Consumer Choice as Political Participation

Michele Micheletti

Consumption as Politics

Political scientists are often rather surprised when they first hear that shopping can be participation in politics. We react this way because we are taught that the political system is the focus of citizen involvement in politics. Our definitions of political participation reflect this understanding: ”those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and, directly or indirectly, in the formation of public policy” (McClosky 1968, 252), and ”politiskt deltagande innebär deltagande i aktiviteter som har till syfte eller resultat att utöva inflytande på de politiska myndigheternas beslut, antingen direkt genom att påverka beslutsprocessen inom ett bestämt område eller indirekt genom att påverka valet av politiska representanter” (Togeby 1997, 219). These definitions form the basis of our empirical work on political participation (for an overview see Teorell 2001).

This article argues that under certain conditions shopping for services and material goods is political participation. It starts with a definition of political consumerism, continues with a section on historical and contemporary examples of the phenomenon, discusses evidence for the increase in political consumerism today, and ends with three sections devoted to the ramifications of political consumerism for our conception of political participation.

What is Political Consumerism?

The Scandinavia countries must be given credit for finding a proper scientific term for citizen use of consumer choice as a political force for change and for putting the phenomenon of political consumption securely on the social science research agenda. The Danish Institute for Future Studies coined the term political consumer (*politiske forbruger*) (IFF 1996).[1] The SNS Democratic Audit picked up the term a few years later to summarize a surprising finding on political participation (Petersson et al. 1998, 148). Three years later Sweden hosted the first International Seminar on Political Consumerism (at City University). Political consumerism is also playing a central role in the Danish Study of Power and Democracy (Goul Andersen & Tobiasen 2001), which is

headed by the Lise Torby, the author of the aforementioned definition of political participation.[2]

Political consumerism may be defined as consumer choice of producers and products on the basis of attitudes and values that concern issues of personal and family well-being as well as ethical and political assessment of favorable and unfavorable business and government practice (Micheletti, Føllesdal, Stolle eds. forthcoming). A political consumer is concerned with the politics of products (Power 1992) and the biography of products (Beck 2000). She sees material goods as embedded in a multitude of power relations that may involve issues of human rights, environmental protection, workers' rights, and gender equality. Citizens use the market to participate in politics in two basic ways. They can either engage in boycotts (negative consumption) or ”buycotts” (positive consumption) to condemn behavior on the basis of concerns mentioned above. Citizens boycott when they decide not to purchase certain kinds of goods or goods from certain companies for political reasons. When citizens decide to follow the advice of labeling schemes they are engaging in buycotts.

The Phenomenon of Political Consumerism – Historical and Contemporary Examples

The use of the market as a site for political participation is an old phenomenon. For centuries, citizens in many countries have viewed consumer choice as a way to express their political sentiment and work with their political issues. Frequently citizens have turned to the market as a venue for politics when the political system has ignored or not heeded their concerns. Material goods played an important role in such epoch-making political events as the American Revolution, the struggle for self-rule in India, the American civil rights movement, and the international protests against the Vietnam War and the Apartheid system in South Africa. Consumer power has also been used to criticize the political consequences of the policy and practices of multinational corporations like Nestlé, Shell, and Nike (Bar Yam 1995; Rask Jensen 2001; Peretti 2001).

A scholar explains the political significance of consumer goods in the American Revolution in the following way:

> Americans who had never dealt with one another, who lived thousands of miles apart, found that they could communicate their political grievances through goods or, more precisely, through the denial of goods that had held the empire together. Private consumer experiences were transformed into public rituals. Indeed many colonists learned about rights and liberties through these common consumer items, articles which in themselves were politically neutral, but which in the explosive atmosphere of the 1760s and 1770s became the medium through which ideological abstractions acquired concrete meaning (Breen 1988, 104).

Consumer products played a similar role in the Indian struggle for independence. *Swadeshi*, meaning use of things belonging to one's own country (indigenous goods), was central to Mahatma Gandhi's strategy for independence. Indian nationalists were encouraged to buy domestically produced

cloth rather than cloth imported from England. The author of a 1931 report offers the following assessment of the importance of Swadeshi in the Indian struggle for independence:

> … When one buys an indigenous product, probably of worse quality or at a higher price than the imported product, he does this, for the good of the nation as a whole. It is these little conscious acts of self sacrifice which have contributed to weld Indians into a nation, in spite of their superficial differences. It is for this reason that many Indian nationalists prefer *Swadeshi* to protection, which, they agree, cannot give the same impetus to efficiency and economy or the same inspiration to national endeavour as ”*Swadeshi*” can. According to them, there must be free and unrestricted competition with imported goods in order that on the one hand Indian manufactures may not slacken their efforts at constant improvement and on the other, Indian consumers may know and feel what sacrifice they are making in the interests of the nation. As against this, there is the view that when an industry is in its infancy, it has to be helped in its upward growth by artificial aid in the shape of protective tariff. (Bose 1931, 34–35).

We find sporadic evidence of the central role of shopping in other attempts to form political identity. Conscious consumer choice of goods produced in one's own country has been common in new nation-states. For instance in the early part of the 1900s, Norwegian citizens were encouraged to buy Norwegian fruit and berry wine and boycott imported spirits in their struggle for economic independence (Myklebus & Myrvang 2001, 19). Swedish examples include the margarine boycott of 1909, which established Kooperativa Förbundet as a market actor worthy of respect and an important identity-signaling institution for social democracy (Giertz & Strömberg 1999, 62–64), and ”det ideologiska försöket.” The supporters of this experiment argued that consumption was just as important as production in the ideological class struggle. Among other things, working class women were taught about consumer good taste and sound home economics. They learned that good taste was based on functional choice and bourgeois taste was bad taste (Hirdman 1983, 48f). Other early examples of political consumerism are the housewife revolts over high food prices in the early 1900s that took place in various countries, among them Sweden. Historians who have studied the housewives' revolts in the United States conclude that they were ”far more widespread and sustained, encompassing a far wider range of ethnic and racial groups than any tenant or consumer uprising before it” (Orleck 1993, 156).

It would seem that historical instances involved more negative than positive political consumerism. An interesting exception is the White Label Campaign, which certified women's and children's cotton underwear according to what we today would call a fair trade label – i.e., workers' rights, working environment, and child labor prohibition. Backers of the labeling campaign maintained that ”no one except the direct employer is so responsible for the fate of these children as the purchasers who buy the product of their toil” (Florence Kelly, creator of the labeling scheme as quoted in Sklar 1998, 27). The scheme was highly successfully as an instrument of labor reform for a period of time in the early 1900s.

A more recent case of political consumerism that is reminiscent of the past is the Swedish food revolt of 1972. This milk and meat boycott was started by

women from the Stockholm suburb of Skärholmen (*Skärholmsfruarna*). It spread across Sweden, led to dramatic decreases in milk sales, and ended in a protest demonstration that attracted 6,000 participants in Stockholm. ”Husmödrarnas mjölkkrig blir ett politiskt hot” was one telling newspaper headline (Kvällsposten 1972). Parliament addressed the group's concerns; Prime Minister Olof Palme called them to a meeting to discuss high food prices, and a popular political issues program on national television (*Kvällsöppet*) invited the women to debate food prices with Kjell-Olof Feldt (Minister of Trade) and supermarket chain representatives. Their demands fell well in line with popular discontent over high food prices. Shortly thereafter Parliament passed legislation to lower milk prices.[3]

Contemporary political consumerism seems to involve more kinds of people and issues of global concern and a greater emphasis on the creation of institutions for positive consumption. A conclusion from available research is that it most likely is on the increase. The World Value Survey and attitudinal studies conducted by political scientists and polling institutes show that more people globally are engaged or can consider to become engaged in boycott activities and that many citizens view the market as a site for ethics and political action (see Environics 2000, Ingelhart 1997 for information on the World Value Survey). The SNS study mentioned earlier reports that citizens increasingly use consumer boycotts to influence politics. In fact, this form of political participation was the one that increased most between 1987 and 1997, the two time periods for the study: from 14.8 percent to 28.7 percent (Petersson et al. 1998, 55). A closer look at the data reveals that boycotting is becoming a more common form of political participation for different categories of citizens.[4] More recently, a SIFO telephone survey of 1,000 persons found that 69 percent of the Swedish people believe that they can influence society by purchasing goods and services that are produced by companies that are ethical role models, 77 percent that they are personally responsible for societal development when they purchase goods and services, and 71 percent that their consumer choices are a more effective way to influence the ethical profile of private business than action by Parliament and government (SIFO, 2001, 13).

The growing number of political consumerist labeling schemes or institutions in place nationally, regionally, and globally tends also to point to its increased importance in the world of today. Some of these schemes are government-sanctioned. Others have been developed by producers or citizens separately or in cooperation with each others. Examples include eco-, fair trade, and organic food labeling schemes, forest and marine stewardship certification, and various schemes for socially responsible investing (see selected list in bibliography). The European Commission as well as the Nordic Council are interested in this general development. The Nordic Council of Ministers has even published a report on the use of ethics by consumers (TemaNord 2001).

Corporations pay close attention to all political consumer choice manifestations because they affect their marketing strategies, as the case of Jonah Peretti's e-mail exchange with Nike Shoes shows clearly (Peretti 2001). They

also know that certified products in many countries have increased in market share over the past few years (Vision 2001; Soil Association 2001; KRAV 2001; Wessells et al. 1999; LRF/Ekologiska Lantbrukarna 2001, see also Cushore et al, forthcoming, and Jordan et al, forthcoming).

This section offers a brief account of the richness of political consumerism as a phenomenon involving political participation. Yet it is important to keep in mind that political consumerism, as with all forms of political expression and participation, does not necessarily promote democracy. Probably the best know example here is the use of boycotts to promote anti-Semitism. Little has been written about this kind of political consumerism that scholars assume started at the end of the 19th century. Groups in various countries actively declared that citizens should not buy Jewish goods and that they should not buy from Jewish merchants. ”Don't Buy Jewish” campaign movements existed in many countries, including the Scandinavian ones. An advertisement that the National Socialist Party placed in a Swedish newspaper in 1934 is telling indeed: ”Svensk vara bör köpas av svenskar hos svenska affärsmän! Medverka icke till den internationella judiska storfinansens exploatering av svenska arbetare och företag!”[5] Scholars call them the ”cold pogrom” of the inter-war years that ”undermined the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of Jews” (Encyclopædia Judaica Jerusalem 1971, 1279).

Political Consumerism as Political Participation

The cases discussed briefly in this article as well as numerous other examples show that the phenomenon of political consumerism fits a similar pattern of political participation. They show how citizens have used their consumer choices in the marketplace as a creative form of political expression. Focus on consumer goods has given them a venue to express moral outrage, whose targets are the political realm, local and national businesses, and multinational companies. Citizens focus on consumer goods to influence politics, become involved more directly in political problem-solving, and participate in arenas for political discussion.

Political consumerism is a rich phenomenon for the study of various kinds of political participation (Teorell 2001). Citizens may know what they want to accomplish – their preference orders are established – and put their fate in market choices to help them attain their goals. Shopping for goods stamped with political consumerist labels, socially responsible investing, and even boycotts are examples of this kind of political participation. Labeling schemes help citizens channel their political values in the marketplace. Also as users of market goods and services, they want to contribute directly to various forms of policy-making in the marketplace. Direct dialogue with producers about their ethical and political profile as a step in the formulation of codes of conduct that satisfy both consumer and producer interests is one of many examples here. Citizens may even participate as street-level evaluators who assess the implementation of codes of conduct and green business profiles on a very local level

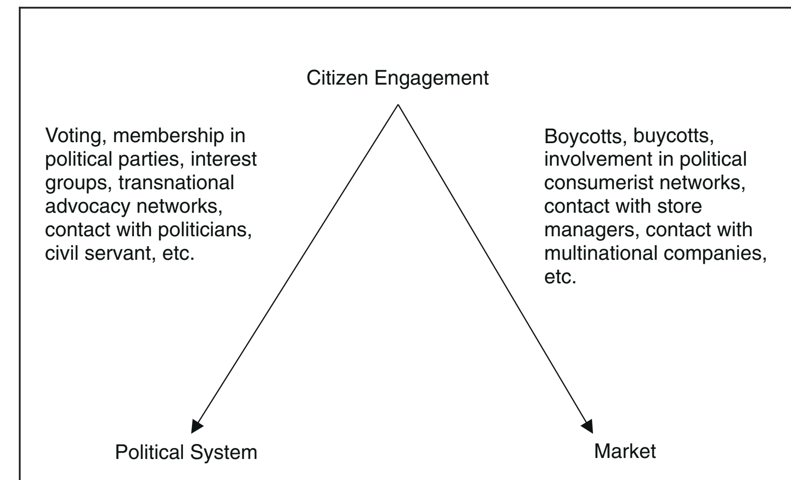

Figure 1. Definition of Political Participation.

(Micheletti forthcoming). Finally, citizens participate in political consumerism to understand more fully the interrelations among spheres in society. They surf political consumerist web sites for information on issues of importance to them, contribute to chat sites, and become involved in networks to improve their understanding of how consumption is related to the complexities of our global world. Their goal is to become an enlightened citizen-consumer.

An acknowledgement of shopping as political participation has great significance for political science. It requires a reworking of our classical definitions of political participation to include consideration from new citizenship theory, our changing political landscapes, and the use of other arenas for politics (Trend 1996, 15; Van Gunsteren 1998, 29; Soltan 1999, 18; Vogel 1996; Kech & Sikkink 1998). Perhaps we should define political participation generally as those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the working with influential institutions whose formulation of norms and rules and practices thereof affect our common concerns for well-being. Figure 1 offers a visual summary of this new definition that includes the market as a venue of political participation.

Political Consumerism and the Need to Engender Political Participation[6]

One of the most important general results revealed in historical studies of political consumerism is that market-based political participation has engaged women and opened up political space for them to work on their issues. It gave them a tool to exercise moral and political power at a time in history when men dominated formal civil society and government settings. What may come as a

surprise is that recent studies on political consumerism are reporting similar findings. Women consider the marketplace as a site for political engagement very accommodating to their needs and identities as mothers, wives, women, and citizens.

We need to study the relationship between women and political consumerism more fully. Available research suggests that there are three general themes for further research: attraction of networks; everyday-making, and risk thresholds. First, can it be that women find political consumerist networks attractive for the same reasons they participate in other networks, namely their lack of formality and bureaucratic hierarchy (Micheletti 2000)? Second, is it the case that political consumerism gives women the opportunity to work with important global and local political issues in a hand-on way that makes them feel useful and, as shown in the examples above, allows them to develop further as citizens? There are interesting similarities between women's participation in political consumerism and their participation as users of welfare state services, as shown by Ylva Stubbergaard in her current research. Finally, are women drawn to political consumerism as a way of taking responsibility for public/private problems associated with risks in society (Micheletti forthcoming)? Is what social psychologists term the ”mother effect” in operation here?[7]

It may, thus, be the case that political consumerism suits women because it allows them to work with their private worries in everyday political settings and political worries in familiar everyday settings. This general explanation dovetails nicely with feminist research on the importance of an overlap of the private and public spheres for women and survey research which shows that women tend to embrace post-materialist values more than men (Ingelhart 1997; Wängnerud 1998; Oskarson & Wängnerud 1995). The important implication for political science from this discussion is that we should consider developing an engendered theory of political participation, that allows for a broader span of activities and more spheres.

Political Consumerism as Privately-Oriented Political Participation[8]

Historical and contemporary experience with political consumerism has another important implication for our conception of political participation. Research on the phenomenon shows clearly how our private lives and actions impact public concerns locally and globally and how these public concerns impact our private lives in ways that often are special for individual citizens. This interrelation is expressed in two basic ways. A public-oriented person practices her public principles in everyday consumer choices; a privately-oriented person becomes involved in everyday consumer choices because she must ensure the availability of the kinds of goods that she needs to satisfy her self-interests. Let us preliminarily call the first person a citizen-consumer and the second person a consumer-citizen.[9] The reflections and actions of these two kinds of persons form the basis of the definition of political consumerism offered earlier in this article.

The *citizen-consumer* chooses products for other-oriented reasons that may concern political, social, and ethical issues which she finds important to apply consistently in all life spheres. On her daily trips to the store, she boycotts some products and follows labeling schemes for others. In certain cases her dedication to her public principles forces her to abstain from purchasing products that she, as a private consumer, wants to buy. She may, for example, have boycotted French wine in 1995 as a protest against the French Government's nuclear weapons testing program. In other cases, she may choose goods that are ”morally-superior” and perhaps more expensive than other alternatives. Political consumerism may be just another site or possibly the only site for her to express her political commitment. Her actions reflect the public virtue tradition in political philosophy whose assumption is that good citizens are emotionally engaged with the polity and its principles. This is a well-accepted view of good citizens as enthusiastic, self-sacrificing, and public-spirited and who willingly subordinate their private interests for the good of the public.

Consumer-citizens start with self-interest, which may spill over into political engagement. Consumer choice is initially a good site for expression of private concerns. The consumer-citizen buys certain products over others to solve private problems. These problems are the starting point that can tie the individual consumer's self-interest to publicly-oriented interests. The consumer-citizen's goal is to promote her family's interests. This may mean that she buys the same eco-labeled soap as the citizen-consumer but does so for reasons that are private- rather than publicly-oriented. The consumer-citizens may, actually, be more dedicated to promoting the good than the citizen-consumer since the good directly solves a problem that involves her loved ones. Her intense private focus may even lead her to engage in collective action to ensure the continued availability of the product. She may mobilize people to join her cause.

The political participation that is represented in the action of the consumer-citizen have important ramifications for political science research both in terms of theorizing and empirical study. It means developing a normative theory of political participation that is based on the private virtue tradition in political philosophy. The political philosopher, Shelly Burtt (1995), has begun to do this. She argues that it is normatively unsound only to equate political participation and good citizenship with people who sacrifice their private concerns for the political community. For her, this is an illusory normative ideal because such publicly-dedicated people are far too few in number, and as individuals they run the risk of overexertion if their only source of commitment is the public good. She contrasts these publicly-oriented or self-sacrificing people (i.e., citizen-consumers) with privately-oriented, self-serving people (i.e., consumer-citizens). For her, politics must not only include but also promote private self-interest. She argues that this is one of the few ways to develop more participatory self-rule. It is from private issues that individuals see how their own lives are affected by and interconnected with the lives of others and vice verse.

We see the importance of private interest in practice today in many participative settings. Many examples here involve mothers. Mothers whose children

have been injured or killed by intoxicated drivers have created networks to convince legislators to improve anti-drunk driving and underage drinking laws; as mothers of children who have been maimed by guns they have created networks to work for stricter gun control, and mothers have mobilized to find their children and soldier-sons who have disappeared in countries marked by war and civil strife.[10] Another illustration comes from the work of the American leftist political activist, Saul Alinsky, who maintained that ”the only time you stand up in righteous moral indignation is when it serves your purpose” (Alinsky 1971b, 64). For him, morality began at home, and outrage over personal problems was the starting point for collective action. In the 1970s, he developed a system for what we today call socially responsible investing. A final example is results from studies of green consumerism that show how many people who buy eco-labeled products do so to solve personal problems. Scholars conclude that these consumer-citizens' feeling of ”closeness” to environmental problems prompts them into action (Solér 1997, 64, 181–184).

In conclusion, it seems wise for political scientists to focus more on self-interest as an important motivational source of an individual's positive contributions to society. It also seems intellectually sound to develop normative theory to accommodate this focus on politics. The argument here is that more problems can be brought to the public fore once politics and political participation is opened to the strivings of self-interest. The merits of privately impassioned participation for democracy are: use of geographical closeness as a site for political action; low thresholds for engagement in politics, and diminishing problems with free riding problems. Because participants are willing to exert tremendous amounts of resources to solve personal problems, they avoid many of the pitfalls of collective action as commonly conceived by social scientists (Olsen 1975; Chwe 1999; Zhao 1998; Hedström 1994; Granoveter 1978). This kind of political participation can renew the political community. Citizens find that their everyday interests, problems, and concerns are shared by others. They develop common knowledge and use this knowledge to recreate the public interest.[11]

Political Consumerism as Individualized Collective Action[12]

Consumption as politics implies politics by other means. It fits well with research results that show how citizens in the western world are moving away from traditional forms of political participation (Wollebæk et al. 2001; Petersson et al. 1998; Putnam 2001; Norris et al. 1999) and how they are attracted to less time-consuming, bureaucratic, hierarchical kinds of involvement. These participative forms are characterized by a more loosely, egalitarian, and informal structure (Castells 1997; Lowndes 2000; Wuthnow 1998). Citizens seek sites for politics that are more flexible and network-oriented. These studies show that citizens are tending to view political participation in a different light than in the past. I have coined the concept of *individualized collective action* to capture the essence of this new citizen view of political participation. The central idea of the concept is responsibility-taking in society, which is actually what collective action is all about. I use social science scholarship on collective action to ground this concept theoretically. An initial definition of the concept is offered at the end of the section.

We begin with the conventional view of collective action, here called *collectivist collection action*, whose point of departure is responsibility-taking through interest articulating and interest aggregating structures such as interest groups and political parties. Membership in them implies that individual citizens find an institutional home through which their political voice and identity is filtered, adapted, and molded to the political preferences and priorities of these representative structures. Membership frequently means delegating responsibility-taking to the organizational leadership and supporting organizational politics. This implies the acceptance of the norms, values, and standard operating procedures that structure these institutions of collective action.[13]

The concept of *individualized collective action* is grounded in a different logic of responsibility-taking. Individual citizens do not seek a political home that takes care of their interests for them. Instead, they use established political homes to work with their own preferences and priorities, and they may even create their own political homes as a responsibility-taking response. An important difference between this logic and the traditional logic is that individual citizens do not need to join and show loyalty to interest articulating structures to exercise collective action, i.e., assume responsibility. These physical and territorially-based structures with their grand or semi-grand ideological narratives are not necessary for citizens to achieve strength in numbers. This strength or political influence can be achieved through everyday activism, responsibility-taking in geographically close settings, and through the Internet.

The social science concepts of subpolitics, everyday-makers, new citizenship, and serial identity help us with an initial understanding of the role of daily activism and local and even glocal responsibility-taking in individualized collective action. They help us theorize on how politics and democracy is brought down to the level of the individual citizen in her daily, individualized concerns (cf. Sørensen 1997, 97). Each will now be discussed in some detail.

The concept of *active subpolitics* has developed from Ulrick Beck's (1997) work on risk society (see Holzer & Sørensen 2001). Subpolitics means politics emerging in places other than formal politics. Sociologists of this school maintain that ”politics” has moved from the parliamentary arena of explicit interest conflicts and from conventional forms of political participation. This is occurring for different reasons, among them are citizens' perceptions that government is unable to understand and control the new uncertainties and risks created by public and corporate policy. This is causing a responsibility vacuum which is filled by active subpolitics, i.e., responsibility-taking by citizens in their everyday, individual-oriented life arena that cuts across the public and private spheres. The important point here for political scientists is that this development should not solely be analyzed as a flight from politics, cocooning, or retreat from public concerns and defense for a private life. Rather, it is quite possible that it is responsibility-taking by other means than conventional po-

litical participation. The implication is that individual citizens act increasingly politically in their daily private lives.[14] The concept of active subpolitics acknowledges that everyday acts by citizens have the power to potentially restructure society.[15]

This concept dovetails with the work by Danish political scientists on everyday-makers (*hverdagsmager*) (Sørensen 1997; Hansen and Neufeld 1999; Ulrich 1999; Kristensen 1999). An *everyday-maker* is a responsibility-taking citizen who becomes involved with issues in a very local and specific way. Everyday-makers may work alone or in ad hoc networks organized outside the formal system of politics and across traditional political ideological boundaries. They organized sub-politically. For our purposes, everyday-makers can be seen as street-level political entrepreneurs who seek solutions for very concrete or local problems that may even include problems with global ramifications. Everyday-makers are also street-level auditors of governmental and corporate performance who either want to keep service up to standard or make service conform to a level of standard that goes beyond compliance to regulatory rules and practices. Everyday-makers do not necessarily view their participation as political. They may see it rather as an expression of self-interest, self-organization, and personal responsibility-taking. Yet in these activities, they put democratic values to practice daily and in so doing make politics and democracy tangible (Sørensen 1997).

An important aspect implicit in active sub-politics and everyday-making is political identity. Identity formation is, thus, an essential part of the concept of individualized collective action. Political identity in collectivist and individualized collective action differs considerably from one another. Conventionally, we have understood political identity as a unitary notion that is reflected in membership in well-established state-oriented institutions – for instance political parties and unions. Political identity is not so much a matter of active, individual choice as it is defined by one's position in society. The implication is that people in the same position in society have the same political identity. They have common experiences and share the same interests, be they publicly- or privately-oriented. Research over the past few decades shows that such political landscape changes as globalization, postmodernization, individualization, governance, and risk society force us to reconsider our view of political identity formation. A good starting point is theoretical work on *seriality* and *serial identity* which implies that our political identities are not fixed but flexible and embedded in concrete situations.

Iris Marion Young (1994) reintroduced the concept of serial identity to political participation research to understand why women do not in large numbers organize in established and long-term women's organizations.[16] The relevance of her point here is that we should be careful not only to consider political identity as based on "a collection of persons who recognize themselves and one another as in a unified relation with one another." A theoretical alternative is to understand identity as fragmented rather than homogenous and contextual rather than structural. Serial identity develops from feelings of commonness with others in the same situation as ourselves: "To be said to be part of the same series it is not necessary to identify a set of common attributes that every member has, because their membership is defined not by something they are but rather by the fact that in their diverse existences and actions they are oriented around the same objects…" (Young 1994, 728).

The concept of seriality signals that political identity may be temporary and highly contextual. Citizens can craft their personalized, individualized political identity and adapt their political involvement thereafter. We can even hold seemingly conflicting political identities. This is possible because our identities are an articulation of an ensemble of subject position that are "constructed within specific discourses and always precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those subject positions" (Mouffe 1991, 80). The implication for theories of political participation is that we decide for ourselves which events, issues, and phenomena are relevant for our custom-made political identity. People with opposing views, experiences, and interests may even find that they in certain contexts have common ground for collective action. This is the case because they strive to solve concrete problems rather than allowing established institutions and ideologies to position them politically.

Serial identity ties in nicely with new citizenship theories, which argue that the idea of citizenship should not be restricted to the relationship between people and the state. Rather, citizenship is a relationship to institutions regardless of sphere. It is commitment to working with institutions – to defend, improve, and reform them (Soltan 1999, 18). Citizenship is active involvement and entails civic or political competence – i.e., attitudes and skills – necessary to create an institutional context for responsibility-taking through collective action. These ideas reflect an understanding of the impact of changes in the political landscape, which show how contemporary citizens are demanding more arenas for self-expression and more opportunities for involvement that allow them to take both individual and collective responsibility for their own needs and interests (cf. Trend 1996, 15; Van Gunsteren 1998, 29).

New citizenship and serial identity theories along with scholarship on subpolitics and everyday-making help craft the concept of individualized collective action. Together they stress how individual citizens adapt their involvement so that it is appropriate for the responsibility-taking at hand. A multitude of identities and contact with sites for involvement help citizens develop the necessary competence to assess which forums and kinds of action are best for solving complex contemporary problems. The implication is that political problems need not solely be solved in the political sphere and through mobilizing for action on the basis of established political identities, ideologies, and organizational settings.

It is now time to offer a preliminary definition of the concept of individualized collective action: the practice of responsibility-taking through the creation of everyday settings on the part of citizens alone or together with others to deal with problems which they believe are affecting what they identify as the good life.

In Sum

The phenomenon of political consumerism is a gold mine for political scientists interested in understanding the workings of citizenship and political participation more fully. Taking the market seriously as a site for politics and ethics opens up new areas for empirical study. Available research on the phenomenon shows that citizen involvement in politics is much richer than maintained in our research on political participation and social capital. The phenomenon also shows the weaknesses in our present concepts of political participation, political identity, and arena for politics. Political participation as attempts at influence, self-government, and deliberation are all found in the phenomenon of political consumerism. It is high time that we give the phenomenon the theoretical and empirical attention that it deserves.

Notes

1. The term political consumer was first used by the Danish media during the Brent Spar-conflict in 1995. This conflict involved Greenpeace's call for a boycott on Shell Oil Company for its decision to explode an oil platform in the ocean (Svendsen 1995).

2. In general, Danish social scientists have shown more interest and invested more resources in studying political consumerism (Goul Andersen et al. 2000; Halkier 1999; Rask Jensen 2001; Holzer & Sørensen 2001).

3. This account is based on my own research that was part of the research program Ethics, Virtues, and Social Capital in Sweden at City University of Stockholm. It was financed by the Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnsson Stiftelse.

4. I want to thank Jan Teorell for providing me with an extra analysis of the data on boycotting.

5. I want to thank Orsi Husz, Department of History, Stockholm University, for providing me with a copy of this advertisement.

6. Feminist scholars are highly encouraged to offer comments on this point.

7. They show that women care more about what they perceive as serious threats to the health and safety of their communities and families, have lower threshold for risks, and put less faith in technology and others to solve problems these problems (Davidson & Freudenburg 1996; Gustafson 1998; Flyn, Slovic & Mertz 1994).

8. Comments from colleagues that can help me develop this concept more fully are highly appreciated.

9. These terms have a history and are being used more frequently in political science. (see Scammell 2000). According to historian Lawrence B. Glickman in a private correspondence, the terms most likely have an earlier origin, possibly from the first years of the 1900s (see for instance Potter 1902).

10. Specific examples are MADD Mothers (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) and A Million Moms (against gun death and injury) in the United States (see High-Pippert 2001) and Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (see Keck and Sikkink 1998, 17, 93f).

11. This is similar to Eva Sørensen's (1997) argument that the public interest is the aggregation of various self-interests.

12. As the reader can see, this is a new concept that I am trying to develop. The aim of the concept is to capture theoretically new reasoning on citizenship and political participation in societies exposed to globalization, postmodernization, individualization, governability problems, governance, reflexive modernization, and risk society. For a discussion on how this processes affect the relationship between citizens and their political systems, see Micheletti 2000.

13. Decades of studies in social science show that this kind of collective action easily leads to a passive membership, responsibility-avoiding behavior, free riders, and difficulty for the association to renew itself due to problems with inflexibility and organization maintenance (see e.g., Micheletti 1990, 1994).

14. In Beck's (1997, 101) words "What appeared to be a 'loss of consensus', an 'unpolitical retreat to private life', 'a new inwardness' or 'caring for emotional wounds' in the old understanding of politics can, when seen from the other side, represent the struggle for a new dimension of politics."

15. Holzer and Sørensen (2001) distinguish negative and positive power sanctions in active subpolitics. Negative sanctions include consumer boycotts and other contentious strategies. Positive power is positive political consumer choice like use of labeling schemes.

16. The concept initially comes from Satre and was called serial collectivity.

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Bra Miljöval. www.snf.se/bmv

Consumer´s Choice Council. www.consumerscouncil.org

Co-op America . *Boycott Action* News. www.coopamerica.org /boycotts/index.html

Ethical Junction. www.ethical-junction.org

EU-Flower. www.blomman.nu

Fairtrade Center. www.fairtradecenter.a.se

FLO (Fairtrade Labeling Organization International) 2000. www.fairtrade.net

Friends Provident. *Friends Provident.* www.friendsprovident.co.uk

FSC (Forest Forest Stewardship Certification). www.fscoax.org/index.html

GBMP (Gender Benchmarking and Mainstreaming Project) 2000. www.ab.lst.se/gbmp/htm(sv)/eng(sv).htm

GEN (Global Ecolabelling Network). www.gen.gr.jp

KRAV (Kontrolförening för ekologisk odling). www.krav.se

Max Havelaar Foundation. www.maxhavellar.nl

Miljömärkarna. www.miljomarkarna.org

Marine Stewardship Council. www. msc.org

Oxfam's Make Trade Fair Campaign. www.maketradefair.com

Pan European Forest Certification. www.pefc.org

Rättvisemärkt. www.raettvist.se

Kampanjen Rena Kläder. www.renaklader.org

SAI (Social Accountability International). www.cepaa.org

SIF (Social Investment Forum). www.socialinvest.org

Svanen. www.svanen.nu

TCO-development. www.tcodevelopment.com/s/index.html

UK Social Investment Forum. www.uksif.org/home/welcome/content.shtml