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# POLITICAL CONSUMERISM AND FOOD ACTIVISM

*Jasmine Lorenzini*

Some citizens refuse to buy brands that do not comply with specific environmental or social norms, others buy fair-trade clothes or join community-supported agricultural projects, and still others adapt their whole lifestyle to avoid consuming animal products. Whatever form it takes, citizens increasingly use their purchasing power to support and advance a variety of political values, such as environmental protection, animal rights, fair working conditions, and child-free labor. Political consumerism is a central mode of political participation that has attracted much scholarly attention in the last decades. Some scholars view political consumerism as a way to mobilize citizens who are disconnected from politics and who seek individualized modes of action (Bennett, 2012; Stolle and Hooghe, 2011). Others criticize political consumerism for its narrow understanding of politics based on individual interests (Johnston, 2008), for draining resources away from other political actions (Berglund and Matti, 2006), and for reinforcing the power of ever-expanding markets (Jacques, 2016). Environmental researchers point to the narrow understanding of social change that accompanies political consumerism (Maniates, 2001). They show how corporations hijack the concept of sustainability through green consumption (Dauvergne and LeBaron, 2014) and how they influence the environmental movement through financial support (Assadourian, 2016). Altogether, these studies enquire about the capacity of political consumerism to bring about social change in the face of multiple environmental challenges. Yet political sociologists devote limited attention to question the democratic imagination that these forms of action carry. Hence, the following research question guides the reflections presented in this chapter: how political consumerism contributes to shaping citizens' relation to politics. To answer this question, I argue that we need to distinguish different forms of political participation that broadly fall under the label of political consumerism in order to examine specific conceptions of citizens' participation and democratic social change that prevail in each action form.

The hybrid consumer-citizen is a central actor in contemporary democracies. Ever-expanding markets shape individuals' everyday life across multiple life spheres. Want to cook a meal for your friends? Hire a chef. Want to graduate? Pay someone to write your thesis. Want a baby? Rent a uterus. Want to become president? Invest millions in a political campaign. In advanced capitalism, everything appears to be for sale, and this phenomenon does not spare democratic life (Sandel, 2000). Commodification processes affect democracies at different levels, influencing the selection of elected representatives but also the shape of public policies (Bartels, 2009;

Crouch, 2004; Hacker and Pierson, 2010). The neoliberal state serves primarily the interest of the economy since growth is the ultimate goal of governments, the one goal that constitutes their *raison d'être* (Brown, 2015). Social solidarities are dismantled in favor of individualism, personal responsibility, and family values (Harvey, 2007). Public policies are increasingly written in terms of services offered to customers, not in terms of public services (Schneider and Ingram, 2005). Together, all these transformations affect citizens' democratic imagination – how they understand social problems, as well as their capacity and tools for action. In a world where everything seems to be for sale, citizens imagine their participation in terms of donating money to political groups or parties and buying eco-friendly, fair, local products. Focusing on the environmental movement, Szasz (2007) refers to this phenomenon as the inverted quarantine. Individuals feel threatened by growing air, water, and soil pollution so they buy goods that “insulate” them from these harmful environmental conditions, such as bottled water, organic fruit, and suntan lotion. The quest for commercial solutions to environmental (social or political) problems takes place at the individual level *and* at the collective level. Social movements use market-based strategies to gain leverage on politics. They organize boycott campaigns (Balsiger, 2014) and create labels (Bartley et al., 2015) or small-scale food networks (Graziano and Forno, 2012). The environmental movement is no exception; major organizations in the movement encourage and engage in political consumerism (Dauvergne and LeBaron, 2014; Jacques, 2016). However, multiple forms of participation are available for consumer-citizens. It is worth understanding the democratic implications of each such form of participation as they vary in their relationship to the market – some actions seek to influence markets while others try to bypass or overcome markets.

In the first part of the chapter, I define political consumerism as forms of action that refer to buying or refusing to buy products and services for political reasons. These political acts commodify political values – citizens buy goods and services that correspond to their ideological views. Citizens can financially support projects that offer alternatives to the mainstream market: for instance, fair-trade goods, organic food, or local services. However, other forms of political consumerism have a broader scope – people who engage in community-supported agriculture often give time and work to the project; people who refuse to eat meat embrace a broader political project. In these cases, political consumerism is more far reaching and not reducible to a mere commodification of political values. Thus, I argue that the meaning and the scope of political consumerism change depending on the specific forms that it takes. Studying a broader set of action forms allows identifying those action forms that move away from purely market-based mechanisms of monetary exchanges with profit-seeking goals. In order to expand the concept of political consumerism while maintaining conceptual clarity, I introduce the concept of food activism to distinguish different forms of market-based activism that aim at transforming food production, distribution, and consumption.

In the second part of the chapter, I examine the different forms of social change foreseen by specific forms of food activism. I build on the idea of real utopias (Wright, 2010) and different conceptions of social change (Lofland, 1993). Wright (2010) proposes to start with a critical diagnostic of the existing situation to develop alternatives that defend emancipatory and democratic goals. Real utopias enable transformations by expanding our imaginaries. One key element in his approach is the focus on the interplay of state, economic, and social power. Hence, to assess the transformative potential of food activism, one needs to assess its understanding of social change in the economic realm (transformation of capitalist modes of consumption and production), in the political realm (transformation in the understanding of the state's role and democratic institutions), and in society (collective action capacity of different groups). Building on Erik Olin Wright's work on real utopias,

I ask how food activism in its different forms proposes to transform the economy, society, and politics.

In the third part, I ask to what extent the environmental movement uses political consumerism to advance its goals and highlight four alternatives. Voluntary simplifiers and ecofeminists challenge prevailing divisions between production and consumption, they highlight the core value of reproductive work, and they place the subsistence economy central stage. In addition, commoners and freegans enlarge the action repertoire of the environmental movement through strategies of direct action and resistance, as well as collective processes of decision-making. Hence, a variety of relations to production and consumption transpire and enrich our democratic imaginaries. In the conclusion, I return to the consumer-citizen debate, and I emphasize promising forms of citizenship and democratic social change that appear in market-based forms of activism.

### **Political consumerism and food activism**

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Michele Micheletti (2003) coined the term “political consumerism” to refer to citizens’ attempt to influence politics through their consumption choices. Micheletti refers to political consumerism as an individualized collective form of political participation. This term highlights that these actions are performed at the individual level in a flexible way, which, at first, appear disconnected from any political group. Yet most boycott campaigns result from social movement activism (Balsiger, 2010). A political group organizes and calls the action. Beyond the individualized action, there is a collective agency. Similarly, buying products for political reasons results from collective organization and action. In a complex world, individuals are not able to assess modes of production and distribution or to evaluate the impact of consumption in order to choose between one product and another solely on their own. Labels guide their choices; they reduce the complexity of markets characterized by long chains of transformation. Political groups (Balsiger, 2016) and consumers’ organizations (Lang and Gabriel, 2005) set up and promote labels to help individuals acquire information about the products and services that they buy.

### ***Forms of political consumerism***

Although the most common and well-known forms of political consumerism are buying or refusing to buy products for political reasons, it is important not to limit political consumerism to these actions (Littler, 2005). Researchers have expanded the scope of the concept to include: 1) actions that require a long-lasting commitment such as community-supported agriculture, 2) actions that mark a rupture with the market such as voluntary simplicity, and 3) actions that question the consumer culture: for instance, culture jamming. What is markedly different in these other forms of participation?

Community-supported agriculture brings together consumers and producers in a long-lasting economic relationship. Consumers pay in advance for the food that producers will grow, produce, and/or transform for them. This guarantees a stable income to the producers and shortens food chains. Thus, consumers gain more traction on the food that they eat. It is part of an action mode that includes different food collectives, such as participator supermarkets (Zitcer, 2017b), solidarity purchase groups (Forno et al., 2015), and community-supported agriculture (Dubuisson-Quellier and Lamine, 2004; Graziano and Forno, 2012; Hassanein, 2008).

Voluntary simplicity seeks to reduce consumption altogether; practitioners work less and earn less (Lorenzen, 2012; Schor, 1998). This means that they have more time to produce their

own food – either growing food or buying raw products and cooking at home. In addition, they engage in exchanging goods and services. Voluntary simplicity creates social connections within groups where people share goods and services free of charge – one hour of work being exchanged for another hour of work or one good for another – and where they discuss trade-offs and build collective solutions to problems they face in their everyday lives (Lorenzen, 2014). Voluntary simplicity is a form of lifestyle politics – the transformation of different dimensions of one's life to adjust to specific political values (Micheletti and Stolle, 2012).

Lastly, culture jamming transforms advertisement to make people think about their social environment (Carducci, 2006). Subverting advertisement allows us to see what becomes invisible as part of our taken-for-granted everyday life. So many public spaces are rented to advertisers that commercial messages are omnipresent in the streets, on public transport, and online. They shape how we think and relate to the world around us.

These forms of action all have an indirect relationship to markets; thus, some researchers consider that they are part of political consumerism. However, this creates conceptual problems. Are all these actions specific forms of political consumerism or, rather, different forms of participation? I suggest that we refer instead to market-based activism, to include all the political actions that question mainstream economic, social, and political engagements within markets, and use the concept of political consumerism to refer only to boycotting and buying products for political reasons – the individualized collective action forms (Micheletti, 2003).<sup>1</sup>

### ***What is wrong with political consumerism?***

As the concept of political consumerism gained more traction, it became an important mode of political participation (Teorell et al., 2006; Van Deth, 2014). This means that citizens have additional means to have their voices heard in the political realm. Political consumerism is one form of action in a diversified action repertoire (Willis and Schor, 2012). In addition, it might even be a way to enter politics – a gateway to politics (de Moor and Verhaegen, 2020). As such, political consumerism might offer opportunities to mobilize citizens who would otherwise be disconnected from politics. However, increased attention to and usage of political consumerism resulted in a critical reading of this action form. Political consumerism offers a narrow understanding of politics based on individual interests and commodified dissent (Maniates, 2001). In so doing, it might be draining resources away from other political actions and reinforcing the power of ever-expanding markets. In short, prevailing critiques point to four problematic aspects of political consumerism: 1) the unequal access to political consumerism due to purchasing power, 2) the crowding out of other forms of participation by these “easy” or “light” forms of political action, 3) the commodification of political values, and 4) the retreat of the state (see Lorenzini, 2019 for a discussion).

In this chapter, I want to focus on what political consumerism does to citizens' democratic imagination. Citizenship is based on thinking, talking, and practicing (Perrin, 2009). This means that citizens learn about political participation and experiment with it to be (come) active citizens. So what is wrong with political consumerism when we consider how it informs citizens about democratic thinking, talking, and practicing? Buying or refusing to buy is a form of political action that uses consumers' purchasing power to have an influence on politics. In terms of thinking, talking, and practicing, the key message is that individuals engage in politics with their money, and that politics, like many other goods and services in a capitalist economy, is for sale. Another example of critique addressed to political consumerism relates to labels. One of the problems is that labels promote passive information and do not promote active learning (Boström and Klintman, 2019). Individuals rely on labels and take them at face value since they

have limited or no information about the criteria used to give the label, how compliance with the norms and values promoted is guaranteed, and how independent the label is from the firm that sells the product.

Is it possible to overcome the shrinking of citizens' political imagination that political consumerism sustains? I argue that we can recognize the existence of a more vivid democratic imagination, perhaps even expand it, if we 1) consider a broader range of action forms that fall in the category of market-based activism but cannot be narrowed down to political consumerism and 2) examine critically the understandings of social change that prevail in each of these action forms.

### ***Food activism – focusing on a single issue to expand our understanding of social change***

Focusing on one issue – namely, contention around food – allows seeing the richness and diversity of actions associated with consumption. Food activism includes all action forms that aim at transforming food production, distribution, and consumption (Reichman, 2014). It includes political consumerism but goes beyond this form of action since it covers actions that establish long-term relationships between producers and consumers, as well as actions that aim to bypass the market. Food activism includes political consumerism, food collectives, and lifestyle politics (Lorenzini, 2019).

Political consumerism, in this case, means either refusing to buy or buying specific food for political reasons. For instance, boycotting a brand that has damaging environmental modes of production, that does not respect workers' rights, or that sells genetically modified products. Boycotting, in turn, refers to the act of buying products for political reasons: for instance, choosing products that correspond to specific labels, are produced locally, or comply with the social and solidary economy. Food collectives include participatory supermarkets, where consumers not only shop but also work to fill in the shelves, make orders, or work as a cashier (Zitcer, 2017a). It also covers community-supported agriculture, where citizens buy in advance a certain amount of vegetables, fruit, cereals, or other goods produced by local farmers (Forno et al., 2015; Hassanein, 2008). Lastly, lifestyle politics includes forms of action that require important changes in citizens' everyday lives – for instance veganism (Ophélie, 2016), voluntary simplicity (Lorenzen, 2012), or freeganism (Barnard, 2011). In these cases, citizens commit to a lifestyle that sets them apart from prevailing modes of consumption and require that they adapt their everyday life – not only refusing to buy some goods (e.g., meat, non-essential goods) but also changing their lives in terms of work, sociability, and political activism.

This fine-grained distinction of political actions that fall into the broad category of market-based activism and that are associated with transformation of the food system allows thinking about the kind of transformations that they propose. In the next section, I introduce the concept of real utopias and different understandings of social change to examine in more detail each form of market-based activism.

### **Real utopias and social change – the transformative potential of political actions**

Eric Olin Wright proposed the concept of real utopias “to provide empirical and theoretical grounding for radical democratic egalitarian visions of an alternative social world” (Wright, 2010: 1). The core idea is that what we envision as “real” alternative possibilities depends on our capacity to imagine a different reality – different models of organizing society. Research

on citizens' participation shows that our democratic imagination is fairly limited (Perrin, 2009). People see politics as remote from their everyday life and consider that they have few means of action. In addition, scholars pointed at the pervasive influence of market-based logics in our everyday life (Gibson-Graham, 2006). It is difficult to imagine any exchange and practices that fall outside the reach of markets. Yet our everyday life rests heavily on non-monetary exchanges if only for most of care work – providing food, shelter, and love in the realm of family life and friendship.

In order to build real utopias, the first step, according to Wright, is to identify how institutions limit our possibility to act differently. Furthermore, a key idea relates to the balance between three domains of power: the state, the economy, and society. The state includes the institutions that create binding rules, and state power refers to “the effective capacity to impose rules and regulate social relations over territory” (Wright, 2010: 119). The economy is the “the sphere of social activity in which people interact to produce and distribute goods and services” (Wright, 2010: 119). Economic power depends on economically relevant resources that actors control. Lastly, society is the domain of voluntary associations and interactions between individuals. Power in this case depends on the capacity for collective action. In the democratic ideal, state power is subordinated to social power. However, in recent years, critiques have pointed to the increasing concentration of power in the hands of a few elected representatives (Crouch, 2004). Key processes, in these regards, relate to the government growing power over the parliament (Rosanvallon, 2015) and the move from representative to responsible governments (Mair, 2013). Others pointed at the growing influence of economic power over politics (Purcell, 2003, 2009) and how, in a neoliberal state, the core task of the state is to support economic growth (Brown, 2015).

Conceptions of social change also shape the transformative potential of different forms of political participation. Lofland (1993) identified different conceptions of social change that coexist in the American peace movement. Conceptions of social change include two aspects. First, the end state – an assessment of what is wrong with the current situation and the definition of political objectives. Second, the means to get there – how to construct alternatives to the current state of affairs, identifying behaviors resulting in social change. Lofland distinguishes six theories of social change: 1) transcender theory, 2) educator theory, 3) intellectual theory, 4) politician theory, 5) protest theory, and 6) Prophet theory. Transcender theories argue that change happens because ideas spread; underpinning this conception is the idea of threshold – once a large number of people adhere to an idea, it changes the overall society. The goal is to trigger epochal change through rational thinking. Educator theory builds on the communication of facts and reasoning to accompany change. Similar to transcendents, they believe in the power of fact, but they consider that change is slow and incremental. Intellectual theory shares the core beliefs of educator theory; however, in this case, the process of change runs from intellectuals to educators, enlightened politicians, and broader audiences. The change is again slow and incremental. These conceptions resemble Serge Moscovici's theory of conversion (1980). An avant-garde first experiments with a new idea, then the idea spreads out in the private realm until it becomes the new mainstream mode of action. The politician theory of social change is the predominant conception of social change in society. The goal is to build majorities in the parliament, and therefore pragmatic policies are required to win over the elites. In this theory of social change, realism, feasibility, and compromise prevail. These first four theories are conventional forms of action, they rely on knowledge and information, and they demand trust in public authorities. The downside of these conventional action forms is that public authorities can easily ignore them. In response to these “weak” modes of action, some peace activists adopted an understanding of social change based on a more confrontational approach, using



protest to disrupt the course of action and force authorities to consider their claims. These form the protest theories of social change. Lastly, prophet theory relies on the idea of regeneration at the individual level. Prophet theory seeks profound inner transformations. In this case, people change their overall lifestyle and are ready to engage in a marginal lifestyle to pursue their ideals. I use these ideal types to highlight the specific conceptions of social change that prevail in different forms of food activism.

### ***Transformative potential of food activism***

To apply these ideas to the study of food activism, I first consider the proposed balance of power between the state, the market, and society. Second, I examine the kind of social transformations that are likely to result from each form of action. Third, I discuss the conception of social change that characterizes each mode of food activism. I summarize these reflections in Table 15.1.

In political consumerism, political actions take place directly on the market. They seek to transform how firms produce goods and services, forcing them to comply with different values and norms. These actions seldom appeal to the regulatory role of the state. They directly target enterprises (Soule, 2009). Society has a role to play inasmuch as social movement seek to create new norms for the consumption of goods and services. They contribute to the moralization of markets (Balsiger, 2019). The transformations associated with political consumerism imply a commodification of political values since new norms for the production of goods and services add to their financial value. In addition, they imply some degree of individualization and privatization of responsibility since consumers and firms are responsible for engaging in changing prevailing modes of consumption and production. Lastly, this mode of action creates inequalities with a two-tier market offering goods and services that follow higher or lower social and environmental standards of production (Friedmann, 2005). In order to do so, social movement organizations run boycott campaigns or provide information through labels. These pursue two different goals, each associated with a specific conception of social change. In the case of a boycott, social change is close to a protest theory of social change. Protest claims are set on the market, not addressed to the state. Social movements seek to disrupt the normal course of action to force firms to take into account their demands. They are seldom able to weight on their market share or on their financial situation. Having this sort of impact would require mobilizing millions of consumers (Friedman, 2002). Hence, they rely mostly on the threat and the damage they might cause to the image of the firm (King, 2016). In the case of labels, which facilitate consumption choices, social movements rely on a learning process – they teach consumers how

*Table 15.1* Specific forms of food activism and the role of the state, the economy, and society

	<i>Political consumerism</i>	<i>Food collectives</i>	<i>Lifestyle politics</i>
<b>Locus of change</b>	Market (+ society)	Society (+ market)	Society
<b>Prevailing types of transformations</b>	Commodification Individualization Privatization Inequalities	Small-scale Trust-enhancing Community-based	Experimental New narratives
<b>Conceptions of social change</b>	Education and protest theory	Prefigurative	Transcender and Prophet theory



to buy products that comply with social or environmental norms. In this case, we are closer to the education theory of social change.

Turning to food collectives, the main locus of change is society. Food collectives are organizations or informal groups that bring together food consumers and producers to create alternative food chains. Innovations take the form of advanced payment for the production of food through contractual relations between producers and consumers (Dubuisson-Quellier and Lamine, 2004; Hassanein, 2008); direct interactions between consumers and producers to define the quality, quantity, and types of good exchanged (Forno et al., 2015; Graziano and Forno, 2012); and participatory labelling or quality control (Koensler, 2020). The kind of transformations that prevail in food collectives are small-scale innovations that build on and contribute to developing trust. Scaling up is a key feature of capitalism and contributes to the creation and expansion of new markets (Tsing, 2017). Successful food collectives might expand or offer models for larger firms to copy. Therefore, the key locus of change is society, and the market is a second locus of change in the case of food collectives. In addition, these projects create communities of like-minded citizens. However, it is important to note here that food collectives may involve heterogeneous sets of members – with more or less engaged participants – and that they might compromise with some of their core values as they attract more members. For instance, participatory supermarkets face problems related to the inclusion of different types of participants (Zitcer, 2017b). It is difficult to tie food collectives to a theory of social change that Lofland identified in the peace movement. In this case, social change is more directly connected to collective action and takes place within groups that experiment with alternatives. It comes closest to a prefigurative understanding of social change (Yates, 2015). Luke Yates identifies five steps in the process associated with prefigurative social change: experimentation, circulation of political perspectives, production of new norms and conducts, material consolidation, and diffusion. In this conception, the collective plays a central role as experimenter of alternatives, but also in disseminating these alternatives, thanks to new material arrangements that facilitate the practice of these alternatives.

Lastly, lifestyle politics are laboratories of social change. The main locus of change is society; engaged citizens seek to create new values and practices that transform how we relate to the world around us. In these actions, food plays an important role but is not the sole or the most important issue of contention. Vegan citizens seek to develop new narratives and practices associated with the respect of animal rights and welfare (Giroux and Larue, 2019). They advocate not eating meat, eggs, dairy, or other animal products, but they also defend animals' right to live freely in good conditions. Voluntary simplifiers aim at reducing their environmental footprint thanks to minimal consumption. They reduce their consumption of manufactured goods, energy, and land. In the case of food, the main question relates to the quality of food (e.g., local, organic, seasonal). In so doing, voluntary simplifiers experiment with changes in their everyday life, but they also constantly deliberate with themselves and others about the choices that have to be made to reduce their consumption of natural resources (Lorenzen, 2012). Lifestyle politics offers experimental practices and creates new narratives about food. Transcender or prophet theories of social change come closest to lifestyle politics.

### **Market-based activism in the action repertoire of environmental movements**

In the environmental movement, different practices are associated with market-based activism. Among them are political consumerism and the consumption of goods that either “protect” the environment or individually “protect” from environmental hazards. In addition, the boundaries

between civil society organizations and corporations are blurring as these two types of actors collaborate to set up labels or to develop “sustainable” practices. Lastly, I present alternatives to market-based activism that stem from the environmental movement. These social movements question the core principles of a consumerist society. Voluntary simplifiers seek to reduce their engagement in production and consumption; they seek alternative sources of meaning in their lives. Similarly, ecofeminists highlight the value of a subsistence economy as an alternative to the division between paid productive and unpaid reproductive work but also as a way to establish satisfiers that fill different needs at once. Freegans value decommodified food (i.e., food that is considered as waste by mainstream food chains, and, therefore, is no longer a valued and valuable commodity) and aim to avoid paid work. Lastly, commoners seek collective modes of production, consumption, and decision-making processes. Each offers material and ideational alternatives that point at social transformation.

### ***Political consumerism in the environmental movement***

Maniates (2001) shows how limited our democratic imagination is when it comes to solving environmental issues. Even environmental students have difficulties envisioning forms of action that go beyond planting a tree, riding a bike, or changing a light bulb. Maniates argues that this individualized and commodified understanding of social change prevents any large-scale transformation. Szasz (2007) coined the term “inverted quarantine” to discuss how people move from collective action to individual sheltering from environmental hazards. Szasz documents how people sought individual solutions to collective problems instead of turning to protest and other forms of activism. Sometime in the 1980s, people began to buy bottled water instead of drinking tap water because they feared pollution of their drinking water (Szasz, 2007). During approximately the same period, the sales of organic food began to rise (Guthman, 2014 [2004]). Julie Guthman shows how, as it expanded and became more mainstream, organic food became a commodity that adds value to goods and increases the profits of large corporations. Friedmann (2005) even defines the current food regime as a corporate environmental food regime: a two-tier food regime in which those who can afford to, pay higher prices to gain access to healthy food while those who are too poor to do so are left with the cheap, unhealthy, industrial alternatives.

The increased use of political consumerism in the environmental movement is linked to protest waves and broader changes in social movements’ action repertoires. As the state became less effective in responding to social movement demands, social movement organizations turned to the corporate world to set their claims (Soule, 2009). At the turn of the twenty-first century, the global justice movement set in motion a global protest wave. However, as it failed to materialize any major transformations, it triggered a turn to political consumerism and activism focused on private lives (Forno, 2019). Social movements that engage in market-based transformations – the moralization of markets – are heterogeneous. They include both radical actors who seek major transformations and moderate ones who seek compromise and collaboration with corporations (Balsiger, 2019). Processes of market moralization are associated with the creation of brands or labels to identify goods produced in compliance with stricter environmental or social norms.

### ***Reinventing production and consumption – voluntary simplicity and ecofeminism***

Etzioni (1999) argues that voluntary simplicity builds around three core principles: 1) free will and the deliberate choice to live a simple life (not due to necessity or poverty), 2) clear focus on

changing and reducing consumption at the individual or household level, and 3) an attempt to possess fewer material goods accompanied by a quest for meaning (engaging in fulfilling activities and finding meaning in one's life). Voluntary simplifiers are more than downshiffters who reduce their working time to earn less and spend less (Schor, 1998). They seek to consume less, and their concerns are driven by environmental awareness, the search for small scales of action that build community ties, a willingness to engage in self-determination, and self-realization (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977). Although it builds on individual action, it offers a promising understanding of the interplay between consumption and production. Rather, it redefines production as consumption – the consumption of time, human energy, creativity, natural resources (Maniates, 2017). As such, it offers the premises of alternative modes of production that consume less human and environmental capital.

Voluntary simplifiers question the relation to paid work and consumption. Ecofeminists interrogate, more generally, the division of work between productive and reproductive work in capitalist economies and defend a subsistence economy. An economic model focused on working to provide for one's needs – subsistence economy – growing food, hunting, wood picking, etc., that prevailed in pre-capitalist societies (Federici, 2004). Federici (2004) shows the centrality of taking over women's reproductive work during the establishment of capitalism. Marx highlighted the importance of primitive accumulation for capitalism. Federici (2004) identifies three key dimensions in this primitive accumulation: 1) concentration of land and capital (enclosure), 2) dispossessing workers of their means of production, and 3) controlling women's body and reproductive work (to ensure the reproduction of life and, therefore, of the workforce). The last element is the key contribution of ecofeminists to the study of capitalism and its emergence. Growth-based societies do not recognize the value of female unpaid reproductive labor and, more generally, the work related to self-production. Subsistence work does not add to the GDP; thus, it is easily discarded and considered irrelevant. This devaluation of (female) reproductive work is at the core of capitalism. Although these activities are vital for society (and for capitalism), they do not contribute to a narrow understanding of the economy (Mies and Shiva, 1993). More generally, Mies and Shiva (1993) highlight that capitalism threatens the environment because it fails to see the value of the economy of nature and subsistence, while both are vital for human survival. Capitalism's myopic focus on growth and the dismissal of reproductive work as non-contributive to growth are the core problems in the ecofeminist perspective. Hence, their alternative builds around the development and strengthening of a subsistence perspective.

The subsistence perspective contends that in consumerist societies, people satisfy most of their needs on the market – through consumption. However, consumption is a “pseudo-satisfier”; it produces little to no satisfaction. For instance, shopping is a quest for love and recognition, which cannot be obtained on the market. When fundamental needs are satisfied in non-commercial ways, they are often reciprocal – satisfiers exist for both giver and receiver. This is the case if someone helps a friend move out of his old house, when a father takes care of his children, or when a woman cooks for her family. This is what Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva call the “subsistence way”. The changes they seek require a turn to small-scale synchronized modes of production and consumption that enhance participatory decision-making within social groups.

### ***Resisting commodification and transforming decision-making – freeganism and the commons***

Voluntary simplicity and ecofeminism build on prefigurative understandings of social change – they are forms of lifestyle politics in which individuals, households, or communities engage in

alternative modes of production and consumption. Furthermore, they redefine what producing and consuming mean. Yet there is only a limited protest agenda. Freeganism and its ties to anarchism offer a glimpse of a more protest-and-resistance understanding of social change.

Freeganism “is a combination of the words ‘free’ and ‘vegan’, and the philosophy behind freeganism is a fusion of both” (Barnard, 2011: 421). Freegans “protest over-consumption by abstaining from consuming anything that must be purchased” (Barnard, 2011: 421). In this movement, activists aim to work as little as possible because paid employment is the cornerstone of a consumerist society. Yet many freegans are not able to live without engaging in paid work. Those who live in a city need to pay rent for their housing, and this forces freegans to engage in some paid work. Alex Barnard (2011) argues that dumpster diving – the art of seeking edible food waste to feed oneself – plays a central part in the movement because it gives visibility to the movement and offers opportunities to engage in discussion with passers-by or invited participants. Freegans are close to anarchist movements. Ferrell (2014) studies scrounging practices and defines them “not only as alternative economic practice, but as a distinctively oppositional practice to legal regulation, mainstream politics, and consumerism” (Ferrell, 2014: 301). In this sense, they are akin to anarchist movements that seek to disavow existing structures of power and authority.

What are the alternatives to the existing oppressive structures of power and authority? Commoners oppose and resist laws that limit the possibilities for people to come together in communities and to own collectively the means of their subsistence economy. In addition, the commons are characterized by a two-step process: commoning and governing the common. Thus, the common is the result of a struggle by the plurality to acquire a good and to give meaning to that good (De Angelis, 2017). The commons are not specific products or goods; rather, they are the end result of a collective process of decision-making. Therefore, commons offer opportunities to create active citizens – individuals who take an active part in all the decisions related to the usage, management, and maintenance of common goods: that is, goods that have utility for collective entities. De Angelis (2017: 63) writes “to claim something as a common good in the context of a social struggle ‘gives awareness to people, produces active citizenship, and therefore overcomes the passive consumerist model’”. Many food collectives include collective decision-making processes; however, they fall short of envisioning and practicing the ideals of the commons.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I asked how political consumerism shapes citizens’ democratic imagination. I examined how food activism proposes to transform the economy, the state, and society. On the other hand, I explored alternatives to political consumerism in the environmental movement.

First, I proposed to expand the concept of political consumerism to include different forms of actions that are tied to the market but not necessarily seeking changes directly on the market. Political consumerism builds a narrow democratic imagination associated with individualized modes of action, the privatization of goods and services, which foster inequalities. In this case, social change is understood in terms of education and protest. Yet, protest refers mostly to setting claims directly on the market. The state is absent in this conception of social change. The state’s limited role is also striking in the other two modes of action. In food collectives, social change happens in society within small collectives. It enhances trust and reinforces communities, but it focuses only on small-scale projects. Lastly, lifestyle politics builds social change in society through experimental practices that seek to create new narratives about the good life within small communities.

Second, I scanned the environmental movement in search of alternatives to political consumerism. I identified four avenues of social change that depart from political consumerism and that propose an understanding of social change that redefines existing divisions between production and consumption, but also between production and reproduction. In these movements, social change is associated with a more-or-less radical break away from capitalism's core principles. Voluntary simplifiers work less and consume less, while ecofeminists defend a subsistence economy as the core provider of well-being for all. The subsistence economy offers satisfiers that address multiple needs at once outside the realm of market exchanges. Furthermore, freeganism and the commons expand democratic imagination beyond prefigurative politics and individual changes. Both freegans and commoners resist laws, institutions, and social practices that create structures of authority and power. They constitute sites for citizens to engage in critical thinking and participatory decision-making processes.

### Note

- 1 In her original definition, Micheletti included petitions in addition to boycotts and buycotts, which I do not consider here.

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