

International Consumerism

International Consumerism The Life and Death of Consumer Society in the Modern World

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Constructing a consumer society has always been a radical enterprise. The 'birth' of consumer society in eighteenth-century western Europe was accompanied by an emerging middle class, eager to assert its political and economic rights to freedom of contract and to be unleashed from the restraints of aristocratic clientage. Consumption not only offered material gain for the individual producer but it represented an aim for political economy which, it was ultimately hoped, would bring prosperity for all. Notwithstanding the continued unease over luxury and excess which has persisted over the last two centuries, liberals, socialists and co-operators have all attended to the dynamics of consumption and have sought means to ensure everybody has access to the good life. In the twentieth century, the construction of consumer society has become a fundamental dimension of the modern state. Following the world economic depression of the 1930s and the ravages of the Second World War, building a society structured around consumption seemed to offer both the basis for a new world order and an escape from the political ideologies and extremities which had seemingly destroyed the consuming ambitions of much of the world's population. Consequently, the Marshall Plan brought productivity missions from the American government, while European social democratic ideals aimed to place the consumer at the heart of the affluent society. Moreover, in the institutions of the global architecture of peace, a system of liberal rights was established entirely in accord with the goals of bringing plenty to the people.

This was much more than the usurpation of national government agendas by the interests of business or the vision of mass marketers. It was also a genuine commitment to building a society in which all would share in the material benefits of affluence. It culminated in the notorious 'kitchen debate' between the US Vice-President Richard Nixon and the Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev, at the Moscow Trade Fair in 1959, when the two leaders debated the relative merits of communism and capitalism in improving the standards of living of the mass of the people. As other scholars have pointed out, ultimately the American model prevailed, presenting a legacy of a particular vision of consumer society.

In the midst of such state initiatives what have consumers themselves thought of the society being built in their name? The purpose of this project is to uncover the politics inherent to international consumer society by exploring the principal organisations of consumer activism since the Second World War. It is about the response of consumers to the post-war settlement and to the economic conditions they found themselves living in. It charts the rise of the modern consumer movement, usually associated with comparative testing magazines and the pursuit of the 'best buy'. Yet, crucially, the modern consumer movement has been about much more than shopping and has thrived in countries such as Malaysia where the vast majority of the population has not been able to have access to – and participate in – the fruits of affluence.

Consumer activism and consumer protest therefore offers an insight into the dynamics of consumer society, into the politics of participation and into questions of rights, choice and access in the marketplace. While the institutions established at Bretton Woods have overseen the development of consumer society, consumers themselves have often sought to challenge the shape of this society and to offer important engagements with the various equations of the consumer and the citizen that have often taken place. 'Consumer society' has been the project of a system of global governance which has enshrined the consumer at the heart of capitalist development, yet the definition of this consumer has not been set in stone and waves of consumer protest have brought out these tensions.

This suggests a dialectic in the creation of consumer society, one between the participants in an organised consumer movement on the one hand, and the architects of the global economic order on the other. Yet the dialectic is much broader and more loosely defined than that, since it is a dialectic between the advocates of competing visions of the consumer society: of ensuring more choice for individual shoppers, or ensuring that all shoppers can participate in the market place on an equal footing. And it is a dialectic perhaps at the heart of every consumer as he or she seeks to participate in the world of goods, at all times – though to varying degrees – conscious of the broader questions of citizenship that each act of consumption confers.

