendencies toward cultural and economic closure more likely to prevail that cement the institutional and habitual dependencies of other-direction? Or will conflict dynamics emerge with the potential of paving new ways for gaining private and political autonomy, thus allowing the consumer citizen to escape such a predicament? Will the Internet, in particular, provide a fertile experimental ground for this?

Politicization of consumption is clearly on the rise and anticonsumerism is experiencing a revival. At least the non-fiction book market creates this impression – and casts doubt on this assessment at the same time (Table 1; for a more detailed discussion, see Lamla 2006). It appears that capitalism and the critique of capitalism can splendidly co-exist harmoniously, hence raising the question whether public mobilizations of consumers are actually more than a subversive form of stimulating markets. How do patterns of criticism and forms of engagement relate to the modes of regulation governing contemporary capitalism? Do they create a crisis of legitimacy with which civil society pressures existing economic institutions to change? Or does such criticism keep within the bounds of cultural capitalism's system of justifications so that it fits in with the institutional structures of capitalism and maybe even serves to strengthen them? Or – and this is an important third possibility – may such criticism possibly be vague, contradictory, and fragmented to the point that economic institutions can easily adopt single elements of such criticism to rejuvenate their justifications while sidestepping or otherwise warding off attacks directed at their institutional cores?

Table 1: The discursive field of anticonsumerist critique
and forms of anticonsumerist engagement

pattern of criticism arena	social critique of consumption		artistic critique of consumption	
	more liberal	strong values	lack of authenticity	authenticity
politics	The Rebel Sell (Heath/Potter): state shapes policies	No Logo! (Klein): decentralized participatory democracy	limiting the spaces of "commercial culture"[10] (Misik)	civic existence as craftsmanship (Bauman; Sennett; Taylor)
media (advertising industry)	Black Book on Brand-name Companies[11] (Werner/Weiss): creative forms of redistribution		Fake for Real (Mair/Becker): subversion via deconstruction	Culture Jam (Lasn): mental environmental protection
market		sustainable consumption (Pötter; Worldwatch Institute; Busse)	consumerist manifesto[12] (Bolz): consumption = civility	possessive desire[13] (Ullrich): biographical formation process

The discursive landscape of anticonsumerism under-
scores the verdict by Boltanski und Chiapello (2003)
who claim that the critique of capitalism currently con-
tributes to its own weakening and represents no serious
threat to the prevailing capitalist system. *Firstly*, capi-
talism was able to accommodate *critique from* the ranks
of *art* in the late 1960s, which championed the ideas of

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[10] Book-title, translated from German (*Kommerzkultur*)

[11] Book-title, translated from German (*SchwarzbuchMarkenfirmen*)

[12] Book-title, translated from German (*Konsumistisches Manifest*)

[13] Book-title, translated from German (*Habenwollen)*

emancipation and self-realization, by developing and exploiting the underlying principles as a marketable cultural resource. The artistic critique of capitalism has been reduced to aesthetic issues of lifestyles and has itself become a question of contingent choices. To whatever degree citizen engagement may be authentic or not, in cultural capitalism, the criticisms launched at the sphere of consumption, the acts of affirmation, distanciation or subversion citizens may partake in are, in any case, all welcome instances for creating new value, providing new focal points around which to group new lifestyle offers. For instance, the culture jammers – the self-proclaimed Luddites of the media age – who wage their subversive attacks against the advertising industry and its brand clichés do more to keep the language-game of the hip and the cool going (Frank 1997; Doll 2006) than to effectively disrupt it. Take for example the two positions in table 1 represented by Kalle Lasn (1999), on the one hand, and Judith Mair and Silke Becker (2005), on the other. Both use the same methods of deconstructing the language of mass media and advertisement. But they differ clearly in the way they state their mission: While Lasn wants to resort to some kind of green, sufficient, and authentic lifestyle, the other position completely rejects all authenticity claims and looks for a way of life emancipated from such strong values as associated with conceptions of the so-called "good life". Therefore, a broad spectrum of different normative claims supports this kind of anticonsumerist engagement. But in cases where the politicization of consumers revolves around normative questions of the authenticity and inauthenticity of more or less commercialized cultural expressions and aims at breaking the advertising industry's power of interpretation, ethical issues not only quickly get tangled up in matters of taste. Moreover, drawing on de Certeau, we can object to such a strategy that consumers gain distance and autonomy vis-à-vis the commercial coding of their conduct of life mainly through tactics of everyday usage and less by way of engaging themselves at the same

level of language-games with the goal of creating a counter-culture.[14]

A *second* problem ensuing from the artistic critique of consumption and its communication structures is the weakening of *social critique* rooted in indignation aroused by social inequalities and injustices related to the accumulation regime of global capitalism. Those critical positions in table 1 represented by Pötter (2006) or Busse (2006), who try to relate the moral claims of the sustainable development debate to Western consumption patterns, have many difficulties in finding an appropriate strategy for changing consumer behavior. At least they trust in the capabilities of established communication channels in the market sphere to form and transform consumption. But marketing frames critical positions that link the Western style of consumption to social inequality and injustice and demand the consumer citizen adopt sustainable consumption patterns in the same way that it frames positions inspired by artistic critique: as political choices of lifestyles. This provides the ground for figures such as the LoHaS to emerge – they are consumers who cultivate a "lifestyle of health and sustainability" modeled after health-obsessed, Smart-driving Hollywood stars. But organic wellness products, too, form a consumer market where exponential growth rapidly offsets gains in efficiency and economies in resource use. Only in conjunction with a politico-institutional and public framing of markets that would allow to counteract and provide effective feedback in case of such paradoxes and the numerous other inconsistencies in individual consumption styles is it conceivable that the consumption-dependent evolution of markets might be geared toward maintaining collective goods, such as social justice and sustainability, but not by simply letting the segmentation of lifestyles take its course.

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[14] This does not deny that marketing strategies may be a suitable *means* for civil society to elicit public reponse (e.g. Hieber 2006; Baringhorst 2006).

As long as this does not happen, the spiral of disappointment and the concurrent process of oscillating between private and political forms of engagement threaten to continue. This diagnosis of a persistent incongruity between forms of individual and collective autonomy is confirmed – and this is the *third* aspect – in areas where those voicing social criticism are not content with engaging in politically charged consumption, but seek to install a vigilant political public ready to champion the right of regulating markets through sovereign acts of democratic legislation in light of globally operating corporations that readily accept child labor and exploitative wages. Note that cases of this type, of which globalization-critical non-governmental organizations or protest movements are examples, do not represent an integrative form of reconciling consumer and citizen either. Rather, this is a type of civil society activist, who, in the face of limitations to the nation state's capacity for governance in a global economy, has discovered the symbolic worlds of branded consumption as a public arena and a remaining point of attack. In terms of their critical stance and level of involvement, such forms of politicizing consumption by way of calling for boycotts, information campaigns, assuming watchdog functions, or immediate involvement in regimes of global governance distinguish these citizen activists from the majority of other consumers, who seek to exert political influence (and believe in the ability to do so) upon markets by making private choices in the course of everyday consumption.

While they, by protesting in the market arena, do indeed attempt to win other consumers over and mobilize them for their ethical concerns, these activists, however, encounter the dilemma of how to approach consumer citizens without either demanding to much of them on the basis of their own strong political values and high expectations of virtue or otherwise casting their moral concerns in the guise of consumer goods and services, offering them for sale according to the rules governing volatile (opinion) markets (Beetz 2007). Naomi Klein's

manifest "No Logo!" (2000) is a characteristic example of trying to cope with (or cover up) the difficulties of bridging the gap between a social critique of sweatshops, which seeks to improve the standards of living in the developing countries, and an anticonsumerist attitude of Western consumer citizens, whose lifestyle politics follows the tracks of artistic critique.

Altogether, the heterogeneity involved in the politicization of consumption documented in table 1 indicates difficulties of reconciling political and private engagement in cultural capitalism without taking the sting out of criticism. The fragmentation of the discursive field not only points to structural shortcomings of anticonsumerism under cultural capitalism, but can also be interpreted as reflecting a historically open quest for an appropriate mode of expression, which, although so far proceeding in a largely uncoordinated division of labor, has nonetheless evoked responses on the part of economic and political institutions. Hence, the way the various patterns of critique and forms of involvement are linked may well prove to be much more important for enhancing and reconciling collective and individual autonomy than consumer citizens individually integrating public and private virtues (Micheletti 2003). In other words, the key issue is the specific configuration of a consumer democracy's institutional make-up, including the nature of its public sphere, in the creation of which a variety of actors are involved (governments, companies, interest organizations, political movements, consumers, etc.) and where a wide range of different types of consumer citizens can legitimately claim a place.[15]

Under current conditions, however, such a path of institutionalization would seem to require, as an essential, that structures of a political public evolve that subject discourse about the political forms of consumption to

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[15] As we all know, Habermas already sought forms of communication for reasonable political will-formation, which „exact political morality only in small increments" (Habermas 1996, 487).

greater pressures of learning and justification. At this point, the question arises whether the Internet could act as a medium for such a consumer public. Current developments on the Web give cause for skepticism (Lamla 2008c). However, due to the plasticity of digital technology and the fact that it resists monopolization, a struggle over the institutional framing and shaping of digital interaction spaces, platforms and publics is ongoing. The open-source movement comes to mind or challenges to property rights through subversive forms of gift exchange in the world of digital commodities, such as music, movies, pictures, books, and computer games.[16] The conflict dynamics on the Internet that can be expected to unfold in the wake of culturalization of the economy and the simultaneous economization of culture are not easy to predict (Benkler 2006). However, as long as the struggle over the digital boundaries between public and private, free and commercial platforms, Web-citizenship vs. Web-consumership is carried out through flexing muscles and market segmentation, which largely defy the logic of reasoned debate, the financially powerful parties, in this case the large media corporations, usually are in a better position to cultivate the "economic field" (Bourdieu 1998) according to their own criteria.

6 Conclusion: Toward a normative theory of consumer democracy

Here, I have introduced the figure of consumer citizen to draw the attention of research on democracy to the complex boundaries between the private and public, and the market and politics. The aim of this exercise is to underpin models of a normatively demanding consumer democracy with a social scientific analysis of the cul-

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[16] Following de Certeau (1984, 27), we can interpret these practices as instances of potlatch, indicating an alternative economy, surviving under conditions of advanced economic liberalism.

tural and institutional conditions for its realization. The methodological position guiding this investigation might best be characterized as an empirically reconstructive critical theory. In this vein, I will take a – still very preliminary – stance on the prospects of consumer democracy.

In line with de Certeau, Hirschman, and Riesman, I consider the consumer citizen to be a concept with considerable potential in principle. However, given the structural dynamics of a consumer-oriented polis, as is apparent in the contemporary critique of capitalism and consumerism, the key factor in tapping such potential would seem to be developing the institutional structures of the public sphere along lines that guard against it immediately being directed into the channels of segmented and fragmented markets right from the start and preserving its genuine political character instead, the essence of which I consider to be the principle of *resolving conflict through reasoned debate*. Only if consumers, beyond engaging in specific consumption or consumer boycott activities that remain tied to the market setting (on whatever grounds such action may be motivated: politically, morally, by criticism of contemporary culture or shared ideologies), also exercise themselves in negotiating the conflicts originating from their validity claims, will they be able to develop democratic competence and regain collective autonomy. This appears to be a hopeless venture within the realm of the mass media communication system, and much seems to indicate that the established media patterns are also being extended into the digital communication space of the Internet. Nonetheless, the direction the transformation of the digital public sphere will ultimately take has historically yet to be decided. Whether the politicization of consumption will be able to reinvigorate general awareness of the interrelations between private and political, individual and collective autonomy and structurally anchor such awareness more effectively than before is an open question awaiting an answer. This in any

case poses a veritable challenge to a democratic civic culture.

Iris Marion Young (2006) made an interesting suggestion in this respect. Drawing on the case of sweatshops in the garment industry, she outlined a "social connection model" that spells out social responsibility not in terms of a general civic obligation, but graded according to the power and influence granted different actors, institutionally and by way of resources, by the social positions they occupy in the complex fabric of interdependencies that mark global society. She believes that instead of mutually attributing responsibility according to the principle of causation it is, first of all, necessary to make implicit knowledge of how things interrelate and are entangled more explicit – for instance, how rapidly changing fashions in the West, which are also fueled by expressive forms of everyday practice, affect production conditions in developing countries. In her view, efforts at communicating and making such relationships known and publicly visible are more important than rather helpless attempts at adjusting individual buying patterns to force change upon institutions and structures.

Applied to the Internet, this would mean that *arenas* would have to form that are not confined to negotiating and ascertaining common understandings within distinct social worlds but encourage communication transcending such social boundaries. Only then would the *politicization* of consumption styles and lifestyles and their tacit validity claims, which currently tends to neutralize itself, actually take on qualities resembling a process of democratic deliberation. Consumption, existence as a consumer, and consumerism have in fact long been politicized, not only by critiques of consumerism and capitalism, but also through privatization and the activation of consumers in the course of public economic and social policies (Giddens 2003, 18; Evers 1998; Clarke et al. 2007; Lamla 2008d), strategic "investments in forms" by influential market actors (Thévenot 1984), or by young people populating the Parisian banlieues who,

in terms of participating in prosperity, feel left out in the cold. Thus, a consumer democracy would first have to effectively channel in public arenas and argumentatively further elaborate what is indeed already widely taking place, yet in a too widely dispersed, segmented fashion and, for this reason, generally without consequences at the structural level: political talk about consumption and its consequences.

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