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# **The Trouble with Shopping: Discourses, Practices and Pedagogies of the Consumer-Citizen**

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I begin with an outline of modern citizenship and a review of feminist and other critical analyses of this concept. I then discuss the role of consumption as a marker of citizenship. The paper closes with the prospect of understanding shopping as a potential process of learning about the links between consumption, citizenship and globalization.

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I begin by outlining the concept of modern democratic citizenship, and review feminist and other critical responses to it. I focus on the five elements of citizenship outlined by Faulks (2002), and insert a sixth element: resistance. I then relate consumption to citizenship for two key reasons. First, the topic of consumption, traditionally feminized, provides an opportunity to counter highly masculinized accounts and theories of citizenship and production. Secondly, as a key process in contemporary capitalist globalization, consumption frames an exploration of the very concept of citizenship which is coming under increased challenge. In developing the concept of the consumer-citizen, I apply the six elements of democratic citizenship to consumption, indicating how consumption has come to function as a signifier and an expression of citizenship. Finally, I problematize the concept of the “consumer-citizen,” summarize the limitations of consumption and consumerism in realizing the aim of equality central to democratic citizenship, and review the critical learning opportunities present in the mundane activity of shopping.

### *An Outline of Modern Democratic Citizenship*

In a frequently quoted excerpt from his essay of 1950, T. H. Marshall (1992) defines citizenship as “a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed” (p. 18). Marshall goes on to outline three types of rights, and maps a timeline of their development in the West. Beginning in the eighteenth century, major shifts began occurring with the emergence of civil rights. Political rights, evident in citizens’ political participation, came to the forefront in the nineteenth century when voting rights were extended to male citizens who achieved a minimal class status. Social rights were not emphasized until after the Second World War, and are evident in public programs such as health care, education and social assistance.

Building on Marshall’s conception of rights, Faulks (2002) outlines five “Rs” of democratic citizenship. The other four are responsibilities (which Marshall calls practice or duties), resources, recognition and residence. Recognition of groups, associated with so-called “politics of identity,” acknowledges the diversity which exists within a citizenry. The final “R” ties citizenship to territory because, even in an era of globalization, “[c]itizenship connotes membership within a bordered territory and an internationally recognized state” (Brodie, 2002, p.

379). Like the different types of rights discussed above, these five “Rs” of democratic citizenship can either support or challenge one another, and often do both at the same time.

### **Critiques from the Margins**

From its Enlightenment era roots, liberal democracy has emphasized the qualities of reason and individual potential. These qualities have been gendered as masculine, so that men have come to embody the qualities of the complete citizen (Dillabough & Arnot, 2000; Lister, 2003; Werbner & Yuval-Davis, 1999). Regarded as “psychologically unbalanced and unable to articulate a political consciousness” (Dillabough & Arnot, p. 25), women have been relegated to the margins of citizenry. Historically, many of women’s contributions to social life – child bearing, family care, home work – have been consigned to the private sphere, and the rights of citizens contributing to the so-called public sphere have been denied to them.

Anti-racist and postcolonial scholars similarly establish how democratic citizenship privileges some groups over others in the West. Gender, race and class have been employed to “order human grouping distinguished by real and alleged biological features into status hierarchies that become the bases of various forms of discrimination and exclusion” (Ong, 2004, pp. 157-158). As Dhruvarajan (2000) explains, “Whiteness carries privileges; non-whiteness carries disadvantages. Despite differences in culture and history, all people of colour share one thing – they are racialised on the basis of skin colour, devalued as persons, and their histories and cultures are distorted and stigmatized” (p. 157). The “racial profiling” and heightened surveillance in post-9/11 democratic societies have seeped into “the localized sites where people of color live out their lives, that is, the malls where they shop and the apartments in which they live” (Thobani, p. 598). These examples remind us of the ongoing politics of race in Western societies, notwithstanding a mainstream citizenship discourse of social equality and tolerance.

Many feminists focus on the tension between the elements that Faulks (2002) calls rights, recognition and resources. Some respond to this tension through an integrated, “dialectical model of citizenship” and a “logic of encompassment” to balance “abstract universalism and difference. For democracy to work, universalism must transcend difference, defining all subjects in abstract terms as equal before the law. But difference is then reinstated as a higher-order value which encompasses equality through a relational and dialogical ethic of care, compassion and responsibility” (p. 10). Similarly, Lister (2003) proposes “a *differentiated universalism* in which the achievement of the universal is contingent upon attention to difference” (p. 91). Nancy Fraser (2003) proposes a “status” model to replace the opposition of the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution, avoiding both the “vulgar culturalism” (Fraser, p. 25) of a stance which removes inequality from any structural context, and the “reification” which arises in the struggle to define the “authentic” group member. The advantages to this approach, Fraser argues, is that it returns recognition to its social context of gender and class relations.

A distinct contribution by feminist scholars to this debate is their discussion of activism. Fraser puts forward her notion of “*subaltern counterpublics*,...[the] parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1992, p. 123, emphasis in original, in Sparks, p. 85). With her exploration of cultural hybridity and “borderlands,” Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) shatters the image of the good citizen-at-centre, validating the claims of marginalized citizens. She inserts the idea of dissidence not as a repudiation of citizenship, but as an expression of it. Holloway Sparks (1997) further develops the idea of dissident citizenship, using the example of American civil rights figure Rosa Parks.

Sparks discusses the complications of dissent, noting that Parks “epitomized quiet, middle-class respectability. She was demure, feminine, heterosexual, married, family-oriented, hard-working, and churchgoing.... Arguably, this respectability and traditionality made Parks a relatively ‘safe’ means of contesting white male power in Montgomery” (Sparks, p. 99). Recognizing and exploring the role of dissidence and political courage in this way exposes the contradictions inherent in liberal democracy, and bolsters the insistence that we consider more than abstract philosophical arguments in coming to an understanding of citizenship. It also suggests a sixth “R” of citizenship: resistance.

Taking up the call to explore the concrete, where can we find encounters with citizenship? In this time of neoliberal, capitalist globalization, the links between consumption and citizenship seem especially salient. Consumption is, after all, a process in which all citizens participate. In the following section, consumption is explored in the context of the six elements of citizenship outlined above, to demonstrate how these concepts have been and continue to be interwoven.

### **Consumption as a Marker of Democratic Citizenship**

Until recently, consumption was rarely studied, particularly in the context of citizenship (Ong, 2004; Zukin & Maguire, 2004). Zukin and Maguire explain that this omission originates in the work of nineteenth-century sociologists for whom “consumption is broadly taken for granted and often denigrated” (p. 174). Bocoock (1993) explains how globalization, a new phase in the development of capitalism, shifts the primary site of identity construction from production to consumption, for several reasons. First, occupational stability – the citizen’s role in production – is undermined by corporate global portability and technological developments. Secondly, groups other than class around which identity can be constructed through consumption are asserting themselves and being identified by marketers eager to advance their own brands and products. Terms such as “consumer-citizens” (Baudrillard, 1998; Zukin & Maguire) indicate the extent to which consumption and citizenship have come to mark each other in contemporary democratic societies and, furthermore, have developed in concert with each other historically. In this section, I return to Faulks’ (2002) notion of the five “Rs” of citizenship and insert the sixth “R” of resistance to illustrate how consumption can be viewed as an indicator of citizenship.

### **Rights**

From the nineteenth century, a discourse of consumer rights has proclaimed consumption’s democratizing effects. The expansion of consumer credit offered opportunities for the emerging middle class “to participate in an image of the aristocratic life” (Bowlby, 2001, p. 10). “Weights and measures” and “adulteration” legislation were developed to ensure safety and accuracy (Hilton, 2003). Calls for a “living wage” have always argued that wages must be sufficient for workers to consume their fair share. Even early anti-sweatshop efforts such as those in New York City’s late nineteenth century garment district were directed not so much at stopping exploitation of immigrant workers as they were at protecting “American” consumers who came into contact with them through the process of shopping (Bender, 2003). Bender further argues that, in trying to assimilate into American society, many of these sweatshop workers took up the arguments of consumers and public health officials that their home-based labour was harmful because it blurred the lines between the work of men and women, the public and private. In this way, consumption discourses and practices have marked the right to equality

and independence promised by democratic citizenship, even as they have reiterated gender, racial and class hierarchies.

As the preceding discussion of citizenship rights predicts, there are tensions between the different types of rights connected to consumption. While some calls have trumpeted individualist consumer rights, others have favoured a co-operative model to strengthen the social fabric, and still others have argued for free trade or trade unionism (Hilton, 2003). These calls echo still, and indicate only some of the tensions apparent in the discourse of consumer-citizenship; other tensions arise as consumer rights are juxtaposed with the remaining “Rs.”

### **Responsibilities**

Consistent with contemporary notions of citizenship, consumers’ rights must be accompanied by responsibilities. Consumer-citizens are expected to shop in support of their economy; hence, following 9/11, New York City Mayor Giuliani advised people to For women in particular, consumption has weighted responsibilities over rights. Historically, women were denied credit, along with other rights of citizenship, even as they were charged with the task of shopping for their families (Bowlby, 2001; Rappaport, 2000). Although by the mid nineteenth century shopping was promoted as a leisure activity for women of the middle and upper classes (Bocock, 1993; Bowlby; Rappaport), careful consumption was first and foremost one of women’s familial and social responsibilities. Today, credit might be extended as a consumer right, but creditors – like governments that issue rights of citizenship – insist that it be handled carefully and respectfully. Governors of credit have developed means of punishing consumers who disregard the boundaries of their credit rights.

### **Resources**

Proponents of the consumerist ideology proclaim the inherent fairness and neutrality of a market-based society. With mass production and mass consumption, we are assured, more citizens are able to enjoy more choices. Consumption, the rhetoric goes, democratizes society. Marketing, in both its mass and segmented forms, supports consumerism by appealing to consumer-citizens to shop endlessly as a way to acquire not just goods, but also social status. Critics of this ideology, however, point out that consumption is “one of the major ways in which social and societal inequality is experienced, reproduced and represented, by age, class, gender, racialisation, and other social divisions” (Hearn & Roseneil, 1999, p. 5). Far from building equality, “[c]onsumption no more homogenizes the social body than the educational system homogenizes cultural opportunities. It even highlights the disparities within it” (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 429). Citizens might be assured of equal rights to security – to housing and food; however, these rights are qualified through the structure of capitalism and the process of consumption.

### **Recognition**

Globalization has produced increasing variations of “transnationals” who challenge existing discourses of citizenship, and produce new discourses and practices of consumption. Bhachu’s (2004) study of British-Indian producers and marketers of women’s fashion explores how the traditional Punjabi women’s suit is being reinterpreted across borders and cultures. It relays examples of how citizens assert their identities and claims for recognition through consumption. As Bhachu explains about the sewers interviewed for her study,

Localized global citizens asserting their voices through identity-coded products, they are at the same time reinscribing the nation. Whether using a diasporic inheritance of improvisation, or newly negotiating migrant status, they are working to constitute a dynamic sense of self in their British contexts. In so doing, they create new signifiers which are about negotiating migrant status, they create new signifiers which are about negotiating a new nation, new forms of Britishness, new ways of being European. (p. 23)

### **Residence**

Paradoxically, consumption has been treated by theorists as an exclusively private matter, although for some time consumption has been segmented and increasingly pushed into the public sphere. Satterthwaite (2004) discusses late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century by-laws and city planning which restricted the location of commercial enterprises in European and American cities, in response to fears as diverse as “fire hazard, street litter, traffic, and dust...[along with] disease, as flies and vermin landing on the food in the stores would infect the neighborhood” (p. 244). It was only through advances evident in the public sphere – transportation, advertising and mass transit – that women in suburban communities were able to experience the new shopping areas of the nineteenth century and help ensure their success (Rappaport, 2000).

Residence is also a factor because of global geography and structures. International trade agreements, free-trade zones and “the hegemony of global financial and trade institutions continue the trend that began several decades ago to increase richer nations’, their transnationals’ and their elites’ share of global profitability at the expense of impoverished peoples whose countries are drowning under the burden of debt” (Grimes, 2005, p. 244).

### **Resistance**

Often overlooked in mainstream accounts of both citizenship and consumption, resistance is the missing “R” for critical consumer-citizens. Historical examples of resistance through consumption – often driven by women in their role as consumers – include organized boycotts of sugar in the anti-slavery movement (Hilton, 2003) as well as less formally organized efforts by marginalized groups. In societies that continue to be characterized by social centres and margins, resistance is closely linked to rights, resources and recognition. Grimes (2005) sees the expanding fair trade movement as “exemplary of participatory democracy.... For consumers in First World countries, fair trade gives people the opportunity to not only purchase products that support their values of a more socially just and equitable world trade order, but to also learn about the producers' lives, their struggles, and our mutual interdependence” (pp. 237-238). As Mort (1990) comments, “High tech in the hands of young blacks or girls making-up are not simply forms of buying into the system. They can be very effectively hijacked for cultures of resistance, reappearing as street-style cred or assertive femininity (p. 166). Finally, as Hearn and Roseneil (1999) remind us, consumer resistance can be multi-faceted: “Consumption can be a form of resistance, just as much as consumption can be resisted” (pp. 5-6).

#### *A Final Lesson for the Critical Consumer-Citizen*

As this discussion establishes, consumption is one marker of citizenship. The elements of citizen-consumption work both in concert and against one another. The association has become problematic, however, because consumption has often become a stand-in for citizenship, the extent to which the elements of citizenship are pursued and discussed in policy discourses.

How, though, is this discussion relevant to the field of adult education? If we conceive of education in a Gramscian (1971) sense, as a process of learning-through-engagement aimed at social change, then we can view shopping as a potential learning process. Critical education scholar Griff Foley (1999; 2001) discusses the largely overlooked “incidental learning” which imbues activities of daily life with unexpected opportunities to learn about social relations and political struggles. Bocock (1993) recognizes that “[t]here is nothing natural about modern consumption; it is something which is acquired, learned; something which people are socialized into doing” (p. 54). Adult educators, then, might ask how the process of shopping helps socialize people into consumption, even as it presents opportunities for resistance. Critical adult educators can explore how shopping can create unanticipated opportunities for “incidental” learning about consumption and citizenship – teaching us about the complications of globalization. As critical consumer-citizens, we cannot escape our complicity in globalization even as we resist it. Despite our best efforts to shop responsibly, ecologically and fairly, we come to understand that we cannot buy our way out of the margins.

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