

Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain

The Search for a Historical Movement

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11 Affluence or effluence: globalisation and ethical consumerism

The critique of luxury remains as strong as ever it was in the eighteenth century. While specific objects, especially psychoactive substances and commodities associated with youth culture, continue to give rise to moral discourses and government regulation, general unease about modern forms of luxury have persisted, whether it be in exposés of the excesses of corporate capitalism or the play on liberal guilt invoked by Galbraith, Packard, Mitford and their successors. In a recent *Philosophy Today* article Philip Cafaro outlined the elements of the ancient philosophers' virtue ethics that urged limited material accumulation and the disciplining of consuming desires.¹ He concludes that less is, in fact, more, in the sense that a rejection of the dismal life of consumption will lead to a greater focus on the spiritual and the intellectual. To this critique we might add a recent Christian assessment of the consumer society or even a range of anti-globalisation critiques.² But a more interesting observation of this ongoing discussion of luxury is the belief shared by many commentators that consumers themselves, rather than their self-appointed moral guardians, are beginning to feel a similar sense of unease with material abundance. If the problem facing affluent consumers in the 1950s was the inability to make informed choices, the problem facing affluent consumers today is one of too much choice. As with the ass in Jean Buridan's allegory, so confused are we by the array of brands and images for identical goods placed before us, that we are prone to starve through our inability to choose between two equally attractive piles of hay. According to a report commissioned in 2000, US-style commercialism in Britain 'has failed to enrich our lives but has caused confusion and anxiety as people struggle with the mind-boggling array of options available'.³

Such sentiments have been taken as evidence of a growing consumer resentment of corporate culture and a disenchantment with the branding

¹ P. Cafaro, 'Less is more: economic consumption and the good life', *Philosophy Today*, 42:1 (1998), 26–39.

² J. Benton, *Christians in a Consumer Culture* (Ross-Shire, 2000).

³ *Guardian* (24 April 2000), pp. 7, 17.

of the global economy. According to John Vidal, 'consumers are on the march', reacting against the power of the multinationals and scoring important victories against, for instance, Shell's decision to dump its old oil rigs at sea or Barclays Bank's financial stake in the apartheid regime of South Africa.⁴ In June 1999, the Women's Institute voted to join with groups such as the CA, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and seventy other consumer, environmental and single-issue pressure groups to oppose any further increase in the cultivation of genetically modified (GM) crops. Together, these traditional voluntary groups and NGOs have formed, according to Vidal, a powerful third sector of consumers, forming a 'civil society' which has sought to check the transference of power from governments to multinationals. He went on to predict that consumer power would realise its potential on the streets of Seattle in early December 1999 as a myriad of groups prepared to join forces in protest against the World Trade Organisation.⁵

Shortly after the Seattle demonstrations, however, activists were apparently to find a new guidebook and leader. Naomi Klein's *No Logo* has been heralded as the '*Das Kapital* of the anti-corporate movement', its uncovering of the economic abuses and exploitation which lie behind the corporate brand clearly capturing the imagination of a generation.⁶ Klein's book is a brilliant piece of investigative journalism, at its best in its vivid accounts of the conditions of the workers in the factories and sweatshops of Nike, Diesel and The Gap. But it is far from being a manifesto for the growing numbers of anti-globalisation groups she recounts in her later chapters. Indeed, it contains almost no theoretical observation whatsoever, nor any statement of the ideological unity between the various strands of protest, and perhaps what has therefore been the most interesting aspect of the book has been its reception. In the perceived absence of a radical, post-Marxist understanding of the dynamics of the global economy, protestors have been eager to latch on optimistically and even blindly to *No Logo* as the most relevant exposition of the new political-economic environment. Even the Socialist Bookstore in London featured *No Logo* as its main display for several months, despite Klein's only conceptual link to an older politics of dissent being a rejection of the identity issues which dominated campus politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s and a bald assertion that consumers need to remember the economic structures that give rise to western affluence.

⁴ J. Vidal, 'Power to the people', *Guardian [G2]* (7 June 1999), pp. 2–3.

⁵ *Guardian* (27 November 1999), p. 15.

⁶ N. Klein, *No Logo* (London, 2000); *Observer Review* (12 November 2000), p. 3; K. Viner, 'Hand-to-brand combat', *Guardian Weekend* (23 September 2002), pp. 12–21.

It is not that Klein's work requires a theoretical exposition of globalisation and she is in many ways correct to argue that the strength of the new protestors lies in the very absence of a manifesto. Single-issue politics, as in the field of organised consumerism, has drawn strength from its diversity and its ability to incorporate incrementally new agendas and issues. But some attempt nevertheless needs to be made to understand the relations between forms of protest and the consumer society within which they operate. What appears below is an attempt to locate the consumer movement within the rise of modern-day single-issue global politics. From almost the very beginning of the life of the CA, attempts were made to collaborate on international projects. The first part of this chapter therefore focuses on the development of such international bodies as the Bureau Européen des Unions de Consommateurs (BEUC) and, in greater detail, the International Organisation of Consumers' Unions (IOCU). The second half examines, in contrast, the rise of ethical consumerism in Britain and the concerns it shares with much of the global resistance movement.

While these different strands of consumerism have almost no crossover in terms of personnel or institutional support, they are examined together here because of the similarity of many of their concerns. Although funded mainly by comparative testing organisations, IOCU has expanded into the developing world and today involves itself in campaigns to maintain standards of living among poorer nations and to limit the ability of multinational corporations to exploit consumers rich and poor alike. Furthermore, many of the IOCU's initiatives have focussed on issues such as pollution and the environment, human rights and forms of government protection, all areas which have motivated the rise of ethical consumerism and the politics of the consumer boycott. What is apparent in this chapter is that the language of rights which has dominated post-Second World War consumer movements has also come to take on board a series of consumer duties within an international context, thereby replicating many of the concerns of 'consumers' at the end of the nineteenth century. Consumer and anti-consumer are thus treated as one within this chapter, though this is not only a means to demonstrate the similarity in the concerns of an older organised consumerism with a wave of modern single-issue protests. An ongoing theme of this chapter will be to follow through the implications of a recent scholarship which claims that not only our social and cultural, but also our political, life has come to be shaped by the world of goods. Whether one subscribes to *Which?* or to the *Ethical Consumer*, then, one develops political opinions about the world through an understanding of the meaning of the commodities we choose, or do not choose, to consume. Whether consumers feel they have

obtained a position from which they can bargain with business and the state within a global capitalist framework, will dictate the moderation or extremism of their responses.

The global consumer movement

The spread of US-style comparative-testing consumerism was not just restricted to Britain in the post-Second World War period. The CA had been preceded by such organisations as the Union fédérale de la consommation in France (1951), the Nederlandse Consumentenbond (1953) and the Belgian Association des Consommateurs (1957), as well as several state-sponsored bodies such as the Norwegian Forbrukerrådet (1953) and the Swedish Statens Konsumentråd (1957).⁷ With the development of the Common Market, these organisations increasingly recognised the need for a European perspective on many consumer issues. Consequently, in February 1962, the BEUC was formed to co-ordinate the activities of the independent consumer groups from the then six EEC member countries. For its first ten years the BEUC aimed to assist members with product testing and to influence the development of EEC policy, as well as holding regular meetings to discuss other matters of mutual interest and to develop contacts with consumer groups in countries outside of the EEC.⁸ Financed largely by the subscriptions paid by its non-profit-making members, the BEUC expanded its scope alongside the growth of the EEC itself. In 1972, Eirlys Roberts of the CA was made Director of the BEUC in anticipation of the UK's entry into Europe the following year and, with the extra income obtained with the membership of such a comparatively robust organisation, the BEUC was able to set up a permanent office in Brussels in May 1973.

Although the BEUC has launched prominent campaigns for lead-free petrol and against the use of hormones in beef, most of its activities have been based around developing consumer policies within the EEC, monitoring the complicated processes of legislation from the European Commission through to the Council of Ministers and later the European Parliament. Originally, the Council of Europe had set out a Consumer Protection Charter, based around the five established consumer movement concerns of protection, redress, information, education and

⁷ IOCU, *The Consumer and the World of Tomorrow: Report of the Second Conference of the IOCU* (The Hague, 1962), p. 1; see entries on Belgium, France, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands in S. Brobeck, R. N. Mayer and R. O. Herrmann (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of the Consumer Movement* (Santa Barbara, 1997).

⁸ J. Murray, 'Bureau Européen des Unions de Consommateurs', in Brobeck *et al.* (eds.), *Encyclopaedia*, pp. 73–6.

representation, which influenced the establishment of the Consumers' Consultative Committee (CCC) in 1973. Working in close collaboration, the CCC and BEUC drew up a draft programme which, subject to the various amendments made by the numerous institutions of the EEC bureaucracy, was finally ratified by the Council of Ministers in 1975 as the first Programme for Consumer Protection and Information. Subsequently, the Programme came to be referred to as the Consumer Charter of the Community and its five areas of action were framed within the language of rights, providing a crucial reference point for the harmonisation of European consumer legislation within which the British system was broadly in line.⁹

British consumer activists have always played a prominent role in Europe, with many leading advocates gaining their first experience in the CA and the NCC. Their actions have been assisted by the formation of the UK Consumers in the European Community Group which helped co-ordinate policy initiatives prior to negotiation at European level.¹⁰ Michael Shanks, as Chairman of the NCC, saw in Europe the danger of replicating the productivist bias of the corporate state as, for instance, in the UK's NEDC or West Germany's 'Concerted Action'. Noting that there was no direct mention of consumer protection in any of the treaties establishing the European Communities, Shanks worried in 1979 that consumerism was to be, along with social policy, environmental protection, regional development and overseas aid, a mere tactic to provide Europe with a 'human face'. In the discussions over the second Programme for Consumer Protection, he urged, as in his early plans for the NCC, not just more legislation but the implementation of structures that created a 'consumer-oriented society', moving the consumer 'out of the ghetto' and into a 'horizontal' type of policy-making: for example, by placing the consumer centre-stage, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) would become a food, rather than a farm, policy.¹¹

As with consumerism in Britain, Shanks' aim to make consumers fully integrated partners within the corporate state was never realised, though the EEC and later the EU have continued to be at the forefront of

⁹ L. Maier, 'Consumer policy in the European Union', in Brobeck *et al.* (eds.), *Encyclopaedia*, pp. 248–51; H. W. Micklitz and S. Weatherill, 'Consumer policy in the European Community: before and after Maastricht', *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 16:3–4 (1993), 285–322; M. A. Orsini, 'Consumer policy and the European Economic Community', in E. S. Maynes (ed.), *The Frontier of Research in the Consumer Interest* (Columbia, MO, 1988), pp. 510–21; R. Wraith, *The Consumer Cause: A Short Account of its Organisation, Power and Importance* (London, 1976), pp. 62–6; J. Aspinall, 'Glossary of organisations active in consumer affairs', in J. Mitchell (ed.), *Marketing and the Consumer Movement* (London, 1978), pp. 273–4.

¹⁰ NCC, *Annual Report, 1978–1979*, p. 17.

¹¹ M. Shanks, *The Consumer in Europe* (Brussels, 1979).

consumer protection measures. Additional Programmes on Consumer Protection were adopted throughout the 1980s and, from 1989, three year action plans have been set out. Article 129a of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty entitled the European Commission to ensure a high level of consumer protection in three of Europe's five fundamental consumer rights: health and safety, protection of economic interests and information and education. Today, institutions exist for the articulation of the consumer interest at a range of different levels. Within the European Parliament there is a Committee on Environment, Public Health and Consumer Affairs. A sub-committee on consumer affairs exists within the Economic and Social Committee which advises directly the Council of Ministers. Since 1989 there has been a Commissioner for Consumer Affairs and in 1995 the Consumer Policy Service was upgraded to a Directorate General (XXIV), with the responsibility for assessing all aspects of EU policy that impacted upon the consumer, though it has come to have an increasing emphasis on food and health. Finally, the increased status of consumer affairs within Europe was apparent in the upgrading of the Consumer Consultative Committee into a full Council in 1990. However, comparative-testing style organisations were dissatisfied with the inclusion of trade union and co-operative movement members and, as has so often been the case, this attempt to unite two different politics of consumption, or two very different branches of a much more broadly conceived consumerism, failed and the Council became the Consumer Committee in 1995, consisting once again (as with the original CCC) of representatives of the fifteen national consumer bodies. For organisations such as the CA and the BEUC, the restriction of consumer representation to specific consumer organisations has helped focus European consumerism on issues around the established rights, but it has restricted its extension into areas of traditional concern for the labour movement and also the IOCU.¹² And for some critics, European consumer policy has remained a populist measure, a rhetoric which appears to respond to the concerns of the people but which is ultimately a top-down programme. Here, an institutionalised consumerism which is careful in its selection of the groups to speak for the consumer offers only a limited 'culture of complaint' rather than a wholly 're-energised' society.¹³

Other international organisations have also attempted to speak for the consumer, adopting a similar rights-based language which as much pre-empts rather than responds to a grass-roots consumer movement. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

¹² Maier, 'Consumer policy in the EU', p. 250; CAA 66: A. Bradley, 'The role of consumer associations' (June 1990).

¹³ A. Burgess, 'Flattering consumption: creating a Europe of the consumer', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1:1 (2001), 93–117.

(OECD) appointed its own Committee on Consumer Policy in 1969 which has constantly monitored the types of national consumer protection policies which are compatible with the OECD's main function of fostering international trade and achieving 'the highest sustainable economic growth'.¹⁴ The United Nations has worked more closely with consumer groups, especially in the areas of unethical marketing (for example, Nestlé's infant milk formula) and product safety, resulting in the publication, from 1982, of a UN Consolidated List of Banned Products. Within the UN, the IOCU has Category I status, enabling it to speak as a national delegation (though it cannot vote), and a set of Guidelines for Consumer Protection were created in 1985. Again, consumerism in this document is defined through a series of rights, or government responsibilities, in regard to product safety, consumers' economic interests, quality standards, the distribution of essential goods and services, redress and education and information.¹⁵ The Guidelines have acted as an important reference for the development of consumer protection legislation in Asian, African and South American states, thereby ensuring that the principles of organised western consumerism have provided the models for the development of nation-specific politics of consumption. However, the Guidelines also made reference to food and other essential goods and services, reflecting the politics of necessitous consumption which is still most relevant to the majority of nations. By the mid-1990s, the UN Commission for Sustainable Development and the UN Economic and Social Council were urging the inclusion of guidelines on the promotion of sustainable consumption, placing duties as well as rights on consumers to think further than the boundaries of rational self-interest contained within the comparative testing model.¹⁶

But the principal means by which western consumerism has been spread around the globe has been the IOCU. In the mid-1950s, French, Italian and American activists began to discuss the establishment of an international body,¹⁷ but following a visit made by Elizabeth Schadee of the Dutch Consumentenbond to Caspar Brook of the CA in early 1958,

¹⁴ OECD, *Annual Report on Consumer Policy, 1975* (Paris, 1975); E. Linke, 'OECD Committee on Consumer Policy', in Brobeck *et al.* (eds.), *Encyclopaedia*, p. 419; OECD, *A Global Marketplace for Consumers* (Paris, 1995); OECD Committee on Consumer Policy, *Consumer Policy During the Past Ten Years* (Paris, 1983).

¹⁵ United Nations, *Guidelines for Consumer Protection* (New York, 1986); D. Harland, 'The United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection', *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 10 (1987), 245–66.

¹⁶ A. Peterson and J. M. Halloran, 'United Nations Consumer Protections', in Brobeck *et al.* (eds.), *Encyclopaedia*, pp. 581–3.

¹⁷ C. E. Warne, 'Consumer organisations: an international conference?', *Cartel*, 7:1 (1957), 2–5; speech by Warne made in 1959 reprinted in F. G. Sim, *IOCU on Record: A Documentary History of the IOCU, 1960–1990* (Yonkers, NY, 1991), pp. 13–19.

moves were made to carry out joint comparative tests. They approached Colston Warne of the US Consumers' Union who pledged financial support to any such venture, having already received expressions of interest from Michael Young and even the International Co-operative Alliance, though the latter was not to play a role in the future development of the IOCU. The First International Conference on Consumer Testing met at the Hague from 30 March to 1 April 1960, with delegates from seventeen organisations in fourteen countries, and led to the establishment of a Technical Exchange Committee to supervise joint product testing and the IOCU to act as a clearing house for the exchange of information. With an initial annual budget of £5,000 (including £2,000 from the US), the IOCU was created with an office in the Hague, a journal entitled *IOCU Bulletin*, and a Council consisting of the Dutch, British and American sponsors of the conference, plus the Belgian Association des Consommateurs and the Australian Consumers' Association.¹⁸

The growth of the IOCU is a testament in itself to the global importance of organised consumerism since the 1950s. By the time of its third meeting, in Norway in 1964, the IOCU was clearly an international movement. The Japanese Consumers' Association alone sent thirty-two delegates and the range of 'observers' reflected an interest well beyond the comparative testing organisations that formed the IOCU's core: manufacturers' organisations sent several delegates but so too did the Co-operative movement, the Supreme Co-operative Council of Poland, and the Soviet Union.¹⁹ In 1970 the Council still consisted of the core of the five founding members, but also five co-opted members (Stiftung Warntest of West Germany and the national consumer bodies of the UK and the Scandinavian countries) and four elected members from Austria, New Zealand, Israel and Canada. A further sixteen Associate members and twenty-three Corresponding members ensured that organised consumerism now reached into Asia, Africa and Latin America, if only into the richest nations of these areas.²⁰ By 1990, however, the IOCU had extended well beyond the affluent West and an Executive had been formed which included South Korea and Mauritius and had as its President Erna Witoelar of the Yayasan Lembaga Konsumen, Indonesia.²¹ Today, the IOCU is called Consumers International, and in November 2000

¹⁸ Sim, *IOCU*, pp. 26–7; S. Brobeck, 'Consumers International', in Brobeck *et al.* (eds.) *Encyclopaedia*, pp. 175–9.

¹⁹ IOCU, *Consumers on the March: Proceedings of the Third Biennial Conference of the IOCU* (The Hague, 1964), pp. 139–43.

²⁰ IOCU, *Knowledge is Power: Consumer Goals in the 1970s. Proceedings of the Sixth Biennial World Conference of the IOCU* (The Hague, 1970), pp. 115–17.

²¹ IOCU, *Consumer Power in the Nineties: Proceedings of the Thirteenth IOCU World Congress* (The Hague, 1991), p. 113.

it held its 16th World Congress in Durban, South Africa. Its headquarters are in London, but there are thriving regional offices in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Incredibly, in 1999 there were 253 members from 115 different countries which ranged from all the states of the western world to post-communist Eastern Europe and a whole collection of developing states (China, Chad, Guatemala, El Salvador, Gabon, Nigeria, Malawi and Burkina Faso) that, on first instinct, one might suppose had other interests that needed defending than those of consumers.²²

This expansion was by no means inevitable since western and especially British consumers have dominated the IOCU's history (for instance, Peter Goldman acted as Treasurer for several years, was President from 1970–5 and was about to become Director-General before he died in 1987²³) and private comparative testing bodies have been the movement's backbone. The IOCU originally took as its *raison d'être* the four consumer rights first articulated by President Kennedy in his speech to Congress in March 1962 – the right to safety, to be informed, to choose and to be heard. These offered a model for the potential Americanisation of consumerist agendas around the world as various interests would be articulated through the language of US constitutional liberalism. And in the first decade of its existence at least, IOCU consumerism was centred around the faith in rational choice as a means to improve competition and raise standards of living around the world.²⁴ According to Eva Preiss of the Austrian Verein für Konsumenteninformation, production had been rationalised in the early twentieth century: now it was up to the 'brotherly' consumer organisations to rationalise consumption on behalf of the individual shopper who too often cried alone in the wilderness.²⁵ For Peter Goldman, the IOCU represented the opportunity to awaken a 'sleeping giant'. Whereas trade unions had been set up to rectify the balance of power between capital and labour, consumerism had emerged to rectify the balance of power between the ignorant consumer and the fully informed manufacturer. The solution was simple: 'Wissen ist Macht. Knowledge is power'.²⁶ Henry Epstein of the Australian Consumers' Association took the historical awareness and missionary zeal still further and ascribed an almost utopian end-goal to the movement, in which consumption and purchasing would become entirely logical. In attempting to achieve this, the 1962 IOCU meeting was 'a kind of second Internationale' and subsequent institutional developments within the IOCU

²² Consumers International, *Annual Report, 1999*, pp. 37–41.

²³ CA, *Annual Report, 1987–1988*, p. 5.

²⁴ IOCU, *The Consumer and the World of Tomorrow: Report of the Second Conference* (The Hague, 1962), p. 7.

²⁵ IOCU, *Knowledge is Power*, p. 8. ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

have been designed to promote education, representation, standards and the policing of dangerous goods through a Consumer Interpol.²⁷

Yet for other consumers none of these activities and ideas provided the IOCU with a specific rationale. As Michael Shanks argued in 1978, the IOCU had been in a position to lead the world but had failed to find an 'overall ideology' with which to unite a global citizenry. The IOCU was in a position, he claimed, to break from its middle-class roots, acquire a social conscience and begin a social revolution which would tackle the issues of multinational capitalism, population growth, economic imbalance and the whole range of questions facing the modern world citizen. Although the priorities of the consumer would always be with safety, choice, information and redress, it was time to build on the grass-root aspects of consumerism as a movement and begin to have a direct and influential role in global affairs.²⁸ Shanks' indictment of his colleagues for their lack of a grand narrative or a theoretical justification of their existence was unfair and was perhaps ignorant of some of the developments which had been occurring in the IOCU over the last seventeen years. As the organisation had expanded throughout the 1960s it had been forced to confront issues facing consumers not imagined by the enthusiasts of comparative testing, expanding incrementally the definition of the consumer interest. Firstly, in the Scandinavian countries where it was felt the population was too small to sustain an effective comparative testing organisation based on private subscription, state organisations had been created to represent all consumers. These bodies had attended IOCU meetings but, as non-private bodies, were not permitted to sit on Council. This resulted in a potential split which was only resolved by 1968 when a new constitution was adopted which shifted power from the original Council to the General Assembly, made up of Associates which were 'active exclusively on behalf of consumers'.²⁹ The IOCU was therefore made more democratic, with the Council being elected, paving the way for the emergence of European state-sponsored organisations such as the Statens Konsumentråd of Sweden and the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Verbraucherverbände of West Germany which had no individual members but was made up of fifteen constituent regional bodies. What such state-sponsored bodies brought to the IOCU was a far greater concern with regulation, participation, the economy and citizenship, issues which in

²⁷ IOCU, *Consumer and World of Tomorrow*, p. 77; IOCU, *A World in Crisis: The Consumer Response: Proceedings of the Ninth IOCU World Congress* (The Hague, 1978); IOCU, *Consumer Policy 2000: Seminar Report* (The Hague, 1986), pp. 33–4; K. Gillman, *The Consumer Interpol* (The Hague, 1981); International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO), *Consumer Standards Today and Tomorrow* (London, 1976).

²⁸ IOCU, *World in Crisis*, pp. 16–20. ²⁹ Sim, *IOCU*, p. 42.

turn provided comparisons and stimuli to different national agendas and made the IOCU leaders regard themselves as 'humanists' campaigning to create a 'consumer civilisation'.³⁰

Secondly, and still more significantly, were the efforts of the Development Committee to establish consumer organisations around the world, which gradually focussed the work of the IOCU on disadvantaged consumers and those without the ability to obtain the information necessary for individual discrimination. It also made the IOCU aware of the very different problems facing consumer activists, such as when seven prominent members of the Greek movement were arrested and imprisoned without trial during the events following the political uprising of 1973.³¹ In April 1963, the IOCU had been granted consultative status by the Economic and Social Council of the UN resulting in a greater concern for non-affluent consumers at the 1964 biennial conference. Even Colstone Warne, a prominent advocate of comparative testing urged the consumer movement to be 'not only attentive to the problems of choosing automobiles, air conditioners and refrigerators, but . . . also with the day to day issues of those in countries which have not yet attained an advanced technology'.³² As a consequence, the IOCU began to work more closely with the UN in the 1960s, to upgrade its efforts to help set up new consumer groups and to make efforts to collect data on the kinds of problems facing poorer consumers.³³ One early investigation, undertaken by RICA, urged economic development policy to take account of the consumer else risk making the same mistakes as 'doctrinaire Marxism or laissez-faire capitalism', though its own recommendations for greater local voluntary action among consumers did not detract too far from the *Which?*-brand of consumerism.³⁴ Such vague platitudes have been followed up in later decades with more concrete action on foreign debt relief, inappropriate baby foods and assistance with food production and distribution to ensure adequate supplies to consumers.³⁵ Yet in the early 1960s, many of the IOCU discussions smacked of a well-meaning philanthropic humanitarianism that was not really overcome until emerging non-western consumer groups began to speak at the meetings and workshops of the IOCU.

Rational choice was increasingly acknowledged to be a far less important concern for many of the world's consumers. In 1969, for the first time, the IOCU held a meeting in what it identified as a developing nation,

³⁰ IOCU, *Consumers on the March*, pp. 14–19.

³¹ IOCU, *Report for 1972–1974* (The Hague, 1975), p. 1.

³² IOCU, *Consumers on the March*, p. 6. ³³ Sim, IOCU, pp. 57–9.

³⁴ RICA, *New Nations: Problems for Consumers* (London, 1964), p. 45.

³⁵ IOCU, *World in Crisis*, p. 6; IOCU, *Consumer Solidarity: For a Better World: Proceedings of Twelfth Congress* (The Hague, 1987), pp. 30, 82–3.

in Kingston, Jamaica, while Florence Mason of the CU continued to write to nascent consumer activists across the world such that she had corresponded with organisers in over 140 countries by 1980.³⁶ In the 1970 biennial meeting, Persia Campbell, the committed internationalist, UN worker and former first New York State Consumer Counsel (1955–8), led a discussion on ‘the consumer in the developing countries’ and, in 1974, the theme for the Sydney conference was the cost of living, enabling discussion of the problems of both inflation within the affluent west and everyday getting and spending for the poor.³⁷ Here, the IOCU was able to expand its sphere of protest to include a sustained critique of ‘big business’ which drew on an intellectual trajectory which stretched back to Galbraith’s ‘countervailing powers’ and looked forward to alliances with the anti-Reaganite actions of campaigners like Ralph Nader.³⁸ But as well as seeking to curb the power of multinationals through UN-sanctioned codes of conduct and other measures to keep down the cost of living, the IOCU has also turned to the quality of life, the right to a clean environment being added to the original list of four fundamental consumer rights. Taking the view that consumerism must ask itself, ‘how much is enough?’, the IOCU set up a Working Group in 1970 which soon presented its declaration on ‘The Consumer and the Environment’ to the UN’s own conference on the subject.³⁹ The consumer interest in the environment was initially conceived as the need for collective action on, for instance, the abolition of dangerous chemicals and rising rates of energy consumption.⁴⁰ It has drawn heavily on the agenda of Rachel Carson and expanded into more general environmental issues such as ozone layer depletion and hazardous technologies which present dangers for workers exposed to unnecessary risk through inadequate health and safety regulations.⁴¹ The Bhopal gas leak tragedy in December 1984 was a defining moment for the IOCU as it has subsequently moved to combat ‘corporate callousness in exposing consumers and communities to highly

³⁶ Sim, *IOCU*, pp. 60–1.

³⁷ IOCU, *Report for 1972–1974*, p. 2; IOCU, *Knowledge is Power*, pp. 77–92.

³⁸ M. Green, ‘The mega-corporation versus consumers’, speech at 1986 conference reprinted in IOCU, *Consumer Policy 2000*, pp. 18–21.

³⁹ A. Durning, ‘An environmentalist’s perspective on consumer society’, in L. B. Glickman (ed.), *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca, 1999), pp. 78–81; IOCU, *Biennial Report, 1970–1972* (The Hague, 1972), pp. 11–15.

⁴⁰ IOCU, *The Quality of Life: 1972 World Congress Handbook* (The Hague, 1972), pp. 21–3.

⁴¹ R. Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962; Harmondsworth, 1999); IOCU, *Consumer Solidarity*, 77–81; IOCU, *Five Billion Consumers: Organising for Change Proceedings of Eleventh World Congress* (The Hague, 1984), p. 52; T. Gips, *Breaking the Pesticide Habit: Alternatives to Twelve Hazardous Pesticides* (Penang, 1990); S. Rengam and K. Snyder, *The Pesticide Handbook: Profiles for Action* (Penang, 1991); IOCU, *Pests at Home: A Consumer Guide to Safer Pest Control* (Penang, 1993).

hazardous products' and the ability of corporations to fabricate misinformation which is accepted by governments 'apathetic' to the interests of ordinary citizens.⁴² A logical development of this policy has been a concern with nuclear safety and more recently biotechnology and GM foods, all of which were identified as early as 1970 as part of a broader shift to a humanitarian form of consumerism in which the IOCU was to be concerned with a 'general welfare policy with the object of promoting the physical, psychological and social well-being'.⁴³

Even though the source of funding for the IOCU ultimately came from the pockets of subscribers to test magazines concerned mainly with the purchasing of better refrigerators, it is clear that as early as 1964 the IOCU was becoming a forum for the articulation of more radical consumerist agendas. It was then that Henry Epstein of the Australian Consumers' Association, a keen advocate of rationality and individual consumer action, asked whether organised consumerism did not 'intend to march around in a circle to a tune played with one finger on a cash register' and suggested instead that activists focus on 'needs' as well as 'pleasures'.⁴⁴ It was then also that Michael Young questioned the achievements of the modern consumer movement and called for a range of other questions to be addressed, thus beginning a trend as trade unionists and co-operators, although not allowed to join, were at least invited to speak at IOCU meetings in the 1960s and spread consumerism beyond 'literate upper middle class women'.⁴⁵ He launched into a broad commentary on the state of organised consumerism. The IOCU, he claimed, had to take account of the social costs of consumption and perhaps even the Marcusean anti-consumerist attacks being led by students, hippies, beatniks and dropouts. Consumerism had to acknowledge that 'the affluent society is also the effluent society', that it must take into account issues of deforestation, pesticides, recycling and the suffering of the poor, and that testing organisations had to move away from helping consumers as individuals to regarding consumers 'as members of a society which collectively has to bear the costs' of increased spending.⁴⁶ His expansion of the IOCU's role was followed by frequent conference discussions on 'the limits of consumption', inequality and 'the quality of life' and he returned to his theme in 1978, casting aside the self-interested complaining that appeared on Esther Rantzen's TV programme, 'That's Life', and embracing instead a 'third sector' which saw much greater links with

⁴² IOCU, *Consumer Solidarity*, p. 79.

⁴³ IOCU, *Knowledge is Power*, p. 10. ⁴⁴ IOCU, *Consumers on the March*, p. 130.

⁴⁵ IOCU, *Knowledge is Power*, p. 17; IOCU, *World in Crisis*, p. 11.

⁴⁶ IOCU, *Knowledge is Power*, pp. 30–6.

the Co-operative movement, as he took inspiration from the Rochdale Pioneers, the 'active democracy' of the Mondragon Co-operative in Spain, the Israeli kibbutzim and his own Mutual Aid Centre.⁴⁷

By the early 1980s, the consumerism of the IOCU was firmly defined as a movement which had a major contribution to make in all the problems of the world, including both the economic and the physical environment: 'it stresses the importance of international solidarity which must assure that the basic needs of consumers *all over the world* are reasonably satisfied'.⁴⁸ By 1984 campaigns ranged from food supply, tobacco control, pharmaceutical medicines, protectionism, the power of transnational corporations, working women and breastfeeding, banned products, environmental disasters such as Bhopal, the problems facing disabled and young consumers, international codes of practice, energy policy, nuclear power and access to information technology.⁴⁹ The first World Consumer Rights Day was launched on 15 March 1983 and, one year later, the IOCU had added to Kennedy's four rights, the right to redress, the right to consumer education and the right to a healthy environment. Consumerism was still defined through rights, but they were also human rights, and interpreted according to a broad view of liberalism which harked back to the notions of duty within the nineteenth-century thought. The consumer right was therefore 'the right not to be exploited either by individuals or by social and economic systems'.⁵⁰

The principal advocate of such a global vision of consumerism within the IOCU was Anwar Fazal from the Malaysian consumer movement, whose own rise to prominence symbolised the greater power afforded to the non-western consumer groups by the 1980s. In classic civil rights rhetoric, Fazal spoke of the need for 'solidarity', 'spirit' and 'the strength of many voices together'. Quoting 'we shall overcome' he adopted a more aggressive tone to those businesses and governments which denied consumers their freedoms and he ended with a self-confessed 'romantic' call to arms that demanded 'access to a dignified and fuller life. We are a force for human rights, we are a force for social justice, and we are a force for a better, a kinder and a happier world. We rise from one ocean, we drink one water, we breathe one air, we share this earth.'⁵¹ The *Consumer Manifesto 2000* likewise called for a 'just and fair society' and listed a set of demands which included the implementation in all countries of the

⁴⁷ IOCU, *World in Crisis*, pp. 31–3, 37–9; IOCU, *Five Billion Consumers*, p. 52; IOCU, *Quality of Life*, pp. 21, 25.

⁴⁸ IOCU, *World in Crisis*, p. 3. ⁴⁹ IOCU, *Five Billion Consumers*, pp. 52–6, 62–7.

⁵⁰ CAA 24: Miscellaneous papers on World Consumer Rights Day, leaflet.

⁵¹ IOCU, *Consumer Policy 2000*, p. 13.

UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection, the full implementation of a Code of Conduct on Transnational Corporations, regulation of the international food supply, the removal of trade barriers and the international prohibition of trade in dangerous substances.⁵² Crucially, the manifesto also stated the IOCU commitment to ‘promoting the fulfilment of basic needs of consumers, in particular of the poor, low income and disadvantaged.’ This was a remarkable addition and was soon to become the eighth consumer right of the IOCU.⁵³ In fact, it implied less a right and more a duty, given that the ultimate source of funding for the IOCU was the pockets of affluent consumers in Europe and the United States who had probably largely forgotten or never experienced either poverty, disadvantage or the struggle to meet basic needs.

As closer links were established between the IOCU and green and ethical consumerism (symbolised by the keynote address of 1990 given by Ralph Nader⁵⁴), the constitution was again changed to facilitate greater parity between North and South. And, to mark the IOCU’s commitment to both rich and poor, it changed its name in 1994 to Consumers International (CI), thus removing any remaining symbolic association with straightforward comparative testing consumerism.⁵⁵ Today, issues of food standards and safety, consumer health, the regulation of global trade, sustainable consumption, consumer representation and national consumer protection regimes continue to dominate its work. But greatest attention is given to sustainable consumption and the whole range of questions arising from globalisation, making many of CI’s main campaigning efforts indistinguishable from other forms of global resistance. Significantly, CI staff joined a myriad of representatives from other NGOs on the streets of Seattle to campaign against aspects of the World Trade Organisation in 1999.⁵⁶ For an older generation of consumer activists, there is a worry over the scope of this CI vision. It is feared that many activists ‘are not particularly interested in consumerism’ and that ‘things are being done in the name of consumers which are really being done in the name of something else’, such as environmentalism, anti-colonialism, or the protests against GM foods.⁵⁷ Yet it has been the ability of IOCU to make itself such a broad umbrella that has also clearly provided much of the impetus for its continued expansion. There might still be no coherent consumerist ideology at work, but it is one institution which has made

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 7.

⁵³ IOCU, *Consumer Solidarity*, p. 85; IOCU, *Biennial Report, 1970–1972*, pp. 25, 29.

⁵⁴ IOCU, *Consumer Power in the Nineties*, pp. 1–16.

⁵⁵ Brobeck, ‘Consumers International’, p. 179.

⁵⁶ Consumers International, *Annual Report, 1999*, p. 18.

⁵⁷ Interview with Maurice Healy, 26 March 2002.

a definite attempt to link a politics of affluence with a politics of necessity. In its campaigns against the exploitative profits of multinationals, it draws on an anti-colonial and anti-profiteering rhetoric that establishes links all the way from J. A. Hobson and Sidney Webb to Naomi Klein and George Monbiot. And, in its concerns for the problems faced by developing world women consumers, it has reinvented a feminist politics of consumption long since forgotten, at least in Britain. In a poem contained in the 1985 Filipino Women's Manifesto, reproduced in an IOCU investigation into women and consumption, the line, 'We are the housewives who can barely make ends meet because of the dwindling value of the peso and spiralling prices', points to a common experience which motivated the political interventions of a Teresa Billington Greig and a Margaret Llewelyn Davies.⁵⁸

Unity for the IOCU has come not through a theoretical abstraction on the links between milk and microprocessors, but through a pragmatic focus on the politics of networks. Just as British consumerism began to operate within policy networks from the late 1970s, so too did the IOCU combine with other NGO's and supra-national institutions to formulate campaign strategies on single issues. By 1986, IOCU seminars and workshops were focussing on networks as the way forward for future campaigning. Pointing to successful ventures such as the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), the Pesticide Action Network (PAN) and the Health Action Network (HAN), Jean Halloran of the US Consumers' Union argued that networks focussed expertise, attention and resources on single issues, developed concern and solidarity among participants and provided a global dimension to otherwise local issues.⁵⁹ Many examples exist of how, by the 1990s, the IOCU's activities could rely on well-established networks of personnel, materials and institutional support. It has meant the original unity which existed between the comparative testing organisations that created the IOCU in 1960 has long been lost, but the range of questions the international 'consumer' is able to answer is theoretically boundless, precisely because its network-based, single-issue politics has never been directed by ideology over experience. The irony is, of course, that many aspects of the consumer society which gave rise to the organised consumer movement are now being opposed by the IOCU and the stance it has taken on certain topics has made it indistinguishable from the apparently more radical organisations which are opposed to globalisation, favour ethical consumption and which might be more appropriately be termed anti-consumerist.

⁵⁸ T. Wells and F. G. Sim, *Till They Have Faces: Women as Consumers* (Penang, 1987), p. ii.

⁵⁹ IOCU, *Consumer Policy 2000*, p. 49

Ethical consumerism

Ethical consumerism is recognisable as a social movement of the last three decades, as firstly 'green' or environmental issues and then human and animal rights issues have been brought to bear upon aspects of personal consumption. Yet unloading a wider political baggage on to goods can hardly be described as a recent phenomenon and surely stretches as far back as one wishes to take a history of material culture. If ethical consumerism is therefore to be identified as a movement specifically bound up with contemporary society, then some broader understanding of the role of consumption needs to be made. It is now a commonplace within consumption studies to discuss the extent to which material culture is used to explore individual identity. In an arguably post-industrial, postmodern, disorganised or 'late capitalist' society, exchange values are alleged to have given way to sign values, substance to form, and reality to image. As individual identities are no longer rooted within an economic structure based around production, they have become agents operating instead within a culture of consumption, defining themselves and their relations to the world through the symbolic expression afforded by goods. So much is familiar, but so too is it likely that the more the commodity dominates the individual's consciousness, the more probable it is that material culture will form the basis through which knowledge about the world is obtained and learned: as greater importance is attached to consumption, the more it is likely that political action will begin first through our roles as consumers. Yet while some scholars have begun to turn more to the politics rather than the culture of consumption, examining issues of regulation, social movements and citizenship, few have tried to make deliberate links between the politics of consuming identity and the politics of societies more traditionally understood. Ethical consumerism, however, provides just such a case study for this type of intellectual link.

To do this, one has to reject Michael Young's claim that information represents the fourth right of citizenship and suggest instead that the whole field of culture is the final corner to Marshall's civil, political and social rights. 'Cultural rights' acknowledge the increased emphasis placed on consumption in the affluent west and emerge within the liberal tradition from the right to explore one's social and political identity through the culture of consumption. Thus, for example, new gendered identities are often first explored through alternative uses of consumption, either for the individual to express difference or allegiance to a recognised subculture. Consumption helps make real the explored identity, the expression of which is then defined as a right. Consumption, as the foremost tool within everyday life, enables new social forms to be developed, which

are in turn positioned as rights – rights which need protecting by the state, but which are actually lived through and demonstrated to the world through consumption. Similarly, the modern consumer movement itself began with the development of a new social habitus based around affluent goods. While some might dismiss the *Which?*-buying public as props to materialistic individualism, it is clear that their culture of consumption ultimately gave rise to the articulation of further rights and a number of attempts to extend liberal citizenship. Once these individual rights were converted into the broader liberal duty to ensure that others enjoy the same such rights, consumerism, at least in the work of the IOCU, became a global political movement. Ethical consumerism can also be seen as the means by which social and individual identities – be it vegetarian, environmentalist, feminist, humanist – have first been explored and expressed through consumption, translated into rights and then become the basis of political action usually through single-issue politics.

If consumption is the site for the development of individual and collective identity, then it must follow that the politics of consumption has the potential to be as broad and as varied as humanity itself. This is seen no more so than in the history of consumer boycotts. Strikes against commodities have ranged from eighteenth-century nationalist movements in the United States and Ireland to the sugar boycott of the anti-slavery movement and on to the avoidance of retail stores which did not sell trade union-approved goods.⁶⁰ In recent decades, in Britain alone, there have been boycotts against lead in paint (1984), against an amusement park because of its captured whales and dolphins (organised by Greenpeace, 1984), against Tarmac and MAN-VW over their links with cruise missiles (organised by CND, 1983) and against Schweppes for using non-returnable bottles (organised by Friends of the Earth, early 1970s).⁶¹ Famous international campaigns have included the boycott of Barclays for its activities in apartheid-era South Africa, Nestlé for its marketing of baby-milk substitutes and of Douwe Egberts for processing coffee from Angola. At present, the *Ethical Consumer* magazine maintains a list of around forty companies being boycotted, ranging from oil companies such as Esso, Texaco and Shell, clothes stores such as Gap, Nike and Marks & Spencer and perceived perennial offenders such as McDonald's

⁶⁰ T. H. Breen, 'An empire of goods: the Anglicisation of colonial America, 1690–1776', *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (1986), 467–99; T. H. Breen, '“Baubles of Britain”: the American and British consumer revolutions of the eighteenth century', *Past & Present*, 69 (1988), 73–104; S. Foster, 'Consumer nationalism in eighteenth-century Dublin', *History Today*, 47:6 (1997), 45–51.

⁶¹ N. C. Smith, *Morality and the Market: Consumer Pressure for Corporate Accountability* (London, 1990), pp. 299–309.

and Philip Morris. Added to this list are several countries included for their abuses of human rights, including China, Turkey, Burma and Israel, as well as the United States through the 'boycott Bush' campaign.⁶²

There is no strict coherence to boycotts as a form of general consumer protest. Campaigns have been inspired for the defence of human rights, for and against ethnic minorities, to defend workers, to support particular religions, to protect the environment and to save money for the consumer.⁶³ Often these might even be contradictory, such as the National Anti-Hunt Coalition's campaign against the John Lewis Partnership for its encouragement of animal hunting by its workers on company outings, a form of company welfare that might otherwise have encouraged other consumers to shop at its stores in support of its treatment of its staff.⁶⁴ While boycotts themselves might be as diverse as the range of political opinions consumers bring to their consumption decisions, Monroe Friedman argues that early boycotts, such as the protests over food prices or the white label campaigns of the Consumers' Leagues, tended to be 'marketplace-oriented', involving direct protests outside shops or of picket lines against boycotted stores. Today, boycotts tend to be 'media-oriented', aimed just as much at 'embarrassing their targets by exposing their objectionable behaviours in the news media' as they do at hurting the companies financially.⁶⁵ Their success or otherwise (empirically extremely difficult to test) still depends on the ability to concentrate either the target, the market activity, or the social, economic, ethnic or geographical characteristics of the protestors, but it is clear that modern boycotting rests very much on the institutions of the information society. Boycotting reflects the increased information consumers now have at their disposal, information which means their acts of consumption often become the starting point for a process of political awareness, either through the boycott itself or what Friedman also refers to as the 'buycott': the targeted purchase of goods and services to reward particular firms for behaviour in accord with the activists' wishes.⁶⁶

Buycotts, though, are only a specific action of a more general trend towards ethical consumer behaviour. Arising out of the boycott movement and the growth of single-issue political groups since the 1960s, green

⁶² See website: http://www.ethicalconsumer.org/boycotts/boycotts_list.htm.

⁶³ M. Friedman, *Consumer Boycotts: Effecting Change through the Marketplace and the Media* (London, 1999).

⁶⁴ *Ethical Consumer*, 53 (1998), 31; *Ethical Consumer*, 70 (2001), 26.

⁶⁵ M. Friedman, *Consumer Boycotts*, p. 226; M. Friedman, 'American consumer boycotts in response to rising food prices: housewives' protests at the grassroots level', *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 18 (1995), 55–72.

⁶⁶ M. Friedman, 'A positive approach to organised consumer action: the "buycott" as an alternative to the boycott', *Journal of Consumer Policy*, 19 (1996), 439–51.

consumerism was seen to have come of age with the publication of *The Green Consumer Guide* in 1988.⁶⁷ Aimed at ‘a “sandals-to-Saabs” spectrum of consumers’, rather than those committed to a ‘hair-shirt lifestyle’, the *Guide* attempted to build on previous green consumer victories, such as the shift to unleaded petrol and the greater use of biodegradable products.⁶⁸ It shared the same optimism and principles of the early CA and it drew strength from a survey of environmental organisations, 88 per cent of which believed that individual consumer choice could have a major impact on the direction of the economy. Friends of the Earth’s *Good Wood Guide* supported not a state-directed control of the logging industry, but offered information for consumers acting by themselves to switch their preferences in the marketplace away from hardwoods grown in tropical forests to sustainable alternatives. Green consumerism was therefore shifting away from the ascetism, self-denial and anti-materialism of the austere Left and building instead on the growing number of ‘lifestyle’ shoppers so apparent in the consumption studies literature. For these consumers, green consumerism was just as much a projection of identity as any subcultural *bricoleur*, though the *Guide* hoped that the focus on lifestyle would be equally important for society as well as the self. By the early 1990s, companies were embracing some degree of green consumerism within their marketing strategies and notable achievements included the declining manufacture of CFC-propelled aerosols and the abandonment of animal testing by several cosmetics manufactures.

The trend is best encapsulated with the emergence of the Ethical Consumer Research Association (ECRA). This might be regarded as just one of a large number of institutions which today promotes alternative visions of the consumer society, but it warrants further study in itself because of its direct parallels with the CA, focussing as it does on rational choice and appealing to a particular section of society or habitus. ECRA began in 1987 as a research group collecting information on company activities, but began publishing the bi-monthly *Ethical Consumer* in March 1989. Although never as successful as the CA (there were just 5,000 subscribers at the end of its first year), it has drawn on a committed subscriber membership, many of which were able to provide ECRA with a £40,000 collective loan in 1991 to finance its expansion.⁶⁹ *Ethical Consumer* has drawn on a whole range of political beliefs, committing itself to the promotion of universal human rights, environmental sustainability and animal welfare. While the magazine itself informs consumers of these issues in relation

⁶⁷ Earlier, less successful, efforts had also been made. For example, J. Holliman, *Consumer’s Guide to the Protection of the Environment* (London, 1971).

⁶⁸ J. Elkington and J. Hailes, *The Green Consumer Guide* (London, 1988), p. 2.

⁶⁹ ECRA, *Ethical Consumer Briefing Pack* (Manchester, 1997), p. 2.