

The Bohemian Habitus: New Social Theory and Political Consumerism

Sam Binkley
Emerson College

Samuel_binkley@emerson.edu
34 Hall Street no. 2, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130
(617) 390 5520

Sam Binkley is assistant professor of sociology at Emerson College. His research interests focus on questions of identity formation in the context of contemporary cultures of consumption with a focus on the role of lifestyle movements, from the counterculture of the 1960s and 70s to contemporary anti-consumerist activism. His forthcoming book, *Loosening Up: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Duke University Press, 2007) examines the role of lifestyle discourses of the 1970s in the reconfiguration of personal identity in the American middle classes. He has also published in the *Journal of Consumer Culture*; the *Journal of Material Culture*; *Cultural Studies-Critical Methodologies*; *Consumption, Markets and Culture*; *Cultural Studies* and the *Journal for Cultural Research*.

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ABSTRACT:

Recent political consumerist mobilisations have been examined through the lens of sociological theories. Anthony Giddens' and Ulrich Beck's work on life politics and subpolitics are often used to describe the demise of traditional politics and the rise of reflexive, self-aware individuals responding to dilemmas of modern life as they encounter them in their own experiences. In this essay, while such arguments are acknowledged for their importance and relevance, limits to this thesis are discussed. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of the consumer habitus, it is argued that many consumers operate according to a pre-reflexive, unaware practical logic which resists exhortations to ethical self awareness. However, it is also argued that changes in the 'culturalisation' of the economy are disseminating the influence of artistic vanguards, or bohemians, who practice consumption in a more reflexive manner. The bohemian habitus, it is argued, is one that opposes the institutional sterility of mainstream consumption with the sensuality of its own embodiment, presenting an opening for a politics of ethical consumerism.

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'Black Friday' is the name given to the first Friday after American Thanksgiving – the symbolic ending of the domestic serenity surrounding that occasion, and the launch of the frenzied holiday shopping season. But Black Friday has also recently become a day of reflection and protest directed against the culture of consumption itself, designated international 'Buy Nothing Day' by the anti-consumerist campaign group, Adbusters. In 2004, activities around Buy Nothing Day prompted a CNN interview with Adbusters founder and activist, Kalle Lasn, in which the following exchange took place:

CNN: ...Kalle, I mean, Black Friday is like a tradition. People love to go out on this day and shop. We absolutely love it. Why do you want them to quit shopping?

LASN: But think about it. After this very spiritual holiday of Thanksgiving, why is it that our culture is somehow then requiring us to go out the next day and max out on our credit cards... over-consumption is in some sense the mother of all our environmental problems.

CNN: Oh, come on! Environmental problems?

LASN: Yes, environmental problem

CNN: Oh, come on! Come on! If somebody wants to buy their kid an Elmo doll, what's the harm in that? (CNN transcripts).

The tone of this exchange is familiar to audiences of American television journalism in a post-FoxNews world, in which figures of the loony-left are routinely paraded for ridicule by brutish television anchor, where data-studded arguments evoking broad global pictures wither under the jeers of skeptical, everyday 'common sense.' But this encounter, I would argue, is interesting for other reasons, and serves here as a springboard into the central concerns of this essay: the viability of political consumerism as a cultural and intellectual project, and the ambivalence or hostility with which it is greeted by some consumers.

Arguments for political consumerism have been offered by activists, scholars, students and everyday consumers themselves. In different ways, the claim has been made that mundane choices in the field of consumption might serve as instruments of ethical action and or have political impact. (Stolle; Conca, Maniates & Princen; Klein; Lasn; Micheletti, Follesdal & Stolle; *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science; Cultural Studies*). It is hoped that consumers might be prompted to link their choices in the mall or grocery store to their broader global and societal consequences, and that social movements organized around these everyday actions of political consumerism might take the place of the grander strategies previously played out in more traditional political processes (Micheletti). While proponents of this new politics draw support from a variety of academic fields, the trend has been to pass over the work of traditional political theorists (whose approaches tend to center on the

state and traditional forms of civic participation), in favor of macro-level explanations that are seen as better able to comprehend the changing configurations of politics and society on a global scale. (Walsh; Bauman, 1999; Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1997; Giddens, 1998) Among such theorists, macro-level processes of social change are described in terms of the shifting location of politics itself: no longer enshrined in the traditional institutions of democratic governance, politics today is found in more spontaneous grassroots networks centered on personal, daily life concerns. (Dalton & Wattenberg; Giddens, 1991; Rojek).

Indeed, recent mobilisations around consumption have found a fit with these sociological theories, drawing on notions of 'subpolitics' or 'life politics' described by Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman and most importantly Ulrich Beck, wherein personal practices in everyday life attain the significance of collective political action. (Holzer & Sørensen; Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 1999, 2000) Yet as Lasn's experience on CNN suggests, the extent to which an ethics of political consumption is influencing everyday lives and the practical logics of shopping encounters some obstacles, at least where it concerns such mundane objects as Elmo dolls and the like. The aim of this paper is to locate these obstacles within the terrain of social theory: while theoretical invocations of subpolitics are doubtless promising, and the efforts of activists within the realm of consumption have already shown, and will

doubtless continue to show, significant political traction, there remains much to be understood about the politicisation of everyday practices.

Against the backdrop of arguments for subpolitics and life politics gleaned from the sociology of Beck and Giddens, and drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's conception of 'habitus' as a pre-reflexive set of generative categories organizing everyday practice, this chapter considers how the everyday character of mundane consumption practices, embodied in the pre-thought categories of the consumer's habitus, limits the viability of some anti-consumerist strategies as sub-political projects, particularly as they attempt to enlist wider constituencies (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1997). Everyday consumption is defined by a particular entropy, or an inertia of the quotidian characterized by a logic of naturalness and common sense which tends to censor exhortations to ethical reflection and self distancing, responding instead to the more immediate and practical logic of simply 'getting-by'.

Yet rather than resign in despair at these limits, my aim here is to overcome them, to rethink political consumerism as a sphere of intervention by better understanding changes in the practical dynamics of everyday consumption. In the third section of this essay, I shall point the way toward further research into the changing configuration of the consumer habitus among influential segments of the middle classes of post-industrial societies. (Harvey, 1992; Tourraine 1971) Drawing on recent analyses of the increasing aestheticisation of the economy developing from the growth of a largely urban,

post-Fordist professional sector centered on the production of cultural goods, I shall argue that the increasing influence of an inner city sub-cultural vanguard groups – or bohemians – promises to bring significant changes to the way people think and act as consumers, and thereby to the place of politics in daily habits of consumption (Florida, 2002, *The Rise of the Creative Class*; Entwistle & Wissinger).

1. Life Politics and Subpolitics

Discussions of the politics of consumption have drawn from a range of sources in the field of social theory, to explain how the personal, mundane and seemingly inconsequential domain of consumption might assume the significance of politics. The arguments of Beck and Giddens on the rise of ‘reflexive modernity’ and what they term ‘subpolitics’ and ‘life politics’ respectively, have in this regard served a special purpose. Together these theorists shed light on the proposed link between the personal realm of everyday life and new social movements centered on political consumerism.

The important points can be briefly summarized: Beck’s comprehensive sociological account of what he terms ‘reflexive modernity’ describes a shift from a first order modernity defined by the imperatives of progress, the domestication of nature, increased societal rationalisation and robust wealth generation, to a second order modernity in which previously concealed, unanticipated effects of these primary processes have emerged as urgent concerns in their own right

(Beck, 1992). At an earlier moment of development driven by industrial modernisation, the imperative to tame nature and to satisfy fundamental human needs stood out as an enduring problem. Now, under reflexive modernity, it is the secondary effects generated by modern progress itself that warrant intervention. Beck has in mind a variety of environmental and health issues, but also a range of personal and cultural effects, from the erosion of community and personal isolation to the depletion of shared meanings (Beck 1996). More precisely, these second order effects of reflexive modernity involve the struggle of individuals to manage risks in their daily lives: once contained and minimized by the planning mechanisms of industrial modernity and the calculations of the welfare state, risks are today distributed multifariously throughout the social fabric. And they are left to the individual to negotiate through her own life plans, which include job training and retraining, the purchase of insurance policies, the maintenance of personal health and the like. In a 'risk society,' everyday life is increasingly reflexive – examined and assessed by individuals themselves acting on their own, on themselves, without the support of the state or any collective body.

All of this has meant a specific shift in the location of politics: where previously struggles developed around those steering mechanisms by which the direction of modern advance was determined and its attendant risks were contained (particularly the welfare state which set priorities for economic growth and wealth distribution, but also supplied social safety nets to enforce risk

reduction), today political processes take place within the spaces of those second order consequences and risks once excluded from the realm of politics. Politics, in other words, has taken root in social and personal life, wherein modernity's unintended effects are experienced and negotiated on a daily basis (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1997).

Moreover, at the center of this shift is a process Beck describes as one of individualization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Individualisation entails the redefinition of core existential certainties – assured beliefs in community, shared purpose and meaning – from forms enshrined in meta-narratives of modern progress and shared institutions (such as trade unions, parties and civic organizations), to personal undertakings and objects of individual improvisation. With the bankruptcy of such meta-narratives and their legitimising discourses, we are left to rethink the basic assumptions and reexamine the daily effects of modern progress privately, in our own personal lives (David & Wilkinson). Previously taken-for-granted beliefs about the moral meanings underpinning modernisation – the expansion and rationalisation of industry, the growth of markets, the spread of administration and control mechanisms in daily life – are now viewed with suspicion as contingent events, measured for their consequences on social and personal existence. Reflexive modernity is perpetually assessed for the risks it incurs, and subjected to the rigours of a new kind of political scrutiny, or what Giddens calls a 'life politics' (Giddens, 1991).

Individualisation, however, does not necessarily entail atomisation. The improvisations of individuals in their daily lives can ultimately acquire a collective character as groups begin to form around the containment of risk and the replenishing of meaning. Taking up the newly politicised domain of personal experience in modern life wherein the unintended consequences of modernist development are felt the most intensely – areas such as ecology, personal health, community, consumption, well being and so on – new political horizons open up which blur distinctions traditionally maintained between public and private life (Halkier; Bennett ; Harvey, 1999; Knight & Greenberg). The case for anti-consumerism is often advanced against the backdrop of such a collapsing distinction: Michelle Micheletti, for example, has described the subpolitical as ‘responsibility-taking by citizens in their everyday, individual-oriented life arena that cuts across the public and private spheres’ (Micheletti, p.29) Indeed, Micheletti goes on to offer the following example as an instance of subpolitics in action in the realm of consumption:

Individuals begin by worrying about a private matter – wanting to provided a healthy meal for the family, work, a shorter day for personal health and family solitude, or buy new furniture for a barbecue planned on the patio – and soon find that their private issues and interests have a public side to them as well... Healthy food for one’s family may mean finding where one can buy it,

leading to a demand for organic foods and a movement for eco-labeled produce that takes a stance against genetically modified organisms, and finally in institutions that audit and label food products to ensure their environmental quality. (Micheletti, p. 35).

Micheletti's account illustrates a process central to political consumerist practice and theory: everyday concerns provide the spark which stimulates greater reflexivity or self-awareness, which in turn motivates a program of political conduct. But central to this argument is an account of the increasingly self-conscious nature of daily life under the conditions of reflexive modernity – a point that is important for a theory of political consumerism, yet one which nonetheless runs up against some conflicting empirical realities.

It is Giddens who, in recognizing this tension, has ventured furthest in exploring increasing levels of self-consciousness in reflexive modernity. For Giddens, reflexive modernity entails the extension of self awareness into the most intimate domains of identity and selfhood. Individuals resolve existential dilemmas imposed by reflexive modernisation through a project of self-actualisation, at the center of which is an increase in self awareness, or 'reflexive self-monitoring,' in all areas of life. Distinguishing life politics from more traditional forms of emancipatory politics, Giddens writes,

Life politics concerns political issues which flow from processes of self-actualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalizing

influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realisation influence global strategies.... Life politics, to repeat, is a politics of life decisions (Giddens, 1991, pp.214f.).

Giddens' thesis on life politics, like Beck's subpolitics, has fostered a fruitful research discourse on the proliferation of new social movements outside the categories defined by traditional politics, which derive from people's increasing self-awareness of personal experiences and daily practices (Bennett). Yet both assume a very high level of reflexivity in everyday life — degrees of self awareness and self consciousness, and a willingness to introduce highly reflexive ethical discourses into the most mundane aspects of one's daily practices. The question remains: to what extent can everyday consumption be defined by such high levels of self awareness, or, conversely, to what extent do consumers possess, and practice, the ability to suppress self awareness when it comes down to completing their daily consumption activities? This question, I contend, is best addressed through reflection on the role of the embodied logic of the habitus in consumption routines, and in the contrasting ways in which such forms of embodiment are conceived, on the one hand, as the object of reflexive self-awareness, and, on the other, as the pre-reflexive, unthought basis for everyday practice. To pose this question with some measure of theoretical clarity, we must turn to another important contribution from social theory, one provided by

Pierre Bourdieu and his theorization of the habitus as the structuring foundation for everyday practice.

2. Reflexivity, Embodiment and the Consumer Habitus_

An important element in Beck's and Giddens' theories of reflexive modernity concerns the role of the body, which emerges as an object of increasing awareness and scrutiny, and of cultivation and care. With the onset of reflexive modernity, the body, it is claimed, becomes 'denaturalized' – its givenness transformed into an object of choosing within the realm of human control. As Giddens describes it,

The body used to be one aspect of nature, governed in a fundamental way by processes only marginally subject to human intervention. The body was a 'given', the often inconvenient and inadequate seat of the self. With the increasing invasion of the body by abstract systems all this becomes altered. The body, like the self, becomes a site of interaction, appropriation and reappropriation, linking reflexively organized processes and systematically ordered expert knowledge. The body itself has become emancipated – the condition for its reflexive restructuring (Giddens, 1991, p.218).

Giddens has in mind here the various regimes of bodily cultivation that have come to characterize contemporary lifestyles, which include exercise and health practices, dietary regimes and myriad other practices of self monitoring and self awareness centered on physical well being. Such concerns provide the framework for the kinds of life politics and subpolitics already discussed, powerful elements of which appear in varieties of political consumerism ranging from green consumerism to environmentalism to alternative foodways (Lewis). Indeed, in many ways, the body, as an object of reflexive self-awareness, has a significant role to play in the shaping of self identity, and is mobilised as an important counterpoint to what are perceived to be the impersonal machinations of the mass market, distributors of risks to bodily health and existential well being. The political force of this reappropriation of the body is captured in the tension Giddens describes between 'personalisation and commodification,' in which the market presents specific challenges to the project of a self realisation:

For the project of the self as such may become heavily commodified. Not just lifestyles but self-actualisation is packaged and distributed according to market criteria... Yet commodification does not carry the day unopposed on either an individual or a collective level. Even the most oppressed of individuals – perhaps in some ways particularly the most oppressed – react creatively

and interpretively to processes of commodification which impinge on their lives(Giddens, 1991, pp.198f.).

One might include among the ranks of such oppressed individuals familiar figures within anti-consumerist discourses from the French farming activist Jose Bové (who famously bulldozed a McDonalds restaurant in rural France) to the anti-McDonald's documentarian Morgan Spurlock (director of *Supersize Me*, in which Spurlock himself explores the immediate health effects of a fast food diet) – opponents of commodified food systems whose experience with the incursion of such abstract systems registers on the level of the body. The reflexivity of such groups is, of course, highly variable: as Jo Littler has pointed out, reflexivity in anti-consumerist politics varies from 'a relatively narcissistic form of reflexivity that acts to shore up a romantic anti-consumerist activist self,' to one that expresses a more relational and dispersed process (Littler, p. 229) Yet in either case, it is an awareness of the body, its cultivation and maintenance as the object of a reflexive project of self-actualisation, that serves as the touchstone of a political consumerist project. The body becomes, for those pursuing such a project of self-identity, an object-to-be-decommodified through sustained practices of reflexive self-awareness, coupled together with strategies of collective action (Binkley).

This account, however, does not fully take into consideration the ways in which people live their bodies in the performance of daily tasks, such as

consumption. Everyday trips to the mall, to Starbucks, to Ikea; visits to retailers of unhealthy or environmentally damaging goods produced under conditions of exploitation within a global economy – these visits involve undertakings in which actors inhabit their bodies in ways that specifically exclude much reflective thinking. Bourdieu’s theorization of social practice provides insight on this by directing us to the unthought, pre-reflexive features of the body in a range of daily tasks and interactions – to a reality which, in my view, significantly advances the project of anti-consumerism as a political enterprise (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984,1992; Kauppi).

Bourdieu’s theory of social practice centers on the role of the habitus of the specific actors, understood as a system of bodily dispositions in which social locations are internalized, naturalized and experienced as the common sense articulation of things, yet incorporated as a transposable set of bodily logics, or a ‘bodily hexis,’ serving as a generative set of principles for the structuring of everyday practices (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 93f.). The habitus is, Bourdieu writes, ‘a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions, and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to the analogical transfers of schemes’ (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.82f.). Distinguished from the reflexive body of life politics, the habitus is the place in which prior determinations imprinted on the individual in the course of life – determinations originating in inter-group relations at the structuring of society,

and most likely in the individual's specific class location – are converted into naturally felt and taken-for-granted aspects of social existence and daily practice. 'The habitus makes coherence and necessity out of accident and contingency,' writes Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977, p.87). Indeed, habitus shapes ways of acting premised on specific ways of perceiving the world, even as it integrates practices of 'apperception,' or managed tasks of non-comprehension, into its mode of daily conduct (Bourdieu, 1977, p.86). The habitus expresses deeply engrained patterns of perception and apperception, ways of being conscious of specific things but also ways of remaining specifically unconscious of them.

In this way, the principle of the habitus seems to demand careful qualification of claims concerning self-awareness, and the power (or obligation) of individuals to make specific choices about their bodily well being. Where life politics is premised on new forms of awareness directed at the body, the habitus seems specifically structured around the suppression of such awareness as a condition of its operation, foreclosing the very distance one takes on oneself when one considers one's actions ethical. Bourdieu writes,

Through the systematic 'choices' it makes among the places, events and people that might be frequented, the *habitus* tends to protect itself from crises and political challenges by providing itself with a milieu to which it is as pre-adapted as possible, that is, a relatively constant universe of situations tending to reinforce its dispositions

by offering the market most favorable to its products. And once again it is the most paradoxical property of the *habitus*, the unchosen principle of all 'choices', that yields the solution to the paradox of the information needed in order to avoid information. The schemes of perception and appreciation of the *habitus* which are the basis of all the avoidance strategies are largely the product of a non-conscious, unwilled avoidance, whether it results automatically from the conditions of existence (for example, spatial segregation) or has been produced by a strategic intention (such as avoidance of 'bad company' or 'unsuitable books') originating from adults themselves formed in the same conditions (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 61).

As such, the *habitus*, as the 'unchosen principle of all "choices",' deflects or suppresses views that threaten to unsettle it, to de-naturalize the naturalness by which it operates. While Bourdieu's critics on the left have questioned what they consider his fatalism on this point, his analysis provides insight on the wider puzzle confronting political consumerism (Wacquant; Bourdieu & Eagleton; Csordas; Holton). As proponents of political consumerism attempt to expand their ranks, their message can at times run up against the limits of the *habitus*: exhortations to consume more responsibly are resisted or ignored.

3. The Bohemian Habitus: A Place for Political Consumerism?

Competing accounts of the viability of political consumerism as a practice incorporating a certain reflective distance taken by practitioners on their own practices, have been offered here to clarify the likely limits on the current objectives of political consumerism. Yet the aim of this discussion is not to foreclose such objectives, but to consider more advantageous ways of realizing them. Toward this end, I will close with some comments on the developments in the nature of consumer practices that now and in the foreseeable future hold out opportunities for consumer activism. While more research is required before these points can be presented in anything like a synthetic manner, I offer them here in thumbnail form, as an affirmative conclusion to the points already made.

In a very general sense, in many areas of society, the consumer habitus is changing in significant ways. People are becoming less hostile to appeals to self awareness in their everyday habits, at least among a small but influential portion of the population. This transformation is occurring along with a broader transformation in the economic organization of capitalism from a Fordist model centered on the manufacture of mass produced goods, to a post-Fordist mode centered on cultural, aesthetic and symbolic production. (Harvey, 1992) Very briefly: contemporary forms of capitalist development have turned from a model of growth and accumulation centered on competition in the realm of industrial production (where techniques of shop-floor discipline and the rational planning on the managerial level assured strong, regular and voluminous output of

serially produced goods), to one centered on the production of experiences, meanings, signs, knowledge and abstract values – to what has been termed the ‘culturalization’ of the economy (Du Gay & Pryke). Under these conditions, the occupational structure of Western economies has undergone a radical change: once dominated by workers and managers accustomed to hierarchical organizational schemes and dutiful, if repetitive work, today it is a far more flexible workforce – designers, advertisers, marketers, communicators of various stripes, aestheticians, and ‘cultural intermediaries’ – who drive the economy (or large portions of it). Such a case is advanced persuasively by Scott Lash and John Urry in *Economies of Signs and Space*, wherein the authors argue that ‘economic and symbolic processes are more than ever interlaced and inter-articulated... the economy is increasingly culturally inflected and that culture is more and more economically inflected.’ (Lash & Urry, p. 64).

Moreover, these changes, it is claimed, have cultivated a workforce endowed with the capacity to innovate aesthetically, to communicate in nuanced and expressive ways, and to mediate the world of appearances in ways that far surpass that of its industrial counterpart. This has been noted in several influential urban centers (New York, London, Berlin), where capital accumulation draws on innovations in the fields of research, media and expressive culture, and the work of ‘cultural mediation’ has become central to economic development (McRobbie; Zukin, 1982, 1995; Lloyd). Labour has been drawn from growing pockets of urban bohemians – artists, musicians,

intellectuals, small business people, writers and others – whose numbers have been rising since the 1980s. Speaking of the American context, Richard Florida has described transformations in the workforces of such centers in terms of the ‘rise of the creative class’: individuals with aesthetic sensibilities, Florida argues, are seminal to economic growth in urban centers, where their talents feed the growing culture industries and their mere presence in certain neighbourhoods increases a city’s cultural appeal, giving it an edge over other urban centers in an increasingly competitive global marketplace (Florida, 2002, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 2002, ‘Bohemia and Economic Geography’). Indeed, the economic contributions of bohemians has been judged to be of such significance as to justify their extensive monitoring, as evidenced in the development of the ‘Bohemian Index,’ an inventory of writers, artists and performers compiled by Florida. For the purposes of the Index, a bohemian is described as ‘someone who believes they cannot be defined by their job. Bohemians devote their lives to the pursuit of things other than money, but end up with a stable income. Bohemians believe that there is a class system in America, and believe themselves exempt.’ (Florida, 2005; Womack, 2004) Yet to understand who these workers are, how they go about the mundane tasks of consumption and what sort of specific habitus they embody, we must reflect briefly on the history and structural location of this group within core social dynamics of modern societies. This location, I will argue, can be linked to the legacy of bohemianism more generally.

Historically, bohemianism defines an aesthetic disposition which brings together a romantic investment in the authenticity and irreducible autonomy of aesthetic production as a practice of everyday life – one which operates against the perceived encroachments of a capitalist market in cultural goods patronized by bourgeois audiences (Wilson; Bourdieu 1993). While traditionally such an antagonistic stance consigned the bohemian to the margins of economic life, today, bohemian sensibilities are well incorporated into market systems – part and parcel of economic ‘culturalization.’ The antagonism between the instrumental demands of economic growth and the expressive possibilities of leisure and consumption that worried social theorists like Daniel Bell (who fretted over the ‘disjuncture’ between the cultural and economic spheres) has been resolved as the expressive logics of bohemia, with their penchant for authenticity and creativity in everyday life, have come to define more and more aspects of personal and commercial life. (Bell)

Yet the oppositional quality and aesthetic self-awareness that shape the bohemian disposition run deeper than its professional incorporation. It is one that persists in many aspects of everyday life, perpetuated in a deeply internalized, intuitively felt way of getting by – what we might call a ‘bohemian habitus.’ Bohemianism reproduces an aristocratic disdain for bourgeois culture and its market products, enacting a stylized refusal of what it deems crass commercialism; it petitions on the side of personal integrity, authenticity and an embodied naturalness against the abstractions, calculations and impersonal

machinations of mass society; yet at the same time it licenses the play of appearances and aesthetics in everyday life, and occasionally delights in the contradictions of its own position with regard to a market system it knows it cannot resist (and, indeed, upon which it remains dependent). Moreover, it is the bohemian's specific predilection for aesthetic manipulation — a delight taken in the stylization of appearances and the collapsing of boundaries separating artistry and daily life — that situates bohemian antagonism to the market. The bohemian looks with scorn upon the regimented production of serially produced, identical goods which suppresses the expressive capacities and the everyday artistry to which the bohemian remains committed.

For this reason, the bohemian habitus is at once antagonistic and reflexive: the integrity of aesthetic production demands a constant self monitoring and an opposition to the instrumental rationality of the market system. This 'aestheticization of everyday life', as Mike Featherstone has termed it, demands an awareness of the self as an object of aesthetic consumption and production. With the increasing culturalization of the economic and social life, such sensibilities, it can be argued, have become significantly generalized, such that the oppositional stance of this new bohemianism has become a general feature of many consumer markets and practices. This is evidenced in the growing popularity of personalized products, appeals to the expressive uniqueness and alleged creative agency of individual consumers merely through the act of purchase, and increasing flirtations with the ethical dimensions of product

choice, evidenced in Gap's 'Red' campaign, Starbuck's emphasis on economic justice in the purchase of coffee beans, and the general 'greening' of consumer culture. While much of this falls radically short of a sustained political strategy (such a 'greening' of consumption, it is often pointed out, amounts to little more than a 'greenwashing' of mass market practices), what is important here is the oppositional logic of the habitus it betrays, and the potential that such a shared habitus holds for more radical appeals to integrate reflexive awareness into the daily practices of shopping and spending. Such an oppositional logic can be apprehended structurally and historically in the location held by bohemians, as practitioners of a reflexive aesthetics of daily life.

Moreover, reflexivity and opposition among bohemians, as any stroller through an urban enclave registering high on the Bohemian Index can attest, is not a consciously held position, but an embodied logic, embedded in an everyday mode of embodiment. The body is here inhabited as the seat not only of a replenishing source of expressive authenticity in everyday practice, but also as the embodied negation of the commodity form itself: against the seriality and standardization of mass market products, the bohemian body exudes expressive authenticity and opposition, even as this opposition is becoming increasingly central to the production and circulation of goods for those same markets. While critics have convincingly pointed out the extent to which this opposition depends on an ever more implausible differentiation between a bohemian space of expressive authenticity and a commodified space of mass consumption, it

nonetheless holds that the belief in this distinction sustains in the minds, bodies and practices of bohemians (and those inflected with the logic of their practice), animating their conduct and opening them to perhaps more radical critical discourses on consumption as an ethically consequential mode of conduct. (Frank 1997; Heath & Potter 2004)

In other words, the bohemian habitus mobilizes the body against the market in its own way, and in doing so overcomes the foreclosure of reflexive politics evidenced by many other consumer groups. Where the commodifying logic of the mass market is marked by antiseptic, abstract, rationalist and hygienic (and hence bodiless) textures, the bohemian disposition cultivates a sense of authentic corporeality in its own daily practices. This taste can be witnessed in any of thousands of bohemian coffee shops which signal their independence from the sterility, homogeneity and institutional sensibility of large franchises by cultivating a sense of authenticity, warmth and 'funkiness' (Thompson & Arsel). It is palpably expressed in the bohemian somatic practice of tattooing and body modification, in countercultural youth styles, much of which seems to cut against the cold seriality of the commodity form. Indeed, this embodied opposition, which marshals the body's authenticity and sensuality against the coldness and instrumentality of commodity culture, incorporates reflexivity into the practice of everyday consumerism.

One might argue, then, in conclusion, that as these cultural vanguards extend their influence more generally, more people are likely to be inflected with

a specifically bohemian sense of aesthetics in daily life, and to develop an implicit opposition to a market system deemed lacking in corporeal pleasures and expressive embodiment. Moreover, it seems possible that such conditions would mean that consumers became more responsive to appeals for ethical reflection on their everyday consumer practices, thus making them more aware of their environmental impacts, consequences for health and implications for global economic inequality. The reflexive self awareness that is part and parcel of subpolitics and life politics moves from being an explicit reflexive discourse to an internalized mode of daily practice – an embodied characteristic of the expressive body of the bohemian habitus itself, thus permitting an openness to self reflection suppressed in many other walks of life.

4. Concluding Reflections

In the preceding pages I have offered what I hope is a fairly convincing (though undoubtedly, for some, an unnecessarily lofty) account of some of the problems and opportunities facing the project of political consumerism. While it is widely held that political consumerism opens new avenues of political participation and contest, it does so by politicizing a dimension of everyday conduct that poses more resistance to this politicization than many consumption activists and scholars typically recognize. My comments on the reflexivity of the consumer habitus are intended as a cautionary note to readers whose inclinations have led them to a book that takes seriously the promise of this new political

opening. At the same time, I have indicated that the changing field of consumption, aligned with broad economic and societal transformations concentrated in urban areas, yet apparent more generally in a range of sectors and populations, hold the promise for increasing receptivity among consumers to efforts to instill ethical reflexivity in their habits as consumers. Urban bohemian vanguards, whose distinctively reflexive sensibilities as consumers are disproportionately influential to their numbers, provide something of a template for more mainstream groups. I would like to offer in these closing remarks a reflection on the relevance of this argument to the wider aims of this volume, and to some more general challenges that face political consumerism as a social movement.

First with regard to the presupposition of the present volume, and the place occupied by this essay within this wider polemic. It seems to me that, while ostensibly critical, a certain complementarity is reached. While the present article sets out to limit the claims of political consumerism, this effort concludes with model of ethical consumerism that dovetails well with the “alternative hedonism” that is proposed in this volume. The editors write in the volume’s introduction: “A counter-consumerist ethic and politics should therefore appeal not only to altruistic compassion and environmental concern, but also to the more self-regarding gratifications of consuming differently. It should develop and communicate a new erotics of consumption or hedonist ‘imaginary’.” In that

sense, I think we are on the same track. Such an erotics of consumption is certainly appropriate to the modes of embodied reflexivity expressed in the bohemian habitus. Indeed, the cautionary tone expressed in this article against robust and explicit exhortations to political consumption — efforts practiced, perhaps, by activist or scholars operating in a much more dogmatic mode than those discussed in this volume — is perhaps better saved for those with a more diminished vision of the aesthetic properties of the good life. Alternative hedonism seems to anticipate and incorporate many of the assertions put forward here, particularly in its call for a “hedonist imaginary” — a task perhaps best tacked in the aesthetic domain to which urban bohemians are particularly well adapted.

Yet while the willingness to depart from the didacticism, dogmatism and self-consciousness of much conventional social movement discourse, and to invest the sensual realm of aesthetics and hedonism might be a welcome departure for a politics of consumption, and might take important steps in avoiding the stubborn refusals of the pre-reflexive habitus discussed here, it nonetheless opens itself up to the other problems which both the present article and the general thesis of alternative hedonism has yet to address satisfactorily. This concerns the fundamental requirement that political consumerism, for it to be effective, necessarily entails the general availability of accurate information on the wider social, economic and environmental impact of consumption decisions.

For political consumers to develop and practice habits which are, only in a very general and ultimately aesthetic way, oriented to wider political objectives, runs the real danger that these decisions could become misdirected, and fail to affect real political change.

This problem seems to run to the heart of claims for political consumerism as a social movement. Such claims rightly acknowledge the uniqueness of political consumerism in reaching new constituencies and eliciting political participation from wider groups than traditional social movements, by concentrating on nontraditional outlets for political participation, embedded in mundane, extra-institutional contexts, and embracing dispersed, non-hierarchical organizational forms. Yet such institutional and hierarchical forms served an important purpose in traditional social movements in orienting collective action toward strategic goals. Within such coordination, and without the dissemination of information and directives to its memberships, political consumerism runs the risk of remaining ineffectual and of missing key strategic targets, in spite of the enthusiasm of its participants.

Michelle Micheletti has described in great detail the ways in which political consumerist efforts are often wide of their mark, and the need for accurate auditing mechanisms in political consumerist practice. (Micheletti 9-11) Where snap decisions between various products undertaken in the midst of mundane shopping activities are guided only by rumor, by hunches or aesthetic inclinations, the likelihood that they will successfully apply just the correct

amount of pressure the most economically and politically sensitive spots in the consumer market place is tenuous. What is required, Micheletti argues, are accurate auditing mechanisms capable of informing and directing ethical consumer choices, strategists capable of devising plans and operations with specific goals in mind, and efficient and transparent means of communicating these plans to willing consumers. (128) In short, in addition to aesthetics, what is required is education. For this purpose, a range of labeling schemes have traditionally served to orient consumers, and now there are several auditing agencies and certification schemes, from fair trade organizations to the Clean Clothes Campaign. In other words, political consumerism, like the traditional social movements its advocates counterpoise it to, still runs up against some familiar difficulties: how to direct the activities of spontaneously acting participants in order that meaningful and pragmatic change might occur. The largely aesthetic and hedonistic solutions proposed in this article, and in this volume more generally, must account for the role of such distinctly informational, and at times dogmatic and instructional content, if political consumerism is to translate into an effective strategy for the monitoring and regulation of the global economy. This problem is doubly important when one considers the slipperiness of politics in the phantasmagoric world of contemporary marketing. Strategies such as greenwashing, and now bluewashing and sweatwashing make politics of aesthetic decision making highly problematic. (163) What is required, then, is an integration of aesthetic

and informational content, in such a way that the hedonistic dynamics of consumption retain their persuasive appeal. Labeling schemes must partake in the aesthetics of hedonistic consumption without appearing dogmatic and didactic. And what is required is a sense of identification and trust with the auditing sources which relate information to consumers, and the planning authorities – activists and organizers – whose presence must be integrated with this general aesthetics. Trust, a resource that is in radically short supply in late modern contexts, must be maintained by a leadership celebrated for its aesthetic, and not just moral or political stature.

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[Please add in Bauman, Beck and Giddens 1994]

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