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Author(s): Michael Schudson

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Citizens, Consumers, and the Good Society

By
MICHAEL SCHUDSON

Advocating a “postmoralist” position in the analysis of consumer culture, this article holds that it is a mistake to identify political action with public-spirited motives and consumer behavior with self-interested motives. Both political behavior and consumer behavior can be either public-spirited or self-interested. Consumer choices can be expressly political and public-spirited, and styles of consumer behavior can enlist and enshrine values that serve democracy, from going to coffeehouses in eighteenth-century London to eating at McDonald’s in twenty-first-century Beijing. Political behavior, meanwhile, may be a particular kind of consumer behavior, and political practice often turns out not to be public-spirited but egocentric and grasping. The article concludes with some suggestions for making political activity more like the experience of consumer choice, that is, more like a situation in which people can take their own preferences seriously because there is a reasonable prospect that they will ultimately matter.

Keywords: citizens; civic virtue; consumers; elections; McDonald’s; politics; postmoralism

In 2004, historian Daniel Horowitz published *The Anxieties of Affluence*, a book that examines critics of American consumer culture from 1939 to 1979. In a brief epilogue, Horowitz takes the story into the twenty-first century. He includes a long footnote on a set of thinkers he calls “postmoralist,” in which camp he counts me. He observes that postmoralists, beginning with anthropologists in the 1980s, notably Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, do not necessarily

Michael Schudson is a distinguished professor of communication at the University of California, San Diego, as well as a professor of communication in the Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University. He is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, and a residency at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Palo Alto, California. He has coedited two books and authored six, the latter including Discovering the News (1978), Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion (1984), The Good Citizen (1998), and The Sociology of News (2003).

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celebrate consumer culture but seek to “understand people’s longings for affluence as inevitable and genuine.” Postmoralists see consumer culture in a way “appreciative yet analytic” (p. 256).

I accept Horowitz’s characterization of my work as postmoralist in this “appreciative yet analytic” vein. I think a lot of criticism of consumer culture has been moralistic, judgmental, intolerant, condescending, and, perhaps worse, muddled. The revisionist thinkers from anthropology and cultural studies of the 1980s and after, although sometimes in their zeal lurching to the side of celebration, have provided a useful corrective. Having said that, there is still something about consumerism that does not sit right with me. Consider how you would like to be remembered on your gravestone. Beloved parent. Cherished spouse. Devoted friend. Something like “citizen of the world” would be nice, too, or simply “citizen,” would it not? Compare that to “he shopped till he dropped” or “a consumer of exquisite taste” or “she could always find it wholesale.” These do not have quite the same ring to them. If being a “good citizen” as we often define it is not necessarily a sign of inner virtue—which is what I am about to argue—and if consumption is sometimes a route to admirable civic participation, a view I shall endorse, why is the label “citizen” a term of praise and the label “consumer” is not?

The position I am arguing against is well known. We have a long tradition of distinguished intellectuals, artists, and politicians who attack consumer culture and see it as inferior in every way—except its popularity with the unwashed masses—to political engagement. Adlai Stevenson, a case in point, complained that the effort to merchandise candidates like cornflakes in presidential campaigns was “the ultimate indignity to the democratic process” (quoted in Westbrook 1983, 156). Marketers may romanticize consumers, but social critics are unlikely to. British scholar Philip Elliot in 1982 expressed what was and remains the left-liberal consensus. He wrote that we faced “a continuation of the shift away from involving people in society as political citizens of nation states toward involving them as consumption units in a corporate world. The consequence of this for the culture is a continuation of the erosion of what Habermas called the public sphere or C. Wright Mills the community of publics” (p. 244).

The basic assumption of this line of criticism is that buying in the marketplace is an inferior form of human activity compared to voting at the polling place or otherwise exercising citizenship. Although no particular thinker has provided us the key text on this, the assumption pervades many texts and authors from John Dewey to John Kenneth Galbraith to Vance Packard to Christopher Lasch, from Adlai Stevenson to Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush’s first inaugural address, and many others. The inferiority of consumer behavior seems to be either that consuming is self-centered whereas political behavior is public-regarding or public-oriented, or that consuming, whatever its motives, distracts people from their civic obligations. Either consumption is in itself unvirtuous because it seeks the individual’s own pleasures, or its displacement of political activity has unfortunate consequences for the social good.

It is high time to put both of these notions in the trash rather than the recycling bin. Measuring the virtue of “the citizen” against the virtue of “the consumer”

should be recognized as a ridiculous exercise on its face since nearly all of us, with the possible exceptions of Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, and Ralph Nader, are and necessarily must be consumers as well as citizens. There are important distinctions between ordinary consumer behavior and ordinary civic behavior, but they are not invidious distinctions.

As for the argument that consumerism distracts us from civic duties, this has been forthrightly stated many times. To take one example, consider John Dewey writing in 1927: "Man is a consuming and sportive animal as well as a political one. . . . [T]he movie, radio, cheap reading matter and motor car with all they stand for have come to stay. That they did not originate in deliberate desire to divert attention from political interests does not lessen their effectiveness in that direction. The political elements in the constitution of the human being, those having to do with citizenship, are crowded to one side" (p. 139). With all due respect to a great thinker, this is largely nonsense. The starting point for analysis should not be that activities of consuming and activities of politics are equally appealing and that people would pursue politics were it not for the glitter and glamour of consuming. The starting point should be that politics is time-consuming, alternately boring and scary, often contentious, often remote from the present and the concrete, and often makes people feel ineffectual, not empowered. Politics raises difficult and complex matters that make one feel stupid. No one needed to invent pet rocks and sport utility vehicles (SUVs) and iPods, cosmetics and movies and casinos, to distract people from something they were not attracted to in the first place.

Of course, some consumption may be distracting. Perhaps some people put off jury duty so they can attend a rock concert, although more often they put off jury duty to deal with the obligations of work and family. Some forms of consumption clearly weaken political life. Cigarette consumption kills citizens, particularly older citizens who are more inclined to vote than young people; alcohol consumption destroys families. But tobacco also is or was a social, sharing, sociable activity; alcohol use is also frequently sociable, and in American political life the saloon was a central institution of American democracy for more than a century.

So there is reason to be wary of the tradition of moralizing about consumption. It offers a narrow and misleading view of consumer behavior as well as an absurdly romanticized view of civic behavior. True, some of us who do not own Hummers imagine buying a Hummer to be an act of conspicuous disregard of everyone and everything except oneself. But there are not many purchases of this sort. Quite a number of conscientious citizens who would not dream of buying a Hummer have spent far more than the price of a Hummer on two other items—a house and private higher education for one or more children. Is such lavish spending to be judged moral? One might claim, for instance, that the Harvards and Columbias and Amhersts of the world should not receive our approbation or financial support. The money they cost and the competition to get into them is a realm of consumer activity and anxiety that distracts people from the higher life of politics. But that view is unlikely to win many adherents, most of whom see their investment in their children's education, public or private, as an act of love and a vote for a brighter future.

As this may suggest, a great deal of consumer behavior is anything but selfish. It is a form of gift-giving. An interesting study of what material objects people value among their possessions found that 40 percent of the objects mentioned had been received as gifts or had been inherited—this included 65 percent of the jewelry mentioned, 73 percent of the clocks, 76 percent of the silverware, 89 percent of the stuffed animals, and 65 percent of the house plants (Rochberg-Halton 1979). Some of the material goods that critics might judge the most frivolous are goods most often given or received as gifts—Macy's sells a quarter of its annual supply of cosmetics in December. In the Christmas season, department stores sell more than 40 percent of their toys, 28 percent of their candy, 20 percent of tobacco and liquor (Schudson 1984, 138).

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So, postmoralist? Yes. There are reasons to believe that the contrast between consumer and citizen is neither as flattering to political choice nor as favorable to a strong civic life as those who uphold the distinction imagine. There are five reasons to complicate the consumer/citizen contrast. First, sometimes consumer choices are political in even the most elevated understandings of the term, that is, choices made not to maximize individual utility but to weigh social value or the public good in a calculus along with individual utility.

Second, consumer behavior is more than just the moment of choosing; it is a complex set of activities, some of which enable, enact, and engender democratic values. When looking at the larger array of consumer behavior, some of it clearly promotes a democratic culture, as I hope to demonstrate.

Third, sometimes political choices are—and have long been—consumer-like in the narrow and morally dubious sense, that is, self-centered, intended to maximize individual or group (class, ethnic, racial, or religious) utility rather than to consider the public good.

Fourth, sometimes political behavior in a democracy is not a morally elevating education in democratic values. Often politics is primarily about winning and losing. It is about ego and the personal utility invested in winning and losing, not about finding a path to the public good. In other words, political action can be as self-serving as consumer behavior at its most self-centered.

Finally, consumer and civic behavior and styles are in flux. The difference between them is in flux. Critics in 2006 should not be trapped with models of citizenship or consumption that are a half century or more out of date.

Consumer Choice Can Be Political¹

This is the easiest point to make. If you have ever boycotted grapes to support the United Farm Workers union or decided to drive a hybrid car to help conserve the earth's resources, if you have ever "bought green," or paid extra to purchase "fair trade" coffee, you know perfectly well that consumer decisions can be political. Sometimes, these individual choices at the point of purchase are planned ahead and direct you to some stores rather than others; patronage at these stores—the health foods store, for instance—may lead you to informal associations that are not as random or nonpolitical as those you would have at the neighborhood market.

To add some symbolic weight to this point, historian T. H. Breen (2004) has argued that consumer choice was a critical element in the American Revolution. The boycott of British goods was a key tactic for involving the general public in a fight for independence. Issues of political theory that agitated some of the colonial leaders did not agitate anybody else. A revolution could not be mounted unless it had some popular support, and what brought along that popular support was the experience of ordinary people joining up in the nonimportation movement that began with the Stamp Act in 1765. In the nonimportation effort, citizens signed their names to a publicly circulated and posted list, testifying to their commitment not to purchase imported British goods. This public affirmation of the boycott brought ordinary people, women as well as men, into the public realm as never before. By the time of the Boston Tea Party, British goods had "invited colonists to think radical new thoughts about empire. British manufactures came to symbolize dependence and repression" (p. 299). History would repeat itself. What the American colonists learned in the 1760s, Mahatma Gandhi would reinvent as the central tactic of the Indian independence movement in the 1920s and 1930s.

Lizabeth Cohen (1990) made a related point. She argued persuasively in *Making a New Deal* that even when consumption is not intended to be political, it may have important consequences that are politicizing rather than distracting. Cohen argued that one reason the CIO was so successful in its organizing efforts in the 1930s is that workers once separated into ethnically and racially separate communities gradually in the 1920s came together as participants in mainstream commercial culture. "Workers in the 1930s were more likely to share a cultural world, to see the same movies and newsreels in the same chain theaters, shop for the same items in the same chain stores, and listen to the same radio shows on network radio, a situation very different from that of 1919 when workers lived in isolated cultural communities" (p. 325). Mass culture—particularly network radio—helped make industrial workers more cosmopolitan. Far from depoliticizing them, it gave them resources to reach out to one another and "enabled them to mount more effective political action" (p. 357). Far from distracting, consumption can create the conditions for political action and mobilization.

Consumerism Can Enlist and Enshrine Values that Serve Democracy

In contrasting consumers and citizens, neither consuming nor being an active citizen can be or should be reduced to occasions when the individual makes choices among alternatives. In both consumer behavior and civic action, individuals enact social rituals that instruct them and others in a set of expectations and values. These expectations and values either enhance democracy or endanger it; it all depends on what kind of consumer behavior or civic action we are talking about.

Studies of fast-food restaurants in Asia have been illuminating in showing that what matters at McDonald's is not whether one selects a Big Mac or a chicken sandwich but the egalitarian ambience of the setting. In contrast to traditional restaurant-going behavior in urban China, going to McDonald's or KFC empowers the young over the old and women over men. In conventional, formal restaurants, "men usually order the food for their female companions and control the conversation. In contrast . . . at a McDonald's everyone can make his or her own choices and, because smoking and alcohol are prohibited, men dominate less of the conversation" (Yan 2000, 217; see also Yan 1997). Fast food also equalizes relations between restaurant employees and clients—both stand when the clients are placing their orders. The smiles and friendliness of the carefully trained staff "give customers the impression that no matter who you are you will be treated with equal warmth and friendliness." Accordingly, anthropologist Yunxiang Yan (2000) wrote, many people patronize McDonald's "to experience a moment of equality" (p. 214). Customers also learn, often from observing foreigners in the restaurants, to clear their own tables. In the old Maoist China, Yan wrote, organized, public sociality was guided by the state and focused on mass rallies. In post-Maoist China, there is a new form of public sociality that "celebrates individuality and private desires in unofficial social and spatial contexts" (p. 224).

One may resist identifying McDonald's in Beijing today as the equivalent of the coffeehouses of London or Paris that cultivated the emerging and revolutionary public sphere that Habermas writes about, but why? The story Habermas tells is another vitally important instance of the democratic political value of consumer behavior. In both cases, London and Paris in the late eighteenth century and Beijing in the late twentieth century, private people come together safely in public, commercial spaces to talk and to socialize around food and drink. Many of the Chinese customers at McDonald's Yan (2000) interviewed did not particularly care for the food. Nor were they attracted to the speed with which they could complete a meal; McDonald's proved to be a place they could linger over a meal in a clean, brightly lit, friendly, and egalitarian atmosphere. McDonald's will not turn China into a democracy, but it is perfectly apt to recognize it as a small Trojan horse inside the gates of autocratic party rule.

What this example suggests, more broadly, is that some manners and modes of consuming have more affinity with democratic cultural presuppositions than others. Everyone has had the uncomfortable experience of walking into a snooty

retail establishment for clothing or jewelry or a restaurant meal where the staff make one instantly uncomfortable. If you do not know what you are looking for, if you are all too obviously unfamiliar with the merchandise and unaccustomed to shopping in a high-priced establishment, you are quickly made to feel that you are socially presumptuous even to have walked in the door. Department stores and self-service-style stores empower the browser, the newcomer, the immigrant, whether from another country or another neighborhood. Cohen's (1990) work indicates that as common places to shop supplanted ethnic neighborhood shopping sites, this had politically mobilizing consequences for the Chicago working classes of the 1920s and 1930s. The relationship of consuming to democracy is not a constant but a variable; consuming may or may not be a detriment to civic life. It all depends on what kind of consuming under what kinds of conditions.

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Political Behavior, in Terms of Its Moral Framework, May Be a Particular Kind of Consumer Behavior

Voters often look at political candidates in terms of what benefits the candidates will be likely to provide them or what costs they might inflict on them through raising taxes. Voters are not mechanically pocketbook voters, but "It's the economy, stupid" is a plausible first approximation of voters' moods and preferences. "A chicken in every pot" was not a slogan intended to appeal to voters' public-spirited instincts. Nor was "the full dinner pail"; nor was "no new taxes." Politicians have accepted that when voters go to the polls, one of the important things they do is a kind of price comparison shopping.

As with the citizens of eighteenth-century Boston who did not read Montesquieu but did drink tea, matters close to home for reasons close to home bring people into the political arena. This is not to say that voters are simply selfish or self-interested. It is only to say that self-interest is frequently politically motivating and mobilizing. It can be educative. It can be transformative. True, some people are more interested in clearing mine fields halfway around the world than in going to the meeting down the street to insist on a traffic light at

the corner where their children cross to school. But this is not a contrast between public-minded and self-centered. The more self-centered act—going to the meeting about the traffic light—is also the one likely to require a more substantial personal sacrifice (attending a boring meeting rather than writing a check) and to put more at risk (because of the discomfort of conflict and confrontation).

The question, again, is not about individual virtue. It is in part about the opportunity structure and the costs of action. Is political or civic action relatively accessible and convenient or not? Politics cannot always be convenient, but there are many cases where making it more convenient and more accessible will make it more popular. Efforts to make voting more accessible or to make jury service more a matter of serving on a jury than of sitting around all day at the courthouse waiting to be called are well worth undertaking.

Curiously, liberal critics of consumer culture often urge voters to act more like consumers, not less. I have in mind people who believe that if only the broad middle-class and working-class voters knew what was good for them economically, they would realize that Republican promises to lower taxes would be harmful to them. Yes, they would save a few hundred dollars in taxes, but the public schools they depend on would have fewer teachers, the school nurse would be let go, the art program would die. There would be charges for garbage collection that government once provided free. The bus fare would increase, and the frequency of buses would decline. The lines at the social security office or the motor vehicles department would be longer with the number of employees reduced. Public library hours would be cut. After-school care or before-school child care for working parents would close. Why, liberals wonder, can people not read the bookkeeping on the wall and vote their pocketbooks?

This view recognizes that politics is often bound to questions of self-interest. Undergirding its hope that people of modest means will come to recognize how useful government services are to them is a question of justice, of fairness. The activist liberals want ordinary people to vote their interests, in an informed way, even though the activists themselves may be seeking to serve others more than they want to serve themselves. They—the activists—by invoking a sense of justice are treating politics with the public-spirited ethos we connect with citizenship, but they are urging others to treat politics as a form of self-interested consumption.

Political Practice Is Often Not Virtuous or Public-Spirited

Historian Gordon Wood (2006) made a strong case that James Madison's disappointment with the government under the Articles of Confederation had less to do with the weakness of the confederation than with the venality of the state legislatures. The plan of a Constitution Madison originally proposed would have allowed the new national government to veto any and all state laws. He found the

legislators in his own state of Virginia to be driven by parochial interests, their debates to be marked by “crudeness and tedious discussion,” and the results of their lawmaking to be “unjust” (pp. 148-49, 157).

But perhaps this is just politicians whose political views are particular rather than public-spirited; are citizen-activists made of finer stuff? Sometimes they are. But it takes no imagination for us to recognize that the White Citizens Councils were volunteer social organizations just as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was. There are surely difficult issues concerning the justice and injustice of U.S. immigration policies today, but active anti-immigration groups are evidently driven by fear and by racism, not by public spirit or perhaps, more generously, by a public spirit that draws narrowly the circle of who is to count as part of “the public.” It is not sensible to judge the moral quality of political action by noting that George Wallace, David Duke, and Strom Thurmond were all politically active. One should not judge the worth of political idealism by the actions of a political ideologue like Timothy McVeigh. But neither is it sensible to imagine Rosa Parks as a typical representative of political activity.

The motives of political actors are ordinarily mixed. Political motivation is about the narcissistic pleasure of winning, of being in the public eye, of dispensing favors, of ironing out a compromise others were unable to achieve, the thrill of seizing the moment or seeing the opportunity to untie a political knot that stymied others, the pulse-quickenning excitement of competition and of victory. One hopes this is not the whole story of politics, but that is a part of it. From James Madison, offended by the demagogic Patrick Henry and eager to best him, to Karl Rove, politics is a mixed bag of ideals, interests, and the sheer motivating energy of doing battle.

Citizen and Consumer Behavior Have Changed

Making political choice less consumer-like is a task democracies undertake at their peril. I make this claim with a glance back to the Progressive Era political reforms between 1890 and 1920. Reformers of that day were not crusading against consumerism but against a mindlessness or thoughtlessness in political life, a mindlessness or thoughtlessness that political parties organized and exploited for their own ends. American political life in the late nineteenth century, for white males, was more participatory and more enthusiastic than at any other point in our history, with election turnouts routinely in the 70 to 80 percent range. Vast numbers of people participated in election campaigns in torchlight processions, brass band concerts, parades, picnics, pole raisings, and other activities that shocked visitors to our shores. When Jules Verne’s (1872/1962) fictional hero, Phileas Fogg, arrives in San Francisco, he is literally swept up in an election rally, a rally that turns into a brawl. Barely escaping, Fogg later asks someone what all the commotion was about—just a political meeting, he is told. For “the

election of a general-in-chief, no doubt?" Fogg asked. "No, sir; of a justice of the peace" (p. 180).

This political hoopla is just what the Progressives sought to phase out. They wanted electoral campaigns focused on issues, not on the military-like recruitment of knee-jerk partisans. They urged secret ballots, rather than the standard public distribution of party-printed tickets that voters placed in the ballot box in return for a convivial reward at the party's favorite saloon. They fought for primary elections to remove from party hacks the power to choose candidates. They sponsored laws for initiatives and referenda to place complex legislative matters directly before the voters, providing a new check on the power of party-controlled legislatures. What they accomplished with these reforms was to reduce voter turnout from more than 70 percent in the 1880s and 1890s to less than 50 percent by the 1920s. This sharp decline was no doubt a product of many forces, but these included what we might think of as the de-branding or unbranding of politicians, forcing individual voters to read the package ingredients rather than just the party logo on the package. The reformers pressed individuals to rely on information and not on personal influence and social pressure. They protected the individual conscience at the expense of separating the act of voting from the fraternity it had once expressed.

These reforms brought a kind of Protestant reformation to American politics, removing the idols and the incense from the political church, offering a politics cleansed of the souvenirs, the sensuous experience, and the small everyday rewards that once enhanced political life. No more Election Day hooliganism, or at least a lot less, no more festivity, no more emotionalism and soccer-team-style loyalties. The new voter should be motivated by ideas and ideals and information, not by social pressure or the social pleasure of a free drink and an extra dollar (Schudson 1998, 144-87).

The reformers of the day self-servingly, but not without cause, contrasted honest politics with corruption. The nineteenth-century politics they opposed was one of emotional, partisan manipulation and mobilization that had more to do with feelings of fellowship and teamwork and rivalry, and the good feeling engendered by alcohol, than it did with considerations of policy or the public good. The new politics may have led to superficiality in presenting candidates to the public and may have been the avenue that would one day lead high-minded leaders to complain of being marketed like breakfast cereal, but the old politics was no closer to the sort of "rational-critical" public discussion that political philosophers think should be the heart of democracy.

Political choices and consumer choices are not just the same, but we will not enhance the value of public affairs by positing the moral weakness of consuming as if any of us could, or would want to, do without it. Better, I think, to find strategic opportunity in consuming to enlarge the points of entry to political life. Better, also, to underline the political dimensions of our private, consuming world with cases in point. I would love to see someone write, for instance, about the politics of the morning bathroom ritual—what political choices and public

investments have made possible clean running water in sink and shower and toilet? What regulation of the licensing of plumbers, of housing inspections, of water filtration, of waste disposal, of fluoridation, of the ingredient labeling on the toothpaste or the trustworthiness of the claims on the shampoo bottle that no animals were used in testing—not to mention that the bathroom light turned on reliably? In a day when even Democrats will not talk about raising taxes, is this in part because the political infrastructure of our everyday consumer lives has become invisible to us? There are ways for the consumer and the citizen in each of us to meet.

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Could we make our political actions more satisfying in ways that our consumer behavior already often is? That is, could we make politics a domain where we feel more empowered and more satisfied in the act itself? I think the answer is yes. Most people find jury service fascinating; almost everybody finds sitting around the jury pool room for half a day an imposition. Politics can be and should be enjoyable. Everybody knows that you get better attendance at colloquia or lectures or committee meetings if you offer lunch. Is there anything wrong with offering lunch? Why not offer lunch at the voting booth? Too expensive? Maybe. Why not offer a lottery ticket to each voter? A quixotic Arizona reformer got such a proposal on the ballot in November 2006 and was attacked in op-ed pages across the country by pundits who are still living in the Progressive Era of the 1890s. His proposition went down to an inglorious defeat by a margin of two to one. Why? I am not convinced voters made the right call on this. Why not bring out the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts on Election Day? Why are they not selling cookies or singing songs at the polling places? Why is the arts community not engaged in enhancing aesthetically the act of voting, whether with posters or with glee clubs? We do not need to restore the corner tavern to increase voter turnout, but there is no reason to keep Election Day sterile. We should not be mental captives of the political purity crusades of the late nineteenth century.

People can feel as powerless at a town meeting as at a polling station. Romanticizing the small group is an error. But moderated small groups, with norms and rules about participation to both protect and encourage minorities or

shy persons, can be worked out. The Constitutional Convention in 1787 operated by a rule that no one could speak twice to an issue unless all who wanted to had spoken once. I suspect attendance at public meetings would quickly grow if only people were assured that rules of this sort would be strictly enforced.

The distinction between citizen and consumer remains a stand-in for the difference between the self-centered and the public-spirited. But this is misleading. Both consumer choices and political choices can be public-spirited or not; both consumer behavior and political behavior can be egalitarian and tolerant and respectful of others, or not. There are differences between the modal act of consuming and the modal act of political engagement. But it is not that in consuming one looks out only for oneself. It is only that in the ordinary act of consuming, the circle of people one thinks about tends to be small; in the ordinary act of politics, the circle of people one *should* be thinking about should extend to the boundary of whatever polity one is acting in—if not further! Consuming feels good not only because it may provide material pleasures but because it is enacted largely within a comfortable social circle. Politics feels tense and dangerous, even under relatively peaceful circumstances because it is performed in the midst of and because of significant conflict with others.

Citizenship differs from consumerism because it is more likely to involve the question of fairness in the distribution of resources. Consumerism may involve guilt over having too many resources compared to starving children somewhere or disappointment at having too few resources relative to family and friends—but it does not pose a question of collective decision making about just distribution. It raises questions of individual conscience and questions of prudence.

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Part of what distinguishes those questions from questions one might ask at the voting booth or in deciding whether to attend a public meeting about a traffic light is that the consumer decision is either entirely up to you or up to you and a small number of people you know well. You can be sure your vote either is the only one that counts or one of the two that counts in a marriage or one of a few that counts when a group of friends orders dinner together at a Chinese restaurant. In choosing to attend the community meeting or in voting at the polls, most people can be confident their voices will matter little and that their contribution to the ultimate decision will be vanishingly small. This is what makes the political

act selfless compared to the consuming act—not that the person who takes it is a better human being, not that the person who takes it has more lofty and public-spirited goals, but that the person acting in politics chooses to do something where the outcome is uncertain and control over the outcome is minimal. What is in it for me? Almost nothing: just the satisfaction of expressing oneself, occasionally the larger satisfaction of working with a group or a kind of team to achieve a desired end, sometimes the satisfaction of winning, and maybe—but this is rare—the pleasure of experiencing power in persuading others of one’s position, of turning the tide in a public discussion. This is most likely in the smallest democracies—a faculty meeting; a book club; a block association; or a committee at school, work, or church.

The strange result of this line of thinking is that the various efforts both practical and utopian to keep democracy small are ways to make the experience of politics more like the experience of consumer choice, that is, more like situations in which one is obliged to take one’s own preferences seriously because they are likely or certain to matter. People frequently enjoy the act of shopping. Yes, they also enjoy cooking and eating the steak, wearing and showing off the new tie—but they also enjoy shopping for these goods. They do so, I would suggest, because shopping is empowering. It does not make shoppers sovereign of all they survey—for most of us, the caviar really is beyond our means. But it enables one to make choices that make a difference to ourselves and our families. We can feel gratification in the very act of choosing and purchasing. Nineteenth-century Americans felt something like that on Election Day, and they deserve credit for having invented a politics where that could happen. We need to think harder about these matters and determine what really the political act and the consuming act are, and what variety of things they are or have been in different times and places and civic circumstances. We need to move from moralism and complaint to analysis and action where the necessary and often enjoyable acts of consuming are appreciated—but where the political structure that makes those acts possible is made visible.

Note

1. Parts of the following sections also appeared verbatim in Michael Schudson, “The Troubling Equivalence of Citizen and Consumer,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 608 (November 2006): 193-204.

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