

Consumer Resistance Movements

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Consumer resistance movements are collective efforts, both formal and informal, that use the power of the marketplace either as a means of expression or to bring about some kind of change. Consumer resistance movements, often in wealthy nations of the global North, can be anti-consumerist as a general orientation, such as *Adbusters* magazine's annual Buy Nothing Day and the broader trend of "do-it-yourself," or activist, targeted to achieve economic or political goals, as in the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) efforts to pressure American colleges and universities to adopt fair labor and environmentally friendly practices in their purchasing and service operations. Consumer resistance movements and consumer resistance in general have a long history, and have garnered popular attention in recent years with the publication of Naomi Klein's book *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (1999).

An element of consumer resistance is built into the process of market exchange. Classical economics sees exchange as the balancing of supply on the producer's part and demand on the consumer's part in the assignment of value mediated through the mechanism of price. The consumer, in effect, resists completing the exchange transaction until equilibrium has been achieved in the form of a mutually agreed-upon price. Neoclassical economics introduces the concept of marginal utility into the decision-making process, focusing

on the rational calculation of choices to be made in allocating scarce resources between a myriad of needs, desires, and purchase options and the opportunity costs of selecting one versus another. For example, one may forgo the value of current news information in favor of the satisfaction of caffeine in opting for a cup of coffee in the morning instead of the daily paper. The calculation of marginal utility can be realized in a number of ways: resisting one product and opting for another in the same category, resisting a product in one category and opting for one in another category, or not completing any transaction at all. Negotiating the margins of utility in order to overcome consumer resistance is central to modern sales tactics and marketing theory from the producer's perspective (Olivier 2009).

Albert O. Hirschman's (1970) concepts of exit and voice are useful for parsing the varieties of consumer resistance and their organization into movements. Hirschman associates *exit*, the refusal to buy a firm's product or service, with economics; he associates *voice*, the expression of disapproval either directly to a firm or indirectly through more oblique channels, with politics. Exit may be expressed either by leaving the market entirely or by simply choosing another product, essentially the operation of the invisible hand of the self-regulating market. Voice is more complex and visible, as it seeks to consciously register dissatisfaction in the hope of effecting change either in the product or the producer. Exit and voice can commingle as when a consumer boycott is coupled with a letter writing campaign, public demonstration, or other tactic meant to garner media attention or instigate regulatory

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action. Anti-consumerist movements such as Buy Nothing Day are exit, whereas activist movements such as USAS are voice.

Another example of consumer resistance in the form of exit is the voluntary simplicity movement. As a contemporary form of asceticism, voluntary simplicity encompasses a number of practices to reduce one's level of consumption as a way to disengage from market transactions, from lowering the number and types of possessions, particularly those considered extraneous or luxurious, to increasing self-sufficiency, in the form of home production and other do-it-yourself methods. The power of voice as a form of consumer resistance can be further seen in the rise of conscientious consumption as a social movement – that is, consumers who, as markets have matured, possess information and affluence and who factor such considerations as environmental sustainability, workplace equity, point of origin, and so on into virtually every purchasing decision across a broad range of product and service categories, with the full expectation that producers will supply their demands (Stehr 2008).

Perspectives on consumer resistance differ depending on which side of the transaction the interested party sits. For producers, consumer resistance is a barrier to completing a transaction that needs to be overcome. For consumers, resistance is a form of agency, the assertion of sovereignty in the marketplace. The nature of the resistance also varies. It can be purely economic – producer and consumer are simply unable to come to terms with respect to the determination of price and value. It can be based on anxiety, for example fear on the consumer's part that a product or service poses a physical threat or other serious disadvantage. It can even be moral, a refusal to engage in certain kinds of consumption transactions based on principled

concerns for such questions as ecological sustainability, social responsibility, and national ideology, among other things.

If a modern understanding of consumer resistance from the producer side is grounded in classical economics, then its opposite can be seen through the theoretical lens of the Marxist tradition and its romantic antecedents. For Marx, commodity consumption is the site of mystification, alienation, and exploitation within the capitalist system, a mechanism whereby workers unwittingly reproduce their inequality through the purchase on the market of the surplus value (that is, the fruits of their labor in commodity form) that has been appropriated from them by the bourgeoisie. Nineteenth-century utopian socialists sought to create exchange networks that would ameliorate the abuses of the modern division of labor, constituting a resistance to the burgeoning commodity system in the form of what is now known as *solidarity economics*. Marxism directly inspired some of the models, such as the Arts and Crafts movement founded by William Morris, while others are more accurately described as fellow travelers, such as the British cooperative movement of Robert Owen.

Consumer resistance in this vein is often characterized as politics carried on by other means. This can take the form of mass protests against material scarcity and rising prices, going back at least to the plebeian bread riots of ancient Rome. Or it could assume more of a moral dimension, as in the later resistance to and social unrest in the face of the increasingly monopolized distribution of corn and other grains in the nascent capitalist market economy in eighteenth-century England; E. P. Thompson (1971) has characterized these events as a breach of trust on the part of the patron classes in neglecting to provide for those in the community who are less fortunate. Consumer resistance as

alternative political action is also evident in the sugar boycott of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in protest at the Caribbean slave trade under the British empire: middle- and upper-class women who otherwise lacked voting privileges expressed their political will by refusing to purchase the sweetener imported from colonial plantations under production conditions that were perceived to be tainted with what the abolitionists termed “Brother’s blood.”

Indeed, boycotts are one of the main forms of collective consumer resistance, and their exercise is sometimes referred to as “negative political consumerism,” a term that recognizes their reactive nature in the exchange process (Micheletti 2003). Monroe Friedman (1999) notes that boycotts are a frequently used tactic for those outside the conventional power structure. Their use as an alternative means of political action has historically been to achieve either economic or social justice. The former is typically the concern of consumers, while the latter is often the concern of minorities. Examples of economic justice boycotts include the protests against high meat prices during the Great Depression and coffee in the 1970s. Examples of social justice boycotts include the “Don’t Buy from Where You Can’t Work” boycotts for equal employment opportunity, which also occurred during the Great Depression, and the celebrated Civil Rights movement bus boycotts of the 1950s. Most consumer boycotts have historically been directed against commodities, such as meat, grapes, and coffee. They have also tended to be more market-oriented, that is, directed to effecting change by impacting a target’s sales revenues, giving economic leverage to those mounting the action. Contemporary consumer boycotts, on the other hand, tend to be more media-oriented, seeking to have an effect by damaging the target’s reputation or brand image.

Recent examples of market-oriented consumer boycotts include those mounted against Nestlé for its alleged exploitative sale of baby formula in less developed countries, and Nike for unfair labor practices, outsourcing, and environmentally unfriendly production practices. Faith-based groups have also organized boycotts of television programs, products, and brands to protest what they perceive to be anti-family values. The 2012 campaign against J. C. Penney for its endorsement deal with lesbian celebrity Ellen DeGeneres is an example.

Parodies of brand names and marketing slogans are among the primary and more effective tools used in organizing contemporary media-oriented methods of consumer resistance. These actions are known by the term “culture jamming,” after the technique of electronically interfering with broadcast and radio signals for military or political purposes. Common culture jams include subverting commercial advertising and other promotional messages by altering copy and images and appropriating brand identities.

The opposite of boycotts, “buycotts,” have additionally appeared, seeking to offer support for products deemed admirable from such perspectives as ecological sustainability or fair trade, known as green and blue consumerism respectively. These actions are forms of “positive political consumerism” (Micheletti 2003) in recognition of their proactive aspect. Other examples include “Buy American” and similar campaigns, which employ nationalist ideology to promote the purchase of certain products. Implicit in these types of actions is resistance to the consumption of products offered by perceived foreign competitors.

In light of these trends, many companies have adopted corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs as a tactic for overcoming certain kinds of consumer resistance. CSR

takes many forms and seeks to mediate between the mandates of pure profitability and broader social concerns (Werther and Chandler 2010). The simplest and arguably most traditional practice is corporate philanthropy in which a firm offers financial or in-kind support to target communities or other stakeholders. A common practice in this regard is to devote a certain portion of revenues to specific causes such as the arts, the environment, or at-risk communities as a way to demonstrate concern on the part of the corporation, the intent being to garner support for the firm's overall mission and thereby minimize consumer resistance. A more recent development is social accounting, in which organizations open their operations to external review to certify compliance with various standards that are typically monitored by third parties, including ISO 14000 and 9000, the Fair Labor Association, and the Forest Stewardship Council. Another recent trend is to integrate CSR into the business plan as a form of socially responsible marketing. Firms that have done this include Fair Trade-certified purveyors of coffee, tea, and cocoa, for example Pete's Coffee and Divine Chocolates, and anti-sweatshop apparel manufacturers, for example Fair Indigo and Maggie's Organic Fibers.

These practices have engendered further consumer resistance based on skepticism with respect to the firms' true commitment to CSR. The terms "greenwashing" and "bluewashing" describe what are perceived as disingenuous efforts on the part of corporations to act in environmentally and socially responsible ways respectively. The label has been used to describe Starbucks, for example, in that even though it is, as its promotional communications claim, the world's largest purchaser of Fair Trade-certified coffee, the company's financial commitment to the category constitutes only a tiny fraction of its total supply. Another criticism of Starbucks pertains to its

use of internally determined criteria for CSR rather than third-party certification, a charge which is leveled against many corporations and their perceived green- and bluewashing practices.

Recently, a new form of business organization has emerged termed the B (for benefit) corporation, whose purpose is to create value for society at large as well as for shareholders. B corporations typically report performance to their socially responsible objectives using third-party certified criteria rather than those they might develop internally. Maryland was the first US state to permit such corporate organization in 2010, with several other states having since allowed similar types of corporate charters. Examples include Namaste Solar, an employee-owned cooperative based in Boulder, Colorado, which designs, installs, and maintains solar electric systems for homes, businesses, nonprofits, and government, and Green Building Services, based in Portland, Oregon, a provider of sustainable building services and tools to benefit business, the community, and the environment. These operations are typically small and locally based, often capitalizing on consumer resistance to large multinational corporations as part of their value proposition.

Some researchers see the ostensible antagonism between producer and consumer, on which the concept of consumer resistance is based, as an outmoded dialectic, particularly with the blurring of these roles within the information economy, a process known in the social sciences as de-differentiation. Increasingly, the cycles of production and consumption are coming together, with users producing the goods and services they consume. This can be seen most clearly in social media such as Facebook, Pinterest, Tumblr, and Twitter, and in massively multiplayer online games (MMPOGs), such as *World of Warcraft* and *Happy Farm*, in

which time spent online is taken up with providing content that constitutes one's form of entertainment and self-expression while simultaneously creating value for the for-profit enterprises that provide the software services. Even so, some semblance of consumer resistance persists in the do-it-yourself practices of hacker spaces, Maker Faires, urban farming, and the like. This activity is sometimes referred to as prosumption, a portmanteau of the words "production" and "consumption" (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010).

SEE ALSO: Boycotts; Consumer Activism; Culture Jamming; Do-It-Yourself (DIY); Downshifting; Ethical Consumption; Fair Trade; Markets, Moral Aspects of; Politics and Consumer Culture; Prosumption; Socially Responsible Marketing (SRM)

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